
Making a Case for General Qualitative Descriptive

Revealing Cisgender and Heterosexual Fragilities

ABSTRACT This research used general qualitative descriptive to explore LGBTQ+ social justice education interventions (SJEIs) facilitator experiences—commonly named safe zones—and how that role influenced their self-awareness, and perceptions of campus and campus constituents. This article signals the importance of general qualitative descriptive as a queerly robust approach to stand as its own sufficient methodology. The article focuses only on participants who facilitated LGBTQ+ SJEIs on their campus (81 of 87 participants), using social justice education pedagogy and praxis as our conceptual frameworks. Our findings highlight how the role affirms facilitators' queer and trans identities. Additionally, our findings reveal how facilitation focused on catering to cis and heterosexual fragility and attendee desires to remain passive, not active, allies. **KEYWORDS** LGBTQ+; Social justice; Self-awareness; Safe zone; General qualitative descriptive

In a search for current manifestations of heterosexism and trans oppression, we need only look to the pernicious legislative agendas that seek to erase and silence trans and queer (TQ) youth (Branigin & Kirkpatrick, 2022). Queer and trans antagonism in the current political climate reveals that, despite many efforts to transform views in the U.S. of minoritized sexualities and genders, efforts to diminish the dignity of TQ people persist. In fact, this persistence exposes enduring hegemonic norms instrumental to the maintenance and propulsion of intersectional oppression (Crenshaw, 1991; Lorde, 1983). In the context of higher education, there exist histories of policies and practices aimed to silence and exclude queerness from campus (e.g., Nash & Silverman, 2015; Ferguson, 2019; Werth, 2001). In response to, or in spite of, these histories, since at least the late 1990s, faculty and staff at various institutions endeavored to offer educational efforts in the form of diversity workshops (McCauley et al., 2000) to improve campus climate for minoritized groups, including LGBTQ+ communities.

These early diversity workshops were distinctive from curricular approaches because of their compressed time of hours versus weeks,

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intentional use of activities to increase group interaction (e.g., storytelling and reflection sharing), and responsibility of facilitation fell to staff and administrators, not faculty (McCauley et al., 2000). Safe zone or safe space workshops—what we refer to as LGBTQ+ social justice educational interventions (SJEIs) because of their intention to interrupt hetero- and cisnormativities—are akin to these diversity workshops and gained popularity in higher education around this same time (Draughn et al., 2002; Poynter & Tubbs, 2007). A scant amount of research appeared in the 30 years that followed the emergence of LGBTQ+ SJEIs on campus that examined the role, impact, and curriculum of LGBTQ+ SJEIs (Poynter & Tubbs, 2007; Woodford et al., 2014). Receiving even less attention than LGBTQ+ SJEIs themselves was any information about educators who facilitate them. Possibly the expectation was that facilitation of LGBTQ+ SJEIs was the responsibility of LGBT student services staff, a still-emerging functional area in student affairs during these three decades (Fine, 2012; Marine, 2011; Sanlo, 2000). Yet, even as LGBTQ+ centers continue to come into existence at colleges and universities—a total of 262 in the U.S. as of this writing—that still leaves approximately 93% of degree granting institutions without this important resource (Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2020; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). Thus, students, faculty, and staff could be the facilitator of LGBTQ+ SJEIs, and little is known about their experiences in this role.

The goal of this research project was an exploration of LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitators. Due to the paucity of foundational research on LGBTQ+ SJEIs, determining a specific qualitative approach seemed an arbitrary decision, not an informed choice. The appeal of general qualitative descriptive was its permeable methodological boundaries that encourage experimentation between traditions (Sandelowski, 2010). Additionally, general qualitative descriptive demands only that findings remain close to the data, not adherence to any theory, leaving data analysis open to a multitude of conceptual and theoretical possibilities (Sandelowski, 2010).

This article is a lengthy rebuttal to various methodological reviewer comments on manuscripts generated from these data who expressed considerable dubiousness about the appropriateness (read: rigor) of general qualitative descriptive for higher education research. In response, we argue that general qualitative descriptive queers qualitative methods by its resistance to rules, distinctions, and refusal to offer allegiance to ideas about any correct ways to conduct research (Patel, 2022; Sandelowski, 2010). In this article we advance

how general qualitative descriptive opened up pathways to describe LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitators as a type of diversity worker who puts in the effort and energies, sometimes in the face of resistant and antagonistic attendees, with the hope of changing hearts and minds toward more inclusive behaviors and thinking (Ahmed, 2012). Through an expansive research approach, we exposed and interrupted well-intentioned practices to reveal how they may be complicit with flattening out the nuances of queer and trans lives, and potentially contributing to, instead of subverting, normativities. To demonstrate the possibilities of general qualitative descriptive to higher education research, this article, an examination of a subset of participants, describes how facilitation impacted participant self-perception and perceptions of campus. Our research questions for this aspect of the project were:

- How did self-awareness manifest in participants' approach to facilitation?
- How did the role or process of facilitation influence participants' self-awareness and/or their perceptions of campus?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ostensibly, the role of LGBTQ+ SJEIs is to develop “a critical mass of heterosexual and cisgender individuals who support LGBTQ+ individuals” (DeVita & Anders, 2018, p. 65). To garner a critical mass—one we would argue must include LGBTQ+ individuals too—requires a design to meet attendees at various knowledge levels and facilitators must expect a range of attendee reactions to the content and process (Catalano, 2022; Catalano & Simms, under review). Formal classroom spaces tend to be the context for the examination of pedagogical tools, specifically those used to engender safe space (Baxter Magolda, 2000; Gayle et al., 2013). Instructors must know “how best to deal with tensions, hostility, and general crankiness that can accompany a challenging class discussion” (Gayle et al., 2013, p. 3). Gayle et al. (2013) named the dynamics as a “paradox of participation” (p. 1): more contentious course topics increase participation risk, which can stifle deep learning.

Research on responding to students who demonstrate resistance to diversity or multicultural education in class highlighted the limited scholarship on this pedagogical challenge (Mildred & Zúñiga, 2004). Intergroup dialogue, a specific pedagogical approach that facilitates discussion across and within social identity groups, requires instructors to have the developmental

readiness to attend to the tensions, conflicts, content, and emotions that surface within that environment (Quaye & Johnson, 2016). Although LGBTQ+ SJEIs typically occur outside of a formal classroom setting, facilitators must respond to challenges like those of diversity education instructors such as attendee discomfort and resistance from content or activities in the design (Catalano, 2022).

Resistance and discomfort might also serve to recenter cisgender and/or heterosexual identities, experiences, and norms. Oaster (2019) leaned on DiAngelo's (2019) work on white fragility to construct a working definition of cisgender fragility (cis-fragility) as defensive reactions to trans/non-binary expressions and existence of genders. Oaster (2019) asserted that cis-fragility persists because "cisgender people in the United States are socialized in an environment that cushions and screens them from gender-identity-based stress" (p. 9). Cis-fragility, once triggered, operates through defensive acts and false claims (Oaster, 2019). Similarly, heterosexual fragility is a way to describe caretaking of heterosexuals when they find conversations about queerness too uncomfortable or examinations of heterosexual privilege as too fraught. Fragility becomes apparent when, in response to challenges of cis and heterosexual supremacy, individual or collective reactions occur to deny or subsume those critiques (Bell, 2016; Oaster, 2019).

Ideally, LGBTQ+ SJEIs contribute to transforming institutions of higher education into more inclusive places and spaces by interrupting these gender and sexuality hegemonic dynamics. However, assertions about institutional commitments to diversity through LGBTQ+ SJEIs often diverged from institutional actions (Ahmed, 2012). Ahmed's (2012) work contributed the powerful concept of *non-performatives* where institutions name a commitment that actually obscures how the institution makes no efforts to bring that commitment into effect. LGBTQ+ SJEIs, as an institutional commitment, suffer from benign neglect (Catalano et al., in press) whereby facilitators experience unenforceable authority, administrative gaslighting, and scarcity of resources. In this way, we must recognize how it would impact an individual to recognize that their work as a facilitator for an LGBTQ+ SJEI is a non-performative, a kind of tick-box diversity that signals a completed task or a "tick in the box" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 118). In this tick-box approach to LGBTQ+ SJEIs, the commitment is a hollow gesture where "being behind" can become an institutional performance: a statement of commitment might create *an illusion of the behind*" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 119).

In recognition of LGBTQ+ SJEIs as a non-performative, we also characterize LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitation as diversity education and facilitators as diversity workers (Ahmed, 2012) because they engage in “training colleagues in hopes of increasing the institution’s broader capacity to care, or to at least minimize the harm inflicted on students” (Anderson, 2021, p. 365). Facilitation skills are akin to pedagogical approaches in their intention to cultivate attendee learning, development, and reflection. At the same time, diversity education requires facilitators to have self-awareness of their own identities and group dynamics (Adams, 2016; Bell et al., 2016). Failure to recognize and develop self-awareness of the impact of facilitation can lead to compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995; McCloud, 2021), queer battle fatigue (Robinson, 2022), racial battle fatigue (Gorski, 2019; Quaye et al., 2020), and problematic responses to triggering events (Love, 2021; Obear, 2007). Our research is an advancement of existing scholarship that names the impact of the facilitator role in diversity education and how their role influences how they experience themselves and their campus (see Lau et al., 2011; Obear, 2007; Quaye & Johnson, 2016).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We use social justice education (SJE) pedagogy as our conceptual framework because it requires instructors/facilitators to grapple with the complex dynamics of groups that includes cognitive and emotional reactions to both content and the process of learning (Adams, 2016). Educational spaces are not neutral spaces, as the dynamics of oppression that exist outside the space tend to manifest within the space, reflecting attendee and facilitator thoughts and experiences (Adams, 2016). Experience helps prepare an educator or facilitator for their role, yet they must also recognize how “each classroom or workshop experience feels ‘new’ because of the mix of participants and the unknown dynamics and issues that may arise” (Adams, 2016, p. 37).

Necessary in the preparation of a facilitator of social justice education is intentional and intensive attention to critical self-knowledge that includes explorations and recognition of social identities; dynamics of privilege and oppression connected to those identities; influence and recognition of norms, assumptions, and biases; communication and interpersonal style; ability to notice and respond to group dynamics; reactions and responses to emotional intensity; and ability to navigate competence and authority (Bell et al., 2016). Put simply, facilitation of LGBTQ+ SJEIs requires an individual to achieve

a depth in understanding of what is both familiar to them and unfamiliar, as well as a willingness to continuously learn and reexamine their own knowledge. Facilitators lead LGBTQ+ SJEIs where they must manage group dynamics that include a “complex mix of feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and experiences that make us who we are, as well as monitor how this affects our interactions with participants and handling of group processes” (Bell et al., 2016, p. 405). To engage in facilitation that centers a social justice education approach requires content knowledge, process attention, and self-awareness.

In an LGBTQ+ SJEI, facilitators must recognize how their identities are also central to the educational experience and are an integral part of the learning process (Bell et al., 2016). “The more aware we are of how who we are affects our knowledge, awareness, approaches, and interactions, the more effective we can be” (Bell et al., 2016, p. 399). Central to social justice education pedagogy is the use of praxis, action corresponding to intentional reflection, to deepen facilitator self-awareness (Freire, 2003). Praxis is a process that enhances capacities to bring about political and societal change through acting and reflecting to transform the world (Freire, 2003). In our research, we hoped to understand how the act of facilitating an LGBTQ+ SJEI influenced both the facilitator’s sense of self and their perceptions of attendees and campus. We used social justice education (Adams, 2016; Bell et al., 2016) and praxis (Freire, 2003) in our data analysis to explore how participants described the impact of their role.

METHODOLOGY

General qualitative descriptive (Sandelowski, 2000) has a variety of names such as generic qualitative research (Caelli et al., 2003; Cooper & Endacott, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2015) and interpretive description (Thorn et al., 1997). General qualitative descriptive offered an approach to understanding LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitators that would provide insights about these understudied phenomena (Merriam, 1998). The flexibility of general qualitative descriptive allowed for a methodological bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001), similar to how Tillapaugh and Nicolazzo (2015) used an epistemological bricolage. In practice, this means Catalano conducted semi-structured interviews, and moved through data collection somewhat conceptually and theoretically naked (Sandelowski, 2010). The interview protocol was vast and covered institutional context, history and content of the training, facilitation style and experience, perceptions of impact, and conceptual ideas conveyed

about allyship and safety. The goal of the project was to provide a comprehensive description and stay close to the data (Sandelowski, 2000).

General qualitative descriptive is a discovery process, an invitation for contributions to develop a greater understanding (Sandelowski, 2010). As aligned with qualitative descriptive methods, Catalano remained open to theoretical or conceptual frameworks throughout the data collection process (Caelli et al., 2003; Sandelowski, 2010). General qualitative descriptive does not mean an absence of criticality. Instead, it demands researcher transparency to reveal how our conceptual framework informed our data analysis and discussion of our findings (Caelli et al., 2003). As co-authors, we recognized the threads of critical stances we brought to the project—explained in our “Researcher Positionalities” section—which led us to embrace social justice education as a conceptual framework. General qualitative descriptive afforded us the conceptual nimbleness to be generative contributors who desired to offer research about and for diversity workers “that does not seek to over-determine the future and also recognizes responsibility as duty” (Patel, 2022, p. xi). This led to a harmony with our choice of conceptual framework of social justice education, and resulted in an approach to the data with a goal to disrupt, unsettle, and potentially transform LGBTQ+ SJEIs (Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2022). Our use of social justice education as our conceptual framework means we desired to engage in transformative research to contest systemic inequities and power asymmetries, center the well-being of minoritized groups, and commit to conducting research that improves the social world and enhances social justice (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Mertens, 2015; Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2022).

Researcher Positionalities

As authors and collaborators on this project, we have extensive experience as social justice educators, supervising and training student leaders in social justice education initiatives and studying social justice in higher education. Additionally, we studied and worked at institutions ranging from small, private liberal arts colleges to large, public research universities. These experiences enhance our understanding of various social justice education initiatives and help us uncover facilitator perceptions. Our shared social identities (e.g., as queer people) and distinctive identities and experiences (e.g., gender, racial, and dis/ability identities) strengthen our analysis in how they influence our perceptions of these data. We also recognize how power manifests in our co-author relationship in our social identities, socialization, and institutional

roles as a faculty member and doctoral student. We began our co-researcher relationship with attention to how our positionalities influenced our working dynamic and reveal them here as a measure of trustworthiness in how they influence our research process.

Data

After securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, Catalano put out a call to potential participants through email listservs and social media platforms in the hopes of reaching a diversity of participants (e.g., social identities, institutional types). Catalano conducted interviews with all participants between April and August of 2020. These data represent a subsection ($n = 81$) from a larger project ($n = 87$). We exclude the one participant from outside the United States, and five whose LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitation did not occur on their specific campus (i.e., conference session presentation). Of those 81 participants, some facilitated as a volunteer on their campus (facilitating as few as one time an academic year) to those for whom facilitation was a part of their position description (facilitating many times within a single academic semester). An open field questionnaire was how participants supplied their demographic information, which is a challenge to represent in the aggregate. For instance, participant roles on campus were 8 in a faculty role of some kind, 49 in a student affairs position, 16 in a staff or academic affairs position, and 8 identified as students (graduate and undergraduate). We provide the names and unedited demographic language of participants whose direct quotations we use within this article (Table 1). Each participant had the ability to choose their own pseudonym and review interview transcripts (member-checking), although not all availed themselves of those opportunities. For language clarity, we refer to LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitators as participants (they were participants in this project) and those who attend LGBTQ+ SJEIs as attendees.

Analytic Approach

We focused our coding process to consider our research questions in a way that would allow us to center perceptions of participants. In our first cycle coding, we isolated content-based segments, which indexed the data for easier categorization; these were the responses to questions about how facilitating LGBTQ+ SJEIs impacted how they thought about their own identities and their perception of campus and campus constituents (Saldaña, 2021). Then we engaged in pattern coding to explore what was within each larger category

TABLE 1. Highlighted Participants

Participant Name	Demographics
Alpine	a queer, white, queer/trans person (they/them)
Astin	a queer, Black, nonbinary person (they/them)
Ayden	a queer, white, genderqueer/nonbinary person (they/them)
Blake	a queer, white, nonbinary person (she/her or they/them)
Christian W.	a queer, white, female (she/her)
Darby	a biqueer, white, woman (She/her)
Dustin	a queer, Asian American, trans male (he/him)
Ezra	a demi, unknown racial identification, agender person (they/them)
Gibson	a queer, white, non-binary, trans masculine person (he, she, they)
Gwen	a bi/pan/queer, white, cis-gender female (she/her)
Isabella	a queer, Latinx/multiracial, trans woman (she/her)
Jamie	a queer/gay, white non-Hispanic, cisgender man (he/him)
Kat Murray	a queer, white, genderfluid person (she/her)
Ken	a gay, Asian/Japanese, cis man (he/him)
Lily	a not straight white woman (she/her)
Lucy	a lesbionic, white, femme cis woman (she/her)
Marley	a queer, white, nonbinary person (they/them)
Marlow	a queer, white/Jewish, cis woman (they/them or she/her)
Mike J.	a queer, Black, cisman (he/him)
Sophie	a pansexual white female (she/her)
Walker	a queer/gay, white, man (he/him)
Wray	a queer, white, womxn (she/her or they/them)

(Saldaña, 2021). We did this round of coding in isolation from each other, using only a small sample of transcripts. We then met to discuss our initial findings and develop a codebook, which functioned as a method of trustworthiness and a confirmation mechanism (Mertens, 2015). We coded the remaining transcripts using the codebook, making notes of expansions to discuss in meetings or in shared researcher memos. Next, we consolidated themes to highlight patterns and reveal insights about participant experiences. Throughout the coding process we regularly wrote each other memos about our individual coding process and met regularly to discuss and describe connections we deemed emergent in the data (Janesick, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wolcott, 1995). We contend that our former professional roles

that included LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitation provide a foundation to articulate the goodness of our findings, as well as to determine the transferability of said findings.

FINDINGS

We present our findings in two discrete categories. The first major category is self-awareness with themes of narratives of identity and experience as educational materials, facilitation as affirmation of self, and facilitation as dangerous. Our second major category addresses participants' perceptions of campus and campus constituents. This category has two themes of discouraging experiences and perceptions and assuaging attendee fears.

Self-Awareness

Many LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitators, like Jamie, “started wanting to do this work because I saw a need where I was.” The three themes of narratives of identity and experience as educational materials, facilitation as affirmation of self, and facilitation as dangerous collectively illuminate how facilitation of LGBTQ+ SJEIs influences facilitator sense of self. However, we must note there was a small handful of participants who felt they already were self-aware and LGBTQ+ SJEIs had no meaningful impact on their sense of self. Of those participants, most reported they engaged in reflection earlier in their career that led them to this role as an LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitator. For instance, Ken asserted, “I think I learned a lot about my identity through either my classes or I guess education.” Within this group were some participants who still engaged in growth and learning; it was just that the LGBTQ+ SJEI was not necessarily the space where that occurred. And, though even smaller in number, there were participants who stated they had no need for growth or reflection—a concerning assertion when praxis (reflection and action) is pivotal to SJE pedagogy.

Use of Identity and Experience to Educate Participants often shared their LGBTQ+ identity(ies), how they came to that identity(ies), and experience related to their gender and/or sexuality to educate attendees in training. Participants intentionally revealed examples from their own life about how they once too were ashamed and or uneducated around LGBTQ+ topics. Dustin went on to disclose:

As an undergrad you would not catch me dead in an [LGBTQ+ Center]. And it was pretty much because, at that time, I was afraid of what it would mean if somebody saw me walk into the [LGBTQ+ Center]. I refused to acknowledge it for myself.

Dustin shared his revelation with attendees in service of a broader theme of growth in comfort to increase connections with LGBTQ+ spaces and people. Participants believed that their use of personal narratives was an important aspect that increased learning and attendee engagement.

Participants also drew stories from their recognition of privilege to teach about what it means to enact allyship. For example, Marlow reflected their privileged standpoints with, “as a White cis person, I think a lot about my privilege in these trainings because a large part of what I want to do is to advocate for trans People of Color.” Participants discussed how they must consider a variety of factors when they make facilitation choices of how to connect with attendees about allyship. Facilitation included the precarious challenge of how to invite in an array of voices and how to avoid placing additional labor on those with minoritized identities to speak on behalf of that group.

At the same time, participants shared how they intentionally chose to resist pressure to share their personal narratives because it felt too intimate. Mike J. shared,

So much of this work can be so personal. . . . You oftentimes are having to teach people about your trauma. And teach people about the things that have affected you and how you have had to move throughout the world, how people perceive you throughout the world. But people just kind of see you as this facilitator, not somebody who actually has the lived experiences.

Mike J., and other participants, felt pressure to share of themselves, and if they did not reveal themselves when asked intrusive questions, then attendees failed to see them as a whole human. Attendees expected facilitators to be vulnerably revealing for their own edification. As the next two themes in this finding will demonstrate, the dynamics of self-awareness for participants was a complicated binary.

Affirmation of Self Some participants described how LGBTQ+ SJEIs affirmed their experiences and identities. Facilitating LGBTQ+ SJEIs gave participants a platform to develop confidence about sharing their identities, which led to increased comfort with their identity, and feeling more

connections with LGBTQ+ communities. Sophie offered that she had not disclosed her identity at previous institutions. She explained, “And I think having the opportunity to share knowledge and understanding with people around campus has given me that confidence to say, this is who I am.” Participants described how outing themselves and willingly sharing their personal experiences during LGBTQ+ SJEIs helped them build relationships with colleagues across campus. Aren shared how it was common for someone to approach them after an LGBTQ+ SJEI saying, “Oh my God, thank you. I thought I was the only one.” These interactions provided ways for participants to feel more entrenched in their campus community, as well as served as an affirmation through shared experiences, positive and negative.

The connections participants felt with others that affirmed their identities also manifested in a feeling of responsibility to serve as an advocate. Gibson saw himself as an advocate who wanted to replicate how he received support as a student. Gibson described, “It feels empowering and impactful to be able to try to create that change within the spaces that I occupy.” Participants specifically described LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitation as sites of learning that held them accountable about their privilege and encouraged them to consider the complexity of intersecting identities. Jamie provided an example of this: “And then by involving and by leading and facilitating these, I want to be the best facilitator I can be. So, [I am] making sure that I am knowledgeable and up-to-date and expansive in my ability to answer tough questions.” Jamie’s diligence and investment in his own learning was a common component across participants, with worries they did not know enough (Catalano, 2022). A vast majority of participants found facilitation had a positive impact on how they viewed themselves and their identities. At the same time, LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitation also surfaced feelings of danger for participants.

Facilitation as Dangerous In tension with facilitation as a site of affirmation and advocacy was how participants described facilitation as a risky action, dangerous. During an LGBTQ+ SJEI, participants experienced threats that made them feel vulnerable and inadequate. These threats most commonly manifested in choices to hide their identities and continuously intrusive questions. As LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitators, participants become public figures on campus. Kat Murray shared how she only shares her gender identity with a select few such as those she is in close relationship with and those whom she deems need to know; her gender identity is not up for discussion in

LGBTQ+ SJEIs. She explained, “The reason why I’m not as out with that identity on campus is ‘cause I don’t want to have to talk about it during a training. I don’t want . . . them to make it about me.” Her intentional boundary about what she willingly shares during an LGBTQ+ SJEI was similar to how other participants stated disinterest in LGBTQ+ SJEI as a space where their identity is up for discussion or dissection. Such a dynamic was especially true when a participant’s own journey of identity was still under self-examination, or if they perceived that attendees would not be receptive to their identity.

Participants shared how attendees seemed to expect facilitators to share their personal narratives during LGBTQ+ SJEIs. Ezra felt this expectation was fraught with danger given how leaders at their institution refused to come out because of negative professional consequences. Ezra noted that their director was “too afraid to come out because they think they won’t be able to progress to the next step.” Certainly, none of the participants believed an individual should come out if the person is not ready or interested. What Ezra’s quotation draws attention to is a discrepancy between espoused values of inclusion that should liberate Ezra to share, yet such disclosure would be a career-ending move for a senior administrator. At the same time, a senior administrator shared her doubts about Gwen’s choice to come out in an LGBTQ+ SJEI. Gwen relayed how the senior administrators said, “Because I have been doing these trainings for many, many years and I would never come out.” Gwen experienced this assertion as a form of chastisement and considered this a warning message that self-disclosure was dangerous.

Christian W. described how he must not emotionally react to intrusive or offensive questions:

When you’re doing these trainings, you have to realize that they’re going to ask questions that are going to insult you and your identity. But you can’t be insulted in that moment because if you become insulted, then it tells them that they asked a stupid question and it’s going to make them feel like they can’t open their mouth or ask any other questions throughout the remainder of the training.

Christian W.’s experience was not unique, as numerous participants shared the emotional restraint they engaged in as part of their facilitation. Another dangerous drain on participants’ emotional fortitude was their response to the relentless challenges that came with LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitation. For

Alpine, they described the exhaustion from feeling distrust toward attendees. Alpine recalled, “There are going to be some really well-intentioned people that may seem like they’re supportive, but I can’t trust them.” Mistrust and doubt about attendee intentions was a heavy weight that many participants carried and caused them to doubt the purpose of their efforts.

Participants were often quite attuned to their self-perceptions, whether from constantly sharing their own identities and experiences, affirmation of self, or recognizing the dangers associated with facilitating an LGBTQ+ SJEI. Most significant in this larger category of self-awareness was the role of continued self-awareness, how LGBTQ+ SJEIs provide affirmation of trans and queer existence, and that regardless of political progress, aspects of danger still accompany facilitation.

Perceptions of Campus and Campus Constituents

When asked about their perceptions of campus and campus constituents, numerous participants shared a sentiment similar to that of Wray, “I’m trying to find an answer that’s not like I have a bunch of assumptions about humans. Like we’re all doing the best that we can and we’re hurting and have been taught a bunch of lies.” This statement conveys the desire to believe everyone has an investment in unlearning practices that perpetuate the enduring realities of power, privilege, and oppression. At the same time, facilitating LGBTQ+ SJEIs influenced participant perceptions of campus and campus constituents. As is reasonable to expect, attendee demeanor influenced how participants viewed individuals, organizations, and offices.

Our findings illuminate how facilitating LGBTQ+ SJEIs influenced participant perceptions of campus and/or campus constituents that we captured in the two themes: discouraging experiences and perceptions, and assuaging attendee fears. Within the discouraging theme, LGBTQ+ SJEIs felt like an obligation or transactional experience, which participants interpreted as a lack of investment in learning. In contrast, assuaging fears provides insights into perceptions of what it means to engage in earnest commitment to growth and learning with examples of positive or noticeable changes to campus, and growth of campus community connections.

Discouraging Experiences and Perceptions Participants described attendee motivations as obligatory or an educational transaction with the end goal of receiving whatever token (e.g., sticker, placard) facilitators distributed. This led to descriptions of attendees, such as by Isabella, as engaged in a kind of

performative allyship. Isabella described inclusion as an ongoing process and that a onetime LGBTQ+ SJEI is insufficient for inclusion. She explained that attendance creates

this false sense of inclusion, which very much feels like poster allyship. Like you come to the pride parade or you go to the drag brunch, but you're not marching with us in the protest. Right? Kind of like that kind of performative activism or allyship.

Instead, attendees use the sticker they receive after completing the LGBTQ+ SJEI as a credential of allyship. These perceptions raise doubts about what the token of completion signals (DeVita & Anders, 2018), and surface important questions about the purpose of LGBTQ+ SJEIs and attendee expectation of what completion means.

As a transactional exchange of attendance for a token as credential, attendees seem to think of LGBTQ+ SJEI content as complete. Clarke described the transactional dynamic this way: "I also think there are definitely folks who this is kind of in one ear and out the other and they came, got the sticker, you know, went on about their day." Similarly, Ayden shared, "But also, even for faculty and staff who had been like, 'I did this training, and now I don't ever have to do a training again or I don't ever really have to think about it again.'" Attendees believe the receipt of a sticker or placard that recognizes the achievement of attendance at an LGBTQ+ SJEI becomes the achievement itself (Ahmed, 2012).

The emphasis is in the display of the token, whereby the work of allyship was the effort to attend an LGBTQ+ SJEI. Darby shared that attendees desire to display the sticker to show support, "but not necessarily doing any work to learn how to support specific populations." This passive allyship translated into attendees having greater interest in completion of an LGBTQ+ SJEI as an act that satisfied a diversity requirement to attain ally status. Marley questioned the impetus behind attendance. They shared, "It's also frustrating sometimes that it feels like it's a checkbox. Like, 'Oh, I need to do this to say that I've done it.' And sometimes those people are really engaged, sometimes they're not at all." As Marley explained, attendance was a form of obligation to demonstrate a kind of goodness in effort without any substantial investment to engage in allyship.

Participants struggle to communicate with attendees and campus writ large that allyship actually means to engage in continuous work. Walker described his frustration this way:

I think most people who work on our campus currently . . . they want to do the right thing. They also don't know they're not doing the right thing and they're actually doing the wrong thing. And so, seeing and experiencing them being able to go, "Hold on. God, I thought I was an ally just because I said you can exist." . . . And then realizing like, "Oh, I have to say we exist and we're all part of this and I value you and nurture you."

From Walker's words, we can glean how he sees the interplay of well-meaning intentions (attendance is allyship) with attendee realizations that allyship requires engagement. This dynamic requires facilitators to endure and support attendees through a range of emotional and cognitive turns, including witnessing this realization that they are inadequately providing any substantial allyship. Understandably, such encounters can challenge facilitators' capacity to be patient and assume the best of attendees. However, we must consider this abundance of discouraging examples in relationship with how their facilitation led to positive outcomes and included earnest engagement by attendees.

Assuaging Attendee Fears A hallmark of the findings was how participants described various aspects of attendee fears about learning, appropriate actions, avoidance of enacting harm, and how that led to positive changes and new relationships across campus. One way to combat the fears attendees brought to LGBTQ+ SJEI sessions was to provide content knowledge. Lily shared, "Most people on our campus want to do the right thing. . . . And most of the time they are absolutely clueless as to how to not hurt queer people." The impetus behind learning was to combat fear to ensure attendance resulted in harm reduction.

Participants described attendees who came with anxiety to the LGBTQ+ SJEI because they wanted to be supportive and demonstrate allyship, but how to enact allyship eluded them. Marley described the dynamic this way:

They want to be there for students, but feel like it's this giant thing. And if they screw up at all, then it's going to totally negate. So they don't even try. And so when we talk about some of the very simple, small things that they can do, I think that they feel more confident and I feel like they feel less anxious.

What Marley's words offer is how pervasive trans and queer antagonism is and amplifies marginalization to make it seem insurmountable. Attendees expressed how they felt overwhelmed with the evolving and contested

language of transness and queerness, which inspired attendee fears of mistakes they equated to failure as an ally. Some attendees seemed to dismiss learning as too big of a task. Thankfully, there were other attendees who recognized that doing better for students meant to work harder.

Participants described various methods to support attendee learning. For instance, Darby shared, “But sometimes it’s okay for them to leave feeling uncomfortable, feeling unfinished.” Darby was intentional to provide an experience where attendees would learn and recognize their learning was “unfinished.” In this way, she anticipated attendee discomfort and offered that a way to diminish that feeling is through sustained educational effort. Participants also increased attendee awareness, to encourage them to notice and recognize useful resources that they never had to pay attention to because of their heterosexual and/or cisgender privilege. In this way, participants hoped to transition attendees and institutions from what Blake described as “ideological support versus the actual support.” Blake’s distinction is significant to consider what it means too for individuals who desire to talk about LGBTQ+ inclusion, yet fail to take action when situations present themselves.

To take action, participants had to create environments for attendees to face their fears as learners. Lucy reported that attendees said things like, “I was scared to talk. I was scared to ask questions. The workshop helped me realize I don’t need to be scared.” Learning is difficult to do if the fear stymies attendees from asking questions. When attendees moved past their fear to engage with the content, there were a lot of positive outcomes. Astin shared this shift as, “I thought I would be defensive the entire time or that I would feel completely overwhelmed and this information is a lot more accessible than I expected it to be.” Astin’s description offered what is possible when attendees move toward making change, not stuck in their fear. Additionally, to hear about or witness the impact or tangible outcome of the LGBTQ+ SJEI on attendees’ behaviors provided participants motivation to continue to facilitate what can sometimes seem like pointless endeavors.

DISCUSSION

Our findings are the consequence of staying close to our data, by not creating an “abstract rendering of our data” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 335). These data offer hopeful possibilities and warning signs about the influence of LGBTQ+ SJEI on facilitators. Our findings reveal the complex dynamics

that facilitators must navigate in their engagement in social justice education. We first review the encouraging aspects that bolster the use of LGBTQ+ SJEIs and the experiences of facilitators. Then we attend to the concerns that accompany the use of LGBTQ+ SJEIs. Finally, in our implications, we will offer opportunities for how to interrupt and/or subvert these dynamics toward liberatory possibilities.

Facilitators perceived LGBTQ+ SJEIs as potentially inspirational endeavors to establish relationships across campus and result in sustained educational efforts. As SJE pedagogy requires the recognition of dynamics outside the space permeating and replicating inside the space, LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitators must contend with this dynamic (Adams, 2016). Participants managed various interplays of power between themselves and attendees and across attendees. They also had to demonstrate patience for those who believed themselves to be allies and find ways to expose the harm they caused without pushing them away as a voluntary attendee; facilitators managed to communicate how learning is necessary for everyone, including for other queer and trans people. Through a lens of SJE pedagogy, facilitators opened attendee thinking to a more capacious notion of allyship, engaging in reflections of what it means to both reckon with privilege and build coalitions across communities. In this way, they sought to cultivate coalitions within queer and trans communities by surfacing how intersecting identities nuances experiences beyond a monolithic understanding (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022). Ultimately, participants amplified how LGBTQ+ SJEIs are integral to their campus to advance inclusion efforts.

LGBTQ+ SJEIs might be integral, yet facilitation was also politically and emotionally dangerous for participants. The perilous realities of LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitation shared by participants also signal a deeper precarity about the impact of non-performatives and preoccupation with cis and hetero fragilities; these are hints of instabilities in diversity, equity, and inclusion structures in higher education. Participants used language of non-performatives to capture the attendee dynamics such as passive allies and poster allyship to denote disappointment in attendee engagement during, but more importantly beyond, attendance at an LGBTQ+ SJEI (Ahmed, 2012). Facilitators noted how attendees seemed disinclined to move beyond gestures into active engagement as an ally. What additionally discouraged participants was the transactional dynamic of attendance, often in exchange for a credential and/or token of completion (e.g., sticker) (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022). Allyship work, in face of transactional expectations for social justice education,

requires facilitators to create an environment where attendees feel vulnerable enough to ask questions, doubt actions, and desire to learn. To achieve such a space requires attention to cisgender and heterosexual fragility (Oaster, 2019).

LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitators recognized the importance of inviting cis and heterosexual attendees into the content and process without being too assertive, which would provoke cis and heterosexual fragilities. There is a risky balance required in LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitation because any imbalance could provoke cis and heterosexual defenses and resistance (Mildred & Zúñiga, 2004). This attention demands a lot of mental energy from facilitators and skews LGBTQ+ SJEI intentions toward using SJE pedagogies to protect cis and heterosexual fragility instead of addressing the harms of non-performative allyship.

SJE pedagogy requires providing opportunities for critical thinking, including critical self-awareness (Adams, 2016; Bell, 2016). A concern our findings revealed, because it is out of alignment with our conceptual framework of SJE pedagogy, was the limited influence on self-awareness reported by participants. This finding requires greater attention and demonstrates the benefits of general qualitative descriptive to open up new pathways for analysis. The out of alignment with SJE pedagogical foundations of an interdependent learning dynamic (Adams, 2016; Freire, 2003) came as the result of how we used our conceptual framework. In fact, the application of SJE pedagogy as a conceptual framework revealed skepticism of participants in how provocative the LGBTQ+ SJEIs were to deepen attendee critical thinking. Instead, and potentially a greater concern, was how LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitators tacitly accepted the responsibility to transform campus through their individual work. Campus transformation requires more than the work of the individual (Ahmed, 2012; Stewart, 2018), and LGBTQ+ SJEIs should not be the only mechanism of institutional transformation. The scarcity of opportunities, the high stakes of each LGBTQ+ SJEI to not squander an opportunity to cultivate allies, and the feelings of diversity, equity, and inclusion antagonism writ large, are incredibly dangerous. Why do facilitators believe this is the only way or opportunity? We speculate the absence of empirical research, especially exploratory, of LGBTQ+ SJEIs that perpetuated how their existence was sufficient for ally development. We suggest intentional efforts to explore how LGBTQ+ SJEIs could cultivate more than passive allyship.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

LGBTQ+ SJEIs provide opportunities for facilitators to cultivate their own self-awareness and form opinions about campus and campus constituents based on attendee behavior, affiliations, and/or willingness to connect beyond the confines of the workshop. We found an absence of some aspects of SJE pedagogy that would inspire attendee (and facilitator) reflection, and we also found that identity integration must be part of the process (Adams, 2016; Bell et al., 2016). Our participants felt significant responsibility to inspire institutional transformations through using LGBTQ+ SJEIs. At the same time, LGBTQ+ SJEIs function as non-performatives that espouse a desire to transform campus without ever calling such action into effect (Ahmed, 2012), and transformational change requires more than the work of an individual. We advocate for honest conversations about the purpose of LGBTQ+ SJEIs on campus, the role of facilitators, and the support available for those who facilitate.

The perpetual existence of oppression seems an unfortunate rationale for the persistence of LGBTQ+ SJEIs in higher education. We wonder how and when institutions of higher education might provide adequate resources to support transformational change (Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Stewart, 2018). In short, the weight of campus transformation cannot remain only with those who facilitate SJEIs. We imagine an initial place to begin would be to provide professional development for facilitators that use SJE pedagogies where they can reflect on their own identities, and how those identities influence content and process choices during facilitation, and imagine ways to process their experiences and insights about attendee and campus dynamics. For those who supervise or work with LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitators, they must accept responsibility to engage in imagining what it means to lead campus inclusion transformation efforts. They must resist being benevolent leaders who support LGBTQ+ SJEI facilitation through their own passive allyship. As Stewart (2018) offered, institutional transformation requires more than individual efforts and window dressing. To do this, LGBTQ+ SJEIs must be more than transactional education that awards attendance, and instead advances change that creates discomfort in their resistance to cis- and heteronormativities. ■

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