Cultural Barriers Facing Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students at a Catholic College

The guys I lived with my sophomore year made statements like, "No one at St. James is gay." They really thought that, and I was living with them. They just were very sure that no one who was gay would come here.

Dave, founding member of the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Alliance

Dave[^1] was a senior at St. James College[^2], a religiously affiliated institution (RAI), and part of a group trying to establish a gay, lesbian, and bisexual alliance. Invisibility was but one of the obstacles he and other students had to overcome. Quentin, a psychology professor and former residence hall chaplain, knew of other barriers at St. James—in this case assumptions related to Catholicism—faced by lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students. During his first year as a residence hall chaplain, Quentin knew of no students who were out, though he did know of several students who had attempted to take their own lives because of their sexual orientation. He described an incident where a student tried unsuccessfully to hang himself with a belt. Quentin had become aware of the situation and, in consultation with the counseling center, confronted the student. The student almost immediately began to cry and broke down telling Quentin, "It's horrible. I can't cut it." Quentin responded, "Well, maybe I can help you. . . . Could it have something to do with sexual orientation?" And the student said, "Yes, but you don't know what it's like. You don't know. The church con-

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demns it. It’s sinful.” The student would not give Quentin his word that he would not make another suicide attempt, claiming Quentin did not understand what his life was like. So Quentin told the student he also was gay. It was the first time Quentin ever came out to a student.

St. James College experienced a period of ferment regarding the issue of sexual orientation between the fall of 1991 and the fall of 1993. For the first time in the memories of long-time members of the institution, sexual orientation was a topic of public discussion and a focus of organizing, training, and programming. People Against Homophobia (a faculty and staff “allies” group) formed in the fall of 1991. During their first year they helped add sexual orientation to the institution’s nondiscrimination clause, produced “People Against Homophobia” buttons that they wore and distributed on campus, and secured funding for and invited a national speaker to campus to discuss self-esteem issues of lesbian and gay students. Residence life, through professional and paraprofessional staff, conducted training and programming in the area of sexual orientation. Students Against Homophobia (a student “allies” group) and the Continuum Group (a counseling center based support group for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students) were established during the fall of 1992. Also during the fall semester, the Student Senate sponsored a Diversity Forum to which Students Against Homophobia was invited. By the spring of 1993, a faculty member (Quentin) had come out in the context of a class, several other students had come out on campus, and a group of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students had left the Continuum Group and had begun working to establish the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Alliance [GLBA] of St. James College.

However, by fall semester 1993 organizing had waned. The GLBA never coalesced, People Against Homophobia (PAH) stopped meeting, Students Against Homophobia (SAH) had their only meeting of the semester in November, and discussion and programming had dramatically diminished on campus. This study discovered the organizational cultural barriers facing those individuals and groups addressing sexual orientation at St. James and explored the cultural dynamics that played a part in diminishing activity related to sexual orientation at this religiously affiliated institution.

Religiously Affiliated Institutions and Sexual Orientation

All colleges and universities exist within a societal culture that is homophobic and heterosexist, and so all institutions struggle in some way with issues related to sexual orientation. Religiously affiliated institutions are perceived to be even less friendly places for lesbian, gay, and
biseXual people. This is no surprise. The surprise to Dave’s roommates and others is that LGB students, faculty, and staff attend, teach, and work at religiously affiliated colleges. Like such individuals at most secular institutions, they are faced with oppressive, nonsupportive, homophobic cultures in which they are made to feel invisible and isolated (Norris, 1992; Rhoads, 1994). Many students leave. Others contemplate, attempt, or commit suicide (Gibson, 1989; Saunders & Valente, 1987). Some stay and struggle to develop, despite the lack of a supportive environment.

Religiously affiliated colleges vary widely. Lumping them together masks as much diversity as lumping together all liberal arts colleges. This is especially the case when examining the way in which they deal with the issue of sexual orientation. At one extreme there are those institutions, such as bible colleges and fundamentalist schools, where beliefs about homosexuality are very clear and consistent: it is a choice, it is wrong, it is immoral, and the bible specifies it to be a sin (Maret, 1984). At the other end of this continuum are institutions, such as some of those founded in the Quaker tradition, that tend to be more open to and accepting of the diversity of individuals who exist in the world and to see sexual orientation as one element of that diversity. Of course, many institutions fall between the extremes and comprise the bulk of RAs in the United States.

Research on the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, faculty, and staff traditionally has been constrained due to the stigma attached to homosexuality (Herdt, 1989), the forced invisibility of this population, and the taboo nature of discussing oppression due to sexual orientation (Evans & Wall, 1991). Recently, Rhoads (1994, 1995), D’Augelli (1989a, 1989b), and others have explored the experiences of LGB students at large universities. Both Rhoads and D’Augelli highlight the struggles faced by lesbian, gay, and bisexual students in and outside the classroom. However, there is virtually no research that examines RAs and their relationship to students who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The issue of religion—in the case of St. James, Catholicism—presents a great challenge to people trying to address the issue of sexual orientation at RAs (D’Emilio, 1992; Gramick, 1983; Maret, 1984; Norris, 1992). For example, in the case of Catholicism homosexuality has been identified as an “intrinsic disorder” (Giurlanda, 1993). Additionally, some LGB students only come to grips with their sexual orientation after going to college, because many LGB students remain closeted (to themselves and others) until their college years (D’Augelli, 1991). Therefore, some of these students end up on campuses least able to help them; campuses that may label them as intrinsically disordered.

This study took place at St. James College during the spring and fall
of 1993. St. James is a liberal arts college of 2,200 students located in the northeastern United States, in a suburb of a moderate-sized urban area. Most students are white, Catholic, and come from working- or middle-class families. It is a college in “the Catholic tradition.” That is, although it no longer has formal ties with the Catholic church, its history, traditions, and values are grounded in their Catholic origin, and students, parents, and alumni still consider it a Catholic college. Catholic colleges comprise the largest percentage (33%) of RAI s in the United States (Guthrie, 1992). The founding order was invited by the local bishop early in this century to establish a college. Therefore, a long history exists of influence by the local community beyond the college. Priests of the founding denomination reside on campus, serve on the faculty, and only their members have served as president of the institution. Priests from the local diocese (including one of the bishops) serve on the board of trustees.

I pursued this study when I became aware, through colleagues working at St. James, that some students were working to establish a Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Alliance. Given that culture is easier to identify during times of transition or conflict (Love, 1991), the emergence of the GLBA and the previously mentioned groups presented an ideal opportunity to study through live interviews on location the culture of an RAI, cultural resistance, and possible culture change.

Methods

Investigating culture requires discovering and understanding the meanings that people give to their experiences. This involves identifying shared meaning, beliefs, values, and assumptions related to organizational experiences. Uncovering these meanings, beliefs, values, and assumptions requires the prolonged contact, in-depth interviews, and empathic listening employed in qualitative research.

Data Collection

Data collection began in March 1993 and continued until December 1993. Data were gathered through interviews and observations. The process of participant selection began with students who self-identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and were working to develop the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Alliance (GLBA) of St. James College. Additional participants were selected both purposively (Patton, 1980) and through snowball sampling, in that those students identified other people who were supportive of efforts to address sexual orientation matters (Dobbert, 1984; Whitt & Kuh, 1991). I also invited members of Students
Against Homophobia to participate. Faculty and professional staff who were identified as supporters by participants were contacted and asked to take part in the study. Early on, I decided to focus the study on lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, faculty, staff, and their supporters, because I was interested in studying their experiences and their perceptions of actions, behaviors, and the environment, perceptions that were indicative of the culture. Therefore, no individuals resistant to the actions related to sexual orientation on campus were included in this study.

Twenty-six people were interviewed, some were interviewed on more than one occasion (a total of 41 interviews). These included the four founding members of the GLBA; nine members of Students Against Homophobia; the Student Senate president; the chairperson of the student programming committee; four administrators (which included three members of People Against Homophobia, including the two co-founders [the director of the counseling center and a campus minister] and the moderator of Students Against Homophobia); the academic dean; and six faculty (three of whom were members of People Against Homophobia).

Based on the interviews with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and ally faculty, staff, and students, it was discovered that there was neither an “out” nor an underground LGB community at St. James. Most lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals were isolated on campus, though some faculty had connections to communities beyond the campus. Given this lack of community, the opportunity in which to participate and observe the activities of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students as a group was extremely limited. However, six events were observed—three residence hall programs related to sexual orientation, one campuswide program related to sexual orientation, and two meetings of Students Against Homophobia. These events were helpful in examining how both the lesbian, gay, and bisexual students and the straight students working on this issue dealt with the greater public within the college community and also helped to triangulate the information gathered through interviews.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded concurrently with data collection, using unitizing and categorizing methods adapted from Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) constructivist inquiry methodology and Glaser and Strauss’s constant comparative method (1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The first round of interviews was conducted during the spring semester with six people, including the four students working to establish the GLBA, a faculty member involved in campus sexual orientation issues, and the advisor to Students Against Homophobia. The interview protocol for these initial interviews was open-ended (Spradley, 1979). Following this
round of interviews, I analyzed the transcripts for the values, beliefs, and assumptions related to sexual orientation issues at St. James. The transcripts and the themes and categories were returned to the initial interviewees for reaction and comment. The preliminary analysis and feedback from the participants shaped the interview protocols for subsequent rounds of interviews. Data collection and analysis continued throughout the summer and the fall 1993 semester.

Authenticity and Trustworthiness

In order to enhance the study's authenticity and trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), which are qualitative equivalents of reliability and validity, I focused on incorporating the criteria of fairness (openly negotiating emerging themes and categories with participants), ontological authenticity (reflecting back to key informants' elaborated constructions of their experience—themes, categories, and subsequent analysis), and educative authenticity (expanding participants' appreciation for constructions beyond their own, most specifically a more conscious understanding of one examination of the institution's culture related to sexual orientation). Actions included returning transcripts to most participants for their review (several students indicated no desire to review their transcripts). Eleven participants returned transcripts with notes of correction and clarification. I also discussed emerging categories with six participants and provided an initial report of the study to four key informants for their reaction and critique. Analysis resulted in a picture of a culture that exhibited significant barriers to addressing the issue of sexual orientation.

Organizational Culture

The analytical lens for this study was organizational culture. Kuh and Whitt (1988) defined culture as "the collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institute of higher education and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus" (pp. 12–13). Giroux (1983) included the concepts of power and influence in his definition of culture, in that culture exists "within a social sphere of contestation and struggle, a sphere rooted in a complex of power relations that influence and condition lived experience" (p. 164). Therefore, culture is a dynamic entity where power and influence help to determine appropriate frames of reference and appropriate norms, behaviors, and actions. Culture is then a form of social control (Foucault, 1979), in that there are accepted and val-
ued ways of doing things, topics of conversation, and activities. Social control is achieved by inducing in organizational members "a state of conscious and permanent awareness of expectations and social repercussions" (Rhoads, 1994, p. 28). Culture exerts an equivalent and opposite influence on non-normative actions. Included among these non-normative actions at St. James was the fact that several students and one member of the faculty came out, people organized into groups dealing with sexual orientation, and sexual orientation was the topic of discussion (in PAH, SAH, the Continuum Group, the Student Senate Diversity Forum), programming (by PAH, SAH, residence life), and training (in residence life).

These non-normative actions were attempts to change patterns and frames of reference; they were attempts to change the culture. Though typically stable, culture is constantly changing, evolving, and being shaped through the interactions and experiences of members of the culture (Smircich, 1983). However, as Schein (1992) has pointed out, due to its subconscious nature, culture is difficult to identify and even more difficult to change systematically or in a particular direction. Culture also exists on and exerts influence from many levels, including society, geographic region, institution, organization, and group.

Culture provided the lens through which the stream of activity in the institution was interpreted by its members. A cultural perspective was especially important for making sense of this particular situation, because on this campus no documents or official policy prohibited discussing, organizing, or programming about homosexuality. For most of the institution's history, though, the issue had not been talked about, and by the fall 1993 semester organizing waned and discussion and programming dramatically diminished on campus. The institution's administration never announced that the GLBA could not form, but it never did. The institution's culture asserted itself.

I argue that traditional notions of culture and culture change do not adequately address the issue of resistance to and attempts to change a dominant culture from within that culture. The literature recognizes the importance of working from the margins or from outside the culture to change culture (e.g., Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1992; Rhoads, 1994) but does not address the experiences of those who attempt to change culture while desiring to remain a part of the culture. This is an important consideration for culture change related to sexual orientation. Whereas other, visible cultural "minorities" (e.g., women, people of color, mobility impaired individuals) may be forced to the margins, the invisibility of sexual orientation to some degree introduces an element of choice about whether an individual resists the dominant culture and from where an individual or group attempts to change the culture of an institution.
The literature is also relatively silent on the relationship among and influence of the varying "levels" of culture—in this case societal and institutional—on each other as they relate to the lived experience of members and attempts to change institutional culture related to sexual orientation. The impact of societal culture on lesbian, gay, and bisexual people has been described (e.g., Herdt, 1992; Herek, 1989), as has the impact of various institutional cultures (e.g., D’Augelli, 1989a, 1989b; Norris, 1992; Rhoads, 1994). However, to what degree societal culture is tightly or loosely coupled with institutional culture, how societal culture is played out through institutional culture, and what role societal culture plays in attempts to change institutional culture are issues that have not been explored, and their importance became evident due to the religiously affiliated nature of St. James.

Eight interrelated cultural barriers were discovered that served to reassert the culture’s dominance and suppress the visibility of lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues at this campus. Other research (e.g., Blumenfeld, 1992; Herek, 1989) indicates that the first five cultural barriers—labeled "societal cultural barriers"—are pervasive throughout society and evidenced at other colleges and universities (Rhoads, 1994). The last three—labeled "institutional cultural barriers"—related more closely to the religiously affiliated nature of St. James and served to channel and intensify the societal barriers on campus. Additionally, four mechanisms were uncovered that contributed to the decline in activity related to sexual orientation and therefore assisted the process of cultural reassertion.

Societal Cultural Barriers

Organizational culture, though unique to its specific organization, derives much of its fabric from the larger society. Aspects of societal culture pervaded the campus of St. James. The most prominent were the norms of homophobia and heterosexism, discomfort with sexuality, the stigma associated with homosexuality, and the pressure to keep sexual minorities invisible. The pervasiveness of these oppressive aspects of American culture is well established (Blumenfeld, 1992; Herek, 1989), and their damaging influence on college campuses has also been substantiated (D’Augelli, 1989a, 1989b; Herek, 1986; La Salle & Rhoads, 1992; Nieberding, 1989; Norris, 1992; Rhoads, 1994; Stage & Manning, 1992; Tierney, 1992). However, as previously indicated, little has been documented about the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people at RAIs and about the way society’s culture is mediated through this type of context.

Homophobia. Homophobia specifically relates to the irrational hatred and fear of homosexuality in oneself and in others (Friend, 1992). "It is
a word that calls up images of loss of freedom, verbal and physical violence, death” (Pharr, 1988, p. 1). Grounded in and related to sexism and heterosexism, homophobia also draws much of its power from “the social norms and codes of behavior that, although not expressly written into law or policy, nonetheless work within a society to legitimize oppression” of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people (Blumenfeld, 1992, p. 6). Homophobia is pervasive in American society and includes the silencing of people regarding the topic of sexual minorities, stereotyping, fearing visibility of LGB people, heterosexism (Tinney, 1983), the threat of violence, and violence itself. The root of homophobia—phobia—relates specifically to fear. Beyond fear of homosexuals and homosexuality (i.e., homophobia), participants in this study perceived fear pervading the campus regarding issues of sexual orientation. This included fear on the part of closeted students, faculty, or staff of being found out, and fear on the part of heterosexual students of being labeled as lesbian or gay. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty feared that they would be discounted, isolated, and excluded, and that it would be too personally damaging to be out. Given the violence experienced by gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in the larger society (Herek, 1989) and on college campuses (Rhoads, 1994), fear of a homophobic reaction and possibly violent retribution was a strong deterrent to action.

Straight, lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty and staff could not imagine an openly gay or lesbian person being hired as a faculty member. While considering the issue of hiring openly lesbian, gay, or bisexual faculty members, Wendy, a heterosexual sociology professor, stated, "I think that even though [an out faculty person might] be acceptable, that if they were public they could no longer represent the institution, and that would be taken for granted. . . . They are okay as long as they don't represent themselves on the outside as a person from St. James. They would never be called to speak for the college in public statements of any kind.” This statement revealed a form of ostracism related to the homophobic nature of the culture; that the process of coming out on the part of a member of the faculty would disconnect the individual from the culture and identity of the institution, without necessarily separating them physically from the institution.

Heterosexism. Heterosexism is the assumption that everyone is or ought to be heterosexual and that heterosexuality is the only legitimate sexual orientation (Lorde, 1985). Participants shared many traditional examples of heterosexism (e.g., assumptions about dating partners, marriage as a goal in life). However, heterosexism influenced lesbian, gay, and bisexual people at this RAI in other specific ways: it reinforced their invisibility and its impact on communicating with other lesbian, gay, and
biseexual people in this environment. This made it that much more difficult for LGB people to find each other and develop supportive communities.

Trying to find other sexual minorities and to make them aware of one’s presence in this homophobic climate, where no lesbian, gay, or bisexual community existed, was a complicated process, especially for faculty and administrative staff. From participants’ descriptions, it was a dance of physical and verbal nuances, inflections, and subtlety. One used double entendres, “invaded” personal space, referred to particular authors, and was intentional about hanging posters and displaying books. At St. James, unobtrusively displaying a pink triangle was considered by some of the participants as safe, given the lack of awareness of the meaning of that particular symbol on the part of straight faculty and staff. However, in view of the increased danger and potential damage in a culture that rejected homosexuality, most participants talked about being very careful about the signs, signals, and symbols they gave that might betray them to “the wrong people.”

One of the ways in which the culture of St. James impacted this process of communication was that LGB people, especially faculty, who were trying to send signals concerning their sexual orientation to potential supporters in their environment found that they had to come further out and explain who they were. Amy was a faculty member in religious studies and a bisexual woman who was in a long distance relationship with a woman when she arrived at St. James. She spoke about how this issue affected her: “Here at St. James it seemed really necessary to spell it out. . . . If you know that I lived with this woman and she’s coming up to see me all the time. If you know that, why do I have to explain that to you? My impression is that people’s surprise has been genuine enough when I told them my sexual orientation that they didn’t know. And that made it very different from other places where I have been. And again, I think that’s in the absence of the lesbian or gay community.”

The need to be explicit was not just with straight people. This aspect of the culture (i.e., heightened heterosexism) was also internalized by other LGB people, in that one gay faculty member did not pick up on any of the signals from Amy, and she finally had to tell him directly about her sexual orientation. The lack of a lesbian, gay, and bisexual community and the invisibility of the issue fed into these heterosexist assumptions.

Discomfort with sexuality. Faculty described students as lacking knowledge of sexuality, fearing sexuality in general, and in classes (e.g., biology, psychology) being unable to say words related to sex organs and acts. This description characterizes the concept of erotophobia, which is defined as having fear, discomfort, or other negative attitudes
about sexuality and erotic topics (Fisher, Byrne, White, & Kelley, 1988). Individuals with authoritarian personalities have been found to score higher on erotophobia (Fisher et al., 1988). Other research (Yarber & Lee, 1983) indicates that erotophobic and high sex-guilt students have more negative attitudes related to homosexuality. Elze (1992) contends that discomfort with sexuality pervades American culture, however, no research has been done to compare the level of erotophobia among college students attending RAIs with those attending secular institutions. While accepting discomfort with sexuality as an element of society's culture, faculty and staff, in comparing their experiences at St. James to experiences at secular institutions, believed it was exacerbated by the Catholic nature of the institution and the fact that a large percentage of the students and faculty were Catholic.

In reference to this study, a first step between not discussing and discussing sexual orientation is recognizing the topic of sexuality in general. This step was perceived to be especially difficult at this Catholic institution. Karen, a heterosexual political science professor, described it this way: "Those were all forces—the general conservatism of the country, the general Catholic discomfort around issues of sex. If you're going to talk about homosexuality, God forbid, you're going to have to acknowledge that everyone is sexual." Given this situation, people who were interested in addressing the issue of sexual orientation had to take on the additional burden of getting people to discuss a broader topic about which there was already tremendous discomfort—sexuality. Opposing this particular societal norm takes great courage (Elze, 1992).

Invisibility. None of the faculty and staff in the study who had been at the institution for more than a few years (and several had been at the institution for more than twelve years) could remember a time when a lesbian, gay, and bisexual student, faculty, or staff member had been out on campus. During the 1991–93 time period the visibility of the issue of sexual orientation was increased due to the activity and organizing occurring on campus and due to the people who came out. However, the actions of people in the institution continued to press toward reducing visibility.

One particularly telling incident was mentioned by several people as symbolizing the pressure toward invisibility. It involved a large, centrally located poster advertising a student senate “Diversity Forum.” This was a program where representatives from student groups dealing with issues of diversity, multiculturalism, or marginalization came together to discuss their issues. In separate interviews, both Patty, the advisor to the group and a heterosexual, and Wendy, the sociology professor, spoke of this incident. Patty said, "One corner of the poster had been
ripped off and taken away, and that was the corner that said ‘Students Against Homophobia’. . . . It was kind of telling in that we weren’t just written on. We were torn off and taken away. It wasn’t even like they threw us on the ground. It was literally like they made us nonexistent.” Wendy remarked, “Of course, nobody knows who does it. Nobody claims to do it. And they didn’t actually do what they do with the women’s history stuff, which is to do junk on it, to attack the poster. Here it’s trying to keep it invisible. . . . They don’t want to have an acknowledged presence of gays and lesbians here.” Some might argue that this was an isolated incident and to draw conclusions from this single act is suspect. However, it is the strongly symbolic meaning that people drew from this single act that is most important. For some people, it brought into clear focus the cultural pressure toward invisibility and silence.

**Stigma.** Homosexuality has long been recognized as a stigmatizing agent in our society (Herdt, 1989). There is also evidence of courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1963)—the stigmatizing nature of being acquaintances or friends of stigmatized individuals (in this case homosexuals) (Gochros, 1985; Pfuhl, 1986; Sigelman, Howell, Cornell, Cutright, & Dewey, 1991). The experiences of the participants in this study suggested that at St. James the stigma extended beyond interacting with stigmatized people to anyone who associated with a stigmatized topic—homosexuality. Given that a person was heterosexual until proven otherwise, then anyone concerned about the issue of sexual orientation or homophobia had to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Anyone who decided to take up the cause (e.g., fight homophobia) first had to deal with the fact that culturally negative assumptions would be made about her or him. In an institutional culture that people recognized as having a narrow band of convention, this may have been too far out of the norm for many people, and several of the participants believed that it constrained the number of people willing to be involved in groups like Students Against Homophobia, which went out of its way to advertise that it was not a group for just LGB students. The process of stigmatization was used to discount people’s actions or motivations. If a person was identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, his or her actions were seen as politically motivated, and this was enough reason to discount them. The campus minister who cofounded People Against Homophobia indicated that he thought the homophobic atmosphere was so threatening that no one could even mention that they had experienced a homosexual thought or incident in their life to anybody without fear of being labeled, branded, and ostracized. Patty, the advisor of Students Against Homophobia, was explicit about this issue at the organizing meeting of the group.
I told people right up front when we started our group, “Just by virtue of you saying you’re coming to this meeting, there are going to be people who assume that’s why [being lesbian, gay, or bisexual] you’re here. I’m telling you that up front, and if that bothers you, think about that or figure out how you want to respond to that yourself.”

Institutional Cultural Barriers

Societal cultural barriers were forms of prejudice and oppression that institutional members brought to the campus; however, the religiously affiliated nature of the institution appeared to spawn specific cultural barriers that provided additional potency to the societal barriers and served to strongly enforce dominant cultural norms and behaviors. The primary organizational barrier at the institutional level was, not surprisingly, perceptions related to the Catholic nature of the institution. Other institutional cultural barriers were the pervasive fear of external and typically peripheral constituencies and the uncertainty about when and where it was appropriate to discuss sexual orientation.

Perceptions of Catholicism. The traditions of the Catholic church anchored St. James, and many of the people in the St. James community were perceived by the participants in this study as substantiating their homophobia by drawing on what they perceived to be the history, tradition, and dogma of the Catholic church. Karen, the political science professor, said, “I’m surprised by the extent to which people feel compelled to fall back on the church in their homophobia.” Harold, a sociology professor and heterosexual, shared this thought: “Sometimes for students, Catholicism simply will be their argument. They will not talk any further about it. . . . They will say, ‘My religion finds it reprehensible, period. It’s in the bible.’” Homophobia and perceptions of the Catholic church seemed to be very much intertwined in the culture of the institution. This was perceived especially among the general student body. Many of the participants of this study experienced conversations in which people indicated the belief that the Catholic church specifically condoned homophobia. Several of the participants, especially the LGB students and their allies, struggled with these perceptions as well. However, most of the students in the study reconciled themselves to the fact that the Catholic church was homophobic and not doing enough to address homophobia, but they did not believe that it was sanctioning homophobia. Some of the programming and training being done during this time tried to address these perceptions among the student body. Participants had no idea what, if any, impact the programming and training was having. Given the drop in activity in the fall of 1993 it might be surmised that whatever impact it had, it was not enough to help sustain the “movement.”
One contradiction identified by several of the faculty and professional staff was that many of the students at St. James were willing to depart from church views on birth control, premarital sex, and divorce, but not on homosexuality. Instead, they used their views of the church to validate their fear and hatred. Karen addressed this issue: “They call up Catholic doctrine to defend that homosexuality is unnatural, immoral, indecent, obscene. It should be outlawed, it should be punished. And so it’s very striking that among a student body that leans, I wouldn’t say strongly to the left, but it leans to the left on reproductive issues, on most of those types of issues, doesn’t lean that way when it concerns homosexuality.” This differentiation among sexuality issues may reflect a way in which the societal barrier of homophobia was played out on this particular campus. That is, perceptions of the Catholic Church doctrine served for some people as a legitimate excuse for their homophobia.

Catholic lesbian, gay, and bisexual students described ways in which their experiences of the Catholic Church, as mediated through parents, parish priests, Catholic school teachers, and St. James faculty, had a negative influence on their development. Some of the results they mentioned included resisting their own sexual orientation (not wanting to admit to themselves that they might be lesbian or gay), having tremendous feelings of guilt, and considering or attempting suicide. They spoke about the church amplifying the negative messages already coming at them from society and acting as a strong deterrent to people who wanted to work on this issue and address the needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students.

Fear of external and typically peripheral constituencies. At secular institutions homophobic and heterosexist elements of societal culture pervade the campus. However, the values, beliefs, and assumptions of external (e.g., local clergy, church hierarchy, potential donors) and typically peripheral (e.g., board of trustees, alumni, parents of students, parents of prospective students) constituencies invaded St. James in the form of local influence and fear of the power of these constituencies, making work on this issue that much more difficult. The elements of external (societal) and internal (institutional) culture were tightly coupled at St. James (Weick, 1982). The board of trustees and the alumni of St. James were perceived as the guardians of the Catholic tradition of the institution and as religiously, socially, and politically conservative. Parents were perceived in much the same way, both parents of current students and especially parents of prospective students. St. James, as a tuition-driven institution, feared their power. In reference to dealing with HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases, and the question of having condoms available on campus, Amy, the religious studies professor, commented,
“No matter how good it might be for the students in terms of preventing HIV or STDs, . . . . that wasn’t the issue. It was just, how will the parents [and] how will our alumni money perceive this?”

This fear constrained the actions of those involved in these change efforts on campus. Andrea, one of the founders of the GLBA and a lesbian, was concerned about trying to involve some of the supportive priests on campus. “You always run into [those questions], what kind of position am I putting this person in? Who am I going to get them in trouble with—the bishop, the archbishop?” This fear also led to the desire on the part of many of the students’ supporters among the upper administration that the students and their allies pursue their issues quietly without attracting attention to themselves, the issue, or the institution. The academic dean, viewed as a strong supporter of the students, said, “Let’s see if we can’t do it quietly, and for God’s sake, let’s watch what we do with regard to how things play out in the public arena, because this college, in fact, does have ties to the different constituents.” It is not so much what external constituencies would do, but the fear of what they would do that constrained activity. Their power in the culture had an influence on maintaining normed behavior even without exerting this power.

Appropriate ways to discuss sexual orientation. There were two culturally appropriate ways to discuss sexual orientation that protected an individual on this campus from being stigmatized. One was in an educational/academic context, and the other was in a counseling situation. Wendy, the sociology professor, indicated, “The director of the counseling center is the one person on campus who can say that our lesbian, gay, and bisexual students are suffering, and say ‘We must do something’ and not be politically marked.” It was accepted as inappropriate to make sexual orientation a political issue or to deal with it on a lived level. This cultural restriction contributed to the pressure toward invisibility of the issue.

Given the value of academic freedom, individual faculty could legitimately address the topic of sexual orientation in the context of their classes. There were examples of sociology, psychology, and religious studies professors who had addressed the topic in class for years. The academic dean discussed how he dealt with the topic as a classroom teacher in religious studies.

The question of sexual orientation for faculty would generally pop up with regard to what a person might or might not be able to say in class about these issues. And I tried to be fairly careful about that. I always tried to do it in a way that was within my area of technical competence, because, it’s only if you do it within the area of your technical competence that you have any hope of claiming the protections of academic freedom.
There appeared to be no stigmatizing of individuals who dealt with sexual orientation in their classes, and they were among the people identified by students as supporters. Any other mode of addressing the issue meant that it was becoming politicized. Political discussion meant that the underlying beliefs, values, and attitudes of the culture were being called into question. The legitimacy of those beliefs, values, and attitudes would be challenged, perhaps leading to a focus on the power structures within the culture. Addressing the topic in the context of class intellectualized it and removed it from the context of the institution and its culture. Dealing with it in the context of counseling meant that it was being dealt with quietly and individually and that the symptoms (e.g., depression, anger, frustration) were being addressed, but not all of the causes (e.g., oppression, being closeted, homophobic climate).

The perceptions of Catholicism's stand on homosexuality, the fear of external and typically peripheral constituencies, and the lack of appropriate ways to discuss sexuality because of the societal-based cultural barriers on campus created a formidable barrier to addressing issues of sexual orientation. Although for about a two-year time period sexual orientation was addressed on campus, eventually the power of the culture reasserted itself.

Cultural Dynamics Leading to Decline in Activity

Cultural artifacts, in this case cultural barriers, are easier to discover and substantiate than cultural processes, because the former tend to be more visible and closer to the conscious level (Schein, 1992). However, the issue of cultural dynamics—attributing cultural causes to specific actions—must be presented in a much more tentative manner, because most actions on the part of individuals in an organization have various motivations and multiple causes. For example, although an individual may indicate that the reason for leaving an institution is a better offer somewhere else, most often there are other causes (e.g., unhappiness in the current position, lack of professional satisfaction, lack of fit with the organization or one's co-workers, a chilly climate, a spouse's or partner's desire to move) and motivations (e.g., prestige needs, desire for a higher salary, desire to move to another part of the country, family concerns) that contribute to that decision. The purpose of the following section is to suggest tentative answers to why and how the culture of the institution defeated the opposition of the individuals who were actively addressing the issue of sexual orientation on St. James campus.

Cultural barriers. The cultural barriers were part of the cultural dynamics that contributed to the fall off in activity. The work on the part of study participants did not address most of the barriers identified above
and failed to eliminate any of them. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual students and faculty and their allies faced a web of interrelated barriers in their attempts to address issues of sexual orientation at St. James College. Homophobia, heterosexism, the discomfort with issues related to sexuality, the invisibility of sexual minorities, and the stigma associated with homosexuality were all elements of the culture of the greater societal context in which St. James existed. These elements interacted to reinforce one another; they were intensified by the religiously affiliated elements of the culture (i.e., perceptions of Catholicism, fear of typically peripheral and external constituencies, lack of appropriate ways to discuss sexual issues); and they marginalized the work that was being done to address sexual orientation. These barriers also contributed to and were strengthened by the lack of an identifiable LGB community that by its presence might have presented a counterweight to these cultural elements and provided a cultural enclave (Rhoads, 1994) in which to “escape” the dominant institutional culture. Not having an alternative presence or voice made the culture appear to be that much more monolithically homophobic and heterosexist and made lesbian, gay, and bisexual people feel that much more isolated and alone.

According to participants’ reports, the sum of their actions during 1991–93 seemed to have had an immediate influence on improving the campus climate, especially in reducing overt homophobia. However, the people who were the focus of this study were members of the culture of this RAI. Rhoads (1994), in his study of the Queer Nation movement at a large research university, studied a group of individuals many of whom consciously adopted a “contraculture” stance to the dominant culture. By placing themselves in opposition to the prevailing culture, they created a cultural space from which to “wage” their struggle to change the dominant culture. Virtually none of the participants in the St. James study saw her- or himself as separate from the dominant culture, nor—outside of sexual orientation issues—did these individuals want to be culturally distinct. In their resistance to dominant ways of thinking, believing, and acting in relation to sexual orientation these individuals did not suddenly become separate from the prevailing culture; they were attempting to influence and change the culture while trying to remain members of it. Therefore, they continued to be influenced and, more specifically, constrained in their actions by the dominant culture, and eventually this culture crumbled the oppositional response of the students and their allies.

The difficult dynamic of attempting to change the culture from within was compounded by the conditional support received by others. As described above, the academic dean was identified by the students as a
supporter of their efforts, yet he wanted the students to "work quietly." Other faculty were viewed as supporters because they addressed issues of sexual orientation in their sociology, psychology, or religious studies classes (i.e., culturally appropriate ways of addressing sexual orientation). However, except for Quentin, none of the other faculty members who addressed these issues in class took any action to challenge the underlying culture.

Faculty could continue to deal with the topic of sexual orientation intellectually in the classroom, hall directors and student activities professionals could facilitate awareness raising and sensitivity programs, and counselors could deal with students struggling with these issues on an individual basis. These activities perhaps resisted, but ultimately did not challenge the underlying culture. As Tierney (1993) pointed out, changing the culture of an institution is not just a matter of changing people's attitudes and encouraging the empowerment of individuals, but a matter of addressing and changing the structures and power relationships that underlie the culture. Cultural structures and power relationships were not addressed by the participants in this study.

Early successes reduced urgency. From participants' stories, early activity (1991–92) related to sexual orientation seemed to tap a well of pent-up energy among those who became involved. The impetus to organizing was a chance meeting and discussion between the two cofounders of People Against Homophobia (Irene, director of the counseling center and a heterosexual, and Bert, a campus minister) early in the fall 1991 semester. Faculty and staff who, individually, had been frustrated about the situation on campus were invited to come together to discuss the situation. This group of about a dozen people eventually formed People Against Homophobia. During their first year the group met regularly, discussed a name for the group (a culturally appropriate name, in that it is not "for" anything related to LGB issues, it is against hatred and fear), supported programming and training efforts on the part of the residence life staff, helped add sexual orientation to the campus nondiscrimination statement, produced "People Against Homophobia" buttons that members wore and distributed on campus, and secured funding for and invited a national speaker to campus to discuss self-esteem issues of lesbian and gay students. The activity and visibility of PAH encouraged some LGB students to come forward, meet each other, and ask for help. This resulted in the founding of both Students Against Homophobia and the Continuum Group (the counseling center based support group for LGB students) during the 1992–93 school year. PAH continued to meet during 1992–93 but did not experience near the level of activity of the first year. Quentin, the psychology professor, came out in the context of
a class in the spring of 1993, and some of the students from the Continuum Group volunteered to serve on class panels to discuss issues of sexual orientation during that spring semester. As mentioned above, this activity appeared to have an influence on improving the campus climate related to sexual orientation, especially in reducing overt homophobia. It also appeared to convince some individuals, particularly the students, that the culture on campus was changing to one that was more accepting of issues related to sexual orientation and sexual minorities and that efforts could be safely curtailed. These early successes, rather than changing the culture, appeared to eliminate the urgency of continued cultural opposition.

Lack of reward for work and shifts in priorities. Faculty especially noted the lack of recognition and reward for working on issues related to sexual orientation. No one mentioned being specifically punished for their participation in such organizations as PAH (though at least one administrative staff member was “cautioned”), but neither was their time and energy rewarded. By the fall of 1993 priorities had shifted for several individuals. Irene, the director of the counseling center, had one counselor out on maternity leave and felt that she had to spend more time on issues related to relationship violence and date rape. Other faculty returned other projects to a level of priority higher than their work with PAH.

Leaders left and were not replaced. Related to shifting priorities was the fact that there was a high rate of turnover in a number of leadership positions between the spring of 1993 and the fall. As indicated above, Irene relinquished her position as one of the conveners of PAH. Bert, the other cofounder of PAH, took a leave that fall. Wendy, the sociology professor, was identified as the person to take over as chair of PAH, but neither she nor anyone else convened the group during the fall semester. Wendy had also agreed to be the moderator of the GLBA but was never contacted. Two of the students who had worked to establish the GLBA (Andrea and Dave) had graduated. The other students involved did not carry on the work, neither did they seek to recruit or involve more students. Two influential and supportive student leaders (Ted, the president of the student senate, and Larry, the chair of the campus programming board) both graduated. Quentin left both St. James and college teaching. He had known he was leaving when he decided to come out on campus, so his risk in coming out was lessened. No other faculty or staff followed his lead in coming out, so when he left, there were once again no “out” professionals on campus. For various reasons SAH had a difficult time getting started that fall. Patty, the founder and advisor, could not identify the reasons why this had been the case, but the group had their first
meeting in November and had what she considered a good turnout of 20 students (about 15 were new to the group and about 5 were returning).

Perhaps it was just a coincidence that activity diminished and that all these people left at this particular time. However, as indicated above, organizational actions typically have multiple motivations and causes. Viewing the process through a cultural lens allows us to identify additional possible causes and motivations for the actions that occurred at St. James during this time period. Just as Quentin knew he was leaving, the seniors knew they were graduating. Each was firmly entrenched in the culture when they “took up the cause.” Perhaps they could afford to take additional risks in challenging the culture of the institution by coming out and attempting to establish a gay, lesbian, and bisexual alliance. Several of them mentioned wanting to leave the institution better than they had found it. Cultural resistance is hard work. Two years as convener of PAH was enough for Irene; other priorities called her as well as other faculty and staff.

With the sense of urgency diminished and in view of shifting priorities and lack of reward for working in this area, when leadership voids emerged, no one moved to fill them. Without individuals to provide energy and leadership, activity dropped off and cultural resistance all but ceased.

Implications

What was needed at St. James to overcome the cultural barriers and address the cultural dynamics in order to change the institution’s culture? The findings of this research imply several conclusions from which other institutions can gain insight about culture and culture change related to sexual orientation at religiously affiliated institutions. Obviously, no one can predict what might have happened if gay, lesbian, and bisexual students and staff and their supporters had acted differently at St. James. Given the tightly coupled nature of the campus to its external constituents and societal culture, significant cultural change might have been impossible without change in the greater culture in which St. James existed and that further public resistance would have been met by more direct action on the part of the members of the dominant culture, especially campus leaders or external constituents. However, it can be argued that for any changes in the culture of St. James to occur the following actions were necessary:

1. At least some of the members of the institution seeking to change the culture of St. James in regard to sexual orientation had to move outside of the dominant culture. It appears from the experiences of the par-
Participants in this study that there is a difference between feeling marginalized by and within a culture and working to change culture from the margins (from outside or at the border of the culture). Tierney (1993) contended that cultural resistance and change must address the underlying power and influence structures of the culture. However, especially when compared to Rhoads’s (1994) study of the Queer Nation movement on one campus, the experiences of the individuals in this study imply that, in order for them to have persisted in their work to change the culture, they could not have remained totally “of” that culture. Culture is very difficult to change from the center, and it is most often changed from the margins or borders (Giroux, 1992). The margin can be a lonely place, because when one moves to the margin, one is seen as an outsider to the dominant culture. Some of the participants recognized this when discussing what they believed would happen if a faculty member came out on campus (i.e., that he or she could no longer represent St. James to any external audiences).

2. A “contra” subculture was needed to persist in the change efforts. Because working at the margins can be lonely work, a mutually supportive group beyond the subgroups identified was needed. In his study of a cultural enclave of queer students at a research university, Rhoads (1994) found that their resistance to dominant cultural norms was enhanced and maintained by the development of a “contracultural” community or enclave at the border of the dominant culture of the institution. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and their allies at St. James needed to go to the margins and develop a sustained community and subculture through which to address culture change, but because they did not do this, the dominant culture was able to suppress the resistance.

Although not identified as a cultural barrier, the lack of an LGB community on or associated with campus served to intensify the cultural barriers that were identified. Membership in an LGB community goes beyond membership in formal groups (e.g., PAH, SAH, and the Continuum Group), and the existence of formal groups does not ensure the existence of a community. To use a professional sports analogy, the community is the clubhouse; it is a place where one can relax, be one’s self, and where one can control who enters. The formal groups are the actual games. They are public and played by a set of agreed upon rules. The formal groups are one of the places where cultural resistance is waged. A community, by contrast, whether underground or “out,” offers multiple social and interpersonal spaces within which to interact and explore one’s identity as a lesbian, gay, or bisexual person. It can offer a cultural space distinct from the oppressive dominant culture.

3. The culture had to be brought to conscious awareness. It appeared
that the participants of the study needed to better identify and understand the complex, mutually shaping, pervasive, and reinforcing nature of the culture as it related to issues of sexual orientation at St. James. Additionally, as Tierney (1993) recommended, the cultural structures and power relationships also had to be brought to conscious awareness by those seeking to change the culture. Only when cultural influences were understood, could the individuals and groups more effectively work intentionally to dismantle and remove those barriers (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1992). Coming to know and understand the culture and how they, as lesbian, gay, or bisexual people, were influenced by it required looking for and analyzing contradictions in the environment (e.g., recognizing that students accepted Catholic teachings on homosexuality but rejected those related to birth control and premarital sex), and it required openness and critical reflection on their actions and on the responses to their actions.

4. The visibility of the issue of sexual orientation had to be maintained and increased. Beyond being aware of the culture, it was important to maintain the visibility of the issue on campus. There were isolated individuals, especially LGB students, who were in pain and had no idea where or to whom to reach out for help. During the 1991–93 time period the activity surrounding the issue made it quite visible on campus. A cadre of faculty and student affairs staff came together and through People Against Homophobia breached the invisibility of the issue in multiple ways (by existing, distributing “People Against Homophobia” buttons, programming, and discussing the topic in classes). The counseling center advertised the Continuum Group, a counseling center based (and, therefore, culturally appropriate) support group for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. A relatively small group of people who either did not fear the stigma or were protected from it (e.g., counselors, faculty in educational settings, members of religious orders) needed to continue to increase the visibility, break the silence, and possibly reach students who needed help.

Conclusion

Changing oppressive cultures has been a focus in the literature and a concern for those wishing to rid our society of such negative attitudes as racism, sexism, homophobia, and heterosexism. Tierney (1993) has suggested a focus on creating communities of difference where those attributes that make us unique and distinct as individuals and groups are celebrated and are a source of mutual learning. However, the results of this study highlight the difficulty of trying to change oppressive cultures
from within the culture, specifically in relation to sexual orientation. The findings also emphasize the influence of varying levels of culture and suggest that future research focus on how these various layers of culture serve to reinforce and/or intensify one another, and how it might be possible to "disconnect" institutional culture from societal culture in order to make successful cultural change efforts more likely.

Notes

1All names for students, staff, and faculty are pseudonyms.
2The name of the institution is a pseudonym.
3A lesbian, gay, bisexual community would require a group of people who saw themselves as a social group, sharing interests and perceiving themselves as distinct in some respect from the larger community. This kind of community did not exist at St. James. LGB faculty and staff tended to identify with LGB communities beyond the campus and remained closeted on campus. LGB students tended to be closeted and isolated, apparently rarely finding other LGB students. The activities of 1991–93 did bring together a number of LGB students into formal groups, but as the formal groups faded, so did any semblance of a nascent LGB community.
4Though at times awkward, for sake of clarity and to reduce the influence of assumptions, the sexual orientation of each participant is identified where it is known.

References


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