

Identifying & Addressing the Subtle Dynamics of LGBTQ Marginalization in Our Communal Spaces: Four Case Studies through a “Wexnery” Leadership Lens

Wexner Graduate Fellowship Summer Institute 2018

Facilitated by Justin Rosen Smolen (WGF Class 23)

Keshet National Director of Youth Programs

Case Study #1: Heterosexism

Jessica and Rachel are a married lesbian couple in their early 30s who recently accepted new jobs and relocated to a new area of the country where they do not have a robust network of family or friends. Jessica spent many summers as a camper and staff member at a Jewish overnight camp, and in her senior year of college, served as Hillel president. Rachel had not been particularly involved in Jewish life following her bat mitzvah, uncertain if she would be accepted as gay in Jewish spaces, but she happened to meet Jessica in their early weeks of graduate school at a Rosh Hashanah dinner a friend asked her to attend.

Looking for community, Jessica and Rachel began visiting local synagogues for Shabbat services as well as the young professionals group at the Jewish Community Center. On the whole, people were warm and friendly towards them, though each was repeatedly asked about her husband when mingling at kiddish or at events. Apart from an older gay male couple at one synagogue, they did not meet any other out LGBTQ people in any of these organizations. When viewing the membership form for that synagogue, they were surprised to see that the form had a blank space for “husband’s name” and “wife’s name.” Upon inquiring with the membership director, they learned that the online registration system only recognizes these two fields and it would be too time intensive to switch. Besides, the membership director reasoned, the language suits the majority of synagogue households, even as the director stressed how excited a family “like yours” was joining the community. The director invited them to join the inclusion committee, which was re-launching after a few-year hiatus.

Case Study #2: Cis-normativity

Alex and Sasha began dating before their junior year of high school when they served as Maccabiah captains on opposing teams at camp. The friendly rivalry turned romantic before the summer’s end, and in the remaining years of high school and college, they regularly found themselves on plane rides up and down the East Coast to visit the other. Many years later, they are now the proud parents of three children. Their eldest, Blake, is 10 and gearing up for his first summer at the camp where they met, a moment they’ve been anticipating for quite some time.

Last year, Blake came out as trans, and Alex and Sasha quickly rallied behind him, participating in their regional PFLAG chapter and launching a social and support group for trans kids and their families through their local JCFS and JCC. Alex and Sasha have been speaking extensively with the camp director in recent months to ensure that Blake will be placed in a unit with other boys entering fifth grade. After speaking with the board, the director called Alex and Sasha to inform them that their strong preference is that Blake room with girls this summer. If they insist, the director offered to chat with the facilities manager about designating a counselor room off one of the boy’s bunks for Blake, though the director is not sure which bathroom and shower facility Blake should use.

Case Study #3: Homophobia

Now juniors, Ari and David met freshman year at their pluralistic Jewish high school when they showed up at the first day of robotics club. They came out as gay later on that year and began dating the fall of their sophomore year. Their experience as openly gay young men in a relationship at the school has been mixed. Their immediate friend group and teachers were quite supportive, and the guidance counselor offered her assistance to them in starting a queer-straight alliance. The students roomed (separately) with other boys on a recent trip to a robotics competition and they felt comfortable in their



rooming arrangement, as did the other students.

Yet the school administration was not particularly responsive when Ari received a barrage of derogatory letters jammed into his locker over the course of several days, or when a teacher wrote Ari and David up for lingering in the hallway after the morning bell as they were finishing a homework assignment while sitting closely together on a bench. In the report, the teacher noted the students were being inappropriately physical with one another, though the two students, and even some of their friends, observed that straight couples in the school are similarly affectionate and their behavior goes unnoticed, much less disciplined. Following this incident, the principal called a meeting with Ari and David in his office to discuss their plans for the upcoming prom. The boys had planned to go together, which the principal assured them was fine, provided they “tone down” their physical behavior and “not use the prom to make a political statement,” which, he relayed, some board members feared they would. The principal reminded Ari and David that there were a number of more conservative families at the school, who must also feel welcome at public events.

Case Study #4: Transphobia

Responding to student feedback, the professional team at a large university Hillel instituted a number of new practices geared towards creating a more affirming and inclusive space for LGBTQ students in the community. One practice they incorporated into their their staff meetings, and suggested to their student leaders as a practice for their meetings as well, is sharing pronouns when people introduce themselves—to mitigate assumptions people make about one another’s gender and invite people to proactively share how they would like to be addressed. This new practice was largely received well by students and staff, and a few trans first year students at orientation week programs remarked to staff at how warm and open Hillel seemed.

About a month into the school year, two cisgender student leaders approached the executive director with a series of complaints about this practice. They felt this practice “othered students who aren’t trans” by forcing them to “justify their gender and their pronouns.” They also accused Hillel staff of turning an apolitical space into a “smug and radically leftist” one and feared their clubs and interactions with community members would be overly scrutinized if they rejected this practice. Hillel, they argued, should be a safe space for all students, but by “forcing trans issues” on the entire community, staff and student leaders would inevitably alienate the “majority of Jewish students” on campus.

Guiding Questions

1. What issues are at stake in this scenario? Where does the conflict lie?
2. Who holds power in this scenario? In what ways are those holding power using it? In what ways are they not acknowledging or rejecting their power?
3. Whose experience or comfort is “centered” in the scenario? How, and why?
4. What is the leadership challenge in this scenario? How would you respond, and what are the benefits and costs associated with your response?
5. How might an institution’s policies or response in a scenario like this one be influenced by different cultural or religious considerations? What particular factors might weigh in the balance, and how might an institution respond to the challenges at hand within those constraints?

Mapping Our Change Efforts

Current State of Affairs

Obstacles Impeding Change

My Role

What does a community that affirms gender and sexual diversity look like?