LGBTQ Coalition Building: Finding an Identity, Sharing Resources, and Improving Lives in the Community

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Abstract
This qualitative study investigates coalition-building in the LGBTQ community of a large Midwestern community. The Northeastern Indiana LGBTQ Coalition is a unique group that unites members from many different local non-profit organizations who come together each month to share resources, and deliberate alliance, awareness, and support for local LGBTQ individuals. Through coding of eight in-depth interviews and five monthly coalition meetings as well as textual analysis of coalition documents, this study yields insight into the organizational structure of the NEI LGBTQ Coalition while revealing agreements and tensions in the ideology and practice of the organization. Ultimately, we argue that the development of ‘coalitional subjectivity’ or group identity has been blunted through the structural development of the organization and uncertainty surrounding the mission and goals.

Keywords: LGBTQ, coalition building, activism
The idea for a regional LGBTQ Coalition emerged from a small resource awareness/public information meeting held about transgender issues. With a host of local non-profit organization leaders present, it became evident through the presentation and community conversation that several organizations were unnecessarily duplicating services for the LGBTQ population in the region. A few planning meetings, several phone calls, and a number of invitations later, the Northeast Indiana Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer Coalition (hereafter NEI LGBTQ Coalition) was realized. While comprised of exclusively non-profit organizations, it has, so far, been formally withdrawn from election politics, the organizational members see themselves as deeply invested in contemporary struggles for LGBTQ equality and justice.

While coalition building and social movement literatures suggest that coalitions generally form around an inciting incident or issue, the coalition here was not as a result of any one issue in particular. But, as Bevacqua (2008) articulates, they do share a “bridge issue” in their shared investments in LGBTQ people in the area (p. 164). Some members of the coalition are a host of non-profit organization directly invested in LGBTQ people: AIDS Task Force, Campus Safe Zone, Pride, PFLAG, and a diversity library. In addition, several organizations are members that do not exclusively focus on LGBTQ issues: the Church of the Brethren, Sexual Assault Treatment Center, Planned Parenthood, the YWCA, Center for Nonviolence, and the Women’s Bureau. There is little doubt the latter organizations service members of the LGBTQ community and their presence on the coalition is notable given their direct organizational missions and goals. The membership was largely networked from formal and informal contacts of the original members, consistent with theories of coalition development (Van Dyke & MacCammon, 2010).

The fact that this coalition remains in its early stages, makes it especially fruitful for study. The study of coalitions in the field of communication is sparse. Chávez (2011, 2013) demonstrates the near silence of communication scholarship on coalition building. Chávez (2011) rightly argues that coalition building can be a particular challenge for communication scholars to access because it frequently occurs in ‘counterpublic enclaves’ generally inaccessible to researchers. Toward the end of developing more research to discovered the discourses of what Carrillo Rowe (2008) calls coalitional subjectivity we began our ethnography of the NEI LGBTQ coalition just one year after its establishment. Coalition subjectivity stands apart from traditional identity politics as an organizing function of social movements or, in our case, coalitions; instead, she argues coalitional subjectivity “entails understanding agency, experience, and consciousness as collective and interrelated moments
within a circuit” (p. 11). The dynamic and flowing process of circuitry is a nice metaphor for the ways we have seen this coalition through the process of self-definition and identification, through a restructuring of the governance policies, a change in leadership, and a revision of the organizations goals and commitments. In order to understand the development of a group identity and the functionality of the coalition and its members, we ask the following research questions:

RQ1: How do coalition members create a ‘coalitional subjectivity’ or group identity?
RQ2: What rhetorical strategies emerge in the creation of LGBTQ coalitions?

We argue through the data collected that the development of ‘coalitional subjectivity’ or group identity has been blunted through the structural development of the organization and the uncertainty surrounding the mission and goals. This document proceeds with a discussion of method and data analysis, results and conclusions.

Method

Over the duration of eight months, we observed monthly coalition meetings and invited coalition member representatives to individual in-depth interviews. The coding includes eight long interviews and five recordings of the coalition meetings. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), “the observer-as-participant is primarily invested in observing group members but may still interact with them casually” (p. 147). During the monthly coalition observations, we kept field notes to aid in the description and interpretation of the relationships and meanings of the interactions. The in-depth interviews (between 70-140 minutes in length) then served to understand the coalition members’ experiences, gather the language they used to describe them, and give them an opportunity to reflect on their own role in the coalition as well as describe the dynamics of the group (see also Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 173). A semi-structured interview guide was used to focus the discussion but gave enough flexibility to adjust to emergent topics that were useful to the research questions. Additionally, we were granted access to the coalition documents (governance materials, meeting minutes since formal inception, etc.), which aided in our overall understanding of the structure and mission of the group.

Data Analysis Procedures

Both the monthly coalition meetings and the individual in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim which yielded 923 minutes of analyzable data. Utilizing the qualitative research software NVivo, both authors coded their assigned transcriptions into categories. NVivo allows users to store, organize, and evaluate data as well as as visually map relationships and tentatively explore themes in
the imported data (see Bazeley, 2007). The NVivo software enabled the researchers to work on the coding autonomously and collaboratively with each author identifying themes that were later developed into the main codes.

**Results**

From the coding of the coalition meetings/individual interviews, and the textual analysis of the fieldnotes and coalition documents, three dominant themes emerged: questions regarding the mission and goals of the coalition, how the coalition is structured and what obligations members have, and issues of interpersonal conflict. Throughout all themes weaved a tone of insecurity about the identity and involvement in the group, a sentiment that roots deep into the ways individuals expressed their own understanding of the coalition. The following themes emerge as the NEI LGBTQ Coalition enters a phase of renegotiation and the hopeful development of a cohesive group identity.

**Mission/Goals of the Coalition**

While the mission of the coalition is clear and published in multiple accessible locations among the coalition’s printed materials, on the website, and in the governing documents, we discovered a sense of confusion regarding that mission and its relationship to the goals articulated in governance documents and measurement frameworks. The mission statement reads:

> The Northeast Indiana LGBTQ coalition seeks to enhance and support LGBTQ services in Allen County and the surrounding areas by raising awareness of LGBTQ issues and engaging in education and advocacy for LGBTQ-affirming nonprofit organizations (neiccoaliton.org, 2014).

Despite this mission, as the coalition proceeds in its development, references back to the mission or the goals is absent. In the October meeting, a member suggested: “Maybe we should start talking about what this group is really for.” One point of tension that emerged in the individual interviews was the distinction between the resource-sharing mission of the organization and the clear desire by the core members of the organization to become involved in activism. The former is a mission that everyone in the coalition seems to agree with; indeed, many of the members reported in their individual interviews that sharing resources and not duplicating services was both useful and important to them. In the October meeting, a member explains:
One of our main reason for joining and being part of this is to help us with our clients . . . to guide them in the right directions and to get them to the resources that they need in the community.

Others report joining the group to remain connected to other organizations, to gain connections to resources, to have access to social media sharing, and to get volunteers and attendees to their own events. Conceptually, then, the coalition was a space for each individual organization to benefit itself or its clients in some direct manner. With few external motivations for creating a coalition that would, as a group, hold events, or develop a community relationship as an organization, the development of coalitional subjectivity is deferred, but not undesired.

After a particularly difficult several months of attempting unsuccessfully to organize a community debrief dinner at the end of an especially powerful art exhibition about Nazi persecution of homosexuals during the holocaust, Quinn suggested “maybe the coalition should get out of the event business? It would be great if it—we could become an advocacy organization—we have some really smart people around this table.” Jamie added, “this coalition has a lot of good ideas, but they don’t have good follow through. We need to figure that out.”

In the monthly coalition meetings as well as in the individual interviews, members of the coalition continuously voice confusion regarding the goals of the coalition and how it relates to why they formed this group. While there seems to be a strong consent that sharing resources and directing LGBTQ individuals in need to the appropriate non-profit, conversations about events and “activism” are greeted with mixed responses.

In the November coalition meeting, a representative gives voice to the frustration and asks to abort all plans that go beyond resource sharing, an expression that received positive reinforcement by many. The conversation moves to a discussion about reflection about the mission and goals of the coalition, and a revisiting of what the coalition is for. The meeting facilitator suggest, “That’s why we have to take those steps back and say wait a minute, do we need—can we do all of this stuff?” Similar sentiments have dominated the meetings in October respectively. The aforementioned representative expresses: “I would feel most comfortably if we were operating as more of a inter-agency info-sharing kind of group.” This statement is illustrative of the difficulties the coalition has been experiencing in the ways they have been operating. A core issue that prevents the coalition to develop their full potential is the structure of the coalition and the commitment from members and their representative organizations to the coalition.
Structure of the Coalition

Governance. Overall individual interviews with most participant yielded little in the way of understanding the governance of the organization. With only one founding member of the coalition in regular attendance of meetings our interview with her focused on the origin story of the coalition; however, it was clear from our interviews with others and during coalition meetings that this origin story was not shared very widely or with much detail. We detailed in the introduction of this manuscript the social and cultural forces that brought the coalition together, the structural development emerged very quickly. The governance documents for the coalition were developed by four of the founding members of the coalition with extensive non-profit organizing experience. The governance committee crafted the governance documents, a logic model, and a measurement framework. The coalition voted on these structures and documents within 6 months of the first monthly meeting. While organizing within six months does not seem unreasonable, because the coalition meets only once a month this work was completed with little more than 10 hours of meetings. Avery remembers the speed of which the governance documents were developed

Well, we [the governance committee] had all had been members of nonprofits before where no one could take lead. The groups didn’t--they just never got anything done. And it’s frustrating [laughter]. So I thought—we thought we could sort of, you know, fix that [laughter] before it got started, you know?

She continues explaining why the formal documents seemed so important

As an LGBTQ organization, you don’t want to mess up. You want to do the things the community needs and not worry about leadership or attendance or that other stuff that gets in the way of doing things.

With a governance committee organized and formal documents drawn up, the group expanded the structure of the coalition with subcommittees for communication, education, and ad hoc committees for other events when needed. The organization of the coalition, while efficient, seems to elude many of the participants that were not present at the start, or were not on the governance committee but were part of the early years. Indeed, for many the lack of knowledge about the structure causes general confusion about the roles people are meant to play in meetings or work on projects. Rory explains:
I just don’t know if maybe everybody always knows what to do. That sometimes is a problem, too, if you don’t necessarily have the direction and you don’t step up. Some people may just not know what they’re supposed to do in the coalition.

Stemming from this uncertainty, members are uncertain about their individual roles in the coalition; this confusion grows more generalized to the mission, goals, and expectations of the group itself.

Membership Obligations. Among the chief complaints of the structure of the coalition was the question of membership obligations. The governance documents demand very little in order to maintain good standing in the coalition: the member organization must attend over 50% of the meetings. There is some flexibility here too, however, because a member can send a substitute in his or her place if an absence is unavoidable. From the textual analysis of the governance documents and the individual interviews with coalition members, the built-in flexibility is meant to attend to the already strained schedules of those working in the non-profit sector, as well as a underscoring the relaxed nature of the coalition. During the October meeting, the facilitator illustrates:

Yeah. I think that we’ve kind of just had these meetings and I know I missed a lot for a while, which was—because we’re all busy with our jobs or whatever, so I understand that, but I do think that we need to—.

These types of explanations are common in the ways members reconcile their respective obligations for their organizations as well as the coalition. However, some members’ lack of commitment spurs frustrations in many. An overall sense that membership should mean something “more” than attendance is apparent across several interviews, although there was some disagreement on how to enforce not only attendance but also active participation in coalition activities.

In an individual interview, Avery voices frustration about the commitment of members to the coalition:

We had a lot of ‘along-for-the-ride’ and ideas, and not ‘follow-through-doers’ in the group. Some of us who tend to be more of the doers—even though we don’t wanna be the doers, but we are the doers—had to finally say okay, if this is what you want, let’s quit talking about it and just do it.

Overall, there seems to be a concern for the passion about LGBTQ issues some of the members hold or do not hold. Avery explains:
Some of the organizations that are involved are not—not that they’re not passionate about it. They’re not so much the passionate founding members, like we’re doing this because we believe in the LGBT community or whatever.

Similarly, Jamie notes: “I think that would bring folks who have a little more of that spark and drive to really meet the mission of the coalition.” Additionally, Jamie, Quin, and Elliot all express concern that some member organizations contribute more than others, and denote Parker as a member of the coalition who continually “makes things happen.”

The difficulty of members just “talking” about issues/items on the agenda without developing concrete plans to get things accomplished is something that also annoys Jamie, Parker, and Quin. In an attempt to explain this, Reese acknowledges that some of the coalition members have been part of the struggle for LGBTQ rights for a while and have thus had their involvement tainted by the lack of success in other groups:

We’re also tempered by experience, and age, and having been through, and having been disappointed, and having had to settle for half a loaf of whatever it was we were doing, and that kind of thing. It makes you realistic. You can be passionate and realistic at the same time.

In both the individual interviews as well as in the coalition meetings, members continuously caution each other to recognize limits. Particularly, meeting attendance and volunteerism appears to be an issue. In the October meeting, a member explains:

Instead of putting something together quickly, everybody takes ownership in it, everybody gets assigned tasks. That’s your task. That’s what we do. We put on a big event. Instead of all of these little things that seem to wanna be done very quickly. It’s like all of a sudden we have to have an education [sub-committee], we have to have this, we have to have this, we have do this, and I’m just like—

The meeting facilitator responds, “I know exactly what you—[laughter] . . . We get a little ambitious,” to which the member answers, “There’s nothing wrong with being ambitious, but then things don’t play out because then people—,” the facilitator interjects, “Get burnt out.” This conversation illustrates how members of this coalition feel about tasks and obligations; however, it raises the questions whether members are willing to go beyond resource sharing at all. Whichever motivation is resulting in this overall lack of commitment to the organization, it become over the course of observations a problem and directly affected the way the coalition operated.
Many members pointed to what they felt is an unstated but central membership obligation: volunteer and attend coalition sponsored events. At the October meeting one participant said:

I remember our last meeting that Parker was like, ‘I’m not volunteering.’ Everybody was like ‘I’m not volunteering.’ We have all these ideas to do these events, but no one wants to volunteer to help with them.

Similarly, in the individual interview, Casey was frustrated by the lack of involvement of other members of the coalition. Casey, who attends as many events as possible, does not see the reciprocal effort on the part of other coalition members: “I thought we agree to show up to each other’s events, but I don’t know—don’t think everyone got that memo.”

These events are essential in reaching out to the community and in “raising awareness of LGBTQ issues and engaging in education and advocacy,” a core statement of the extant mission statement. However, the lack of member commitment and funds, and the difficulty to get tasks delegated and completed is creating obstacles in the ways the coalition can do any activist work. This tension reciprocates back to the true mission of the coalition and how members gauge their involvement in community outreach.

Activism. The only other requirement for membership according to the governance document is a non-profit status; each organization represented on the coalition must be a non-profit. The meetings are open, however, so, according to the bylaws, other people can attend the meetings, volunteer to help with events, and brainstorm ideas; they simply cannot vote when decisions must be made. The non-profit status of the coalition is an interesting tension as it emerges in defense of a narrow mission. In the individual interviews, the overwhelming sentiment was that the coalition must remain unpolitical because of its non-profit status. Curiously, however, the coalition itself is not a non-profit, and therefore not beholden to remain at the margins of politics. In every interview, each participant expressed the same sentiment. “Well, and you have to be really careful. It’s a not-for-profit organization. We have to be very careful what we do” (Reese). Despite the hesitation for political action, member organizations remain convinced that the coalition is part of the broader gay rights advocacy. For example, Avery argued “I think that there’s definitely movements in our history that you can see... I think right now, in this country the movement is LGBT.”

While the non-profit status is the qualifying reason the members of the coalition suggest they are not political, the distinction between resource sharing and political involvement is rhetorically significant. For marginalized populations, particularly in unfriendly geographical and cultural
locations, the very act of sharing resources, of grassroots organizing, the existence of the coalition itself must be understood as necessarily political. While respondents understand that non-profit status means they cannot engage in election politics of specific candidates; they also talk about resource sharing as something apolitical. Avery demonstrates succinctly, “we are a resource sharing coalition...no, not political.”

These mixed emotions about activism nurture the overall sense of confusion and the lack of a cohesive identity. As members bear varying ideas about the alliance and education work they advertise in the existing mission statement, the ways in which the coalition reaches out into the community is strained. Indeed, at the February 2015 meeting of the coalition one member remarked in the midst of overhauling the structure of the coalition, “I mean I don’t really like when other people come in.” Others in the group agreed that inviting people into the coalition is frustrating. This demonstrates most clearly the tedious relationship between the coalition and its willingness to reach out beyond the group already gathered. Hence, the overall uncertainty about the ways the coalition should operate, and which contribution each member and their respective organization should make, transpires into how members communicate interpersonally.

Conclusions and Implications

From witnessing the proceedings of the NEI LGBTQ Coalition over the course of eight months, it becomes evident that the coalition goes through “phases” of activity and passivity. The members agree that formalizing the coalition is a substantial accomplishment; however, the frustrations about members’ commitment to the group is overshadowing its productivity. While the coalition has celebrated some successful events in the community since its inception, the hurdles of task completion and uncertainty about governance and a concrete mission is affecting the ways in which it can operate. In the November 2014 meeting, the struggles culminated when members voted to resolve the voting system, abolished the governance committee, and halted further event plans, including the work of the education sub-committee to plan a summer camp for local LGBTQ children and adolescents. Three years after its founding the coalition members are engaged in reflection and reevaluation.

This moment is in part due to increasing frustrations with member attendance, commitments to the coalition, and a lack of leadership. At the February 2015 meeting of the coalition, with no original members of the governance committee regularly attending, the members of the coalition
voted unanimously to amend the governance documents and substantially revise the mission and goals of the organization.

Ultimately three rhetorical problems have prevented the development of coalitional subjectivity to develop in this coalition: immediate professionalization of the coalition, missing origin story, and mission confusion. The immediate professionalization of the organization was an attempt to move beyond past mistakes of leadership errors in nonprofit organizing; however, we argue that the move to create the structure and expectations of the organization before relationships could meaningfully develop around the members diminished the ability of a group identity to form around those that gathered for the group. Instead, it overly formalized relationships and diffused relational work. This relational work is central to coalitional subjectivity. Second, we discovered that even through all of the emphasis on procedure and organization, the origin story of the coalition is lost on most members. They are not enculturated to the group or its dynamics. This, too, undercuts the relational potential of the coalition. These two factors culminate in mission and role confusion both individually and as a coalition itself. Members report being very happy with the coalition and committed to the ideals of the coalition, but struggle to articulate what specific role they play in the coalition as well as the role the coalition plays in the community. All told, then, it becomes clear that the NEI LGBTQ Coalition remains in search of an identity.

While all members appear deeply invested in LGBTQ rights, they seemed to have very discrepant ideals about the work of the coalition and what it means to engage in LGBTQ activism. It is vital that the coalition members and non-profit organizations work together to resolve organizational issues and begin doing activist work. Otherwise, the coalition will have accomplished its goal to share resources and no further group engagement would be necessary. As we continue our study of the coalition, we are hopeful that the newest changes in leadership, the governance documents, and the mission will be fertile ground for coalitional subjectivity to develop and flourish.
References


