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When we break bread together: perceptions of consensus amongst queer organizers

David M. Caswell

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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WHEN WE BREAK BREAD TOGETHER:
PERCEPTIONS OF CONSENSUS AMONGST QUEER ORGANIZERS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by
David M. Caswell
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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to understand consensus decision making through the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) activists in Louisiana through autoethnography and interviews with various individuals involved in Louisiana LGBTQ organizations. When looking at the experiences and perceptions of the participants in relation to each other and the author's own experiences, the ideas equity, responsibility, and flexibility stand out along with organizational structure. This suggests that consensus may be defined based on these elements.

In the narrow scope of this thesis, consensus building in queer spaces in Louisiana can be defined as the opportunity to be in community and to share in power, accountability, and understanding which is created at the intersection between organizational structure and the nature of personal relationships of the actors in that space.

CHAPTER 1: BECOMING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

This thesis aims to understand consensus decision making through the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) activists in Louisiana. Through interviews with various individuals involved in Louisiana LGBTQ organizations, I hope to provide a snapshot of the multiple ways diverse individuals and organizations in the Louisiana LGBTQ community understand, experience, and perform consensus.

You might ask yourself how I arrived at my topic. My interest comes from my own experiences as a *radical* queer¹ in Louisiana. By *radical*, here, I mean simply actively working against normative expectations. I have been a part of various organizations and groups of organizers working to better the political and social environments for LGBTQ people in the state for over three years. I have sat in quite a few meetings in that timespan with other radical queers, and I have watched different groups or variations of those groups work with a different understanding of how to make decisions through consensus as well as how those groups expressed, or performed, consensus and decision making. It would be unethical to ignore my own participation and lived experience in the community with which I am working. There is no reason to hide my own experiences that contribute to the story I wish to tell. Walter Benjamin (1968) states, “The story teller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening [or reading] his tale” (qtd. In Langellier & Peterson, 2004, p. 5). In the following pages I will use my own experience and the experiences reported by others, and I hope to make it the experience of you, my reader.

¹ *Queer* has different meanings. First, I use it here to refer to individual identity, specifically my own. Queer is used as an individual identity by people (usually younger) who feel as though other words (ie. gay or lesbian) do not adequately describe their feelings, attractions, beliefs, or experiences. The term can also be used to refer to the entire lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning community in place of *LGBTQ*. Though it has a history of being used as a slur against the LGBTQ community, it is being used in a positive and empowering way more and more often. Finally, it is used, mostly in academia, to suggest a position outside of societal expectations or norms, sometimes with no connections to sexuality. As a verb (ie. to queer the process), it means to reshape or rework, generally in a way that positions its object outside of societal norms.

Regardless of the context, a researcher's own experiences influence what she writes and produce biases. Edward M. Bruner (1986) is cited in Madison (2005), "By experience we mean not just sense data, cognition, or in Dilthey's phrase, 'the diluted juice of reason,' but also feelings and expectations ... Lived experience, then, as thought and desire, as word and image, is the primary reality" (pp. 4-5). Just so, a researcher's experience shapes her reality, whether that subjectivity is acknowledged or not. Thus, I want to be honest about my biases and to make a conscious effort to identify and express them to the best of my ability.

Alice Walker asked the question, "What is the work my soul must have?" (Madison, 2005, p. 19). If I answer that question honestly, this radical queerness is the work my soul must have. After admitting that, it was clear I needed to shape my research around the non-academic part of *my* life.

My own biases and experiences with consensus building in queer spaces will distort the experiences of others as they are analyzed and interpreted. Tessa Muncey (2010) asks, "Can you really filter out your own experience, even if you wanted to?" (p. 10). Because of this, I include my own experience formally in an autoethnographic account of my own introduction to consensus building, my consequent experiences of the process, and my thoughts and observations of those experiences with the understanding that it informs the information I collect through interviews. Muncey (2010) writes, "As an autoethnographer, your story will emerge out of the juxtaposition of your own experience and outside influences, and the interaction of the two. The desire to engage in autoethnography derives from the disjunctions that occur between one's own experience and the official narrative set out to explain it" (p. 10). Here, she justifies the use of autoethnography to fully include one's own experience in research.

Often, *autoethnography* is conflated with *autobiography*, and understandably so. Ellis (2004) claims, “Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness” (p. 37). It is with this explanation that I enter into my own autobiographical writing as I hope to the point at which autobiography becomes autoethnography, described by Catherine Russell (2003) as “the point where the film- or video maker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes” (p. 276). In this chapter, and throughout this thesis, I attempt to examine my self in relation to the historical and social elements on which I draw. Russell goes on to characterize autoethnography by saying, “Identity is no longer a transcendental or essential self that is revealed, but a “staging of subjectivity” – a representation of the self as a performance” (p. 1). In this chapter, I perform my self as that self was positioned in my first experiences of consensus.

When It Rains (May 2011)

It was cold and raining. That’s right. This isn’t one of those Louisiana tales that starts with a shining sun and perspiration. I was about to walk into Highland Coffees for the first time to escape the wet cold and, more importantly, because I was late for a meeting. So, maybe there was some perspiration. My friends and peers had created an arrangement of four tables that I joined when I walked in. There were five of us.

There we sat, a bunch of queer college kids talking about starting a statewide transgender advocacy organization was necessary. We discussed and debated what to do and how to do it. Is this necessary? How do we find more trans people to get involved? How do we convince them to get involved? What is the best way to serve the trans community’s needs? How do we start?

Why do we need this? These are all questions that were volleyed around our tables and addressed by all of us.

Though it was still new to me – that everyone present was supposed to vocalize their opinions and work with each other to reach a final decision that everyone can agree to – I also shared my thoughts and opinions even with my limited understanding of trans issues at the time. I had had a little bit of practice by this particular meeting.

For the First Time (April 2011)

He was late again. For every date we had had, he was somehow delayed. His explanation was always the same – he was in a meeting. This time was different though because I went looking for him instead of just sitting around. I didn't understand how a group of college kids possibly took so long to meet or why it was so hard for him to tell me the time his meetings would actually end. I had no way of knowing then that the reason was consensus building.

The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) gives a succinct description of consensus decision making in their “Civil Disobedience Training”:

Consensus is a process for group decision-making. It is a method by which an entire group of people can come to an agreement. The input and ideas of all participants are gathered and synthesized to arrive at a final decision acceptable to all. Through consensus, we are not only working to achieve better solutions, but also to promote the growth of community and trust. (p. 19)

This makes consensus sound like an impossible utopia, as we have all sat in meetings where ideas presented were not just different, but in fact opposed. Later in the document ACT UP addresses just that, “Consensus does not mean that everyone thinks that the decision made is necessarily the best one possible, or even that they are sure it will work. What it does mean is that in coming to that decision, no one felt that her/his position on the matter was misunderstood or that it wasn't given a proper hearing” (p. 19). I look to ACT UP for an already published

“queer” perspective on consensus since that is the object of my project, though specifically in Louisiana. While I am unsure of their exact methodology, I believe this guide to have been based on the experiences of active members and organizers in the ACT UP community.

I walked into the LGBTQ Project Coordinator’s office, and there they were – six people, four of whom were sitting on the floor. They all had computers and notebooks. They said, “Hey,” and Eric smiled at me. It was a smile that I did not remember seeing before, so I thought to myself, “Why is he so happy while he is sitting in a meeting, on the floor?” The Coordinator told me to take a seat and join them. Everyone concurred, and Eric was in chorus with them. Apparently, they needed all the help they could get, and I had just stumbled into a crisis.

It is important to note that Eric and I had only been dating, not even in a relationship, for about one week when I stumbled into that meeting. I was also fairly sure that I was his rebound fling since he had just broken up with his boyfriend of over a year.

Nonetheless, I sat down and asked what was going on. They all filled me in – a statewide conference for queer students that they had organized was only a week and a half away, and there was still a lot that needed to be done. Then, I was suddenly being asked my opinion on things like how many programs needed to be printed and who could design these programs. I did not understand why my opinion on these things mattered when I really knew nothing about the conference except that it was happening before sitting down on that floor. I vocalized these thoughts, and I was told that the people in the room get to make these kinds of decisions because those were the people who cared enough to show up.

“Really?” I thought. Upon further pushing, I began to say what I thought. This was extremely strange for me because I never really talked in meeting settings (including class meetings).

I did not know the word for it at the time, but this was my first encounter with consensus building. Everyone was asked to share their opinions, and if people disagreed, everyone tried to come up with a solution or a compromise together. I can now guess that this is what had made Eric smile in such foreign way – that he was amidst a group of people who cared enough about each other and each other's thoughts and feelings to prolong the decision making process to ensure every person in the room felt heard and was a part of the decision to move forward in a particular way. Well, that or he was just really happy to see me. I can say with some certainty though it was not the latter.

I never thought that moment, that decision to go looking for him, would lead me to where I am now. As a part of the leadership of a statewide coalition, I am still a part of a group of queer activists who go to extreme lengths, at least I think they seem extreme to some people, to allow others to voice opinions and beliefs and to feel heard.

Performing Possibilities

As I begin this draft of my Master's thesis, I work on LGBTQ issues in Louisiana in various ways. My graduate assistantship is in the Office of Multicultural Affairs, coordinating the LGBTQ Project and Safe Space Campaign. Until very recently, I was still on the Board of Directors for the statewide transgender organization – the organization that was birthed from that meeting in Highland Coffees. I have done communications work for a citywide LGBTQ education and advocacy nonprofit, and I am the Communications Coordinator for a statewide coalition of over 30 LGBTQ and allied organizations.

I became involved in all three of these organizations while sitting on the floor of the office that my graduate assistantship is now in. I have spent a lot of time on the floor of that office, laptop and many other things at hand, with my best friends. It is where we decided that

the way things were being done in Louisiana was not good enough and that more should be done. It is where the very first discussions of the two statewide organizations with which I work took place.

We realized we needed a new way of organizing for LGBTQ rights in Louisiana. There are local groups that have had some successes, but it has been difficult to translate these successes at the local level into the passage of meaningful and inclusive state legislation. So, we created a new model of openly and proactively coordinating statewide efforts, an absolute commitment to transgender inclusion, and the ability to make sure that voices from all over the state are heard when LGBTQ issues come before the legislature. This new model was in the spirit of how the decision to create such an organization was made – many questions, an abundance of shared information and long discussions.

We have always tried to use consensus building to make decisions, and from those decisions, incredible things have come.

Shaping Our World

As Humpty Dumpty once said, “When I use the word...it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less” (Carroll, 2004, p. 99). Language functions as a major tool in shaping our identities and other people’s perceptions of who we are. Humans rely on language to describe, understand, and know the world that they inhabit. As Burke (1945) wrote, “Men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful *reflections* of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are *selections* of reality” (p. 59). Language functions as a reflection of reality, including the reality of who we are. We use that reflection – and deflection – of ourselves to guide others in how they define us. If language does not exist to describe a situation, or phenomenon, we create language that can.

We designate reality through language, and how we designate reality shapes what that reality means to us. Depending on the words used to describe it, reality can shift and change. It is not fixed. Reality is what we say it is. Words make the world, and we choose which words we use, thus choosing what the world is and what the world means. Thus, we create the processes we dub consensus when we name them consensus.

Imperfect Ideals

I realize that at this point my readers might conclude I think consensus is the best way to make decisions or is always fun and productive and easy. This is not my argument at all. I have been in situations where consensus cannot be reached, where the same discussion goes on for hours, or days, and nothing changes, and where some other democratic method must be used to reach a decision or where the idea has to be dropped altogether.

Looking at what I have experienced in comparison to the definition from ACT UP earlier in this chapter, consensus is an unattainable ideal. Some voices will be louder than others. Someone will feel as though they were not heard or as though their idea is not given enough consideration. People will go into a meeting knowing what they want the outcome to be and with a strategy of how to get there. Consensus seems like an impossibility as long as humans are involved.

However, I do think using the principles of consensus to allow prolonged discussion in order to get everyone on the same page, so to speak, is always useful even if the final decision is made through some other democratic process, such as a two-thirds majority vote. I do advocate for the use of consensus building in queer communities, or in any other community that has been largely silenced, because being heard can be a new and empowering experience for members of

these communities. Even if consensus does not build towards the decision made, it can be a model for discussion to help marginalized voices to be heard.

In many ways, what I have experienced as consensus building is, in fact, not. There are voices that are louder than others and times when particular people drown out anyone else in the room. People and ideas can still be silenced. Compromise is not always compromise. Informal votes are taken, and sometimes the discussion will end with only a majority, albeit usually a large one, agreeing with the decision reached. Despite these things, we do give any person in the room the power to put their foot down if they absolutely feel as though the decision being reached is unacceptable.

The language used to describe our processes by ourselves and others, though, is that of consensus building, exhaustive discussion, and unanimity. That is the reason my project is centered around consensus and how queer organizers in Louisiana. I wanted to know how the people with whom I work and the people with whom I closest have experienced the “radical” term that is consensus. In their everyday lives, I know some of them believe it to be a signifier of radical politics, some of them believe it to be exhausting, and some of them believe it just is not real – not able to be effectively used, but just a theory or an ideal. If I am honest, I fall somewhere between the latter two.

My “Gaze”

When I first started to think about what consensus meant, or what I wanted it to mean in the scope of this project, I did what I think anyone who works in nonprofits doing communications would do. I thought, “How can social media help?” This question may not occur to others in this situation, but if you really think about it, you might realize the following things: social media is free; many demographic groups can be found on one social media

platform or another. We should also consider how easy it is for some people to access social media platforms, even when those people might generally have trouble accessing information through other media.

Given this and taking into account the fact that I have grown up in an age of instant gratification, technological revolution, and globalization, I hope you can see why I would turn to social media in such a situation. Because of the readily accessible information on social media and the potential to inform, evoke, and activate, I, and others like me, are able to see revolutions happening across the world and can take part in those revolutions from wherever we are. We would not be able to do so without the instant connectiveness provided by Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, and so many other social media platforms.

My venture into the world of pictures, words, and videos helped me to see the significance of my project to even those with no interest in queer organizations, organizers or spaces. The platform to which I turned in this case was YouTube. Why? I wanted to hear people talk about their ideas of consensus – to get a sense of what others have asked and said about consensus before I was the person sitting across from someone and asking the questions. The videos brought up quite a few ideas as I sat in the CC's Coffeehouse booth.

The first video returned by my search was a video promoting the work and process of the Occupy Movement (Meerkat Media Collective, 2011). Now of course, YouTube, like its parent company (Google), sorts search results based on an algorithm that considers things like number of views a video has had. This video appeared at the top of my screen because of the 121,371 views it had already received when I viewed it. Occupy has prided itself on its use of consensus decision making and the process they feel allows everyone's voice to be heard. This is what helped me to consciously think about non-LGBTQ organizations using consensus building as a

decision making process. Though the argument could be made that Occupy is a queer organization, they do not proclaim themselves to be. It was this foray into YouTube videos that helped me to realize my project was relevant not just to queer and/or LGBTQ organizations and groups but to any group of people interested in a decision making process focused on making sure all ideas were given equal and fair treatment and consideration.

As I watched this eight minute video of testimonials, echoed voices and distinct nonverbal symbols, I started to write down the words that described what I saw or that stuck out more than the other words said. This led to a word map on my yellow legal pad with more than twenty words extending outward from the word “consensus.” From there, I watched four more of the top videos returned by the search terms “consensus building” and “consensus decision making.” The words produced were largely the same as the ones from the Occupy video.

Five possible paths were forged on the page. First, democracy and related words or ideas quickly took up space. Some of these included voice, decision, movement, place and change. Another path that emerged quickly was the process path with words like facilitation, understanding, endless meetings and messy. Next came the empowerment chain with active words like performer, teams and projects. From there, some of the not-so-positive aspects or perceptions of consensus building started to emerge. Hierarchy was one term that came up and was accompanied by the concept “block” and power as I heard people expressing how powerful/less they felt during the consensus building process. Lastly, the feel-good path came up. While this is usually viewed as a negative aspect of making decisions through consensus, positive words like honesty, connection and communication got linked to this branch. From this cloud or map of words, my mind began to wander into my own experiences, and I found myself identifying moments where each was applicable.

Queering the Board Room

Even if consensus has not been employed by *definition*, I can say with certainty that many of the meetings in which I have participated with other queer activists have been different than most meetings I have seen. They are somehow more open and encourage more discussion and open processes and provide a forum for even the quietest of voices. I have historically been that quiet voice, but I learned that what I thought and felt mattered in those meetings.

The word consensus transformed those meetings. Even when votes have to be taken or ideas are pushed aside without adequate consideration, the word consensus remains and influences the ways that I feel – that I can influence decisions, that I will be heard, that I have a seat at the table. That is not what I feel when I imagine other meetings. Part of the reason I am drawn to the concept of consensus is its power to queer the “board room,” so to speak. It has, at least for me and some of the people who work with me, the power to suppress the societal oppressive structures that exist outside of that room in ways that I have not seen democratic process do so. Women are given equal voice. People of color are given equal voice. People are given equal voice regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds.

The “board room” is a space where I became friends with the people I now call family. It is a space where I feel comfortable and safe. I sit in the “board room” with my partner and can smile at him from across the table even when we offer differing positions on any one issue. Respect for every person in the room is apparent. Arguably, all of this is because of one word and the effects it has on the deliberation that needs to happen – *consensus*.

CHAPTER 2: EXPERIENCE AND PROCESS EMBODIED

In this chapter, I report the data collected through interviews with five individuals who fit my narrow qualifications – queer organizers in Louisiana. I provide basic analysis on the data and begin to put each of my participants in conversation with the others to generate a public portrait of what consensus building looks like among queer organizers in Louisiana. Participants have been given pseudonyms for privacy purposes.

I interviewed five queer organizers in Louisiana to gather their perceptions and experiences surrounding consensus – both the word and the process. The interviews lasted around thirty minutes and were audio recorded. Using the Spradley Model (1979), the questions asked were descriptive, structural, and contrast, in order to collect as much information as possible about the interviewees' notions of consensus. Descriptive questions do just what their name implies – ask participants to describe a concrete object, event or circumstance. These questions can include asking for examples, an “average” day (or meeting), how participants experienced a particular event and how language is used in a participant's (sub)culture. Structural questions are explanation questions. The researcher asks the participants to help her to understand a process, how an event came about, who the participants are, etc. Structural questions seek to find out how something works or how something has happened. Contrast questions are used to find out how a symbol is different from other principles with the idea in mind that meaning can be constructed by asking what a symbol means, asking how it is like other symbols and asking how it is different from other symbols (Madison, 2005, p. 28). In asking all three types of questions, my goal was to gain the most complete data possible from the participants and to learn how they fit their experiences into larger cultural schema and how they relate consensus to other decision making processes or styles. My interviews with each of my

participants consisted of the same basic questions with probing questions tailored to the specific conversations which built off something the other person had said in the interview.

To begin the analysis of each interview, I re-listened to the recording and outlined the interview on large pieces of chart paper. Once I had outlined each interview, I hung the outlines on two walls in my home office. With them hanging side by side, I was able to look for common themes, as well as opposing themes, and used them to organize the texts. I created categories to organize all the chunks of data extracted from the interview texts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Spiggle, 1994; Turner, 1988). Each category assigned to each interview was added to the piece of chart paper for that interview so that relationships between the categories could be visually represented. Using the grounded theory approach, I allowed new categories to emerge as I looked at each outline separately and as I looked at each in relation to the others (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Some basic themes that emerged include the need for every voice to be heard, empowerment, no hierarchy, and a need for facilitators. All of these things were addressed in some way by each of the people I interviewed. They all agreed that consensus building leads to feelings of being heard and empowerment – that the process often helps to ensure the inclusion of groups of people who have been marginalized. Consensus was described as nonhierarchical by each of them at some point in the interview, and everyone recognized the need for facilitators, monitors, or “consensus builders” to ensure that no one in the space was being marginalized and that everyone was allowed to take up space and voice their opinions and concerns.

On further examination of the categories and data chunks within them, three main themes emerged. The themes of most interest to me are: 1) accountability, community, and compromise; 2) possible shortcomings or failures of consensus as a decision making process; and, 3) the

adaptation of consensus to specific groups of people. These are the reshaped categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 252) that were given the most attention by my participants. Many of these ideas were explicitly highlighted by my interviewees, but some of them I have extrapolated from my own readings of their responses, especially when taken in conjunction with the responses of other people. To further analyze the data using these three themes, I used selective transcription to extract the most relevant data which I report in this chapter.

Meet the Participants

This section will provide details of the advocacy work of each of my participants as well as my preexisting relationships with them and my reasoning for including their voices in my project. The individuals I interviewed are largely homogenous in terms of race and age. Four of my participants are white, and only one is a person of color. I believe this is reflective of the larger problem of the mainstream LGBT Movement historically excluding people of color and doing little to remedy that problem now. Four of my participants are in their 20s, and only one is older. Since I have begun doing LGBTQ organizing in Louisiana, my experience has been that many people in the generations before mine feel burnout and discouragement because of the state constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage that passed in 2004. After the passage, some community groups went defunct, others entered into a period of low activity, and many individuals who had tried to oppose the amendment felt as though they could not make a difference. However, I believe my participants to be an accurate representation of the population of people who currently do LGBTQ advocacy in Louisiana, despite the lack of diversity among them in regards to race and age. Another area of what could be called a lack of diversity amongst the participants is organizational affiliation. Three of the participants work with the same statewide coalition that advocates for LGBTQ equality. I believe this to be a repercussion of my

own work with that coalition but also to be a product of the kind of work the organization does – movement building and grassroots initiatives. These two functions allow for the involvement of more people than an organization that only does political work that is not based on grassroots efforts. They also suggest, to me, a predisposition to consensus building within that organization.

Albert is a white man in his mid-twenties who has been doing LGBTQ advocacy and organizing work for about four and a half years. He currently serves on the board of two statewide LGBTQ advocacy organizations and has previously served as the president of an LGBTQ student organization and as a staff member for a citywide LGBTQ nonprofit. I have worked with Albert in all four of those organizations for about three and a half years. I have a close working and personal relationship with him and interact with him on a daily basis. Our interview took place face to face in a quiet conference room. The interview was structured as an informal conversation. After each question, we would talk about the topic of the question broadly, and I would ask probing questions when necessary. I anticipated many of Albert's answers, particularly when he gave examples because of our shared experiences in various organizations and working groups. I recognize that my close relationship with Albert might call into question the soundness of my methodology, as might my relationships with all of my participants, but I chose to interview Albert because of the bandwidth of his involvement in LGBTQ organizing, from a student group to a statewide coalition of over thirty statewide, local, and student organizations. I was also previously aware of his role in the founding of that coalition, as well as Louisiana's only statewide transgender social support and advocacy organization. I suspect that all of his accomplishments would surprise most people because of his youth, so I wanted to include him in my thesis project because I greatly value his perspective in our work and personal relationships.

Bridget is a white middle-aged woman who has done a lot of advocacy work with various women's organizations both in Louisiana and in other states. She has been involved in LGBTQ organizing in Louisiana since the early 2000's and serves as board chair of a statewide LGBTQ nonprofit that is based in New Orleans and has served on the board of other LGBTQ organizations. Of all my participants, my preexisting relationship with Bridget is the one I would describe as the least close. We have never been a part of the same organization, but we have collaborated on specific projects before. Our interview was conducted via Google Hangout, a video-calling software, and was recorded. Because of our lack of a personal relationship with one another this interview was more structured than others and took on a clear question and answer structure. I did not interact with her based on her answers as I did with my other participants. For example, when she told a story to illustrate a point, I noticed that I slipped into a pattern of active listening and took the story as she told it, whereas I took a more active role in the storytelling of my other participants, asking questions about details I noticed they left out of the story. This was possible because many of the stories told by other participants were experiences that I had shared with them. I suspected Bridget would have a different take on consensus, knowing that I did not share as many of her experiences in LGBTQ organizing as my other participants. Because of the narrow qualifications for my participants and the small number of LGBTQ organizers in Louisiana, Bridget is one of only a few people who could give that different perspective. We have, at times, disagreed vehemently on various goals, tactics, and principles when it comes to LGBTQ advocacy, so I hoped she would help to give a more complete picture of what consensus might look like in queer organizing spaces.

Clarissa is a black woman in her upper 20s who has done a lot of advocacy work with organizations that focus on women's issues, particularly women of color and transgender women

on both the state and national levels. She has been organizing in Louisiana for almost a decade and has served on the board of LGBTQ community organizations and has held leadership roles in LGBTQ student groups. Clarissa, while not ingrained into my work life, does have a preexisting personal relationship with me and has also worked with me before through our involvements in various organizations. Our interview was conducted via Google Hangout, video-calling software. Our personal relationship allowed us to have a candid conversation that was loosely guided by my interview questions. I asked Clarissa to participate in my project in order to gain an element of racial diversity and also because she has worked with very different populations of people than any of my other participants. Because her organizing experiences are centered around women of color and the many issues that face them, whether they are queer, trans, or neither, I knew she would have a different take on consensus. Her organizing work is “across difference, at the margins,” so she works with people from different backgrounds but who share in a common struggle and work together in that struggle.

Dalton is a white man in his early 20s who has only recently gotten involved in LGBTQ advocacy in Louisiana. He is currently an undergraduate student and works with the statewide LGBTQ coalition, the statewide transgender advocacy organization, and a statewide nonprofit that promotes progressive policies. Dalton has preexisting personal and work relationships with me. Our interview took place in a private office. Our relationship allowed us to have an informal conversation guided by my interview questions. I asked all of the questions as if they were probing questions, relating each to what he had previously said. Dalton provided a perspective of someone who has not been doing LGBTQ work as long as I have. He is in the process of learning what consensus means and the effects it can have on organizations and individuals from the same people whom I credit with having taught me those things. The difference is that I am

now seen as one of those teachers. This switch in dynamics is a large contributor to my decision to include Dalton's experiences.

Elli is a white woman in her upper twenties who has been doing LGBTQ advocacy and organizing work for about ten years. She is currently in a leadership position for the statewide LGBTQ coalition. She has done organizing work for a variety of progressive issues in Louisiana and elsewhere, specifically at the Ivy League university where she obtained her undergraduate degree. I have a close working relationship with her and interact with her at least once a week. Our interview was conducted via Google Hangout. It lasted twenty-five minutes. The interview was structured as an informal conversation. After each question, we would talk about the topic of the question broadly, and I would ask probing questions when necessary. Elli seemed to try to give examples that came from experiences we shared as well as examples from her work with which I am much less familiar, and thus gave a plethora of information. Her involvement in other types of organizing work as well as her work in the LGBTQ community is one of the reasons I asked her to participate. She is, like Albert, a founding member of the statewide LGBTQ coalition and has worked with a national queer advocacy organization. Since our relationship is mostly based around the work that we currently do together and less on personal ties, I believed her demeanor in the interview would be much more formal than with many of my other participants, though she did show many signs of familiarity and tried to connect with me through our shared experiences.

Accountability, Community, and Compromise

As I mentioned, accountability, community, and compromise is one of the categories, or themes, with which I am working. The tie between accountability and community is not a surprising relationship to have emerged, but I did not anticipate the relationship to compromise.

All three of these words, in the ways that my participants used them, relate to the establishment of relationships and the dynamics of those relationships in “work” settings. *Accountability* – the word itself – came from my interview with Clarissa, but I found as I re-experienced the others that the idea of accountability was quite present in all of them and tied closely to feelings of community. That is, building community required a sense of accountability to the group and its members.

When asked how she would define or explain consensus, Clarissa clearly stated, “Consensus I think, for me, is directly tied to accountability and transparency.” It is clear to me that her understanding of consensus is directly impacted by the work she does “at the margins,” as a black queer woman. She defined consensus as a group process but ultimately claimed that consensus was about much more than decision making.

Doing work at the intersections, at the margins, in the Deep South, across differences, I need to know who the fuck I’m in the trenches with, so to speak. And one way I could do that is by knowing who I’m accountable to and who’s accountable to me, and consensus is a way that I can do that, like I want to know that when I say, ‘I am unapologetically a woman.’ I want you to know what I mean, and whatever challenges you have, I want us to be really upfront about that. That is a form of consensus. It’s not always about decision making, which is a part of consensus, but to me it is so much more than that.

Here, Clarissa introduces the idea that consensus, rather than only being about decision making, is about knowing who is in the room with you when you are making those decisions and being as honest and authentic as possible. In short, consensus is not just about asking everyone in the room if they have an objection to a particular course of action, but about knowing that everyone in the room will be honest about any feelings of reservation or discomfort.

Clarissa said that kind of accountability and transparency looks the way it looks when people are in community. Invoking the expectation of Southern hospitality, she drew attention to the importance of building authentic relationships with people when “organizing in the South,

especially the Deep South, particularly organizing across race and across class and across gender.” She did break out of the Southern belle and gentleman framework by then saying, “It’s not sexy ... It’s hard, it’s extremely hard. It’s not always pretty. I don’t always feel good when I’m in a process that is building consensus. It’s hard feeling challenged. It just is. I don’t care how cool you think you are, how accountable. It’s hard, and I think being honest about that is okay.” Clarissa emphasizes the importance of relationships and community by connecting those ideas to the simple idea of “having a shared understanding of what’s going to happen next.” For her, that is dependent on her relationship with the other people in the room.

To relate her ideas to current “hot topics,” Clarissa talks about the big movement to combat anti-abortion legislation and policies. She says right away that she’s never been an abortion rights activist because she “isn’t a middle class cisgender white woman,” though she is not at all against abortion. She has been in groups of people who have claimed to have consensus with her group about the issue, but she says that is not possible because they have done nothing to establish relationships with her group or the women with whom they work. She ends her example by saying, “It’s not only your analysis, but how you’re doing the work as well.” My understanding of what she means is that it does not matter if her group agrees with the ideology of the abortion rights activists. That agreement does not translate into consensus because they have not put in the effort to build community and “break bread” with these other women.

Though Elli, a white queer woman who graduated from an Ivy League university, does not explicitly reference accountability or acknowledge that consensus might be about more than making decisions, she does, through her explanation, parallel Clarissa’s vocalization of accountability and shared understanding. For me, this directly connects compromise to ideas of accountability and community. She defined consensus as a way of making decisions and

acknowledged that the process does shape organizations that employ it, but did not explicitly explain consensus as anything larger than decision making.

Consensus is a nonhierarchical way of making decisions that tries to have input from everybody and that's based on not a confrontational [process], but [leads to] a decision everybody can feel good about the outcome.

The way the process avoids confrontation, according to Elli, is by allowing people to talk through any problems they might perceive with the idea put forward. Through extensive discussions, individuals often become more willing to compromise because they can better understand who other people are and their frames of reference. Consensus building can lead to a willingness to compromise because it requires each person in the room to establish relationships and build community with the others. This willingness to compromise also suggests a level of trust within the group which comes with the establishment of relationships.

"I first think of it [consensus] in terms of group decision making," said Albert. He said he had seen it used when a "group is invested in having everyone being on the same page on what the outcome is so that everyone feels as good as they can about the decision and feels like everyone is in it together with the outcome." In the beginning of our conversation – after I had asked only one question, "How would you define or explain consensus?" – He immediately drew attention to the importance of compromise for consensus building to be an effective decision making process.

I think an important part of it is that if something is not super important to you, if it's not a big sticking point, like an ethical issue or a big dilemma, sometimes you want to compromise your position a bit so that the whole group can get to a place where everyone feels comfortable with the decision moving forward, even if that means that you don't one hundred percent get your way.

Here, he both confirms and rebuts Clarissa's declaration that consensus does not always feel good. Albert explains the importance of compromising one's own position, which can be

challenging, but for the purposes of making other people in the group feel “comfortable,” but Clarissa makes it clear that consensus is, and should be, challenging.

Albert does, however, agree with both Clarissa and Elli about the significance of personal relationships with the other people in the group. He said, “Part of it is personal relationships ... in working with people for years, you sort of come to know and trust them, and so you’re really invested in their opinions so you want to know what they think about something.” A feeling of community and investment in the other members of that community is one of the reasons groups build consensus according to Albert. He also said that he likes the “group accountability” that comes with the process and does not feel as though other methods of decision making would create that degree of accountability to others in the group. With personal relationships also comes a certain level of credibility when you have experience working with a particular group of people. If he were to be working with a random group of strangers who did not try to establish relationships with him, Albert said, “I don’t really know that those people have any kind of credibility.”

Consensus allows for a greater degree of accountability, community, and credibility than other processes. Consensus, according to Clarissa, requires accountability and the establishment of community. This community provides a foundation for the process which Elli describes – an extensive discussion so that everyone’s concerns or misunderstandings can be resolved. Through the sense of community and manner in which issues are discussed, Albert had the opportunity to establish close relationships with those with whom he works. Those relationships are a large contributor to his willingness to compromise on issues related to work decisions because they allow individuals to develop a greater ethos than someone who is not a part of that community.

Dysfunction and Risk

Thus far, Clarissa, Elli, and Albert have sung the praises of consensus building as the method to use in groups or organizations, but some shortcomings of the process were also highlighted in some of my interviews. Clarissa has already expressed that consensus building does not feel good all of the time and is not always a pretty sight. In addition to that, Bridget and Dalton point out that with accountability, community, and compromise come dysfunction and risk.

“That everyone involved in a decision comes to an agreement about that decision,” is what Bridget understands consensus to be. While she believes there is utility in a consensus building process, getting input from everyone involved, Bridget is the only person I interviewed who plainly stated that consensus is not a sustainable decision making mechanism on its own. “If it [consensus] is the only method used, then it [decision making] can be subverted by anyone who takes their eyes off the end zone, and the organization’s goals can be undermined. Consensus needs to be balanced with some other democratic process,” according to Bridget. The suggestion she made was to have a mechanism to call for a vote and to require a two-thirds majority. She said a simple majority would only serve to further marginalize some members of the group.

Her main issue was that one disgruntled voice could derail the entire process since everyone in the room has an equal voice, in her understanding of consensus. This would prevent the group from moving on any decision because without consensus, no decision could be made. She also drew attention to the role that personality differences within a group can have in undermining the consensus process, saying that sometimes the problems – the reasons consensus could not be reached – were not about the issue at hand but with the people in the room.

“Sometimes you just have to make a decision,” said Bridget. She went on to warn that individuals in the group “can learn how to work the system,” in that they learn to manipulate the process in order to get to the outcome they want.

Dalton’s understanding of consensus was similar to that of Bridget’s, in that it involved getting input from everyone involved. He also acknowledged the role personality differences might play in situations where consensus cannot be reached. He expressed that it often was not due to the issue at hand, but rather the differences between the people in the room that blocked consensus. He did not have reasons that consensus could not be used alone to reach decisions within a group, but he did bring up some interesting issues about the ways in which we might understand, or misunderstand, the process of building consensus. He understood consensus building to be a drawn out process that takes a great deal of effort. He also said that there was “a risk associated with letting someone new in the room have equal say to the people who maybe have been there from the beginning.” He went on to explain the risk is specifically allowing a new person to have equal voice, sometimes without having an opportunity to build a relationship and trust with an individual. Dalton says the risk is not knowing what that new person might do. This risk is one of the reasons he thinks consensus may fall short in some situations.

I was surprised when he started to describe consensus as something that sounded a lot like manipulation.

The way that I see that [consensus] happening around me a lot of the times is people going into a conversation sort of knowing what they want the outcome to be and knowing how to maneuver the conversation to that outcome. I don’t really know if that counts as consensus ... But people know it’s happening to them, so I think that counts.

Upon further probing though, it became clear that he meant something very different than what I originally interpreted him to mean. By “maneuver the conversation,” he said he meant, “Knowing your audience, knowing what will move them,” and “having a well thought out idea

and logical arguments.” So rather than manipulation, he simply meant that one should enter into conversations with ideas that were sound and had been seriously considered before bringing them to a larger group to make the decision, but this does further highlight Bridget’s point of individuals who learn how to “work the system.”

In short, groups should be aware of these potential problems with consensus building: personality differences that affect the willingness to compromise, manipulation of the process, and the risk associated with giving everyone equal say. In that awareness and through authentic group interactions and relationships, these shortcomings could likely be avoided.

Queering Consensus

When the adaptation of the process of consensus building emerged as an emphasized category, I could not help but be pleased. There is something poetic for me in that consensus, while I believe already viewed as a queer process, can be further queered. I, until that point, had not considered using the framework of adaptation to view how queer organizers performed consensus. Albert, Elli, and Dalton most clearly illustrate the reworking of consensus.

In Albert’s interview, he indicated that sometimes what he thought of as the formal process of consensus building was not possible. This could be due to quickly moving events or lack of physical proximity, for example. He said in his experiences, these situations usually lead to one person acting as a “consensus builder.” This means that person gathers other people’s opinions individually and pieces them together to make a final decision for the group. Sometimes it can also result in multi-line phone calls. Albert said, “We will say, ‘okay, well the main people that this decision will pertain to need to hop on the phone real quick, and we’ll just talk through it ... and figure out what our plan is going to be.” He thinks a main reason for this is the informal, or flat, structure of the organizations with which he works.

Consensus, for Elli, is an egalitarian process, meaning there are no leaders and no hierarchy, anyone who is in the room has an equal voice in decision making, and individuals rotate through different roles. Despite this, she did say one group with which she works does not quite fit that mold. She said, “A lot of times people have different skill sets or special skills in an area like communications or politics, or just where they are in the state, and we want those people to do that stuff. In [other groups] I’ve been in we did a lot more of rotating through roles.” In order to capitalize on the specific skillsets of individuals in her organization and to only include people who want or need to be included on specific issues, they have altered what consensus looks like but have stayed true to what all of my participants see as a primary tenet of consensus, inclusion. Often, individuals will check in with each other outside of larger group conversations about issues in order to encourage input from people who do not always speak up.

Dalton, like Elli, does not rigidly subscribe to egalitarian ideals and emphasized individuals’ specialized skillsets as an asset in the groups with which he is involved.

Each person that’s involved has a very specific skillset that they bring into the team, and so depending on what the decision is about, it doesn’t need to involve everyone. Conversations are always open to everyone, but it doesn’t need to necessarily go through everyone before a decision is reached. But when it comes to conversations about larger structural questions or organizational goals, we try to involve as many people as we can in those decisions.

He believes that not every single decision needs input from everyone, so it is acceptable to have certain conversations with only certain individuals. Different people are needed to discuss different issues because of the skillsets everyone has.

In a broader sense, he said it is not uncommon that someone does not agree with a decision that is made, but they do not disagree strongly enough to “derail the train over that one thing.” According to Dalton, “It’s not consensus exactly, but it’s also not [complete disagreement

or lack of understanding.]” His organization does not use “clean-cut consensus,” but what he called “modified consensus.” Essentially, they have taken the idea of consensus and made it something that works for their group to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to voice their opinions and that they create a shared understanding before they take action.

Largely, though my participants have altered what consensus building might look like, they all feel as though they do operate using a consensus process. It seems to me that those feelings and perceptions keep them aware of what all of them agreed was the main tenet of consensus building: that everyone’s voice is heard. They take steps to create an open space for discussions and for working out issues while also making use of the skillsets held by individuals and allowing those individuals to hone those skills to the benefit of the organizations or groups.

CHAPTER 3: AN EMERGING CONVERSATION

In the previous two chapters, I have described the experiences of queer organizers in Louisiana, including my own, as they pertain to consensus building. When I began this project, my goal was to create a queer, Southern definition of consensus that adequately describes the act of consensus building as it is experienced by queers in the South. We use and misuse symbols in our quest to effectively communicate with others (Burke 1966). As I write this chapter, I realize that task is in some ways much harder than I originally anticipated. Nonetheless, in this chapter I will explore the many definitions of consensus gathered from Albert, Bridget, Clarissa, Dalton, and Elli, as well as the definition I subscribed to before starting this project, with the intention of reconciling the language we use to describe consensus with the ways in which we describe the performance of consensus.

I do this because, regardless of any textbook or academic definition, these queer organizers are experiencing consensus, or a lack there of, in their lived performance of organizing in the South. My goals in themselves are heavily influenced by the way I learned organizing – in a group of people who operated as equals with no one having “final say.” In many ways, I am so drawn to the idea of consensus that I want to build consensus amongst my participants, my friends, about what consensus means to us. In fact, I will do just that in my final chapter by looking at three common ideas from my interviews and the implications of those ideas: flat structure or a lack of hierarchy, what it means to modify or adapt consensus and when that might be useful, and the effects of allowing subgroups to make some decisions without input from everyone.

Equal Say and Equal Risk

A flat structure or lack of hierarchy in a group is a key factor in consensus building according to the responses from my participants and my own experiences. Two implications of a flat structure are that everyone has equal say in decisions and also that everyone takes an equal risk with each decision made and action taken. With power comes responsibility, and in a flat structure, power is evenly distributed throughout the group, making each person in that group equally responsible for the results of the group's actions, whether they be good or bad. This equity in the group, I believe, is a part of the ideology of most people who are a part of social justice advocacy or activism groups.

Consensus was described as nonhierarchical by each of my participants at some point in the interviews, and I myself have always thought a flat structure was a prerequisite for consensus building to work in a group. This is probably not a surprise to anyone, but I want to go a little bit deeper into the ideologies that are reflected by that structure. The same ideology of equity within the group that is reflected in flat structures is also reflected in the desire to use consensus building. If equity, which could be said to be a defining principle of social justice work, is the ideological backdrop for groups without hierarchy and groups that build consensus, then it seems as though groups who define their work as social justice are more likely to have flat structures and to build consensus. Dean Spade (2011) calls this type of infrastructure, “the traditionally central strategy of social movement work: building change by mobilizing the participation of a mass base of directly impacted people who share an experience of harm and a demand for transforming it” (p. 174). Though the rise of the nonprofit industrial complex has encouraged a shift away from that strategy (INCITE!, 2007), I believe social justice work still presupposes a

“‘bottom-up’ mobilization for transformative change” (Spade, 2011, p. 171), in which participants attempt to distribute power evenly amongst themselves.

Bridget, who believes consensus building needs to be supplemented with some other democratic process, acknowledged the ideology behind consensus as an important one. She said consensus is “the best way to make sure every voice is heard, not just the loudest, not just the experts. Everyone has the opportunity to put their stamp on the decision.” It is important to recognize that huge groups of people have been locked out of spaces where decisions are made, and she believes looking to consensus building as a way to structure what discussions look like is a good way to make sure those marginalized groups are given the opportunity to give input. Thus, consensus building is doing the work of actively engaging communities who have previously been silenced and ignored.

Beyond a purely ideological argument, my participants expressed similar sentiments during their interviews. When asked if they would advocate for other organizations to make decisions through consensus, the response from all five participants came as a resounding “It’s not for everyone.” Clarissa’s explanation focused on more than organizational structure, which is where others focused their answers as you will see below. She said, “Not everyone is ready to be that authentic. Not everyone is trying to be authentic.” Remember that, for Clarissa, consensus building requires authentic relationships with others involved. Beyond that, explanations stayed in the realm of organizational structure. A common sentiment was that consensus building likely would not work for larger, “more traditional” organizations – organizations with hierarchical structures. Albert explained that it requires some flexibility in structure. Because it allows everyone in the room an equal voice, not only does there need to be a nonhierarchical structure, but also a certain level of adaptability in order to fully include anyone who is new to the group.

That inclusion of new voices is the source of a lot of the risk involved in consensus, according to Dalton. When new people are allowed equal say to the people who have been in the room all along, Dalton says, “We have to take a huge risk.” The older members of the group have to have faith that the new individual won’t “derail the train.” Elli reinforces that idea by saying, “There is definitely a risk associated with giving equal say to a random person who shows up as opposed to the people who spend all of their time working on this stuff [organizing for the statewide coalition].” The idea of risk for Albert, though, shows up in a very different way in relation to consensus building itself. Albert only mentions the shared risk in everything the group decided and did. “We are all equally on the line with every decision,” he said. This risk equity, I feel, is directly related to the ideas of accountability discussed in the previous chapter. Clarissa most clearly states that consensus building is “about more than decision making,” but all of the participants agree that consensus is related to accountability to the others present or represented.

If, as Albert says, everyone is equally on the line, then consensus is about a shared accountability for the actions of the group because everyone has an equal say in what those actions are. Clarissa’s consensus, however, is about knowing to whom she is accountable and who is accountable to her. It is about knowing who is in the room, understanding their challenges, and working together to overcome those challenges. She gives this example, “When I say, ‘I am unapologetically a woman,’ I want to know that you know what I mean. And whatever challenges you have, I want us just to be really upfront about that. That to me is a type of consensus.” While this isn’t about making a decision, it is about sharing her authentic self with someone and expecting the same in return and about working with each other to create a shared understanding.

It is interesting that nonhierarchical structures were partly responsible for the risk associated with consensus building, when those flat structures were also explicitly or implicitly praised by most of my participants. Flat structures allow for every voice to be equal but also for every person to be equally accountable for the decisions that drive the group's actions. The point of shared accountability and knowing who is accountable to whom is once again highlighted. This leads me to believe that accountability and an understanding of what that accountability means is correlated with consensus building in groups.

Not “Strictly” Speaking

One of the things that I found in common amongst three of my interviewees was their groups' adaptations of what they think of as “strict consensus,” as Elli calls it. After first providing a definition or description of consensus that they likely thought paralleled the “textbook definition” and then describing what that process actually looked like in their experiences, Albert, Dalton, and Elli realized a divergence from the definition they had given. This led to the three of them then drawing distinctions between “consensus” and the process that they experienced, or “modified consensus.” This modification, as Elli pointed out, was signified by some difference between what they experienced and pure egalitarianism. The reasons for modification given by the three of them are very utilitarian and seem to address some of the shortcomings identified in the previous chapter. Geographic distance, time constraints, and taking advantage of specialized skill sets were cited as the main reasons for modified consensus.

Elli said, “That [strict consensus] is hard for a statewide coalition with people all over the state. It isn't easy to get everyone in the same room ... or even on the same phone call.” Here she points out that geographic distance can make it hard to use what she sees as strict consensus, and she identifies time constraints as another reason shortly after. “Things also tend to happen really

fast, especially with the legislature, so sometimes people just have to make a decision with whoever is available.” She says decisions tend to be made by a nuclear subgroup in Baton Rouge, since the Capitol is there and the organization does a lot of work on statewide policy. “We know each other pretty well though,” she continued. “We trust each other, so we don’t have to talk about every little thing.” She gives a specific example that she does not care about what colors are used on promotional materials, but she knows there are some members of the group who do. She says those are the people who should be a part of conversations about colors and other design issues because she does not want to be. Elli plays at the idea that various subgroups within her group might make decisions on their own, without input from others, in relation to certain issues. These delegated decisions, however, rely on the fact that they know each other well because they have done the hard work previously of listening to each other.

Elli is not the only person who talked about subgroups. Both Albert and Dalton talked about subgroups within the group getting together to make a decision. Dalton reiterates Elli’s points about geography and time factoring into who makes decisions about what. Albert talked about getting different subgroups to “hop on the phone” to make quick decisions about issues that might not necessarily pertain to the entire group. Part of the reason for that is the way the coalition he works with is organized. People are given titles to reflect specialized skills they may have, so rather than have an arbitrary hierarchy where power is distributed unevenly, individuals are given functional titles to maintain the flat structure. Dalton described the idea behind the subgroups as decision makers, “Each person that’s involved has a very specific skill set that they bring to the team, and so depending on what the decision is about, it doesn’t need to involve everyone.” These “roles based on skill sets” are a part of what Elli says makes the process “not quite consensus.” Because in an egalitarian framework people rotate through different roles

regardless of strengths an individual may have in a particular area, the skill-based roles differentiate the organization's process from what Elli describes as strict consensus.

These subgroups, I suspect, are a product of the risk aversion for all the individuals involved to having a new voice in an old conversation. There is, however, the concern that each subgroup might fall into "group think," where each person in that group becomes accustomed to simply agreeing with the others, so no one challenges the status quo. I have established that one of the virtues of consensus building is the inclusion of every voice, especially those that have historically been ignored. It is possible that the "subgroup modification" to the consensus building process nullifies that virtue by ensuring that only certain people discuss certain issues. Within those groups though, Albert, Elli, and Dalton still feel as though the process to make decisions can be called consensus building.

The possibility of the incestuous group think above reinforces the necessity to have "consensus builders" who make sure that as many voices as possible can be heard for every issue. The modification of the process makes it more functional within the framework that these three organizers work, given geographic distance, frequent time limitations, and the developed skills of each individual within the organization. Though the process has been reshaped by the specific situations in which they work, consensus is being used to drive the actions of the organizations and the individuals within them, and the same purposes of allowing everyone to speak and increasing organizational buy in from individuals are being met. Thus, these organizers are building consensus towards a decision.

But Who Is in the Room Matters

As I began to process the information I collected through my interviews, I started to think of something that I did not expect at all when I started my project – who is in the room matters.

Consensus, strict or otherwise, is not a process or model that can be forced onto any situation, into any board room. It is a process that is wholly dependent on the people in that room and their relationships with each other. The relationships and personalities of the people involved are themes highlighted by each of my participants, and as it came up over and over again, I started to think about how true that is in relation to my own experiences of consensus.

Part of what makes the board room a queer space, for me, is having people with whom I have intimate personal relationships in the room. Part of what makes me care so much about what the other people in the room have to say is that those people are my friends and family. I know that they respect me, as well as my thoughts and opinions, and the same is true for them. As Elli said, “We trust each other.” That trust is a pivotal part of the consensus building process. Consensus “takes a lot of communication and a lot of effort,” according to Dalton. When he said that to me, I could not help but think, “Of course it does, just like any other relationship.” Having already interviewed three people and thought about the personal relationships that I have established with other organizers over the past few years, I had already reflected on the time and effort invested in the consensus building process.

Albert’s thoughts about consensus are very tied to the personal relationships he has with the people who sit in the “board room” with him.

I hold the people I work with in high esteem, so their opinions, to me, are important, and so I am more likely to think if they all disagree with me that I’m probably wrong and that they are probably all right versus like random strangers or random motherfuckers. I don’t really necessarily, I don’t really know that those people have any kind of credibility.

He acknowledges that his relationships with people with whom he works influences how he goes about making decisions with them. Because he has invested the effort of establishing authentic relationships with them, he is more invested in their input in terms of making decisions related to work. He feels as though that is one of the strengths of consensus building in his organization.

While all of my interviewees agree that who is in the room matters, only one of them talked about it being a potential weakness. Bridget said that in her experience, personality differences or conflicts within a group can make consensus building impossible. This leads to no decisions being made and no work being done because the group cannot agree on any issue. Individuals can disagree and refuse to compromise just to spite each other – it can have nothing to do with the issue at hand, but one person just does not want to agree with another. Bridget spoke only about negative personal relationships or differences in relation to consensus building, which, she said, act only as a block to any work getting done.

Clarissa, on the other hand, made it clear that consensus is the relationships between individuals in the group, the shared understanding and sense of community in the group. For her, the only time that difference is problematic in a consensus building process is when people are not completely authentic in the way in which they present themselves. Consensus is tied to the ways we present ourselves to others in the group, but she did concede, like my other interviewees, that it was not right for everyone or every group “because not everyone can handle being authentic.” Clarissa has been in groups who said they operated by consensus, but she did not feel like it was really consensus.

I’ve had some experiences where I don’t feel like it was really consensus and that it really didn’t work because like I said, folks weren’t really open to having an honest dialogue about who they were and actually being in community ... I feel like there are some people who really aren’t trying to be authentic in relationships with other people. I feel like not everyone is ready to do that. Some people are just not willing to examine their shit, examine their privilege, and examine their traumas, and I feel like that’s what is so necessary in terms of having a consensus process.

I think that Clarissa might say Bridget has had negative experiences with consensus building, not because of the process itself, but because the people in the room were not open to that honest dialogue about who they were and what their challenges might be.

Albert said it best, “Part of it is personal relationships.” Consensus is based on relationships – if the relationships among participants in a process are dysfunctional, that process is also likely to be dysfunctional. Authentic relationships are an integral part in a consensus process in that they are the foundation for trust between participants in that process and allow each individual to enter into the process with inherited ethos. They get to come into the process with a certain level of credibility.

When looking at the experiences and perceptions of my participants in relation to each other and using those experiences as a lens through which I can view the others, the ideas equity, responsibility, and flexibility stand out to me in relationship to the nonhierarchical structure mentioned over and over again. Flat structures imply an equitable distribution of power and, thus, place responsibility on all parties so that everyone is accountable to a reasonable degree for the decisions made by the group. Everyone having equal voice means everyone has equal responsibility. Groups with flat structures seem to be more likely to successfully employ consensus building processes in the views of the queer organizers whom I interviewed. This kind of structure and consensus building are in line with Spade’s (2011) central strategy of social movement work, in which a group of people who experience oppression mobilize against that oppression, as opposed to a more top-down framework. In fact consensus is often a process used to push back at the marginalization that often occurs in decision-making spaces.

Summarizing and Defining

Flat structures, because they are less “traditional” than hierarchical structures, also allow for more flexibility in the ways in which the group functions in that the functions of the group can be altered by anyone who is a part of it. The flexibility that comes with nonhierarchical structures is a part of what allows the adaptation of consensus described by my participants.

When modifying the consensus building process to make it function in a specific situation though, it is important to remain conscious of the goals, as they have been identified by my participants, of the strict process – to include marginalized voices and to create a shared understanding in which everyone feels as though they have participated. Adaptation can allow consensus building to be a functional mechanism in some spaces where strict consensus would not be.

Adaptation is affected by the relationships between the people in the room, as consensus itself is affected by those relationships. Relationships formed within a group with a flat structure are likely to be quite different than those formed in traditional hierarchical organizations. This difference is a big contributor to whether a consensus building process will work in a group. The nature of “flat relationships” seems to lend itself more towards that process than “hierarchical relationships,” thus reinforcing the importance of authentic presentation of self in groups whose aim is to build consensus towards a decision. Ultimately, the intersection of relationships and organizational structure is the point at which consensus building becomes a possibility for an organization.

Based on my own experiences and those of my participants, I believe consensus building in queer spaces in Louisiana to be the opportunity to be in community and to share in power, accountability, and understanding which is created at the intersection between organizational structure and the nature of personal relationships of the actors in that space.

CHAPTER 4: DRAWING A RADICAL CONCLUSION

Thus far, I have written about the experiences of myself and other queer organizers in Louisiana and made claims based on those specific experiences. In this chapter, I will situate those claims in three bodies of literature. First, to provide a more stable foundation for my claims about organizational structure and that structure's effects on the relationships of individual in the organization and how they make decisions, I will draw on management theory, specifically a narrow history of organizational structures as it relates to my work. It is important to me that this project is conceived as something useful outside of the academy, and to that end, the other literature to which I look is produced outside of the academy. I will connect my project and claims to the contemporary discourse around consensus that is produced by nonviolent and/or radical collectives and other accessible sources. And finally, I want to begin to expand my focus to look at the possible relationships between consensus building and the critiques by radical collectives and activists of the nonprofit industrial complex.

Framing Organizational Structure

My findings suggest that organizational structure (i.e. hierarchical vs. flat) has an impact on the relationships between individuals who are a part of an organization, the likelihood of consensus building processes, and flexibility or willingness to adapt. A history* of research on organizational structure and adaptation validates my claim though it does not focus on consensus building. Organic organizations, those with a more informal structure and characterized by open communication (Galbraith, 1973; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), are likely to adapt and respond to a given situation in a timely manner (Miller, 1980). I argue that the organizations with flat structures mentioned in my findings fall into the category of organic organizations. The open communication of these organizations is assumed to foster authentic relationships, the

relationships necessary to perform consensus building, and the loose structure is held together by those relationships, rather than a structure with strict roles and hierarchy. Other research points out the fact that organizations with more traditional characteristics, such as hierarchical structure and reliance on stability, or avoidance of uncertainty (Carter, 1971), are much slower to adapt to changes and respond in an effective way to changes in their environment (Hedberg, 1973, 1974, 1975; Hedberg, Nystrom, & Starbuck, 1976), which is in agreement with the assertion that consensus building processes would not be effective in organizations with hierarchical structures. The reasoning here being that the organization is less likely to adapt quickly and respond to new situations.

A shift from a focus on management theory to a more sociological view of organizational structures brings us to Anthony Giddens' (1984) Structuration Theory (ST). I am not a sociologist, but I believe ST can be used as a framework to organize the definition of consensus I offer at the end of Chapter 3. Structuration is a term used to describe the process by which structures are constituted or formed (Parker, 2000). As my definition is dependent on the structure of any given organization, I look to the many theorists who have studied the production of structures, and I extract the following as my working definition of ST: A theory in which structures and individual agents contribute to producing each other (Archer, 1995, 2003; Bourdieu, 1977, 1992; Giddens, 1984; Mouzelis, 1991). Recall the definition of consensus building I put forth based on my research:

Consensus building in queer spaces in Louisiana is the opportunity to be in community and to share in power, accountability, and understanding which is created at the intersection of organizational structure and the nature of personal relationships between the actors in that space.

ST puts forward the idea that structures and agents constitute each other. In a recent examination of ST, Rob Stones (2005) asserts, "A characterizing feature of structuration theory is that it goes

beyond just looking at structure or just looking at agents, or of giving *a priori* primacy to one or the other” (p. 4). The equal weight he assigns to agents and structures parallel my claim that consensus building is created at the intersection of organizational structure and relationships between the actors, both impacting the resulting process, framework, or structure.

A Collective Perspective

At the intersection between structure and relationships are the various interactions amongst group members, including decision making. Group decision-making practice has been addressed by countless scholars, but as the body of academic literature on decision making applies to my work, the most pertinent are: Tonja Pritzlaff’s (2006) *Entscheiden als Handeln. Eine begriffliche Rekonstruktion*, which suggests most research at the time focused on individual deciders, rather than on collective process (cited in Hoffmann-Rehnitz, 2013); Phillipe Urfalino’s (2007) examination of two modes of collective decision making; Donatella della Porta’s (2009) portrayal of the role consensus plays in social movements; and, Koschmann’s (2012) focus on how collective identity influences decisions, signifying a drastic shift since the time of Pritzlaff’s work. However, as I said, I am much more interested in situating my project in the broader discourse around consensus which is constituted by activists and collectives who are not necessarily a part of the academy and whose writings can be found outside of peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes.

In my first chapter, I embed a definition from the group ACT UP into my memories and reflections. I want to return to that definition before I begin to bring in other definitions, or perhaps *explanations* is a more accurate term.

Consensus is a process for group decision-making. It is a method by which an entire group of people can come to an agreement. The input and ideas of all participants are gathered and synthesized to arrive at a final decision acceptable to all. Through consensus, we are not only working to achieve better solutions, but also to promote the

growth of community and trust. Consensus does not mean that everyone thinks that the decision made is necessarily the best one possible, or even that they are sure it will work. What it does mean is that in coming to that decision, no one felt that her/his position on the matter was misunderstood or that it wasn't given a proper hearing. (p. 19)

In this definition, I can point to some of the same themes that ultimately constituted my own constructed definition – group process, community, shared understanding. ACT UP does not use consensus to describe anything more than a decision-making process, at least not in this document. ACT UP's "Civil Disobedience Training" includes information about consensus as a part of a larger framework for nonviolent civil disobedience. Because of that, I want to look at other explanations of consensus that specifically accompany broader instructions for nonviolent actions.

The Vernal Education Project is a long-term effort initiated by Randy Schutt to create a comprehensive education and support network that can bolster and sustain grassroots progressive social change movements in the United States. The Vernal Project hosts resources on topics related to social change, or social justice, including decision making. In one of his many writings for the project, "Consensus Is Not Unanimity: Making Decisions Cooperatively," Schutt (2007) acknowledges several assertions I have made based on my experiences and my participants' experiences, "Consensus is a process for deciding what is best for a **group**. The final decision is often not the first preference of any individual in the group, and many may not even like the final result. But it is a decision to which they all **consent** because they know it is the best one for the group" (p. 1, emphasis in original). The importance of compromise is highlighted again, and he provides a reminder that actors should keep the groups' goals in mind and hold them above their own. Schutt, like my participants, also observes that consensus allows for inclusion, is not necessarily pain free or pretty, and "consensus is best practiced by a group of people who are all

committed and accountable to the group” (p. 2). Schutt is in agreement with many of the characteristics my participants and I have assigned to consensus.

Another slightly different explanation of consensus comes from Heidi Burgess and Brad Spangler (2003). Their explanation is situated in a larger conversation about intractable conflicts, “the conflicts that stubbornly seem to elude resolution, even when the best available techniques are applied” (Burgess & Burgess, 2003). Burgess and Spangler view consensus building through a conflict resolution framework, in which a problem is identified and a series of stages can be followed to build consensus towards a resolution. Here the language used to describe the process, to me, seems to be describing an adaptation of consensus building that might address some of the issues identified with hierarchical groups using consensus. The detailed stages and evaluation system provided do not allow for flexibility based on the relationships of the individuals involved. In my definition, those relationships are an integral part of consensus. Burgess and Spangler do some work to adapt the process to be more easily used in traditional nonprofit structures. It could be said that this is appropriating the process as a part of the nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC). However, I believe social justice frameworks and consensus processes are tools that can be used to combat the NPIC.

Justice for Sale

“I’m very much afraid of this ‘Foundation Complex.’ We’re getting praise from places that worry me,” is an utterance from Ella Baker (1963) that often accompanies discussions and writings on the problematics of the NPIC. The NPIC is “a system of relationships between the state, the owning classes, foundations, and social service & social justice organizations that results in the surveillance, control, derailment, and everyday management of political movements” (INCITE!, 2014). It refers to the emergence and now rapid domination of the

501(c)(3) nonprofit model – the incorporation status that allows for tax exemption. These are the organizations that most often receive funding from foundations in the form of grants, hence Ella Baker’s comments about the “Foundation Complex.” The issue with the NPIC that is most easily connected to this project is the influence that foundations, usually controlled by conservative white men, are able to exert on organizations with 501(c)(3) status. Even if the organization has a mission based in social justice or social change frameworks, it may have to mute its goals and practices in order to receive funding. This dynamic recreates a top-down structure no matter what the structure of the organization might be. The biggest threat is that the 501(c)(3) model will completely and permanently “eclipse autonomous grassroots-movement building in the arena of social justice” (INCITE!, 2014).

This threat is equally to the use of consensus building within organizations if the definition I propose in the previous chapter is accepted. Consensus is created at the intersection of organizational structure and relationships. The expansion of the NPIC suggests that a standard, conservative structure, which is assumed to be hierarchical, is being used by more and more organizations. This impedes the central strategy for organizing suggested by Spade (2011). Christine Ahn (2007) is cited in Spade (2008), and points out, “Money funneled into nonprofits by philanthropists is actually tax money diverted out of the government and into focused causes. That vast majority of that money does, she points out, end up in social justice organizations fighting inequality and oppression” (p. 58). She explains further that nonprofit tax exemptions benefit the wealthiest portion of the population. This is obviously at odds with the mission of an organization that works towards social justice. In essence, when looking at the NPIC in relation to consensus building, as I have defined it, organizations are literally selling their ability to function by consensus.

Summary

I connect my project to these three broad areas of discourse in an effort to draw on the discourse I suspect has influenced my own preconceived notions of consensus and the notions of my participants. There are doubtless other areas that I could connect to my project, and those may serve as a guide for any future exploration of consensus building. For now though, I stand by my queered consensus: the opportunity to be in community and to share in power, accountability, and understanding which is created at the intersection between organizational structure and the nature of personal relationships of the actors in that space. I look to the research and discourse above to inform and transform that notion.

Consensus building is a phenomenon that clearly transcends any one discipline or school of thought, can be adapted into various situations, and thus can be defined in a multitude of ways based on those situations and based on the lens through which you view it. The implications of my exercise in defining consensus, then, are as follows. Consensus, as a label used to describe different processes, is defined by the people who participate in a process called consensus. I am able to provide a loose definition of the processes named consensus by queer organizers in Louisiana because of the narrow scope of experiences with which I concern myself. That definition would need to shift and change and likely become less concrete as I expanded that scope. I imagine as the scope grows it also becomes harder to find the connections in the experiences of individuals and eventually impossible to provide a definition that adequately describes those experiences.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introduction

This project aims to explore how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) activists in Louisiana understand and perform, or do, consensus. I am using interviews, like this one, and reflections on my own experiences to do that. The goal is to give a snapshot of the diverse ways in which the diverse individuals and organizations in the Louisiana queer community understand, experience, and/or perform consensus.

For the purposes of this interview, consensus is what you understand it to be. There are no right or wrong answers. I want to know what it is you think and feel about the term and the experiences you attach to it. Any questions?

Interview Questions

1. How would you define or explain consensus?
2. (Follow up) What does consensus building look like?
3. Have you ever been a part of an organization or group (within an organization) who employed consensus as their decision making model?
 - a. Can you describe that group or organization?
 - b. How were decisions made?
 - c. Have you been a part of other organizations who have done this as well? If so, were your experiences similar to the ones you just described?
4. Why do you think that group (or those groups) in particular made decisions in this way?
5. How do you think making decisions using consensus building affected the organization, the individuals involved, and the population the organization served/worked for/dealt with?
6. How do you feel about consensus building as a way of making decisions?
7. Do you think more organizations or groups should employ consensus to make decisions?

APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL

Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight

Unless qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research/ projects using living humans as subjects, or samples, or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This Form helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.

– Applicant, Please fill out the application in its entirety and include the completed application as well as parts A-F, listed below, when submitting to the IRB. Once the application is completed, please the completed application to the IRB Office or to a member of the Human Subjects Screening Committee. Members of this committee can be found at <http://sites01.lsu.edu/wp/ored/human-subjects-screening-committee-members/>

– A Complete Application Includes All of the Following:

(A) A copy of this completed form and a copy of parts B thru F.

(B) A brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts 1&2)

(C) Copies of all instruments to be used.

*If this proposal is part of a grant proposal, include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment material.

(D) The consent form that you will use in the study (see part 3 for more information.)

(E) Certificate of Completion of Human Subjects Protection Training for all personnel involved in the project, including students who are involved with testing or handling data, unless already on file with the IRB. Training link: (<http://phrp.nihtraining.com/users/login.php>)

(F) IRB Security of Data Agreement: (<https://sites01.lsu.edu/wp/ored/files/2013/07/Security-of-Data-Agreement.pdf>)



Institutional Review Board
Dr. Robert Mathews, Chair
130 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
P: 225.578.8692
F: 225.578.5983
irb@lsu.edu | lsu.edu/irb

1) Principal Investigator: Loretta Pecchioni

Rank: Associate Professor

Dept: Comm. Studies

Ph: (225) 578-6724

E-mail: lpecch1@lsu.edu

2) Co Investigator(s): please include department, rank, phone and e-mail for each

*If student, please identify and name supervising professor in this space

David "Micah" Caswell, Master's student, (337) 580-4615, dcaswe1@tigers.lsu.edu

IRB#	<u>E8506</u>	LSU Proposal #
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Complete Application	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Human Subjects Training	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	IRB Security of Data Agreement	

3) Project Title: Consensus Decision Making Through the Eyes of Queer Organizers

STUDY EXEMPTED BY:

Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman
Institutional Review Board
Louisiana State University
130 David Boyd Hall
225-578-8692 / www.lsu.edu/irb

4) Proposal? (yes or no) ☐

If Yes, LSU Proposal Number

Also, if YES, either

☐ This application completely matches the scope of work in the grant

OR

☐ More IRB Applications will be filed later

Exemption Expires: 10/30/2016

5) Subject pool (e.g. Psychology students) LGBTQ advocates (ages 18-50) in Louisiana

*Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children <18; the mentally impaired, pregnant women, the aged, other). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.

6) PI Signature

Date

10/21/13

(no per signatures)

** I certify my responses are accurate and complete. If the project scope or design is later changes, I will resubmit for review. I will obtain written approval from the Authorized Representative of all non-LSU institutions in which the study is conducted. I also understand that it is my responsibility to maintain copies of all consent forms at LSU for three years after completion of the study. If I leave LSU before that time the consent forms should be preserved in the Departmental Office.

Screening Committee Action: Exempted ☒ Not Exempted ☐ Category/Paragraph 2

Signed Consent Waived? ☒ Yes / No

Reviewer

Mathews

Signature

Robert Mathews

Date 10/31/13

Consent Form

1. Study Title: Consensus Decision Making Through the Eyes of Queer Organizers.
2. Performance Site: Louisiana (locations will vary to accommodate the participants).
3. Investigators: Please call Micah Caswell at 337-580-4615 or email at dcaswe1@tigers.lsu.edu if you have any questions.
4. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research project is to explore the experiences of LGBTQ organizers and activists as they relate to consensus decision making.
5. Subject Inclusion: L LGBTQ people currently involved in LGBTQ advocacy work in Louisiana between the ages of 18 and 50 who do not report psychological or neurological conditions.
6. Number of subjects: 12.
7. Benefits: Subjects will provide a valuable picture of consensus decision making as it relates to LGBTQ advocates, potentially providing a framework for other organizers, organizations and groups to use in their attempts to implement consensus models.
8. Risks: No risk can be identified for individuals who will participate in the study.
9. Study Procedures: Subjects will be interviewed by the researcher about past and current experiences relating to decision making models employed in organizations and/or groups of which they have been a part.
10. Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.
11. Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no actual names of individuals and organizations will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
12. Signatures: The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects' rights or concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Subject Signature: _____ Date: _____

STUDY EXEMPTED BY:

Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman
Institutional Review Board
Louisiana State University
130 David Boyd Hall
225-578-8692 / www.lsu.edu/irb

Exemption Expires: 10/30/2016

VITA

David Caswell, a native of Eunice, Louisiana, received his bachelor's degree at Louisiana State University in 2011. Thereafter, he immediately pursued a master's degree in Communication Studies at Louisiana State University. While in graduate coursework, he worked with various advocacy nonprofit organizations focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues. He expects to receive his master's degree in May 2014 and plans to begin a career in the nonprofit sector.