Advancing the LGBT Community in Northwest Michigan: Strategic Planning for the Region’s First Pride Celebration

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Abstract

Social science research concerning the LGBT community has largely favored concerns regarding individuals connected to larger cities and communities. In smaller and rural communities, there are a unique set of challenges concerning individuals’ expressions of identity and building a community in a less populated area. This study adds to understandings about expressions of smaller LGBT communities by understanding the planning process for a debut pride celebration used by activists and supporters in Cadillac, Michigan, an incorporated community that serves a surrounding rural northwest region of the Lower Peninsula. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals (n = 12) who worked to plan the celebration or support organizers of the event. Themes regarding the organizers and supporters goals, strategies and challenges in planning for a community’s first pride celebration were revealed. Conclusions regarding communication practices, limitations to the study, and suggestions for future research are also included.
Introduction

Rural communities have long been perceived as lacking similar potential for political and social advocacy within the LGBT community. While some individuals who identify as LGBT choose to live in non-metropolitan areas, Oswald and Culton (2003) argue “the prevailing wisdom appears to be that ‘rural’ and ‘gay’ appear to be incompatible” (p. 72). Because community organizing has lacked in garnering significant media attention or making legislative strides, rural communities have yet to emerge as a focus of LGBT advocacy. This lack of attention has also caused a deficiency in the production of research on LGBT individuals, organizations, and communities uniquely situated in a context lacking a large influential urban center. This study seeks to fill in the gap on the research of expressions of LGBT communities in areas not characterized by urbanization and will be amongst the first known research activities on sexual minorities in small cities and rural areas in the state of Michigan. Semi-structured interviews guide this investigation on LGBT outreach in Cadillac, Michigan, an incorporated community that serves a surrounding rural northwest region of the Lower Peninsula.

Literature Review

Although studies connecting LGBT individuals and rural environments are not absent from historical and contemporary literature, when compared to the amount of information on LGBT topics and communities in urban centers, there is a significantly disproportionate amount of research (Cody & Welch, 1997). In the most recent decade, while more studies have emerged on LGBT experiences and challenges in rural communities, scholars have argued that crucial topics connecting sexuality and rurality continue to lack scholarly inquiry. Some critical issues to advance understandings about LGBT experiences in the rural U.S. - which scholars have attempted to intervene because of a lacking breadth of research - include LGBT health and
wellness (Fisher, Irwin, & Coleman, 2014), the aging LGBT community (Rowan, Giunta, Grudowski, & Anderson, 2013), social support (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010), and experiences of youth (Yarbrough, 2003).

The body of literature that exists has concluded that a particular set of challenges emerge for LGBT individuals and communities in less populated areas. Adolescents experience isolation and difficulties in the process of coming out (Yarbrough, 2005). Oswald and Culton (2003) argue individuals may hide their sexual orientations as a means of survival. A higher percentage of rural residents believe that LGBT individuals should not have the same legal privileges as other citizens when compared to the opinions of urban respondents (Snively, et.al, 2005). The school environment for gay youth in rural communities do not have staff and resources that are adequately prepared to support the needs of LGBT students (O’Connell, Atlas, Saunders, & Philbrick, 2010). Communities outside of large urban centers hold a series of unique barriers to making critical progress and these research findings demonstrate why exploring and advancing knowledge on LGBT persons in rural contexts is highly valuable and exigent.

**Defining the Urban Cluster & Rural Outreach**

The U.S. Bureau of the Census (2014) since the year 2000, has defined *urbanized* communities as holding more than 50,000 people in an incorporated area, and places with a population between 2,500 and 50,000 in an incorporated community as an *urban cluster*. *Rural* is defined as anything less in population than 2,500 persons and or any population of person living in an unincorporated community. These terms are not universal, but because the U.S. Census will be used to provide foundational facts on the location at the center of this study, the
previous terms will serve as descriptors consistent with the same source consulted for demographic data.

**Context of Location**

Cadillac, Michigan is located in the northwestern region of the lower peninsula of Michigan. The 2010 U.S. census reported that Cadillac has a population of 10,355 people, 93.7% of residents identified as White, and the average per capita income was less than $19,000 and significantly lower than the state’s 2010 per capita average of $25,547. Other urban clusters within 50 miles include Traverse City MI, and Big Rapids, MI. The closest urban area is Grand Rapids which is over 90 miles away (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2014). As Cadillac sits on the edge of the vast Manistee National forest with several smaller communities in the local area, it serves as a hub for a large region in mid-Northwest Michigan. The town serves a niche market for nature tourism (water sports, snow sports, hunting, fishing, hiking, etc) and was one of the communities featured with its own state-sponsored “Pure Michigan” commercial spot starting in 2013 (Charmoli, 2013).

**Method**

Conventional qualitative methodologies have been appreciated by researchers and foundations who are interested in generating knowledge and developing new theory about the LGBT community. Qualitative research approaches allow researchers to examine LGBT groups from within, unearth powerful narratives, and argue how social oppression impacts individuals and communities (Rainbow Health Ontario & Ross, 2012). Qualitative approaches also create the possibility for researchers to partner with community organizations in a way other methods cannot (Lamont & White, 2009). The use of semi-structured interviews as a means to understand the attitudes and experiences of individuals who were involved in the planning
process and people who also showed interest and support for the event allow for a deep understanding of the barriers, challenges, and experiences in preparing for coming out as a community in an area not characterized by urbanization.

Data for this study were gathered from interviews that took place from two weeks before and until the day of the celebration (August 17th). Two researchers conducted interviews in a semi-structured format and were present for the interviewing process of all participants. Interviews were conducted in private settings that were mutually convenient for both researchers and volunteers. Each interview lasted between 15 and 30 minutes depending upon each participant’s time used to answer and to allow for any necessary follow-up questions from researchers. Approval from the sponsoring university’s institutional research board was conferred before the investigators recruited and interviewed participants. All names used in this study will be replaced with pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of participants.

**Participants**

Twelve participants volunteered for this study. The ages of participants ranged from 25 to 70 and represented individuals who all shared an interest in planning for and/or attending the pride celebration. Individuals who identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and (Straight) Allies were represented in this study. Seven individuals who were interviewed identified as having a role in the planning process and eleven of the twelve participants were planning to attend the event.

**Procedures**

To best collect data that allowed participants to openly respond about their opinions and experiences in planning for the pride celebration, this investigation used semi-structured interviewing supported by Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Introductory questions
asked in a consistent order allowed participants to provide responses in the contexts of their individual roles and interests in planning for and attending the first pride celebration in Northwest Michigan. Follow-up questions were asked when needed to contextualize the participant’s response in connection to a level or role of participation. Also, because the questions were open-ended rather than closed (yes/no), this approach allowed the participants with different roles to speak openly. Nine initial questions which broadly addressed goals, strategies, and challenges in preparing for the event were included. All participants were given information (approved by the sponsoring university’s internal research board) on the purpose of the study, minimal risks, the precautions to protect anonymity, and the understanding that participation was voluntary. The participants also signed a form to acknowledge an understanding the previous information and allowance to have their interviews recorded with an audio device.

**Data Analysis**

All of the conducted interviews were recoded and transcribed verbatim by one of the researchers who participated in the data collection process. The choice to use transcription thereafter allowed for the interviewer to use follow-up questions and responses to situate the process of data gathering in the context of the participant’s role and experiences. (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In accordance with applying Grounded Theory, the interviews were analyzed using open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to construct thematic categories shared by participants. Various categories were initially made upon the process of surveying the responses and these themes were later eliminated to provide a consistent understanding of the prevalent themes shared across all interviews.
Results

Goals.

Visibility

More than half (6) of the interviewees discussed that the pride celebration was important because it will bring visibility in an area that has lacked gathering and display of presence of the LGBT community. Olivia, who identified as a lesbian who had a role in planning for the event, said that “even with friends and family, I think it’s a Don’t Ask Don’t Tell here.” Amber, who also identified as a lesbian and as having a role in planning the event stated the importance of bringing visibility.

And, you know the older generation to show them we’re not scary people. We’re normal, we’re just like you. Not that we’re just like you, but we’re people too.

Phil, who identified as a gay man from a small nearby community who didn’t share a role in the planning process but had planned to attend, stated, “Its showing that we are coming out to speak…and that more communities are hopefully doing it.” The issue of visibility was particularly important amongst respondents who identified members of the LGBT community.

Youth support

The need to be visible was very important to the respondents because of the impacts this could have on struggling LGBT youth. Amber said,

I think for teenagers it’s the hardest. They want to come out and they want to be themselves, but they can’t because they’ve got people making fun of them. But downstate, I know I’ve talked to many people, and they’re like “Oh, our schools aren’t like that at all. Be whoever you want to be.” It’s a little bit slower process.
She also noted that with such struggles for LGBT youth, this event could draw in many young people who did not identify as LGBT. The goal of providing support for youth was shared amongst participants regardless of their role in planning or only attending the event and amongst LGBT citizens and their allies.

**Strategies.**

**All-Inclusive Diversity**

Because of the region’s lack of celebrations for other diverse communities (race, religion, etc.), the individuals involved in the planning process intended to honor people from all backgrounds. Theresa, a lesbian who also was involved in the planning process hoped that anyone would want to attend to celebrate and learn about all differences that make the community unique. This strategy would lead to different individuals enjoying time together. “Everybody gets together… Let’s get everything---everybody be cool---you know, have fun.”

Flora believed that an open strategy would lead to more people who would support the event in the community who may not feel welcome to an LGBT-centered celebration.

Yeah, we’re focusing not only on the LGBT community, but on diversity in general. And we figured with that as our mission statement – rather than focusing on LGBT – that we’ll get a lot better reception from the community and from the outlying communities as well.

Thomas, who has a long history in the region, mentioned that even though he identifies as gay and the event was very important for that reason, that the town has other minorities who live in the shadows.

**Building Relationships with Community Institutions**

Smaller communities have a stronger sense of immediate connections and individuals involved in the planning process noted that this was a crucial part in preparing for August.
Olivia mentioned that the “church and established businesses” that would support were needed to help such an event succeed. Thomas noted that it was extremely important to have “older ladies from the church sitting in lawnchairs and enjoying the performances.”

Flora also expanded that in a close-knit community, local officials have a good amount of power and could help the event succeed or fail because of their control of local laws.

If we hadn’t have been so organized in the beginning – and I don’t want to say we were organized – but we knew the basics of what we needed – they would’ve said no from the beginning. So if you want to do it, before you take it to your city council, because they’re – if it’s on their land they have to okay it – before you take it to them and say this is what we want to do, make sure you have your proposal all written out and you have everything they could possibly want even if it might look like five pages, you put it in there just to make sure you’re covered.

Churches, business, and city officials all have a role a significant role in their community and the influence of establishments with local influences had to be considered in the process to build the

**Challenges.**

*External Opposition*

Amber summarized her understanding that naysayers were more skeptical of the event’s ability to succeed rather than directly encountering opposition to the reason for the celebration.

I’ve had people saying things like “You can’t do this in Cadillac, it’s not going to happen, people aren’t going to want to come to this.” I’m just like well, we’ll see. What can you do? If you don’t try – well, at least I tried. And then, for the whole board in general, in small towns you have a lot of the *hen* in the background, people to your face are one way, and then to everybody else they are completely different.

Thomas believed that any voices of opposition in the community come from those who have been long time residents.
Some of the people who were more resentful to it, are more institutionalized Cadillac. And my response probably is not the most political, my response is my family has been there since the beginning of the town, when did y’all arrive? Yeah. It is very, very “here we are” and “there they are.”

Multiple individuals regardless of their sexual orientation or role in the process articulated that various external oppositions to the event could be a barrier in the process.

**Internal Opposition**

Also, the voices of opposition did not only include those who were necessarily homophobic or outside the LGBT and ally communities, but also LGBT individuals who were hesitant.

Thomas said that not all of his communication with LGBT citizens led to support for the event. He acknowledged that there was a difficulty individuals in building community in a region where many individuals are not fully out and proud, “even though they are out, they’re out with a very narrow boundary. So, this event, for some of them, is too out.” Olivia noted that the biggest voice of opposition to the entire idea is “bisexual, and I don’t understand that.” Phil, who resides in a nearby smaller community noted that the majority of LGBT residents there are “still in the closet….There’s no place to meet other than the PFLAG meetings.” Three participants who all identified as members of the LGBT community but didn’t all have a role in planning the event articulated that the barrier of asking individuals to be out at a very public event was a barrier to getting much needed support.

**Symbolic Expression**

The previously discussed larger categories (goals and strategies) had many shared responses amongst participants. However, the symbolic expression of the LGBT community in
the region was difficult aspect to navigate for participants regardless of the role of sexual orientation.

One participant who had lived in Cadillac the longest (more than 70 years) who identified as an ally and someone who intended to attend the event, Twila, reminded us that in this community the LGBT supporters have to “move slow” because “acceptance in this town is going to be hard.” This sentiment led to conflicts of how to best express individual and collective freedom without pushing the bounds of acceptable expressions and action.

Amber reiterated that community institutions wanted to know that this would be done tastefully. Olivia extended her sentiment by stating, “if we have one man wearing chaps and nothing but, we’re in trouble.” Deciding how the schedule of performances, the encouragement of dress, and standing displays that would be used to both express affirmation for LGBT citizens, other diverse groups, and provide a family friendly environment required much thought in the process.

**Discussion**

The questions used in this study did not use the word communication in any of the questions nor were specific concepts regarding communication (e.g. symbol, interaction, etc.). The respondents approached their answers with using communication resources as the crux of the event’s potential success or failure. The goals of the event were shared by providing visibility and building a connection with youth in the community, all of which are symbolic cultural productions. Strategies for how to make the event successful such as broadening the event’s scope and building relationships with local and external support systems were invested in the importance of successfully relating to people outside the event. The understanding that relationships with others in a variety of contexts was at the core of the participants’ responses as
the tactics that needed to be a part of the planning process. Finally, the challenges were also invested in multiple levels of communication. While respondents named different external voices of opposition, the culture and context of the community as well as public messages of hate were pervasive to the planning process. Even though topics such as getting permits, fundraising, and scheduling the events were discussed, the implications of what each action would do for the event were more pervasive.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Conventional qualitative methodologies have been appreciated by researchers and foundations who are interested in generating knowledge and developing new theory about the LGBT community. Qualitative research approaches allow researchers to examine LGBT groups from within, unearth powerful narratives, and argue how social oppression impacts individuals and communities (Rainbow Health Ontario & Ross, 2012). Qualitative approaches also create the possibility or researchers to partner with community organizations in a way other methodologies cannot (Lamont & White, 2008). While this study in qualitative interviewing adds to sparse research about experiences for LGBT individuals in rural communities, the respondents revealed a host of themes and concerns that call for a need to conduct research on underexplored communities. Furthermore, research with critical intentions will help transfer knowledge gained to knowledge that can be used to create change in communities.
Works Cited


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