The University of Illinois's LGBT Community - A Look at Organizations

Introduction

This project was conceived in the effort to better understand the kind of community that exists as a resource for individuals at the University of Illinois who identify as LGBT. Having a community, especially for groups that are in some way marginalized, is incredibly important, and the intimate details of these individual communities is invaluable to understand and archive, as well as to be better aware of the good aspects and negative aspects within these communities. This ethnographic project began as a way to explore the things I had noticed in my own limited experiences with the University of Illinois’s LGBT community. I noticed that certain people seemed more excited at the prospect of being an active member in campus RSO’s, while others shied away from the big groups. More importantly, I noticed certain things that seemed potentially problematic to me, and ultimately, I decided that this was an important topic to explore further, and try to understand the things I thought I was seeing.

Research Methods: Biases, Questions, and Recruitment

Biases

I went into this project with certain potential biases. In my past two years as a self-proclaimed active member of the LGBTQ community on the University of Illinois’s campus, I had noticed interactions within members of the community and other groups that were negative. I also have received some backlash at one point in time with one of the biggest LGBT registered student organizations (RSO) on campus due to a critique I once made about a recent activity of
the group that got back to the executive board. I worked to be aware of this bias at all steps of
the project. To do this, I engineered a research question and interview questions that would
allow me to reach an unbiased position. My question started out as, “How do LGBT people on
campus decide in what groups they participate? What goals and motivators
courage/discourage participation and who are the people who feel encouraged versus
discouraged?” This question was incredibly useful as a starting point and all of my interview
subjects responded very thoroughly when chatting about the various motivators that influenced
their decisions. My interview questions were similarly chosen very carefully. I wanted to see
how people viewed the activity on campus and how important and useful social and activist
goals were met in these groups. I also wondered how non-monosexual or trans* identified
people experienced these groups and if it would be any different from the experiences of
monosexual, cisgender identified students. Ultimately, I wanted to know more about what goals
the campus community accomplished and who felt the most included in these groups.

Questions

Some of the starter questions I asked included:

1. What is the LGBT community like on campus? What/who are the most visible
   LGBT places/people/things on campus?
2. What do you think it means to be “active” in the LGBT community on campus?
3. Are you an active member of any LGBT organizations, either officially
   recognized (i.e. RSOs) or unofficial (i.e. queer reading groups), on campus?
4. What drew you to these particular groups over others/What has stopped you from
   becoming active in LGBT organizations on campus?

These questions gave me a look into the motivations surrounding participation in LGBT RSOs,
but as my interviews went on, the subjects kept bringing up the climate of the community. I
realized that the climate was part of the factors that would determine a person’s participation or lack thereof, and I realized that it was important to gain access into this knowledge. My research question evolved, then, to also ask, “What kind of climate does the LGBT community foster on this campus, and who are the people who are active in the community and in creating this climate?”

**Recruitment and Demographics**

To go out and try to answer these questions, I used my own connections to the LGBT community to get the word out that I was doing this project, and my subjects were recruited through word of mouth. I made an effort to find LGBT identified people who were involved in officially recognized groups on the UIUC campus as well as individuals who had alternative sources of community. I interviewed 5 people and of my interview subjects, two identify as gay men, two identify as queer women, and one identifies as a lesbian woman. Four of my research subjects are Caucasian, and one individual is biracial, identifying as half-Caucasian and half-African American. None of the research subjects identify as trans*. At the time of interviewing, one subject was an 18 year old freshman (Eowyn), one subject was a 19 year old sophomore (Frank), one subject was a 21 year old junior (Rosie), one subject was a 21 year old senior (Gabrielle), and the last subject was a 22 year old senior (Kevin). All participants were in the second semesters of their respective years.

**Findings**

**Motivation**

My first question, “How do LGBT people on campus decide in what groups they participate? What goals and motivators encourage/discourage participation and who are the
people who feel encouraged versus discouraged?’ was answered with two major factors being motives or discouragers, one being inclusion and the other being desire for community or activism. One of the biggest names that kept coming up on my research was the RSO, Pride, which acts as the umbrella organization for many other LGBT RSOs that have their headquarters, so to speak, at the UIUC LGBT Resource Center (LGBTRC). The LGBTRC was brought up in each interview as what people considered the main space for LGBT activities and groups.

In terms of inclusion, individuals who felt that their identities were not represented were generally unlikely to participate in LGBT RSOs on campus and found alternatives. One individual, a 21 year old queer identified woman, Gabrielle, described feeling like an outsider in this space. “I would say, when I think about Pride, I only think of lesbians or gays, I don’t think about bisexuals or transgender people or queers, uh, mostly gay actually, even more than lesbian…” This statement was echoed in other interviews by the other queer identified woman, Rosie. Rosie described a disappointment in Pride in what she saw in a lack of inclusion of non-monosexual and trans* people and discussed the frustration of the divisiveness of this head group.

“I’ve never seen an email that was like… ‘we’re gonna be talking about like, bisexuality at this meeting,’ or like, ‘we’re going to be talking about gender identity!’ … They establish a separate group for like… bisexual people at the U of I and I don’t even know how well attended that group is, but like, it has to be an off-shoot because Pride, I feel like, is supposed to be the umbrella group, but is really the like, the gay and lesbian majority group and then everybody else has their little, like, offshoot groups they ‘get’ to
be in. So I don’t know, I guess I just felt like I didn’t, I didn’t really relate to a lot of stuff they [Pride] were talking about for the most part…”

These groups are all essentially linked together by the one head group of Pride, and by separating all the groups like this, one has to wonder how effective this system is in providing a community for individuals from all backgrounds and all experiences. Rosie and Gabrielle had very similar reactions. While I was unable to interview any trans* individuals, I wonder that the responses may have been similar. As Gabrielle stated, she did not feel her identity included in the group and, while in a relationship with another woman in the RSO, felt her identity was not represented because she did not identify a lesbian. The common theme of having to identify as monosexual, and, as Rosie discussed for ideal group inclusion, as a gay White male, was very striking.

Personal inclusion was also a big factor in determining participation. Pride was described by three of the five interviewees as “clique-y.” Some of the descriptions given during interviews were fairly minor, such as Rosie’s description of her experience at a Pride meeting saying that, “for somebody who’s like shy and introverted, I think it might’ve been harder because there was already like an established friend group there…” (Rosie). Other descriptions were more severe, such as Gabrielle’s experiences with Pride groups, “The LGBT Resource Center is a place that I know, like, people from Pride and Women of Pride hang out in, but I myself would never ever feel comfortable going there because I feel like they would kind of look at me in a way that said, ‘What are you doing in my space? You don’t belong here,’” (Gabrielle). These feelings were echoed by Frank, the gay identified sophomore, who described the groups and the common spaces, such as the LGBT Resource Center, as places where, “some people don’t feel like they’re welcome there,” (Frank).
The only individual who did not express discontentment with the level of personal inclusion she felt was Eowyn, the lesbian identified freshman. Eowyn had had limited experience with the LGBT RSOs on campus, as she was just starting to be open about her identity as a lesbian. She described her desire for community and her first experience with the group for lesbian and bisexual identified women, Women of Pride. Eowyn described this first meeting saying, “…until that point, I could count on my hands how many people I had told… They just made funny jokes I can’t imagine my straight friends making or wanting to hear, so it was just, I don’t know, it was just nice talking to people like me,” (Eowyn). Eowyn’s desire for a community is clear in these instances. As she talked about her first time in a room full of other LGB people, her excitement was palpable. Her descriptions of this experience were ones of happiness, but it is interesting to note that the way she talked about the meeting was very much like an outsider looking in. She never described herself as participating and instead talked about what the other people did at the meeting. While Eowyn did not mention feeling excluded at all, it is important to note that, since this was her first experience with any kind of LGBT group, the happiness of simply being around other queer people may have been enough to make her not notice a lack of outreach to a newcomer. Judging from the wistfulness in Eowyn’s responses, as well as her complete lack of first person pronouns in her description of her first Women of Pride meeting, it seems that her excitement stemmed from simply having a community. Even when pushed when I asked her, “You talk kind of passively, like ‘they seemed happy.’” What was the experience like for you?” she continued to talk of how she perceived others’ experiences.

Eowyn seemed to desire a community. As a freshman who is just starting to come out and experience the LGBT community and life as a gay woman, community was vital to her. As she saw it, being active in the community was a matter of social inclusion, saying, “You’re not
very active if you don’t know anyone,” (Eowyn). She further describes how she is still very much in learning process regarding the LGBT community and therefore was not as interested in activism until she could say she knew more. This brings me to the other motivator that encouraged individuals to find LGBT community outside of RSOs, which was an emphasis on social events rather than activism. When asked, to describe what it meant to be active in the community on campus, all my interviewees except for Eowyn responded the same way. Each of these respondent separated his or her definitions of “being active” into two definitions: what it meant for the main campus community and what it meant for themselves/the community at large. The definition of being active on campus was unanimously described as being social and going to the social events that the different groups hosted. Being active for these four respondents was focused much more strongly around social justice issues, politics, and education. Three of these respondents considered themselves active through their own definitions of active, while considering themselves less active according to what they perceived the campus community’s definition of active. Rosie participates in an RSO that is not directly LGBT centered, but still talks about and works with issues related to LGBTQ issues, while also doing LGBT outreach through a committee at the campus Counseling Center. Frank works with another LGBT group on campus, Q, a group in Allen Hall dormitory, where they discuss LGBT rights and issues while also forming a safe space for community within that dorm, and Gabrielle described herself as active through her Gender and Women’s Studies major and her work to learn more and educate herself and others. Kevin did not describe himself as active, but did express a desire to be more so. He described the reasons behind his lack of involvement saying, “I really haven’t been gravitated [sic] towards any of the like, the main organizations because there really hasn’t
been something that would interest me, you know like a theory, or um, yeah like theoretical backgrounds you know, like any … reading groups, so on and so forth,” (Kevin).

Climate

This distinction is very interesting and very important to keep in mind, especially as I move into the discussion that kept coming up in my interviews, which is the one of climate. As I asked questions about what it meant to be active, and as my interviewees discussed the distinctions between being active on campus and what it meant to be active to them, there were a lot more emotions. Rosie, Frank, Gabrielle, and Kevin all expressed annoyance, and there were more palpable emotions that came up as they discussed the kind of climate they saw the community on campus producing.

Gabrielle gave me my first indication that the climate on campus was problematic. As she described the need for individuals who wanted to be active to participate in events hosted by the LGBT RSOs, Gabrielle mentioned the feeling of exclusivity that she felt saying, “I guess to be active in my mind you have to go to events that LGBT RSOs put on. Go to their parties where they have lists of people that they don’t let in. … If you, I don’t know screw over one of the exec [board] members, you can’t go,” (Gabrielle). Rosie and Gabrielle both brought up a climate of having to fit into a certain kind of LGBT identity, as well as feelings that these groups were perpetuating homonormativity and that only a “certain kind” of LGB person was welcome. Furthermore, both women felt that trans* people were left out of the equation altogether.

There was a feeling of perpetuating a social atmosphere centered around drinking and parties, but what one of the most saddening discussions of climate came from my interview with Frank. Frank started to bring up the “cliques” of the LGBT RSOs on campus and discussed how
they were “catty with each other,” and when pressed to go into detail, gave this alarming account, “...there’s this story that someone just told me about a person talking about Pride and saying that it was clique-y and then someone resp- someone texting them saying they hoped that they slit their wrists...” (Frank). Frank qualified this story by saying, “I’ve never heard anything that severe in my personal experience, but I feel like it’s just, it’s like an exaggeration of what I felt on a personal level,” (Frank). Gabrielle described similar feelings saying, “I just became kind of disinterested in it after I saw how they treated other people, and yeah I just didn’t really want to go...” (Gabrielle). Rosie described the hierarchy of the LGBT campus as being headed by “cis, white, gay men” and she described how she felt the climate is was created and controlled by these people. It is unsettling, to say the least, that the climate that this university has for its queer students is as dangerous as it is, especially when it is apparent that this danger is not just coming from outside of the community. According to these interviews, much of the community that exists at the University of Illinois is structured by media-driven perceptions that recreate homonormativity and the kind of definitions of gayness discussed that are assimilationist. It is said best by Martin Manalansan, “Homosexuality has come to be a social formation unto itself, characterized by self-awareness and group identity,” (Manalansan, 1997).

**Concluding Analysis**

These interviews give a brief look into what the LGBT community is like at the University of Illinois. It is important to note that this project offers a limited perspective, as only one person of color was interviewed, and there were no trans* people interviewed. However, the fact that individuals who, arguably, experience more privilege than the groups who were underrepresented, still experienced negativity from the community and feelings of being unwelcome suggests that other individuals would likely experience an even harsher climate.
These RSOs focus on a social atmosphere and building a social network, when what many individuals on this campus seem to want and need is activism and education on LGBT issues.
Works Cited: