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"Community Is Wherever These Friends Are":
LGBTQ Friendships and Ambivalent Community in River City

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ABSTRACT

Using interviews and friendship mapping with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and ally (LGBTQ+) community members as well as ethnographic observations, this dissertation analyzes post-gay LGBTQ community in River City, a small, Midwestern city. My findings reveal a formation I call *ambivalent community*: even as participants express a desire for LGBTQ community, they express a simultaneous desire for LGBTQ identities to "not matter." This ambivalence is further demonstrated in the friendship networks and friendship talk of LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ allies, those supportive of LGBTQ people but who did not claim an LGBTQ identity. Friendship networks enable community formation in surprising ways: close friendships do not connect LGBTQ people to a sense of community, while, for non-LGBTQ allies, friendships with LGBTQ people create community connections. This project suggests that identity-based communities maintain desires for identities to become less relevant *and* acknowledgment that identities still matter. These communities are continually in flux, as LGBTQ community is created by and for allies; new LGBTQ organizations and events develop, emerge, and fail; and friendships between LGBTQ people both are and are not important. This project further challenges linear narratives of progress in a time of changing identity relevance and proposes ambivalence as a dimension of community that should be explored in other community cases. Overall, this project extends theories of friendship, kinship, community, and identity; challenges the conceptual boundaries of LGBTQ communities and identities; and identifies communities as simultaneously pre- and post-gay.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a late winter weekend evening in River City,[1] a Midwestern city and the site of my research, and I am passing through a smoke-filled casino floor, heading toward a drag show at a popular, local bar and performance venue tucked away in the corner of the building. To be honest, I am expecting a sparse crowd because I suspect that my small community's capacity for drag performance has reached its limit. This is not the first drag show I have seen, and previous shows have been so full of people that it is hard to find enough elbow room to drink your beer, let alone get a clear view of the stage. When I arrive, though, the bar is packed, tables are full, and I quickly grab a seat up in the mezzanine level for a clear view of the show. Performances are as raunchy and campy as drag shows anywhere tend to be, except with perhaps a slightly higher-than-average emphasis on country music and, interestingly, also Disney songs. Two drag queens offer an homage to *The Little Mermaid*'s "Poor Unfortunate Souls," featuring a fabulous Ursula-like costume and an Ariel who sports a flouncy tail and wheeled sneakers, allowing her to zoom around the stage as though she is underwater.

The "Queen of River City," a drag queen who has performed locally since the early 1980s, executes a particularly clever number about a drilling dentist accompanied by a large, black, dildo as a prop, notable given River City's predominantly white population. In the audience, I spot several my lesbian-, gay, and queer-identified research participants, but I see none of my transgender participants. My initial estimates of the crowd suggest that at least 300 people are in attendance, but a post on the local group's Facebook page later suggests that more than

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[1] I use pseudonyms for place names to protect participants' identities.

400 people decided to spend their weekend evening – and money – watching a drag show. Interestingly, two weeks later, a second, newly-created drag group hosts its first show at a different local bar. When I arrive just three minutes after the scheduled start of the show, one of my participants informs me that they are turning people away at the door. The bar is at capacity, and they are worried about breaking fire code.

While drag shows are indeed a booming business in River City, they are not the only indicator of what I observed over the course of my research as a growing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community. A well-attended, biweekly LGBTQ youth group meets at a local community center, a new *weekly* LGBTQ adult support group has been meeting at the same location, each of the local high schools supports an active gay-straight alliance (GSA), and local organizations – notably healthcare-specific – have sought LGBTQ competency training for their staff. No commercial establishments advertise themselves explicitly as gay venues, and some of my participants mourn the loss of previously-existing gay bars in River City. However, "everyone knows" about the local gay-owned bar and which establishments are owned by lesbians and lesbian couples, identified exclusively through word of mouth, a key way information about LGBTQ community circulated in River City.

This landscape of growing LGBTQ community institutions is in the Midwest, but not in Chicago, the Twin Cities, St. Louis, Milwaukee, or Omaha. This is River City, a picturesque, post-industrial, small city of approximately 55,000, a regional hub for the many small towns and townships spread out across the nearby landscape. While I would hesitate to call River City itself "rural" due to its population size and density, some of my participants do. Popular descriptions of the city depict it as an isolated small town, and its connection to rural life through local events

and the presence of more than one "farm and fleet" store[2] is beyond dispute. In coverage of the 2016 presidential campaign, for example, a news comedy show featured comments from a Southern ranch owner whose comments about River City suggested his understanding of the city as an isolated haven of small-minded, uncritical Americans. A 2016 episode of a popular, traveling reality TV show presented River City as a quaint, "cute" small town unwelcoming particularly to transgender residents. In the national imagination (Anderson 2006), River City represents the kind of "flyover country" celebrated as the Midwestern heart of American culture and simultaneously decried as its seat of ignorance. With respect to LGBTQ people, River City, according to Census data, has historically had one of the lowest proportions of gay men (technically gay male couples) in the nation (Baumle, Compton, and Poston, Jr. 2009), is heavily Catholic and largely white, and contains a growing Black community with a number of active, youth-focused institutions. Despite this growing Black community, persistent racism and a rise of backlash against these community-building efforts is evident across an array of social and print media. To all outside appearances, River City is hostile toward L, G, and B, and especially T and Q people and people of color.

In one of my earliest interviews, I sat with Peter,[3] a participant who is well-connected to River City's gay community, and we "did the math," trying to calculate the number of LGBTQ people in the city, producing a guess of about 250 people. Research participants described LGBTQ community in River City as disconnected, dispersed, difficult to find, and "cliquey."

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[2] "Farm and fleet" stores are big-box retail stores that sell a mix of farm equipment, farm animal and pet supplies, home supplies, clothes, boots, snacks, and other sundries. They are typically found in cities and towns located in rural areas, and there may be more than one competing chain in any given city.
[3] All participants' names are pseudonyms.

And while some LGBTQ institutions seem to be growing, others are declining, and still others remain invisible to community observers. A brief genealogy of River City's gay bars illustrates these shifts. For example, Next Level,[4] a gay bar open for nearly a decade, closed in 2007, while Barney's has operated on a well-traveled downtown street for a scant few years as an unmarked gay-friendly, or, as one participant explained, "queer" bar. Barney's, everyone knows, is gay-owned, but visitors to River City would see no indication that Barney's is gay-friendly. No rainbow flags or stickers mark its façade, even as participants identified Barney's by name when asked whether there are any gay bars in town.

In the spring of 2017, Barney's announced that it, too, was being sold to new owners, thus losing its "gay-owned" reputation, just as a new, purportedly gay bar, Underground, was opening just down the street. The Underground, too, is not marked as gay, except perhaps by the colorful lights behind the bar and the more visibly gay bartenders, young men whose masculinity fits with a more urban hipster aesthetic than is common among their straight River City peers. Two "pop-up" queer bar events have been hosted at the Underground, attended largely by a small cluster of queer women and trans men, the "introverts" of LGBTQ community in River City, as one participant explained. These queer and trans River Citizens carved out a small space within the not-obviously-gay gay bar.

So, what is going on here? Is River City the rural vanguard of overlapping queer and gay communities, its closeted past, or its performative present? How do we make sense of highly visible and popular drag shows alongside gay spaces that remain committed to invisibility, and queer spaces meant to be inclusive of a range of LGBTQ identities nested within gay spaces?

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[4] All business names are also pseudonyms.

How can LGBTQ institutions be growing with such a small, divided, and often invisible community? And why are some institutions explosively popular (like drag shows) while others struggle to survive (like gay bars)?

In this dissertation, my aim is to identify what constitutes LGBTQ communities in smaller cities like River City, where LGBTQ organizations and events occur occasionally but are generally not grounded in long-standing LGBTQ institutions. A second aim is to assess what *kind* of LGBTQ community exists in River City, given existing frameworks for understanding such communities in a moment of shifting identities. The case of River City offers conflicting evidence of visible, out gay community alongside hidden pockets of friends. A final aim is to examine the role that identities play in forming, and possibly dissolving, LGBTQ communities, as non-LGBTQ allies could be found even among the performers in River City's now-vibrant drag scene. I consider whether close relationships like friendships and family networks supplement or substitute for LGBTQ community.

I argue that River City's LGBTQ community does not follow the linear narrative of progress suggested by researchers of urban, gay neighborhoods. A close examination of key dimensions of LGBTQ community (institutions, friendships, and allies) reveals that multiple "phases" of LGBTQ community development (Ghaziani 2014) exist simultaneously within the same context. LGBTQ community members express hopes that LGBTQ institutions might no longer be needed and simultaneous longing for affirming spaces and relationships. Shared-identity friendships both do and do not "matter" for LGBTQ participants. Allies benefit from their relationships with LGBTQ people and institutions even as they work to sustain them. These findings shift

LGBTQ community theory-making from a linear to an ambivalent model and challenge assumptions about how LGBTQ communities grow and change.

In what follows, I ground the questions I formulated above in the sociological literature on LGBTQ community, proposing the concept of "ambivalent communities" as a way to recognize the contradictions evident in River City's LGBTQ community. I then identify an absence in sociological approaches to LGBTQ community: the role of friendship as a necessary ingredient in community formation. While friendship is often referenced obliquely in LGBTQ community research, its contours remain unexplored, leaving significant gaps in our knowledge about these communities and how these communities are formed and organized. I then describe the context of River City itself, discuss my research methods, and briefly outline the chapters of the dissertation.

LGBTQ progress and community ambivalence

Analyses of LGBTQ community must begin with a clear definition of the concept of community. In this project, I use Albert Hunter's (1974, 1975, 2006) tripartite framework of community as ecological (across space and time dimensions), social structural (including interpersonal networks and institutional density), and symbolic (composed of identity and culture). LGBTQ communities, then, require a bounded place located in time, identifiable institutions, personal relationships that link individuals, and a sense of shared identity and culture. LGBTQ community research has historically addressed each of these elements of community. For example, early LGBTQ community research identified the spatial as well as temporal dimensions of gay community formation, focusing on gay institutions that emerged in cities like New York,

San Francisco, and Chicago (Chauncey 1995; D'Emilio 1998; Levine 1979). Others have considered the symbolic centrality of the foundational LGBTQ community story, the raid on the Stonewall Inn in New York City (Armstrong and Crage 2006). Still others have analyzed the personal relationships that form LGBTQ community, like Kath Weston's "chosen family" (1991) and gay men's friendships (Nardi 1999). As I will show below, River City's LGBTQ community contains each of these three dimensions; however, my focus in this dissertation is largely on the social structural dimension of LGBTQ community, specifically. Within this dimension, I analyze LGBTQ community through its institutions (even when they disappear) and friendships (even when they draw LGBTQ people away from those institutions).

Researchers of LGBTQ community have long argued that "gay community," and, later, LGBTQ and queer community, encapsulate an array of disparate experiences under one identitarian roof. Elizabeth Armstrong (2002), for example, highlights the process by which San Francisco's gay community unified a set of conflicting identities under a single organizational umbrella that also managed to acknowledge the differences within. More recently, researchers have identified the processes by which LGBTQ social movements coalesce (Ghaziani, Taylor, and Stone 2016), suggesting the ongoing relevance of an imagined (Weston 1995), if fractured, LGBTQ community. While there are a range of identities and experiences within LGBTQ community, tensions within LGBTQ community are certainly not new (Weiss 2008).

To what extent can we speak of LGBTQ community in River City, specifically? Despite an array of everyday experiences that vary across gender, sexual, racial, and class identities, the evidence is strong. River City's LGBTQ community is limited spatially and temporally (as discussed in chapter 1), includes LGBTQ-specific and broadly inclusive institutions like youth

groups and "queer bars" (described in chapters 1 and 2), is composed of social networks of varying density (analyzed in chapters 3 and 4), and references national and local LGBTQ identities and iconography, like rainbow flags, Pride events, shared jokes, and identity-specific terminology (discussed in chapters 1, 2, and 3). Other researchers have analyzed the organizational logics of LGBTQ communities (Armstrong 2002), which are also evident in River City. One clear, powerful example of what Armstrong (2002) calls the "interest group" logic of LGBTQ community might be seen in the rapid organization of the vigil following the 2016 mass murder of LGBTQ people in Orlando, attended by participants of *all* LGBTQ identities, described in chapter 1. If anything, LGBTQ community might be *more* coherent in River City than in larger, urban contexts where organization under different identities might be possible, and, some argue, necessary (Doan 2007).

Despite its persistence, River City's LGBTQ community has experienced the same kinds of shifts noted in communities across the U.S.: growing acceptance among friends, family, and communities alongside persistent hostility, discrimination, and inequality. Researchers have grappled with the meaning of these changes and have marked the most recent decades as ones of declining gay identity relevance (Brown-Saracino 2011; Ghaziani 2011, 2014). The overall focus of this literature has typically been on urban gay contexts (Chauncey 1995; D'Emilio 1998; Gray 2009; Weston 1995), and much of the thinking about gay community has emerged from research focused on gay communities in large, often gay-friendly cities. More recent research on rural (Gray 2009; Gray, Johnson, and Gilley 2016; Johnson 2013) and suburban (Brekhus 2003; Kirkey and Forsyth 2001; Tongson 2011) LGBTQ communities has challenged some of this

thinking, suggesting multiple forms of LGBTQ communities that depend on their local community contexts and possibilities for LGBTQ identity expression (Brown-Saracino 2015). Still, the theoretical division between urban and rural remains squarely mapped onto friendly and hostile, post-gay and closet, and progressive and conservative binaries, even as researchers continually challenge this framework (Gray et al. 2016).

Noting a shift from an era of gay activism in the 80s and 90s, pop cultural critiques of gay community beginning in the 90s (Collard 1998) suggested that urban gay communities were evolving toward a post-gay era (Ghaziani 2011), a time marked by declining and disappearing gay institutions like gay bars and increasing equivocation about gay identity. Among lesbians, similar themes involving the downplay of differences relative to straight people have emerged (Brown-Saracino 2011; Stein 2010). Same-sex marriage might have been considered a threshold for communities' evolving toward a post-gay, and perhaps post-lesbian era (McNaron 2007). Following the logic of a post-gay framework, we might expect to find communities across the U.S. developing familiar gay institutions which thrive during a coming-out era, only to disappear as a national narrative of assimilation, multiculturalism, and emphasis on sameness permeates these contexts. Within River City, the cyclical rise, fall, and rise (again) of gay bars and LGBTQ community organizations, popular drag shows, and LGBTQ-friendly social activities suggests a mix of identities and spaces that challenge such linear narratives of progress centered in urban, gay communities.

LGBTQ community has long been subsumed under the umbrella term "gay community," and some participants used the language of "gay community" to describe community that includes a range of gender and sexual identities. I use the term "LGBTQ community" to highlight

the disparate identities of participants who might not be visible under the term "gay community" (see Appendix B for a discussion of terminology). While some suggest that LGBTQ community might not unify such a broad range of gender and sexual identities, I argue that LGBTQ as unified category is already embedded in the local and national cultural imagination. One local example is the "LGBTQ+" support groups available at a multicultural center in River City, and the language of a municipal proclamation designating June as "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Pride Month." As Kath Weston argues, "Gay community can best be understood not as a unified subculture, but rather as a category implicated in the ways lesbians and gay men have developed collective identities, organized urban space, and conceptualized their significant relationships" (Weston 1991:124). "LGBTQ community similarly describes a category "implicated in the ways" LGBTQ people and others have imagined their identities, spaces, and relationships.

Researchers have pivoted to focus on LGBTQ communities beyond gay, urban contexts, and these approaches have yielded alternative models of LGBTQ community, some of which resonate with post-gay themes. For instance, Brown-Saracino's discussion of "ambient community" (2011:362) suggests that, for lesbians and queer women in especially friendly communities, being part of a lesbian-specific community is less central to lesbian and queer women's lives (2011). "Ambient" communities centered around shared leisure activities and interests have largely replaced traditional lesbian institutions and organizations. Furthermore, researchers have found that rural LGBTQ communities exist but are temporary, contingent, and technology-based as few visible gay institutions endure in these spaces (Bell and Valentine 1995; Browne 2009;

Gray 2009). And suburban and rural spaces seem marked by the possibilities of comfort, mobility, and urban gay tourism (Brekhus 2003; Greene 2014). For example, Wayne Brekhus' research describes "tunnel and bridge gays" (2003:99), or "lifestylers" (2003:33), who live in the suburbs but commute to the city to attend gay community institutions and events. Similarly, Theo Greene suggests that suburban and rural gay citizens may engage in gay community "vicariously" by traveling to well-known urban gay contexts (2014:99). Post-gay theorists acknowledge that the picture of gay community is complex (Ghaziani 2014) and shifting, but a tension exists in the literature between the declining relevance of LGBTQ communities and their ongoing importance as a touchstone, if a temporary one.

My research in this dissertation draws on this key tension in discussions of LGBTQ communities, a tension that is reflected in my participants' mixed feelings of local LGBTQ community and narratives of identity. Drawing from Ghaziani's work on post-gay communities, Brown-Saracino's discussion of ambient communities, Brekhus' analysis of gay "lifestylers," and Greene's theorizing of vicarious community consumption, I find evidence of *ambivalent* community in River City. Ambivalent community includes emphatic mixed feelings, both a desire for a sense of community *and* an acknowledgment that, perhaps, an LGBTQ community should no longer be necessary.

The concept of ambivalent community brings together two strands of literature in sociological research about identities and social change: first, research on LGBTQ communities that present a linear narrative of assimilation, as in Ghaziani's (2011, 2014) post-gay theory, and, second, social psychological research demonstrating ambivalence as central to institutional mainte-

nance (Merton 1976; Smelser 1998). Ambivalence has primarily been studied as an aspect of individuals' approaches to social circumstances (Smelser 1998). As Smelser explains, "The nature of ambivalence is to hold *opposing affective orientations* [emphasis in original] toward the same person, object, or symbol. [And] with some exceptions, preferences are regarded as relatively stable; ambivalence tends to be unstable, expressing itself in different and sometimes contradictory ways as actors attempt to cope with it" (1998:5). Ambivalence's primary purchase in sociology has been in the case of families, as, for example, older family members express intergenerational ambivalence as they navigate between solidarity and conflict with younger generations (Luescher and Hoff 2013; Luescher and Pillemer 1998; Lüscher 2002). Furthermore, feminist and gender scholars have explored ambivalence as a conceptual tool useful in theory-making (Bondi 2004; Butler 2002) but have not applied this concept to social life. Applying ambivalence to identity-based communities is a logical next step, given its utility as a concept in families and status systems in transition (Coser 1966). Indeed, we see calls for more ambivalent approaches to processes of assimilation in research focused on communities of color grappling with processes of assimilation (Garcia 2016). Given its rich theoretical roots in sociology, it is time to apply the concept of ambivalence to LGBTQ identity and community change.

As we will see, the ambivalent community formation is location-specific, enabled in particular community contexts, especially those that do not fit neatly into narratives of urban gay progress. Ambivalent community reflects a sense of both/and—a sense of both the need and lack of need for LGBTQ community. And it draws from the perspectives of a range of identities: gay, lesbian, genderqueer, transgender, and other identities that have been traditionally, and academically, lumped under the gay or LGBTQ umbrella (Doan 2007; Easterbrook et al. 2013). Unlike

the concept of post-gay community, which encapsulates assimilative changes in gay identities, spaces, and lives, ambivalent community does not suggest a linear narrative of progress but retains attention on the desire for LGBTQ community alongside a desire for its absence. Similar to the concept of ambient community (Brown-Saracino 2011), ambivalent community demonstrates the ways that LGBTQ community is embedded in broader community contexts in relation to their degree of acceptance, array of local norms, conservative and liberal political landscape, and community "friendliness," for example.

Ambivalent community may well be specific to small cities like River City, a typical case of the kind of places that are not fully urban, not fully rural, and not traditionally suburban or proximate to large cities. Ambivalent community suggests an emphatic interest and need for LGBTQ community institutions and symbols, and this need is demonstrated in well-attended community events; at the same time, ambivalent community presents for a desire for the declining relevance of LGBTQ identity, for sameness and assimilation reminiscent of post-gay narratives. In other words, ambivalent community encapsulates the desires for LGBTQ community alongside its absence. We might think of ambivalent community as post-gay with "gay" bolded, as ambient community with an emphasis on the longing for lesbian community, and as vicarious citizenship with a memory of one's home always in mind.

Ambivalence may be found beyond the LGBTQ community, as pressures of assimilation are central to a number of identities. Beginning with the Chicago School, sociologists have explored assimilation processes for white ethnic groups (Gans 1962; Gordon 1964) in the U.S., as well as non-white groups (Lowe 1996; Smith 2006). More recent research incorporates global perspectives on race, ethnicity, migration, and class (Alba and Nee 2005; Garcia 2016) and have

analyzed how processes of racialization are interwoven with assimilation pressures (Perlmann 2007; Telles, Ortiz, and Moore 2009). However, researchers of race and ethnicity have already challenged a linear, or what Garcia calls "unidirectional" (2016:468–69), processes of assimilation and integration. Ambivalent communities are not exclusive to gender and sexuality, in other words, and may be helpful to understand communities organized around other social identities, for example, immigrant communities grappling with assimilation.

The missing friendships in LGBTQ community research

Critically, for LGBTQ communities, LGBTQ *relationships* are shifting as acceptance of LGBTQ people grows, even in places like River City. While some scholars have investigated the changing context of LGBTQ romantic relationships (Bernstein and Taylor 2013; Ocobock 2013), there remains a surprising dearth of research about the ways LGBTQ friendships have changed. Yet, the shifting landscape of LGBTQ friendships is central to post-gay claims. As Ghaziani notes, "Those who consider themselves post-gay profess that their sexual orientation does not form the core of how they define themselves, and they prefer to hang out with their straight friends as much as with those who are gay" (2014:3). In this comment, Ghaziani references "straight friends," but does not describe these social networks or explain how friendships benefit or limit community formation. My research aims to fill the gap left by superficial discussions of friendship that do not show how friendship may, in fact, hold LGBTQ institutions together or constitute communities after such institutions have faded away.

Research on LGBTQ friendships is not new; for example, long-standing research on "chosen families" (Weston 1991) argues that close relationships among LGBTQ people are critical to LGBTQ individuals' and communities' survival. However, in a post-gay era, researchers have not continued to focused on close friendships in communities and how those friendships may or may not contribute to community continuity. More recent research explores the "intersectional friendships" between LGBTQ people and allies, as in the case of gay men and straight women and lesbians and straight men (Muraco 2012). My research shows that these kinds of cross-identity friendships, as well as within-identity friendships like "chosen families," generate particular LGBTQ community formations.

A limitation of this research on LGBTQ friendships, however, is that it tends to be disconnected from an analysis of community context, and it is unclear whether findings about LGBTQ friendships in urban settings apply to processes of community and identity in suburban and rural contexts (Fischer 1982a). Friendships formed in San Francisco, as in Muraco's (2012) research, face an array of LGBTQ institutions, organizations, and events not available to LGBTQ people in smaller places—for instance in Midwestern cities like River City. It is hard to imagine the kinds of social events Muraco describes taking place in River City. Furthermore, in research on LGBTQ friendships more generally, friendship is often referenced as an aspect of community and broadly related to identity, although without a clear explanation of how friendship relates to community, a topic that remains largely underexplored. Community-based research on LGBTQ friendships beyond urban, gay enclaves offers a helpful corrective to theory-making focused on these contexts. In other words, might LGBTQ friendships offer a way into understanding the contradictions of River City's LGBTQ community?

One challenge with friendship research is the range of relationships that fall under a "friendship" umbrella. Sociologists of friendship agree that definitions continue to evolve (Allan 2009; Fischer 1982b), and this process is especially relevant for changing LGBTQ communities as relationship terminology changes rapidly. Most relevant to my research, researchers have sought to describe the variation of friendships present in the lives of lesbians and gay men (Gillespie et al. 2015; Nardi 1999; Weinstock and Rothblum 1996). Fruitful research on friendship emerges at the boundaries between friendship and other types of close relationships. The changing boundary between kinship and friendship, for example, suggests changing norms and marks shifts in expectations about relationships (Allan 2008). Weston's (1991) groundbreaking work on "chosen families" of lesbians and gays challenged the boundary between kinship and friendship in San Francisco. Similarly, Nardi's edited volume on gay men's friendships (1999) highlights the overlap and tension between friendships, family, and romantic relationships. Following this earlier work, researchers probed the boundaries between close relationships: between friendships, family, and romantic relationships (Monsour 2002), particularly for lesbians and gay men (Stacey 2004; Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001). Beyond a focus on gays and lesbians, however, research about friendships in transgender and queer lives is limited (Galupo et al. 2014). Definitions of friendship as it relates to other close relationships also remain in flux, although a growing research field at the boundaries of friendship, around kinship (Tillmann 2014; Wilkinson 2014) and romantic relationships (Cronin 2015) shows promise. Debate about these definitional boundaries continues, as friendships are folded into the language of kinship and, more recently, some have argued that family members are folded into the language of friendship, a phenomenon Spencer and Pahl (2006) describe as "suffusion."

These studies of friendship focused on definitional debates, some of which were clearly located in specific communities, missed community determinants of friendship. In a second friendship literature theme, friendship researchers have focused on the *causes* of friendship with limited attention to friendship definitions, with some notable exceptions. Early sociological approaches to friendship have responded to causal questions of choice, making strong assertions that friendships are partially determined by institutional and community contexts (Adams and Allan 1999; Allan 1979, 1990; Bell and Boat 1957; Blatterer 2014; Eve 2002). And researchers of LGBTQ friendships argue that membership in LGBTQ communities generates, logically, LGBTQ friends, while these friendships then sustain LGBTQ in what Nardi calls an "ongoing dialectic" between friendship and community (1999:172). This "ongoing dialectic" depends in part on shared identities, a theme explored in LGBTQ friendship literature, although, again, these analyses are removed from community contexts. LGBTQ friendship researchers have explored, for example, within-identity friendships (Goins 2011; Hall 2005) and have sought to explain how cross-identity friendships are possible (Korgen 2002; Monsour 2002; Muraco 2012). Yet researchers have little to say about how these friendships relate to community.

For LGBTQ people, the rise in cross-identity friendships has been seen as evidence of the declining relevance of at least gay and lesbian identities (Ghaziani 2014:9), even as researchers have found that these cross-identity friendships reinforce heteronormative gender and sexual norms (Galupo et al. 2014; Muraco 2012; Ueno and Gentile 2015a). In Muraco's study of straight men and women's friendships with lesbians and gay men, these "intersectional friendships" (a term used to describe friendships that cross lines of gender and sexuality, for example, between lesbians and straight men and between gay men and straight women) both challenge and

recreate expectations about gender expression and behavior. In Muraco's research, and in research on LGBTQ friendships more generally, an understanding of the community context of these friendships is missing or beyond the scope of the project. For LGBTQ people, while friendship networks limited exclusively to within-identity contacts are rare (Muraco 2012), researchers still assume that the majority of LGBTQ friendships are with people who share a sexual or gender identity. Given changing LGBTQ identities and communities, friendship in the context of these changes is a barometer of LGBTQ community and requires in-depth analysis.

We can no longer assume that LGBTQ friendships generate a sense of LGBTQ community, or that LGBTQ community institutions generate LGBTQ friendships. And yet, the LGBTQ community landscape is partially determined by friendships, as clusters of people who clearly know each other gather at LGBTQ events, in LGBTQ-friendly spaces, and in places that are *not* marked as especially welcoming for LGBTQ people. But what *kinds* of friendships generate LGBTQ community? Two dimensions of friendship remain underexplored in the literature on LGBTQ friendships and communities: friendship *closeness* and friends' *identities*. In other words, are close friends more likely to create LGBTQ community? And given growing acceptance of LGBTQ in straight and cisgender[5] families and communities, do cross-identity friendships generate LGBTQ community, too? What might it mean if LGBTQ people's friendships with straight and cisgender people *centrally* sustain LGBTQ communities? I respond to these questions using the case of River City, where LGBTQ community is small but observable.

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[5] The term cisgender means that one's current gender identity matches the gender assigned at birth.

The Research Setting

     River City is an ideal location for understanding LGBTQ community and friendship processes, as it simultaneously demonstrates characteristics of smaller towns and larger cities. River City is a small, Midwestern, post-industrial city surrounded by green hills and farmland and bordered on one side by a large, active river. Its population has declined since its peak in the 1980s (U.S. Census 2010), and the nearest mid-sized city (with a population greater than 250,000) is more than an hour away by car. It operates as a hub for several small towns in the region, drawing nearby residents who come to River City to shop, connect with family, visit local parks, or see a movie at the independent theater or its larger, newer competitor. River City's downtown streets are active in the summertime with festivals and public music performances, as well as a sprawling weekend Farmers' Market. The city contains three primary neighborhoods divided sharply by class and race, as well as outlying communities connected straight to the downtown area via a series of four-lane highways. Despite its sometimes-urban feel, River City might also be characterized as a small town, as information about neighborhoods, businesses, churches, and other community institutions are communicated primarily by word of mouth (not, notably, through online services popular in larger cities, like the restaurant-rating app Yelp). Yet, anonymous dating apps and websites are popular, especially for gay men, which provide a measure of anonymity for LGBTQ people who may not wish to "be out." Regular LGBTQ social events are increasing in popularity, although no visible gay or lesbian bars currently exist in River City. For those seeking LGBTQ community beyond River City, options within a two-hour drive of River City include a metropolitan cluster of several small cities, a known-to-be-liberal city of about 250,000, and smaller cities of about 125,000 and 70,000. River City's population is about 90%

white (not Hispanic or Latino), 4% Black, 2% Hispanic or Latino, and 4% Asian, American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, or two or more races, and the median household income is about $47,500 (U.S. Census 2010),

A number of metrics suggest that River City is not an obvious, welcoming community for LGBTQ people. River City, according to Census data, has historically had one of the lowest proportions of gay male couples in the nation (Baumle et al. 2009) and is heavily Catholic. In the 2010 Census year, according to the Williams Institute, River City County's proportion of male same-sex couples is listed as zero (2016), suggesting that gay male couples may not be willing to be "out" in Census documents or aware that their households are counted. Despite progress toward LGBTQ equality, the proportion of gay male couples in River City remains low, relative to other cities in the region (The Williams Institute 2016). Like other small cities and rural towns (Brown-Saracino 2015; Johnson 2013; Kazyak 2012), same-sex female couples outnumber male couples, although Census data indicate fewer than three same-sex female couples per 1,000 households at the county level (The Williams Institute 2016). The proportion of same-sex couples in River City County, furthermore, is disproportionately lower than its population would suggest; in other words, other smaller counties within the state contain higher proportions of same-sex couples. Counties that are half, a quarter, and a fifth of the size of River City County contain proportionately more same-sex couples. At the state level, despite legal protections for lesbian, gay, and transgender people, River City's home state remains in the lower third of states by LGBT proportion of the population. Given the position of River City County within the state,

the proportion of LGBT individuals within the county is also likely to be low. I describe partici-

pants' perspectives on River City's ecological, symbolic, and social structural landscape (Hunter

2006) in more detail in chapter 1.

Methods

To assess LGBTQ identities, friendships, and community, I used a number of recruitment

strategies in locating participants. My aim was to analyze River City as a "case" (Small 2009), a

small city that contains an LGBTQ community that is small enough to observe yet large enough

to contain visible community events. I initially posted calls for interviews on craigslist, local

LGBTQ Facebook groups, and a BDSM social network, and I contacted LGBTQ community

leaders directly by email, phone, and Facebook message. I attended LGBTQ community events

and asked participants if they would be interested in being interviewed. Some LGBTQ River Cit-

izens enthusiastically responded to my call for interviews, actively shared my advertisements

with their networks, and put me in touch with friends and acquaintances I "really should" inter-

view. Additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling and follow-up postings

on social media. And while I posted flyers at local bars, coffee shops, grocery stores, and retail

establishments, it is worth noting that none of my contacts responded to my flyers. As interviews

proceeded, I remained attentive to the mix of identities included in my sample, aiming to inter-

view a range of participants across class, race, gender, age, and sexual identities, as well as part-

nership status, residential history, and connection to LGBTQ networks. In other words, I sought

interviews with people who were from River City *and* were recent River City transplants, those

who were single *and* partnered in various configurations, and were leaders in LGBTQ communities *and* kept their distance from LGBTQ community events.

This recruitment strategy yielded 52 interviews with 54 participants (two couples were interviewed together). Participants include a broad range of LGBTQ community members. In terms of sexuality, participants identified as gay men (14); lesbians (10); queer, fluid, and "whatever" (8); bisexual or pansexual (6); asexual (1); straight or heteroflexible (15); and polyamourous (2). In terms of gender, participants identified as cisgender women (27), cisgender men (16), genderqueer people (5), trans women (4), and trans men (2). [6] A discussion of terminology is included in Appendix B, and participants' descriptive statistics may be found in Appendix C. Participants also include non-LGBTQ allies (13, including 10 women and 3 men), community members who participate in LGBTQ events and have LGBTQ friends, but who do not necessarily identify as LGBTQ. Furthermore, the line between ally and LGBTQ community member is fuzzy at best, as especially bisexual participants' discourse about LGBTQ community suggested a self-understanding more in line with ally than community member identities. Most my participants were white (46), but some were not (8), and participants' implicit and explicit discussions of race suggested that they understand LGBTQ community in River City as limited to white LGBTQ people. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 59, with 20 participants who were under 30, and 34 participants between 30 and 59. Most participants were middle-class, as 16 indicated that they made $40,000 a year or more, while 14 made between $20,000 and $40,000, 17 made up to $20,000, and 7 declined to respond to this portion of the demographic survey. Most participants were employed (46), about half were partnered (28), and most had at least a college degree

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[6] Some participants belong to multiple categories, as in, for example, a transgender woman who identifies as a lesbian.

(34) and had lived in River City for more than six years (34). Interviews were audio recorded and

transcribed verbatim, and I analyzed transcripts using Excel (La Pelle 2004), a simple and intui-

tive tool for coding.

In each interview, I asked participants to complete a brief demographic survey and an

open-ended friendship map (Fischer 1982a), which helped me understand participants' under-

standing of their identities, friendships, and friendship networks and offered a visual network of

LGBTQ friends throughout River City. Participants were instructed to draw a map of their

friends and connections between their friends, with themselves at the center, and they indicated

as few as four and as many as fifty individual friends on these maps. I did not define "friendship"

for participants, even when pressed, and some participants included partners and family members

on their maps. Some friendship maps substantially overlapped, for example, when I interviewed

close friends. Other friendship maps were wholly distinct and included no friendships with any

other participants. Some participants grouped their friends into sub-categories, like friendships

from college, from work, or from community organizations. Others drew their maps like spokes

on a wheel, a network of relatively disconnected individuals.

I also conducted ethnographic observations at 36 community meetings, events, and loca-

tions. Community events included LGBTQ-specific events (like Pride picnics, panels, and work-

shops), events that are not LGBTQ-specific but likely to attract LGBTQ people (like screenings

of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, film festivals, and public storytelling events), and some

events one might think would not welcome LGBTQ people (like a Mixed Martial Arts event).

Whenever possible, I took notes on my cell phone during these events, and I recorded and devel-

oped my field notes immediately upon returning home. This broad-based approach allowed me

to observe friendship networks indicated on participants' maps in action and yielded surprising

insights about the landscape of LGBTQ community in River City, demonstrating, for example,

the "cliquey" social structure of LGBTQ community and bubbles of friends as mini-communities

surrounding LGBTQ participants. Furthermore, being a known LGBTQ community member

who lives in River City enabled me access to events that featured identifiable groups of LGBTQ

friends and other clusters of queer kinship, patterns that would not have been visible to me had I

focused on interviews and friendship mapping alone.

Chapter outline

The dissertation is composed of five chapters and a conclusion. In the first chapter, I ana-

lyze LGBTQ participants' discussions of LGBTQ community in River City, in light of a post-

gay community progress narrative. I first present evidence that River City falls under the rubric

of a closet-era community (Ghaziani 2014), a place where being "out" as a LGBTQ community

member is not preferred. I then identify evidence of post-gay community, as LGBTQ partici-

pants described River City as safe and comfortable, highlighting the presence of gay-friendly in-

stitutions and mixed-identity spaces. A closer examination of participants' discussions reveals

the presence of ambivalent community in River City, as LGBTQ participants felt safe as long as

they were not visible, identified disappointing cycles of LGBTQ events and organizations, and

described the "cliquey" social structure of LGBTQ community.

In chapter two, I analyze participants' responses to an interview question that asked them

to consider whether River City's LGBTQ community might be considered post-gay. Participants

offered three types of responses, suggesting their approaches to LGBTQ community. I call these

three responses inclusive, progressive, and exclusive, and they represent a range of perspectives

on whether and how LGBTQ people should assimilate into River City's normative mainstream

culture. These three responses demonstrate dimensions of ambivalent community that might be

explored in future research.

In the third chapter, I turn to friendships, analyzing the ways that LGBTQ participants

ambivalently explained that shared-identity friendships both *did* and *did not matter* to them. Par-

ticipants minimized identity differences and explained that shared identities were insufficient to

generate a friendship. Participants also explained that shared-identity friendships offered affirma-

tion and a shared sense of LGBTQ culture. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the lone-

liest LGBTQ participants, connecting friendships to relationship norms embedded in family-ori-

ented River City.

I discuss ally participants' involvement in LGBTQ community and friendships in the

fourth chapter. I outline the ways that allies offered "diversity resources" to their LGBTQ friends

and to LGBTQ community institutions, even as they consumed such resources from friends and

community. I demonstrate the ways that LGBTQ community cannot be understood fully without

analyzing the contributions of allies, but how these allies drew upon LGBTQ communities for

their own benefit must simultaneously be recognized.

In the fifth chapter, I consider whether and how friendships create community, and I

identify two ways that the friendship-community connection should be unpacked. First, I exam-

ine friendship closeness, as close friends and acquaintances offered differing connections to

LGBTQ community for LGBTQ and ally community members. Second, participants' roles in

LGBTQ community also affected how they connected, through friends, to community institutions. I also highlight participants' challenges to simplistic definitions of friendship, as some, for example, identified their friends as their community, while others included families of origin alongside chosen families on their friendship maps.

In the conclusion, I return to the overarching concepts of ambivalence and friendship as essential elements of LGBTQ community analyses. I challenge linear narratives of community progress centered in urban LGBTQ communities, and I highlight the ways that friendships may themselves constitute the future of LGBTQ community, for better or worse. Finally, I identify several ongoing changes for River City's LGBTQ community and for my participants. These shifts suggest a way forward in understanding how identity-based communities coalesce and disperse. These processes will continue to involve ambivalence among community insiders and outsiders and will require analyses of friendships as a key social institution.

CHAPTER 1: Progressive and conservative: Ambivalent LGBTQ community in River City

When I first arrived in River City to conduct focus groups about LGBTQ community, Brews was the first LGBTQ-friendly space a participant suggested. It is neither gay-owned nor visibly gay-friendly, but it is known as a space that welcomes River City's misfits, from liberal college professors to hippies and local activists to college students seeking a slightly crunchy vibe. A coffee shop and pub, Brews is perched just above street level in the heart of River City's tourist-centered downtown, and its dark interior includes an array of cozy nooks for coffee and beer consumption and conversation. I met Derek and his partner Sean, both white gay men in their 20s and employed in the healthcare industry, at Brews one late spring afternoon. Derek shared a story of his experience with employment discrimination in a nearby town, one that I sense could have been challenged legally. Despite these experiences, Derek held a surprising view of River City. He explained that, "I view [River City] as a progressive city. It's pretty pro-gressive, compared to what's around us."

Derek was not the only gay participant who described River City as "progressive" and "liberal," especially given the absence of self-identified gay men, or at least partnered gay men, in 2010 Census data (The Williams Institute 2016). But not everyone agreed. At a different downtown coffee shop, I talked with white, gay, partnered participant Kyle, who offered a con-trasting perspective, describing River City as "conservative" and not a place where he and his husband would choose to live in the long term. On the surface, Kyle and his partner are similar to Derek and Sean: young, partnered, upwardly-mobile gay men making their homes in River City. And, yet, their perspectives about River City, and their engagement with gay community, dif-fered significantly. While Derek and Sean generally did not attend LGBTQ community events,

they viewed River City as progressive. Kyle, however, understood River City to be conservative, yet he was highly involved as a leader in the LGBTQ youth group and in other community events and organizations. Their differing perspectives on River City and of LGBTQ people highlight a paradox in perspectives on LGBTQ communities: "progressive" contexts generate less LGBTQ community engagement, while "conservative" contexts create LGBTQ community involvement. These two perspectives also demonstrate a challenge in LGBTQ community research: how to interpret sometimes opposing perspectives on community acceptance and the ongoing need for LGBTQ community spaces.

In this chapter, I reconcile seemingly conflicting views of LGBTQ community in River City, a context that participants describe as simultaneously "progressive" and isolating. In my nearly two years attending River City LGBTQ community events, they were both exuberant and muted, raucous and subdued, large enough to challenge fire code and small enough to prevent achieving event goals. In some cases, events with the largest (proportional) crowd of LGBTQ participants have not been LGBTQ-focused, such as a recent series of public storytelling events that participant Robin confirmed as one of the gayest spaces she's seen in River City. These three types of events–muted meetings, explosive drag shows, and non-LGBTQ-focused storytelling–mirror the three phases of gay community Ghaziani (2014) discusses, "closet," "coming out," and "post-gay." The closet era, Ghaziani explains, is characterized by gays' and lesbians' fear and shame, hiding their identities, and feeling generally isolated and disconnected from others who share their identities (2014:8). The coming out era features gays and lesbians being "out" about their identities and forming networks of exclusively gay and lesbian friendships

(2014:8). Finally, in a post-gay era, gays and lesbians minimize their identities, embrace same-ness (and friendships) with straight people, and argue for acceptance into a heterosexual main-stream (2014:9-10).

I find evidence that all three phases exist simultaneously in the context of seemingly-hos-tile River City, denoting what I think of as a sense of ambivalence that I encapsulate in the con-cept of "ambivalent community." I argue that River City's LGBTQ community, like those in other small, Midwestern towns and cities, are well represented by such concept. Members of am-bivalent communities demonstrate emphatic mixed feelings, both desires for a sense of commu-nity *and* an acknowledgment that, perhaps, it is no longer necessary.

My aim in this chapter is to use Ghaziani's characterization of closet, coming out, and post-gay to consider what "kind" of community River City might be. I begin by describing River City from insiders' and outsiders' perspectives, suggesting that, by some metrics, River City is a closet-era community, that is, hostile and unfriendly toward LGBTQ people. I then offer contra-dictory evidence from participants that suggests that River City is a post-gay LGBTQ commu-nity in some ways quite similar to what Ghaziani observed in gay neighborhoods larger, more urban cities. To make this point, I analyze three dimensions of community (Hunter 1974, 2006)—individuals' sense of comfort and safety, LGBTQ institutions, and social networks. In a third section, I argue that LGBTQ communities in small cities such as River City may be better understood as cases of ambivalent communities—as LGBTQ communities that require an ongo-ing management of conflicting understandings of community as closet, coming out, and post-gay. In contrast to a linear narrative of progress suggested by Ghaziani's post-gay community

model, River City's LGBTQ community suggests that the closet, coming out, and post-gay eras persist simultaneously.

Closet River City, a "closed door type of town"

As I discussed in the introduction, an outsider's perspective on River City suggests a closet-era community hostile to LGBTQ people, and such messages are conveyed through mainstream media and through indicators of LGBTQ acceptance. In one example, participants' descriptions of River City reflect an understanding that the city is *seen* as Catholic, *ergo* conservative. Participants who migrated to River City described River City's hostile conservatism most strongly and were least interested in staying in River City in the longer term. For example, Zara, a white, transgender woman who moved to River City from a distant Midwestern state, described River City as an "intolerant closed-minded group of people." Kyle, a gay, Southern newcomer to River City, expressed hesitation about staying, stating: "I know that I couldn't live there forever - partially being the cold, partially being the conservatism. Especially the Catholic. It's very Catholic." Kyle moved to River City with his husband, who was relocated for work. Once there, Kyle quickly became involved in the local LGBTQ youth group, as well as other community-based initiatives. Kyle's description of River City as simultaneously "friendly" and "closed-minded" captures a sense of surface-level Midwestern friendliness that other participants noted. As Fia, a white, transgender participant who had returned to River City following years living throughout the Midwest, explained, "They're very restricted and reserved, if they don't know you. And it's like you're talking to a closed door. That's, that's very much how I describe [River City], it's a closed door type of town." Participants who migrated *from* River City made similar observations.

Kit, a young, white lesbian born and raised in River City but attending college at a nearby university, explained that River City is religious, as well as "conservative not in the sense of political views but conservative in the sense of just, mindset, ideas, social interactions, that kind of thing." River City's Catholicism was seen as an indicator of social conservatism, one that is, at least implicitly, not open and accepting of LGBTQ people.

In the popular press, River City acts as a foil to more sophisticated urban contexts across the country. As I noted in the introduction, River City appeared by name in 2016 presidential campaign news coverage and in an episode of a reality TV show. Here, too, participants contrast River City with "real" cities in the region and on the coasts, like Chicago, San Francisco, and Minneapolis. Karen, a white, transgender activist working to build LGBTQ community, summarized River City's status by describing cities like Chicago and Minneapolis as the "big boys," who were "all 14 and 18 and you're, like, 11." Karen's comment suggests the possibility that River City might one day grow to compete with larger cities, at least, in her eyes, in terms of local amenities.

Participants also spoke broadly about River City's hostility, overlapping discussions of race with discussions of gender and sexuality and referencing former and recent cross burnings—including one in 2016—alongside descriptions of River City's religiosity. River City might also be described as a "closed door type of town" in terms of race, perhaps more than gender and sexuality. While overwhelmingly white, segregation by race is very visible, as growing Black community organizations and public events are held largely in one neighborhood. White River Citizens demonstrate the kind of "colorblind" racism that has characterized American discourse about race in recent years (Bonilla-Silva 2006), and euphemistic terms for people of color

(such as "people from Chicago") dominate local discussions about crime. Despite the efforts of local business leaders and River City employees, it seems that little progress has been made.

And white community newcomers are warned away especially from River City's main Black neighborhood. Both work colleagues and acquaintances suggested I avoid renting a home within this "downtown" neighborhood because they described it as "unsafe." While there is little evidence to suggest that River City's downtown, or any neighborhood, is less safe than any other, or is less safe today than in the past, white River Citizens publicly lamented that they are afraid to walk downtown streets even in broad daylight. Despite this implicit and sometimes explicitly hostile context, organizations supporting Black, Latinx, and Pacific Islander communities are increasingly visible, drawing resources and volunteers from River City and nearby towns.

River City's LGBTQ community, too, remains largely segregated by race, as similar implicitly racist rhetoric emerges in group discussions, for example, and one-on-one conversations. LGBTQ participants of color explained that they left River City to travel to nearby cities in which they could engage with communities of color, while white LGBTQ participants could access LGBTQ events and organizations *either* within River City *or* in these nearby cities. LGBTQ community activities and spaces like drag shows at local bars were also attended largely by middle-class people, with some exceptions: the annual Pride picnic and LGBTQ support groups seemed well-attended by working-class LGBTQ people and families. However, poor and working-class LGBTQ people also tended to gravitate to organizations that were largely composed of working-class people and were not necessarily LGBTQ-friendly. In one example, working-class LGBTQ participants noted a local substance abuse recovery organization as a primary source of

community. In brief, LGBTQ people in River City demonstrated the same kind of friendship ho-mophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001) as non-LGBTQ people, associating largely with those who shared a racial, class, and gender identity.

Given the various indicators I have discussed, it would be tempting for researchers to lump River City with other rural, and hostile cities where LGBTQ people are forced to remain "in the closet," or perhaps just beginning to enter a "coming out" era, following more progres-sive cities. Evidence of post-gay community would thus be surprising. Following the logic of post-gay communities (Ghaziani 2014:8), we might expect LGBTQ community in River City to shift between these closet and coming out periods, demonstrated by minimal LGBTQ institutions (closet) and popular drag shows (coming out). In other words, we would not expect to find evi-dence of post-gay communities in River City. The logic here is that LGBTQ community mem-bers need community institutions and symbols to coalesce, and their absence indicates a closet *or* post-gay community state. In what follows, however, I argue that the markers of a post-gay com-munity are evident in River City, before turning to seemingly contradictory evidence demonstrat-ing the presence of markers of closet and coming out community periods, better described by ambivalent community.

Post-gay River City, "More progressive than anywhere else"

As the above discussion suggests, River City retains some elements of a closet-era com-munity. And, yet, the closing of Next Level, a visibly gay bar that Miguel explained disappeared due to "politics" among the owner and bar staff, is evidence of River City as a post-gay context (Ghaziani 2011, 2014). In addition to Next Level's disappearance, three key indicators of post-

gay community emerged in my research. The first indicator is participants' comfort and safety in River City, notably *not* an urban, gay enclave (Ghaziani 2014). The second indicator is the decline and decentering of gay institutions and symbols in favor of unmarked, more inclusive spaces. The third indicator is the incorporation of non-LGBTQ people into LGBTQ community.

"Open and accepting": Progressive, comfortable River City

In contrast to evidence suggesting River City's hostility toward LGBTQ community members, several participants described River City as accepting, liberal, and friendly toward LGBTQ people, especially compared to the previous history of treatment toward LGBTQ people in River City, and also how LGBTQ people are treated in other regions of the U.S. Some gay, lesbian, and transgender participants (notably, all white) described River City as explicitly "progressive." Robin, a white, lesbian participant, is a key example of such an approach.

While Robin is not a River City native, she and her partner worked hard to develop ties to an array of River City community organizations, and, together with their children, they have clearly made River City their home. Exuberant and effusive, Robin describes herself as a "hugger," and her love and enthusiasm for River City's Catholic culture is evident in her support for a relationship-based approach to community. She is no longer active in the Catholic church, although she described herself as "culturally Catholic." She explained that the "spirit of Catholicism" present in River City represented Catholicism "not as a religion but just as a way of life. That people really value people and relationships and community and kindness." Robin noted that she has "always loved [River City]," because "I feel like it's a lot more liberal and progressive, you know?" Robin's cultural Catholicism echoes that of a specific liberal, progressive, even

feminist community in River City: nuns. While a focus on nuns' significant role in progressive circles in River City is beyond the scope of this chapter, nuns share a kind of cultural queerness with lesbian participants like Robin, one that resonated with white, straight, but celibate, nun-in-training participant Nadine.

However, Robin's statement about "liberal and progressive" River City leaves an implicit, comparative context unnamed. As Robin's comment indicates, participants stressed River City's progressiveness *in relation to* two other contexts: River City in the past and River City compared to other towns and regions. For example, participants stressed River City's "progress" relative to specific timelines, typically 20 years. As Peter, a gay man with a long-term partner, noted, "thinking about where it's come from the last twenty years when I first was dealing with my [coming out], I think it's significantly come a lot further, and I think that's even just from a societal perspective has really happened."

Cishet[7] allies, a term for strong straight and/or cisgender advocates for their LGBTQ family and friends, also described River City's progressiveness, compared to the past. Shelley, long-time and well-known LGBTQ community ally who has performed more than thirty same-sex weddings in River City and neighboring towns, offered her feelings about River City: "This is certainly as much home to us as any place, and we love the people, it's a lovely city now, and lovely livable place, very livable and has been progressive and in a lot of things now, very different than when we came here originally." Paul, a straight man, drag queen, and active community ally who described his oft-mistaken-as-gay identity as "gay adjacent," offered a similar perspective:

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[7] The term "cishet" is short for cisgender and heterosexual and generally refers to non-LGBTQ people. I credit this term to one of my students.

If you were to come here twenty years ago, you would have wanted to leave right away…

Seriously, very homophobic, very racist, very close-minded, very backwards, a lot more

conservative… Now, I believe [River City] is actually fairly LGBT friendly.

Compared to nearby towns and River City's more conservative past, participants felt that River

City's progress demonstrates a more inclusive community for LGBTQ people.

Participants sometimes explicitly named the "anywhere else," comparing River City to

"the South" or to other small towns in the area, or to seemingly more dangerous larger cities like

Chicago. In other words, "anywhere else" could include small towns or large cities. Greg, in an

interview with his partner Steve, observed that, "I mean, for the most part, I feel safe here. [River

City] has its ups and downs, but that's anywhere, but I think it's more progressive than anywhere

else."

Some participants who migrated from nearby cities recognized River City's Catholic and

conservative reputation but did not see it as a barrier to staying in the longer term. For married

couple Steve and Greg, active membership in a local Protestant church helped them feel more

accepted in the larger River City community, despite its Catholic reputation. Steve, discussing

the benefits of his and his husband's church, explained that "a lot of people come to [River City],

they see that it's heavy Roman Catholic, and they kinda go, ehhhh, this is a really conservative

small town, I don't know." Steve had moved to River City from the Chicago suburbs to attend a

local college, met his husband through a gay social networking website, and he and his husband

have no interest in leaving. Both men are deeply engaged in River City's larger community or-

ganizations and appreciate River City's affordability and short commute time, *especially* relative

to their friends' experiences in Chicago. They see River City's conservative culture as largely

avoidable, through choice. Finding more, as he described them, "liberal" and "accepting" groups "requires you as the participant to seek that out. If you choose not to, you're not gonna find it," according to Steve.

Participants also explained that they felt relatively comfortable and safe in River City, especially compared to other urban communities. Notably, when white participants identified areas of River City in which they did not feel safe, those narratives at times aligned with implicit assumptions about race, rather than gender or sexuality. White LGBTQ participants euphemistically referred to racially-segregated "downtown" (Maddy) or "gang-related activity" (Jack) as making them feel unsafe. On the other hand, some white participants were explicitly critical of such framing. Paul, for example, described the specific neighborhood that others identified as unsafe, noting, "of course it happens to be more Black populated but, you know, when I drive by there like all I see is they're just sitting out on their porches watching. What, you know, pfft, big deal. I don't know if people just get like, 'oh my God, you know, they're like gangs' and I'm like, 'no.'"

Few participants identified specific places where they would not be comfortable, or places in River City that they would avoid due to their gender or sexual identities. Safety, to white participants, in particular, meant freedom from public harassment and physical violence. Teagan, a white woman who identified as "bisexual or something," explained that "I've lived in [River City] literally all my life… I've lived here for a long time, I have heard a lot of people say a lot of things about it, but I really really like it here. I think it's for me, it's always been a really comfortable, happy kind of place to be." Charlie, a queer woman of color, noted that her sense of physical safety in River City rivaled that of her small, paragon-of-liberal-arts college, compared

to other places she had lived, particularly in the South. For white, queer and genderqueer Leah, openly religious places felt less comfortable, but "other than that, I haven't really found any places that I'm not comfortable going." She felt that her "bulky" stature as a rugby player made her "intimidating," and her comments about River City suggested a less-welcoming comparative context. She observed that:

> I think just [River City] being an open and accepting community has really made it easy
> for me to live. I know in other areas, people don't always get that luxury but… for me in
> [River City], I haven't really found any areas where you know I go there and I'm holding
> my partner's hand and somebody says something to me about it.

For some participants, safety included a sense of recognition. Janine, a white, transgender, pansexual woman whose gender identity fluctuates between feminine and masculine expression, explained that she "feel[s] pretty safe," then offered the following story:

> I was at a corner at a stop light, and basically this woman comes out, and to the corner,
> she looks at me, like once or twice, she's like "you're the one that goes, has gone down to
> McDonalds all dressed up in that black dress, that real nice black dress." I'm like "yeah,
> um, that was me." I mean, had a real nice short conversation, right there on the spot at the
> corner, and you know, she said she actually talked about how she really liked it and all
> that, you know, the way I am, [that] I don't care, I'm willing to do that, go to some place
> like that all dressed up and she said I looked really good, as to say "well thanks so much."
> And it's like, we went our way. I mean, just briefly, but it made me feel really good, too.

Janine's sense of safety was bolstered by the affirmation she received by strangers in the community. Specifically, for Janine, explicit recognition based on her gender expression—that she

"looked really good"—facilitated a feeling of safety in River City. This kind of public recognition by a stranger was remarkable in River City, for Janine.

While Janine's sense of safety could be traced to a specific type of interaction, for others, comfort in River City was present, but more nebulous. Speaking about a particular downtown coffee shop, Colby explained that "I get this sense that they're LGBT friendly. It's not that they have done something specifically to make me think that way or, you know, not think that way. It's just like I feel comfortable there and I think they would be [friendly]." Safety for participants was multidimensional: it included freedom from harassment and a sense of at least potential affirmation and recognition, if not (yet) fully realized.

These narratives of comfort and progressiveness demonstrate a post-gay understanding of River City, a sense that most places in River City were safe and comfortable for LGBTQ people, who did not need to sequester themselves in LGBTQ spaces, even if River City is also a largely heteronormative place. Unlike a "coming out" phase in which LGBTQ people connect through LGBTQ institutions, or a "closet" phase in which LGBTQ people must hide their identities, participants agreed that River City as a whole was liberal and progressive, providing a safe place to hold their partner's hand or express their gender identity in public spaces.

"We've got some gay friendly places": Gay vs. gay-friendly institutions

Visible gay community in River City is limited largely to specific Pride events, online contexts like Facebook, and dating apps like Grindr and Scruff, although a small, recently-formed, and quickly-growing nonprofit is striving to "catalyze and sustain" elements of "the region's diverse LGBTQ+ and ally community" (River City Collective 2016). One of only two

River City organizations dedicated solely and explicitly to supporting LGBTQ people,[8] River City Collective's name and mission exhibit the kind of inclusivity and diversity that constitute a post-gay approach to identity (Ghaziani 2015). This approach emphasizes multiculturalism and inclusion of differences while minimizing LGBTQ people's identity specificity and experiences of inequality. Participants also identified the Center for Multicultural Community (CMC), an organization that houses LGBTQ youth and support groups and offers LGBTQ-specific ally training, as an LGBTQ-friendly organization. The CMC's mission is to "empower… all families and community members of [River City] to reach their potential and build unity out of diversity" (Center for Multicultural Community 2016). Aimed as an inclusive statement, the CMC's mission demonstrates both a post-gay and post-racial (Bonilla-Silva 2006) approach to difference, as specific identities are not named in the organization's mission or vision. The CMC's efforts to be as inclusive as possible may be the result of relatively small numbers of people who fall under the "multicultural" umbrella. However, an emphasis on unity and "all families and community members" also obliquely references River City's divisive, exclusive past and, like in a post-gay era, references inclusion rather than persistent inequality.

Ten participants (all LGBTQ) stated that LGBTQ-specific institutions or spaces are no longer needed. For instance, Peter, a white, gay participant whose River City LGBTQ community credentials are beyond dispute, lives with his long-time partner in a nearby, rural town that is so isolated that he is unable to use streaming services like Netflix due to poor internet availabil-

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[8] The second organization is River City Trans, which, unlike River City Collective, names the identity it supports in the organization title. River City Trans is an organization staffed entirely by Karen, a transgender woman who has become the most visible face of transgender River Citizens in local, regional, and national contexts.

ity. He works at a solidly middle-class, professional job in River City, has co-organized the annual Pride event for several years, and is generally known as a go-to LGBTQ community leader, even within his workplace. Peter argued that, "I don't think that you necessarily need to have a community center or an advocacy [sic] as much as it once was, because society has progressed a lot, and it's kind of second nature." Peter's knowledge of River City's gay community and its history is extensive, and his comment that an LGBTQ community center is no longer needed reflects a post-gay understanding of LGBTQ community in River City.

Colby, a young, chipper transgender man, is a local college student, and his perspective aligns with Peter's suggestion that LGBTQ institutions – in this case, Pride events – are no longer central to gay identities. Colby explained that:

It's like now people can be seen as individuals that are also part of the LGBT community but you don't need to be a part of that LBGT community for people to see you, if that makes sense? So you don't have to go to that Pride picnic for people to be like gay. You can be gay and people can see you as a person now and that's acceptable.

Despite Colby's and Peter's assertions that LGBTQ institutions are no longer central to LGBTQ lives, the recent appearance and growth of River City Collective indicates some desire for an LGBTQ organization. As noted above, however, RCC might itself be a post-gay organization like the Pride Alliance, the LGBT student organization Ghaziani describes (Ghaziani 2011), given its explicit inclusion of allies and absence of LGBTQ terminology in its name.

River City has hosted a small handful of gay bars, but, as in larger cities, they have closed. The *disappearance* of visible gay institutions like the gay bar Next Level also suggests a shift to post-gay community in River City. As in other gay communities like Chicago (Ghaziani

2014; Orne 2016), the closing of gay bars specifically marked a shift in gay community for River City participants. Long-time River City community members recalled between one and three bars that opened and closed in rapid succession in the previous twenty years, notably the same period through which, participants suggested, River City was evolving toward LGBTQ inclusivity. Next Level, the most frequently-mentioned gay bar, was noted with particular nostalgia among former patrons and bar employees.

Miguel is a Midwestern native, having grown up in small communities throughout the region. When I interviewed him, he had recently returned to River City with his partner of several years and was working to re-establish the gay networks he left behind when he moved away. Soft-spoken Miguel self-identified as Latino and German, both gay and queer, and he and his partner quickly became known as a young, energetic, power couple in the community, co-founding RCC with a group of friends. Miguel's nostalgia for Next Level, a now-closed gay bar located downtown, was palpable, and he described Next Level as "the hub of [River City]. It was the gay safe place, so like it being around for so long, everybody who moved away would always come back and visit if their family still lived here. You'd always seem familiar faces or new people. Like, they would just come. They had a place to go to." In contrast, Miguel lamented that, at the time of the interview, there were no explicit gay bars in River City. He explained that, while some gay-friendly bars existed, "there's no safety zone [sic] or anything like that. There's no rainbow flags in front of anywhere, claiming to be a gay bar, like they were before." Next Level's closing, and the absence of visibly marked gay bars in River City, suggest a transition to post-gay community similar to such transitions in urban gay communities.

While explanations of why gay bars have closed in River City range from internal "politics" (Miguel) to bar raids in the early 1990s (Steve and Greg), the consensus among gay participants was that gay community was simply too small and unwilling to sustain an exclusively gay bar. As Nate suggested, "The problem is when we have such small numbers, you have everybody, you only have a very few people to choose from, you know." While the popularity of drag shows challenges this "small numbers" argument, LGBTQ participants listed non-gay bars they frequented in River City, suggesting that LGBTQ people did not feel the need to patronize exclusively gay bars.

In another example, Shelley, an LGBTQ ally, explained the decision to close the local chapter of Parents and Friend of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) in favor of a more broadly focused "Caring Community" group housed within the CMC. She asserted that, "I think as times have gotten more relaxed, you know, there's been less and less need for the way it has been." She noted that the need for parents, friends, and family to seek support in supporting their LGBTQ kin was in decline, and more *LGBTQ* people were attending the PFLAG group than parents and friends. "Caring Community" now meets quarterly, and attendance is slim and mixed between supportive and LGBTQ participants.

Known spaces for LGBTQ community members included two "gay-owned" bars that explicitly did not advertise themselves as gay bars. Participants learned about them through word-of-mouth and assurances that the bar *owners* were gay and lesbian. After I asked Kyle, a newcomer to River City, whether he knew of any gay bars in River City, he responded, "Not that I know of. There are only two that I've been told were gay friendly. I've been to one, it is owned by a lesbian but it's not a gay bar by any means. Because there's not, there's not one indication

anywhere visibly... Just even a little flag, nothing. That I've found." Kyle's comments echo Miguel's in the noted absence of gay symbols, such as rainbow flags, marking gay spaces. Peter explained, "We've got some gay friendly places in [River City] from a bar atmosphere perspective. [Barney's], which is [a] gay owned bar, but they don't really focus on just the gay community, has been always receptive. I mean, I've been in there, there's street people in there, nobody's really showed offense. I know some of the local drag queens can go down there and not have any concern." Barney's function as a gay-friendly, but not explicitly gay, bar that welcomes a range of patrons, including presumably poor "street people," suggests a transition to post-gay community in River City.

Barney's is located in one of River City's historic downtown neighborhoods, just across the street from a block that includes an upscale restaurant, book store, and coffee shop, sandwiched between a tanning salon and crisis pregnancy center. Its interior light is best described as golden, and a smattering of couches, tables, and chairs occupy the space between the front door and the bar. Patrons gather to play Cards Against Humanity and trivia in front of the fireplace, or enjoy a pizza procured from one of the upscale restaurants across the street. Callie, a queer woman and Barney's patron who drives a half-hour from her home in a nearby town to spend time there, echoed Peter's inclusive language when she described Barney's as a "queer bar." Callie's distinction between a gay bar and a queer bar summarizes the distinction between gay and gay-friendly spaces in River City and hint at Barney's as a post-gay "queer" space. As she explains:

> I've gone to some of the Pride events [River City] puts on, or like drag shows and things
> like that, it still feels very um... gay white male? [laughs] Dominant, so there's that too,

which, I was having this conversation with somebody, they were like, well what's the dif-

ference between a gay bar and a queer bar? I was like... there's differences! [laughs]

There are differences, and I feel, I think it's that kind of a feel right, where it's like where

[River City] maybe feels, in any of those events feel very gay, as opposed to them feel-

ing... you know, like the difference between a gay bar and a queer bar, where it's like gay

white male, not so much anyone else.

When I asked what distinguished a gay bar from a queer bar, Callie explained that a

queer bar would include "non-gender bathrooms," a more "chill" and "come as you are" atmos-

phere, and would be more welcoming specifically to women. "I think they [the bar owners]

didn't want the focus to be just on gender or sexuality, but also on race where it's like just any-

body can come and be comfortable." Here, Callie's use of the word "queer" operates as more in-

clusive and multicultural, echoing a shift toward the use of queer as umbrella term, rather than

queer signaling non-normativity (Casey 2004; Ryan 2016; Warner 1993, 2000; Wortham 2016).

Paul's description of Barney's echoes Callie's: "So you got the whole gay straight alliance hap-

pening there. Um, and there's never any judgment ever, you know, it's just nice. It's my new

utopia."

Inclusive (but gay-friendly) bars, or queer bars, then, offer opportunities for a range of

people to interact, spaces that are not exclusive along lines of sexuality, gender, and race, accord-

ing to some. Spaces like Barney's, a gay-owned "queer bar," demonstrate inclusion, a key ele-

ment of post-gay community, and these spaces are defined more by their openness than their ex-

clusive focus on shared gay (or LGBTQ) identities. This inclusion, according to participants, is

meant to encompass specific identities heretofore excluded from white, gay community spaces:

women, transgender people (symbolically welcomed by the "non-gender bathrooms," as Callie suggested), people of color, and straight people. "Queer bars" like Barney's might be considered a quintessential post-gay space, places where all identities are welcome, if minimized. The line between inclusion and invisibility is quite thin indeed, as "come as you are" may also be interpreted as "come as you are" (as long as you are not too "out"). How such spaces demonstrate a shared value of inclusivity, and whether queer bars like Barney's are as inclusive as some patrons claim, remains an open question. Participants' discussion of spaces like Barney's as inclusive and multicultural, rather than oriented around gay identity, demonstrate the possibility of post-gay spaces in River City.

<u>"They're at the drag show and having a blast": Cishet allies in gay community</u>

Shifts in community institutions emphasized inclusivity of non-LGBTQ community members by minimizing gender and sexuality-based differences. Participants' descriptions of gay-friendly bars and LGBTQ-focused organizations reflect this inclusive approach to community. Drag shows, specifically, have become wildly popular in River City in recent years, and two distinct drag groups regularly hold shows at local venues. Whether drag shows are examples of LGBTQ community spaces is a question open for academic debate (Rupp and Taylor 2003; Stone 2009), although I spotted a number of LGBTQ community members at the drag shows I attended, both at a casino bar and at the Warehouse, a local bar known for supporting progressive causes. While several participants included drag shows in their lists of LGBTQ events, they also remarked on the overwhelming presence of people they took to be straight at these shows. Kyle,

who later became an active drag performer in one of River City's two drag groups, noted that he has "been surprised at the people that come to the drag shows here." He went on:

> They're clearly straight couples which, nothing, no judgment. But then it'll be like just, and this is me stereotyping a hundred percent, but the people who normally are the ones yelling, "Hey queer," out of a window, they look like that and then they're at a drag show and having a blast; having a drink and tipping the drag queen. And I really hope that they go home and are just as open about it as they are in that dark room.

My observations at drag shows echo Kyle's description. At one packed drag show held at the Warehouse, I noted a group of white young women who I understood to be straight closest to the stage, dancing and standing on chairs, waving arms and clapping along with the music (and tipping the drag queens). Just behind them were a few straight men, who, judging by their physical interaction with them, may have been their boyfriends or spouses. The men stood awkwardly and occasionally placed hands and arms around their girlfriends and wives, to signal (both of) their straightness. Just behind the phalanx of straight girls was a layer of gay men, some dancing enthusiastically, some quite young, and some older, standing around and bopping slightly, eyeing each other. My field notes from other drag shows reflected the same kind of spatial orientation: straight women closest to the stage, surrounded by their partners, with a ring of known gay community members toward the edges of the space.

Participants noted the general inclusion, and centrality, of straight people at drag shows, as well as the acceptance of straight people within River City's drag culture. Some also noted the surprising acceptance of drag culture among straight people in River City. Paul, a straight, white, and active LGBTQ ally, in some ways exemplifies this straight acceptance of drag culture. I

shared a meal with Paul and his wife in their middle-class home in a quiet residential neighborhood, and Paul and I sat at their dining room table for our interview. Bald, with sparkling blue eyes, a contagious smile, and a warm personality, he connected his life's philosophy to the contemporary political moment, explaining, "if you look at Donald Trump, I try to be the opposite." Paul described himself as "gay adjacent," noting that "I should have been born a gay man." In fact, Paul was often identified as gay based on his gender presentation, which he described as more "open and expressive" than typical straight men. Paul grew up on a farm in a nearby town, "population like seventy," is a college graduate, and loved science fiction, proudly showing me his enviable room full of science fiction paraphernalia in his basement. Paul's love for his children and his community was also palpable, and he functioned as a local drag mentor for several LGBTQ young people. Paul is a straight drag queen, a "comedy queen" and a "bit of a ham" who "like[s] to make people laugh" with his campy, hilarious performances. Paul emphasized his straight friends' acceptance of his drag persona, describing his straight, male neighbors as "totally great guys. You know, they've seen me in drag, they think it's, you know, awesome, they, you know, so it's, it's you know. I mean, the one actual neighbor, she saw me driving in drag once and was honking at me and waving, you know, so, it's, it's great."

Drag shows may be seen as archetypal markers of a "coming out" phase (Ghaziani 2014), given their centrality as indicators of visible, gay community (Rupp and Taylor 2003). However, LGBTQ participants' comments in my research suggest that they may also be seen as evidence of a post-gay community, or a community space of sexual transgression, but not *just* for gay people. For example, some participants argued that drag performances are too straight to be considered LGBTQ institutions. Fia summed up a critical approach to drag shows as gay community,

noting that she was "surprised by the number of drag shows [in River City], but on the other hand I'm not surprised because drag shows are not really a sign of LGBT community at all." Fia explained that:

> It's almost like objectification of the LGBT community. That drag shows are kind of like straight people go to drag shows, it's almost more common, you, you'll, generally you'll find far more straight people at a drag show than you will LGBT people. You'll, you usually find some LGBT people, usually they know the performers, and that's why they're there, um, and, you know, there's, there's that sense of it, it's very voyeuristic. Uh, very exhibitionist… And, uh, it's uh, you know, a hyperbole expression of femininity, which isn't really femininity. Um, so, it's... drag shows are not a marker of LGBT communities.

Drag shows, in other words, may be an example of both coming out *and* post-gay community. While drag shows in River City offer opportunities to build gay community among the performers (as Steve and Greg suggested), they are also spaces that emphasize straight people's consumption of transgressive gender performances (according to Fia). Fia's observations echo previous research on sexual (and gender) transgression. For example, these spaces offer bounded opportunities for subversion, but ones that ultimately recreate the sexual and gender systems they aim to challenge, as in the case of *carnaval* in Brazil (Parker 1991). Drag shows clearly blur the boundaries between largely (but not exclusively) gay performers and largely (but not exclusively) straight audience members, but drag shows in River City are also a straight-inclusive space. Furthermore, for some participants (especially trans women participants like Fia and Karen), drag shows were spaces of exclusion for LGBTQ people, places they would not go as members of River City's LGBTQ community. Fia's and Kyle's comments suggest the risks associated

with straight inclusion in presumed LGBTQ spaces: a lack of fully inclusive LGBTQ commu-

nity, and the limitation of sexual and gender transgressions to drag spaces. Drag shows in River

City are one example of the kinds of straight inclusion in gay spaces demonstrated in communi-

ties shifting toward a post-gay era (Ghaziani 2014:253-4). I provide additional evidence of this

shift toward a post-gay era in River City in my discussion of friendships in chapter 3.

To test the limits of a post-gay River City, I attended an event I thought might be the least

gay-friendly in town: a Mixed Martial Arts match at a downtown arena. While gay men and les-

bians likely peppered the audience, I have no way of knowing whether this is true. If any

LGBTQ people attended the MMA match, they remained gender-normative and, thus, invisible,

and I identified none of my research participants, including allies, at the arena. Displays of heter-

osexuality and "fag discourse" (Pascoe 2007) were evident around me, as in the young, white

man seated immediately to my right, who screamed the incongruous phrase "cowboy faggot!" at

one of the fighters opposite his friend in the ring. Gender-normative comments emerged from the

woman seated above me, as well, who shouted "shake your money maker!" at her daughter, a

"ring girl" who held up signs indicating the number of each round. I later wondered whether an

exploration of Grindr data during the timeframe of the match would reveal a high proportion of

gay men active on the app, suggesting a layered kind of gay community technologically possible

in ambivalent LGBTQ communities like River City.

I would have a hard time describing the MMA match as gay-friendly and, yet, I found

myself wondering whether the presence of gay and lesbian, if not transgender (Thomas 2015),

community members in the audience would have suggested that River City is fully post-gay or

closeted. The MMA match highlights the substantial overlap between post-gay and closet eras in

River City. In other words, if LGBTQ people invisibly attended the MMA match, did they feel their gender or sexual identities were irrelevant in those spaces, or did they feel the need to hide them to remain safe? In public spaces like MMA matches, what, truly, is the difference between closet and post-gay?

Given the above evidence, River City could be seen as post-gay, especially if we take Fia's comments that drag shows are *not* LGBTQ community institutions seriously and consider gay "sexy community" (Orne 2016) possibly forged at a MMA match. Participants noted the presence of non-LGBTQ people in LGBTQ community spaces, formerly-gay institutions have shifted to gay-friendly ones, and LGBTQ participants indicated River City's "progress" and their comfort throughout the city. Focusing on three dimensions of community—individuals' sense of comfort and safety, LGBTQ institutions, and social networks—reveals the ways River City is post-gay. However, a fuller picture of participants' comments requires an acknowledgment of multiple community approaches I reconcile in the concept of ambivalent community. Examining these three community dimensions more closely suggests that participants felt *both* safe and un-safe, *both* declining and emerging institutions, and *both* straight-oriented and "cliquey" social networks.

Ambivalent LGBTQ community: "It's both and*""*

As I argued in the introduction, ambivalent community acknowledges the complexity of individuals' sense of connection to LGBTQ community. Jack exemplified this sense of complex-ity when he acknowledged his desire to both be himself, as a transgender man and seminarian, and to feel recognition for his identity. Jack's assertion that LGBTQ community in River City is

"both *and*" captures this simultaneous desire for LGBTQ community and for a time when such community is not needed. In participants' discussion of LGBTQ community, they frequently juxtapose closet, coming out, and post-gay frameworks, and in their comments we see that community is never fully realized *and* never fully absent. In this section I revisit the three dimensions of post-gay community demonstrated in River City: comfort and safety, the decline of gay institutions, and the social structural, "cliquey" landscape of LGBTQ community.

Not "flamboyantly, rah-rah-shish-koom-bah gay": (Dis)comfort, (un)safety, and (in)visibility

Discourses of safety and comfort in River City were often coupled with caveats. Colby, the young, transgender man, and college student, offered an explanation of safety in stealth[9] *and* his greater fear in contexts where he was "out" as a transgender man. He stated that:

> I only feel safe because most people in [River City] don't know [that I'm trans]. Like [my university] community knows and I actually feel less safe with everyone knowing almost. Like I know there's people I don't feel, I don't know, I'm always scared that somebody's gonna to decide to act out or get violent towards me.

Colby's unrelentingly positive approach to life and vast friendship network (including 35 named friends on his friendship map) belied his fears about violence toward transgender people, fears he felt could be realized in River City. Remaining invisible as a member of LGBTQ community was key to other participants' sense of safety. Some participants located their sense of safety in contrast to more visibly flamboyant LGBTQ community members. Explaining why he and his husband felt comfortable in River City, Steve explained that "I mean maybe it's because, I mean

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[9] "Stealth" or "going stealth" refers to the ongoing process of not revealing one's transgender identity, for example, in the workplace (Schilt 2011).

in talking in like LGBT terminology, him and I can both pass, in the sense that we're not, you know, flamboyantly, rah-rah-shish-koom-bah gay, you know? So we can pass, so we, I don't look at it, I don't feel the need to have to be in a queer community type of area." While trans participants going "stealth" and gay participants "passing" as straight are not equivalent strategies (Schilt 2011), both suggest a fear of being visible as LGBTQ people in River City.

Mark, a gay, single man who is planning to leave River City as soon as he can, was critical of this approach, and his comments challenge the level of safety even for normatively gendered LGBT people. He reflected that:

I even wonder for those folks who are able to, who are gay or lesbian and fit the stereotypical roles and physical features of those sexes. I wonder how many of them have actually had real conversations with the people they surround themselves with would find affirming answers when they would ask the question of, "what if your son or daughter was gay or would you want to have a son or daughter that's gay?" I think that there is a perception that there is more acceptance then there really is. And I don't think that's the case.

Participants' comments suggest a comparative context in which safety both is and is not possible: passing, being stealth, or generally being perceived as normative provides some protection (probably), while being "out" and identifiable as LGBTQ may make for uncomfortable conversations, risks of violence, and, as Leah suggested, a loss of a job, especially in a religious context. While River City's home state provides some legal protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, no federal protections for LGBTQ people exist at this writing, and

many LGBTQ people fear that the rise of religious exemptions will affect their future employment.

As these comments suggest, post-gay and closet community phases become nearly indistinguishable, as safety is contingent on invisibility and normativity. One symbol of lesbian and gay identities that participants used to describe this line was holding hands with a same-sex partner. Some participants shared narratives of hand holding with a same-sex partner as a marker of a sense of safety, as Leah's comments in the above section indicate. Participants also stated that holding hands in public was becoming newly possible. For Shelley, strong LGBT ally, "I'm actually now seeing on the streets people holding hands, which is something, when you talk to the couples who've been together, even those who've gotten married, they would never show public affection, same-sex couples, but that's beginning to happen, and I'm glad for that." Others explained that they would not hold their partner's hand, or that others had shared fears about hand holding. Callie, speaking about Keith, one of Barney's owners, explained:

> Part of the reason he even opened the bar was that once the gay bar closed, he and his boyfriend had no place to go that they felt comfortable. So they opened their own bar. Like that was absolutely part of the reason that they did that, because they would go to other places, and they would hear people saying things, or whatever, and they just didn't feel like they could be in public, and be themselves, or like hold hands, or like you know, any of that kind of stuff, and like feel safe.

Callie further described the contexts where same-sex couples might not feel safe expressing affection through hand-holding or kissing, like the dog park or "just going for a walk." Colby recalled holding hands with his then-lesbian girlfriend at the local fair, "and like people were like

scoffing, like, agh, lesbians." Hand holding, a simple gesture between partners, operated as an ambivalent marker of *both* safe *and* unsafe community for LGBTQ and ally participants.

"Explosive" and "Pooping out:" The rise and fall and rise of LGBTQ institutions and events

When I arrived in River City, my first year of research revealed a small, but growing, number of LGBTQ events and institutions. Drag shows were just beginning to be performed again, after a brief absence, at a local fraternal club. Participants described a kind of frustratingly cyclical LGBTQ community landscape. On the one hand, long-term LGBTQ community members reflected on the feeling of community from a handful of LGBTQ-specific events. Robin, for example, described recent Pride picnics and a local, by all accounts well-attended LGBTQ conference as times "where that part of me felt very free." She further described her feeling at the conference: "It was all of the local gay people coming together and not fighting, not being catty. Just enjoying their time together and some connecting and you know I mean generally positive things happening." On the other hand, some LGBTQ community members lamented the sense of loss, of lack of community, and complacency following some of these events. Robin's reflections about LGBTQ events in River City are telling:

> Okay so what seems to have happened, so this is even in the nine years I've been here. There are people who sort of rise up, take some leadership, and then whatever it is disintegrates. Maybe it's the bar, maybe it's [the conference], maybe it's [Pride events]. You know whatever it is, there's some sort of volunteer leadership that comes up to try to do something good in and or with the gay community that then falls apart. I mean that's sort of the pattern.

LGBTQ events and institutions, in other words, seemed to rise and fall in a noticeable cycle, rather than follow a clear trajectory from coming out to post-gay. Karen, transgender activist and organizer of River City Trans, also described this cyclical community process. She pointedly asserted that people who "come from other walks of life" should decide to stay in River City to create community. Speaking about both the broader River City community and "LGBT community," she explained that:

> We don't keep that nucleus healthy, and if it doesn't stay healthy and growing, it doesn't catch on, and it never gains the traction to get so big that you can't knock down, to get to that place where, okay, we are strong. We never get to that place where we're strong. We start things, and we do the best we can with them, [and they] poop out.

While Karen referred to a "nucleus" of LGBTQ people, this idea might also be understood as institutionalized LGBTQ community. In other words, without *long-standing* LGBTQ institutions, a persistent sense of "strong" LGBTQ community is missing in River City.

Other long-term members of LGBTQ community referenced recent, popular LGBTQ events and their sense of frustration that things had quieted down in recent years. For Peter, who led Pride event efforts in recent years, this sense of frustration and loss was most keenly felt following the well-attended LGBTQ conference. Shelley, LGBTQ ally, summarized the ambivalent feeling about LGBTQ events in River City. Speaking specifically about the conference, which she explained was "really sort of like coming out gathering in [River City], in a lot of ways," Shelley described the challenges with the conference and the "explosive" feeling of the conference itself. She explained that "we had issues because it was a very, the community was very bifurcated, at least, bifurcated, but it was not cohesive, as you would expect…. And so that one

thing isn't enough to pull the whole group together." Despite its challenges, Shelley also noted that the conference "was just the right thing at the right time, it was one of those explosive kinda things that happened and people from different colleges and from different businesses and… just people gravitated, and it just came together." The temporary togetherness of the conference seemed to be waning in the first year of my research in River City.

However, the increasing number of planned LGBTQ-themed and -oriented events and organizations suggests that perhaps LGBTQ community is again coalescing in River City, especially in the last year. The first indicator that this may be occurring was the incredibly popular drag show in early 2016, described in the introduction, the culmination of an increasing frequency of drag shows on the events calendar in River City.[10] In contrast to previous years in which Pride events included a weekend picnic and single drag show, the 2016 series of Pride events were organized by different groups and include at least three picnics, two of which are youth-focused, in addition to River City Collective's Pride night and at least one Pride-focused drag show. According to River City Collective's online calendar, five LGBTQ-focused events were scheduled for one summer month alone. These five events do not include ongoing, regularly scheduled LGBTQ support activities, especially organized within the CMC; the LGBTQ+ youth group and adult support groups met each week, although their meeting frequency has declined in early 2017. Whether the most recent LGBTQ events and organizations represent a longer-term institutionalization of LGBTQ community in River City remains an open question. River City Collective's efforts to institutionalize include registering nonprofit paperwork, fundraising, twice-weekly meetings, and nonprofit board development, although leaders admit that

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[10] I have attended six drag shows in four separate venues during my time in River City.

they do not intend to stay in River City. The "pooping out" risk, it seems, is present, although these and other institutionalization efforts suggest that community coherence through this organization could occur.

Follow-up conversations with long-term LGBTQ community members demonstrate some skepticism about the future of organizations like River City Collective, and their hesitation given the history of LGBTQ community in River City suggest a sense of ambivalence about the River City LGBTQ community's future. LGBTQ community in River City seems on the cusp of a simultaneous "coming out" *and* "post-gay" phase, given both the rise of LGBTQ events and fears that community coalescence will decline again, if leaders exit River City.

<u>"The recipe is not intact": The social structural, "cliquey" landscape of LGBTQ community</u>

LGBTQ community members' concerns about community decline related to their overall sense of LGBTQ community as fractured and "cliquey." Fia described LGBTQ community in River City as "sparse," also asserting that "there definitely is a community here. It's kind of slightly disjointed. And it doesn't seem like, with many people, the LGBT community is their primary concern." Steve and Greg echoed each other's descriptions of gay community in River City, describing it as "terribly fractured." For Mark, at the time of our interview, he asserted: "There is no gay community here. There is but it's cliquey in a way, and there is not unified like let's all come with our differences and look at the whole and see where we can leverage our diversity to help improve the life of a gay and lesbian, transgendered, queer person living in this city." Paul, LGBTQ ally and straight drag queen, also described the "cliques" he saw in River City:

Even within the LGBT community, there's strife. I see kind of cliques with different

groups and it's, you know, too bad. You know, I just want to say, you guys gotta all just

get along, come on. But, you know, I mean everyone is like that so is it fair to say that

they shouldn't do it just because that they're an LGBT community, maybe not.

Describing the "larger cultural force at play" in River City keeping LGBTQ community

disconnected, Robin noted that "That the ingredients for the recipe are not here, I don't even

know what the ingredients are. But the recipe is not intact." Robin's comments suggest that indi-

vidual people, even small group "ingredients" of LGBTQ community exist in River City, while

the chemistry needed to bring these groups together through a holistic "recipe" was missing. For

these LGBTQ community leaders, most with extensive knowledge of LGBTQ community his-

tory in River City, community felt disconnected and not unified.

And, yet, even as participants described the disjointed landscape of LGBTQ community,

they also expressed a desire for some kind of coming together. Participants' desire for some

sense of LGBTQ community suggests ambivalence about the reality of LGBTQ community and

its necessity, or possibility. Colby explained that "I just feel like there's people out there who

would be a part of something if they knew it was there, and if it was open and I feel like there are

like little groups, like kind of spotted throughout that would come together if they had something

to pull them together." Maddy's desire for community was not necessarily limited to LGBTQ-

specific events, but she hoped for shared spaces with LGBTQ people. After stating that she

"wish[ed] there was more of a community where I could meet other people," she explained the

need for such a community:

Just so you don't feel so alone and so isolated and like, there is definitely something to say of people sharing a common experience, and going through similar things, even if these groups or hangouts don't revolve around specified LGBT issues just knowing that this other person has gone through similar things or shares a similar worldview to you, to some respect, you already know you have this common ground, and just to meet new people… I think it's important to have other people that identify that way in some respect as well so you can talk if you need to talk and they will know and have experienced similar things to you.

Robin, too, wanted a sense of community, stating that "And so it's like yeah we really need each other for support and just to know we're there and to not feel alone. Just to increase our sense of safety and belonging." Finally, Mark's speculation about his unmet need for LGBTQ community again suggests an approach to community that could be read as post-gay *and* closeted. He explained that he:

Would want us to better collectively understand the lived experience of the folks, and intentionally try to do what the [Black Men's Community] is doing for African American or Black children. Let's do that for people who identify with different sexual orientations or gender identity. But we don't. And so maybe there isn't a need. I know they've tried to start two gay clubs and they closed. Now is that because there's safety issues and people don't feel proud or safe to come and support those establishments? Or is it because people here are more interested in drag queens? But I guess they have that, so I don't know. I

just... Maybe people feel that the collective thing is not necessary. Because nobody is be-

ing killed, nobody is being murdered. You know they think about these worst-case sce-

narios but what about like just your quality of life? Feeling okay and I don't know.

Mark's reflections suggested ambivalence about LGBTQ community through the example of gay

clubs, a well-known source of gay community and collective identity (Armstrong 2002). Ulti-

mately, for him, and for other young, single LGBTQ people in River City, this sense of fractured

community lead him to make plans to leave River City in search of a more unified, accessible

community. However, Mark's comments pre-dated the 2016 mass murder of 49 people at Pulse,

a gay nightclub in Orlando, on Latinx night, an example of a "worst-case scenario" that gener-

ated a sense of community, discussed below.

Mark's intention to leave River City contrasts with other participants' commitment to

staying and investing time in LGBTQ community institutions. These contradictory approaches to

LGBTQ community highlight the limitations of a linear, post-gay approach to LGBTQ commu-

nity. In sum, LGBTQ community members in River City demonstrate post-gay, coming out, and

closet community characteristics that are better understood under the concept of ambivalent com-

munity. Ambivalent community includes, in the case of River City, senses of comfort and safety

alongside desires to remain invisible, gay-friendly but not visibly gay LGBTQ organizations

alongside cyclical processes of community growth and decline, and popular, ally-inclusive drag

shows alongside "cliquey," isolating social landscapes. A post-gay analysis of River City makes

coalescing LGBTQ community events difficult to analyze; ambivalent community helps us un-

derstand how such events occur. I conclude by sharing one such community event to demon-

strate what an ambivalent approach to community enables.

Conclusion: Catalyzing ambivalent community

Following the shootings in Orlando in mid-June of 2016, I joined a small group of community members gathered to organize a vigil to honor the 49 victims. The evening was warm and steamy, but the downtown square, the location of the first River City Pride march back in the 1980s, was already covered mostly in shade. The large group of about 70 volunteers, recruited in the span of five days, began showing up early, and Mark, ever a public crier, was consistently moved by their physical and emotional labor throughout the evening. We set up the 25 easels, clipping the 49 glossy, professionally produced posters of those killed to sheets of foam board. We discovered the boards kept blowing off the easels, and we improvised, duct- and masking- and packing-taping them to the easels. We tested the sound system. We unpacked the candles, setting them up on a table. We put the volunteers to work on these small, mundane tasks, volunteers like the mom with her young-adult child, whose gender identity I could not assume. I watched them, the young person, throughout the evening, wordlessly carrying boxes, posters, and generally being useful without complaining, even though I would have, at their age. A long-time, gay community member who has organized many a festival event arrived with 500 bottles of water, plastic tubs, and ice to cover all, and he and his team set them up underneath a tree near the edge of the park.

Mark gathered the volunteers in one place to read them his instructions. There were young folks, older folks, women and men and genderqueer folks, River Citizens and people traveling back to River City, their home town, from a large, nearby city, a car full of queers whose fashionable gender expression suggested a more urban home. Participants, overall, expressed

their gender in a panoply of styles: they had a shaved head with a blue mohawk perched atop, shaved head with a baseball cap, wearing shorts and sneakers, nose rings and hair spray, middle-class, middle-aged mom clothing, summer dresses and khaki shorts and tee shirts, sunglasses, mirrored and not, shy, quiet, and drinking alcohol from water bottles. Attendees began arriving at the vigil early, walking slowly through the volunteers holding the posters of those killed. The mood was both somber and strangely joyful, as people connected, reconnected, newly connected with their neighbors, with people they knew, with people they had not seen for a long time. I spotted nearly every one of my interviewees (those who were in town, at least), and some volunteered, like Sandra, who brought a few boxes of tissues for folks who needed them, and Callie who came with her partner to do some heavy lifting and stand with posters, and Nick, who is in recovery now and hoping to move out of his halfway house soon. The 49 people holding posters stood stone-faced, sad, crying, sometimes. Volunteers were largely white, holding the posters and stories of the brown people killed. Some tapped out, after some time at their task, asking the volunteer "floaters" to take their spots for a time, for the evening. They stood for more than an hour in the declining light.

It would be tempting to suggest that the fractured LGBTQ community, the disappearance of gay bars and other institutions, and the claim that community is no longer needed are evidence of a post-gay community, but events like the Orlando vigil, which drew more than 300 community members to a downtown square with little advance notice, require us to consider alternative models of community. The vigil and other community events coexist alongside feelings of disunity, of dispersion, of disconnection. Community is mobilized periodically, strategically; as sug-

gested by River City Collective's mission statement, "catalyzing" is a good metaphor for the process by which community events occur, as are other chemical processes like "precipitating." The Orlando vigil quickly formed through the actions of a small group of fewer than ten community members, some practiced leaders, others new to organizing events. In this chapter, I have demonstrated the ways that River City LGBTQ community may be seen as hostile or closeted, coming out, *and* post-gay, given shifts in community and LGBTQ and ally participants' perspectives. I offered evidence of ambivalent community as a way to make space for multiple, simultaneous experiences of community by LGBTQ and ally River Citizens, old and new. And I described examples of ambivalence in individual, institutional, and social-structural dimensions of community.

LGBTQ community ambivalence may be highly contextual, as community coalesces and fractures in urban contexts differently from rural contexts, and regional differences in community matter. For example, Brown-Saracino's (2011) discussion of ambient community in lesbian-friendly Ithaca suggest that perhaps at least lesbian community members do not feel as strongly about the need for community – one "half" of ambivalence – as those in Midwestern, rural contexts. Perhaps the kind of temporary community Gray (2009) describes in rural contexts might exist ambivalently alongside post-gay sensibilities in small cities like River City. While this project may be considered a case study (Small 2009) of one community, a similar community landscape is likely in cities and towns with similar demographics: relatively isolated, rural, largely white, and religious cities in the Midwest and, as some participants suggested, in the South. Brown-Saracino's more recent work (2015) suggests that perhaps, in addition to consider com-

munities as more or less post-gay, understanding communities as more or less strongly ambivalent might yield additional insights into LGBTQ community. In other words, perhaps "friendlier" cities might be seen as less ambivalent, while "hostile" cities demonstrate stronger ambivalence about the need for community. I suspect that River City exists somewhere in the middle of such a continuum, and thick descriptions (Geertz 2002) of seemingly similar community contexts might reveal whether this assertion is true. The benefit of an ambivalent approach to community involves acknowledging the real lives LGBTQ people live, and choose to live, in these spaces, with the emphatic joys and challenges experienced therein.

The relationship between ambivalence and two key dimensions of LGBTQ community require further examination, specifically, race, and gender. First, as I discussed briefly above, white participants' discourse around race suggested an understanding of LGBTQ community as one that is exclusively white. For example, white LGBTQ and ally participants often compared LGBTQ community and Black communities, assuming similar, progressive trajectories and neglecting community overlap. Participants of color demonstrated a sense of multiple community memberships (Battle and Ashley 2008; Ferguson 2004; Moore 2010, 2011), some preferring to distance themselves from LGBTQ community in River City. Transgender and genderqueer participants, most of whom were white, expressed a disconnect with lesbian and gay community that resonates with transgender people's experiences in other communities (Broad 2002; Doan 2007; Halberstam 2005) and cisgender participants' comments suggested a conflation between lesbian/gay and LGBTQ community, as a whole. Again, a comparison to similar community contexts would be beneficial here, as race and gender dimensions differ across regions.

Comparing identity-based communities in terms of ambivalence might suggest ways for activists to operate strategically to achieve social change. Strongly ambivalent communities might generate different kinds of community events that require, for example, the involvement of allies, coupled with "only" spaces specifically for identity-based community members. Observations in River City's "only" spaces suggest that events specifically for LGBTQ community members sometimes work and sometimes do not, while events focused on allies and featuring ally involvement tend to be largely successful. Ambivalence may offer activists a way to focus on the "both *and*" of social change: an acknowledgment that multiple dimensions of community mobilization are crucial to support LGBTQ lives.

CHAPTER 2: "We haven't jumped over the need for one": Inclusive, progressive, and exclusive community approaches

Toward the end of my interviews, I asked participants to respond to the statement: "some researchers say that we are living in a post-gay moment where LGBTQ communities are less central to LGBTQ life." Some participants agreed with this statement, but the vast majority of participants disagreed, although not fully. Peter, who had long been involved in LGBTQ community events such as the annual Pride picnic, responded in the most typical way. Recall that, in chapter 1, Peter explained that an LGBTQ community center was no longer needed, evidence of post-gay approach to community. However, Peter's full response to my question about post-gay community demonstrates participants' ambivalence about LGBTQ community:

I think that's true in some aspects, like we were talking about before. I don't think that you necessarily need to have a community center or an advocacy as much as it once was, because society has progressed a lot, and it's kind of second nature. But at the same time, we lose our personal identity or our unification as a broader community when you don't have that forum or that outlet. I think society's come along way, but I don't think that they are still to the point where everywhere you go you feel comfortable being who you are.

Peter's statement exemplifies a clear sense of ambivalence about the present and future of LGBTQ communities: "society's come along way," but not yet "to the point where everywhere you go you feel comfortable being who you are." Peter suggested that both rural and urban communities still need to change, noting that "But I think then it's kind of twofold, because I hear about a lot more of the bigotry that might be happening in the bigger cities because there's more

people there." Describing the problem of post-gay community as a "catch 22," his understanding of progress and the ongoing the need for LGBTQ community expresses ambivalent desires for a time when "it doesn't make a difference who are you are and who you love" and the realization that River City, and possibly larger cities, have not yet arrived at the doorstep of post-gay community. In fact, as Peter suggests, perhaps larger cities are not yet post-gay, either, raising questions about whether smaller communities *could* be post-gay sooner than larger cities. This possibility challenges a linear narrative of gay progress based in urban, gay communities.

Peter's ambivalent response to the post-gay question highlights an ongoing theme in LGBTQ community and identity research, and in identity research more generally: the changing, perhaps declining, relevance of LGBTQ (or at least gay) identities and the decreasing desire for exclusive LGBTQ spaces. Participants expressed a desire for inclusion, for their identities to "not matter," within the larger River City community, even as they identified a need for LGBTQ-specific institutions and fears about assimilation (the idea that "we lose our personal identity," as Peter put it). As noted in the introduction, researchers have long considered the causes and consequences of identity-based differentiation in forming social movements (Armstrong 2002; Bernstein 1997; Seidman 2003), consequences of discourses of inclusion and diversity (Ahmed 2012), and resistance to pressures to assimilate (Duggan 2004; Vaid 1995; Ward 2008; Warner 2000). River City LGBTQ community members offered responses to this post-gay question that demonstrated ambivalence about desires to be included, just as they are, into "straight" culture, a process that, some argue (Conrad 2014; Sycamore 2008), constitutes queer assimilation. In fact, most did not see full inclusion as an achievable goal, at least in the short term. However, their

desires for a post-gay *future* differed, as some hoped for a day when identity differences no longer mattered.

Participants' reactions to the specific idea of post-gay community demonstrate three specific types of ambivalence about post-gay community and its future, which I call inclusive, progressive, and exclusive. Inclusive participants generally agreed that post-gay community had not yet been realized, but they hoped it would be some day. Progressive participants saw the arc of LGBTQ history bending toward inclusion through an iterative, incremental process. They shared the perspective of inclusive participants that post-gay community did not exist, but unlike inclusive participants, they did not express a desire for a post-gay future. While they saw acceptance of LGBTQ people growing in the future, they were not interested in a time when LGBTQ identities no longer mattered. Exclusive participants, although few in number, were more emphatic that post-gay community should *never* exist, maintaining that distinctive LGBTQ communities are essential to LGBTQ lives. Participants' responses demonstrate one way that ambivalence as a theoretical frame might be developed, particularly in identity-based communities that face the dual pressures of differentiation and assimilation (Garcia 2016). These ambivalent responses may be specific to River City, and assessing their presence or absence in other community contexts suggests one way forward in developing a theory of ambivalent community.

Inclusive: Our future is post-gay

Inclusive participants recognized that LGBTQ community has not fully disappeared, but they emphasized an idealized future with minimized LGBTQ identities. An inclusive response acknowledges the complexity of the current moment while still expressing a desire for a post-

gay, post-LGBTQ, post-queer (Green 2002; Orne 2016), and in some cases, post-racial (Bonilla-Silva 2006) future. This approach should be most familiar, as it aligns with post-gay narratives explored in previous literatures. Even among the two participants who strongly agreed with the post-gay statement, their responses suggest a conflicting desire for LGBTQ community. Leah, a queer-identified River City native, stated clearly that she believed a post-gay moment had arrived. She said: "I would agree. Like I said, there are our own cliques within the LGBT community now and so we don't view ourselves as a whole community, but rather cliques inside the community now. So being seen as a huge force isn't really something we need to do anymore." While her response to the post-gay statement was clearly not ambivalent, she later noted that she "would like to see that strong community feel come back." She recognized value in both "our force of like this is the community and we're here to actually support each other" and in connecting with non-LGBTQ focused subcultures, especially for LGBTQ young people. And, yet, her life did not centrally involve engagement with LGBTQ community events and organizations. Leah's life echoed those of Brown-Saracino's "ambient community" (2011) members: Leah participated in a music subculture organized around shared aesthetic tastes, not around LGBTQ identities, even as she did not hide her queer identity in these groups.

Karen, local transgender activist who identifies as a lesbian, agreed. In many ways, Karen's and Leah's lives radically differed. While Leah came out as a lesbian in middle school, Karen came out as a trans woman later in her life, and she is an active advocate for transgender people in River City. Karen's efforts to generate specifically trans community in River City are well-known by those in the LGBTQ community, and she often makes appearances at LGBTQ and

other community events, speaking up about her experiences and answering questions from at-

tendees. She founded River City Trans, an organization she created to provide resources and sup-

port to transgender River Citizens and education to cisgender allies. When I asked the post-gay

question, Karen responded: "I think that's true. I think, you know, no longer are we the closed

society that we used to be, and LGBT people hung around [only] with each other." Again, her

later comments suggest that perhaps that post-gay moment is not quite realized. She asserted, "I

think it's time for history to change it, you know. We were worried for so long that, well, we be-

long over here. Well, why can't we belong with everybody?" Her reflections on post-gay com-

munity demonstrate the desire for an inclusive future echoed by other participants; after listing

the groups who should be accepted equally, she asserted, "Let's make it a one world thing, and I

say get rid of the individuality that makes us all, you know."

Marilyn's discussion of post-gay community in her previous home, a large, Southern city,

was tempered by her claim that "we haven't jumped over the need for one here [in River City]."

And yet, she argued that "it'd be nice to think we don't need a gay community because every-

body was accepted and it was totally cool to be who you are and to wear it on your sleeve or to

hold their hand and kiss and do whatever everywhere, just like heterosexuals do, but I… think in

[River City], that's not the case." Marilyn, a white woman who identifies as bisexual, has long

been a supporter of LGBTQ community, which she connects closely with her gay friends. For

Janine, a white, pansexual-identified trans woman, "it has gotten better in a way speaking, I

mean, I can see that. It's just, you know, as long as you're able to get out and about and just be

yourself, and hang out with people no matter who they are, it's like, and just have a good time,

you know?... It's like, come on. I'm just, I'm just like anybody else." For Janine, Karen, and

Leah, their ambivalence about LGBTQ community emphasizes inclusion, the ultimate goal of being seen as "just like anybody else," although the unnamed "anybody else" also hints at a possible desire for assimilation into River City's mainstream culture.

An inclusive response was strongly expressed by LGBTQ allies, as well. Angela is a straight, married woman whose connections to LGBTQ community have followed in the western and southern states in which she has made her home. She returned to her native River City when her child was young and works in the community organization that houses the LGBTQ youth and adult support groups. In Angela's reaction to the post-gay question, she stated that:

> I guess in a utopian world, we're all a part of one human race and one big community, so why would you need to have a section that, you know, for LGBT, like a LGBT specific community. And we're all accepting, everyone's all ah, right, you know or why would you need that? Like… I don't think we're there.

Angela's work in an organization that emphasizes multiculturalism, rather than difference, echoes a post-gay approach to community, even as she agrees that "one big community" has not yet arrived. Paul more strongly asserted that a post-gay era had not yet been realized, noting, "I don't think that's true. I do like that idea where we don't have straight community and an LGBT community, there's just community. Um, and so that's the utopia I hope we get to but I think until that happens, I don't think we're there yet." Both Angela and Paul described their "utopia" as one community in which differences are no longer needed, key features of an inclusion model. Paul expressed hope for the future in describing what he had learned from his high-school daughter, that "no one cares" about students' LGBTQ identities in River City. Paul said, "I'm like, that's wonderful, that's how it should be."

Shelley, who moved to River City with her husband from a Southern state, discussed the process of racial desegregation, suggesting that desegregation resulted in fractured Black community institutions and highlighting her desire for a uniform community: "I mean we all are just human beings, anyway, it doesn't make any difference in, and I would love to see where, does it need to have a separate community, is what I hope." She also acknowledged that LGBTQ community spaces are still needed, primarily for dating purposes. She said, "there's still definite needs for places for folks to be able to find each other, and be able to, um, mingle and find others that you would possibly want to date or to marry." Finally, Brenda echoed Janine's hopes for inclusion through sameness, even as she argued that, "I don't think it's completely true, but I think it's getting better towards that way." She described the lesbians she knew from work and through family, noting that "they're just like you and me."

Notably, the largest proportion of participants who reflected an inclusive approach to post-gay community were allies like Angela, Paul, Shelley, and Brenda. This finding is not surprising, given that research on the role of allies in LGBTQ communities demonstrates the ways that allies privilege heterosexual norms and identities in these spaces (Burgess and Baunach 2014; Dean 2014; Mathers, Sumerau, and Ueno 2015). Allies' emphasis on inclusion reflects an overarching cultural emphasis on a future in which sexual differences are minimized or deemed irrelevant, which could erase inequalities LGBTQ people experience. This model of "utopia" is quintessentially post-gay, but it has particular implications in River City. Given the central role of allies in LGBTQ community institutions in River City, discussed more fully in chapter 4, the use of inclusive language that encourages LGBTQ people to minimize their identities because

"no one cares" (for example) suggests desires for sameness that may play out in LGBTQ community organizations and spaces.

Hope for a utopian future in which differences are no longer central to LGBTQ lives are especially imaginable for those outside of LGBTQ community; what is more surprising is that LGBTQ participants shared this inclusive perspective, too. Inclusive LGBTQ participants varied in age, gender expression, class, and education level, but their friendship maps suggested one similarity: close friends who are largely not LGBTQ, and LGBTQ friends who are not deeply engaged or active in LGBTQ community. I discuss LGBTQ participants' friendships in chapters 3 and 5, but evidence from participants' friendship maps generally suggests that inclusive LGBTQ participants were not closely connected with politically active LGBTQ friends.

Progressive: We're not post-gay, and some LGBTQ people still need community

Most LGBTQ participants expressed ambivalence about post-gay community with an incrementally progressive, but not fully inclusive, inflection. They rejected the idea of post-gay community but described the arc of history as tending toward inclusion, even as they did not express a strong preference for a future in which gender and sexual identities are minimized or irrelevant. Participants referenced same-sex marriage and legal protections for transgender people as evidence of this progress while also expressed concerns about disappearing community and the ongoing need for LGBTQ community, particularly for the most vulnerable LGBTQ people. Mark, a key LGBTQ community activist, flatly denied the post-gay statement, saying, "Oh, that's such crap… Just because there is gay marriage and there is, you know, no discrimination or zero tolerance for discrimination… That doesn't mean that discrimination and people are of

that identity don't feel not included." He later acknowledged that some post-gay communities

may exist: "So I do think that, I think the overt discrimination in some parts of the country that

maybe those communities are past that. But you still need the support, the visibility. The people

like, yo where are we here?" Teagan, a young, politically progressive, white woman and River

City native who identified as "bisexual or something," shared a similarly frustrated response,

stating:

> Post-gay just made me mad… Not mad, but just like… it comes down to the idea that like
>
> the fight for gay equality is over because we have gay marriage now from the Supreme
>
> Court which is being upheld in the states kind of? Not really? Have laws changed? Has
>
> very much changed in the states where it wasn't already? I don't know. I forgot the ques-
>
> tion because I was upset by it, not upset by it but like post-gay made me bristle.

Her sarcasm in this moment, what she described as "making a sarcastic face," suggests both

awareness of and frustration with this narrative of progress.

Callie, a queer-identified participant introduced in chapter 1, summarized a progressive

perspective when she responded to the post-gay statement, saying, "No, I wouldn't agree. I

wouldn't say that we're, um, there's progress, obviously. Um, better, yes. But completely post

and everyone's okay, no. No, not everyone is okay." She described her experiences being out in

the community with a new female partner, and "the looks and the feelings" associated with being

visibly out. Colby and Nate both explicitly referenced "history"; Colby stated that "obviously be-

ing together as a core helped make a lot of progress. So coming back together as a core, make

more progress, you know." His plan for making this progress involved symbolic unification of

LGBTQ community: "you know, if you push on something from a bunch of different angles, it's

not gonna move. But if you push it from one point it will move." Notably, this "progress" did not explicitly involve the erasure of LGBTQ identities. Nate, a reluctant post-gay, referenced the "natural evolution" toward assimilation, even as he acknowledged the ongoing need for community in places like River City, perhaps less so in the larger cities where he has lived. Finally, for Kyle, the arc of gay history now also includes transgender identities, and, while he reluctantly agreed that we may be approach a post-gay era, "I would say that for certain we are more post-gay than post-trans. I think that trans is the new issue that's up there as it should be but um...makes us think we're post gay."

Participants with a progressive reaction to ambivalent community also referenced the vulnerable groups who still need a sense of, or a connection to, LGBTQ community, like young or transgender community members, as in Kyle's above quote. Elina, an active ally and woman of color, responded to the post-gay statement by suggesting that "I think that's coming from people that don't need it, and some of the people do. Maybe those are the ones that are not powerful enough to say that they need it. It's the ones that are educated, it's the ones that are in power, it's the ones that are connected to resources so they don't feel the need for it." Elina's comment highlights an implicit, disempowered group that need LGBTQ community.

Greg described a kind of gay "orientation grace period" in which LGBTQ people who are coming out need support from those who share their identities. He explained that, "we don't need the gay center so to speak," and he continued that, "I think there's a sort of need for them, for when you're first coming out, there's always that like the orientation grace period." His ambivalence around transitions to post-gay communities especially in Chicago were demonstrated in the following quote:

I don't think there's the need for having this overly, we need to have rainbow flags every-where. Like, I'm sad to say what's happened with Boystown in Chicago, for example. Here was a nice, beautiful, gentrified, gay area, and then we let all the straights in. I really get upset with Pride in Chicago. It's like, really? All these stupid straight people are here. Go the fuck away! This isn't for you; this is for me! Fuck off! Why are you here?

It is unclear whether the need to have rainbow flags is still necessary in Boystown, even as Greg's desires for community for LGBTQ people coming out, and for vicarious community (Greene 2014) in Boystown persists. Greg's statement presents a conundrum: without the rain-bow flags in "beautiful, gentrified, gay area[s]," how do straights know which spaces are not for them? While Greg and his husband Steve explained that they "pass" as straight, they simultane-ously resisted "let[ting] all the straights in." In a way, Greg and Steve were engaging in their own process of gentrification in River City, on a tiny scale. A white, gay, middle-class couple, they owned two houses in the heart of River City's Black neighborhood, one of which they rented to another gay man. Their very lives demonstrated this kind of progressive response to post-gay community: while they are not visibly gay and claim to not need LGBTQ organizations, they recognize that others might need them, and they value Pride events, as long as they don't involve straight people. They recognized the historical progress that allowed them to live com-fortable, if less visible, gay lives, even as they supported LGBTQ organizations and events for those who need them. Greg's comments highlight a tension between two elements of post-gay community: the incorporation of straight people into gay community, and the desire for gay peo-ple like Greg and Steve to participate in straight culture (through processes of gentrification or "passing"). Overall, progressive participants like Greg and Steve asserted that historical progress

was central to their sense of ambivalence about post-gay LGBTQ community. These largely LGBTQ participants agreed that, despite this progress, some LGBTQ community organizations would likely be needed in the longer term, especially for the most marginal LGBTQ community members.

Exclusive: Post-gay? No way.

Some participants projected the need for gay community into the future, an approach that suggests an active resistance to assimilation, even as the pressure to assimilate persists. Participants who shared this exclusive approach emphasized the ongoing need for community, even as they acknowledged the existence of post-gay communities for some. Charlie, for example, described the difference between "culturally queer" people and normative gay, lesbian, and some transgender people for whom their "sexuality or gender does not require you now to have this community in order to live a satisfying life." Charlie, educated in a progressive, small liberal arts college in the Midwest, was not a River City native, and she struggled to find the kind of queer community she valued in River City. While her professional connections afforded her some connection to a thoughtful, if small, group of queer friends, she anticipated a need for non-normative queer community in the future. For Charlie, queer community "is central to my experience in my life," and she echoed queer theorists like José Esteban Muñoz (2009) in her discussion of essential queer futures. Charlie's response hints at the possibility that a *normative* post-gay future could exist alongside exclusive queer community.

Alimah's response to the post-gay statement was emphatic, and she noted that, "No, the need for community is always fundamental!" Alimah's experiences as a college student and

member of overlapping communities, like the North African family and friends with whom she had grown up, informed her discussion of the importance of community. She extended her understandings of community to her experiences as a newly-out lesbian. She referenced a recent TED talk where the speaker claimed:

> We're a world that's like, we're all experiencing the same world but we're fractured by perspectives and the only way to, like, what do you call it, heal that is by community, and like, yeah…. I think that there's always a need to like, especially with an oppressed group of people, you need to have a community, that's the only way you can fight it, you know what I mean, or feel less oppressed or, and like see yourself as a soul who's like, who needs to like be stronger, like is by your community, there's no need to not ever have community.

Alimah, like Charlie, expected to connect with "community" throughout her life, although her irritation at the lack of a sense of community among her college peers emerged throughout our interview.

Robin was similarly frustrated by River City LGBTQ community members who take a post-gay approach to community. This frustration was coupled with her own desire to make ongoing connections with LGBTQ people, particularly around families, given her own small family with her partner and two children. She stated that:

> There are plenty of gay people in [River City] who have been gay forever and not been out. Who have [not] given two squats about gay community. They've been post gay community since they were out, you know? So I believe that that attitude as well as the attitude of believing that gay community is important, both have always existed, you know?

I mean when I came here and I was trying interest people in being more connected, what-

ever that meant. There were plenty of people who were like, that's not how I define my-

self. No I'm not interested, leave me alone, you know?... And I really want to know

same sex families with children my age. I really want that, desperately, you know? Um

again, we don't have to be best friends but at least to see each other regularly and to

check in and to see what each other is experiencing. And how does that relate, and how is

that the same and how is it different from what I'm experiencing. And you know like

those are the things that I really want. And are difficult to force to happen.

Robin later worked to "force" such community to happen, co-founding a group for LGBTQ par-

ents at the local community center. The group has, unfortunately, met infrequently due to low at-

tendance.

Grey's reflections on post-gay community align with Robin's. Grey noted that "espe-

cially for this area… since people are secluded, they're looking for the community. Or they're

not actively looking for it, but they're wishing it was there." Grey, a white participant who iden-

tifies as nonbinary/genderqueer and queer, lives and works as a young professional in small

towns in the greater River City metro area but travels to River City to participate in LGBTQ

community events. Grey preferred living near River City to living in the South, where they at-

tended college very recently. They explained that they would never have stayed in the South be-

cause, "One, it was way too hot. Lizards, cockroaches. Um, also you know, it's a little bit more

conservative down there. Gender norms, gender everything, it's really strict and yeah, that's ba-

sically it." Grey described themselves as a "nerdy nineteen fifties boy," referring to their interests

and gender expression. In Grey's online LGBTQ community, they connected with other LGBTQ

people from a "really small town" who stated that "There's nobody gay here and I wish there was." Grey felt an affinity with those similarly-"secluded" LGBTQ people, as their friendship network was composed largely of straight and cisgender friends and family members. On the other hand, Grey also knew people whose friends were all gay. When asked where such people live, Grey shared their response: "In a huge city where they can just huddle together and have gay hugs." For Grey, however, such a context is not appealing, despite the hugs; their desires were more separatist: "If we could just have, like, a gay commune out, out in the [laughs] country." Grey anticipated a future need for LGBTQ community, and they described "A camp," a summer camp run by Autostraddle, a progressive, feminist, and queer online blog and community as a possible future queer space they might enjoy, if they could overcome their self-described "fear" of other LGBTQ people.

Grey, Robin, Alimah, and Charlie expressed a desire for exclusive LGBTQ community, even in the face of social pressures toward post-gay community. However, participants who expressed exclusive responses to the post-gay interview question were relatively few. These participants shared one characteristic: a sense of isolation and outsider status, even though each had grown up in the Midwest, if not in a nearby town. It is possible that this low number of LGBTQ people with an exclusive approach to post-gay community is specific to River City, given overall normative pressures within the city's Catholic culture. Future research might further specify whether exclusive approaches are as common in larger cities as post-gay researchers suggest (Brown-Saracino 2011, 2015; Ghaziani 2014).

Conclusion

Inclusive, progressive, and exclusive responses to the post-gay question demonstrate mixed perspectives on the current moment, the need for LGBTQ communities, as well as visions for LGBTQ futures. Inclusive and progressive responses suggest movement toward futures that minimize LGBTQ communities in favor of an inclusive, difference-minimizing community, even if such a state is not yet realized in River City. Exclusive approaches acknowledge and resist inclusive pressures. These three responses (inclusive, progressive, and exclusive) demonstrate one way forward in developing a theory of ambivalence as it relates to identity-based communities in a moment of transition (Coser 1966; Garcia 2016). They answer the question: how might ambivalence be measured in these kinds of communities? They offer evidence of how tensions between "sameness and difference" in LGBTQ social movements (Ghaziani, Taylor, and Stone 2016) play out in non-activist LGBTQ people's everyday lives, as they encounter pressures to express or minimize their identities.

Participants' responses to the post-gay question suggest perspectives on the future of LGBTQ communities that may well guide participant's actions. However, in my observations, LGBTQ and ally individuals who demonstrate *each* these three approaches participate in LGBTQ community-making processes. They share spaces, organize events together, and support each other, even if their ultimate visions for LGBTQ futures differ. Further specifying how types of ambivalence contribute to the cyclical community formation process discussed above is beyond the scope of this chapter, and exploring how inclusive, progressive, and exclusive perspec-

tives connect with powerful narratives in an evolving LGBTQ community context may demonstrate how equality may or may not be achieved. The differences in participants' friendships, however, suggest a key dimension of their approaches that is further explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3: "What do you mean your *gay* friend?" LGBTQ friendships, identities, and normativities in River City

I am sitting with Mark, a white, gay man in his late 20s, at Brews, a dark, downtown, coffee shop that doubles as a pub, and we are both nestled into a set of benches surrounding a chrome kitchen table, drinking coffee. Mellow, ambient music wafts into our space as we caffeinate and chat about the challenges of maintaining friendships and finding partnerships and a sense of community in River City. Mark wears comfortable clothes like thin, light-colored hoodies and tee shirts, and he would easily be mistaken for a graduate student in a more urban context. He has a bald, shaved head and a neatly-trimmed beard, and as we talk, I think that Mark is the warmest gay man I have ever met. Mark is known among his close friends as an amateur photographer of River City's visually appealing architecture, and his reflections about River City are as descriptive as his ethereal snapshots. While he spent his young adulthood in a nearby Midwestern city, he is originally from an Eastern European country and migrated to the Midwest as a child due to "social unrest back home," as he explains it. His family's experiences in his home country affect his perspectives on community today, and his work and social life revolve around fostering community dialogue and change.

Mark seems to make friendships easily wherever he travels, although he struggles to find the romantic partner he deeply desires. Despite his ability to make friends, his friendship map is relatively small and includes twelve people, five of whom are lesbian or gay, and three of whom he locates close to himself with the remaining friends spiraling outward from this core group of three. I ask Mark about whether he "gets" anything from his friendships with LGBTQ people, compared to his friendships with non-LGBTQ people, and he hesitates. First, he notes that his

response might be different once he is partnered. He then states that, "Maybe it's just that I'm not noticing it. All my friends don't, I can talk to them about… *well*… I guess the thing that is different is that in some cases, maybe the gay friends engage more in the partner conversation, like, actually ask me, like, 'well, who are you looking for, and what are you looking for?' and I have more of an authentic conversation."

Mark's *initial* response, that he can discuss anything with his friends regardless of their sexual identity, resonates with a post-gay analysis: the argument that gay neighborhoods are transitioning toward communities where gayness is deemphasized or invisible (Ghaziani 2014), or operate, perhaps primarily, as sites of tourism and identity consumption for out-of-town gays (Greene 2014). In contrast with friendships in a coming out era, where shared identities might determine what could be discussed in a friendship, in post-gay friendships, even straight friends could discuss gay topics like, in Mark's case, "the partner conversation." Yet Mark's quick shift to reconsidering this response, from "not noticing" differences among his friends to having a more "authentic" conversation about romantic relationships with LGBTQ friends resonates with the importance of gay identities in the coming out era. In other words, Mark's comments about more authentic conversations about partnership with gay friends suggests the ongoing relevance of gay identities in relationships and communities. This seemingly contradictory response characterizes my participants' understanding of their friendships and communities, more generally; participants noted that their friends' (sexual, in this case) identities "don't matter," except when they do.

In this chapter, I approach changing LGBTQ communities and identities through the lens of an underexplored relationship, *friendship*. As I argued in the introduction, researchers have

focused on symbolic and structural dimensions of gay neighborhoods, discussing the changing

meaning of gay identities in these urban spaces. An understanding of the role of friendship in the

formation of gay identities and communities, however, has been neglected in these studies.

Friendship offers a lens through which questions of assimilation and a sense of shared identity

might be explored. Research on LGBTQ communities has conflated friendships with community

(Nardi 1999; Weston 1991), arguing that LGBTQ friends generate LGBTQ community. How-

ever, whether and how these friendships relate to LGBTQ community in a time when the mean-

ing of LGBTQ identities is changing remains underexplored. Are shared identity friendships still

important for LGBTQ people? What might it mean to find that most LGBTQ people in River

City have few LGBTQ friends?

In this chapter, I analyze participants' "friendship talk" (Anthony and McCabe 2015) to

show how participants' shared-identity friendships mattered, and how they did not. Friendship

talk, a concept developed by Anthony and McCabe (2015), is a type of identity talk people use in

self-identity construction (Cooley 1909; Mead 1934). Individuals' narratives and interpretations

of their friendships tell us about how they understand their identities, for example, in terms of

gender (Reid and Fine 1992). In what follows, I focus on what participants' friendship talk re-

veals about participants' *sense of shared identity* and begin to draw connections between shared

identities and community. I discuss reasons why participants claimed that shared-identity friend-

ships did *and* did not matter. Two themes emerged on each side of this argument. On the one

hand, participants explained that shared identities did not matter in their lives for two reasons:

their identity differences are not, or should not, be apparent in their friendships (which I call

"minimizing" identity differences), and simply having a shared identity was not enough to gener-

ate friendship (which I call "insufficiency"). On the other hand, participants explained that iden-

tities still do matter in their friendships, because friendships with those who share their identity

offer a sense of affirmation and require less emotional labor to maintain, and these friendships

offered connections to shared symbols, interests, and language.

I then analyze participants' friendship maps to show which LGBTQ participants were

more likely to have shared-identity friendships. In other words, reviewing the social networks

participants diagrammed in their friendship maps reveals a higher proportion of shared-identity

friendships for a subset of LGBTQ participants. I conclude by discussing two cases that test the

boundaries of a "shared-identity friendship doesn't matter" narrative and reinforce the im-

portance of including community contexts, specifically locally-determined norms, in analyses of

friendship. River City is a community in which adherence to a range of norms in terms of gender

identity, sexual orientation, length of residence, age, and partner status is especially meaningful,

given its size and Catholic cultural history, and LGBTQ River Citizens whose identities chal-

lenge these norms are likely to seek within-identity friendships *as well as* a sense of LGBTQ

community. These two participants, while similar in some ways, exemplify the challenges of

non-normative identities in a context like River City.

Friendship talk: identities don't matter, but…

Research on LGBTQ friendships suggests that friendships that cross lines of gender iden-

tity and sexuality are fairly common, at least in urban communities with high populations of

LGBTQ people (Brown-Saracino 2011; Galupo 2007; Galupo et al. 2014; Muraco 2012). In a

post-gay (Ghaziani 2014) or ambient (Brown-Saracino 2011) community, LGBTQ people would form friendships based on shared interests, not around shared identity. Yet recent research has also found that shared identity in terms of sexuality still matters for social networks, at least in the case of lesbians (Logan 2013). In contrast, LGBTQ people would seek friendships with those who share their identities in a closet or coming out (Ghaziani 2014) community. Given its low proportion of LGBTQ people, relative to larger cities, we might guess that LGBTQ people in River City would feel isolated and might seek friendships with other LGBTQ people. In other words, the community context of River City might require LGBTQ community members to band together in close friendship or form chosen families with close friends (Weston 1991).

However, as I show below, participants demonstrated the same kinds of ambivalence about seeking out LGBTQ-specific friendships that they did about the need for LGBTQ community in River City. Recall Mark's statement above as an example of a typical ambivalent response to LGBTQ friendships. In such an ambivalent response, participants offered conflicting evidence: they stated that shared sexual or gender identities[11] do not matter or should not matter in their friendships, and they also claimed that shared identities do matter. Participants' friendship talk demonstrates a key paradox in LGBTQ identities in River City: a desire to minimize differences and emphasize sameness (with cishet[12] people) alongside a desire for identity affirmation and shared culture.

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[11] While the focus of my research is shared gender and sexual identities, the friendship talk and friendship maps of participants suggest that friendship homophily—the idea that "birds of a feather flock together" (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001)—was evident in terms of race and class.

[12] As I indicated before, I use the term "cishet," short for cisgender and heterosexual to refer to non-LGBTQ people.

"The people who don't necessarily care": Minimizing identity differences

Some participants' friendship talk resonated with post-gay understandings of identity and relationships. As Ghaziani notes, "Those who consider themselves post-gay profess that their sexual orientation does not form the core of how they define themselves, and they prefer to hang out with their straight friends as much as with those who are gay" (2014:3). In a post-gay context, we would expect LGBTQ folks to say that the identities of their friends don't matter and, indeed, *their* identities don't matter in their friendships. And, in fact, some participants, like Jack, said exactly that.

Jack is a young, white, asexual trans man who had received what he described as "an external call into ministry" as early as middle school, meaning that others had suggested to him that he become a pastor. He had resisted the call until college, when his connection with a family in Central America during a study abroad trip made him realize that being a pastor was not all about being "in a pulpit… preaching." He realized that, "instead, I can be with people in their times of need, in their joys, in their sorrows. But I can just simply be with people wherever they are and that makes me really, really excited to do ministry." Not a native River Citizen, Jack had moved to River City to attend theological seminary and clearly loved his experiences there, especially its "intentionality of community." Jack's friendship map included 18 friends, 15 of which were clustered tightly around him and largely interconnected in overlapping friend groups. Jack was close with many of his friends, and of his six closest friends, four are straight, two are pansexual, and none are transgender. I asked Jack why he put some people on his friendship map. He explained that:

I don't know… Cause like all of my friends support me. We wouldn't be friends if they

didn't because I just don't need that. But these are the people who don't necessarily care I

guess that I identify as trans. They just care that I'm their friend. Like so it doesn't matter

that to them, like, yeah I can have really great trans conversations with [these three trans

friends] because, well, they understand. Cause we're all FTMs [Female-to-Male trans

folks]. But everybody else just doesn't really care. Like I can talk to them about, 'oh I get

to stab myself tomorrow in the morning [with my testosterone injection]'… But I can go

talk to any one of these people and know that I'm not going to get judged.

For Jack, while friends were supportive and not judgmental, they "don't necessarily care" about

his transgender identity. Jack's friendship talk demonstrates one of the benefits of friendships

across lines of gender, for transgender people: the feeling of "not [being] judged" (Galupo et al.

2014). However, these benefits come at a price: minimizing one's (marginalized) gender iden-

tity. Jack explains twice in the above quote that his friends "don't care" about his gender identity.

This kind of "don't care" language serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it signals to

LGBTQ friends that their identity differences are not the most important aspect of their identi-

ties, for cishet friends. This language in some ways signals acceptance, that cishet friends did not

"judge" LGBTQ friends based on their identities. On the other hand, "don't care" language also

minimizes LGBTQ friends' identities, potentially for the comfort of their cishet friends. Similar

patterns have been identified among cross-race friends, where white friends especially mini-

mized the role of race in their relationships with Black friends (Korgen 2002). Minimizing the

importance of friends' identities avoids introducing a possible tension in cross-identity friend-

ships but also makes it difficult to discuss identity-specific challenges or inequalities when they

arise. When cishet friends minimize identity differences, then, they demonstrated both acceptance and a possible unwillingness to discuss LGBTQ friends' experiences of marginalization.

Like Jack, Karen's closest friends did not share her gender identity, although her friendship map with 19 named friends showed a clearer distinction between close friends and acquaintances. Karen is a white, transgender lesbian and activist whose close friends have supported her through a number of challenging life transitions. She described Brenda, her best friend and a straight, married, cisgender woman, as her "absolute closest, long time, most magnificent soul person that I could ever have" and as someone who "brings reality down to the ground." She explained what she appreciated about this close friendship:

> Her acceptance of me is wonderful. I don't think she sees me as male or female. I'm just a person. I'm just, you know, she doesn't have that judgment factor in her about male or female… So you don't, it doesn't matter if you're male or female. And she does masculine, like I said, she rides her own motorcycle, does her own Harley thing and all that stuff, so she realizes that the casing that you're in [is not] who you are inside.

Karen's friendship talk reveals a close, well-loved friend who is also nonjudgmental, even as Karen's gender "doesn't matter." For both Jack and Karen, a friend is someone who does not express judgment *despite* their identity. This kind of "don't care" language resonates with colorblind (Bonilla-Silva 2006), or race-neutral, ideology, although not precisely, as race-neutral ideology is generally asserted by the dominant group and effectively erases inequalities. In Karen's and Jack's case, this "don't care" ideology suggests a desire to minimize differences from the perspective of a marginalized group, even as it emphasizes the "nonjudgmental" qualities of

a dominant-group (cisgender) friend. A post-gay era might be characterized by LGBTQ people using similar sexuality-neutral or gender-neutral language in friendship talk. Researchers have found that some transgender folks reject a framework of identity for understanding their friendships (Galupo et al. 2014:210), so perhaps it is not surprising that transgender participants in River City were clear about their identities wholly "not mattering." However, it is striking that the participants who were most emphatic about minimizing their friendship differences were trans participants.

Other participants explained that, although shared-identity friendships might have been important in the past, such friendships *no longer* mattered. They suggested that shared-identity friendships were critical when they were first coming out, but that the need for these friendships had declined in recent years. I asked Leah, a white genderqueer, "queer/lesbian" person in their mid 20s and native River Citizen, how important it was to have LGBTQ friends, and they[13] responded:

> I guess it really wouldn't matter to me. As far as identity, it doesn't matter to me whether like with my friends if I'm straight or not, so they'll listen to my relationship issues either way and vice versa. I guess it's kind of nice because obviously, female to female relationship is different than with female to male just because there are differences in the way that the mind works and other issues as well. So sometimes it's nice to be able to talk to somebody about those things. But I've talked to [my straight former roommate] about my relationship issues just as much as anybody else, so. I haven't really noticed a difference.

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[13] I use singular "they" to refer to participants with nonbinary identities (Hess 2016).

Like Mark, Leah's shared-identity friendships enabled discussions about romantic relationships, and the complexity of Leah's gender identity comes through in this quote, as they refer to "female to female" relationships like theirs. Leah then explained that having friends with shared gender and sexual identities were important for them when they were growing up, but now there is "a pretty even balance for me between whether my friends are straight or LGBTQ. I'm not gonna say, 'You're straight. We're not gonna be friends.'" Here, Leah resists a narrative of exclusion, suggesting that being "straight" does not prevent them from establishing a friendship. In the end, for Leah, "relationship issues" are a topic of conversation even with a straight friend, and she minimizes the role of shared sexual identity in her friendships today, using sexuality-neutral language (but not gender-neutral language).

Fia's friendship talk also demonstrates a minimizing strategy: her gender identity is not a topic of conversation in her friendships. Fia's friendship map looks like the spokes on the wheel of a bicycle, her 22 named friends arrayed evenly around her with few connections between them, indicative of what McCabe calls a "sampler" friendship network (McCabe 2016). For Fia, a straight, white, transgender woman in her mid-30s, talking about her gender identity was not important in her friendships; she reserved these conversations for an LGBTQ-specific context. She explained that:

> That's why I went to support group. What I need from the LGBT community I get out of the support group, which is being able to talk to people about being trans, specifically. The rest of my life, I don't really bother talking about that that much. I am eleven years into transition. I don't really need to talk about it that much.

Fia still attended an adult LGBTQ support group in River City, compartmentalizing[14] her gender-specific support needs by discussing them only in this group, not with friends. Other participants suggested distinct online networks like LGBTQ-focused Facebook groups as places where they sought identity-related support, engaging in similar compartmentalization processes. Yet Fia's comments share a similarity with Leah's: Fia's note about being "eleven years into transition" implicitly suggests that her gender identity may have been discussed in friendships earlier in her transition.

Both Fia and Leah's friendship talk suggests that shared-identity friendships may have mattered more in the past, but they no longer need to focus on their identities in conversations with their friends today. For Jack and Karen, their gender identities were irrelevant in their friendships, beyond a baseline of acceptance, or at least lack of judgment. These examples of friendship talk illustrate the ways participants minimized the importance of their identities and the need for shared-identity discussions with their friends.

Not the "same raindrops": The insufficiency of shared identity

For some participants, simply sharing an identity was an insufficient cause of a friendship. In other words, simply being LGBTQ did not generate enough commonality to generate or sustain a friendship, a finding echoed by other LGBTQ community and identity research (Easterbrook et al. 2013; Fassinger and Arseneau 2007). For example, when I asked Colby, a young, white trans man and college student, whether there were things he got out of his friendships with other LGBTQ people, he responded:

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[14] For more on LGBTQ compartmentalization within friendship networks, see (Ueno et al. 2012).

Um, no. I don't think there's really any difference… Just because you're LGBT does not

mean you have had the same experiences. So it's like, it's not that much different than

talking to a cis-straight person that has no experience being LGBT as it is to, you know,

sharing your experience with someone else with a different experience that's also LGBT.

So, it's like you're under this umbrella together but that doesn't mean the same raindrops

have hit ya.

Colby's logic differed from participants in the previous section: identities were not unim-

portant, but being under the same LGBTQ "umbrella" (Fassinger and Arseneau 2007) was

simply not enough to form the basis of a friendship. Colby's comment suggests that the specific-

ity of identities matters and that, to him, the experiences of lesbians and gay men might not differ

from those of a "cis-straight person."

Charlie, who we met in chapter 2, was specific about the kinds of lesbians with whom she

could not be friends. Charlie is a professional in her early 30s, a woman of color, and a "cis-

gender woman with gender queer [sic] leanings" who is "primarily attracted to women." At the

time of our interview, she was looking explicitly for queer friends in River City. She offered the

following interaction with a woman she described as "such a lesbian" as a way to explain the in-

sufficiency of shared-identity friendships:

It's just, she was very connected to, like, straight culture and, like, heteronormativity.

And so she very much, like, wanted to get married and have kids, and I said somebody

was "poly," and she said, "Who's Polly?" like as if it was somebody's name. And it's

like, we just had a different lexicon for, like, what, what life was like, basically. Like, she

> was very much like, "Everything about me is pretty much straight except for I'm at-
> tracted to women." And that's not who I'm used to hanging out with. Like I'm used to
> hanging out with people who are, like, "no, I would not wanna be straight, even if you
> [laughs] had, like, all the money in the world."

While, on the surface, it might seem that Charlie and the woman she describes would share an identity, a common understanding of lesbian and queer identities did not exist, preventing a friendship from developing.

Others explained that simply sharing an identity did not provide an adequate source of connection for a friendship. Grey, a white, nonbinary/genderqueer and queer participant, explained that "I feel like I'm not gonna be friends with somebody just because they're... Like one girl I did peg in high school is gay. Like she's cool and everything, but we just would never click." Similarly, Kit, a white, lesbian- and female-identified college student, offered a mix of answers about whether it is important to have LGBTQ friends:

> I don't know if it's important. I think it's important, um, to have friends who identify or
> who have gone through the same things as you have, in some ways, and part of the same
> community, as well, but I also think that's not, I mean, you shouldn't place all your im-
> portance on that. It should be other people, as well.

Like Grey, Charlie, and others, for Kit, "all of your importance" should not be placed on a shared identity in developing a friendship.

Vickie, a white, partnered, lesbian participant, offered the example of a friend she described as "straight… well she's bi but she's married to a man" who is close to her and her partner. Despite being technically part of the same (LGBTQ) community, Vickie clearly saw that her

friend's identity differed from hers, and she contrasted this close friend with other gays and lesbians who were not necessarily close. She explained that her bi friend is, "Very close to us and she treats me actually better than by far some of the gay and lesbian people. So just because you're gay and lesbian of course doesn't mean by any means you're automatically affirming." For these participants, shared membership in an LGBTQ community was less important than other aspects of friendship: possibilities for affirmation, a sense of "click," shared understandings of identities, or similar perspectives about what those identities mean.

What was important to Vickie and to others was the ability to talk openly about life experiences and elements of identity without fear of reprisal. As Vickie explained about her "straight" friend, she is "affirming. You get the feeling of non-judgment. You can talk about whatever you want to talk about. Certainly you can talk about your partner and anything to do, if there's a gay pride week going on or anything. It's not like you have to stop and think and censor yourself." Some participants shared a more libertarian approach to friendships: shared identity didn't matter, or shared identity wasn't sufficient to form a friendship, as long as participants could be themselves and not suffer judgment or criticism. And yet, the insufficiency perspective introduced a paradox in their friendships, highlighted by Leah's and Mark's friendship talk: no matter how accepting, friendships with people who did not share an identity included little space to "authentically" discuss key aspects of LGBTQ participants' lives, like romantic relationships. While participants benefited from cross-identity friendships, there were drawbacks to these friendships, too, like the inability to discuss identity-specific topics (Galupo et al. 2014; Muraco 2012)

"You get me": Affirmation and shared culture

Even as participants minimized their identities and explained that (some) shared identities were insufficient to form a friendship, they *also* noted that shared-identity friendships were valuable. Some participants were more explicit in their ambivalence about LGBTQ friendships, explaining that perhaps identities should not matter, but they still do. They explained that friendships with those who share identities offer comfort, affirmation, ease (Comerford et al. 2004), and a lessened sense of emotional labor (Hochschild 1979), of needing to work hard to connect with someone with a different identity (Galupo et al. 2014). Sometimes participants' ambivalence came through in the same interview, as was the case for Colby, who later discussed the importance of having transgender friends, specifically. I asked him whether there was anything he "got" out of his transgender friends that he didn't get out of his cisgender friends, and he explained:

> Yes, because with my trans friends, it's like trans people know how other trans people feel therefore we kind of unspokenly go out of the way for each other to make each other feel validated. So, like when I talk to my trans friends it's always like, 'what up bro,' 'hey man,' 'how's it going dude' and like very like affirming type things. Or like if I'm talking to a trans woman like, you know, 'hey beautiful,' like, 'I like your blah, blah, blah,' give her girl compliments, make her feel very feminine, like always hold the door and be like blah, blah, blah, like super lady things and like super man things. And then like they do the same back to me. They're like, 'What up bro?' And it's always like, whereas with a cis-guy, it's like, 'hey.' You know, it's not really that extra. It's always

like that extra like affirming, validating kind of thing. Like, you get me, like we know who we, we are and we're like, it just works.

Colby's discussion of shared affirmation and shared gendered language suggests that friendships with trans folks still do offer a source of identity affirmation (Anthony and McCabe 2015). For Colby, this affirmation aligned with stereotypically feminine and masculine gendered behavior – the "super lady things" and "super man things." Shared-identity friendships depended, at least in part, upon a shared understanding of transgender identities and gender norms, resulting in a friendship that "just works."

Callie missed the feeling of an affirming friendship after moving to the area and losing her "gay friends." For Callie, a white queer woman, her sense of "missing" her gay friends was related to a sense of acceptance:

I remember there being a point when I first moved here that I was like wow, I really miss my gay friends. Like I really miss having those people in my life, and it was like well why is that? What do you mean your gay friend? Like you don't mean just your friends, like why your gay friends? I'm like, well, it's different, and I still try to pinpoint that of why it's different and what is different about it…I think that like there's this level of acceptance, um... it's definitely a feeling where it's like this, I've found my people.

A sense of finding "my people" is not unique to shared LGBTQ identities. Marnel Goins, for example, describes Black women's friendship groups as a "homeplace" (2011), what she describes as a "safe space" formed through conversations among friends grappling with identity-based contradictions. Their shared experiences recreate a sense of affirmation and offer the ability to freely express their identities.

In sum, Colby's and Callie's comments identify a feeling of shared home, of affirmation; as Colby suggested, "it just works," and, for Callie, "I've found my people." Some participants described moments where this affirmation occurred. Allyson, a white, bisexual woman who grew up in a nearby small town, offered a specific example of that feeling of validation. Speaking about her closest friend, a bisexual man, she explained that:

> He's also the friend I get the most validation from probably too. Cause I might be upset or emotional about something and I explain it to [him] and he instantly, it's like, that's totally fair, it's very reasonable that you're upset about this. I'm like, thank you. Ah I really needed that...you know, he's definitely very...he's part of my support system.

Grey also described this sense of "validation," especially living in a small Midwestern town where, as others have found (Comerford et al. 2004), support for LGBTQ people is hard to find. Grey highlighted "comfort" in being around people with a shared identity, explaining that they:

> Just feel more comfortable around [their LGBTQ friends]…I really don't care how people identify. It just so happens, I mean, like sometimes you do need other people in your life who are like you, and give you some validation, especially if there aren't, like, a lot of people around here who are like yourself.

And despite his comments earlier in the interview that friends "[don't] really care" about his identity, Jack clarified that, "I love being able to talk to those especially who are trans and be like, oh my gosh, why does this, what is this about. Like tell me your experience. How did you do this? Like this is a really hard day because of this, and they understand a whole different level."

Finally, for Teagan, a white, cisgender woman who is "bisexual or something [but] more oriented toward women," people who are "within that spectrum" of LGBTQ identities offer "a little bit of extra understanding. It's not that it's like a better friendship or anything like that, but there's just... there's a little extra there for sure…" That "little extra" is composed of shared understanding, support, affirmation, and, as participants' comments suggest, a sense of "emotional energy" (Collins 2004) generated by a friendship with someone who has a shared identity. Taking their reflections as a whole, LGBTQ participants demonstrated ambivalence about friendships with other people, even questioning their own approaches and preferences to friendship, as Callie did. What enables this sense of affirmation is its effortlessness, or the lack of identity-based emotional labor needed with these friendships. Participants explicitly identified this *je ne sais quoi* in a number of ways. The way that Colby described how transgender friends "unspokenly" affirmed each other, Allyson's friendship "instantly" – Colby's "unspokenly," Allyson's friendship "instantly" with a bisexual friend, and Teagan's "little bit of extra understanding" are good examples. In other words, there *were* ways that shared-identity friendships mattered.

Related to a sense of affirmation, a final theme emerged in LGBTQ participants' discussion of shared-identity friendships: the ongoing importance of shared culture (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Swidler 1986). While shared culture enabled a sense of affirmation, it is distinct in that it refers less to the emotional foundation of a friendship and more to the cultural content of close relationships. In terms of shared culture, participants mentioned cultural objects (Griswold 2013) like insider jokes, symbols, and experiences that they noticed were absent in their relationships with cishet people. Lesbian-identified Alimah, for example, explained that:

To be honest, yeah, I think that LGBT people are like, I think that's one of the reasons

that, that should be more of a connection between people who are underprivileged in gen-

eral, like, you know what I mean? Like, we all have an understanding that we're not

gonna be a part of the culture that's, or not gonna be, we're not gonna be perfectly a part

of the culture that's the major, the majority, or you know what I, whatever it's called. So

it's like, it's really nice to have that understanding, it's really interesting to see what they

see about the world.

Some participants were more explicit about the importance of shared cultural references,

humor, and ability to discuss relationship specifics, as Mark mentioned in the opening quote.

Kyle, a partnered gay man, stated that he:

I would like more LGBT friends. And I'm realizing that because even the conversations I

had on Sunday with [a friend] that I tend to assume people know LGBT things that I

don't even realize aren't common knowledge to people who aren't and then I only realize

it when I talk to my friends who are straight. Um...and the majority of them just don't

know...

Kyle's comments neatly summarize the value of LGBTQ friendships: the idea that cultural refer-

ences are "common knowledge" to friends who share identities and require less emotional labor

to continually explain.

For Allyson, openness and shared humor distinguished her LGBTQ friends from her

cishet friends. Reflecting on two sets of her friends, she explained:

I would say both [of my LGBTQ friends], there's a level of acceptance I get from them

that I probably don't get from the [cishet] males. And [my female cishet friends] I don't

think I can be quite as open about that side of me as I might normally be. I don't, you know hold back or anything too much but it's not the same. I like, I might make a joke and [my LGBTQ friend is] going to laugh. And I'm going to be like, totally and they're just going to chuckle and be like, yeah that's funny.

When I pressed Allyson to offer a more specific example of something her LGBTQ friends would "totally get," she offered the following reflection on understandings of her romantic life:

Probably the situation where you're crushing on a friend that doesn't like your gender or sex...yeah... It doesn't happen terribly often but it does happen. And I know it's happened to all three of us [LGBTQ friends] and in that situation you're like, oh yeah. Well they don't like chicks. Darn it. [laughs]… And I almost think both of them are more sympa-thetic about my relationships period…. [my LGBTQ friends] definitely will, they have a lot more insight into relationships.

Like Mark and Leah, the common cultural knowledge about navigating romantic relationships while LGBTQ made shared-identity friendships important.

Finally, partnered, lesbian Robin reflected on her friendship desires, hoping for friend-ships with other lesbians with children. She explained the emotional support similarly-identified lesbian couples would hypothetically offer, even as she described difficulties finding similar cou-ples in River City. First, she explained that "Lesbians with children are hard to find in [River City]. There are just not that many of us. And so, you know, you hear about them. They're are like Sasquatch." She described a failed experience trying to connect with another lesbian couple with children, one she was excited to build but in which she was ultimately "iced out." While this example demonstrates identity insufficiency, Robin's comments demonstrate the value of

shared-identity friendships, made evident through their absence. She was frustrated because "We should be friends with them. If my theory is correct, which it clearly is not, about sharing socio-economic background and educational level. We should be friends with them." Despite sharing virtually *all* aspects of identity – gender, sexuality, marital and parental status, and class background – the friendship did not coalesce.

This friendship failure, for Robin, demonstrates the hopes she has for shared-identity friendships, particularly around the idea of emotional support. She explained:

Being married, having kids, living in [River City], sharing some maybe pain, sharing some joys. Like it seems like we should want to hang out with each other because we're rare. We fit these identity categories that nobody else fits. And that nobody else can identify with, you know? Um and so it bums me out that that isn't there.

In brief, shared-identity friendships offered opportunities for both more and less work: more emotional support, and less emotional labor, that is, less need to explain culturally-specific symbols and jokes. Participants' ambivalence about shared-identity friendships both challenge and demonstrate the ongoing relevance of LGBTQ identities in River City. Some participants minimized their identities or explained that shared identities were insufficient to generate friendships, while others explained that friends with shared identities were important sources of affirmation and shared knowledge. The future of friendship for LGBTQ participants in River City is murky; most participants expressed a desire for *more* LGBTQ friends, particularly close friends, and regretted that they did not have many close friends who shared their identities. However, analyses of participants' friendship networks demonstrate the ongoing relevance of LGBTQ identities, for some participants more than others. I now turn to this analysis.

Mapping LGBTQ friendships in River City

Participants' friendship maps offer another layer of evidence about LGBTQ friendships and their relationship to a possibly post-gay River City. I had both LGBTQ and cishet participants complete an open-ended friendship mapping exercise in which they identified and described their current friends. We might expect that what participants said about their friendships might differ from who they considered close friends, for example, who they seek out in times of distress (Small 2013). Despite some participants' comments that the identities of their friends "wouldn't matter," friendship maps suggest otherwise.[15] First, like cishet participants, LGBTQ participants are close friends with largely cishet people (Table 1); in other words, about two-thirds of LGBTQ participants' friends are cishet people. LGBTQ participants do have LGBTQ friends, even close friends, but very few participants had a majority of LGBTQ close friends. In other words, having a shared identity is not enough to generate a close friendship; participants echoed Ghaziani's (2014) research in noting that sexual orientation, and, to a lesser degree, gender identity was not enough for them to develop a close friendship.[16] However, LGBTQ participants had *fewer* friends overall (12.7 friends, on average, compared to 17.5 friends for cishet participants),and a *higher* proportion of LGBTQ friends (on average 36.3%, compared to 14.5% for cishet participants).

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[15] The sample examined in these tables is small, but noteworthy, and is meant to prompt examination of these trends at a larger scale, or in a comparative context (Small 2009).

[16] While I do not address LGBTQ participants' likelihood of having friendships that cross lines of race in this chapter, my data from friendship mapping suggest a number of questions about friendship and identity intersections in a largely-white, fairly conservative city. In brief, racial homophily is maintained in friendships even for LGBTQ participants, some of who shared, somewhat shamefacedly, that they had no friends of color.

At first glance, these findings support the idea that River City may be in what Ghaziani calls the closeted or coming out era. LGBTQ people's overall smaller number of friends suggests challenges making friends, relative to cishet people, a possible indicator of a closet era in which LGBTQ people struggle to form relationships that acknowledge their identities. A higher *proportion* of LGBTQ friends among LGBTQ people indicates a possible coming out era, given a desire for shared-identity friendships in such a community. While this finding is not surprising in River City, it adds a layer to what LGBTQ people and cishet allies *say* about gender and sexuality in their friendships. In other words, as researchers have suggested (Jerolmack and Khan 2014; Lamont and Swidler 2014), what people say about their actions and relationships differs from how they act in situ, and individuals' friendship talk should be analyzed alongside evidence of friendship networks. Based on their friendship maps, LGBTQ participants had a higher proportion of LGBTQ friends than cishet participants, suggesting the ongoing relevance of shared identities in LGBTQ friendships.

However, a breakdown by gender and sexuality tells a more complicated story. Table 2 compares LGBTQ participants by gender identity, while Table 3 compares LGBTQ participants by sexual orientation. Note that this table includes straight-identified transgender participants, which emphasizes the need to consider sexual orientation and gender as distinct identities when interpreting these data. Analyzing LGBTQ participant data in terms of sexual orientation *and* gender offers a richer understanding of the complexities of LGBTQ community in River City, an approach that would be missed by focusing on sexual orientation alone. First, cisgender women and transgender men have the highest proportion of LGBTQ friends (41.8% and 41.5% respectively), while transgender women and genderqueer participants had low proportions of LGBTQ

friends (27.7% in both cases). Lesbian and queer participants also had higher proportions of

LGBTQ friends, while straight and bi-, pan-, and asexual participants had lower proportions of

LGBTQ friends. These averages should be treated with extreme caution, given the low numbers

of participants in each category (only 2 trans men and only 2 straight, transgender participants,

for example) and the fact that this is not a random, representative sample. Notably, cisgender

men and gay men have *middling* proportions of LGBTQ friends (32.1% and 35.4%, respec-

tively), as well as middling numbers of friends, compared to other LGBTQ community members.

These findings do not offer clear evidence that River City is post-gay, but they also do not sug-

gest that gay men are especially closeted or out, in terms of their friendship numbers and propor-

tions. These findings may also be the result of small numbers of gay men, and LGBTQ people

more generally, in River City, although it is difficult to know without data comparing River City

to similar, and similarly-sized, cities. In sum, cis lesbians, cis queer women, and trans men had

the largest proportions of LGBTQ friends; followed by cis gay men; with trans women and gen-

derqueer people having the lowest proportion of LGBTQ friends.

Two findings emerge from my analysis when we focus on the range of LGBTQ identities

present in River City. First, shared-identity friendships are more common among lesbians and

queer women. Second, those whose gender and sexual identities challenge normative boundaries

have lower proportions of LGBTQ friends. The first finding challenges research about lesbians

and queer women in small cities and rural communities. First, contra what research about rural

contexts and lesbian identities and communities suggests (Brown-Saracino 2011; Kazyak 2012),

cisgender lesbians, queer people, and trans men have the highest proportion of LGBTQ friends.

River City, in other words, is certainly not post-lesbian; in other words, shared-identity friendships still seem to matter for the cis lesbians, queer women, and trans men in my study. Given that 5 of the 9 queer-identified participants also identified as women, lesbians and queer women more generally in River City likely have higher proportions of LGBTQ friends than gay and queer men. In this small sample of LGBTQ River Citizens, shared identities matter in lesbian and queer participants' friendships, despite research suggesting that some lesbian integration into the cishet mainstream (Brown-Saracino 2011, 2015). Post-gay (or post-lesbian) frameworks may not be relevant for lesbian and queer women, trans men, or community contexts beyond the urban gayborhood.

Second, groups with the lowest proportions of LGBTQ friends include genderqueer participants, transgender women (both straight and lesbian), and bisexual, pansexual, and asexual participants. However, transgender men and queer participants have high proportions of LGBTQ friends. Keeping in mind the low numbers suggested by these tables, it is difficult to know what to make about this array of identities. While the numbers of these participants are relatively small, this finding raises questions about shared-identity friendships and fit with community gender and sexuality norms in River City. We might think that, for example, transgender participants as a whole might have more shared-identity friends than cisgender participants. However, comparing gender and sexuality for transgender participants suggests that these identities might matter in different ways, in the context of River City. However, this finding may have more to do with the age of participants than gender identity specifically, as the trans women I interviewed were generally older and transitioned later in life, while the trans men were younger and came

out as trans at a much younger age. Friendship networks for older trans participants tended to include cishet friends known prior to transition, while younger trans participants' friendship networks included friends they had known during and after transitioning. It is also possible that the coming out process for trans participants affected friendship networks differently for older compared to younger trans folks, and younger trans participants were able to find and make trans friends online more easily.

While average numbers of friendships do not necessarily signal community integration or coherence, initial patterns in proportions of LGBTQ friends suggest that gender and sexuality *normativity* is a dimension along which LGBTQ community change should be assessed. Researchers have examined how, for example, heterosexual (Rich 1993) and gender normativities are enacted in urban public spaces (Doan 2007, 2010), resulting in exclusion of non-normative or queer people (Ingram, Bouthillette, and Retter 1997; Warner 1993). River City's local gender and sexual norms, in some ways typical of the Midwest (Kazyak 2012), meant that some LGBTQ participants struggled to fit in to restrictive community norms. In what follows, I offer two cases from my interview data to demonstrate the need to further explore both post-gay and queer dimensions of LGBTQ community.

The loneliest among us: friendship, normativity, and legibility

Teagan and Kai are young, low-income LGBTQ community members who have lived in River City for more than 20 years. Teagan is a white, cisgender woman in her mid-20s with long hair and Ray Ban glasses, which she explains are stereotypically lesbian. While she is not partnered, she is dating a genderqueer person who is not a River Citizen and who lives in a distant

state, and she is well connected to LGBTQ concepts and ideas through her tumblr friends. Teagan is active in what might best be described as online geek and gaming communities, and her friendships involve connections to those communities. Kai is in their[17] early 30s, is also white, single, identifies as a lesbian, sports a short haircut, and locates themself under the genderqueer umbrella. Kai is active in the local recovery communities, and their friendship networks extend into recovery-specific spaces. Both Teagan and Kai's close friendship circles include LGBTQ people; Teagan's large friend group of at least 20 people include couples and individuals of a range of gender identities and sexual orientations, while Kai's slightly smaller close friend group of 16 includes a mix of lesbian and straight friends. However, Kai's and Teagan's experiences of community differed radically in ways that are prototypical of my participants and indicate a next step for research about friendship, identity, and normativities: Teagan seemed comfortable feeling disconnected from LGBTQ community in River City, while Kai described a sense of loneliness and longing for LGBTQ community. Fitting with normative frameworks of gender, sexuality, partnership, and class are, I suspect, key to the differences between them, and these themes were echoed by other participants.

More generally, among my interviewees, those who expressed the greatest sense of loneliest were those who challenged gender *and* relationship norms, especially if they were uninterested in "passing" as cisgender or straight *and* were single. For example, three LGBTQ participants (one genderqueer and lesbian-identified, one genderqueer and queer, and one straight-identified trans woman) cried during my interviews when discussing what they felt was a lack of

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[17] Here, too, I use "they" as a gender-neutral pronoun. Kai identified as a lesbian at the time of this interview, and they later identified as a trans man, shifting to he, him, and his pronouns. Kai is beginning to use they, them, and theirs as pronouns at the time of this writing, and I use the pronoun "they" to more accurately represent the complexity of their identity, as someone who can identify as both a trans man and as a lesbian.

friendship and community. In each case, participants expressed their gender identities in complex ways that did not align with local gender norms. However, other participants' nonnormative gender identity or expression did not automatically lead to a sense of loneliness.

The difference for these three participants is that they were *single* and struggled to find dating partners who would acknowledge and recognize their sexual and gender identities. In other words, partnership offered a protective effect against loneliness for nonnormative participants as a whole, and queer, genderqueer, and trans participants who were single were not able to enjoy this protection. While all participants described LGBTQ community in River City as disconnected and temporary (on this issue, see (Gray 2009)), at best, single, non-normative participants seemed to feel this disconnect most acutely, *despite* the presence of generally supportive friends. The lack of dating prospects, for these three participants, contributed to their sense of loneliness. For Charlie, a lack of partnership *and* a sense of connection with queer friends was sorely lacking in River City:

> I just feel like I don't get my needs met in the same way. Um, because I don't have queer friends… I don't have queer friends here, basically, at all. Um, and I don't know, that could be because of my age and because lots of people are partnered up and I'm not, and so it feels like there's not really hanging out that happens… like, I just don't have the variety, I guess, is what it feels like. And so I feel really lonely sometimes amongst the friends that I have now. And I realize there are times when I just don't need to hang out with them. Like, there are times when I'm lonely, and so I think of, like, I should go hang out with them, and hang out with them and I'm, like, they don't, no, this is not hitting the

spot. Um, and it's because I don't have, like, other sets of friends to, like, offset that feel-

ing. So yeah, these are reflections I've had since being here.

For Charlie and Kai, this sense of loneliness contributes to a desire to leave River City; indeed,

one has moved away from River City, while the other continues to plan a move in the coming

years.

Interestingly, gay men I interviewed had few complaints about the lack of LGBTQ com-

munity in River City, regardless of their relationship status, and their middling proportion of

LGBTQ friends reflects this approach to what might be described as optional LGBTQ commu-

nity. These preliminary observations suggest that there are limits to understanding a particular

LGBTQ community as post-gay, or as following a post-gay trajectory. The context of River City

may well reward more normative gender identities and sexual orientations and normative family

formations, leaving those whose identities cannot follow a locally-legible trajectory involving

partnership, family, and identity lacking friendship, community, and a sense of belonging. While

evidence of LGBTQ community exists in River City, as discussed in the introduction and chapter

1, this community may also be segmented along lines of gender and community-based norma-

tivities. In other words, LGBTQ community is, and has always been (Armstrong 2002; Ghaziani,

Taylor, and Stone 2016), fractured by gender, race, and class. I add that local norms also divide

LGBTQ community insiders from those who are more on the community's periphery.

Conclusion

Friendship talk and friendship mapping indicates that the story of LGBTQ community in

River City is not clearly post-gay, definitely not post-lesbian, and, still, not entirely queer-

friendly. Focusing on friendship reveals aspects of LGBTQ identities and communities that remain invisible with an exclusive emphasis on gay institutions. In my research in River City, participants explained that shared identities did *and* did not matter in their relationships with other LGBTQ people. Participants' "friendship talk" (Anthony and McCabe 2015) suggests that some participants minimized the importance of *their own* sexual and gender identities in discussing their friendships, while others saw shared identities as insufficient to generate a friendship. Other participants explained that friendships with LGBTQ people offered a sense of affirmation and shared cultural understanding, generating less emotional labor than friendship with cishet people.

In contrast to participants' friendship talk, friendship mapping told a different story for a notable, and surprising, group of participants: cisgender lesbian[18] women. These findings suggest that the presence of post-gay discourses among LGBTQ community members may not align with friendship patterns. A post-gay narrative of progress hides the complex reality that, in the context of River City, those with the highest proportion of LGBTQ friends (lesbian and queer cisgender women) are also those seemingly most likely to be integrated into straight community (Brown-Saracino 2011; Kazyak 2012). Finally, findings from my research support LGBTQ friendship research that identifies the limits of friendship as a progressive foundation for LGBTQ communities (Muraco 2012). That is, gendered and sexual *normativities* that emphasize conformity, traditional gender expression, and monogamous, heterosexual families persist even in friendships, in-

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[18] As I indicated before, the term cisgender means that one's gender identity matches the gender assigned at birth. In this chapter, following my participants' identities, I distinguish gender from sexual orientation. For example, some participants identified as transgender and straight and were explicitly critical of being included in the LGBTQ acronym or LGBTQ community. In another example, not all lesbian-identified participants were cisgender women; Karen, for example, is a transgender woman who identifies as a lesbian. The complexity of this research suggests a need to more carefully unpack the LGBTQ acronym and its uses and limitations in research on gender and sexuality.

dicated by a lower proportion of shared-identity friendships and a sense of "loneliness" experienced by LGBTQ community members who do not align with heteronormative community norms around gender, race, and community insider status. In other words, focusing on communities through the lens of friendships in River City highlights the role normativities play in community and identity contexts, and those normativities are determined, in part, by community contexts (Bell and Valentine 1995; Johnson 2013; Seidman 1996; Warner 1993).

While it would be easy to dismiss friendship talk as what people say, not what they do, understanding the meaning-making process of friendship (Anthony and McCabe 2015; Duck 1994) alongside friendship mapping data suggests that shared identities matter for LGBTQ participants' friendships. LGBTQ friendships "matter," specifically, in ways that differ along lines of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, I have shared examples of friendship talk that demonstrate an ambivalent approach to identity that resonates with post-gay *and* coming out era themes: the "identity doesn't matter, but…" idea. Some participants focused on minimizing identity differences and describing identity insufficiency for friendship, while others described the benefits of shared-identity friendships: affirmation and shared symbols.

I have offered initial analyses that challenge and supplement post-gay community theories in two ways: first, post-gay themes emerge in discussions of LGBTQ community and friendship in even the most presumably hostile communities, places with no history of persistent gay institutions and neighborhoods. Second, shared identities still do matter in LGBTQ participants' friendships, both according to their friendship talk and to their friendship maps. It is important to recall that gay communities are not LGBTQ communities, and expanding an understanding of LGBTQ community to include multiple gender identities and sexual orientations is important in

communities beyond urban centers as well as in larger cities. I suggest that adding a dimension

of normativity, that is, greater or lesser degree of queerness, while difficult to operationalize

(Brim and Ghaziani 2016; Seidman 1996), offers a salient way to chart assimilation. The queer-

est of my participants (in terms of gender identity, sexual orientation, partner status, more ad-

vanced age, newness to River City, and lower income levels) had lower numbers of friends and

in interviews were particularly clear about feeling lonely and disconnected, suggesting the

strength of normative discourses of family, transition, and who is marked as a stranger (Simmel

1917) in a small, Midwestern city. These queerer participants were not, however, embraced by

their local LGBTQ community, which we might imagine as the "home" for community misfits.

In other words, these normativities were contextual; we might not expect trans or explicitly

queer-identified participants to have large numbers of friends, but, in *some* cases, they do.

Finally, friendships offer a lens through which to explore LGBTQ communities even in

places where communities remain difficult to find. The range and organization of LGBTQ

friendship suggests that communities may not follow a linear trajectory through gayness. For ex-

ample, my friendship data demonstrate that, while some say that shared identity is no longer im-

portant in selecting friends, *recognition* of identity is critical to that friendship persisting, as

Colby suggested. Similar to Armstrong's idea of "gay plus one" (2002:22), a concept that refers

to the development of organizations that are both gay and "something else" (like churches or

sports teams), these friendships are not centrally organized around LGBTQ identities, but those

identities must still be acknowledged and, at a minimum, "not judged." These friendships high-

light the complexities of LGBTQ community raised in the introduction: the idea that recognition

and validation of LGBTQ identities remain important in LGBTQ communities even as its members' friendships might look quite different. Exploring what friends *do* together is part of the work of friendships, as allies support LGBTQ acquaintances and see the importance of supporting friends and, in some cases, showing up for LGBTQ events, a theme I explore in my next chapter.

An exclusive focus on urban gay enclaves and gay relationships, while an important start to the discussion, limits our ability to analyze and fully understand the complexities of LGBTQ communities and relationships. Furthermore, researching friendship dynamics in places with *queer* institutions, networks, symbols, and geographies, compared to River City, is a compelling proposition and raises questions about what such institutions, relationships, symbols, and spaces might be. Ultimately, friendship research has the potential to offer critical insights into processes of assimilation, community shifts, and social change, and integrating an analysis of friendships into LGBTQ community research offers a queer corrective to post-gay theories of community change.

CHAPTER 4: Straight woman in a gay man's world: Allyship and diversity resources in LGBTQ community

Angela and Brenda, middle-class, straight, white women in their 40s and 50s, are both close friends with LGBTQ people in River City. Both are River City natives, although Angela has moved to several different states in the U.S., especially as a young adult, while Brenda explains that "I've grown up here, been here my whole life, probably die here, my whole life. [laughs] So, born and raised, um, just a [River Citizen]." Brenda sees herself as a long-term

River City community member, while Angela left when she was "almost twenty-one, kinda sow-ing some wild oats, just, I just needed an adventure." Both live in River City and value their close connections with nearby family, although their friendship maps differed in one key way: Brenda's included primarily family, while Angela's map included friends exclusively. Brenda's friendship map reflects her social life in River City, one that revolves around shared family activi-ties with peripheral connections to friends. Angela's demonstrates her lively, friend-based social life and documents her travels around the country.

Brenda is best friends and one-time business partners with Karen, a transgender woman, activist, and public speaker. Angela's close friendships with two gay men began in her young adulthood and have continued despite her migration to cities in the west and southwest. On the surface, neither of them seem likely candidates for LGBTQ political activism, and, yet, both of-fer support for their friends as well as LGBTQ events and institutions in River City. They might both be considered active allies, people who are not LGBTQ but who support LGBTQ people and communities through their actions, in contrast to more passive allies, who might post mes-sages of support on social media but who fail to show up for their LGBTQ friends at community events and on election days. Angela works for a nonprofit multicultural organization, the Center for Multicultural Community (CMC), and has played a leadership role in supporting LGBTQ groups and events. For example, she helps manage and advertise LGBTQ youth and adult sup-port groups housed at the CMC, and she spearheaded an initiative to create transgender-inclusive bathroom signage at the CMC. Brenda works at a convenience store and occasionally accompa-nies her friend Karen to local LGBTQ events like a downtown walk to honor Transgender Day of Remembrance.

It might seem that Angela is the more politically engaged, active ally, albeit through her work. But Brenda's comments about supporting a young visibly gay man of color in her workplace should give us pause in considering the role of allies in supporting LGBTQ community. In response to a question about whether her friendship with Karen caused her to talk with others about LGBTQ issues, she offered the following story:

> Once in a while maybe, yeah, if something would come up… Different people that I meet, you know, for instance there was a young Black, uh, male that came in the store this morning, and you could tell all over that he was gay, you know? [C: How could you tell?] I just had to think of the Birdcage [film] when I saw the one, you know he is, but very feminine, he was very, very feminine, [chuckles] and even the voice was very feminine, and because he was still male appearance, and I don't know, maybe he could be, um, transgender, too. Maybe he wants to change, I don't know because I don't know him, but I found myself being very pleasant to him and probably a little extra special care to him, you know, conversation or whatever, strike up a conversation with him and that, and, oh are you having a good day? Or you know, where do you work at? Or where are you headed out so early this morning, or, you know? Which normally I'll just kinda wait on somebody, oh, hope you have a good day, thanks, good-bye!

In urban contexts like Chicago (Ghaziani 2014) or San Francisco (Muraco 2012), such an interaction might not be noteworthy. In River City, where being "Birdcage" queer is noteworthy and relatively rare, such support is uncommon. Recall Steve's comment about being able to "pass" as not "flamboyantly, rah-rah-shish-koom-bah gay," which was confirmed by my community observations where, even in the gayest of spaces like gay-owned bars and drag shows,

masculine gender expression was a norm. Brenda's extra effort to engage this anonymous, pre-sumed member of the LGBTQ community highlights the complexity of LGBTQ community support and allyship in contexts outside urban centers. In other words, does Brenda's emotion work (Hochschild 1979; Hochschild and Machung 2003) in support of this young man "count" as support for LGBTQ community?

In Angela's interview, she described her pleasure in participating in gay and lesbian communities, particularly when she left River City for the larger, gay- and lesbian-friendly cities of the Midwest and Southwest. Angela's involvement in gay communities has clearly contributed enjoyment and fun to her life, as she visited gay bars in Chicago's Boystown and lesbian communities in the southwest. It also contributed to her personal development, and after returning to the River City area, she became involved in a community organization that supports LGBTQ people, the CMC. While Angela's active support for LGBTQ community in River City is clear, and frequent, she also still benefits from her engagement with these communities. Her work as an ally might be considered alongside the benefits she gleans from connections with this community. How might we weigh evidence of allyship against a sense of what allies "get" out of their connections to LGBTQ community?

Brenda's and Angela's allyship raise the two key themes I address in this chapter, where I consider the role of self-identified cishet[19] allies in River City's LGBTQ community. I focus on two dimensions: how allies *benefit* from their engagement with LGBTQ people and how they *contribute* to supporting LGBTQ people. These benefits and contributions arose in my research

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[19] As a reminder, "cishet" is shorthand for cisgender and heterosexual. In other words, cishet refers to participants who are not lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer and are not transgender.

in River City's LGBTQ community in two ways: within friendships and within community institutions. Both are equally important. A focus exclusively on community institutions would miss Brenda's everyday contributions to LGBTQ community, while a focus solely on friendship would ignore Angela's important work within community institutions.

Implicit in the literature about cishet involvement and activism in LGBTQ communities (what I am calling "allyship" in this chapter) is a question about what constitutes allyship and which cishet people are authorized to claim an ally identity. While I will consider the identitarian challenges of a specific ally definition elsewhere,[20] for the purposes of this chapter, "allies are movement adherents who are not direct beneficiaries of the movements they support and do not have expectations of such benefits" (Myers 2008:168). Even this seemingly simple definition is complicated, as I am arguing here that allies do indeed benefit from their participation, if not activism, within LGBTQ communities (Dean 2014).

Sociological research offers conflicting evidence about the role of cishet allies in LGBTQ communities. On the one hand, allies offer concrete, often material support for LGBTQ communities, contributing time, money, transportation, education, and their privileged voices and bodies in heteronormative spaces (Broad et al. 2008; Ghaziani 2011; Myers 2008). On the other hand, allies consume LGBTQ community resources and reinforce heteronormative and gender norms (Hartless 2017; Mathers et al. 2015; Muraco 2012). Furthermore, allies play particular roles in different *types* of communities. In urban gay communities, for example, allies engage in what

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[20] In future work, I will address the challenges to the concept of an LGBTQ community that both LGBTQ and cishet participants raised. For example, one participant, an avid feminist and immigration activist on a path to becoming a Dominican nun, convincingly explained that her celibacy might be an example of a "queer" sexuality.

Amin Ghaziani calls "performative progressiveness" (2014:255), an orientation to gay communities marked more by consumption and celebration of these spaces, rather than knowledge and active support for LGBTQ rights (through volunteering, marching, or writing a local legislator, for example). In rural communities, allies play a central role in LGBTQ community institutions (Burgess and Baunach 2014; Gray 2009), even as their participation entails some risk to their community standing. And in a variety of community contexts, allies support their individual LGBTQ friends, offering emotion work and direct and indirect material support to LGBTQ community members who are themselves engaged in a variety of activist labor. Overall, allies both support and benefit from connections with LGBTQ people and communities.

I use the concept of "diversity resources" to consider the relationship between allies and LGBTQ community in River City. The concept of diversity resources builds on the concept of "gay capital" (Morris 2017), which describes a "form of social privilege" (2017:17) gay men use to develop strong social networks, specifically with other gay men. Gay capital, in other words, is:

> An umbrella term which describes the unique forms of cultural, social, and symbolic capital available to young gay men in gay-friendly, post-gay social fields. In other words, cultural gay capital describes insider knowledge about gay cultures, social gay capital describes belonging to social groups which are exclusively or predominantly gay, and symbolic gay capital describes having one's gay identity recognized and legitimized as a form of social prestige by others. (Morris 2017:17)

The concept of "diversity resources" expands upon "gay capital" in four ways. First, while the "others" Morris explores include gay men, I consider how such resources are exchanged even by allies, those who are not part of gay or LGBTQ communities. Second, I analyze the exchange of resources in River City, a community context that is not clearly a "gay-friendly, post-gay social field." Third, I expand the understanding of "capital" beyond cultural, social, and symbolic dimensions. In addition to community-based knowledge as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986; Green 2013; Greene 2014; hooks 2000), diversity resources include material contributions to community as well as emotion work (Hochschild 1979), forms of labor allies draw from and contribute to LGBTQ communities. Finally, the concept of diversity resources may well apply to other marginalized groups, and I suggest possible diversity "exchanges" and equivalencies below. Sarah Ahmed's (2012) discussion of "diversity work" as a kind of labor that ultimately inhibits social justice is central to this concept, as the "work" in which allies engage holds the potential to prevent social change.

I argue that the concept of "diversity resources" grounded in the context of a community helps us think through, if not fully resolve, the tensions between individual and organizational support for LGBTQ communities and who "counts" as an ally. However, the net balance of diversity resources remains an open question, and researchers offer conflicting results. Do allies ultimately deplete or generate LGBTQ community? What quantity of diversity resources is required for allies to offset the resources they draw from LGBTQ communities? To address this question, I first describe friendships between LGBTQ people and cishet allies, identifying the ways that allies see their LGBTQ friends as diversity resources *and* offer material, emotional support as diversity resources. I then identify the ways allies constitute LGBTQ community, as

both community consumers of diversity resources and as pillars embedded in LGBTQ institu-tions, offering institutional diversity resources of their own. I conclude by offering comments about the continuum of politicization (Muraco 2012) allies represent and the importance of con-sidering community context in interpreting allies' ambivalent relationship with LGBTQ commu-nities.

Allies in friendship

In this section, I discuss the ways allies and their LGBTQ friends exchanged diversity re-sources. Allies drew on their LGBTQ friends' identity-based diversity resources and offered their own resources to support their "diverse" friends. In what follows, I identify the ways cishet ally friends drew on the identities and experiences of their LGBTQ friends to signal their own inclusivity, and in the next section I describe the material and emotional resources allies offered to their LGBTQ friends.

Seeing LGBTQ friends as diversity resources

LGBTQ people operated as diversity resources for their ally friends in three ways: as an indicator of River City's progress, as an aspect of personal self-development, and as a demon-stration of "coolness" or cultural distinction (Bourdieu 1986). Allies' diversity talk—defined as a discourse that "simultaneously acknowledges racial (and other) differences while downplaying and disavowing related social problems" (Bell and Hartmann 2007:905)[21]—was offered as evi-dence of their progressiveness (Ghaziani 2014), a newly-valuable reputational enhancement in

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[21] For other analyses of diversity talk in practice, see (Ahmed 2012; Brink-Danan 2015).

River City (Fine 2001). In other words, in discussing their friendships with LGBTQ people, allies demonstrated their progressiveness both at the community level and at the level of the self, where diversity and multiculturalism indicate self-development.

Ally participants described their LGBTQ friends' experiences as an indicator of a progress narrative for River City, a sign that the community has come a long way. Sharing the recent wedding of a gay friend, Angela juxtaposed the ongoing "hardness" of growing up gay in the River City area with the "cool" ability to get married in a small town in the River City metro area:

> He just got married last weekend in [his home town] to his partner. So these are two guys
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> that grew up gay in [this town], which back then was harder, you know, much harder. I
>
> mean, it's always hard I'm sure, I mean, in small communities maybe, maybe…I mean,
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> so it's just hard to, to like, you get to marry your partner now in your hometown, you
>
> have two children together, and you know, just cool, you know.

Angela's discussion of her gay friend's ability to marry his partner illustrates, for her, River City's progress in recent decades.

Gay friends' weddings, a long-standing possibility in River City pre-dating *Obergefell v. Hodges*[22] by more than six years, also marked River City's progress for Shelley, a straight, white woman in her 50s originally from the South and a community leader who had been officiating weddings for same-sex couples since they first became legal in River City. Shelley's journey as an ally began relatively early in her life, when she first began questioning the strict, conservative

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[22] *Obergefell v. Hodges* is the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision guaranteeing the right to marry for same-sex couples.

religion in which she was raised. She explained that she had originally not questioned the frameworks of her childhood, "buying it, hook line and sinker… but I think it was, whenever I threw open the door to the religion and all that, then I decided to really reassess the whole thing, you know. Some of these things weren't true, then what else wasn't? And so that's why, that's when I started I guess questioning." Her active support of LGBTQ people evolved through "just knowing more and more people" and showing curiosity about their lives, and her allyship pre-dated her daughter coming out as a lesbian.

She described the marriage of a gay man and recent transplant to River City as a kind of bookend to her process of understanding and supporting LGBTQ people. He had moved to River City, was looking for community connections, and volunteered to speak at the local LGBTQ youth group. Shelley explained:

> In fact he was my first same-sex wedding, later, but I was leading this youth group that we could talk about everything… So I asked him and his partner [to] come in, and told them they could tell their parents if they want to. I don't think they did. [chuckles] But for two, two different nights they came. And [they] answered every question these kids wanted to know. And, um, I think that was a, that was a big, you know, just listening to him too, really solidified it. I guess I was already there but it really solidified it. I can, now that as I remember that, and then I, and then I married them on their thirtieth anniversary of being together.

In Shelley's case, this "first same-sex wedding" signaled both the evolution of her allyship and the move toward gay acceptance in River City.

For some participants, welcoming LGBTQ friends was part of a conscious strategy to in-corporate LGBTQ people into the broader River City community, or at least, as in Wendy's case, to make them feel "welcome" and "connected." Wendy and her husband Drew met at a nearby liberal arts college, and they have lived in River City, raised their children, worked in colleges and universities in the area for more than two decades. Both are invested in supporting LGBTQ people in River City, and their recent support is focused on a lesbian couple with small children. Answering a broad question about LGBTQ friendships and discussing her and her husband's closeness to this couple, she explained that:

> My thought is … I wonder if part of the reason we're so close to them is we really wanted them to feel welcome and connected back to the community, so I think we put more time and energy into making that relationship happen when they came when [one member of the couple] came back twelve years ago. And of course we loved [her partner] so it's like, but then it was like we just like you so we're friends.

Processes of friendship- and community-making were intertwined for allies like Wendy, suggesting the importance of understanding friendship in community contexts (Adams and Allan 1999). In an urban context, the need to attract and welcome LGBTQ people might not be seen as important, necessary, or urgent, at least, not in the same ways. Allies' LGBTQ friendships oper-ated as diversity resources in their friendship talk (Anthony and McCabe 2015), marking River City's progress through marriage and the conscious emotion work of allies to attract and support LGBTQ people.

Allies also used friendship talk about LGBTQ friends to share a *personal* narrative of progress or acceptance, what Johnson and Best (2012), in analyzing straight parents of gay children, call the "moral careers" of such allies. Without knowing her transgender, lesbian friend Karen, ally Brenda admitted that she would not have questioned others' negative attitudes towards LGBTQ people. She reflected on the source of those attitudes in her discussion of her friendship with Karen:

> In my mind, going from when I was young, you know, everybody saying, oh, yeah, there's a lesbian, you know, or, but now knowing what they actually are… My whole relationship with [Karen] has made me all aware of, of that, I don't think I would be like that if I hadn't met her.

Brenda's "moral career" supporting LGBTQ people in River City would not have existed without her close friendship with Karen, and her personal story of self-development and growing acceptance depended on this friendship.

Brenda also benefited personally from her relationship with Karen, like she would in any other friendship, and something about her friendship with Karen and Karen's friends helped her to understand her own alcoholism and changed how *others* viewed her, as Brenda suggested laughingly, as a "bitch, probably." She described meeting other transgender people through her friend Karen, explaining that "they're just so easy to talk to, so more friendly, so not judgmental, you know." Connections with trans people, in other words, put Brenda at ease in a way interactions with cisgender people did not.

While Brenda met Karen through work, others met LGBTQ friends through institutions like colleges and leisure organizations. For Drew and Wendy, gay and lesbian friends were part

of a process of learning in college that emphasized the benefits of exposure to differences, diversity, and multiculturalism (Anthony and McCabe 2015). Drew explained that:

> So, at [my small, liberal arts college], I met a number of friends and so this expansion of the mind, from small town to I know there's more out there, okay I've read a lot, to meeting people who are visibly different, who are sharing different things, who have a different perspective on politics and everything else, um, and I was involved in choir for four years so I had lots of gay and lesbian friends…

Wendy, also involved in choir at the same college, reflected that the closeness with gay choir members and the historical and political context of the 1980s led her to change her perspective on LGBTQ people and become more accepting. Her choir was:

> A close group of like seventy people. And well each year it changed the membership changed a little bit. It was really in that group of friends it was like oh, you're gay. And then there was like suddenly like I guess that doesn't matter because we're friends and that's whatever that's fine ya know. So I think it was really through those friendships that I realized and let's see, oh ok so that was happening, I know people and they're gay and they're cool and they're my friends and I love them and I would do anything for them… But also what was emerging at that time was homosexuality is not a choice, this is the way people are born so that was happening kind of at the same time. So it was like not only are these people like good and they're my friends and ya know this, but there's nothing wrong with it. Religion has put this label on it has interpreted it in these ways historically and but we know now the science behind it and this is the reality. So it was those

two things coming together kind of in that decade in the eighties that was what changed it

for me.

While for Wendy and Drew, friendships with LGBTQ people marked specific shifts in

acceptance and awareness, for Shelley, friendships with LGBTQ people demonstrated a more

spiritual process of self-development marked by realizations of *similarity*. She described her

LGBTQ friendships as:

They're just the eye-opening ones, the ones that help you understand how similar we all

are. It doesn't make any difference, and but it is lovely in a way that you get a chance to

understand how some of the different things that people have to deal with because of that,

that you just don't think about… Like one couple in particular I'm thinking of, they're, I

just love 'em to death, and I love, I just enjoy watching them. I enjoy watching them with

their children and reminding myself over and over, it's all the same, it's all the same.

Reflecting specifically on her learning about her daughter's transgender friend, she emphasized

this theme of learning and realizing connection and sameness in difference:

When you start getting down deeper into the alphabet, that I'm still, well, and, you know,

wrapping my head around, you know, the trans, but then the, all the different levels

within, all that stuff, I just find it fascinating, it's just lovely if you can just get past the

idea that there's normal, and just go to, wow, we're all people and then there's all these

different gradients of us.

For Brenda, Wendy, and Drew, the diversity resources accessed via their LGBTQ friend-

ships helped them recognize the value of difference, while, for Shelley, these relationships

demonstrated a fundamental human sameness. For each of these participants, friendships with

LGBTQ people connected with a narrative of self-development, whether realized through inti-

mate knowledge of a friend, in the context of college and exposure to diversity discourses, or as

part of an ongoing spiritual process. These narratives of self-development aligned with claims of

"moral worth," (Ueno and Gentile 2015b), the idea that friendships with LGBTQ people play a

role in personal enlightenment. LGBTQ friendships offered diversity resources to help allies

move forward in a process of self-development, demonstrating their "moral worth" and "moral

careers" as supporters of LGBTQ people.

In sharing these friendship stories, ally participants also drew on their LGBTQ friends'

identities and experiences as a source of "coolness" and fun. Friends' "difference" operated as a

source of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) for ally participants, as well as a source of pleasure.

Paul, for example, described his LGBTQ friends as simply more fun than his cishet friends.

Speaking about his friends from the LGBTQ youth group, he explained that "my LGBT friends

[who are also leaders in the youth group], you know, when we're out at [a restaurant] having a

mentor meeting, I mean, oh my gosh, the laughter and you know, the stories and it's just, you

just leave there on such a high. Um, and that's what I love." Some ally participants' comments

about their LGBTQ friends suggest that these friends specifically are offered as evidence of *al-*

lies' hipness, coolness, or taste. Angela explained her attraction to her first gay friends:

> I think in the very beginning, I mean [my two gay friends] were just so interesting and
>
> just different. You know, they were just different from any of my [River City] friends, I
>
> didn't have any openly gay friends and just different and fun and funny, you know. Like,
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> and so, I'm like, okay this is cool, these people are cool and I didn't care about their sex-
>
> uality, you know? I mean, I didn't care what they did in their bedroom or who they loved,

I'm like, that's fine with me, you know? Um, you know I guess I, if I had to say, just really interesting people. [laughs] You know? Just different and interesting from, definitely from growing up in [River City] you know? Was just attracted to that. Diversity. I was attracted to that diversity.

Angela's comments make LGBTQ identities as diversity resources explicit, and allies' comments about their LGBTQ friends being more "interesting" than cishet friends demonstrates the unique diversity resources LGBTQ people offer as friends to cishet allies. Nadine explained that, "I feel like in general... I don't know, LGBTQ people tend to be interesting and smart…" Allies suggested that what made LGBTQ people "interesting" was their subordinate status and assumed struggle. For example, Nadine also explained that:

I mean maybe another thing that's I think my LGBT friends like, just by virtue of being LGBTQ, they have to... they have to have done some self-reflection so not all, but I'd say generally LGBTQ people tend to maybe [have] more self-reflection about their identity and their place in the world, and that's something I can connect with, you know. I think it forces a certain amount of soul searching for lack of a better term. Um, which just makes you a more interesting person, a deeper person and that's attractive to me, yeah.

LGBTQ peoples' experiences of marginalization make them more "interesting," to Nadine.

Similarly, for Wendy, what makes LGBTQ friendships valuable is the way struggles shape LGBTQ people's lives and make them more "comfortable with who they are." She stated that:

I think there's some excitement in having friends who are a same sex couple because none of our other friends are so, I mean I think it's interesting I think they're just really

great people. I think that's true of a lot of people in the LGBTQ community… I think part

of that is what people have to go through. I think they tend to be, I think they tend to

know who they are once they're out, maybe they tend to know who they are and they're

very comfortable with who they are a lot of time, I guess sometimes they can't be out

with some populations. And I wonder if that also is kind of like ya know they're just re-

ally good people.

Nadine's and Wendy's comments highlight the ways allies conceptualize their friends' struggles

as diversity resources for their interest and enjoyment. In brief, ally participants saw LGBTQ

friends as diversity resources, as sources of fun and interest, resources honed in the face of

shared struggle. Much like the straight friends in Muraco's "intersectional friendships" (2012),

allies benefited from the resources available in their friendships with LGBTQ people. In their

friendship talk, ally participants demonstrated their community progressiveness, their personal

development, and their cultural distinction through their LGBTQ friends.

Offering material and emotional support

While ally participants' friendship talk demonstrated an understanding of friendships

with LGBTQ people as diversity resources, allies also offered their own resources in support of

their LGBTQ friends. Specifically, allies offered education for their non-LGBTQ family and

friends as well as emotional labor and material support directly to their LGBTQ friends. First,

allies educated those around them about their LGBTQ friends' identities and the experiences of

LGBTQ people, as they understood them. This education work could take place in both formal

and informal settings. For example, Drew, a college professor, taught about same-sex families,

asked his close LGBTQ friends to speak in his classes about their experiences, and offered a safe space, marked by a "safe zone" pink triangle, to LGBTQ students. He offered educational and emotional support to these students specifically, noting that students seem willing to come out to him because:

I think [it] is a combination of [my] discipline and then some of it is um, I appear to be the kind of person, well, not just appear, I, so there's that and then there's I have a triangle on the door and that kind of stuff that students are comfortable coming out to me it seems because they do that more with me than a lot of my colleagues.

Other allies work to educate those around them in more informal settings. Brenda's friendship with Karen included ongoing education work among even the closest of Brenda's family members. Brenda explains that:

To [Karen's] face, they treat her fine and everything but there are some that will talk about it behind her back. I know my kids have had problems with it. My sons mostly because they think of it as, okay, is she gay or what? You know? They always thought it was gay, and I'm like, gay and transgendered are not the same thing, you know, try to explain that to 'em and, uh, [they] don't want any part of it, you know, whatever. But, I'm like, hey, it's my friend and I expect you to respect her, you know? And they do. So, and you know, the more they get to know her, then I think they're more comfortable with it, too.

What is striking is that this education work is being undertaken across class backgrounds: Drew is part of the River City upper middle class, a married college professor with his own children in college. Brenda's background is working-class, and she did not attend college. Allies themselves

become "diversity resources" for the larger River City community based in part on their friend-ships with LGBTQ people, and these resources, at least in theory, help the River City community become more welcoming and accepting for LGBTQ people, one relationship at a time (Barth, Overby, and Huffmon 2009; Tompkins 2011).

In addition to these education services, allies offered resources in the form of emotion work (Hochschild 1979) and material support to their LGBTQ friends. Brenda, for example, offered her "shoulder" to her friend Karen. After meeting Karen in the same workplace, Brenda explains:

We never talked or were really that close to her, she just worked in the same store I did. Um, and then she went through her divorce and then came over to my department where, that's where I really got to know her. More she, was lonely, I would say, with the divorce going on and stuff like that, and, I don't know, just needed somebody to talk to, I was the shoulder to talk on, and, and more and more confided more and more in me.

Brenda supported her friend Karen through a difficult time; similarly, Elina, whose close friends include Mark, a gay man and former co-worker, also offers a listening ear to her closeted gay cousin. She explains that:

He doesn't have a lot of friends, and I also feel that I'm the only person that he shared such a big like fact about his life that I feel more of his friend than a family member given the context of our family. I mean we're very open, but apparently not, right, because he's not sharing it with anyone. It's only one way. I don't share a whole lot about myself with him. It's mostly me listening. Um, but, yeah. So it's actually a pretty much a one way thing because we don't hang out when I need to, but it's mostly when we go out

on family trips, him and I talk and it's mostly him coming to me and then talking. Now

that I know, I reach out to him.

While this work would be typical of any close friendship (Fischer 1982b), for ally participants'

LGBTQ friends, this support enabled their coming out processes and, in some cases, their very

survival, especially for friends who considered or attempted suicide. This kind of support and

recognition also manifested in the intersectional, cross-gender and cross-sexuality friendships

Muraco (2012) described. What distinguishes this emotion work from general friendship support

in times of crisis is its LGBTQ-specificity, that is, the way it enables LGBTQ friends to live, and

live proudly.

Material support included direct services from childcare (Drew, Wendy) to time spent

shopping (Brenda, Drew) to shared volunteer work (Paul, Lindsay, Shelley, Sandra). For exam-

ple, in addition to supporting her friend Karen by offering emotional support, Brenda explained

that "as I learned more about her, we went shopping, you know, tried makeup or clothes or what-

ever, and, um, we go out to lunch a lot, we still keep in touch that way. I worked with her a lot,

um, we opened the shop together at that point for a couple years." Brenda's investment in her

friendship with Karen also included a substantial financial commitment to a shared business.

Drew's support for his lesbian friends included an educational role for his friend Keri. He ex-

plained that "in some ways I see myself mentoring [her] when we're doing a project cause she

wants to learn. Tell me how to do that, you know, can I, you know, and I'll say, well here, you

make the next cut. See how I do this, okay here now you, you try it. And she, she's eager and

happy to do that, you know." In fact, Drew explained that they were "going to pick up materials

for a swing set tonight." Material, emotional, and educational support offered by allies are examples of "diversity resources" that help LGBTQ people manage day-to-day life.

However, it is important to examine whether the diversity resources offered by allies to their LGBTQ friends and resources offered by LGBTQ people in friendships with cishet allies should be seen as equivalent (Korgen 2002; Muraco 2012). In either case, resources are offered *because* one friend is marginalized. In her study of Black-white friendship pairs, Korgen describes the unidirectional flow of insider knowledge between Black and white close friends (2002:41). Focusing on the status inequality between GLB and straight friends, Ueno and Gentile's (2015a) research demonstrates the ways friends manage their status inequality, and, not surprisingly, the burden to maintain a sense of equality (even when it is not realized) falls on GLB friends, who rationalize their straight friends' discriminatory behaviors. This rationalization occurred within friendships LGBTQ participants discussed. In one example, transgender participant Colby described an "uber-Catholic" friend who may not be aware of his gender identity and who is not currently "necessarily accepting of the LGBT community." He explained that his friend "was home schooled for seventeen years… went to like one year of public high school." Colby, in this case, rationalizes his friend's discriminatory perspectives by describing her presumably isolated background.

Inequality was evident in other River City friendships, as well, even as allies were aware of this inequality. Some allies worked to provide support to LGBTQ community members and institutions as a way to work more actively toward challenging this inequality (Muraco 2012). Sandra's shift in techniques of support is one example of the way such activism changed in an ally's lifetime. She described her career as a former pharmacist, explaining that she was known

through word-of-mouth as a nonjudgmental supporter of HIV+ gay River Citizens who, in her words, were "coming home to die" only to be rejected by parents and friends. After she changed careers and met Karen, her LGBTQ community support expanded to advocacy for transgender protective legislation at the state capitol, where she traveled to offer testimony and support on such legislation. While some participants, like Sandra, took a more active and activist role in supporting LGBTQ community members, this level of activism was rare among ally participants in this study, even as allies supported individual LGBTQ friends and participated in River City-based events. Diversity resources in LGBTQ friendships sometimes extended to LGBTQ community, although allies also drew resources from LGBTQ community, a tension I explore in the next section.

Allies and LGBTQ community

Allies have long supported LGBTQ community formation, for example, by offering labor and resources to LGBTQ advocacy groups and participating in LGBTQ community institutions like gay bars (Casey 2004; Faderman 2015; Ghaziani 2014). However, the role of allies in LGBTQ communities has also been fraught with tension, as allies and LGBTQ community members grapple with managing experiences of privilege and marginalization (Hartless 2017) and the role they play in ally-LGBTQ community engagement. Allies must work to continually assert their membership in LGBTQ social movements (Myers 2008), for example, showing up at LGBTQ community events, even as they risk being seen as community intruders. In some ways, the very presence of allies in LGBTQ community spaces like bars reduces LGBTQ people's

sense of safety and community (Casey 2004). And, yet, LGBTQ social movements and commu-

nity spaces have required allies' involvement to be successful (Fingerhut 2011). In a recent ex-

ample, Mathers et al. (2015) demonstrate the trade-off between ally inclusion and access to

power within a southeastern LGBTQ advocacy group. They note that this advocacy group be-

came "heterosexualized" when straight ally participants became increasingly involved in the

group. Similarly, when allies advocate for LGBTQ people in other community institutions, this

trade-off has ambivalent effects, reproducing normativities even as allies contribute resources

(Bridges 2010; McQueeney 2009). In other words, allies often unintentionally reproduce the gen-

der and sexuality norms they seek to undo. Ally involvement in LGBTQ community both allows

community institutions to persist and reinforces normativities along the way.

River City's local culture affected ally engagement with LGBTQ community, as LGBTQ

community spaces necessarily included, sometimes actively, allies. LGBTQ-supportive program-

ming at the Center for Multicultural Community (CMC), for example, features the following

statement: "The [CMC] is committed to being a welcoming place for members of the LGBTQ+

community (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, +) and its allies."[23] Historically, allies

played a significant role in the creation of LGBTQ institutions like PFLAG and LGBTQ support

groups. River City's dispersed, "cliquey" LGBTQ community meant that LGBTQ community

organizations could not survive without the support of allies. LGBTQ community institutions

were more temporary (Gray 2009) than institutionalized, and more ally-inclusive and post-gay

(Ghaziani 2011) than explicitly and exclusively LGBTQ. Allies most frequently referenced the

annual family-friendly Pride picnics (notably, not parades) and drag shows (notably, not family-

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[23] CMC website, accessed May 29, 2017.

friendly) as sources of community, for example. Community organizations included the now largely-defunct PFLAG and the LGBTQ youth group, housed at the CMC, a space self-consciously designed to be welcoming to allies across a spectrum of identities.

Traditional gay institutions like gay bars existed in River City, a gay-owned "queer bar" is also cited as a local LGBTQ-friendly institution, and there are signs that a new gay bar may be opening in town, sponsored in part by the owner of a former gay bar. The rapid rise of an LGBTQ-oriented nonprofit focused on social events has surprised community members and allies alike, but its future is far from secure. And some allies described Facebook groups as evidence of LGBTQ community, although their engagement in these spaces primarily involved sharing event announcements and local resources. Despite suggestions from both LGBTQ and ally participants that LGBTQ social life is moving online, River City LGBTQ Facebook groups serve largely as bulletin boards, sources of local events rather than spaces of interaction.

Given the centrality of churches in River City community more generally, some allies also identified more LGBTQ-friendly churches as elements of LGBTQ community. However, neither the Metropolitan Community Church, a church founded explicitly for LGBTQ people, nor Dignity, an LGBTQ Catholic organization, exist in River City, and no allies demonstrated an awareness that such organizations existed. The absence of such LGBTQ-exclusive religious organizations illustrates the broader focus on inclusion (as in a post-gay era), rather than separatism (as in a coming out era), in River City. Similarly, no LGBTQ-exclusive organizations to date have survived without institutional support from larger community organizations. Longstanding LGBTQ events and organizations became enfolded in other organizations, like the LGBTQ youth group and former PFLAG group. Allies' roles in these institutions are declining,

as some participants admitted they had taken a step back from their leadership in recent years, as LGBTQ people have taken a more active role in building community organizations and, perhaps, the need for such organizations has simultaneously declined, in allies' eyes. And, yet, allies still participated in social LGBTQ events, even as their involvement in LGBTQ-supporting organizations has waned in recent years.

Consuming LGBTQ community resources

Unlike in larger cities (Ghaziani 2014), few allies identified River City-based LGBTQ community institutions as sources of recreation and consumption, as "diversity resources" for their enjoyment. The presence of straight allies in gay spaces affects the safety, comfort, and ownership LGBTQ people feel in such spaces (Casey 2004; Ghaziani 2011; Greene 2014). Drag shows, in particular, offered opportunities for allies to consume a particularly flamboyant, subversive expression of gay culture (if not gay space) and to be entertained by the gender play these drag shows displayed (Parker 1991; Rupp and Taylor 2003). Aside from drag shows, the relative lack of LGBTQ community institutions meant that there were few places like gay bars for allies to intrude upon.

Still, a few ally participants noted LGBTQ spaces and events where they would go to have fun. Elina and Paul explained that they enjoyed attending LGBTQ events and institutions. Elina, for example, explained that she does "attend [LGBTQ events] when I can just because I like events. I like new things. Not new things. There's always something new that I find, new information. New people I meet. So for that reason, I like it." LGBTQ events, like LGBTQ friends, offer the diversity resources of "newness." For Paul, the local not-gay-but-gay-owned bar offered

an opportunity for comfort. In describing the kinds of activities he enjoys with gay friends, he explained that:

> We do go to bars. We'll, um, there's one bar in particular downtown that I tend to go with more of my gay LGBT friends, just because that's, you know, and I feel very comfortable. It's not a gay bar. It's just a, you know… Um, I love it down there. And actually I love going there just because their music is toned down, that they usually play the eighties, love it. I'm at the age anymore where I can't and I can't go to a really loud, it actually hurts my ears.

Paul's experience of the not-gay gay bar was one of comfort, relative to other, louder bars in the area. Angela and Drew remarked on connections with LGBTQ institutions in contexts outside of River city, participating in "vicarious" LGBTQ community much like the gay community members in Theo Greene's research (Greene 2014). Drew, for example, would visit a gay bar with a colleague from his college while attending conferences. He recalled that "I would go with her to those kinds of things too. She's like, if she and I were ever at a conference, no matter the city, she was going to find a gay bar so I would go with her." For Angela, perhaps the most out consumer of gay culture, living in Boystown in Chicago was a key part of her life experience. She recalled that:

> Like, I remember, in Chicago too, and we were in the thick of it, like myself, [my friends], some of these friends, [local] friends that lived in Chicago, um, and always in Boystown and you know, one time, I said I was going to, I was like, I'm gonna write a book, it's going to be called "Straight Woman in a Gay Man's World." So we'll bring it up every now and then, like remember that book I was going to write? Like, cause I'm

like, that's going in this chapter, like, you know, "Straight Woman in a Gay Man's World," cause I was just, lived in it and was around it quite a bit, you know?

She frequently attended gay events in Chicago, like Pride and the Halsted Street Fair, events that featured a "lot of good memories with a lot of friends in that area." Allies like Angela were more likely to consume LGBTQ community resources through local institutions in other, larger cities, generally because such institutions did not exist to the same extent in River City.

More generally, allies seemed to see their *friendships* as diversity resources more frequently than local LGBTQ institutions. Nadine, for example, was critical of the framing of LGBTQ community participation, swapping out gay friendship for these institutions. After I asked whether participating in LGBTQ community was important to her, she offered the following:

> I mean, I wouldn't say that it was a priority. It's not like when I moved to River City that I like wrote on my "to-do" list like "Hmm, well I need to get my [state] Driver's License, and my [state] license plates and unpack my stuff and make some gay friends..."

I discuss the connection between friendships and community in the next chapter, but, generally speaking, allies were stepping away from LGBTQ community organizations and institutions at the time I interviewed them, even as they continued friendships with LGBTQ people in River City. Whether and how allies engage with new, LGBTQ-led organizations like River City Collective and a new gay bar remains an open question, one that is likely affected by the overarching political context in River City and, importantly, the U.S., as a whole. Initial observations suggest that there is some recognition that these organizations are not "for" allies. Simultaneously, the growth of drag shows as a venue for LGBTQ community consumption went strangely

unremarked in allies' interviews, with one notable exception: Paul, a drag queen himself. How-

ever, the absence of drag shows as a site of community consumption speaks more to the type of

ally recruited for participation in my research than to any absence of cishet people at drag shows.

Ally participants were generally not interested in attending drag shows, although they were

aware of them, and those who were involved in River City drag shows tended to be involved as

performers and MCs, suggesting a leadership role in LGBTQ community.

Allies as pillars of LGBTQ community institutions

Indeed, allies *were* involved in the few LGBTQ community institutions that exist in River

City. Even people unlikely to be involved in community institutions more broadly, like Brenda,

who explained that participating in a community was "somewhat, but not a lot" important, at-

tended LGBTQ events. When I asked whether Brenda engaged in any activities due to her

friendship with Karen, she responded: "Probably yeah. Because I do support the LGB if there's a

walk or stuff like that, I will go on it. No, probably none of my other friends would. Um, so yeah

there are things that way that I do." Brenda overcame her "shyness" to participate in LGB-fo-

cused events with Karen, a big deal for someone who is "not real comfortable with the other peo-

ple, people I don't know." Angela, whose job required engagement with a variety of River City

communities, offered a long list of ways she supports LGBTQ community organizations and

groups, including attending local Pride picnics, drag shows, supporting the CMC-based youth

group and adult support group. Angela's advocacy within the CMC has generated material re-

sources in the form of funding to support LGBTQ community events like workshops. As she ex-

plained:

Well I think, I mean, because I have this position where I'm like, okay, I can help, the re-

sources, like I have the resources where I'm like, okay, and then you know proud that

within the budget I've been able to like, okay, it's not much, but I'm like we need to add

this to the budget so that we could possibly do more things with this group, and luckily

committees and boards have agreed. But it was me pushing for that so I've got, so I have

funds in little pockets to help with that, and that's important, that a little piece of it, right?

Like, hey, there's some backing here, you know?

While Angela's offerings to LGBTQ community include material resources through her organi-

zation, other allies are actively involved in LGBTQ organizations in River City. Paul, for exam-

ple, both volunteers in the LGBTQ youth support group and is an active participant in one of two

local drag queen groups. Elina spearheaded an LGBTQ community workshop that, while yield-

ing a small turnout, kick started initial conversations and reactivated a dormant LGBTQ Face-

book group. Elspeth co-facilitated a community-wide Safe Zone training in which local leaders,

family, and friends of LGBTQ River Citizens learned about LGBTQ terminology and techniques

for support. And Shelley founded the local PFLAG group that has recently disbanded, although

similar supportive conversations are scheduled quarterly through the CMC. In brief, it is difficult

to imagine LGBTQ community institutions in River City without the central role of allies.

And yet, allies also noted the ways they have been absent as a diversity resource in River

City, even as they acknowledged the tensions in being an ally. Drew, for example, noted that he

was not involved LGBTQ institutions in River City, despite offering support to individual stu-

dents and friends. I asked him whether he wished he was involved more in LGBTQ community,

and he responded:

A lot of times I do um, it, yeah. This is, I want to be useful. I want to be able to make a difference and I can see I care about lots of different populations, right, so it's this, kind of this big, [gasp] so how might I contribute, you know. And in some ways it's, were I invited, I probably would. Just like, were I invited to do something with the NAACP, I probably would, you know like, that kind of feeling. Um, but at the same time, it's not like, I don't want to say, hey pick me, cause you know, that, something seems self-serving about that or something like, I want to do something for you! And that doesn't feel right. Pick me, I'm a good guy! I'm not like, you know, and I'll, I want to be part of your group because this is the group that I think is cool anyway, you know, or something like that, right?

This conflict between wanting to support LGBTQ community and not wanting recognition for this support is navigated in complicated ways by other allies who admitted they had been less involved in LGBTQ community events in recent years. Many of the allies I interviewed explained that they had once been involved in LGBTQ organizations but were no longer involved, no longer connected. And those who were involved were also critical of the kinds of events LGBTQ organizations were creating. Elina, for example, described a tension within River City LGBTQ community events:

I think a lot of people don't go to these things because they don't feel informed or they don't know about it or that they don't really see value in it. Like I'm not a member of LGBT community, but even as a strong ally, I wouldn't want to go to this if all it's doing is just showing me a play. I mean yeah, I loved that discussion. That was great. What is going to come out of it, you know? There are issues people are facing. People are like

gay couples are not being looked at or stared down when they apply for housing or when they're going to rent apartments. There are those things, and who do they go talk to? It's not necessarily, being stared at is not a civil rights violation.

Elina's concern is shared by LGBTQ community members: LGBTQ community events are focused on entertainment and social support and not on identifying and solving the widespread "issues" LGBTQ people face in River City, like civil rights violations. Elina's comments raise questions about what constitutes LGBTQ community, and what "diversity resources" might mean if those resources are dedicated to social activities and not social change (Muraco 2012). Examining the complexities of allies both seeking and serving as diversity resources reveals broader tensions within LGBTQ communities, tensions that are playing out within the organizations and events engaging LGBTQ people in River City.

Conclusion: Allies, diversity resources, and activism

Diversity resources demonstrate the ambivalence of LGBTQ community allyship in River City, as allies both offer and appropriate diversity resources from these communities. I have discussed the ways that River City allies draw diversity resources from their LGBTQ friendships and, to a lesser degree, community, and the ways that allies contribute their own diversity resources to support their friends and LGBTQ community. However, whether this exchange of diversity resources generates social change remains an open question and is, I suggest, context-dependent. In Muraco's research on friendships between gay men and straight women and between lesbians and straight men, she asserts that allies demonstrate a "continuum of

straight politicization" in their support for LGBTQ social change, ranging from "shifting atti-

tudes to inspiring activism" (2012:124). However, she concludes that these friendships do not

substantially contribute to social change, explaining that these friendships demonstrate:

> A limited ability to create social change at the societal level, despite the actions of many
>
> straight individuals motivated by gay male and lesbian friends. In addition, while these
>
> intersectional friendships reportedly provided both a greater appreciation for difference
>
> and a context in which heterosexism was challenged, discriminatory attitudes coexisted
>
> with movement toward social progress. (2012:144)

While the allies who participated in my research demonstrated some similar motivations,

appreciation for difference, and discriminatory attitudes, I want to highlight that the community

context matters here. Muraco's research was conducted in the San Francisco Bay area, a haven

for gay community and visibility quite unlike the similarly hilly downtown streets of River City.

In River City, given what LGBTQ participants described as a dis-unified LGBTQ community, as

well as the impact individual LGBTQ people have had on their community acceptance, I argue

that support for an individual friend might well move the community toward social change.

Karen and her friends Brenda and Sandra and are good examples. Karen's work speaking

as an individual transgender woman in a variety of community contexts has generated discussion

and influenced social change at the state level. This work has been supported through her close

friendships with both of these cishet women, one of whom has primarily offered her "shoulder"

and the other who has accompanied her during legislative testimony. While Muraco describes

these friendships as "political" simply because marginalized identities are politicized (2012:143),

I add that we might also consider the extent to which such friendships can generate social

change. Brenda's definition of community as "politics" perhaps inadvertently reinforces this point. She explained that:

> Community I think means the whole thing, the outreach, um, the I guess, the politics of it all is what it means to me, community. Politics. [C: What do you mean, like?] [sighs] Uh, like, you know, the fundraising, the building, the streets, the expanding, the, all of that, you know, getting the licensing, it's all politics and I don't like the politics. I just wanna do it, you know, and do it or don't.

While Brenda's aversion to "politics" as she sees it means that she does not feel involved in community, her support of Karen, in some ways, enables Karen's activism.

And, yet, there is reason for caution in claiming that individual friendship support "counts" as activism, for two reasons. First, despite cross-identity friendships' inherent politicization, shared emotional labor is a characteristic of close friendships more generally, and it is important to distinguish general friendship support from an exchange of diversity resources that specifically supports marginalized friends. What might the lower end of the "continuum of politicization" look like, in other words? When is an exchange of resources enabling LGBTQ survival, and when is that support part of a general process of exchange in friendship (Blatterer 2014; Rawlins 2008)?

Second, consider the other "side" of diversity resources. Drawing these resources from LGBTQ friends and deploying them in the broader community might also be considered a political act, but how that process harms LGBTQ friends (for example, by "outing" them) should be explored. Using the experiences of friends as resources to educate others might change River City's perception of LGBTQ community, but it is a complicated political act with implications

for those who "own" these resources: LGBTQ people themselves. Furthermore, allies are not merely passive consumers of LGBTQ culture and community resources; allies actively constitute community and are self-reflective about their role in this process. There is also a political element to using LGBTQ events, institutions, and people as a marker of "fun," the political benefits of which are dubious (Casey 2004; Ghaziani 2014; Greene 2014).

It is also worth considering how allies differentially value diversity resources. For example, more than one ally I interviewed used explicitly or implicitly racist terminology, and perhaps being able to lay claim to an LGBTQ friend demonstrates growing acceptance or LGBTQ people but not people of color in River City. Brenda, for example, reflected on River City's changes late in our interview, lamenting that:

> I see our economy, our country getting worse. I fear for my grandchildren when they grow up. You know, what kind of a place it's gonna be. I mean, even look at [River City] now how, since they, I shouldn't say this because that's judgmental too, but, you know when the mayor decided to bring in the race people from Chicago and New York from the ghettoes, all that, um, gang people, when they brought 'em here, look at how we've become. We've never locked our doors before. You know, and now you have to lock your doors. You're afraid to walk the streets.

This kind of racist rhetoric is still common in River City among allies *and* LGBTQ participants, even in visible, online spaces like Facebook groups, where participants are identifiable by name. Brenda continued this thread of conversation by sharing a story about a negative experience with a Black man at her workplace, which she used to make stereotypic inferences about Black people

in River City. This story contrasts with her earlier story about the "Birdcage" young man with whom she sought a connection.

It is important to clarify that Brenda was not seeking credit for supporting a "diverse" (transgender, in this case) friend. However, if we view diversity resources as differentially valuable, we might consider how and why friendships with LGBTQ people, or LGBTQ identities themselves, operate as a public symbol of diversity bona fides (Ahmed 2012). In other words, in a largely homogenous (read: white, Catholic, straight, and cisgender) community, those with LGBTQ friends may be able to claim acceptance and inclusivity while reinforcing harmful racist stereotypes and, importantly, voting for policies that continue to reinforce inequalities. How might diversity resources be examined intersectionally, as a medium of exchange, in a context where marginalized identities are differentially valued?

Given the limitations of this small sample, a number of questions remain to be explored. First, this sample likely included more activist-oriented allies than a more representative sample of LGBTQ friends and family. Brenda is one example of an ally who generally avoided community engagement, while most other allies were more visibly active and, it's worth noting, middle-class. Considering allyship and activism across class contexts might flesh out a broader definition of activism and challenge models of activism enabled by greater resources. How LGBTQ people act as allies to their LGBTQ friends is another dimension that should be explored in future research. For example, some research demonstrates that gay and lesbian allies of transgender friends exhibit the same kinds of diversity resource exchanges discussed above (Stone 2009), and whether and how allyship operates across gender should also be explored (between lesbians and

gay men,[24] for example, or trans women and trans men). In recent years, sociologists have ana-

lyzed the allyship of cisgender people in romantic partnerships with transgender people, offering

insights into new community, activist, and relationship identities (Pfeffer 2016; Tompkins 2011,

2013). Another key consideration of allies and activism in River City specifically is whether al-

lies and LGBTQ friends are long-time River Citizens or newcomers to the area. Their friendship

support likely differs depending on their insider/outsider or "stranger" (Simmel 1917) status. Fi-

nally, there is some hint that ally support of LGBTQ friends may be turning a corner following

the 2016 election of Donald Trump as U.S. President. Some progressive LGBTQ people have

been busy jettisoning Trump-voting friends, while, for others, discussions of differences have

been further "disarmed" (Korgen 2002), or actively avoided. How allies will engage in activism

in support of their marginalized friends, and what moves allies across a continuum of activism,

will need to be explored in the coming years, especially given changing and perhaps decreasing

support for the diversity resources allies ambivalently contribute and pull from LGBTQ commu-

nities.

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[24] There is some evidence to suggest that activism supporting lesbians and trans men is relatively invisible, in River City. For example, the newly-formed River City Collective is led by gay men and one transgender woman, and social events have been attended almost exclusively by gay men.

CHAPTER 5: "There's varying degrees of friendship in here": Connections to LGBTQ community in River City

I first met Teagan at a local college, where we chatted following a screening of a documentary about transgender identities. In our interview, 25-year-old Teagan described herself as "funny," a personality quirk she demonstrated frequently throughout the interview by gently mocking both herself and her mode of interaction with me, describing her coughs and hand gestures into my recording device. When I asked her which parts of her identity were most important to her, she explained that "being a queer woman pretty much sums it up," and she described these two elements of her identity (sexuality and gender) as being central to how she saw herself. Teagan suspected that she might leave River City, but she planned to return and expected that she would "probably end up settling here." When I asked Teagan what might keep her in River City, she described her family first and her friends second. She explained:

> Family is a big factor for me. Um, it's just always been nice to be close to... my sister lives in town here, with her husband, and I know they're gonna start a family soon and I'd like to have a pretty big role in [their] lives. You know, my parents are here, my grandparents, the three that are still here are here. Um, and that's, that's been a big draw. A lot of my friends have sort of scattered like since high school which, you know, happens, it's typical, but I have a good group of friends here, I just have a lot of roots put down and I think that's important… home town is important to me, and that kind of thing.

Teagan's "good group of friends," according to her friendship map, included 21 named friends (one of whom was a family member) and a more distant group of "tumblr friends,"

friends with whom she connected using the microblogging, social networking site tumblr. As with other participants, I asked Teagan whether her friendships made her feel more connected to community, LGBTQ or otherwise, and she responded:

> No, I don't think so. I think most, I mean most of my friendships are kind of intercon-
> nected and are their own community but in terms of connecting with a wider community;
> not really. Um, I think it is a little community that we've sort of built and you know
> there's varying degrees of friendship in here… but as far as connecting with a wider com-
> munity, not really. Um, yeah. It is what it is.

While Teagan was close with her friends and family members, relationships that she perceived as constituting its own "little community," she did not feel that this group connected her with a broader sense of community. Yet her little community included shared "roots," interests, and ac-tivities, like her "crochet friend," for example.

We might interpret Teagan's reflection as evidence of what Japonica Brown-Saracino calls "ambient community," (2011) a sense of community dependent on shared tastes and activi-ties, rather than shared identities. However, it is striking to encounter ambient community in River City, a geographic context that, as I described in chapter 1, is quite unlike the well-known lesbian enclave of Ithaca, New York. Given that Brown-Saracino's research was conducted nearly a decade prior to this interview, perhaps River City's LGBTQ population has experienced the same kind of assimilative cultural shift that has allowed them to experience a sense of be-longingness predicated on interests, rather than identities.

As noted in chapter 1, River City is not known regionally as an especially LGBTQ-wel-coming community. A number of participants, LGBTQ and ally, explained that their friendships

did connect them to a sense of LGBTQ community[25]; in fact, very few participants claimed no sense of community, even as they found LGBTQ community disjointed and disconnected. Teagan's comments, however, raise questions about whether and how friendships constitute LGBTQ community, as well as the meaning of community for both LGBTQ and ally participants.

Sociologists have long analyzed the reciprocal relationship between friendship and community, focusing on the ways friendships create community and, conversely, the ways community creates friendships. In the latter case, researchers have demonstrated how community contexts like cities (Fischer 1982a), neighborhoods (Bell and Boat 1957), and work and family (Adams and Allan 1999) influence friendship possibilities. Scholars of LGBTQ communities have also argued that community contexts have enabled friendships between LGBTQ people; historians and ethnographers have shared rich data describing LGBTQ community formation and the friendships that resulted from these new networks. Urban communities in New York and San Francisco (Armstrong 2002; Chauncey 1995; D'Emilio 1998; Esterberg 1997; Faderman 1991) have drawn the most focus, with some notable exceptions that describe mid-sized cities like Buffalo, New York (Kennedy and Davis 1993) and temporary, mobile communities like festivals (Rothblum and Sablove 2005).

As I discussed in chapter 3, some researchers have considered how shared-identity friendships generate communities, for example, among lesbians (Jo 1996) and gay men (Nardi 1999). Recent research on the decline of lesbian and gay institutions (Brown-Saracino 2011; Ghaziani 2014; Greene 2014) has referred, often obliquely, to a vague sense of "friendship" as a

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[25] While participants referred to a range of communities in their discussions of friendships and community, my focus in this chapter is on participants' discussion of LGBTQ community specifically.

cause of community, and a potential loss, if LGBTQ community institutions disappear. In some ways, the concept of "community" has been used too narrowly to refer largely to LGBTQ institutions in large cities, while the concept of "friendship" has been used too broadly to refer to a host of personal relationships, from acquaintances to life-long partners. How friendships constitute LGBTQ communities has remained obscure, even as friendships are described as central to LGBTQ community formation, maintenance, and dissolution.

In this chapter, I extend Brown-Saracino's (2011) call to examine the role of affective ties in LGBTQ community. But I do so by focusing on River City, a community context that features few LGBTQ institutions (which makes it different from the settings that Brown-Saracino and other scholars mentioned above have studied). I analyze the relationship between friendship and community specifically, given previous literatures that presume a causal, if unclear, connection between LGBTQ friendships and senses of community. I consider LGBTQ *and* cishet ally participants, their friendships with LGBTQ people, and how these friendships relate to LGBTQ community in River City. As I noted in chapter 4, analyzing only LGBTQ participants' perspectives on community in River City provides an incomplete picture of this community, especially given the key role allies have played in forming LGBTQ institutions. First, the *type* of friendship matters in parsing out the relationship between friendship and community. Second, the community *role* participants play is central to understanding how friendship relates to a sense of community. Finally, I return to the definitional questions participants raised when discussing their friends and connection to community to highlight the limits of conventional understandings of community. Some participants explained, as Teagan did, that their friendships constituted a community wholly distinct from what they saw as an institutionalized LGBTQ community, similar to

Brown-Saracino's interviewees in lesbian-friendly Ithaca. Like those in Ithaca, River Citizens

identified shared community along lines of shared interests, but variations across participants

suggest that friendship should be considered as distinct from, but related to, a sense of commu-

nity. Participants' friendship and community reflections suggest that the very categories of

friendship and community are being renegotiated alongside growing acceptance of LGBTQ peo-

ple.

The meaning of friendship in LGBTQ community

In River City, friendships do not constitute community, at least, not in the way we might

expect. While both LGBTQ and ally participants noted that their friends connected them to

LGBTQ community, the concept of "friends" held a different meaning in each group. For

LGBTQ participants, *acquaintances* were more likely to connect them to a sense of LGBTQ

community than close friends. For ally participants, *any* LGBTQ friends, acquaintances or close,

connected them with LGBTQ community. Given that an accurate representation of LGBTQ

community in River City includes both allies and LGBTQ community members, understanding

the meaning of "friendship" in creating community requires analyzing both LGBTQ and allies'

friendship networks.

LGBTQ participants' friendships and community

LGBTQ participants explained that their acquaintances helped them connect with

LGBTQ leisure activities in River City and more well-known gay communities in the region.

Participants engaged in "vicarious citizenship" (Greene 2014), claiming membership in distant

LGBTQ communities, as Greene found in his research on gay neighborhoods in Washington, DC and Chicago. For example, for Peter, a white, gay, partnered, and life-long River Citizen, acquaintances were the explicit connection to LGBTQ community, while he connected to a distinct network of family through his partner, as described in chapter 1. After discussing connections to the "white collar or executive community," he stated that, "I might think some of my LGBT acquaintances that I have have [sic] made me more connected to some of the LGBT lifestyle things that I might not directly resonate with because I don't experience it day in and day out." Peter's discussion of LGBT "lifestyle things" included LGBTQ institutions like gay bars, more common in larger cities and nonexistent in River City. In another example, Callie, a white, queer woman living in a nearby town, described LGBTQ-friendly leisure activities like trivia nights. After stating that "my community are my friendships," she explained:

> I always say there's always other people that are kind of in that network that I wouldn't necessarily say that are my close friends either. There are people that like go to trivia, and do all the activities and they're there, but I wouldn't consider them a close friend. Um, just because we haven't established a friendship between the two of us, but they're at all the activities and they're always there, and so they're part of that network, they're part of that community without them being a close friend.

Greg's initial friendships with other gay men when he was first coming out in River City constituted his community but were not necessarily the long-lasting, close friendships he later developed. I asked him whether any of his friendships made him feel connected to community, and he responded:

I would say… yes. Um, growing up on a farm and growing up in in the Catholic church

where I didn't have any gay friends or any gay folks that I knew, to come to [River City]

and meet other gays, it was very, it was basically like that first year and a half, I didn't

talk to anybody. I'd talk to them when I needed to, but I really didn't talk to anyone,

cause that was, my friends had become my new community, my new family, and um,

they were, they weren't all deep lasting friendships like I wanted some of them to be, but

it's alright with that. I would've been a lot more, I felt more connected then, cause it's

like, oh, here is my new home. That's what I felt.

Greg described these new friends as an initial connection to a broader community. Other

participants echoed this observation. Both Jack (a trans man) and Janine (at trans woman) noted

that acquaintances were, as Jack explained, "a stepping stone to a wider community." Janine

elaborated:

There's like so many people that I have been able to meet, have, they're the ones that

have, you know, some connections to this and that, and I was able to um, get to know cer-

tain people, like the people that put on things like, [River City Trans], and things like

that, it's like I was able to get in there and say okay, so this person started this up, and

this person over here started this up, and now I got, you know, looking at how I have

now, now on Facebook, you know, the Transgender Law Center and all these other

things, you know, Eastern [State] Pride, and all this stuff on my um, friends' list it's like,

that's how it starts out, with certain things like [Kai], and definitely and from [Kai] it

goes to, with her [sic] mom, and you know, or certain friends of them.

Janine's comments illustrated the "stepping stone" approach to community such acquaintances enabled.

Karen, a leader and trans community icon in River City, named friends who did not appear on her friendship map as people who connected her with LGBTQ community. She stated that:

> I think the people that I work with within the community, the people like [Angela and Elina] and you, things that we try to [do] as a whole for the good of the community. I recently became a commissioner for the city because I wanted to be more connected with the community and make more of an impact. I'm the first transgender person to serve [in an important position in the city] for a town like this, in the size. Maybe I'll be the first mayor, transgender mayor of the town some day. I don't know where my future goes or what people are gonna ask of me, but if they asked me, I'll sure try to be there.

Karen's acquaintances, including me, connected her with LGBTQ community through her work "for the good of the community." In sum, acquaintances connected LGBTQ participants to community institutions for leisure, support, and community development. These more distant friendships demonstrate the power of "weak ties" (Granovetter 1973) to generate LGBTQ communities, in contrast to research emphasizing the centrality of close friends (Jo 1996; Nardi 1999; Weinstock and Rothblum 1996) and intimate relationships (Orne 2016; Stacey 2005) to LGBTQ communities.

Allies' friendships and LGBTQ community

For allies, *any* friend, close or acquaintance, connected them to LGBTQ community, but close friends were more likely to serve in this role. LGBTQ community to these participants largely meant volunteer activities, with one exception. While ally Drew admitted that he was "not so great at feeling that sense of community" within River City more generally, he explained that his friends motivated him to "make change":

> Maybe this is an age thing, that with [my friends] looking toward [their children], it seems like we're looking to make change for them or to make connections for them or both. And that to me that's compelling, right, to say there's, um, there are little reasons, here they are right now and that's why this matters.

Drew did not mention specific LGBTQ institutions in which they were engaged, due to his friendship with a lesbian couple, however. Brenda, ally and best friend to Karen, a transgender lesbian, as noted in the previous chapter, mentioned "walks" and other events that Karen encouraged her to attend. She explained that Karen connected her to LGBTQ community, "with her getting more connected to it and to these groups and stuff, it makes me more aware of it."

Paul, a white, straight, male drag queen, became increasingly embedded in LGBTQ community throughout my research in River City. At this time, Paul explained that, "I can honestly say I am straight, you know. I, I think I'm on the spectrum that's, you know, between straight and gay than, you know, like I think everyone is." Despite his straight identity, Paul also identified his location "on the spectrum" between straight and gay and explained that he "feel[s] more comfortable around the LGBT community." Paul's connections to LGBTQ community reflected this growing enmeshment in LGBTQ community events and institutions, like the LGBTQ youth

group and a new drag group. For Paul, the friendships that connected him to LGBTQ community included both close friends and an acquaintance:

> My three LGBT friends, again, because the connections with that and then my [lesbian] friend… that [I didn't enter] cause she's a little further out. Again, it's because we are connected through volunteer things we do and so that's a big connection to me to my community.

Paul's connection with LGBTQ community was in flux over the course of my research, and I return to his story in the conclusion. Overall, ally participants identified LGBTQ community primarily as volunteer activities in which they participated with and through their close and more distant friends. For ally and LGBTQ participants, not all friendships generated connections to LGBTQ community, and not all functioned in the same way.

Friendship and LGBTQ community role

Elina, a cishet woman of color who was close friends with Mark, a white gay man, contradicted other allies' approaches to LGBTQ community. She paradoxically noted that being able to say *no* to her LGBTQ close friends enabled her to feel connected and accepted within LGBTQ community. Being able to say no demonstrated the depth of trust in her friendship with her gay friend Mark. She explained that:

> Constantly in [River City], it's very difficult to say no because that no could be take, seen as rejection or the fact that you're not interested or you're not contributing, so I have to wear a mask of, oh I can't be myself now. I just need to go or do this or say this. So, um, I think in my close circle, I don't have to do that even in the community. The same goes

with my, um, friends that are LGBT. Um, is I can comfortably say no, I don't want to do

this. I don't want to go to a drag show. Cause. I mean, [Mark] and I went to, the day, we,

so we were planning on going to the gay bar in, um, [a city about an hour's drive away].

He normally doesn't drink, right, but we still went. And it was, we had already planned

and it was the day the Supreme Court upheld the [*Obergefell v. Hodges*] decision. It was

interesting cause they were now celebrating, but we were already gonna go there anyway,

right? Um, and there was a time when we were like, oh my God, it's probably gonna be

crazy. Let's not go. Like both of us said it, and it was so comfortable just say it. There are

people in my, like even here where I would just have to go, just do it because I'm afraid

of offending them or, um, them taking it differently.

For Elina, an occasional participant in LGBTQ events in River City, her close LGBTQ

friends held the *opportunity* to connect with LGBTQ events and institutions, but not the *require-

ment*. On the surface, Elina's comments signal disengagement from LGBTQ community, the

kind of "performative progressiveness" Ghaziani (2014) discusses as typical of ally behavior in

post-gay communities. However, a deeper understanding of Elina's involvement in LGBTQ

community as an occasional, and well-connected, ally highlights the need to consider partici-

pants' roles in analyzing LGBTQ community and friendship. For example, Elina co-organized a

workshop for LGBTQ community members to identify community needs and plan for the future.

LGBTQ participants (like Karen) described Elina as a key community ally who was working to

change the culture of the city to be more LGBTQ-inclusive. And, yet, Elina did not attend every

LGBTQ event in River City, and being able to bow out of such events was a marker of the close-ness of her friendship with an LGBTQ community member. Elina's role as an ally in LGBTQ community is one example of the ways friendships relate to community formation.

In understanding how friendship relates to LGBTQ community, the *role* of community members matters. Previous research has focused on the relationship between LGBTQ *individuals* and community. For example, Wayne Brekhus (2003) identified three types of suburban gay men, typified by their method of engagement with gay community. In Brekhus' research, "pea-cocks" are gay men who socialize largely in gay networks; "chameleons," like Greene's "vicari-ous citizens" (2014), live and work in suburbs but connect with gay communities in nearby cit-ies; and "centaurs" minimize their gay identities in their work, leisure, and home lives.

In River City, I identified three community roles that matched participants' involvement in LGBTQ community: Leaders, Occasionals, and Absents. For example, when I asked partici-pants whether and how their friends connected them to community, two participants and commu-nity leaders responded that they played that role for their friends. One of these participants was an ally (Angela), while the other was a lesbian (Robin). Angela initially responded no to this question, then added that "I think I feel like I'm in that role. [laughs] In my case, like hey, did you know about that? Like, I'm trying to connect them." She offered an example of a cishet friend who wanted to become more involved in LGBTQ community events and contacted An-gela to identify ways to be more engaged. Robin also noted that "I think I'm probably that friend for people," and her vast networks of connections across multiple communities in River City demonstrated her interests and role as a community networker. Both Robin and Angela were what I call Leaders, people who played an active role in LGBTQ community institutions like

LGBTQ support groups, events like the Pride picnic and educational workshops, and the newly-formed LGBTQ nonprofit, River City Collective (RCC). Participants who were less active in LGBTQ community but still occasionally attended events I call Occasionals, and participants who did not attend LGBTQ community events at the time I interviewed them and conducted observations are Absents. Participants' classifications can be found in Table 4. The largest group of LGBTQ participants are Occasionals, while the largest group of Ally participants were Absents.

Leaders' community connections

LGBTQ Leaders formed LGBTQ support organizations, created educational workshops and trainings, and provided technical and administrative support for LGBTQ events. Peter, Karen, Robin, and Callie are good examples of LGBTQ Leaders. As discussed in previous chapters, Peter co-organized several Pride picnics, and Karen founded a River City-based transgender support, education, and advocacy organization. Robin offered educational trainings to businesses and organizations aiming to better support LGBTQ people and organized an LGBTQ families group. Callie was a member of the inaugural board of a new GSA (gay-straight alliance) for high school students in a nearby town. Angela and Shelley are ally Leaders, exemplified through Angela's administrative support for a handful of LGBTQ support groups housed at the CMC, and Shelley's leadership in River City's former PFLAG chapter.

Despite their similar leadership and involvement in LGBTQ community institutions and events, Leaders' identities affected how they connected with community. LGBTQ Leaders tended to connect to LGBTQ community through acquaintances, while ally leaders were con-

nected to LGBTQ community equally through close friends and acquaintances. For example, Peter's friendship map included a large circle he labeled "acquaintances," where he located most of his LGBTQ friends. Peter has been central to River City community institutions, as a key organizer of the annual Pride events and known networker, often suggested to me as a potential interviewee. At community events, hugs and handshakes from acquaintances were frequent and sincere for Peter, and, yet, he admitted that his closest friends included more family, and his partner's family, than friends, and he was a self-described introvert, even though "a lot of people think I'm an extrovert."

Angela and Shelley are clear Ally Leaders who connected to LGBTQ community through close friends, family, and professional LGBTQ contacts. Shelley's involvement in a River City municipal board, an LGBTQ-focused conference, and as a leader in the local PFLAG organization places her squarely in the Leader category, and she noted friendships with gay and lesbian friends who, while not close, were co-workers in community events. As discussed in chapter 4, Shelley has been a longstanding LGBTQ community advocate and supporter, but she became involved in PFLAG when her daughter came out as a lesbian, later becoming president of the River City chapter. Close relationships also connected Angela to LGBTQ community, and her leadership role developed through her work at the CMC. Her friendships with gay men when she was living near Chicago's Boystown drew her to gay Pride parades as a source of fun and entertainment, and her life in LGBTQ-friendly communities in the Southwest and west coast developed her "social activist" identity. She returned to River City after the birth of a child and connected with the growing LGBTQ community through her role at the CMC. For both Angela and

Shelley, close relationships prompted their leadership and involvement in LGBTQ community in

River City.

<u>Occasionals' community connections</u>

Occasionals did not play a leadership role in LGBTQ community, although they attended

some LGBTQ community events. LGBTQ Occasionals tended to be younger than Leaders, sug-

gesting a possible generational divide in LGBTQ participants' roles in the River City LGBTQ

community, although there certainly were young LGBTQ participants who were Leaders, as

well. LGBTQ Occasionals seemed to need LGBTQ community less than Leaders did, although

they recognized its importance. Marilyn, a Southern transplant to River City who was "white and

Cherokee" and identified as bisexual, is a good example of an LGBTQ Occasional. Marilyn was

cognizant of both how she was perceived, as someone who could pass as straight, white, and

Catholic, and of her distance from LGBTQ community in River City. For example, she hesitated

to describe River City's LGBTQ community because "maybe I'm too far on the periphery." Yet,

Marilyn was close friends with a small "line-up of guys" Marilyn's husband jokingly identified

her "gay boyfriends." She explained that her "husband laughs cause if he doesn't wanna go danc-

ing or getting to go get his hair done or go to see the girl movies or whatever," her gay friends

will engage in these friendship activities.

LGBTQ and Occasionals connected to LGBTQ community primarily through close

friends, unlike LGBTQ Leaders, who connected through acquaintances. Genderqueer participant

Leah named one of six close friends on their friendship map as a community connector, a friend

who:

> Keeps me connected to community in [a town about an hour's drive away], and they're a pretty big community as well. They have a very big Pride parade down there, and they have gay bars that you can go to, and so I kind of stay connected in that aspect through her.

I saw Leah at LGBTQ community events in River City, periodically, usually with a close friend. Leah's friendships, organized around shared interests rather than shared identity, formed the core of their community.

Unlike LGBTQ Leaders, LGBTQ Occasionals attended LGBTQ community events with close friends, rather than acquaintances, in tow. Marilyn described her close friends, one of whom is Kyle, who "helped me make gay jewelry" she sold at the annual Pride picnic. Marilyn and her husband "really consciously wanted to make sure" they supported the former River City gay bar, Next Level, with their close friends, a gay male couple. Just-out-of-college Maddy, who is white and identified as queer, stated that LGBTQ community is "necessary," and she named specific LGBTQ community organizations she learned about through her close, gay friend. Charlie, described above, also attended LGBTQ community events with her close, queer friend Callie. Like Marilyn, Charlie consciously patronized Barney's, the gay-owned bar her friend Callie described as River City's lone "queer bar." LGBTQ Occasionals, overall, had close friendship networks that included LGBTQ people but also supported them, the kinds of friendships-as-community that some participants named explicitly. Yet close friends pulled LGBTQ Occasionals into community events and institutions in ways that differed from LGBTQ Leaders.

There were only two ally Occasionals, Brenda and Elina, both of whom were similarly aware that they did not play a central role in LGBTQ community. Like ally Leaders, ally Occasionals connected to LGBTQ community through their close friends, Karen and Mark, respectively. Brenda, as noted in chapter 3, stated that she "wouldn't go out of my way" to connect with LGBTQ community events without her friendship with Karen. Elina valued being able to say no to attending LGBTQ community events as a form of trust within her friendship with Mark. Like LGBTQ Occasionals, ally Occasionals recognized the need for LGBTQ community, especially for marginalized LGBTQ community members like young LGBTQ people beginning to come out. And like ally Leaders, ally Occasionals also connected to LGBTQ community through their close friends. Allies, overall, were pulled into LGBTQ community primarily through their close friends.

Absents' community connections

Finally, LGBTQ Absent community members tended to connect, at least in theory, to LGBTQ community through acquaintances, and ally Absent community members connected through close friends. While it may seem odd to discuss how community Absent participants viewed community, all had reflections about LGBTQ community and how they would connect to it, even if they were not connected to LGBTQ community in River City at the time of my research. Vickie, a partnered lesbian and former River Citizen who now lives in a western state, identified "lesbians in the softball league in wherever I go" as an example of the way acquaintances connected her specifically to lesbian community. Kit, a lesbian-identified River City native and college student at a nearby university, mentioned "knowing some of the people I know who

also know each other" and "having friends that are part of the LGBT community" in response to the question about friends and community. Other LGBTQ Absents who lived in the River City metro area included bisexual-identified Allyson, agender Arlen, and partnered gay men Derek and Sean. LGBTQ Absents, generally speaking, were deeply embedded in family networks, like Allyson, who named "the friend community around my family" as important to her. Derek and Sean's social time was similarly spent with their families, very rarely attending LGBTQ community events. For LGBTQ Absents, families pulled them away from LGBTQ community and toward integration in family life.

Allies, who were more likely to be Absents than other community roles, explained that close friends were a primary, or exclusive, connector to community events more generally. Married couple Drew and Wendy are good examples, and they identified their close lesbian friends as a primary connector to LGBTQ community, in the past. Wendy, for example, responded to the question about whether friendships connected her to community with the following:

> I definitely think [our two lesbian friends] do and I think it's definitely because of their engagement, well and especially when [one friend] was working for the city and even now she still has some relationships. When we're with them and especially with them and we're in [River City] at an event, then I feel more engaged. More so than I would with others.

It is clear in Wendy's comments that her engagement with community is experienced *through* her relationship with her lesbian friends, who, as I argued in chapter 4, operated in some ways as "diversity resources." When I asked whether Wendy was referring specifically to LGBTQ com-

munity, she responded that she meant "I was just thinking like [River City] and diversity in general not necessarily just LGBTQ." Allies Rochelle and Lindsay, whose immediate family included gay and lesbian people, and ally Nadine, whose overall community engagement was high, just not in LGBTQ community events and organizations, were other examples of ally Absents. Other participants referred to multiple communities in which they were engaged with their friends, but for ally Absents, connection to LGBTQ communities occurred through close friends.

Overall, LGBTQ and ally participants' roles in LGBTQ community, whether Absent, Occasional, or Leader, related to their friendships and connection to LGBTQ community. Allies who played all roles connected to LGBTQ community through their close friends, and ally Leaders also connected to LGBTQ community through their acquaintances. LGBTQ Leaders and Absents connected to LGBTQ community primarily through their acquaintances, and LGBTQ Occasionals connected to LGBTQ community through their close friends (Table 5). This additional layer of understanding the social structure of a community helps us better understand the relationship between community and friendship, specifically, how community role matters in community formation through friendships.

Conclusion: Community and friendship limitations

Friendships do not universally convey a sense of LGBTQ community for both ally and LGBTQ participants. This finding echoes Brown-Saracino's (2011) discussion of "ambient community" as an affective sense of connection based on shared interests and values, not institutions. However, I have added that the definition of "friendship" must be examined to consider friendship closeness and its relationship to LGBTQ community. Furthermore, I have highlighted the

role participants played in River City's small LGBTQ community, emphasizing LGBTQ community institutions and events. Participants' roles in River City's LGBTQ community, similar to the suburban gay men Brekhus (2003) describes, affected not just their community involvement, but also the *way* they connected to community through their friends.

In other words, not all friendships are created equal in forming community. "Weak ties" (Granovetter 1973) play a greater role in connecting LGBTQ participants to community events and organizations, while stronger ties connect allies to LGBTQ community. More specifically, weak ties connect community Leaders and LGBTQ Absents to LGBTQ community, while stronger ties serve a community connection function for Occasionals and ally Leaders, Occasionals, *and* Absents. This finding raises important questions about the role of close LGBTQ friends specifically for allies. In chapter 4, I demonstrated the role that allies played in contributing "diversity resources" to sustaining LGBTQ community. We can now ask: would LGBTQ community exist without allies' close LGBTQ friends? For LGBTQ people, will acceptance into families of origin spell the end of LGBTQ community organizations, as more LGBTQ people become Absents? And are close LGBTQ friends needed for LGBTQ communities to persist (and if so, for whom)? Friendship closeness and community role are key elements in LGBTQ communities' ongoing existence.

CONCLUSION

Charlie, a higher education professional in her early 30s, who we met in chapters 2 and 3, sat at my dining room table one fall weekend, gamely answering my questions about her plans to eventually leave River City. She sketched the broader outlines of her adult life, describing her experiences in graduate school and persistent desires to plan ahead for her next move. Charlie was not a River City native, grew up in a Chicago suburb, and attended college, graduate school, and worked throughout the Midwest and South. Charlie explained that she "always [had] plans to be someplace else" and struggled to stay in one place for more than a few years at a time. She held this desire to move in tension with a wish to be well-grounded in a sense of community, explaining, "I see other people's lives, where they put down roots and they have really strong attachments to community and I want that. At the time… if it doesn't happen after a couple years, I just feel like, well, let's find another place and see if it happens." After I asked what was appealing about putting down roots, she stated:

> I sort of create the analogy of college, or even grad school. Like, just the idea that, like, you have a really good lay of the land socially, and so, like, you have your friends over here for this, and it's funny, like, thinking about, like, cause grad school was where I felt like I had the most, like, social connection even though I was only there for two years. Cause I had, like, my straight-straight friends, my straight-queer friends, my queer-queer friends, um, and so, like, I felt like all of my needs were really met in very particular ways. So, like, whereas here, I feel like I have a single set of friends, and then I have individual people, um, but I don't have, like, friend groups, and I think I would have more of that if I lived in a place, or, like, the fact that, like, in grad school, we had, like, our bar.

Um, it was, like, our place. And so, you know, I don't have, I have some, I have things

resembling that here, but it still doesn't make me wanna stay here.

During Charlie's time in River City, she participated in a variety of community events,

both LGBTQ and not, and she had friends through her workplace and in the larger River City

community. Charlie felt some desire to return to the Chicago area, although, in Charlie's case,

that big city was where she grew up. Charlie could imagine other communities throughout the

U.S. where she might live, and River City was not one of them, despite her connections to some

elements of LGBTQ community. Callie was one of Charlie's close friends, and Callie and Char-

lie often patronized what Callie described as River City's "queer bar," usually with other friends.

And, yet, she tearfully described what was lacking:

And so I feel really lonely sometimes amongst the friends that I have now. And I realize

there are times when I just don't need to hang out with them. Like, there are times when

I'm lonely, and so I think of, like, I should go hang out with them, and [I] hang out with

them and I'm, like, they don't, no, this is not hitting the spot. Um, and it's because I don't

have, like, other sets of friends to, like, offset that feeling.

For Charlie, participation in River City LGBTQ community did not provide the friend-

ships she needed to sustain her, to develop "really strong attachments to community." Con-

versely, her friendships did not create the sense of deep-rooted community she wanted to attain.

Even though Charlie's friendships with LGBTQ people in the River City area connected her to

community institutions, she still felt lonely, and, ultimately, left River City for a job in a nearby

state.

Mark, who I introduced in chapter 3, also felt this sense of loneliness, and he explained that he did not see how he could stay in River City. He stated that:

I'm too young I feel like, to retire here in a way. Like, to be like, yup this is going to be home. Like, no. There are bigger, I want to live in a bigger city to see how that's going to affect me as a person. Um, and also, I just can't see myself right now raising a family here and feeling comfortable and feeling welcomed and included, and not stared at, and maybe even said to somethings [sic], you know? Because when I see how the community, some community members treat people of color and other people who are different than them, you know it's a signifier for me. And I just can't, I don't think I want to deal with it.

Mark foresaw a time when River City's larger community would be too hostile for him and a future family to tolerate. His comments were prophetic, as he left River City for a much larger city on the east coast not long after our interview.

Mark's and Charlie's experiences align with stories of gay migration (Weston 1995) in which LGBTQ people have moved from smaller towns and cities throughout the U.S. to the larger cities of the coast in order to participate in an imagined gay community. Yet, in River City, elements of this imagined gay community existed in the form of LGBTQ support organizations, events, and small, if disconnected, groups of friends. Charlie and Mark *had* LGBTQ friends, as well as connections to family in the area (in the case of Mark) and favorite queer spaces like Barney's. In theory, friendships should have connected Charlie and Mark to a feeling of LGBTQ community in River City, but these connections ultimately failed.

With some exceptions, sociologists of LGBTQ community usually focus on institutions and individuals' experiences within them, while sociologists of friendship analyze personal relationships without their community contexts. Charlie's and Mark's story of community and friendship failure highlights the need to consider not just LGBTQ community institutions, and not just friendships, but how each of these elements of community connect. Peter Nardi's groundbreaking book on gay men's friendships describes this connection as an "ongoing dialectic" between friendship and community: "Friendship networks, thus, become the primary site where the daily lives of gay men and lesbians are carried out and shaped… Networks of friendships, often reconceptualized as kinships of choice, become the source for developing communities of identity and inequality" (1999:192). Friendships create community, and community develops friendships. For Charlie and Mark, this dialectic is revealed in its failure: their friendships did not create a sense of community, and community participation did not lead to the development of friendships (with LGBTQ *or* cishet people) that felt sustaining or supportive.

For Mark and Charlie, the failure to connect to community through friends in some ways grew from a sense that better options were available, and accessible, in other communities. Charlie's experiences in college and graduate school, for example, offered a template of what her ideal queer community might be, and Mark's perspective after "going through war" taught him that discrimination was not tolerable in his future life. This story is one of class, in some ways, as middle-class, if not especially well-paying, jobs enabled them to imagine a move to another part of the U.S. as possible and have the means to carry it out. However, Charlie's friendships and activities in River City's LGBTQ community did not align with her imagined queer community,

and Mark's friendships and work as an LGBTQ community leader did not suggest that community change was likely to occur at the speed he needed to feel connected and safe.

Charlie's and Mark's stories reveal a set of tensions I have explored throughout this dissertation: between community coalescence and diffusion, and between friendship and community. Urban-based LGBTQ community research focused on gay neighborhoods has generally responded to these tensions by identifying a linear narrative of community progress and acceptance, and by conflating friendship and community as part of this teleological process. My research challenges this framing in two ways: first, these linear narratives of progress miss everyday ambivalences experienced in LGBTQ communities. Ambivalence is not an extraneous part of a progress narrative in which communities will ultimately dissolve under assimilative pressures; analysis of River City's LGBTQ community reveal that ambivalence is *central* to LGBTQ community formation and change. Second, explorations of friendship have remained underexplored and underspecified with studies of community. A focus on friendship demonstrates community formation and dissolution processes and challenges community definitions that focus on institutions at the expense of relationships. Below I discuss the challenges my research offers both to LGBTQ community research and sociological research more broadly, and I suggest future possible research oriented toward these findings.

Ambivalence in non-urban LGBTQ spaces

Researchers focused on urban gay communities have described a linear process of community change (Ghaziani 2014), one that locates friendships as the starting point of gay community (Nardi 1999). Proponents of these theories argue that, for example, post-gay approaches to

community are beginning to, in a sense, "trickle down" to suburban, small town, and rural LGBTQ communities as acceptance of LGBTQ people grows. Other theorists of non-urban LGBTQ communities have offered alternative frameworks that challenge this approach (Brown-Saracino 2015; Gray, Johnson, and Gilley 2016), while still others have critiqued the prioritization of urban gay life over LGBTQ lives in other communities (Halberstam 2005). While the critique of the centrality of urban gay communities is not new, analyses of the 2016 presidential election in the U.S. suggests a need to engage deeply with what has been called "flyover country," the rural Midwest, in particular.

I suggest that we might benefit from instead considering the ways that our theory-making about LGBTQ communities might "trickle up" from more peripheral LGBTQ spaces (Connell 2008), changing the ways we think about LGBTQ communities even in those urban contexts. In other words, a dominant focus on urban contexts has meant that analyses of urban LGBTQ communities may have missed the kinds of ambivalences that suburban and rural communities manage every day – and ones that are already present in urban spaces. Indeed, given that *urban* LGBTQ communities, as well as other marginalized urban communities are likely subject to similar kinds of local, national, and global dynamics as those in smaller places, a framework of community ambivalence may reveal the ways that mainstream or normative identities are contested even as they seem dominant. Because River City is a small city in the middle of a primarily rural part of the U.S., evidence from my research highlights the need to maintain a sense of ambivalence about LGBTQ communities and ongoing change in both rural *and* urban contexts.

Ambivalence and linear narratives of progress

I want to be specific about what is missed in the focus on linear narratives of progress based in urban centers. As my research shows, the overlap between post-gay and closet eras is substantial in River City, as the case of Barney's suggests. While Barney's might well be seen as an inclusive, post-gay space, it could also easily be seen as closeted, given the absence of visible indicators of gay community. A linear narrative of gay community progress misses this overlap, while ambivalent community makes space for multiple, even conflicting experiences of LGBTQ community.

I have argued for a framework of ambivalent communities in five ways. First, I outlined the ways that that LGBTQ community itself might be described as ambivalent, rather than clearly closeted, coming out, or post-gay. Second, I outlined three ways that LGBTQ participants responded ambivalently to the concept of post-gay community (inclusive, progressive, and exclusive). Third, I identified ambivalence in LGBTQ friendships, as some LGBTQ participants argued that shared-identity friendships do not matter, even as they say that these friendships are important. Fourth, ambivalence is identifiable in allies' contributions to LGBTQ community as "diversity resources" themselves *and* in the ways they access and "spend" those resources. Finally, friendships ambivalently generate LGBTQ community; in other words, some friendships contribute to community, but others do not. These ambivalences reveal a reciprocal relationship between identities, personal relationships, and institutions, as participants' relationships in some cases, pulled them into LGBTQ community, and in other cases, pushed them away. The concept of ambivalent communities, furthermore, offers one way to think through ongoing pressures to

assimilate and differentiate, pressures that are not new to LGBTQ communities and are unlikely to disappear despite fears of a post-gay future.

Some researchers have indeed signaled that such ambivalences exist; Nardi describes the fracturing of gay community, as discourse shifted to relationship dyads and less friendships (1999:193), and Ghaziani (2014) notes that LGBTQ communities may shift between closet, post-gay, and coming out phases. Theo Greene's research on "vicarious citizenship" (2014) offers a number of examples of the ways LGBTQ people of color ambivalently navigate access to communities that do, and do not, offer a sense of connection. My research in River City reveals that ambivalence is central to LGBTQ communities, particularly in an era of "post" ideologies that, community members in my research seem to agree, are not an accurate reflection of how marginalized people negotiate lived realities. Future research should explore whether this finding is borne out in other community contexts. Perhaps rather than understanding communities as closeted, coming out, or post-gay, or as more or less hostile, understanding communities as normative, queer, or post-queer (Green 2002; Orne 2016) might offer a way to distinguish between communities of similar sizes, with similar dynamics, in multiple regions across the U.S. River City might be one example of a normative LGBTQ community, one marked by pressures to conform to particular gendered, sexual, and relationship (e.g., family) models, while other, similar-sized cities might be seen as queer inasmuch as their LGBTQ communities encourage deviance over conformance. Finally, perhaps some cities might be seen as post-queer; as Orne's (2016) research suggests, gay neighborhoods may be increasingly de-radicalized, and perhaps small-city LGBTQ communities are following. While I remain skeptical of linear narratives of progress, a

queer analytic dimension of LGBTQ communities might reveal key differences in how such communities cohere or disperse.

Ambivalence must also be explored in other identity-based communities, as discourses of "post" become increasingly common, at least, among community outsiders. How do communities of color navigate American cultural ambivalence around race, given colorblind ideologies (Bonilla-Silva 2006), for example? How might working-class Americans navigate meritocratic expectations as they access middle-class institutions (Allan 1998)? As the meanings of identities shift at a broader, cultural level, their local effects on identity-based communities should be assessed in terms of ambivalence, alongside narratives of progress.

The role of friendship in LGBTQ community

My research highlights a second challenge to LGBTQ community research: the missing friendships in LGBTQ community literature and the ongoing, if sometimes contradictory, centrality of friendships in LGBTQ community. LGBTQ community researchers have referenced friendships as an aspect of communities, but it is unclear what "friendship" means (Brown-Saracino 2011; Ghaziani 2014). Conversely, those who study LGBTQ friendships typically leave out community contexts entirely or miss the ways different communities might affect friendship formation (Adams and Allan 1999; Muraco 2012). While individual and dyadic friendships have been extensively analyzed, the role of friendships in constituting, or limiting, LGBTQ community has previously remained underspecified. However, for participants in my research such as Charlie, her connection to, and exit from, LGBTQ community in River City cannot be understood without knowing about and considering the landscape of her friendships.

In other words, my research suggests that we cannot understand LGBTQ community as a whole without analyzing the central role of friendships. For example, we cannot assume that friendships universally constitute community, or that all friendships lead to community in the same ways. "Friendship," as an analytic category, applies to a range of relationships (Fischer 1982b), some of which generate LGBTQ community, and others that do not. Some friendships cause people to show up at LGBTQ institutions, while others draw people away. I thus propose that an in-depth understanding of friends' *identities*, friendship *closeness*, and friends' *roles* in LGBTQ community are a few helpful ways of operationalizing how friendship can be central to the formation of LGBTQ communities. Rather than assume that friendships necessarily and automatically generate community, an alternative question might be: *Which* friendships generate community, and under what conditions? In my research, identities mattered, even as *both* LGBTQ and cishet ally participants played a crucial role in the formation and maintenance of LGBTQ communities. My research showed that acquaintances connected LGBTQ participants to community, while close friends connected allies to community, and families played a role in community dis/connection.

Furthermore, friendships cause us to question the definition of LGBTQ community, one that lies at the heart of a research trajectory that flows from urban centers. Must LGBTQ community always revolve around the growing, or declining, visibility of LGBTQ institutions? In other words, as my research has demonstrated, studying friendship should be central to community research. In rural towns of just a few hundred, for example, like those that represent "home" to many of my participants, perhaps friendships *are* community, full stop. This possibility echoes research about LGBTQ "care networks" constructed around sick or aging LGBTQ community

members (Aronson 1998; D'Augelli and Hart 1987; Dykewomon 2017; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Vries and Megathlin 2009). We can further imagine how friendships coalesce in rural contexts, where groups of friends make temporary communities in public spaces (Gray 2009) or in their own homes (Hall 2005). As in Allyson's case, in these smaller towns, families may be increasingly embedded in friendships and may constitute families for LGBTQ people, a possibility that suggests a shift in the chosen-ness of families. Even rural families welcome their LGBTQ children home for the holidays, in other words. However, no matter how accepting, families also ran the risk of pulling LGBTQ participants away from engagement with LGBTQ community institutions, although not in all cases.

Components of community: friendships and the decline of LGBTQ institutions

Friendships are a central answer to the question: how do we measure community in places with few LGBTQ institutions? In small cities like River City, the range of community that friendship generates is quite visible, from communities centered around groups of friends to those located in LGBTQ institutions like gay bars. For example, I observed clusters of LGBTQ friends at non-LGBTQ community events like a local storytelling forum. In another example, one lesbian-identified participant created a Facebook group for informal LGBTQ activities, and small groups of newly-met LGBTQ people and allies gathered to walk with dogs and children through local parks on sunny summer days. In some cases, these clusters of friends generated new organizations, which spawned additional sub-groups that are still active nearly a year later (one produces a monthly magazine, for example). In one instance, River City Collective (RCC), an LGBTQ-focused nonprofit, was created by a group of friends, several of whom were new to

River City and looking to create a centralized place to "catalyze" LGBTQ community, as their website suggests. While RCC remains focused on social activities and fundraising for RCC and other support organizations, their role in River City's politics is minimal. This gap in more vocal, political activity is being filled by Kai, a newly-out trans community member, who is looking to organize an LGBTQ task force to identify community needs and plan a reboot of a River City-based LGBTQ conference that was successful in previous years. New LGBTQ and ally Leaders are emerging, with the support of close friends and acquaintances, and I suspect that further political action will be undertaken by Kai's LGBTQ task force, should local anti-LGBTQ initiatives be introduced in the state legislature. Not all LGBTQ institutions, in other words, are equally political or equally likely to mobilize should the need arises (Stein 2002), and their relative politicization depends in part on the networks of friends such Leaders employ. Whether and how these organizations actively change the overall culture of River City remains an open question, especially as the leadership of RCC is uncertain. Similar organizations may be forming in other LGBTQ communities like those of River City, especially given the bump in anti-LGBTQ legislation following the 2016 U.S. election, and understanding the role of LGBTQ people, allies, and their acquaintances and close friends will be crucial to understanding how social change occurs in coming years.

Similar to urban gay communities, River City's gay community also gathered in a traditional gay institution: a new gay bar, the Underground, described briefly in the introduction. Extended networks of gay friends had connected through their attendance at Next Level, a visible gay bar replete with rainbow flags that closed in recent years. These friendship networks emerged again at the Underground, a new word-of-mouth gay bar that is more muted in its gay

visibility. The "queer pop-up" bar events organized in the Underground (also discussed in the introduction) suggested an overlapping network of largely new-to-River City, largely white, lesbian, queer, and trans community members. Friendship circles, especially divisions between gay and lesbian, queer, and trans community members, partially explain how and why a queer pop-up bar appeared within the space of an (implicitly) gay bar.

The queer pop-up bar within the less-visibly gay bar is a good example of how friendship networks mobilized small communities of friends in River City. River City's size made it an ideal location to observe the range of manifestations of community through friendship, sometimes in smaller groups unconnected to institutions and, at other times, more recognizably urban and gay. And, yet, the size of the city is not the only indicator of friendship-community relationship. A comparison with other small cities across the U.S. could be instructive, for example, in the case of lesbian-friendly cities (Brown-Saracino 2015). If we take seriously the possibility that post-gay communities centrally feature the disappearance of gay institutions, friendships constitute new community formations, or at the very least, relationships that should be examined for their ambivalent post-gayness and, possibly, post-queerness (Orne 2016).

Communities are not static, nor are participants, and a number of changes suggest avenues for possible future research. Especially in smaller cities like River City, individual-level changes, relationship break-ups, and friendship shifts can have sizable effects on broader friendship networks and community coherence. Two participants "came out," one as gay and the other as transgender. Paul, the straight drag queen discussed in chapter 1, publicly came out as gay near the end of my time in River City, soon began spending more time with gay friends, and

started dating a man from a nearby town. Paul's already-in-place friendship networks, established in part through his involvement in a drag group and the LGBTQ youth group, supported him as his life shifted from one of a straight, middle-class, married man to that of a single, middle-class, gay man. Furthermore, more than one couple in which I interviewed at least one participant ended their relationships, causing ripples in organizations and social events. In one case, such a break-up pulled a participant further into LGBTQ community events while pushing a second participant away. Participants' roles in community have changed, in some cases quite rapidly, as their romantic, family, and friend relationships have shifted, especially following the 2016 election season. Friendship networks are snapshots at one moment in time (Muraco 2012), as are communities, and a longitudinal study of LGBTQ friendship networks in coming years would offer a more complete picture of how friendships do or do not constitute community, and how these relationships change as national and local discourses, policies, and legislation affect LGBTQ people's everyday lives in River City.

The role of origin stories in LGBTQ community

One element of friendship and community that I have not explored is community of origin. Participants' birthplaces and where they grew up affected their friendships, migration in and out of River City, and participation in LGBTQ community events. Some have moved from River City, particularly single participants who were not River City natives, while others who self-identify as "from" River City have doubled down on their commitment to changing River City to be more inclusive of LGBTQ folks. Some have refocused their activism on anti-racist and other political work, while others have withdrawn from LGBTQ engagement. Being "from"

River City or a nearby town affects social networks, connections to family, and the ways friend-ships are constituted (including families of origin, for example). Participants' communities of origin affected their expectations for acceptance, for the contours of gay community, for what a good life for an LGBTQ person looks like (one free from violence, and one of tolerance, but not necessarily full acceptance). River City natives, on the whole, were not interested in queer identi-ties or communities, and some were openly critical of LGBTQ people they perceived as too queer. This normative perspective meant that queer-identified, or less normative, participants like Charlie felt lonely, alienated, and less able to connect with a sense of community.

Race, gender, and LGBTQ friendship networks

I have only scratched the surface of the racialized, classed, and gendered friendship net-works of River Citizens. As many have suggested (Gillespie et al. 2015; McPherson et al. 2001; Ueno et al. 2012), friendship homophily is an especially sticky characteristic of personal rela-tionships. Homophily is the tendency for "birds of a feather to flock together" (McPherson et al. 2001), or people to form friendships primarily with those who share their identities and back-grounds, a social phenomenon that persists despite claims that we are living in a post-identitarian moment. However, friendships do indeed form across identity lines, although race and class lines remain less permeable than sexuality and gender lines (Goins 2011; Korgen 2002; Muraco 2012; Wimmer and Lewis 2010). White participants often shamefacedly told me that they had no close friends who were people of color, even as they enthusiastically described their LGBTQ friends, although participants of color tended to have more friends who crossed race, gender, and sexual-ity identity lines. While I did not explicitly ask about friendships that crossed lines of class,

markers of class (like college attendance, types of social activities, foci of discussion) suggested

that most friendships were within-class. Given a central role of friendships in LGBTQ commu-

nity, my research indicates that friendship homophily may have consequences for LGBTQ com-

munity formation processes. In River City, friendship homophily left LGBTQ people of color

and working-class LGBTQ disconnected from the most active LGBTQ community institutions,

and these participants found other communities that required that they travel (to Chicago, for ex-

ample) or further minimize their identities (in substance abuse recovery organizations, for exam-

ple). Friendship homophily cost the most marginalized LGBTQ people in River City time,

money, and the ability to fully be themselves.

River City is just large enough to accommodate growing communities of color, as Black

and Latinx social, political, and support organizations are becoming increasingly visible, alt-

hough white River Citizens have been actively fighting integration for decades. White suprem-

acy and racism remains endemic to River City, in explicit ways, like a 2016 cross burning, to im-

plicit ways, like the language of "from Chicago" white participants used to refer disparagingly to

Black River Citizens. The power of racial segregation in River City seems too strong an institu-

tionalized force to overcome within LGBTQ community, and one participant suggested that dis-

tinct LGBTQ communities of color might form around their shared identities, rather than attend

largely white LGBTQ spaces and organizations. On the other hand, there is some preliminary ev-

idence that LGBTQ community in River City may be increasingly welcoming to LGBTQ people

of color. A night at the newly-opened Underground featured a small, and surprisingly diverse,

crowd, while events like drag shows have often included both performers and participants of

color. Yet, participants of color were more likely to connect with communities of color in nearby

cities like Chicago, engaging in the kind of "vicarious citizenship" Greene describes (2014). The relationship between LGBTQ people of color and LGBTQ community should be explored further, especially as friendships across lines of race are uncommon, especially in River City. Other, similarly-sized cities might enable cross-race friendships, and a comparison case with such a city would further develop our understanding of how more intersectional, just, and equitable LGBTQ communities are possible.

When friendships across lines of race did occur, they often put LGBTQ people of color in an awkward position as a token friend of color. Charlie, who identified as a Black-American "cisgender woman with gender queer leanings," identified race as a barrier to friendships in River City. She noted that "I don't feel as close to my friends here because I do feel like I'm their only Black friend." She described the effects of being the "only Black friend" on her friendships and experience of LGBTQ community in River City:

> There's a sense of which, like, if I'm your only Black friend, I feel like I'm not just, I'm not [Charlie]. I'm your Black friend. Whereas if you have at least one other Black friend that I know, like, okay. So you have a point of reference. So everything I do is now not reflective on all Black people cause you have a point of reference. Um, and so, and so there's that as well. Um, yeah. I don't know. Like I-I do think that the experience of race is very big for me when it comes to queerness, cause I also feel like I just miss diversity. Like it just is not a thing here. Um, and again, because my experience with queerness is so related to race, like, that also makes me feel like it's just not a very queer place, um, if I can't connect to, you know, queer Latinos and, like, queer Filipinas and, like, all these things, all these people who've, like, kind of enriched my experience of my sexuality.

River City's lack of racial diversity and potential for white friends to see her as a "token" Black friend clearly influenced Charlie's ability to make friends and connect with LGBTQ community.

Yet, white LGBTQ participants also seemed to be making little effort to support communities of color. The absence of white, gay participants in particular in events supporting River Citizens of color should also be elaborated in future research, as events like local Juneteenth celebrations, film screenings, and protest marches and vigils were *only* attended by white lesbians, queer women, and trans men. While white LGBTQ participants decried their lack of friends of color, they also did not, on the whole, publicly engage with communities of color to build those friendships. The limitations of River City's racist history and current racial dynamics play out in friendships, which affect LGBTQ community and contribute to its overwhelming whiteness. This process demonstrates the limitations of friendship particularly as a utopian institution (Eng 2010), and exploring the dynamics of race, gender, and sexuality within friendships and community institutions in River City would help us understand how segregation and racial inequality persists in LGBTQ communities more generally.

Gendered elements of friendship and community networks deeply affected LGBTQ institutions, organizations, and events, and while my focus was largely on LGBTQ community members and allies, a gendered analysis of friendship and community should be central to understandings of community going forward. For example, while gay men and transgender women most visibly led LGBTQ organizations, social events, and drag shows, transgender men and lesbian and queer women were less visible overall but more visible as activists. Lesbians, queer women, and trans men were involved in a variety of organizations, showing up at marches and protests, carrying signs, leading ally trainings, and, importantly, caring for families and friends of

their own. While gay men, trans women, and cishet allies remain the most visible LGBTQ community representatives, with some exceptions, lesbians, queer women, and trans men may be more numerous in the community, in line with Kazyak's (2012) research on lesbian and queer women in the rural Midwest. Kai described this hidden community as "introverts," but I suspect that the reality is much more gendered and reveals an avenue for further research, as well as a bifurcation in the literature focused largely on urban, gay communities.

A second dimension of gender, noted briefly above, should be explored as central to friendship and community. While research on trans friendships is a small, but growing, field (Galupo et al. 2014), the relationship between friendship and community specifically for transgender men and women, and agender, genderqueer, and nonbinary people should be analyzed more fully. While comparisons between a possible transgender community and gay community are not fully accurate, there are hints of a growing trans community in River City that echo gay community institutions. A trans-specific community organization emerged to share information about, and to support, trans River Citizens. And, yet, trans friendship networks differ widely by gender. Recall that trans men mapped the largest group of friends of any group of participants, while trans women had relatively small circles of friends. Research on transgender people's friendships and their relationship to LGBTQ communities should not treat all trans identities as equivalent.

The conceptual limits of community and friendship

My research raises two set of definitional question for future consideration: the limits of "community" and the limits of "friendship." First, LGBTQ participants across community roles

also noted that their friends *were* their community; in other words, they did not initially connect

their friendships to LGBTQ institutions. While some allies stated that their friends are their com-

munity, proportionally more LGBTQ participants made this claim. Teagan's quote at the start of

this chapter is a good example, as she stated that "most of my friendships are kind of intercon-

nected and are their own community." For some LGBTQ participants, *all* of their friendships

"counted" as community, while, for others, their LGBTQ friends constituted a community. Fia, a

performance artist, River City native, and white transgender woman, for example, described a

specific party from 2006, complete with a list of friends and a sense of "synchronicity" that gen-

erated a feeling of community. Thoughtful, transgender college student Colby focused on

LGBTQ friends, and he stated that:

> So like, where, I feel like community is wherever these friends are. And so when I have
>
> LGBTQ friends, it's like I feel a sense of that community in and out of the contacts or in
>
> and out of the LGBTQ contacts. Like if I have LGBTQ friends, I feel like I feel that com-
>
> munity. I feel other communities. I feel like a belonging to other things. I feel like friend-
>
> ships are communities in themselves almost.

These examples should give us pause in considering the definition of community and the

role of friendship therein. In River City's LGBTQ community, described as "cliquey" and dis-

connected, some LGBTQ participants see their friendship circles as more authentic community

than the kind of community observed in institutions and events. This observation is not new, as

Mary Gray (2009) observed similar patterns in her analysis of a rural LGBTQ community and its

temporary communities formed in the aisles of Wal-Mart, for example. However, I suggest that

friendship-based communities offer a new way to consider how LGBTQ communities are more

durable than recent post-gay (Ghaziani 2014), and now post-queer (Green 2002; Orne 2016), literatures suggest. Locating, and analyzing, friendships at the center of LGBTQ community helps us understand how these communities change, and persist, even in contexts that seem to lack LGBTQ institutions. And, yet, the limits of these friendship-based communities should be analyzed in future research. Do friendship-based communities mobilize action and resources in the same way that LGBTQ institutions do? Will friends be aware of, or vote in favor of, LGBTQ-supportive legislation?

Second, what was striking for LGBTQ participants is how many participants included family as central to both their friendship networks *and* to their sense of community. Allyson, who was in her early 20s, for example, described her family as the lynchpin in her sense of community:

> Um, I guess for like [my town], a lot of it is the family and friends that have formed a community. I guess the friend community around my family is important to me. Both my parents have um, just a mass... a huge collection of friends over the years. My mom has a lot of very close friends. And they're always doing stuff and they're always inviting us and um, we definitely go to things and um, it's important to me to maintain that friendship. Because these people, when I'm not around they look after my mom. If we're all at work or something and my mom needs the driveway plowed or something, like it will be done before she even wakes up in the morning. Like, I really appreciate the close-knit community that she has. And I try to be a part of it. I'm not quite as much as I probably should be but um, I guess that's the one that matters most to me in [my town]. Not necessarily having my own close knit community. It's probably my mom's.

Allyson, who identified as bisexual, connected to some degree with her mom's "close-knit community," a network of people who engage in onerous, wintertime labor like driveway plowing. Yet it was unclear whether Allyson's cishet family would be transformed into ally Occasionals or Leaders, or whether her family would attend LGBTQ community events with her. Peter, who I noted above is close especially to his partner's family, is another example, as an extrovert-seeming introvert. He acknowledged that his closest relationships are with his partner's immediate family, who accept Peter and his relationship with his partner. Some research has shown the ways that families constitute LGBTQ communities (Moore 2011), and others have demonstrated the ways family and friendships generate LGBTQ support (Broad et al. 2008; Duhigg et al. 2010; Fingerhut 2011). However, future research should examine how growing acceptance in families might be pulling LGBTQ people away from community engagement.

And Robin's comments about the importance of family in her identity highlight the changing role of multiple generations of families in LGBTQ community. After the values of "living simply, and valuing people over things, and equity" as core elements of her "culturally Catholic" identity, she stated that:

> It's what I aspire to and what I would call a part of being culturally Catholic. Family being very important. And family is an interesting part of my identity. Because it's now two families, it's my family of origin and now it's the family that I've created with my wife, you know?

These participants' perspectives on family acceptance echo research that highlights the overlap between family and friendship (Carrillo 2017; Spencer and Pahl 2006). While participants like Peter and Robin included family on their friendship maps, it was clear that their families saw

them, and their partners, *as family themselves*, not as friends, euphemistically (Carrillo 2017). In other words, LGBTQ participants saw their families as their close friends, a phenomenon Spencer and Pahl call "suffusion" (2006). This phenomenon should be explored further especially within LGBTQ communities, as families increasingly comprise LGBTQ people's social networks, perhaps asserting family relationships as normatively superior to friendships.

And, yet, the sense of "chosen family" (Weston 1991) has not completely disappeared among LGBTQ participants. Nate, who grew up in River City but has since left for the west coast, identified his four closest friends as "yadeed [sic]" which, he explained, is:

A Hebrew word. It means a friend that's closer than a brother… And so I would say these guys are, the four of these guys are my yadeed. So closer than brothers, I could call them at any time and completely be accepted and they'll be behind me no matter what decision I ever make, you know. And they love me enough to yell at me when I'm doing something stupid. But even if I decide to keep on doing stupid, they'll be right behind me.

Nate's description of his yadeed resonates with the concept of chosen family, and these relationships are central to his life outside River City, one in which he is estranged from much of his family of origin.

The concept of chosen family has also been adopted by allies who are themselves estranged from their families. Paul, for example, explained that:

I just, I'm not, I really don't have anything to do with them [my family]. And it saddens me sometimes… So um, I think I look to my community as kind of my family and my friends. I mean I, you know, there are some friends that I have and I'm like, you're my family. And I think that's another way I relate to the LGBT community cause you often

hear, LGBT community, you know, these are my family because a lot of time their families reject them um, or you know, they can't deal with them. And so this has become, and so I'm, I'm kind of like that too. Um, and I think that's another way that I kind of relate to the LGBT community that I choose my family for the most part.

Paul's discussion of his chosen family highlights the need to explore how such a framework for family manifests in variety of community contexts (Moore 2011).

A key question here is whether and how families – either through suffusion or chosen families – create or contribute to community. At this point, cishet families of origin and homonormative (Van Eeden-Moorefield et al. 2011) nuclear families centered around a queer couple seem to draw LGBTQ participants away from community (Carrington 1999; Lehr 1999), while chosen and extended families connect them to community (Moore 2011; Weeks et al. 2001). Yet research also suggests that LGBTQ family members connect allies to LGBTQ events, institutions, and, in some cases, activism (Broad 2011; Broad et al. 2008; Johnson and Best 2012). Whether and how families generate communities, or pull people away from them, remains an open question, one that is dependent to some degree on definitional overlaps with friendship. While my research demonstrates the need to specify the relationship between friendship and community, it also highlights definitional challenges in a changing cultural context of growing LGBTQ acceptance.

Friendships and the future of LGBTQ communities

River City's LGBTQ community remains in flux, although some have noted a growing coalescence around the activities of River City Collective, a nonprofit that focuses largely on

LGBTQ social events like parties at local bars, drag shows, and a monthly magazine. In early 2017, rumors that a new gay bar that was on the cusp of opening began to circulate among LGBTQ community members. In early April, a Facebook page appeared in which it was described as an "all-lifestyles" bar, and its owner is a gay man well-known in River City's gay community. This new bar, the Underground, represents the culmination of the gay social events that have exploded in 2016-17, spurred by the leaders of River City Collective, and the bar is a kind of coalescing force: a space for a benefit drag show, for example, and the site of a "queer pop-up bar." Yet community outsiders would not know that Underground is a "gay bar." Like Barney's, the Underground has no gay iconography, beyond what patrons bring on their bodies; the bar is lit by an array of colorful, vertical lights, but no rainbow flags are visible, and the music, largely catchy, contemporary pop, does not reference LGBTQ culture in any noticeable way. For all the excitement about a new gay bar in town, ambivalence persists in River City, as the "new gay bar" is not obviously gay.

Perhaps what makes the Underground gay is its bartenders and clientele, who are more visibly gay than in other, nearby bars. I have a hard time imagining cishet River Citizens feeling wholly unaware of the Underground's implicit gayness, although it is not signaled by any concrete element of the bar's decoration. From the street, it looks like any other bar in River City's downtown, windows lit by fluorescent beer signage. Rather, the Underground's gayness is made evident in and through *friendships*: in the ways patrons laugh and touch each other's arms, in the cluster of short-haired lesbians perched around the table closest to the front window, in the ways everyone watches to see if they know the person who just entered, or left, via the front door, to see if hugs are forthcoming. If the Underground is to offer a successful challenge to the "post-

gay" era, it will do so through those friendships, acquaintances and close, homophilous or heter-

ogenous. Yet the Underground's potential as a *queer* or *trans* community space remains to be

seen and seems especially challenging given River City's overarching normative pressures. Its

future as a fully-inclusive space depends in part on the friendships that form within and across

identity lines in the coming politically fraught years.

TABLES

Table 1: Average number of close friends by gender identity and sexual orientation

	n	# friends	# LGBTQ friends	# cishet friends	% LGBTQ friends
Cishet	13	17.5	2.5	14.9	14.5%
LGBTQ	41	12.7	4.6	8.2	36.3%
Total	**54**	**13.9**	**4.1**	**9.9**	**29.3%**

Table 2: Average number of close friends by gender identity (LGBTQ participants only)

	n	# friends	# LGBTQ friends	# cishet friends	% LGBTQ friends
cisgender man	13	12.2	3.9	8.3	32.1%
cisgender woman	17	11.8	4.9	7.2	41.8%
genderqueer/genderfluid person	5	9.4	2.6	6.8	27.7%
transgender man	2	26.5	11.0	15.5	41.5%
transgender woman	4	15.7	4.3	11.3	27.7%
Total	**41**	**12.7**	**4.6**	**8.2**	**36.3%**

Table 3: Average number of close friends by sexual orientation (LGBTQ participants only)

	n	# friends	# LGBTQ friends	# cishet friends	% LGBTQ friends
bisexual, pansexual, asexual	6	13.8	4.7	9.2	33.7%
gay	14	13.7	4.8	8.8	35.4%
lesbian	10	10.2	4.5	6.3	44.1%
queer	9	9.5	3.4	6.1	35.5%
straight	2	28.5	8.5	20.0	29.8%
Total	**41**	**12.7**	**4.6**	**8.2**	**36.3%**

Table 4: Participants' role in LGBTQ community institutions

	Leader	Occasional	Absent	Total
LGBTQ	13	18	10	**41**
Ally	3	2	8	**13**
Total	**16**	**20**	**18**	**54**

Table 5: Participants' role in community and connection to community

	LGBTQ	**Ally**
Leader	acquaintance	acquaintance, close friend
Occasional	close friend	close friend
Absent	acquaintance	close friend

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APPENDIX A: Interview script and questions

Interview script

Introduction
Hello! Thanks for taking the time to participate in this interview. I'm Clare Forstie, and I'm a researcher at Northwestern University studying lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (or LGBTQ) friendships. We're going to talk today about your friendships and what they mean to you, and I'll ask you questions related to your friendships and where spend time with your friends. Please note that there are no right or wrong answers to these questions, and I want to encourage you to share your honest responses.

This interview will be audio recorded, but you can ask me to pause the audio recording. I'll take notes throughout the interview, but I won't include your name in my notes. Please use your first name only during the interview, and, if you're uncomfortable using your first name, choose a pseudonym to use in the interview. If you're referring to friends in our discussion, please also only use their first names and try to avoid sharing information about them that would identify them. You can also choose to end the interview at any time. Are you ready to proceed?

Great! Thanks. I will now start the audio recording.

Interview questions

Identity
1. First, tell me a little about you. Where are you from? Where do you live now? How long have you lived there? Do you have plans to stay or do you intend to move?
2. How would you describe yourself?
3. What parts of your identity are most important to you?
4. How would you define your sexuality? Your gender? How did you come to understand them in the way you do now?
5. Are there parts of your identity we haven't addressed that you'd like to discuss?

Friendship
1. Please take a few minutes to draw a diagram of your friends (see friendship diagram sheet).
2. Tell me about the friends you noted in your diagram.
    a. Who are they? How do you know them? Where did you meet them? How long have you known each other? When did you know that they had become a friend?
    b. How would you describe them? Are they LGBTQ? Are most of your friends LGBTQ? Why or why not?
    c. How important is it to you to have LGBTQ friends? Why?
    d. Are your friends generally similar to you? Different from you? In what ways?
    e. Do your friends acknowledge or support the parts of your identity that are most important to you? If so, how so? If not, what do you think about that?

     f.   Would you put your family on this diagram? Would you put a romantic or sexual partner here? Why or why not?

     g.   Have your friendships changed at all in recent years? If so, how? Why? Thinking longer term, have your friendships changed over time? If so, how and why?

3. What kinds of things do you do together with your friends? Why?

     a.   Do you find yourself socializing in a primarily LGBTQ or straight environment when you're with your friends? How do you feel about that?

     b.   Do you attend LGBTQ events? If so, why? If not, why not? Do you attend with your friends? Do you see your friends there? If so, or if not, how do you feel about that?

     c.   If you have LGBTQ friends, are there things you do with them that you don't do with your other friends? Are there things you do with your other friends that you don't do with your LGBTQ friends? Why?

     d.   Have there been any changes in what you do together? If so, why?

     e.   Do you feel any pressure to be romantically involved with your friends? Have you been romantically involved with any of your friends?

4. Where do you primarily socialize?

     a.   How often do you go to these places/that place?

     b.   If you like it, why? What is it you like about it?

     c.   If not, why not? What do you not like about it?

     d.   Have you changed places you socialize at all in recent years? Or over time? If so, how and why?

     e.   Are there any activities you do, or do differently, just because of your friends? Are there any organizations, groups, businesses, volunteer work, or anything else you've done because of them?

5. Who is your closest friend in this group? How do you know them? Why are they your closest friend?

     a.   Do you think your friend's identity affects your friendship at all? In positive ways? In negative ways?

     b.   How does this friend get along with your other friends? Do you have a romantic partner? If so, how does this friend get along with them?

     c.   Do you feel any pressure to be romantically involved with this friend? Do others have this expectation of your relationship?

     d.   Has your friendship given you experiences that you would not have had otherwise? Has your friendship given you contact with groups or ideas you would not have had otherwise? Can you give me an example or two?

     e.   Has this friendship changed over time? If so, how? How do you feel about those changes?

     f.   Have you lost any friends recently? How? What happened? Is there anything that would cause you to end a friendship?

6. How do you interact with your friends? How often do you interact with them and how? What about your closest friend?

     1.   Have the ways you interact changed over time? If so, how? How do you feel about those changes?

7. Thinking generally, is there anything you wish was different about your friendships?
8. Is there anything you'd like to tell me about your friendships that I haven't already asked?

Community

9. Shifting gears, tell me a little about [River City]. How would you describe it? Has it changed at all in the time you've been here? If so, how so?
10. Do you feel that [River City] is a welcoming place for you? A comfortable place? What makes for a welcoming place to live, work, socialize? Comfortable? What makes for an uncomfortable or unwelcoming place?
11. Is participating in a community important to you? Why or why not?
    a. If so, how would you describe your community? Who is included in this community?
    b. Are all of your friends part of this community, or no?
    c. How do you participate in this community? What do you do? Are there things you don't do that you wish you did? Is it easy or hard to connect with your community?
    d. Has this community changed at all in the time you've been here? If so, how, and how do you feel about these changes?
12. Are there other communities that are important to you? Please describe them.
13. Thinking about LGBTQ community more generally, would you say there is an LGBTQ community here? Why or why not, do you think? If so, how would you describe LGBTQ community in [River City]? How do you know it exists?
    e. How important is LGBTQ community to you? Why?
    f. Do you participate in an LGBTQ community in [River City]? If so, why, and how? If not, why not?
    g. Are there times you've felt that you really should participate in LGBTQ community, but you didn't? When? Why?
    h. Where do LGBTQ people go to meet friends in [River City]? Where do they go to find romantic or sexual partners? How do LGBTQ people connect with other LGBTQ people?
    i. How unified is LGBTQ community in [River City]? Can you explain?
14. Thinking about what you know of LGBTQ people generally, how important do you think LGBTQ community is to LGBTQ people these days in [River City]? Why?
15. Some researchers say that we are now living in a post-gay moment in which LGBTQ communities are less central to LGBTQ life. What are your thoughts on that?
16. Is there anything about LGBTQ community or community in [River City] that you'd like to share with me that I haven't asked about?

Concluding questions

17. Are there any of your friendships that make you feel more connected to your community? To LGBTQ community? If so, how so? If not, what do you think about that?
18. Are there any aspects of your friendships, your community, or your life that I haven't asked you about that you think I should know?

19. Do you have any questions for me?
20. May I contact any of your friends for an interview?
21. Do you consent to being observed in one or two friendship interactions? This portion of the project is optional.
22. Please complete the demographic questionnaire.

APPENDIX B: Terminology

My students constantly educate me about new LGBTQ terminology, as new gender and sexual identity terms emerge seemingly on a daily basis. They reference tumblr as their primary, online, and hyper-dynamic encyclopedia of evolving terminology *and* frameworks in which to locate new terms. As just one example, one tumblr page proposes a matrix of "six types of attraction" to which more than 70 terms can be added as prefixes and suffixes (Genderfluid Support n.d.). This list of terms, and its organizational matrix, are likely already outdated. In the more than 15 Safe Zone trainings I conducted with groups of students, staff, faculty, and community members (notably, not part of my research), this proliferation of terminology was a source of anxiety and frustration, especially for those new to LGBTQ terminology. Academics, even those who study gender and sexuality, share these anxieties. In one example, a new Call for Proposals from the *Journal of Homosexuality* (a title the latter portion of which would no doubt make my students wince) for a special issue on terminology notes that, "For some, the ongoing proliferation of previously unnamed sex, gender, and sexuality categories may feel like just a bit 'too much,' while for others it may feel like finally 'almost enough.'"[26]

As we might expect, sociologists have been considering the question of LGBTQ terminology for some time, exploring, for example, the best approaches to using sex, gender, and sexuality terminology in survey research (Bauer et al. 2017; Westbrook and Saperstein 2015). Some of the best, meaning most inclusive, approaches allow for maximum flexibility, enabling participants to name the terms they feel best describe their identities. While such an approach may not

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[26] http://explore.tandfonline.com/cfp/ah/journal-of-homosexuality-call-for-paper

be feasible for larger-scale studies, my sample was small enough to allow open-ended demo-

graphic questions. Wherever possible, I used the terms participants wrote on their demographic

surveys or stated over the course of our interviews in order to remain faithful to participants'

self-understandings.

This process was imperfect, and, as quickly as terms become outdated on the internet,

many I've used in this dissertation are likely already outdated, as categorical terms I've used to

describe some participants are already changing, and participants' own identities have changed,

as I explained in the conclusion. In this moment of terminology flux, however, I wanted to ex-

plain how I've used some terms that may seem unclear, or grammatically incorrect, or simply

confusing to the LGBTQ terminology novice. My aim in this appendix is also to share some of

the perhaps overly simplistic tools I use in teaching about gender and sexuality and explain why I

believe we need to continually reexamine how we connect these two types of identity.

I note in Safe Zone trainings that gender and sexuality are not the same thing. This is an

obvious claim that quickly becomes confusing to training participants when I state that a person

can be transgender and straight. I use "The Genderbread Person" as a helpful, if cartoonish,

shorthand way of distinguishing sex, sexuality ("attraction" in this diagram), gender identity, and

gender expression.[27] This approach is not unproblematic, as some have suggested that this dia-

gram is plagiarized,[28] but it's a useful first step. As sociologists, we, too, need to grow more ac-

customed to thinking of gender and sexuality as separate, but related, concepts. This is not a new

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[27] http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2015/03/the-genderbread-person-v3/#sthash.nViuJa9E.dpbs
[28] https://storify.com/cisnormativity/the-genderbread-plagiarist

claim; researchers have been arguing for this conceptual distinction at least since the 1960s, but this line of thinking poses challenges for sociologists.

For example, in counting the number of "LGBTQ friends," a question about how to count individuals with multiple identities within the acronym emerges. How should I "count" a friend who is both a transgender woman and a lesbian? Should I count cisgender gay men and lesbians as allies for transgender and genderqueer or nonbinary participants? In my context, I avoid these questions by discussing "cishet" allies only, in the interest of simplicity (and, to be frank, a small sample), but I also highlight research that challenges this oversimplification.

I use the term "transgender" to refer to people whose present gender identity does not align with their gender assigned at birth. However, it seems to me that the term "transgender" may be going the way of the dodo, or at least the way of the term "transsexual," meaning that it's increasingly being used by people who are interested in transitioning in some way (surgically, hormonally, or aesthetically). Although I have little evidence to back this up, I suspect that terms like nonbinary and genderqueer are becoming increasingly popular, especially among young people who identify under the very broad, but still constricting LGBTQ umbrella. The term "nonbinary" generally refers to people whose gender identity does not adhere to a strict fe-male/male or feminine/masculine binary, while "genderqueer" is a broader term encompassing a range of nonnormative gender identities and expressions. In this dissertation, I have used them somewhat interchangeably, but I acknowledge here that this is not fully accurate.

The term "cisgender" is often experienced as quite shocking to my training participants, many of whom are learning that such a term applies to them for the first time. Cisgender refers to

people whose present gender identity aligns with their gender assigned at birth. Statistically, most people in the world are cisgender, and it is a useful concept because it describes a previously un-named "norm," much like the relationship between the terms heterosexual/straight and homosexual/gay/lesbian. I use the overlapping term "cishet" in this dissertation because I find that it is a useful shorthand to describe people who are not LGBTQ. Cishet is a shortened form of cisgender and heterosexual, and it is a term I credit, with permission, to Alexzander Harper Dietterich, one of my former students.

I use the gender-neutral pronoun "they" and related versions like "themself" to refer to some participants, a usage that is becoming increasingly common, even accepted by major publications (Brooks 2017). Other gender-neutral pronouns have been proposed, and are occasionally used, even on the most rural college campuses (like my own). One tool I often suggest to training participants who are unfamiliar with how to use gender-neutral pronouns is the aptly-named practicewithpronouns.com, a website that allows users to practice filling in sentences pulled from the fictional podcast series "Welcome to Night Vale" with a small sample of such pronouns.

"Queer" should be distinguished from "genderqueer" in that the latter term refers to gender identity and expression, while the former primarily (although not exclusively) refers to sexual orientation, at least in the way my participants used it. Queer is a surprisingly gendered term, among my participants, as those who used it tended to be cisgender women. I wonder whether "queer" is shifting as a distinctly gendered term to be used by women more than men. Perhaps, in some ways, "queer" is actually the new "lesbian."

One final note: it behooves us, as researchers, as sociologists, and, critically, as teachers to engage with this evolving terminology in an ongoing way. It matters to our students, and it affects their ability to connect and learn in the classroom. It also affects the accuracy and long-term impact of our research. I will share two final bits of advice I offer in my trainings, specifically for those who teach. First, *ask* your students about their names and pronouns, not publicly, because that practice can effectively "out" students on the first day of classes. I use a short first-day survey to ask students to share their names and pronouns privately, which even cishet students use to provide preferred names like nicknames. Finally, be curious about your students' lives, and become accustomed to the idea of being wrong. I find that demonstrating this open curiosity, without putting marginalized students on the spot to explain their identities, and modeling how to shift my thinking in a moment of new information (about terminology, for example) are excellent ways to illustrate sociological thinking.

APPENDIX C: Participants' descriptive statistics

	n	% of sample
Gender		
Cisgender woman	27	50.0%
Cisgender man	16	29.6%
Genderqueer/nonbinary person	5	9.3%
Transgender woman	4	7.4%
Transgender man	2	3.7%
Sexual orientation		
Straight	15	27.8%
Gay	14	25.9%
Lesbian	10	18.5%
Queer	8	14.8%
Bisexual	6	11.1%
Asexual	1	1.9%
Race		
White	46	85.2%
Multiracial	3	5.6%
Asian-American	2	3.7%
Black	2	3.7%
Hispanic	1	1.9%
Age		
18-20	5	9.3%
21-25	10	18.5%
26-30	8	14.8%
31-35	7	13.0%
36-40	7	13.0%
41-45	2	3.7%
46-50	9	16.7%
51-55	3	5.6%
56-60	3	5.6%

	n	% of sample

Residence		
River City	43	79.6%
Nearby town	9	16.7%
Distant state	2	3.7%
Length of time at residence (years)		
<1	10	18.5%
1-5	10	18.5%
6-10	8	14.8%
11-15	6	11.1%
16-20	4	7.4%
21-25	8	14.8%
26+	8	14.8%
Partnered?		
yes	28	51.9%
no	26	48.1%
Education level		
High school	7	13.0%
Some college	11	20.4%
Associate's degree	1	1.9%
Bachelor's degree	16	29.6%
Master's degree	14	25.9%
Law degree	1	1.9%
Doctorate	3	5.6%
(blank)	1	1.9%
Employed?		
yes	46	85.2%
no	7	13.0%
(blank)	1	1.9%

	n	% of sample
Salary		
1-10K	9	16.7%
10K-20K	8	14.8%
20K-30K	8	14.8%
30K-40K	6	11.1%
40K-50K	3	5.6%
50K-75K	10	18.5%
75K+	3	5.6%
(blank)	7	13.0%