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## YOU'VE GOT TO ADMIT, IT'S GETTING BETTER (ALL THE TIME): STRAIGHT ALLIES IN THE *IT GETS BETTER PROJECT*

by

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B.A. Indiana University South Bend, 2010

### A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Arts

Department of Sociology In the Graduate School Southern Illinois University Carbondale May 2012

#### RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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#### Amanda Buday

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

In the field of Sociology

Approved by

Dr. Chris Wienke, Chair

Dr. Jen Dunn, Second Reader

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#### AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

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TITLE: YOU'VE GOT TO ADMIT, IT'S GETTING BETTER (ALL THE TIME): STRAIGHT ALLIES IN THE IT GETS BETTER PROJECT

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Chris Wienke

After a series of gay teen suicides were publicly reported as resulting from homophobic peer bullying in 2010, Dan Savage and Terry Miller created a You Tube video in which they spoke out against bullying and encouraged LGBT teens to persevere through their high school years. The video went viral, and since 2010 over 50,000 *It Gets Better* videos have been created. In this paper, I examine how the *It Gets Better Project* discourse has opened a space for the participation of heterosexual individuals in a movement directed at LGBT youth. I ask how heterosexual *It Gets Better Project* video contributors participate in, appropriate, and expand upon the movement discourse in order to include their voices and stories in spite of the absence of the commonality of experience of belonging to a marginalized sexual identity category. I present a discourse analysis of a non-random sample of *It Gets Better* videos contributed by heterosexual individuals, utilizing a social constructionist perspective in examining how individuals are narrating meaning into their experiences through their *It Gets Better* videos.

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Growing up isn't easy. Many young people face daily tormenting and bullying, leading them to feel like they have nowhere to turn. This is especially true for LGBT kids and teens, who often hide their sexuality for fear of bullying. Without openly gay adults and mentors in their lives, they can't imagine what their future may hold. In many instances, gay and lesbian adolescents are taunted- even tortured- simply for being themselves. Justin Aaberg. Billy Lucas. Cody Barker. Asher Brown. Seth Walsh. Raymond Chase. Tyler Clementi. They were tragic examples of youth who could not believe that it does actually get better.

-"About the It Gets Better Project"

In 2010, the LGBT community experienced searing grief after a series of gay teen suicides were publicly reported as resulting from homophobic peer bullying. In response to these deaths, Dan Savage, author of an internationally syndicated relationship and sex advice column, and Terry Miller, Savage's husband, created a You Tube video in which they spoke out against bullying and encouraged LGBT teens to persevere through their high school years and look with hope upon the bright potential their futures could hold. In less than two years since this first video hit the cyber-world, over 50,000 videos have been posted to the It Gets Better You Tube channel and the It Gets Better Project web page was founded, securing the project's status as an official new LGBT movement. The project attempts to provide LGBT youth encouragement and hope that the trials of high school are temporary and to speak out against bullying. The widespread enthusiasm with which the It Gets Better Project has been received, evidenced by the rapid proliferation of videos as well as the participation of notable public figures, suggests that it is a movement of significant social import, particularly in regards to the community building effect created by the expression of solidarity shared in It Gets Better Project stories (Omar, 2011). However, the *It Gets Better Project* has also inspired an enthusiastic body of critics who point out that the rhetoric present in the project inaccurately portrays a universal experience of being a gay teen which is doubly problematic in its emphasis on gay youth as powerless victims (Harding, 2011; Hlousek, 2011; Majkowski, 2011).

Although its potential for scholarly appeal stretches across disciplines, the medium of the movement (individuals' stories) provides particularly rich material for sociologists interested in the social construction of the self. To the extent that personal identities are based on collective ideas about what characteristics particular types of people possess, how individuals describe their experience is shaped, constrained, and negotiated within the available discourse which bounds the identity they claim (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Davis, 2002). If who we are is in part a product of the stories we tell about ourselves, then 50,000 peoples' narratives of growing up gay must have implications for how one learns to interpret (and potentially re-tell) one's own selfstory. Interestingly, participation in the It Gets Better Project has extended beyond the bounds of the LGBT community for whom and by whom it was created. Present among the collection of stories are a number of videos contributed by heterosexual individuals, both public figures and lay individuals. The interest that heterosexual individuals have expressed in participating in the It Gets Better Project is consequential because an unveiling of the cloak of invisibility obscuring the consequences of heterosexual privilege will be necessary if significant advances in LGBT rights attainment are to occur (Kimmel and Messner, 1993; McIntosh, 2003). In this paper, I am interested in examining how the It Gets Better Project discourse has opened a space for the participation of heterosexual individuals in a movement directed at LGBT youth. I ask how heterosexual It Gets Better video contributors participate in, appropriate, and expand upon the movement discourse in order to include their voices and stories in spite of the absence of the commonality of experience of belonging to a marginalized sexual identity category.

I begin this paper by situating the *It Gets Better Project* in social constructionist literature, beginning with a review of scholarship regarding the narrative construction of identity. I argue that *It Gets Better* videos largely follow the format of contemporary "coming out"

narratives (Plummer, 1995) and discuss potential benefits and detriments of this narrative form. I next present a review of existing *It Gets Better* scholarship, identifying a number of themes, including criticisms which have been launched at the *It Gets Better* discourse. After a brief discussion of methodology, I present a discourse analysis of a non-random sample of *It Gets Better* videos contributed by heterosexual individuals. I consider four new discursive themes present in the narratives in this sample: (1) queering the self; (2) self-authenticity; (3) agency vs. victimization; and (4) political accountability. In the concluding section, I consider the political implications of these four categories in regards to efforts to legitimize and arrest the anti-gay bullying problem.

#### Theoretical Framework and Review of "It Gets Better" Scholarship

The study of individual and group narratives is becoming an increasingly popular site of inquiry in sociology as researchers find that the stories people tell about themselves as well as the groups they belong to have great utility for learning how social actors create and sustain meaning (Bruner, 2004; Gubrium and Holstein, 1998; Loseke, 2007). Narratives as a unit of analysis are instructive because, "If personal experience provides an endless supply of potentially reportable, storyable items, it is the incorporation of particular items into a coherent account that gives them meaning" (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998: 166). Rather than viewing self-stories as objective recollections, we should recognize that the act of telling about oneself to others is an interactive, constructive process whereby individuals attempt to present an image of their character and behaviors which accurately reflects their own conception of self while negotiating the constraint of social and cultural values. The narration of self-stories, then, is a process of reality construction whereby individuals manage tensions between presenting a coherent sense of self over time, despite experiences which might contest the stability of the self,

as well as retaining a sense of authenticity in self-construction, despite the limitations which cultural repertoires and institutional discourses impose on the selves that seem viable to construct (Garfinkel, 1967; Foucault, 1978; Gubrium and Holstein, 1998; Kelly and Dickinson, 1997).

The narrative practice is essential to the formation of group and collective identities because of the role stories play in bringing together communities around shared attributes and reaffirming these connections over time. In Irvine's (1999) description of developing a codependent identity, Irvine shows how Codependents Anonymous (CoDA) members learn over time to interpret their past experiences in light of the experiences shared by other CoDA members at meetings, thus using CoDA stories to make sense of disturbing life events. CoDA meetings provide a new discourse that CoDA members learn to use to make sense of their lives, themselves, and ultimately to repair damaged identities. Through an analysis of the codependent narrative formula, Irvine shows how CoDA provides an institutional framework within which individuals learn to re-structure fractured senses of selves by coming to identify themselves as codependent and then learning from the stories of other members what being a codependent person entails. Pollner and Stein (2001) find a similar effect of institutional influences on the coherence of personal identity in their study of Alcoholics Anonymous. Pollner and Stein (2001) argue that the very conditions of postmodern society which threaten to splinter the self into irreconcilable fragments simultaneously work to produce stabilizing institutions (such as AA) in which identities can be firmly grounded. However, we are cautioned against assuming that narratives always follow the proscriptions of institutionalized formulas, as Loseke (2001) discusses in her study of formula stories in battered women's support groups. Loseke finds that the women in her study resist the attempts of group session facilitators to portray their experiences as ones of violent victimization despite attempts of facilitators and other group

members to indicate to such women that they are failing to tell the "right" story, or that they are describing their experience in a way that does not conform to the institutionalized identity of "battered woman." In narrating our identities, we must synthesize our unique experiences with the culturally intelligible ways of describing ourselves as the type of individual we wish others to perceive us as, creating stories about ourselves that reflect (and sometimes simultaneously resist) the normative cultural understanding of what "people like us" are like.

Scholars of sexuality have found that stories about sexual identity engage with similar institutional and collective forces. For people who belong to marginalized sexual identity categories, the narration of sexual identity development has been formalized by the "coming out" phenomenon. When an individual comes out, or makes public their (stigmatized) sexual identity, they refer to past biographical anecdotes which are consistent with the self they recognize as authentic in the current moment (Schrock and Reid, 2006). In his analysis of disclosures of sexually marginalized identities, or "coming out stories," Plummer (1995) finds a formulaic nature present in coming out stories: coming out stories begin with a recollection of suffering related to their marginalized identity status, relate a moment of "epiphany," or a crisis or turning point when the individual decisively concludes that "something must be done," and finally describes a transformation which occurs, allowing the individual to survive and perhaps surpass the formerly oppressive conditions of her/his existence.

It Gets Better participants are sharing a coming out story of sorts. In a review of the 50 most frequently viewed videos on the It Gets Better Project website, Omar (2011) finds that counter narratives in the It Gets Better videos challenge dominant stereotypes about LGBT people and also serve to build community. Omar (2011) suggests that narratives in the It Gets Better Project create a sense of cohesion and similarity when participants relate the commonality

of the experience of being bullied. Participants refute potential differences between themselves and viewers by emphasizing their similar experiences of dealing with bullying or some other adversity. Additionally, participants create cohesion when they refute doubts that viewers may have about finding a "fit" in the community, assuring viewers that, whoever they are, acceptance can be found in the LGBT community (Omar, 2011).

Sexual story telling in the form of coming out narratives are not without their pitfalls. The narrative formula of the coming out story results in the constitution of a particular experience of being gay, potentially erasing the multiplicity and diversity of individual identities (Plummer, 1995). Crawley and Broad (2004) find that typifying is a part of the coming out formula story and declare it problematic because of its tendency to constrain the expression of diversity. Speaking about oneself as a "typical" lesbian or gay individual presents an illusion of a coherent LGBT experience in place of a much more variable reality of existence. This is particularly problematic because, as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) has shown, marginalized individuals may experience their oppression as arising from an occupation of multiple devalued categories of identity. An individual's experience may be influenced by intersecting oppressions, and attempts of social movement actors to homogenize a collective identity erase the complexity of an individual's location in a matrix of domination (Collins, 2000). Scholars of the It Gets Better *Project* have found that the stories presented in the project conform to a formulaic narrative structure similar to that described by Plummer (1995), and thus have problematized the movement's discourse on a number of counts. Four main themes emerge in the criticisms of the It Gets Better Project: 1. Erasure of issues of intersectional oppression. 2. Assimilationist tendencies. 3. Putting the burden back onto LGBT youth. 4. Disengagement from action.

Hlousek (2011) takes issue with the formula narrative of the It Gets Better Project expressed in Dan Savage and Terry Miller's video. Hlousek finds that this narrative follows a pattern of discussing a painful youth, identifying a turning point where growth was able to begin, and culminating in achieving eventual happiness and success and argues that this narrative creates an image of "self-reliance and rugged individualism" while encouraging the pursuit of material, consumerist measures of success. Hlousek (2011) writes, "This advice places the burden of responsibility upon the victim and ignores the intersecting identities of class and race among other categories that limit access to the social, cultural, and economic capital required to gain mobility in an ostensibly fluid class system" (5). A message of hope, then becomes problematic when it overlooks the reality of multiple, intersecting experiences of oppression (Collins, 2000). After all, "It gets better a lot faster if you are white, cisgendered, and from the middle class" (Hlousek, 2011: 18). In her review of the It Gets Better Project, Majkowski (2011) finds that the tendency of *It Gets Better* videos posted by youth of color to be less optimistic than that of white (often wealthy) participants suggests further support for an erasure of issues of intersectionality in the movement.

The erasure of issues of intersectionality in the *It Gets Better* videos likely results from the desire to create the appearance of a cohesive LGBT community of support for LGBT youth. A combination of this desire to present a collective experience and the counter narrative approach which is used to dispel negative stereotypes about LGBT people results in a strong assimilationist tendency in the movement narratives. Existing literature has shown that instead of presenting a radical critique of heteronormative culture and its homonormative counterpart, the narratives of the *It Gets Better Project* endorse the goals of inclusion and equality for LGBT people into existing (homophobic) cultural institutions (Harding, 2011; Hlousek, 2011). This

accusation has been launched at the mainstream LGBT rights movement in general; critical scholars have questioned whether the current strategy of inserting LGBT people into existing problematic institutions can be effective without destabilizing existing categories of sexual identity (Gamson, 1996; Green, 2002; Namaste, 1996). The emphasis on redeeming LGBT identity from negative stereotypes is conflicted when it does so at the expense of sanctioning diversity and hetero-normalizing LGBT individuals.

While it may be productive to debate the benefits of LGBT rights activist efforts which focus on the inclusion of LGBT people into the existing heteronormative social order, I would argue that accusations made by Hlousek (2011) and Majkowski (2011) that *It Gets Better* videos showcase heteronormative standards of "better" reflect their limited sampling methods. Hlousek (2011) analyzes the discourse presented in Dan Savage and Terry Miller's foundational video, while Majkowski's (2011) failure to include information regarding sampling criteria suggests an absence of a systematic method. Dan Savage and Terry Miller are white, upper-middle class, married gay men with an adopted son. An analysis of their video alone could portray a narrow vision of "success" which LGBT youth may aspire to. However, the *It Gets Better Project* contains over 50,000 videos created by individuals representing a huge variety of identities, experiences, and nationalities and is constantly growing; in the absence of systematic research that assesses a random, representative sample of the *It Gets Better Project*, claims that such a diverse collection of stories could offer a homogenized presentation of the experience of being an LGBT person are unsubstantiated.

Critics of the *It Gets Better Project* also take issue with the prevalent message of "toughing it out" that has been identified as part of the *It Gets Better Project* narrative formula (Hlousek, 2011; Majkowski, 2011). This message is in alignment with the mission of the *It Gets* 

Better Project to provide hope, encouragement, and a space for community for LGBT youth who may be experiencing homophobic bullying which is causing them to contemplate suicide. The intent of "tough it out" narratives is to deter LGBT youth from suicidal actions by assuring them that the despair they may be feeling now will pass- happiness waits around the bend from hard times. Majkowski (2011) argues that this message may be well-intended but is negligent in effect: "The best we can do for bullied youth can't be simply to say: white knuckle it through hell, because everything will be better...in time" (164). Such a message puts the responsibility for making it better on the very backs of the victims of bullying. This narrative is equally problematic as a call to action, encouraging youth to "wait it out" for some unspecified moment when society will accept them as fully deserving members of humanity, disengaging the movement from an active response to homophobic bullying. Majkowski (2011) asks, "Why not start the 'Don't Be an Asshole' campaign?" (164). Similarly, Hlousek (2011) argues that the It Gets Better Project "...falls into the trap set forth by dwelling in the theoretical bright side while disengaging from the work that might help realize a 'better' tomorrow' (17). While there may be immense value in communicating a message of hope, acceptance, and encouragement to despairing and isolated queer youth, these critics assert that inspirational messages alone will do nothing to change the unjust conditions that inspire LGBT suicide.

In a comparison of the foundational narrative of the *It Gets Better Project* and youth narratives from the *Make It Better Project*, an internet-based resource providing youth with tools to fight bullying and make their schools safe, Harding (2011) finds that while the narratives of Dan Savage and Terry Miller "position happiness as the end goal only to be attained by 'getting through' your adolescent experiences" (15) and focus on LGBT youth as victims, stories of youth involved with the *Make It Better Project* focus on empowerment and resistant action.

Harding (2011) is critical of the *It Gets Better Project's* complicit acceptance that bullying is a compulsory experience of LGBT youth which must be endured. Harding (2011) finds the attention to LGBT suicides to be sensationalized, creating visibility for LGBT youth that frames them as a vulnerable, "at risk" group, a characterization which divorces LGBT youth from agency over their own lives:

"...the *It Gets Better Project* did not make it a priority to assess what youths felt they needed, let alone create structures that empower youth to lead themselves. This focus on at-risk-ness and the lack of research concerning the ways in which young people make sense of their gender and sexuality serves to reinforce the invisibility and silencing of queer youth experiences in mainstream discourses of youth studies" (52).

Harding argues that the *Make It Better Project* remedies this shortcoming; it is a movement of action directed by LGBT youth and directed at LGBT youth who want to do something about homophobic bullying in their schools. The *Make It Better Project* is an example of queer youth resistance to dominant LGBT discourse which would characterize them as an at-risk group and focus on their victimization rather than the agency with which they combat homophobia and violence in their schools.

It should be noted that the critiques of the *It Gets Better* discourse presented here are in conflict with one another: while Hlousek (2011) and Majkowski (2011) are critical of the *It Gets Better Project* because it appears to put the burden of change on the backs of LGBT youth themselves, Harding (2011) is critical of a discourse which suggests that they are incapable of doing so. Debates regarding the *It Gets Better* discourse as promoting an active versus a passive response to LGBT bullying neglect a consideration of how *It Gets Better* participants are taking action against the homophobic bullying of LGBT youth through entering their voices into a

support network for despairing youth. Additionally, such charges distort the mission of the *It Gets Better Project*, failing to address the goals and limitations of the project on its own terms. In his introduction to the *It Gets Better* book, Dan Savage (2012) is clear about what the project can and cannot offer in terms of relief from bullying for LGBT youth: "I do want to acknowledge what the *It Gets Better Project* can't do, though. It can't do the impossible. It won't solve the problem of anti-gay bullying, everywhere, forever, overnight. The point of the project is to give despairing kids *hope*" (6). While the *It Gets Better Project* may not be involved in political lobbying or organizing around an activist agenda, the intentions of the project never were to take such actions. As Savage defines it, the *It Gets Better Project* was created to fulfill a particular niche within a broader, existing activist effort:

"Nothing about letting LGBT kids know that it gets better excuses or precludes us from pressing for the passage of the Student Non-Discrimination Act; demanding anti-bullying programs in all schools; confronting bigots who are making things worse for all kinds of kids; and supporting the work of the Trevor Project, GLSEN, and the American Civil Liberties Union's LGBT Project's Youth & Schools program. But we're not going to get legislation passed this instant and it will be years before we get anti-bullying programs and GSAs into all public schools..." (2012: 7).

The *It Gets Better Project* does not ask youth to accept being bullied or tell them to passively endure unjust treatment. Rather, the project recognizes that decades of homophobia will not be undone quickly and, for the while that it will remain difficult to be an LGBT youth in U.S. society, the *It Gets Better Project* promotes an attitude of hope. The *It Gets Better Project* asks the current generation of young LGBT people to cultivate enough optimism that they stay around to fight for and enjoy the changes that must happen for them to enjoy the full recognition of their humanity.

In contrast to the critiques above, Omar (2011) argues that the project creates a much needed community of support for LGBT individuals who have been bullied and marginalized. Further, the It Gets Better Project redefines being LGBT as positive, refuting negative stereotypes and assumptions about what it means to be an LGBT person. Although it is criticized elsewhere, Omar (2011) argues that the rhetoric of hope present in the It Gets Better stories is needed to counter the hopelessness and helplessness that can be a part of the experience of belonging to a marginalized group. Through the sharing of stories of overcoming adversity, participants in the It Gets Better Project attempt to forge connections across barriers of difference, using the shared experience of living through hardship as a unifying force (Omar 2011). In this paper, I am not interested in advancing either supportive or critical perspectives of the It Gets Better Project, nor am I setting out to prove one side or the other of the debate as politically or morally superior. I present these arguments in an effort to demonstrate how It Gets Better videos are already engaged in contributing to LGBT discourses and the generation of knowledge. While conflicting perspectives can be harmful in their tendency to polarize debates into divisive ideological camps (Loseke, 2009), they also diversify the possibilities for creating knowledge, enriching social justice efforts by continuously reconsidering how movement actors can push issues on to the next level. Finally, I would add that, while a debate about the rhetoric of hope in social justice efforts is beyond the scope of this paper, scholarly critiques should be cautious in dismissing the value of offering despairing or suicidal youth some reason to hang on: if that message results in the decision of just one person not to take their life, it has proven itself of immeasurable worth to that person.

This paper considers *It Gets Better* stories as a collection of narratives contributing to cultural stocks of knowledge from which individual identity construction is assembled (Berger

and Luckmann, 1966; Bruner, 2004; Davis, 2002; Gubrium and Holstein, 1998; Loseke, 2007). Previous scholars have demonstrated several ways in which the discourse circulated by It Gets Better videos is already generating an engaging debate (Harding, 2011; Hlousek, 2011; Majkowski, 2011; Omar, 2011). To the extent that the *It Gets Better* stories conform to the narrative genre of coming out stories, it is curious that heterosexual individuals have created a space in the movement for the inclusion of their voices. Ironically, despite the seeming incompatibility of heterosexual experience to contributing to a coming out discourse, the narrative structure of suffering, surviving, and surpassing (Plummer, 1995) present in coming out stories potentially allows for the inclusion of heterosexually identified individuals at the same time that it presumes their exclusion: straight people overcome adversity, too. This insight has led me to develop the following research questions: How do heterosexual individuals make a space for their voices in a movement directed at LGBT youth? In what ways do heterosexual It Gets Better video contributors participate in, appropriate, and expand upon the It Gets Better discourse? What are the political implications of contributions to the discourse that heterosexual participants make? In examining these questions, I draw upon queer theory to make sense of how heterosexual participants extend the It Gets Better discourse to include their own experiences. I draw on literature concerning the social construction of self in discussing essentialist rhetoric of self identity expressed in *It Gets Better* messages. Finally, I use ideas from social problems scholars to examine the framing of the problem of anti-gay bullying and claims-making processes in the narratives of heterosexual participants.

#### Methods

As a straight ally and a feminist researcher with an interest in the construction of sexual identities, I am interested in the ideas and meanings being generated in the narratives shared in *It* 

Gets Better videos. I am interested in how the discourse circulating through the videos allows for the inclusion of heterosexual participants as well as what contributions heterosexual participants are making to the generation of meaning in the *It Gets Better Project*. Discourse analysis, then, provides an appropriate method for this study as I attempt to investigate how a non-random sample of heterosexual *It Gets Better* participants are contributing to the production and distribution of knowledge about growing up gay (Wienke, 2005). A qualitative discourse analysis allows for an in-depth interrogation of how social actors in the *It Gets Better Project* are creating meaningful self narratives which allow straight participants to connect to LGBT youth. No research on the *It Gets Better Project* currently focuses on the contributions of heterosexual participants, making this project's focus a novel and timely addition.

In thinking about how I might accumulate a sample of straight-identified participant videos, I turned to the *It Gets Better Project* "Timeline" which is linked to the *It Gets Better Project* website. The timeline records important events which have occurred throughout the movement's history, beginning with the first suicide death associated with the movement in July, 2010 and updated to the current month. Included in the important dates listed on the timeline are the dates which videos of significant import have been posted, such as videos posted by government officials, celebrities, employees of major corporations, and athletes. Because some of the individuals listed on the timeline are publicly known to be heterosexual (such as Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Stephen Colbert), I expected that using the timeline as a reference for search terms would help me to locate the videos of straight participants among the mass of available videos. I entered the names of important videos listed on the timeline into the search engine on the *It Gets Better Project* You Tube channel. I then used a snowball technique to find more videos; once one video acceptable for inclusion was identified, I was able to find additional

similar videos from the suggestions made on the side-bar of the You Tube site. In order to find videos of non-public figures who identify as straight allies I entered the search terms "straight ally" into the *It Gets Better Project* You Tube channel search engine and again used snow ball techniques to find related videos. Videos included in the study had to be made by straight-identified individuals or corporations/institutions which are not specifically associated with LGBT or queer communities (and are, by default, therefore under the purview of "mainstream" straight culture).

Initially, a number of videos (amount designated in parenthesis following group) from each of the five categories of "types" of people identified above as contributors to the *It Gets Better Project* were analyzed: celebrities (8), politicians (6), athletes (11), corporations (10), and non-public figure participants (12). Common elements that appeared in different stories were identified as thematic categories (Elliot, 2005), and in a second phase of analysis stories were regrouped from types of contributors to identified categories of meaning for further analysis. Following Burck's (2005) suggested three steps of discourse analysis, I first looked at how language is used in *It Gets Better* videos to construct ideas and information. I next identified inconsistencies of meaning in order to uncover the assumptions such contradictions may contain. Finally, I considered the implications of each story, asking what meanings the chorus of voices came together to realize. I have attempted to conduct this analysis in a reflexive manner, always keeping in mind how my own position as a researcher may affect the meanings I interpret from the *It Gets Better* stories (Sprague 2005).

My analysis of heterosexual *It Gets Better* videos identifies four new thematic categories to add to the discussion on circulating discourses in the *It Gets Better Project*: (1) queering the self; (2) self-authenticity; (3) agency vs. victimization; and (4) political accountability. In the

first section below, I briefly review a number of videos contributed by LGBT employees of several major U.S. corporations in order to offer a comparison to the heterosexual videos analyzed in this study. Following this review, I argue that heterosexual *It Gets Better* participants are extending what it means to experience a queered existence by relating personal struggles with stigmatizing conditions to the struggles facing LGBT youth as well as by expressing solidarity through their association with an LGBT friend or family member. Next, I argue that *It Gets Better* participants, in celebrating the merit of being true to oneself, promote an essentialized understanding of self-identity. In the third section, I consider tensions in the *It Gets Better* discourse in the construction of LGBT youth as simultaneously being victims of and empowered resistors against homophobic bullying. Finally, I examine the framing of the bullying problem by some participants as the responsibility of conservative political and religious agendas.

#### Introducing the Gay Google

As stated above, I originally anticipated that videos made by corporate employees would contain straight participants so long as the corporation was not specifically associated with the LGBT community. I found that this was largely not the case. The *It Gets Better* videos made by Google, Facebook, Apple, Pixar, Electronic Arts, Eli Lilly & Co., CBS, and 24 Hour Fitness all contained no straight identifying participants. In the case of these eight videos, several LGBT employees from the company contributed excerpts of dialogue which were pieced together by an editor to create one cohesive story. The *It Gets Better Project* video done by GM included two straight allies and in the video by Gap employees one person identified as gay while all others did not disclose sexual identity and had generic messages from which their sexual identities could not be inferred. I include the corporate employee videos despite the lack of straight

participants because they offer an example of the formulaic narrative typical of LGBT video contributors.

Because the corporate videos are a combination of short clips of several different individuals' stories, all clips combined follow a narrative formula although each individual story may only provide one piece. In these stories, coming out was a pivotal moment of freedom and relief. Prior to coming out, participants talked about living in a state of fear. A GM employee says, "I felt very alone and isolated, like there was nobody else like me." They told stories of being harassed, such as one employee at Pixar who said, "They'd call me 'faggot' and push me around." They discussed how painful it was for them to not be able to live authentically. Says one Google employee, "When I was growing up it was all about conforming, fitting in, and doing what was expected of me." Some participants tell stories of contemplating suicide as a result of these experiences of harassment and repression. Coming out, then, became a tremendous relief from the burden of secrecy they carried. "When I finally did come out I realized I'd been hiding a huge part of myself...I'm finally me!" (Apple employee).

Only after coming out were they able to begin the process of coming into their true "selves," learning to be who they are and achieving self-acceptance: "Once you are more comfortable with that one part of you, then the rest of you is able to flourish" (24 Hour Fitness employee). Participants discuss this as the moment when life really was able to "get better," and describe what better is for them now: "Now, my partner gets birthday cards and Christmas gifts, which is huge. I certainly never thought I would live to see that day" (Facebook employee). In addition, participants affirm LGBT identity, as does one Eli Lilly & Co. employee who says, "It is ok to be who you are and there are people who will support you." LGBT participants resist being saddled with their sexual identity as a master status, saying, "I'm more than just gay.

Hopefully I'm a good friend, I'm a good pet owner, I'm a Kentucky basketball fan- I'm a lot of different things" (CBS employee). In the case of GM's video, which included two straight allies, the LGBT GM employees relate their story of journeying from fear and distress to freedom through coming out and the straight allies contribute to the narrative by affirming LGBT identity, emphasizing the value in being "yourself," offering LGBT youth hope for a bright future, and encouraging them to seek support.

#### Queering the Self: Extending the "It Gets Better" Narrative

Because the narrative formula of the It Gets Better Project turns on the sharing of "common" experiences of overcoming pain, the discourse is opened to extend to the experiences of straight allies of the LGBT movement as well. Originally conceived as a strategy for expanding sexual politics, "queer" has been used as an umbrella term to describe sexual minorities without imposing restrictive labels (Stein and Plummer, 1996) as well as presenting an alternative to binary models of sexuality (hetero versus homosexuality) (Namaste, 1996). Because of its interest in de-centering heterosexuality, queer theory accommodates heterosexuals in its discourse in a way that lesbian and gay studies does not (Thomas, 2000; Namaste, 1996). Straight queer theorists discuss the desire of heterosexually-practicing individuals to be included in queer political movements and the production of queer theory, asking what contribution straight theorists can make to queer discourses (Thomas, 2000; Foertsch, 2000). Additionally, Smith (2000) explores the conditions which constitute queerness in heterosexual relationships. Queer activism has also been extended to experiences of able-ness. In an auto-ethnographic account, Clare (1999) uses queer theory to displace able-bodied-ness, suggesting that to be disabled is to experience a queered existence. Queer identity, politics, and theory can be extended to a variety of identities and experiences, encompassing individuals who do not fall

into the categories of LGB or T. Stories of heterosexually identifying individuals in the *It Gets*Better Project that recount how individuals have dealt with discreditable or discredited stigmatizing identities (Goffman, 1963) work towards a queering of self that extends what it means to be queer beyond sexual identities and practices.

In an effort to express understanding for the situation facing LGBT youth, some straight participants relate a general experience of disliking high school, having a hard time fitting in, or having a "hard time" as teenagers. I refer to such statements as "generalized queering." Singer Adam Levine (Matchbox 20) attempts a generalized queering, saying that he hated high school and "We've all been there." Although actor Kim Kardashian (Keeping up with the Kardashians) can't relate to being bullied because of being gay, she relates the negativity of hateful comments people make about her online to the harassment of bullies. President Obama offers a generalized queering, saying, "I don't know what it's like to be picked on for being gay, but I do know what it's like to grow up feeling that sometimes you don't belong." The Democratic Senators also attempt to relate through a generalized, "Growing up is hard (for everyone)." In an attempt to relate to the experiences of queer youth, MLB players express a generalized understanding of the hardship of growing up through statements such as, "We all know what it's like to face the challenges of being teens" (Giants); "We all know how hard it is to grow up" (Cubs); "The teenage years can be the hardest" (Tampa Bay Rays). DC United players offer their experience of "facing challenges on the field" as a related (but not comparable) experience of overcoming challenges. The Carnivores also relate a generalized experience of feeling queer, saying that they can "...remember a time when I didn't fit in." Several Carnivore players relate stories of personal struggle in high school, such as moving, being a first generation immigrant, and not "belonging."

Other straight participants relate having to overcome a stigmatizing condition, expressing solidarity with the experience of LGBT youth. I refer to these individuals as engaging in a "queering of self." Stephen Colbert engages in a queering of self when he describes being picked on in seventh grade. Vice President Biden draws upon his experience as a stuttering youngster in his self-queering, relating to the experience of being bullied because one is different: "They made fun of me because I stuttered- and it hurt...I came to understand that the fact that I stuttered didn't make me less bright, less worthy, or less of a person as they tried to make me feel." Biden goes on to suggest that this experience has made him a stronger person and his obvious success (as Vice President) offers hope that queer youth can attain success as well. In striking contrast to other videos created by athletes, which maintain an assertive tone in regards to challenging the practice of teenage bullying (see below), one Tampa Bay Rays player relates a struggle to overcome the stigmatizing conditions of stuttering as a child. Boxer Sergio Martinez queers his experience when recounting being bullied and physically assaulted at school. Martinez says that he was able to channel the anger generated by this experience into a highly successful career as a world-class boxer. One straight participant queers herself by relating her experience as a person with Turrets syndrome to the marginalization suffered by queer teens. These participants extend what it can mean to be queer, moving the discourse beyond sexual marginalization.

In their attempt to queer their experience and relate to LGBT youth, two participants move the focus away from suffering from stigmatizing conditions and focus on experiences of marginalization rooted in identity categories. Senator Ross Romero queers his experience by positioning himself as an outsider in his community, therefore likening his experience to that of LGBT youth: "As a Catholic Hispanic Democrat I know what it means to be a minority in a very

majority state [Utah] and to offer a different voice." Andria is a straight, multi-racial woman who is dating a bisexual, white man. Although Andria could claim to be queer by her association with her bisexual boyfriend (Goffman, 1963), Andria focuses on the marginalization that their interracial relationship causes, queering her experience of her racial identity. Andria relates to the experience of having people judge her choice of romantic partner negatively, saying, "People who tell you there is something wrong with who you are attracted to have something wrong with them." In both of these examples, race and ethnicity feature prominently as a marginalizing aspect of identity. Participants who relate to the experiences of LGBT youth by referencing their racial identity add a further layer of complexity to what it can mean to be queer, reminding viewers that marginalization is experienced on multiple and often intersecting points of an individual's experience (Collins, 2001).

Straight non-public figures seem to feel as if they need to justify their participation in the *It Gets Better Project* in a way that straight public figures do not seem to have to. This may be related to issues of status; public figures have been granted a right to speak on public issues by the nature of their public status regardless of their sexual identity while ordinary people must stake a claim in order to establish the right to have a voice on social issues, particularly when they do not identify as a member of the marginalized group the movement targets. One participant says:

"I really wanted to upload a video talking about this as part of the *It Gets Better* campaign, but I thought I had a bit of a problem. I'm not gay, transgender or anything like that, and every time I decided that, 'Yes I am going to make a video about this,' I told myself, 'No, you can't do that because you like guys. You don't know what you're talking about; you can't be a part of this.' Then I finally realized that the same thing I'm telling myself is the same thing that so many

people who are gay, lesbian, bi, transgendered, etc. are told everyday by themselves, their classmates, their coworkers, even their friends and families sometimes. And that's just not right. So I decided that I'm going to do this as a straight ally...I have a lot of friends who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and even transgender and I know that it does in fact get better" (*It Gets Better-From a Straight Ally*).

Straight participants who do not enjoy public notoriety may account for their participation by talking about having gay friends that inspired them to become activists, making themselves queer by association (Goffman, 1963). Straight allies who make a space for themselves in the *It Gets*\*Better Project\* through referencing friendships with LGBT people extend the boundaries of LGBT community to include themselves and other sympathetic heterosexual people. This takes the issue of sexual marginalization and makes it a problem that all people, not just sexual minorities, can and should be concerned about.

#### Being Who You Are: Essentialist Discourse in "It Gets Better" Videos

As noted above, one theme that rang through the *It Gets Better* videos contributed by employees from major corporations was advice for LGBT youth to be "themselves;" to embrace "who they are." This message was also present in several videos contributed by heterosexual participants. Steven Colbert says that when he learned not to give power to the words bullies threw at him he was able to realize, "Things people say about you don't matter, it's who you are." In fact, being "who you are," is a prominent theme in videos contributed by several celebrities: "Being you is rewarding" (Max Adler- *Glee*); "Bullies pick on you because you know who you are" (Rob Thomas- Matchbox 20); "No one should be made fun of for being who they are" (Vinny Guadanino- *Jersey Shore*); "Surround yourself with people who care, people who love you for who you are" (Kim Kardashian- *Keeping up with the Kardashians*). The videos

of politicians included in this study similarly affirm LGBT identity: "I'm proud of you- there's not a single thing about you that's not normal, good and decent" (Joe Biden- Vice President). Politicians tell LGBT youth that "different-ness" is an important and valuable part of "who they are." *It Gets Better* videos contributed by athletes in this sample also affirm LGBT identity, as the Cubs do when they say, "The Cubs celebrate you for who you are, gay or straight." In this way, self-authenticity as a valuable achievement is circulated through the discourse.

In the postmodern era, we engage in many social interactions which call for us to present ourselves in a variety of fashions. According to popular belief, there is some part of us that remains outside of our interactional-selves: our "true" selves (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001). This "true" self is supposed to maintain its integrity despite the threat of instability posed by the constantly fluctuating performances daily life elicits as we negotiate our various social roles (Goffman, 1959). Our ability to reflexively consider our various performances and to synthesize often contradictory roles into a coherent and relatively stable sense of self has been remarked upon by scholars who see this as a unique feature of our humanity (Mead, 1956; Cooley, 1902) and as a product of changes in institutional structures in our society (Giddens, 1991; Foucault, 1973, 1978). The way in which we make sense of our individual biographies and come to see and name ourselves as particular "types" of people is an interactive process; as we navigate the terrain of everyday life we make use of social stocks of knowledge relevant to our culturally situated experiences in order to engage with individuals, institutions, and groups in the production of meaningful understandings of our actions, our environment, and of ourselves (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Social constructionist perspectives on sexuality promote an understanding of sexuality as an interactive rather than in individual phenomenon (Plummer, 1996). While essentialist ideas

about sexuality view sexual identity as something that is inherent within an individual, a natural "truth" of the self awaiting discovery, social constructionists argue that sexual identity formation cannot be divorced from the social and institutional contexts of individual realities (Vance, 1989; Plummer, 1996; Phelen, 1993). The fluidity of sexuality often remains veiled behind the community-building discourse related to coming out stories. It has been suggested that the very idea of "coming out" suggests a project of self-discovery with a definite endpoint or destination (Phelan 1993). *It Gets Better* participants who encourage LGBT youth to "be themselves" are employing an essentialist rhetoric, circulating the idea of sexual identity as a fixed and unchangeable part of the "true" self, rather than a dynamic product of interactional processes.

To suggest that sexuality is socially constructed does not imply that its impact on social life is trivial; Ericksen's (1999) work demonstrates that our socially constructed ideas about what is "true" and "real" become embedded in what passes as objective science, therefore legitimizing their ideological status. Despite this and other assertions that examining LGBT identities as social constructions does not negate the legitimacy or authenticity of these identities, the social constructionist perspective on sexual identity has largely not been favorably received by the LGBT community. Vance (1989) suggests an explanation for this reluctant reliance on essentialist explanations of LGBT identity: the idea that LGBT people are entitled to rights because they belong to a (naturalized) minority category has been an effective political strategy. Advancing the idea that homosexuality and heterosexuality should be examined as forms of sexual expression which emerge from the intersection of a variety of social encounters radically challenges conventional understandings of sexuality and the institutions which regulate it.

Evidence for the utility of essentialist perspectives on LGBT identity in promoting social justice issues can be found in videos contributed by politicians, which are unique in containing

an undercurrent of nationalism. Politicians tell LGBT youth that equality is American and relate LGBT rights efforts to the struggles which other minority groups have faced in their realization of equal rights. President Obama says:

"As a nation we're founded on the belief that all of us are equal and each of us deserves the freedom to pursue our own version of happiness: to make the most of our talents; to speak our minds; to not fit in; most of all to be true to ourselves. That's the freedom that enriches all of us; that's what America's all about."

Similarly, Secretary of State Clinton's message of hope refers to equality for LGBT people as an issue of nationalist justice:

"The story of America is the story of people coming together to tear down barriers, stand up for rights, and insist on equality. Not only for themselves but for all people. And in the process they create a community of support and solidarity that endures...Here at the state department, I'm grateful everyday for the work of our LGBT employees who are serving the United States as Foreign Service officers and civil servants here and around the world. It was not long ago that these men and women would not have been able to serve openly. But today they can because it has gotten better. And it will get better for you. So take heart and have hope."

Vice President Biden also infuses his message to LGBT youth with patriotic undertones, saying, "I look forward to the day when all of you are going to make us all feel better about ourselves as a country." In an *It Gets Better* video produced by thirteen democratic members of the US Senate, senators discuss the actions they are taking to make America a better place for LGBT people, reiterating the idea that equality is "What our country is all about" (Democratic Senators). Taken together, these videos seem to profess a "Gay American Dream" for LGBT youth. By constructing the problem of LGBT youth as just one more minority group in line for

the actualization of equal rights, politicians are able to offer LGBT youth the promise of "progress."

"Step up to the Plate!": Negotiating Agency and Victimization in "It Gets Better" Narratives

Social problems scholars have asserted that social movement actors who seek to make claims about an unjust condition suffered by a marginalized group must manage tension between constructing those that they advocate for as blameless (and thereby worthy) victims and cultural repertoires which devalue passivity, helplessness, and weakness (Dunn 2004; Loseke, 2009). Despite dominant typifications of rural life for LGBT youth as repressive, Gray (2009) describes how LGBT youth carve out spaces for themselves in rural areas where they can enjoy community with other LGBT youth and visibility as authentic selves. The existence of thriving LGBT youth cultures in rural areas presents a queer turn to LGBT discourses which emphasize urbanization as the core of LGBT community building. Further, Gray's (2009) findings that LGBT youth actively work to build community for themselves, advocating for their right to public space and visibility, challenge dominant cultural discourses which would characterize them by their "at-risk-ness" and deny them their attempts to act as agents over their own lives. Similar tensions have been identified by previous scholars as being present in the It Gets Better videos; Harding (2011) suggests that the It Gets Better Project in its entirety represents an adult construction of LGBT youth as an "at risk" group incapable of advocating for themselves. While It Gets Better messages which urge LGBT youth to "hold on" till they can escape high school may risk being interpreted as representing a passive response to the bullying problem, I find that in my sample there is evidence that participants do see LGBT youth as capable of exercising some degree of authority over their lives.

It Gets Better videos made by heterosexual athletes, politicians, and every-day folks reassure LGBT youth that they are not alone and encourage them to seek out the support and assistance of LGBT community organizations, such as the Trevor Project, and caring adults: "You are not alone, you didn't do anything wrong, you didn't do anything to deserve being bullied...There are people out there who love you and care about you just the way you are...don't feel like you're in this by yourself" (Obama); "Please know that you have an amazing future and an entire community in your corner" (Giants); "There is a caring community available to you" (DC United); "Try to find a group of people who are there to support you" (Kansas City Carnivores Rugby Football Club). In encouraging LGBT youth to reach out for support and directing them to activist organizations such as the Trevor Project and GLSEN, these messages urge bullied youth to take action against the injustice they are experiencing, negating claims that It Gets Better videos offer only a passive response.

Further evidence that *It Gets Better* videos attempt an empowered conceptualization of LGBT youth can be found in *It Gets Better* videos contributed by athletes. These videos tend to have an active, assertive tone regarding bullying and LGBT youth. In a series of videos contributed by various teams from Major League Baseball, players address bullying as an injustice that no one deserves to suffer: "There's no place for bullying and intolerance" (Giants); "There's no reason to tolerate bullying" (Cubs); "No one deserves to be the victim of bigotry and hatred" (Mariners); "There is no place for bullying and hatred of LGBT kids or anyone" (Tampa Bay Rays); "You should never experience being bullied, intimidated, or pressured to be something you're not" (Phillies); "You should not have to hide who you are" (Orioles). Here, LGBT youth are encouraged to assert their rights to live in violence-free atmospheres and to live authentically. The Tampa Bay Rays tell LGBT youth to "Step up to the plate, stay strong." The

assertive tone of the messages of athletes compared to those of other *It Gets Better* participants makes sense if we consider how the masculine culture of professional sports intersects with the successful construction of victimization in social problems work.

Social problems work, conceptualized by Loseke (1999) as the activity involved in the construction of phenomena as problematic for society, must evoke an emotional response surrounding the issue of concern and the characters involved. In order for us to feel sympathy for victims, it is important that victims of a social problem be constructed as innocent and morally upright (Dunn, 2004; Loseke, 2009). However, the successful construction of victims is problematic; cultural connotations of weakness and non-responsibility associated with victimization are in conflict with cultural values of strength and self responsibility, making it difficult for claims-makers to construct victims in a way that resonates with positive rather than stigmatized cultural ideals (Dunn, 2004; Loseke, 2009). Compounding problems, the attribution of weakness and passivity to victimization effectively feminizes the victim character (Dunn, 2005), explaining the incomprehensibility of adult men as victims (Lucal, 1995). If, as Whitson (1990) argues, it is true that sport plays a central role in the social construction of masculinity, athletes (particularly male athletes, as is the case here) should be reluctant to champion support for weak and passive (and thereby feminized) victim characters.

The solution to the victim dilemma has emerged in the form of "survivors," (Dunn, 2004) and "heroes" (Loseke, 2009). Survivors and heroes retain their blamelessness for the injustice suffered while redeeming victims from passivity and weakness. In this way, they offer a construction of a character who resonates with U.S. cultural ideals such as strength and self-sufficiency, invoking feeling of admiration rather than (deplorable) pity (Dunn, 2004; Loseke 2009). When athletes tell LGBT youth that "No one deserves to be the victim of bigotry and

hatred" (Mariners), they are constructing LGBT youth as blameless for the bullying to which they are subjected. In asserting that, "There's no reason to tolerate bullying" (Cubs), and encouraging LGBT youth to, "Step up to the plate, stay strong" (Tampa Bay Rays), athletes encourage an active resistance to injustice which is more characteristic of a survivor or hero than it is of a victim. However, despite the assertions that bullying is an intolerable problem which simply must cease, it is disappointing to note that these messages offer little commentary on the social attitudes from which homophobic bullying emerges. In the absence of a challenge to hegemonic constructions of masculinity in modern U.S. society, it is interesting to consider whether the messages contributed by athletes can have any significant impact on countering the homophobic culture of sports.

#### "Don't Be Fucking Shocked": The Politics of Bullying

While the *It Gets Better* videos of heterosexual athletes fall short on commenting on the social attitudes fostering homophobic teen bullying, a number of videos do recognize the intolerant attitudes of bullies as a learned adaptation of similarly intolerant attitudes expressed by heterosexist and homophobic political, religious, and parental figures as well as anti-gay public policies. The *It Gets Better* videos of actor Kathy Griffin and comedian Sarah Silverman hold anti-gay public figures culpable for cultivating homophobic attitudes:

"The politicians, so-called religious leaders, and pundits who have made careers out of saying that being gay is wrong, or immoral, or that gays are somehow less-than: they all have blood on their hands...That's why it's so important that Prop 8 gets thrown out by the Supreme Court, and Don't Ask Don't Tell gets repealed. Because right now the message the government is sending our young people is that it's unacceptable and inferior to be gay. And that's when you grow up thinking you're a second-class citizen when you're not" (Griffin).

This message works to challenge homophobic attitudes as well as affirming gay identity. Silverman similarly attacks the American tradition of homophobic public policy, saying: "Dear America: When you tell gay Americans that they can't serve their country openly, or marry the person that they love, you're telling that to kids, too. So don't be fucking shocked and wonder where all these bullies are coming from that are torturing young kids and driving them to kill themselves because they're different. They learned it from watching you."

Silverman and Griffin's messages point out that, while it is good that bullying is entering the agenda for public discussion as a social problem, it is inconsistent to champion for the rights of LGBT youth while continuing to deny the rights of LGBT adults. Similarly, straight allies from Kent State University tell stories about gay friends who were kicked out of their homes when they came out, saying, "We can't act like we live in a free country when we have second class citizens." These messages connect larger cultural attitudes with the bully phenomenon, calling upon adults to be responsible for the social climate which has made the cruel treatment of queer youth acceptable.

A similar theme is present in the narratives of four non-public figure participants who ground their messages in a condemnation of conservative Christianity. These participants all identify as Christians and say that Christians who spread messages of hatred for LGBT people are not behaving "Christ-like." Two of these participants can relate directly to the experiences of bullying suffered by queer youth because, despite their straight sexual identities, they were perceived to be queer and were bullied and harassed accordingly:

"When I was in middle school I was bullied... I was the mascot and so I hung out with lots of the cheerleaders. I wasn't into sports I loved theatre and I liked music. I wasn't into the jock-y things and sports and that kind of stuff so I was bullied and I was picked on and I can remember being

called faggot all the time and queer and walking down the hallways and kids tripping me and purposely talking bad about me right in front of my face...I didn't understand how people could be so judgmental without even knowing me... I realized that that was so wrong and that so many Christians are like that. People who go around saying they love God and they want to be Christ like and then they treat people who are homosexual from the LGBT community like this- and even people who aren't" (It Gets Better: A Christian Apology).

Straight Christian allies apologize for the hatred spread in the name of Christ, assure queer youth that there are Christians who support and love them, and highlight passages of scripture which suggest that LGBT people are alright by God, too. Straight Christian allies urge their fellow Christians and their church leaders to reevaluate positions of condemnation, saying that the Church is supposed to be a place where all people are accepted and loved.

In their framing of the bullying problem as a response to the homophobic attitudes of adults, *It Gets Better* participants narrow the scope of the issue; conservative politics and religion become the villain of the bullying problem while the contributions of heterosexual privilege and hegemonic constructions of masculinity go unexamined. In part due to contemporary constructions of children as an "at risk" population whom adults have an obligation to protect (Best, 1990), the idea that LGBT children should be protected from violent bullies has gone largely uncontested. Our moral evaluations of children as an "innocent" population have apparently been extended to LGBT youth in the case of the bullying problem, rendering a "progay-teen-bullying" position fairly incomprehensible. The introduction of the construction of conservative-ism as the villain character in the bullying story, then, incorporates an element of moral polarization which constrains the response of potential audiences (Loseke, 2009), making the villianificiation of conservative public figures an effective claims-making move. However,

limiting the discussion to conservative politics and religion comes at the expense of addressing problematic constructions of gender, particularly where conflating heterosexuality with masculinity results in equating homophobia with manliness (Kimmel, 2007; Messner, 1992; Pascoe, 2007; Plummer, 1999). Such a single-issue focus of attacks against homophobic attitudes is detrimental in its failure to call upon the problematic contents of hegemonic gender ideology as a source of bigotry and intolerance.

#### **Conclusion**

Flying in the face of critiques of the *It Gets Better Project* which suggest that it is a movement divorced from action, my analysis of the discourse circulating It Gets Better videos contributed by heterosexual individuals finds the discourse to be infused with political consciousness. By emphasizing the value in "being yourself," It Gets Better participants call upon an essential conception of the self, borrowing rhetoric from the broader LGBT rights movement, which has experienced success in advocating for LGBT people as an oppressed minority based on the assertion that one does not "choose" to be gay. The presence of claimsmaking rhetoric also indicates political undertones, as simultaneous constructions of LGBT youth as blameless victims and empowered actors reflect the need of social problems actors to evoke an empathetic response to the bullying problem. Additionally, claims-making potential is ripe in morally polarizing constructions of conservative, homophobic political, religious, and parental figures as the villains of the bullying problem, cornering us to choose to side either against innocent children or against intolerant bigots. Finally, in deciding to contribute videos to the It Gets Better Project, heterosexual participants make a political statement that concern for the problem of LGBT bullying should be extended to straight society as well. Taken together,

these four themes suggest that the *It Gets Better Project* is indeed generating conceptualizations of the bullying problem that have meaningful implications for social justice activism.

I have also pointed out a number of contradictions contained within the *It Gets Better* discourse which potentially limit its effectiveness in realizing the goal of social justice for LGBT people. Concentration on conservative public figures and parents as the root of attitudes encouraging homophobic bullying ignores the problematic hegemonic construction of masculinity and its conflation with heterosexuality as a source of heterosexism and homophobia. It is also curious to note the coinciding presence of messages such as those of Sarah Silverman and Cathy Griffin, which focus on homophobia and marginalization as American traditions, and the politicians' discourse, which concentrates on the Americanism of realizing equality for disenfranchised groups.

Silverman and Griffin remind us how long-lived and deeply entrenched attitudes of sexual intolerance are. Additionally, given the continued struggle for equality faced by many minorities despite (in the case of Black Americans) decades of legislative acknowledgement of their rights to equal participation as citizens, perhaps we should question the politicians' assertion that equal rights are inevitable for LGBT youth. This has been the position of radical critics of liberal LGBT rights activism: inserting LGBT people into existing heterosexist and homophobic institutions will not result in liberation of LGBT people so long as hegemonic discourses regarding gender, sex, sexuality, and essentialized constructions of the self are left unchallenged. Through examining the contradictions of competing claims (Loseke, 1999) within the *It Gets Better* discourse, we can see social problems actors struggling to construct effective claims which adequately represent the various interests of a diverse LGBT population. While the *It Gets Better Project* was not originally imagined to be a political project, *It Gets Better* 

participants contribute to political discourses through their narrative constructions of themselves, LGBT youth, and the problem of homophobic teen bullying.

This study is limited in its use of a non-random sample of *It Gets Better* videos. Future studies should attempt to create a broader, more representative sample of *It Gets Better* videos in order to better identify the existence of common thematic categories. Future research should investigate the presence of recurring thematic categories described in this study, such as essentialized conceptions of the self and claims-making strategies, in the *It Gets Better* videos of LGBT participants or across a random sample of videos. In addition, future research on heterosexual LGBT rights activism should extend beyond the *It Gets Better Project* to consider the contributions of straight allies in LGBT rights activism, gay/straight alliance programs, and on other on-line projects, such as the *NO H8* campaign. As concern for the recognition of LGBT people as deserving of full human rights extends beyond the borders of the LGBT community, it will be important to consider how the participation of heterosexual allies redefines the problem of homophobic discrimination as an issue for *everyone* to be concerned about.

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