Post-Gay Collective Identity Construction

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Falling under the rubric of "post-gay," recent changes in gay life challenge theoretical accounts of collective identity by creating effects that, while acknowledged, have not yet been articulated using a parsimonious and portable framework. Consistent with conventional wisdom, LGBT activists construct collective identity using an oppositional "us versus *them" formation during those times when they strategically deploy their differences from heterosexuals. But what happens when activists seek to emphasize their similarities to straights, as they are motivated to do during a post-gay moment? Drawing on interview and archival data of a college LGBT student organization, this article argues that in a post-gay era, activists construct collective identity using an inclusive, distinction-muting logic of "us* and *them." The shift from opposition ("versus") to inclusion ("and") implies that activists today are motivated less by drawing boundaries against members of the dominant group and more by building bridges toward them. The article concludes with critiques of and implications for post-gay politics.*
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Gay life in the Western world today is so open that it may be moving "beyond the closet," despite a persistent privileging of heterosexuality by the state, societal institutions, and popular culture (Seidman 2002:6). This mere possibility prompted British journalist Paul Burston to coin the term "post-gay" in 1994 as an observation and critique of gay politics (see Collard 1998). The term found an American audience four years later in 1998 when *Out* magazine editor James Collard used it to defend his claim in the *The New York Times* that "we should no longer define ourselves solely in terms of our sexuality—even if our opponents do. Post-gay isn't 'un-gay.' It's about taking a critical look at gay life and no longer thinking solely in terms of struggle. It's going to a gay bar and wishing there were girls there to talk to" (*The New York Times* 1998). He clarified the meaning of this still-murky idea two months later in a *Newsweek* feature:

> [Post-gay] doesn't refer to someone who's simply switched sexuality, like the wife, mother, ex-lesbian in a recent ad campaign who claims to have filled the God-shaped hole in her life and discovered the joys of heterosexuality. Nor is it anti-gay . . . For me, the post-gay sensibility began when I realized that I preferred the social variety of "mixed" clubs to the more homogeneous gay clubs. First for protection and later with understandable pride, gays have come to colonize whole neighborhoods, like West Hollywood in LA and Chelsea in New York City. It seems to me that the new Jerusalem gay people have been striving for all these years won't be found in a gay-only ghetto, but in a world where we are free, equal, and safe to live our lives (Collard 1998:53).[1]

1. In his *Newsweek* piece, Collard (1998) credits Burston with coining the term "post-gay." The term "post-queer" has also recently entered the English lexicon, although it has a very different meaning. Grounded within a theoretical dialogue known as "queer theory" (e.g., Seidman 1996), some scholars use post-queer to argue that queer theory neglects the "institutional organization of sexuality" and the "complex developmental processes attendant to sexual identification" (Green 2002:523). Others use post-queer to critique and move beyond queer theory's binary conception of the world as either queer or heteronormative (Cohen 2001; Ruffolo 2009).

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In September 1996, as the post-gay rhetoric was diffusing across continents, *New York Magazine* ran a prescient cover story titled "We're Here! We're Queer! Let's Get Coffee!" Journalist Daniel Mendelsohn (1996) observed that the gay community has gradually moved from the "exoticized gay margin to the normalized straight center" (p. 31). The movement's substance and style today "are increasingly hard to differentiate from those of the straight mainstream" (p. 26). Once upon a time, gay politics had a distinctive and defiant edge and enforced the right to have sex in public places and bath houses, debated the morality of "outing," and used dramatic, theater-as-politics tactics such as ACT-UP's disruption of Easter service at St. Patrick's cathedral. At the dawn of the new millennium, however, gay politics focused conservatively on family issues such as marriage and adoption, inclusion in the armed forces, and employment nondiscrimination (Mucciaroni 2008).

As the *New York Magazine* piece implied, a central feature of the post-gay era is the "heterosexualization of gay culture," that is, "the over-time acceptance of mainstream cultural norms by those who were once revolutionaries" (Mendelsohn 1996:3). During the 1990s, Mendelsohn argues, gay culture suffered from "a classic assimilationist ailment (cf, Jews): You can't take away what was most difficult about being gay without losing what made gay culture interesting in the first place . . . [Y]ou realize that, at least culturally speaking, oppression may have been the best thing that could have happened to gay culture. Without it, we're nothing" (p. 31). His description of changes in gay life is strikingly similar to Burston's coining and Collard's usage of "post-gay," and as we will see, it also resembles Steven Seidman's (2002) sense of moving "beyond the closet," Urvashi Vaid's (1995) claim of the "mainstreaming of gay and lesbian liberation," Jane Ward's (2008b) counterintuitive notion of "respectably queer," and many others.

Post-gay life is characterized by the twin impulses of assimilation of gays into the mainstream—even if only "virtual" (Bullough, Eaklor, and Meek 2006; Vaid 1995) and biased toward a small segment of gays (Duggan 2002; Valocchi 1999b; Warner 1999)—and an escalated internal diversification of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities. Identifying these two trends was an important first step, but left unresolved is their conflicting relationship. Identity often requires difference (Gamson 1997:181; Seidman 1997) in which "creating exclusions is an inevitable consequence" (Armstrong 2002:178). Assimilation can mute identity as much as diversity can amplify it by highlighting distinctions. The conventional wisdom is that an internal us (the in-group) is solidified against an external them (the out-group) (Tajfel and Turner 1985; Taylor and Whittier 1992). This taken-for-granted "us versus them" framework fit gay collective identity construction during the closet and coming out eras (Chauncey 1994; D'Emilio 1983), but it provides an inadequate conceptual framework to account for the changes that are transpiring today. If identity requires difference, then how is it constructed during moments when such differences are de-emphasized, that is, when gay activists assert their similarities to, rather than differences from, heterosexuals?

Activists tend not to be exclusively oppositional in how they construct their collective identity. On the contrary, they make strategic selections between the "celebration" or "suppression" of their distinctiveness vis-à-vis mainstream audiences (Bernstein 1997), as they "decide whether to play up or down the differences on which their disadvantages rest" (Polletta and Jasper 2001:295). Despite this accepted oscillation between "sameness and difference" (Einwohner, Reger, and Myers 2008:5), existing theoretical frameworks provide a clearer snapshot of how collective identity is configured when activists are strategically asserting their differences from external audiences. But what happens when they seek to emphasize their similarities to straights, as they are motivated to do during a post-gay moment? How do activists negotiate boundaries between themselves and external audiences—and even among themselves internally—during such moments of sameness? To answer these questions, I use college students' experiences of transitioning to a post-gay era as a theoretical opportunity to reimagine the relationship between "us," "them," and even contending insiders. The changing nature of gay life has generated a challenge for accounts of collective identity by creating effects that, while acknowledged, have not been articulated using a parsimonious and portable framework. I will show that in a post-gay era, activists construct their collective identity using an inclusive, distinction-muting logic of "us *and* them." This shift from opposition (us "versus" them) to inclusion (us "and" them) implies that activists today are motivated less by drawing boundaries against members of the dominant group and more by building bridges toward them.

Collective Identity Construction

If key concepts can be identified that are imbued with the *Geist* or spirit of an age, then collective identity is surely one of them (Cerulo 1997; Snow 2001). Its popularity has prompted scholars to offer several definitions. Early social psychological perspectives proposed that it is "an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals," (Melucci 1988:342, 1995:44) informed by opportunities and constraints that provide "common cognitive frameworks . . . to calculate the costs and benefits of their action" (Melucci 1989:35). Others offered that it is a "shared characteristic" that is "relevant for the mutual recognition of group members" (Cohen 1985:685); "a shorthand designation announcing a status—a set of attitudes, commitments, and rules for behavior" (Friedman and McAdam 1992:157); a "shared definition" of "common interests, experiences, and solidarity" (Taylor 1989); "perceptions of group distinctiveness" that specifies "something closer to a community than a category" (Jasper 1997:86); and an idea that allows for "the mesh between the individual and the social system" (Gamson 1992b). Those who have reviewed this vast literature have identified recurring themes of "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly" (Polletta and Jasper 2001:285).

In their now-classic study of lesbian feminist mobilization, Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier (1992:105, 110–11) define collective identity as "the shared definition of a group" that allows members to assert "who we are." The resulting sense of "we-ness" is established through boundaries, consciousness, and negotiation. Boundaries mark differences between in- and out-group members. Minority groups do this by creating a distinct culture and separate institutions. Consciousness is about identifying common interests in opposition to the dominant order with the intent of redefining members' behavioral expectations. It is imparted in writings, speeches, documents, videos, and other such media. Negotiation entails resisting dominant attributions. The adage "the personal is political" is an example of how daily actions are politicized to redefine what was once potentially stigmatizing. Negotiations occur in self-presentation (e.g., dress, demeanor, language) and other forms of everyday "prefigurative politics" (Breines 1989).

Specifying boundaries is a signature of this research. According to Taylor and Whittier (1992), boundaries "mark social territories of group relations by highlighting differences" (p. 111) and "frame interaction between members of the in-group and the out-group" (p. 113). Lesbian feminists created separate institutions such as health care and rape crisis centers, bookstores, record companies, newspapers, and poetry and writing clubs. They also generated a distinct female culture that valorized traits such as "egalitarianism, collectivism, an ethic of care, a respect for knowledge derived from experience, pacifism, and cooperation." And finally, they vilified male characteristics such as "an emphasis on hierarchy, oppressive individualism, an ethic of individual rights, abstraction, violence, and competition." Redolent of research in social psychology (e.g., Tajfel 1982; Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1985), sociological research also positioned an internally stable "us" against an external, oppressive, and dominant "them."

Taylor and Whittier inspired researchers to later question the assumption of a stable in-group. "The us," notes Joshua Gamson (1997), "is solidified not just against an external *them* but also against *thems* inside, as particular subgroups battle to gain or retain legitimate *us* standing"

(p. 180; emphasis in original). Gamson focuses on two intra-movement debates: the inflammatory relationship between the North American Man/Boy Love Association and the International Lesbian and Gay Association; and the controversial management of transsexuals by the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Gamson concludes that boundary construction takes place not just vis-à-vis outsiders ("us versus them"), but also against those who claim some degree of insider membership status ("us versus thems-inside") (see also Cohen 1999, 2001; Gamson 1995).

Movement scholars today observe that activists are not exclusively oppositional in how they construct their collective identity. Political actors must strategically "decide whether to play up or down the differences on which their disadvantages rest" (Polletta and Jasper 2001:295). Despite this accepted oscillation between "sameness and difference" (Einwohner et al. 2008:5), existing frameworks provide a clearer snapshot of how collective identity is configured when activists are strategically asserting their differences from external audiences. Left comparatively unexplained is how collective identity is constructed during moments when activists articulate their similarities to mainstream audiences. This is where the transition to a post-gay era becomes theoretically useful, as it presents an opportunity to reimagine the relationship between "us," "them," and even "thems inside."

The Post-Gay Era

"Something happened in the 1990s," historian John D'Emilio (2002) observed, "something dramatic and irreversible. A group of people long considered a moral menace and an issue previously deemed unmentionable in public discourse were transformed into a matter of human rights, discussed in every institution of American society . . . During the 1990s, the world seemed finally to turn and take notice of the gay people in its midst."[2] With the spotlight of Americans cast upon them, national lesbian and gay activists strategically returned what they thought would be a palatable, distinction de-emphasizing image. *The New York Times* (1993) picked up on this impression management: "[Lesbians and gay men] wanted to show America that they were 'regular' people, the kind that live next door, go to work every day, and pay their taxes" (p. A20).

The Times and D'Emilio both allude to the advent of a post-gay era. To be post-gay means to define oneself by more than sexuality, to disentangle gayness with militancy and struggle, and to enjoy sexually mixed company (Warner 1999:61–2). Seidman (2002) offers an excellent account of these changing meanings of sexuality. He finds that only an older generation invokes the imagery of the closet to frame their life experiences, an observation he uses to conclude that American sexual culture "has changed from one of 'homosexual pollution and state-driven social repression' (Seidman 2002:24) of the 1950s and 1960s to a culture of normalization and sexual liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite this adjustment, however, Seidman argues that a culture of heterosexual dominance is still in place" (quoted in Valocchi 2005:759; see also Loftus 2001). The point, in other words, is not just the degree of discrimination but also the significance of sexuality.

As "a historically specific social pattern," to borrow Seidman's (2002:29) words, the defining features of the post-gay era emerge when we compare them against the prior closet and coming out eras. The heyday of the closet (pre-World War II) was characterized by concealment (choosing to hide who you are from family and friends); isolation (being disconnected from networks of other gay people); feelings of shame, guilt, and fear (internalizing societal views about homosexuality); and duplicity (living a double life) (Seidman 2002:29–30; see also Chauncey 1994; D'Emilio 1983). The coming out era (World War II to 1997, especially after the 1969 Stonewall riots), in contrast, was typified by being open about one's sexuality; by constructing a world with almost exclusively gay social networks; and by feeling that "gay is good" (Armstrong 2002;

2. Quote from book jacket.

Valocchi 1999a;). Finally, a post-gay society (1998 to the present) is distinguished by an increasing assimilation of gays into the mainstream alongside rapid internal diversification. "Diversity" as a political symbol can be tricky to understand given its multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings (Berrey 2005; Downey 1995). While the word may sometimes imply inclusiveness (as in Armstrong's (2002:26) notion of "unity through diversity" that expressed gay life during the coming out era), in a post-gay context, diversity more often signifies the celebration of different sexual ways of life within LGBT communities. The sheer number and specific types of internal differences have exceeded a critical threshold in a post-gay era. And as we will see, this has rendered ineffective many of the strategies that activists had used in prior eras.

Assimilation and diversity have been in perennial tension in gay life. Over the long course of gay history, but especially from 1950s homophile organizing onward, the gay imagination has routinely oscillated between, on the one hand, a narrow, single-interest vision, rooted in conventional identity politics, that seeks an end to discrimination against gays, and on the other hand, an expansive, multi-issue, coalition view that is grounded in a political philosophy of intersectionality and social justice. Assimilation advocates argue that (1) integration increases choice for how to be gay (Signorile 1997); (2) it prevents urban ghettoization (Bawer 1993); and (3) it reconfigures the public-private split by allowing homosexuality to enter the public sphere (Sullivan 1996). Diversity and distinction devotees counter that (1) assimilation is socially homogenizing and erases a unique gay sensibility that has been a source of cultural innovation in America (Harris 1997); (2) assimilation is an illusion, since what we really have is a state of "virtual equality" (Vaid 1995); and that (3) this "triumphalist view" of assimilation downplays "a stone wall of hardcore homophobia and heterosexual domination" in matters of national policy (see Seidman 2002:2–6 for review; Warner 1999).

Numerous scholars have offered pithy descriptions of these undulations as a contradiction between a "minoritizing view" and "universalizing view" of sexuality (Sedgwick 1990:1); "the movement of gay politics between radical separatism and assimilation" (Seidman 1993:131); "identity for critique" versus "identity for education" (Bernstein 1997:538); "debates of identity and difference" (Epstein 1999:32–33); "a tension between the notion of gay people as a minority group and the notion of gay people as cultural critics" (Valocchi 1999a:59); "sex radicals at one end and assimilationists at the other" (Warner 1999:43–44); "repeated assimilationist tirades against more flamboyant in-your-face gay activists" (Duggan 2002:177); a "revolutionary or reform-oriented" political history (Engel 2007:67); and a dialectic between an "assimilationist approach" and a "liberationist perspective" (Rimmerman 2008:5, 14). But if this is cyclical, then what makes the post-gay era distinct? The answer, says Seidman (2002), must be tentative, given the "slow and uneven but steady" (p. 2) pace of the change:

> Gay life today *is* very different than it was just a decade or two ago. Gay Americans today have more choices about how to live, and their lives often look more like those of conventional heterosexuals than those of the closeted homosexuals of the recent past . . . Gay life is defined by a contradiction: *many individuals can choose to live beyond the closet but they must still live and participate in a world where most institutions maintain heterosexual domination* (p. 6; emphasis in original).
>
> In the heyday of the era of the closet, individuals confronted stark choices: stay in or step out of the closet . . . Identity choices in the era of the closet were also stark: to deny or champion being gay as a core identity . . . Today, the choices are not as stark. Post-Stonewall coming-out motifs . . . are only one strand among many. As individuals live outside the closet, they have more latitude in defining themselves and the place of homosexuality in their lives (pp. 86, 88).

Post-gay collective identity construction entails several ways to affirm oneself and one's imagined community (Anderson 1983) in a way that creates a feeling of belonging in a multicultural society.[3] But underneath this veneer lies a troubling politics of normalization. Even

3. See Seidman (2002:197–204) for how post-gay rhetoric is different from the more familiar "multiculturalism" and "cultural pluralism" discourse that has pervaded American society. For a critical discussion of the differences, see Warner 1993. For a comparison with the corporate-style rhetoric of "diversity," see Ward 2008b.

Seidman (2002) acknowledges as much: The rhetoric and reality of the post-gay era resonates most with those lesbians and gay men "whose sexual behavior conforms to traditional gender norms, who link sex to intimacy, love, monogamy, and preferably marriage, and who restrict sex to private acts that exhibit romantic or caring capacity" (p. 189). Those who are gender or sexually nonnormative become "a lightening rod not only for the hatred of difference, of the abnormal, but also for the more general loathing for sex" (Rubin 1993; Warner 1999:23). Thus, while the twin impulses of assimilation and diversity characterize public debate about what it means to be post-gay, only a certain, perhaps even contradictory type of "diversity" may be encouraged: a narrow range of expression, displayed within the already-narrow parameters of "normal," that is palatable to heterosexuals and that contributes to the goal of assimilation.

Scholars have also critiqued what I refer to in this article as the post-gay era (without using that exact phrase) by suggesting that there is a "class-inflected nature" to this "assimilation project" (Barrett and Pollack 2005; Valocchi 1999b) in today's hyper-consumerist era of commodification (Chasin 2000). Activists today are "enthralled by respectability" and being perceived as "normal" (Ward 2008b; Warner 1999:25). As a result, national policy debates around issues of sexuality often reinforce a white, male, middle class standard (Seidman 1993; Vaid 1995; Warner 1993). This politics of "homonormativity" (Duggan 2002) encourages activists to strive for "tolerance," itself a "grudging form" of assimilation in which the boundary between us and them remains unchallenged (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003:50–52).

While "assimilation" and "diversity" are buzzwords circulating in the post-gay public forum, what we may really have here is "not assimilationist, exactly, but [a] normalizing" trend (Warner 1999).[4] The post-gay era may be marked by the acceptance of a segment of gays and lesbians who are gender conforming, middle class, upwardly mobile—in other words, those best able to take advantage of the benefits of assimilation and the valorization of a particular type of diversity. Considering this critique helps to further clarify what makes the post-gay era different:

> The new conditions of movement politics have vastly heightened the tensions that have simmered in the movement since the Mattachine Society . . . [that is,] the tendency to present the movement in terms oriented to the dominant culture . . . Collard's rhetoric [of post-gay exhibits a] . . . newfound ability of respectable gay people to project themselves as the true lesbian and gay movement, and thus to trump those queers who do not share their own sense of the world (Warner 1999:67–68).

The post-gay cultural sensibility is slowly, unevenly, but actively unfolding, and it can be critiqued for many reasons. The intention of this article is neither to verify that we have definitively embarked upon a new post-gay era, nor is it to offer a sustained critique of the concept—both worthy enterprises for which I will defer to others. I leverage the mere possibility that we may be transitioning into a new historical moment called "post-gay" (or something else) as a theoretical opportunity to rethink conceptual frameworks of collective identity. While the pendulating logics of sameness and difference co-exist across a wide swath of minority groups, extant frameworks provide a clearer snapshot of how activists construct their collective identity when they are strategically operating along the difference end of this continuum. But how do they negotiate boundaries between themselves and external audiences—and even among themselves internally—during a post-gay moment of sameness?

Methods

Organizational Names and Collective Identity

The countervailing impulses of assimilation and diversity that characterize the post-gay era are on vivid display in decisions activists make over what to title their events and organizations.

4. Warner (1999:32) cites Erving Goffman, who calls this "in-group purification": "the efforts of stigmatized persons not only to 'normify' their own conduct but also to clean up the conduct of others in the group."

Consider first the case of the Human Rights Campaign, the largest national gay advocacy organization in the United States. Founded on April 22, 1980, the Human Rights Campaign Fund raised money for gay-supportive Congressional candidates. This mission expanded to lobbying and distributing educational materials to sway public opinion. The organization symbolically marked its growth on August 7, 1995 by dropping the word "Fund" from its name. The resignified Human Rights Campaign (HRC) launched a new Web site, printed a flashy new magazine, and engineered a slick new logo consisting of a block yellow equal sign against a dramatic, navy blue background. The language of "human rights" and the generic equal sign (that notably does not include any traditional symbols of gay life, such as the rainbow flag) erase explicit links to the group on whose behalf the organization presumably exists.

Consider next the Millennium March on Washington for Equality. Compared with the prior three similar national demonstrations staged by LGBT activists, this fourth one was infused with far more infighting, especially over what to title the event (Ghaziani 2008). Title critiques focused on its religious overtones (the 2000th *anno Domini*) and the lack of an identified constituency. A *New Republic* article quoted leaders of past marches who lambasted use of the word "millennium" because it was "a specifically Christian marker of history [that] leaves many feeling uneasy and many non-Christians feeling they don't belong" (Zeller 2000:24). A *Bay Area Reporter* article additionally noted that:

> the millennium has a Christian context based on the supposed date of Christ's birth . . . The emphasis on faith and spirituality rather than diversity is a major problem . . . The word "millennium" would be better replaced with words such as "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender" which would have the added benefit of bringing this march out of the closet (Klein 1998:6).

This report alludes to a second aspect of the march's title debate, namely, its lack of an identity: "It has not been lost on many gay civil rights advocates that the 'Millennium March' does not even contain the words gay or lesbian in its title, much less bisexual, transgendered, or intersexual," noted *The Data Lounge* (Barillas 1998). As a point of comparison, the first two marches were both titled, "National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights" and the third was called the "National March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation" (Ghaziani 2008; see also Barber 2002; Chasin 2000:214–19; Gamson 2000).

The twin impulses of assimilation and diversity conflict in local situations as well. Chicago opened its first LGBT community center in 2007. Financed by a $20 million capital campaign, the "Center on Halsted," as it is called, is a 175,000-square-foot building (shared with Whole Foods) that is "not your average LGBT center," observes *The Advocate* (Sokol 2007), a national LGBT newsmagazine. Similar to the Millennium March and the HRC, we can again not help but wonder: What kind of center is this? And for whom? The answer here as with the HRC and Millennium March is similarly implicit: The center is *on* Halsted, a street that runs through the heart of Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood, known for its high concentration of gay residents (Baim 2008; Gates and Ost 2004). The Center on Halsted is understood as gay only in this context; it is gay by association. Of course, not everyone who lives in Lakeview is lesbian or gay, and the publicity surrounding the opening of the Center strategically used this to de-emphasize distinctions between gays and straights: "An Equal-Opportunity Hangout: The Center on Halsted to Welcome Gays and Lesbians—and Everyone Else," ran a headline in the *Chicago Sun-Times* (Thomas 2007). The article quotes openly gay city Alderman Tom Tunney: "This thing is expensive to build and expensive to operate . . . I'd be pretty upset if it wasn't made available to everybody" (p. 35). The article also cites then-Executive Director Robin Burr, who explicitly said: "Nearly every person I've walked through this building—gay, straight—they all want to come and be here" (p. 35). The message across all three cases—the Human Rights Campaign, Millennium March, and Center on Halsted—is the same: gay is unremarkable (Bawer 1993; Harris 1997; Signorile 1997; Sullivan 1996), at least to the extent that it no longer requires explicit mention in the names of some LGBT organizations and events (and despite the persistence of discrimination).

A tension between assimilation and diversity characterizes the experience of virtually every minority group, whose members feel a sense of "twoness" (DuBois 1903), who sometimes live "double lives" (Chauncey 1994:273), and who tend to be "of two minds" (Allport 1954:238) as they seek to assimilate into the majority while preserving their distinct culture. Like other minorities, gays also "seek to assimilate toward and blend into the majority" (White and Langer 1999:557; see also Gordon 1964) while retaining the option to affirm their group distinctiveness (Brown 1986:563; Waters 1990; White and Langer 1999:557). As the above three vignettes suggest, however, the unfolding transition to post-gay society has been accompanied by a rise in assimilationist and distinction *de*-emphasizing sensibilities (that is strategically concealed in the word "diversity"). In this capacity, the language used to characterize a post-gay era parallels, albeit imperfectly, rhetoric about a "post-racial" society as well (Rieder 2009a, 2009b).

Some gay people may wish to establish subcultural-specific space and style, while others may object to this difference-affirming form of political organizing and community building. These logics of "sameness and difference" (Einwohner et al. 2008:5) coexist across a wide swath of minority groups (e.g., Bernstein and Olsen 2009) whose social movement organizations "shift their emphasis between celebrating and suppressing differences from the majority" (Bernstein 1997:532). But existing conceptual frameworks within social movement theory provide a clearer understanding of how activists construct collective identity when they are strategically operating along the difference end of the spectrum. As a result, scholars are inadequately equipped with the necessary theoretical tools to explain the puzzling pattern of identity muting in the Human Rights Campaign, the Millennium March, the Center on Halsted, and many other LGBT organizations. The objective of the present article is to demystify this process.

Organizational names are an effective lens through which to study collective identity (Clemens 1996, 1997; Engel 2007; Ghaziani 2008), especially boundary construction processes (Lamont and Molnar 2002), since "the name . . . signifies identity" (Bailey 1998:27). Social movement organizations, in particular, are "mediators of collective identity at the micro level and of sociopolitical trends at the macro level" (Ward 2008a:234; see also Gamson 1996; Reger 2002a, 2002b; Ward 2008b). Names and name changes refract an "accumulated history" (Bailey 1998) and express tensions between assimilation and distinctions, as described in the above vignettes. As yet another example, lesbians offered political critiques in the 1970s that voiced dissatisfaction with the omission of the word "lesbian" in organizational names. As Elizabeth A. Armstrong (2002) observes:

> Simply by demanding that "lesbian" be included in organization names lesbians asserted that: (1) women's experience of being gay was different; (2) it was both as universal and as specific as men's experience; (3) lesbian issues were of equal importance; (4) one could not claim to represent lesbians without including "lesbian" in the organization's name; and (5) organizations that claimed to represent lesbians had to have lesbians as members and leaders (p. 145; see also Rich 1980:649–50).

Language affects how we experience the world: what we think about it, how we perceive it, and how we live in it (e.g., Foucault 1978; Gamson 1992a; Sewell 1992; Spillman 1995; Williams 1976; Zerubavel 1997). Sometimes called the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis," research has long shown that language shapes our sense of reality (Sapir 1929; Whorf and Carroll 1956). Phrases such as Stokely Carmichael's "Black is Beautiful" and Franklin Kameny's "Gay is Good" provide evidence for how language can communicate group composition (Armstrong 2002:53; Berube and Escoffier 1991; Valocchi 1999a). As expressions of collective identity, organizational names are invested with competing meanings (Gamson 1996), which create contingencies for who is represented, internally, and how the group is perceived externally (Bailey 1998). Conflict erupts when activists initially choose a name or choose to change names. When infighting is linked to this type of discrete organizational task, it makes concrete otherwise abstract battles of identity (Ghaziani 2009). Tracking changes in organizational names therefore presents an opportunity to map corresponding changes in collective identity.

Data and Analytic Strategy

This single case study investigates how members of Princeton University's Pride Alliance, the local LGBT student group, construct their collective identity during a post-gay moment. In 2006, Princeton was ranked in the top twenty "best of the best" campuses for LGBT students (of 680 total surveyed) in *The Advocate College Guide for LGBT Students* (which is a published book, rather than an annually produced magazine). It ranked highly due to its LGBT policy inclusion, its institutional commitment to LGBT issues, its visible and vibrant LGBT student and academic life, campus safety, counseling and health services, and LGBT recruitment and retention services (Campus Pride n.d.; Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Center 2006).[5] As the context for a case study, Princeton represents a genre of campuses where LGBT issues are empirically observable. Given its demographic uniqueness, however, the Pride Alliance may not be representative of LGBT college groups across the country. Because political ideologies are mediated by context (McAdam 1988), it may be more useful to consider Princeton a critical case, or the leading edge of an uneven and unfinished trend to a post-gay era.

I focus on college students because identity changes are "easier to detect in younger people" (Seidman 2002:11). Today's campuses present an opportunity to study the effects of a post-gay era. "On the dozens of college campuses I have visited over the past decade, the shift in just a few years has been astounding," remarks Andrew Sullivan (2005:4). Colleges are laboratories where politics and culture ferment (Berezin 1997; Gitlin 1980). Young people often pioneer new terms to reflect their sense of self in an inherited world they perceive as different than the one inhabited by the prior generation (Houvouras and Carter 2008; McAdam 1988; Savin-Williams 2006). "Social labels are like this," confirms a 2006 *Advocate* cover story (Vary 2006). "They never sit still . . . Almost every generation wants to reinvent the labels, either reinterpret them or use new ones" (Vary 2006:100). This is especially true for today's college students who comprise the first cohort to grow up in a world where being gay was significantly stripped of its stigma and where gay people routinely appeared in television, film, and the media. "The new emphasis," asserts Sullivan (2005:3), is on "the interaction between gays and straights and on the diversity of gay life and lives." Thus, the twin pillars of a post-gay era are particularly operative in a college context.

The data for this study include 18 interviews and 100 archival documents (including newspaper clippings, meeting minutes, flyers, posters, letters, and alumni reports) that span 38 years of organizational history (1972–2010) and that I collected at the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library at Princeton University. I interviewed 13 of 15 Pride Alliance "officers" (or leaders) who were active during the Spring 2009 semester (9 men and 4 women; 6 white students and 7 students of color; 12 gay and 1 straight).[6] LGBT students at Princeton have a history of regularly changing their organization's name. I therefore also interviewed five alumni officers, including the co-presidents who were at the meeting during which the name changed to the Pride Alliance, which is how it was known at the time of this writing. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, included 124 transcribed single-spaced pages, and covered three major themes: (1) mission (e.g., "What is the Pride Alliance's organizational mission?"); (2) title (e.g., "The words 'gay,' 'lesbian,' 'bisexual,' 'transgender,' and/or 'queer' are noticeably absent in the name 'Pride Alliance.' What is your reaction to this?"); and (3) identity (e.g., "Can you comment on the role self-identified straight students play in the Pride Alliance?"). I retroductively coded the entire data set by identifying keywords (Williams 1976) that are derivative of a post-gay context (e.g., assimilation, diversity, distinction). This coding scheme alternated between *a priori* (i.e., theoretically grounded) and inductive codes (Ragin 1994) to optimize

5. The local IRB has given permission to use Princeton's name in this project (protocol #4276).

6. Two officers declined to be interviewed. They explained to me that, although they were out on campus, those outside the university did not know of their sexuality. Guarantees of confidentiality did not mitigate their concerns. This lends evidence that a post-gay era is not one in which sexual identity is so open that it is meaningless. As Seidman (2002) points out, anti-gay discrimination (and fears of it) persists.

concerns of reliability and validity (Stemler 2001). This type of data set is well-suited to appraise gay collective identity construction (Engel 2007:67–68).

Academic and popular accounts debate whether contemporary changes mark the advent of a post-gay era, rather than use the possibility that we may have to understand its effects on collective identity construction. "While there is little disagreement that gay life in America is changing," notes Seidman (2002:2), "there is little agreement about what this means." I leave for others to debate these meanings, that is, to take changes in gay life as an endpoint that requires explanation (e.g., Archer 1999; Chasin 2000; Harris 1997; Signorile 1997, 2003; Vaid 1995). What I do instead is to take the changing nature of gay life as a starting point (around which there is "little disagreement") and study its effects on collective identity (see Gamson 1995; for a similar approach see Gamson 1997). Of course, organizational names map more than just collective identity; they also reflect practical and strategic concerns (Engel 2007), such as appearing "acceptable" to others and being widely recognizable and memorable. While I acknowledge both, my interest in specifically rethinking frameworks for collective identity compels me to focus on the name-identity link.

I now turn to the results. I begin with a historical overview of the organization to establish that students have repeatedly changed its name to respond to activity in the sociopolitical context. These name changes enable me to track the process with multiple data points (a type of robustness check). I then focus on the organization today. Recall that the post-gay era has been triggered by the assimilation of gays into mainstream society and an internal diversification of LGBT communities. I systematically emphasize the effects of each on identity construction.

Results

"A List of Acronyms": A History of LGBT Student Organizing at Princeton

The Pride Alliance's Web site includes a history section tagged with the byline, "a list of acronyms." Over the organization's nearly 40-year tenure on campus, media reports and meeting minutes have playfully assailed its naming and renaming. For example, some meetings "began by sorting out all the different gay and lesbian organizations affiliated with Princeton, because some of us still hadn't gotten them all straightened out (so to speak)" (Gay and Lesbian Allicance of Princeton 1990). As an overview: Undergraduate students first congealed in the Gay Alliance of Princeton (GAP). From here, the name changed to Gays and Lesbians at Princeton (GALAP), Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Alliance (LGBA), and finally to today's Pride Alliance (PA). Along the way, various groups broke off to represent their particular interests, resulting in a capacious archeological identity dig that includes the Gay Women of Princeton (GWOP); Bisexual and Lesbian Support Group (BLSS); Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Task Force (LBWTF); Women Oriented Women (WOW); Princeton's Eagerly Awaited Radical Lesbians (PEARL); Gay and Bi Men on Campus (GMBoC); Gay, Bi, and Lesbian at Princeton (GABLAP); Bisexual Interest Group (BIG); He's Interested in Men (HIM); Queers Undertaking Exquisite and Symbolic Transformation (QUEST, a coming out group); Princeton University's the Other Persuasions (PU TOPS, for faculty and staff); and Fund for Reunion/Gay and Lesbian Alumni (GALA) (see Table 1).

Our story begins on Friday, May 12, 1972—the final week of the spring semester. "Feeling isolated because he did not know any other gay men on campus," sophomore Arthur Eisenbach '74 placed a classified ad in *The Daily Princetonian* (the student newspaper) declaring "Closet Queens Unite! For information about organizations of gay men and women at Princeton call [phone number]." Eisenbach organized three spring-semester meetings after receiving a dozen responses to his ad; roughly ten students attended each (Chang 1992). During the following fall semester on September 14, 1973, Eisenbach and Judith Schaeffer organized an initiating meeting that formally consolidated what had heretofore been an informal cabal

Table 1 • ***An Organizational History of LGBT Student Organizing at Princeton, 1972–1999***

Year	*Event*
1972	Eisenbach places ad in *The Daily Princetonian*: "Closet Queens Unite!"
1973	**GAP** forms (first group on campus)
1982	**The Gay Women** informally forms
1983	The Gay Women renames to **GWOP** (formally defects from GAP)
1984–1986	**LBWTF** forms (defects from GWOP)
1984–1986	**GMBoC** forms (defects from GAP)
1984–1986	GMBoC informally refers to itself as the **Men's Auxiliary** (of GAP)
1986	**Fund for Reunion** forms
1987	**Homophobia Lunch Group** informally forms
1987	**BLSS** forms (defects from GWOP)
1987	Fund for Reunion merges with GALA to form **Fund/GALA**
1987	GAP renames to **GALAP** (merges with GMBoC and LBWTF)
1988	**CAH** forms (defects from GALAP)
1988–1989	**SOME OF US** forms (defects from Fund / GALA)
1988	GWOP disbands
1989	**Ad Hoc Committee** forms (official consolidation of Homophobia Lunch Group)
1990	**WOW** and **PEARL** form (defections from GALAP)
1991	GALAP renames to **LGBA** (via GABLAP, BOTHWAYS, and GLOBAL)
1991	**BIG** forms (defects from LGBA)
1991	Ad Hoc Committee renames to **GLB Task Force**
1992	GMBoC renames to **HIM**
1994	**QUEST** forms
1999	LGBA renames to **Pride Alliance**

into the Gay Alliance of Princeton (GAP). Thirty students attended this first meeting, which Eisenbach remembered as, "[I]t was the beginning of something. Gay people started to realize there were other gay people on campus, and straight people started to realize the same thing" (Nold 1975). The formation of GAP "was a watershed in the lives of gay and lesbian students at Princeton. For the first time, an organization came out of the closet, though some of its members—or potential members—could not" (Roxe 1995). Indeed, "for the first ten years of GAP, it was the only formal group catering to nonheterosexuals at Princeton" (Edelman 1992). A gay organizational presence was born on campus during the coming out era. Revealingly, lesbian and gay students "only half-jokingly" dubbed their first office space (in 306 Aaron Burr Hall) as "The Closet" (Lamoreaux 1979).

What was happening at Princeton was also happening at its sister institutions. Yale undergraduates organized "a homosexual discussion group" that was "open to gays and straights" (Elliott 1972). Princeton undergrads borrowed this language when they posted large posters all over campus. To the question, "Why go to a meeting of the Gay Alliance?," they replied, "The Gay Alliance . . . is a place where both homosexuals and heterosexuals can come to hear interesting speakers on a wide variety of topics dealing with homosexuality and gay liberation" (anonymous n.d.a). The coextensive nature of hetero- and homosexuality (Ghaziani 2010; Katz 1995) would continue to morph over the years in ways that are insightful for understanding collective identity.

It did not take long for rumblings of dissent to emerge, especially as gay life grew more visible and internally complex. Women quickly discovered that they were in the minority. Even founder Eisenbach observed that GAP "was about 90 percent male." One female member confirmed: "There were always more men than women involved in GAP." This exacerbated lesbians' particular feelings of invisibility and loneliness on campus. Undergraduate Katie Raisz '80 remarked, "We used to say we could count on two hands the number of lesbians around." Women initially sought recourse in smaller, private spaces (Roxe 1995). In 1982, however, students began holding gendered meetings, that is, separate sessions for men and women that were sometimes called "auxiliary groups." The first time they did this and under the name "The Gay Women," female attendance doubled, prompting women to splinter off and form their own group in 1983 "to gain more ground for the lesbian feminist women on campus (although there are few of us in this god-forsaken conservative haven)," in the words of Barb Clanton '84, the first president of the newly-named Gay Women of Princeton, or GWOP (Clanton 1983; see also Edelman 1992). Although the two organizations admitted to having "very similar objectives and programs," GWOP's defection increased female participation in campus activities and "allowed both groups to deal more effectively with their concerns" (Edelman 1992; Ly n.d.). Social movement scholars similarly recognize that multiple organizations can fulfill distinct niches that enhance collective efforts of identity and strategy building (Levitsky 2007).

Perceptions that GWOP was "overly political" and a growing bisexual presence incited additional splits, this time within GWOP. In the years between 1984 and 1986, a new group of women coalesced into the Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Task Force (LBWTF). In September 1987, the Bisexual and Lesbian Support Group (BLSS) formed, with 10 to 12 women at the first meeting. One attending woman commented on her discontent with GWOP: "I imagined a really aggressive, radical group of women who were outspoken about their sexual identity" (Lazarus 1987). To counteract this, BLSS was designed to be a social group to help lesbians on campus meet and share their common experiences. Men responded to the growing bisexual presence on campus in ways similar to women, evidenced in the splintering off of GMBoC, or "Gay and Bi Men on Campus." The cumbersome name ("yes we know the acronym doesn't quite work," group members admitted) compelled members to refer to themselves as "the Men's auxiliary" (LGBA n.d.). These comments illustrate that organizational name changes can reflect concerns of identity and strategy (Engel 2007) and also that collective identities within movements can diverge (Reger 2008; Whittier 1997).

Compared to the men, "lesbian groups have never had the same continuity" (Chang 1992). They shuffled and splintered extensively during the 1980s. GWOP disbanded after five years (in 1988), and BLSS so utterly failed to make an impact that the date of its organizational death is nowhere to be found in the archival records. Explanations for its failure include lack of numbers and funding, modal explanatory factors for many social movements (McAdam 1982).

In 1986, Shawn Cowls and Dick Lamoge founded the Fund for Reunion, Princeton's lesbian and gay alumni organization. One year later in 1987, it merged with the preexisting though less active GALA (Gay and Lesbian Alumni) to form the Fund for Reunion/GALA. Also in 1987 and in a reunification attempt between men and women, GAP merged with GMBoC and LBWTF and renamed to GALAP, or Gays and Lesbians at Princeton (Chang 1992).

Unity was short-lived when the Coalition Against Homophobia (CAH) defected away from GALAP in 1988 "to be more political and to include interested straight folks." CAH's main interests were in pressuring the University to adopt an equal opportunity policy. Its founding "marked the birth of specifically political gay activism" that "not only put gay issues on the University's agenda, but also linked the gay, lesbian, and bisexual population with other activist groups." During this same period, SOME OF US (Sexual Orientation Minorities Education Organization for University Sensitivity) defected away from the Fund for Reunion/GALA to also "be more political" (GALAP 1990). Two years later on October 10, 1989, the Ad Hoc Committee on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Needs and Concerns formed to advise then-university President Shapiro on the creation of new courses, on increasing lesbian and gay themes into preexisting courses, and on increasing lesbian and gay materials in the university's libraries. Originating informally in 1987 as the Homophobia Lunch Group, the Ad Hoc committee (as it was later formally renamed) was the first organization to address gay student life on campus (anonymous n.d.b.; see also Edelman 1992). In 1991, it again renamed to the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual (GLB) Task Force (Chang 1992).

Like the 1980s, the 1990s were also a time of great organizational shuffling when "subgroups were seeking their own identities" (Edelman 1992). In 1990, and as an affirmation of their specific visibility needs, women again defected away from GALAP and formed the social WOW, or Women-Oriented Women, and the political PEARL, or Princeton's Eagerly Awaited Radical Lesbians (also Princeton's Eager and Aggressive Radical Lesbians, depending on who you asked) (Edelman 1992). One cannot help but feel a sense of vertigo here, as the GAP-GWOP relationship of the 1970s mirrored the GALAP-WOW relationship of the 1990s.

Between 1990 and 1991, GALAP experimented with four name changes: GABLAP (Gay, Bi, and Lesbian and Princeton), BOTHWAYS, and GLOBAL. In the fall of 1991, the organization settled on LGBA (Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Alliance). The LGBA was "a place where people can find their separate spaces for support and comfort, while retaining the strength that comes from the unity of such a large group" (Edelman 1992). Bisexual students, however, were not convinced. Although they were included in the name of the group, several bisexual students felt they "did not have a support system they could call their own" and so formed a separate, co-ed organization in spring 1991 that they called BIG, for "Bisexual Interest Group." The next year in 1992, GMBoC, which had been going by the simpler "Men's Auxiliary," changed its name to HIM, or "He's Interested in Men." And in 1994, QUEST debuted on campus as a co-ed and confidential, student-run, questioning/coming out group (LGBA 1994).

Gay student organizing at Princeton encompasses a long history of infighting over social and political objectives; over whether to coalesce with other progressive causes; and over the role of straight students, all of which have incited factional splits. Infighting and defections are common in political organizations when members must contend with one another's racist, sexist, and classist attitudes (Chesler 2001; Meier and Rudwick 1976; Robnett 1997; Waite 2001); when there are difficulties of being situated at the intersection of multiple oppressions (McCall 2005; Moraga and Anzaldua 1981; Stockdill 2003); when there are disagreements over tactics and strategies (Carson [1981] 1995; McAdam 1982; Morris 1984); and when there are pressures for ideological purity (Echols 1983, 1989; Taylor and Rupp 1993). These types of conflicts—especially when linked to a discrete task such as naming an organization—can yield "dividends" as group members use infighting to clarify the contours of their identity (Ghaziani 2008, 2009). The early history of gay student organizing at Princeton also suggests that simply renaming an organization does not eliminate continued exclusions (Ward 2008a). Thus, during the coming out era at Princeton, the dynamics of "us versus them" and "us versus thems-inside"—the conventional theoretical framework for collective identity construction—were in effect, as student activists operated toward the difference end of the identity spectrum.

The Pride Alliance

In 1999, one short year after the term "post-gay" found an American audience, the LGBA changed its name to the Pride Alliance, which is how it was known at the time of this writing. "GAP begat GALAP which begat . . . the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Alliance" (LGBA) which then begat the Pride Alliance. "These changes were not only shifts in name; they also reflected an increase in the level of understanding of the diversity of 'the gay experience,'" keenly noted then-senior Ben Edelman (1992). Motivating the name change was a desire "to recognize members of transgender, questioning and straight communities" ("yes we do have Ally officers," they playfully preempt on their Web site) (see Chang 1999). Diversity here clearly signifies the distinct management of individual, internally variegated groups.

Altering a gay organization's name to accommodate increasing internal diversity can happen in one of two ways. The conventional approach would be to augment the string of represented letters, for example, from **G**AP to GA**L**AP to LG**B**A to LGB**T**A. Sociological research on collective identity produces expectations in support of this position (e.g., Armstrong 2002).

LGBA leaders, however, opted for an opposite approach. Then co-president Caroline Baker ’04 remarked on the strategy, “Rather than turn our name into an alphabet soup, we decided to pick a name that would encompass everyone.” Baker feared that the group would never be able to embrace everyone: “By simply naming categories in a title, we’re excluding people like those who know who they are but feel that they do not fit into any category.” Then co-president Daniel Powell ’00 presaged: “With a name like the Pride Alliance, we can be more inclusive and also leave room open to incorporate other groups in the future.”

As these initial remarks suggest, this final name change was inspired by two things. First and with regard to internal audiences, leaders then and today struggle with how to best accommodate the diversity of LGBT communities. Is the best response to add another letter or employ a different strategy, and why? Second and with regard to external audiences, what role should straight allies play in an organization that is ostensibly about meeting the social and political needs of LGBT students? As I will show, the specific choices that officers of the Pride Alliance made with respect to internal and external audiences reveal that post-gay collective identity construction cannot be easily explained using preexisting theoretical frameworks.

Internal Audiences: How Should We Manage Our Own Diversity? The first trend that triggered the post-gay era, the effects of which I investigate here, is the rapid internal diversification of LGBT communities. Diversity management is not a new issue in LGBT political organizing (Ward 2008b). The birth of a gay identity movement in the early 1970s “sparked the rapid proliferation of a vast diversity of new gay organizations. These new organizations had more specific titles, reflecting a continuously unfolding variety of new identities and subidentities” (Armstrong 2002:2). Organization names followed a formula of “gay plus one other function or identity” (e.g., gay teachers; Armstrong 2002:22). Over the years, subgroup challenges were “domesticated” and “neutralized” (Armstrong 2002:183). Charges of exclusion launched by lesbians and bisexuals, for example, were each met by including their respective letters in a name. At Princeton, this meant that GAP begat GALAP begat LGBA. Similar to how other organizations across the country have responded and thus consistent with Armstrong’s arguments, challenges at Princeton also did not undermine the cohesiveness of the local gay identity building project.

But LGBT diversity in a post-gay era has reached a critical threshold that can no longer be so easily domesticated or neutralized using either the gay-plus-one or add-another-letter strategies that Armstrong describes and that typified the coming-out era. At Princeton, the question of transgender inclusion catalyzed this conversation. As co-president Baker remembers, “I was interested in seeing how the LGBA’s programming and mission could be more inclusive of transgender folks and issues, and I wanted the name to reflect that.” This conversation made vivid the shortcomings of the domestication project. Again from Baker:

> When LGBA officers and members got together to talk about changing the name to LGBTA, we also talked about other people the organization should also be focused on—people who identify as queer, people who are questioning their sexuality and/or gender, people who are intersexed. As we added to the list of identities we thought should be included, we noted how unwieldy the abbreviation was getting and talked about picking a different name that could serve as more of a catch-all.

Co-president Powell’s memory confirms the validity of Baker’s recollections:

> We initially were going to change it to the LGBTA to make sure that we were trans-inclusive . . . And during the meeting, someone raised, well, do we want to have ‘Q’ for questioning or queer? If we change the name why don’t we do the LGBTQA? And then I think somebody even raised the issue of “I” for intersex. I think that’s where it actually got tricky. People were like, “you know, that’s a whole mouthful.” And the concern was [that] there was going to be too many letters at some point, and was there a name that could be as inclusive as possible so we don’t have to keep changing the name every time we think there’s another group that we should include.

Baker and Powell's remembrances point to a counterfactual: in the absence of a post-gay era (if we were still in the coming-out era, for example), officers may have changed the name of the LGBA to the LGBTA (or LGBTQA). The logic that the 1999 co-presidents articulated has stayed with the organization over the last decade. A 2009 co-president believes it is deliberate that the organization has "a name that doesn't have an acronym." The group on whose behalf the organization exists is now so diverse that it defies acronyms, which are perceived as static and singular. One officer explained why he liked "Pride Alliance" more than the alternative "LGBT Pride Alliance": "LGBT implies that there's the—'*the*,' as in singular—definitive characteristic that's holding [the group] together." The decision to change the name to Pride Alliance instead of the LGBTA or LGBTQA was made uniquely possible by the post-gay era.

Although "identities are still being very actively constructed" through "people's choices of words," to quote a current officer, diversity management today calls not for the enumeration of specific groups but instead for a strategy of de-emphasis. Post-gay leaders prefer this for the dual purposes of preventing exclusion and maximizing inclusion. A current co-president justified why he liked the organization's name:

> I think it's definitely preferable to any name that would just have the word "gay" or just the word "lesbian" in the title. [Pride Alliance is] more open-ended and allows more freedom than "these are the letters," the identity letter in which you're taking pride. Nonspecificity allows people to come and see what the organization actually is instead of having a label that they will decide they fit in or don't fit in.

Another officer said, "The Pride Alliance name is kind of nice because it's just pride, which is understood to mean pride for any different sexual identity, sexuality, or whatever group, as opposed to having a listing of them, which eventually gets problematic in trying to get everyone." A third officer also explicitly rejected specificity: "You can never get specific enough because there's always going to be somebody left at the margins, and it's a constant activity trying to use language to describe the infinite variety of human experience. I would be disinclined to be specific in names." Confirmed a fourth officer and former co-president, "If you're using letters, you're always going to be excluding somebody, and so one way to deal with that is not naming those terms at all. I think that's the idea behind the name the Pride Alliance." Yet a fifth officer remarked, "You would have to be like LGBTI or LGBTIQ, and it goes on forever."

In addition to preventing exclusion and as already alluded to earlier is the related desire to maximize inclusion. The name Pride Alliance is "a way of keeping it open and at the same time letting it be clear what it's about," in the words of one officer. The current co-president agreed when she said, "[The name] has many different operational uses. You can use it in any way that you want, so I think that makes it more inclusive." Said another officer, "[The name is] intentional, I think, to be as inclusive as possible, just because not everyone fits into one of those categories or wants to fit into one of those categories, so Pride Alliance is just more general, and it can really apply to anything." Two other officers summarized, "You can be a part of it without having to take on a specific name. There is no specific identity that is defined." And, "I think it's good because it encompasses everyone. The term 'pride' is a lot more universal, and it can reach across a broader LGBT constituency."

These results reveal an "accumulated history" (Bailey 1998:27) of lessons learned from challenges posed by "thems inside" (Gamson 1997). It is noteworthy that students did not debate *whether* to include self-identified transgender, queer, or intersexed students. Their desire to be broadly inclusive was unqualified. This is consistent with other theoretical accounts of LGBT political organizing (Ghaziani 2008; Ward 2008a). The point of departure in a post-gay era is the de-emphasis strategy activists elect to respond to this consistent desire to be inclusive. Domestication during the closet and coming out eras followed an oppositional logic: it was us *versus* thems-inside until contending insiders had their respective letter included (e.g., **G**AP to GA**L**AP to LG**B**A). Generality is the favored strategy in a post-gay era, an equal opportunity maneuver that includes everyone by erasing all letters (e.g., from LGBA to Pride Alliance, which has no letters). When asked why not just list specific letters (e.g., from LGBA to LGBT Alliance), one officer referenced the role of boundaries: "Once you define the collective identity, there's no room for variability within the group. The intent is inclusivity and community building without really marking out a boundary for whether you're in or out." Princeton students construct collective identity in a post-gay era by electing a general name (one that does not list specific groups) and an identity-muted name ("pride" in what is not immediately knowable).

External Audiences: How Do We Accommodate Straight Allies? In addition to managing an unwieldy amount of internal diversity and differences, the Pride Alliance name also enables officers to respond to straight supporters—called "allies" (Myers 2008)—who want to be involved in the group. Recall that assimilation of gays into mainstream society is the second feature of a post-gay era. One way to operationalize this is the extent to which two groups intermix (Waters 1990, 2000; Waters and Ueda 2007). Gay-straight interaction has noticeably increased over the years. For example, the HRC launched "HRC University," a 15-week leadership program for young adults who have recently completed their undergraduate studies. "HRC U" is intended "to bring together LGBT people and allies who will become leaders of equality" (HRC n.d.a.). The pattern of bridging gay and straight students persists at the local level, as well. Consider the popularity of "gay-straight alliances" (GSAs). There are currently more than 3,500 such student organizations in the United States. GSAs share a common mission to make schools a safe space "for all members of the student body regardless of sexual orientation." Some even include straights in their title. The "Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)" is one such example (GLSEN 2007). Even a quintessentially gay cultural phenomenon such as a drag show can at once affirm gay identity and forge "bonds between gay and straight people" (Rupp and Taylor 2003:175). As I will show in this section, the effects of assimilation on post-gay collective identity construction are similar to the effects of diversity: leaders opt for a strategy of de-emphasis that mutes distinctions between gay and straight.

In 1999, when the name changed to the Pride Alliance, there was admittedly some uncertainty about the role of straight allies. According to Baker:

> I recall a lot of us (including some straight allies) didn't think they [straight allies] needed to be given focus in the organization's name—the organization wasn't *for* them—and besides, allies could arguably fit in the 'A' part of a name like LGBA, LGBTA, LGBTQQIA, etc. At the same time, though, I and some of the other folks did like the idea of making the organization as welcoming as possible for straight allies. So we were glad that a catch-all name like Pride Alliance could encompass straight allies, too.

"Catch-all" and "welcoming" operate as symbolic bridges that connect gay and straight students. As one officer explained, "If we want LGBT people to be assimilated into the straight world, we should be welcoming to straight people into our world." Indeed, there have been university-wide efforts to connect gay and straight students. In 2007, Princeton made available a popular "Ally" sign to the entire campus community (see Figure 1). In the words of then-undergraduate student designer Andy Chen '09, the signs present a "reimagining of the Princeton shield for the campus Ally project, which aims to unite straight allies with members of the LGBT community. The type [the two letter 'L's' of different colors in Figure 1] represents *two individuals that are the same in all but one way*, joined together in a common effort" (Chen 2007; emphasis added). The Ally project is a micro reflection of a macro trend. In a post-gay era, leaders prop up heterosexuality as an object against which a gay subjectivity is narrowly defined. "There is a lot of pressure to just become mainstream," observes one officer. Like "catch-all" and "welcoming," "mainstream" is another euphemism for indistinct, suppressed, or muted. This "mainstreaming effect," in the words of the same officer, impacts "all sorts of people," even if their individual identity is "inherently at variance with it."

Figure 1 • ***The Ally Project***

The Pride Alliance institutionally mandates heterosexual inclusion by having an "ally chair," or an officer (gay or straight) responsible for brokering with the straight community on campus. The 2009 ally chair, a straight female and the only straight student involved in the group, explained that "the point [of the organization] isn't to pull students apart. There are so many ranges of different sexual orientations that I think the Pride Alliance is a more applicable title [than one that enumerates specific identities]." When asked if the object of pride was meant to be "gay pride," she disagreed and suggested instead that "they're people. They're students at this university" who are proud to celebrate diversity. This rhetorical de-emphasizing strategy rejects gay—or any other identity signifier—in favor of "people." It even takes the "gay" out of "gay pride" through accusations of exclusion. As she continued to explain, "If it's just all people who identify as LGBT students, then there's a sense of exclusion. There's a sense of 'we want to be separate,' and I think that's maybe not the best message to send. We're all people." Princeton's approach resonates internationally, as evidenced by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's assertion that gay rights are more generally "human rights" (CNN 2009).[7]

The current officers believe that "we need to be visible in a way that engages the entire Princeton community, not just the LGBT community." One might be tempted to read this as a case of "insiders [straights, the dominant group] among outsiders [gays, the minority group]" (Seidman 2002:18). But this framework requires a dividing boundary between the two groups. Pride Alliance officers, however, reject such binary demarcations. "I think making these sorts of distinctions [between gay and straight students] would be contrary to what we do," explained one officer. Another officer independently agreed, "What's true on this campus and what's true in the larger world too is that different LGBT people share a lot of things [and] a lot of other identities with straight people, and I think the sense that there's this bifurcation of LGBT people who are not like other people is exactly one of the things that the Pride Alliance is trying to combat." Yet a third said more colloquially, "It's a lot easier to say to the rest of the world, 'look at us, we're really cool just like you are,' if you're not one group pitted against the rest of the world. So I think having straight officers or ally participants is really smiled upon for that reason. It gives more legitimacy." A fourth officer argued that the Pride Alliance is "not necessarily an organization that is only for LGBT people as much as it is an organization that's about promoting the possibility of pride in LGBT identity" among LGBT and straight people.

Social movement scholars have analyzed effects of "elite involvement" (McAdam 1982) or "conscious constituents" (Adam 1995; Duberman 1993). There is debate about whether such participation provides material (e.g., people, money, and time) and ideological (e.g., legitimacy) resources for the movement and thus facilitates further action, or if instead the movement exposes itself to the risk of co-optation and loss of control, thereby weakening the movement (McAdam 1982:25–26). This applies to the presence of straight allies in gay organizations, as well. Daniel J. Myers (2008) observes that "disagreements almost immediately emerge about the appropriate roles for allies within the movement; the views range from believing that allies have no place in the movement at all to accepting allies into leadership positions" (p. 178).

But if disagreements "almost immediately emerge," why were these Princeton students surprisingly silent about offering a critical analysis? Post-gay politics converge on a particular de-emphasis strategy that redefines the Pride Alliance from being an organization *of* gay people (a closet- and coming out-era strategy that the collective identity literature would predict, and one that would emphasize what is distinctively gay about the group) to an organization *for* gay people (a post-gay era strategy that mutes differences—anyone can be involved, even "Ally students who do not themselves identify as LGBT," in the words of a fifth officer). Post-gay politics paradoxically attempt to organize the collective by making identity boundaries less distinct. Us-versus-them is not tenable if participants refuse to divide the world as such. This perception also affects lived experience since "it really doesn't feel any different to have them [straight students] there [at the meetings] than someone who is gay or lesbian or something else." Oddly however, a de-emphasis strategy requires as its antecedent the almost reified identification of the very groups the strategy seeks to dissolve. If, as officers suggested, the "point isn't to pull students apart," if students are discouraged "to be separate," and if in the end "we're all just people," then why have a separate organization, ally sign, and ally chair?

Conclusions: From "Us *versus* Them" to "Us *and* Them"

The changing nature of gay life has generated a challenge for sociological accounts of collective identity by creating effects that, while acknowledged by social movement theory, are insufficient to capture the particular dynamics individuals use to build movement organizations

7. Ghaziani (2008) calls this "boundary porousness vis-à-vis *external* audiences, that is, softening the demarcation between gays and others in a way that would allow for the inclusion of gay rights with everyone else" (p. 68).

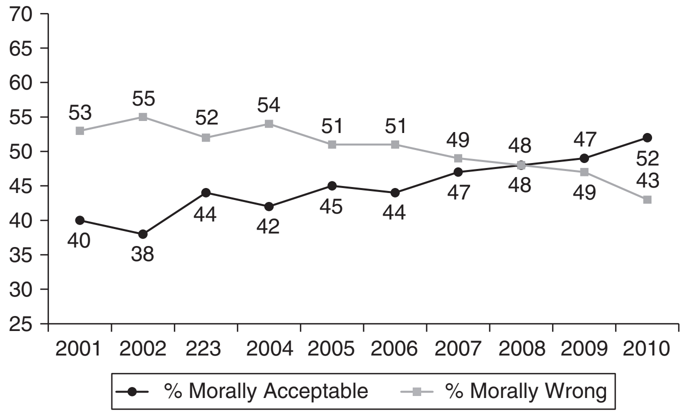
today. Activists of all stripes must all contend with the logics of "sameness and difference" (Einwohner, Reger, and Myers 2008:5) as they calculate whether to celebrate or suppress their distinctiveness from dominant groups (Bernstein 1997; Polletta and Jasper 2001). Theoretical accounts of collective identity, however, are better suited to account for the actions of activists when they are operating toward the difference end of this continuum, for which conventional wisdom correctly identifies that activists will rely on an us-*versus*-them (Taylor and Whittier 1992) or us-*versus*-thems-inside framework (Gamson 1997). But what happens to the boundaries between "us" and "them" during moments of sameness? I have used speculations that we are moving into a post-gay era as a theoretical opportunity to revise preexisting frameworks. I have done this by providing a genealogical analysis of name changes of an LGBT student organization at an elite university since its founding, concentrating on the particular shift that took place in the putatively "beyond the closet" (Seidman 2002) or "post-gay" era away from a laundry list of identities to a more palatable, relatable, and inclusive moniker: "the Pride Alliance."

The advent of a post-gay era may be seen as the impetus for this most recent name change, and it exerts influence through two mechanisms. First, the level of internal diversity within the LGBT movement today has exceeded a critical threshold such that activists can no longer easily implement the preexisting strategies that their predecessors did. Pride Alliance officers opted against "gay plus one" and "add-another-letter" strategies that activists have historically favored, both at Princeton and in national politics (Armstrong 2002). The unwieldy task of including all the groups who are visible today and who might be tomorrow motivates leaders to strategically name their organization in a way that can convey identity without being specific. Princeton students prefer a general name: "Pride Alliance" deliberately does not specify groups, despite the fact that "LGBTA" or "LGBTQA" would have been the historically expected outcome. Thus, accompanying the first mechanism of increased internal diversity is a strategy of intra-group identity muting: "Pride" is understood as gay only in context and by association. The explicitness of LGBT identity is suppressed.

Second, the rate of assimilation today has also exceeded a critical threshold, evidenced in the visible emergence of a straight allies movement (Myers 2008), which itself testifies to increased gay-straight interactions. According to a 2010 Gallup Poll, "Americans' support for the moral acceptability of gay and lesbian relations crossed the symbolic 50 percent threshold in 2010. At the same time, the percentage calling these relations 'morally wrong' dropped to 43 percent, the lowest in Gallup's decade-long trend" (Saad 2010) (see Figure 2).

Thus, accompanying the second mechanism of heightened assimilation is a strategy of inter-group inclusion: Princeton undergraduates construct their collective identity using an implied logic of "us and them." This shift from opposition (us *versus* them) to inclusion (us *and* them) suggests that identity construction in a post-gay era is motivated less by drawing boundaries against the dominant group and more by building bridges toward it (and thus blurring the boundaries). Although collective identity still requires a sense of group-ness, it is now less dependent on differences (Gamson 1997; Seidman 1997) and motivated instead by perceived commonalities. The relevant question in a post-gay era is how to redraw boundaries involving us and them, rather than between us versus them. This de-emphasis or suppression strategy redefines the organization from being one *of* gay people (a closet- and coming out-era strategy the collective identity literature would predict, and one that emphasizes what is distinctively gay about the group) to an organization *for* gay people (a post-gay strategy that mutes differences).

A name like the Pride Alliance confers some advantages, but it can also potentially penalize the group. A general and identity-muted name makes it easier for the group to link with other causes in a coalition building effort. "Pride Alliance" also has strategic marketing potential: "The new name is better for our public relations and is more easily recognizable," noted the LGBT student concerns coordinator in the Office of the Dean of Student Life at Princeton. "It rolls off the tongue," observed many of the current officers. But in a pluralist



Source: Gallup 2010

Figure 2 • ***Perceived Moral Acceptability of Gay/Lesbian Relations***

political system (McAdam 1982), identities are more politically potent when they reference clear boundaries, which are useful for identifying and responding to discrimination, lobbying for reform and policy making, voting to give voice to group needs, mobilizing to respond to threats against the group, and managing resources (Armstrong 2002; Gamson 1995; Taylor and Whittier 1992). "Pride Alliance" erases boundary markers from its name; it affords primacy to an assimilationist strategy that may not be optimally compatible with interest group politics.

So then what might post-gay politics look like? We can assess this through the actual activities of the Pride Alliance. Its formal mission is "to promote understanding and acceptance," which it does by holding regular meetings, sponsoring dances, and organizing special events, such as a speaker series during "Pride Week" and ice cream socials. The officers informally understand the Pride Alliance to be "purely or primarily a social group. They don't like to involve themselves with political protests," in the words of one officer. A second officer defined the mission as "raising awareness and building community on campus"—"where people feel safe and comfortable," added a third. Thus, the practices of the Pride Alliance resemble what "even gay political organizations" do in a post-gay era: they "function more as social groups than as angry activist groups" (Sullivan 2005). While this may seem benign on the surface, as indicative of progress, it is precisely "the trouble with normal" (Warner 1999): "Dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions" remain unchallenged, gay identity becomes "privatized" and "depoliticized" (Duggan 2002:179), and the structure of social inequality that demarcates a heterosexual center and an LGBT margin, while symbolically reconfigured, remains materially intact (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003). This sense of "virtual equality" (Vaid 1995) may also account for the surprising lack of critical analysis by the Princeton students.

A post-gay society presumes the mitigation of conflict, which is the likely culprit for the veneer of political progress behind which lurks a more "durable inequality" (Tilly 1999). Mitigation of conflict, however, is not the same thing as its elimination; there is a "persistent privileging of heterosexuality," Seidman (2002) rightly points out. This is why the Pride Alliance name is not completely stripped of LGBTQ cultural references. Although they are inexplicit, keywords like "pride," "rainbow," "lambda," "lavender," "equality," and others are historically rooted in the struggle for gay rights. Collective identity in a post-gay era is therefore implied, readable in context, and established by association. "The identity is communicated not in the name but in the collective action," one officer explained. Said another, "The context in which the name Pride Alliance appears is clear enough that if you saw the label Pride Alliance you'd understand more or less the content of the group." "'Pride' evokes gay pride or queer pride," and "I think that in general people know that when you have the world 'pride' that that encompasses—it's basically dealing with queer stuff or LGBT stuff," remarked two other officers. A fifth made historical connections, "Pride is historically associated with LGBT issues, so I think it's pretty clear to most people who are familiar with that sort of thing what it is, but at the same time, it's not narrowing itself to one particular group." Yet another remarked, "The word pride typically has been taken by LGBT groups, so there's like pride parades, pride events, but there's a lot of symbols like the rainbow that are taken as a symbol of the LGBT community. And so I think again with the 'pride' word, it's been appropriated by LGBT communities." The persistence of conflict preserves groupness (Coser 1956; Simmel 1955). In its total absence, we might expect a name that is detached from all cultural references.

Identity muted self-naming is not a new trend. "Homophile" organizations such as the "Mattachine Society" and the "Daughters of Bilitis" also elected suppression strategies when they formed in Los Angeles in 1950 and San Francisco in 1955, respectively. The HRC opted for a similar approach in 1980, as I described in the methods section. Indeed, the LGBT movement has a long history of pendulating between a politics of respectability and confrontation. While the features of a post-gay era resemble prior historical incarnations, today's manifestation presents unique elements, as well. Gay politics since the 1990s "have marked a decisive break" from prior historical epochs, asserts Lisa Duggan (2002:190). Characterized as "the new homonormativity," today's post-gay version "comes equipped with a rhetorical recoding of key terms in the history of gay politics," including but not limited to those described in the paragraph above: "'equality' becomes narrow, formal access to a few conservatizing institutions, 'freedom' becomes impunity for bigotry and vast inequalities in commercial life and civil society, the 'right to privacy' becomes domestic confinement" (Duggan 2002:190). This neoliberal economic trend exerts a sexual politics that proceeds today through the framework of "post-gay" and a variety of other recoded terms of democracy and civil society.

Many other scholars have thought about the general issues my research raises, especially the changing historical meanings of sexuality, organizational names, and collective identity. The present study, however, is the first to explicitly characterize today's historical moment as "post-gay" and then use it to sociologically address changes in collective identity construction via organizational name changes. But this is still only a single case study, and so the generalizability of my results should be assessed with caution. Having said that, I should add that the Pride Alliance's strategy is by no means an isolated incident. Recall the examples of the Human Rights Campaign, the Millennium March on Washington, and the Center on Halsted, all of whom have selected a similar, identity-muted organizational name. In the Ivy League, four of eight student groups exemplify a post-gay logic, suggesting that this effect is uneven and unfinished but not unusual (see Table 2). Post-gay names can also be seen outside this one conference. Like Princeton, student groups coast-to-coast at public and private schools such as Amherst College, Arizona State, Eastern Kentucky, George Mason, Georgia Tech, Illinois Wesleyan, Kennesaw State, Penn State, Skidmore, University at Albany, University of Maryland, University of Massachusetts–Amherst, University of South Florida, Utah State, and Washington University in St. Louis are also called the Pride Alliance at the time of this writing.[8]

There is a similar logic operative at the state level. Instead of using the keyword "pride" like some college groups do and instead of the "gay plus one" strategy of the closet- and coming out-eras, some LGBT state organizations today follow the formula of "equality plus one": Equality Illinois is an example. State groups are united under "Equality Federation," "the national alliance of state-based lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender advocacy organizations"

8. See HRC's "LGBT Campus Group Directory" (HRC n.d.b.).

Table 2 • *LGBT Student Groups in the Ivy League (as of 2010)*

University	*Name of Student Group*
Brown	Queer Alliance
Columbia	Queer Alliance
Cornell	**Haven**
Dartmouth	**Rainbow Alliance**
Harvard	BGLTSA
Penn	**Lambda Alliance**
Princeton	**Pride Alliance**
Yale	LGBT Cooperative

Note: Post-gay names in bold.

(Equity Federation n.d.). These study results are therefore relevant to a broad number and variety of LGBTQ cases.

In addition to considering within-group generality (e.g., do other LGBT organizations exhibit a similar pattern?), we might also think about between-group generality. Are my results from the Princeton Pride Alliance generalizable to other minority groups? We have reason to believe that the alleged post-gay paradigm is part of a larger American cultural obsession with the prefix post-. In a 2003 *Los Angeles Times* story pointedly titled, "In 'Post' Culture, the Prefix Is In," Mary McNamara observed, "Enter the brave new post-everything world in which we mark our rejection of past cultural movements, and our refusal to commit to new ones, with one little word: 'post.' In the past few years, Americans have been told . . . that society is becoming post-black, post-ethnic, post-ironic, post-feminist, [and] post-political." Thus, we may reasonably read the post-gay effect transpiring at Princeton as an example of an omnibus cultural trend. This suggests a need for ongoing investigations into the origins, characteristics, and effects of a post-gay era. But here I must offer a word of caution to future researchers: a conversation about the prefix post- may overlook a misalignment between rhetoric and reality. As McNamara smartly observes, "the success of the 'Queer Eye for the Straight Guy' may make society seem very post-gay, but as the recent split in the Episcopal Church over the appointment of its first openly gay bishop proves, all is not what it seems." Post-gay, in other words and as Seidman has also remarked, may not translate to post-discrimination. The danger to be avoided is using the prefix post- for a dubiously cutting edge cultural conversation that is blissfully ignorant of a group's historical and present-day struggles. Post-gay could entail a multiculturalist blurring of modernist boundaries and a move toward expanded tolerance and freedom—or it could entail a neoliberal, class- and racially inflected, and surface blurring that redefines the contours of hetero- and homonormativity. Which of these two models is more valid is as of yet inconclusive.

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