Sexual Identity Development for Adolescents and the Implications of Minority Groups and Social Media

Christina Hale

Bridgewater State University
Sexual Identity Development Models and the Impact of Society on Adolescent Development

Introduction

The study of sexual identity has been a struggle for those seeking to identify and for those researching this developmental framework. At one time sexual identity was labeled strictly for physical actions or sexual conduct. Early research was focused on finding the cause and the cure for same-sex attraction (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Theorists tried to define what makes a person identify as a homosexual, speaking initially of sexual actions to a more detailed, humanistic definition. Two major models of sexual identity development include Vivienne Cass’s model as well as Anthony D’Augelli’s model. Vivienne Cass’s model of identity development for gays and lesbians has been used since its creation in 1979. Anthony D’Augelli’s model was introduced in 1994 and differs from Cass’s model in that it has a lateral approach to identity development.

Models of Sexual Identity Development

Vivienne Cass’s model identifies six stages of development and the process through these stages is different for everyone based on their perceptions and behaviors. Moving through these stages is dependent on the interaction of personal needs, desires, and behaviors. Although there are six stages, according to Cass, not everyone will progress through each stage. Throughout the process of these stages, individuals have the opportunity to view themselves and react to how they feel about the perceptions they have as well as perceptions those around them have.

In stage one, Identity Confusion; the individual becomes aware of thoughts, feelings, and attractions that could be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. In stage two, Identity Comparison; the individual has accepted the possibility that they may be gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB) and figure out how to manage social alienation that comes with a GLB identity. In stage three, Identity Tolerance; the individual acknowledges that they are GLB and they are beginning to seek out other gay or lesbian people to reduce
feeling of isolation. In stage four, Identity Acceptance; the individual becomes comfortable with self and others in the GLB community and selective disclosure may begin. In stage five, Identity Pride; the individual focuses on GLB issues and activities, feelings of pride and anger can lead to activism. In the final stage, Identity Synthesis’ the individual become comfortable and secure with themselves and people are judged more on their personal qualities as opposed to their sexual identity.

Cass’s model has been successfully utilized in counseling individuals facing identity development issues. However, in order to use this approach it is important for the counselor/educator to be aware of the different situations that the individuals may be facing when they approach, go through, and leave each stage. Providing opportunities and encouraging peer or group involvement with other GLB individuals influences how a person sees him or herself (Evans et al., 2010).

Limitations of using this model for counseling sessions include the awareness of social influences and behaviors that may have changed since this model was developed over thirty years ago. Therefore some individuals may not go through, specifically the first couple of stages in Cass’s model simply because times have changed and identifying as GLB is more common now than before when homophobia was most prevalent. This early identity development model also stated that in order for an individual to be healthy, they would have to disclose their identity as GLB and be an active member of the community, not taking into account that personal identity development is different than just identifying with the group. A need for further and more up-to-date research is a limitation that many sexual identity models suffer from. Reassessing the timing of age and the order of the stages when people identify as GLB would probably prove different, than what was initially written in Cass’s model (Evans et al., 2010). Furthermore, a cultural limitation is that the basis of this model was taken from studies of white gay men and therefore has a lack of generalizability to women, bisexuals, and people of color. It was only recently where bisexual identity was actually considered a separate identity and not a transitional stage (Evans et al., 2010).

In contrast to Cass’s model, D’Augelli took a lateral approach and introduced a theory based on the life span on GLB identity development. His model was based on identity being a “social
Sexual Identity Development

construction,” which is shaped by social circumstances and the environment and these changes can happen throughout the course of life. His main tenet was that due to social and legal barriers, identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual was preceded by feelings of panic, anxiety and denial and therefore will take time to be able to fully identify. D’Augelli identified three major variables that are involved in identity formation. The first variable is personal subjectivities and actions. This is characterized by the individuals’ feelings about their sexual identity, sexual behavior and the meaning attached to them. The second variable is the interactive intimacies that are described as being the influences of family, peers, and partners and the meanings attached to experiences with these people. The third variable is sociohistorical connections that include social norms, policies, and laws found in cultures and various locations. It also includes an assessment of the values for that particular time period. He identified three factors that may have an effect on development which include hormonal changes, social circumstances, and peer relationships that may all occur at different life stages for different people (Evans et al., 2010). Certain times of a person’s life and their familial values may also affect the ability to successfully identify at a given age.

D’Augelli composed the Identity Development Process that consisted of six processes involved in sexual identity development. The first process was exiting heterosexual identity. In this process the individual recognizes that their feelings and attractions are not heterosexual and may begin the coming out process. The next process is developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status and this is where the individual finds meaning about being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. An important piece of this process is also to challenge the myths society has about being GLB. The third process is developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity and this is where one finds a support system of people who accept their choices. Next is becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring and this is where one discloses their identity choice with their parents, possibly changing their relationship. The next process is developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status and this can be very complex process due to the challenge of creating a visible homosexual relationship in a society where they are not as likely to be seen as opposed to a heterosexual couple. The final process is entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community and this is where the
individual makes certain social and political commitments and takes actions in regards to those commitments, whether it be protesting or standing up to an ignorant co-worker. It is noted that some people never partake in this step because of the risks associated with it (Evans et al., 2010).

In the world of student affairs practices, college campuses should find a way to utilize information that the environment is a main factor in identity development for students, gay or not. A college campus should be a supportive environment for all students. Campus policies, campus support services, programs and information sessions for gay and heterosexual students, additions to curriculum, and active interventions to address homophobic acts (Evans et al., 2010) are all options that colleges can change within their mission in order to make the effort to create a safe environment for all involved. Many campuses employ faculty and staff to serve as advisors for GLB clubs. These clubs and those involved serve as a support system for students as well as create a safe place for students. The support of other gay or lesbian students makes the transition to college a little more comfortable for a student that feels lost or unsure of coming to terms with their GLB identity. A specific example that Evans et al. (2010, p. 319) gave was for “residence halls to hire LGB-affirmative staff and provide training to address homophobia, all in efforts to make gay students feel more comfortable in their living situations”. Cass noted the importance of realizing that for a student, identity development can take precedence over other issues and she also noted that interaction with other GLB persons on campus is helpful for students.

Factors that may limit D’Augelli’s model from being used include, much research regarding identity development has been taken from GLB people that were fully encompassed and complete the phases or processes of identity development and were just giving information based on memories. Although D’Augelli in particular noted that the environment and external factors play a role in the development of sexual identity development there still is a lack of information present that incorporates sexual identity development and its relationship with other sociocultural influences. Those influences include race, class, gender and disabilities to name a few. Further research also needs to take into consideration individuals in non-Western cultures and older generations (Evans et al., 2010).
The term homosexual identity is found in earlier literature and “refers only to sexual behavior” (Evans et al., 2010). Klein identified more factors that encompassed sexual identity and they include emotional and social preference, lifestyle, self-identification, sexual attraction, fantasy, and behavior (Evans et al., 2010). The lesbian, gay and bisexual community prefers a more positive and less clinical description of what it means to identify as LGB. The community embraces the notion that how they identify as a homosexual is in part due to their emotional, lifestyle, political aspects and sexual aspects of life. Alongside the differences in ages that people may have, the environment that surrounds them can also play a critical role in their developmental process. Whether the individual was brought up in an urban or rural area can affect their identity development, whether they had positive or negative interactions with peers and family, and the meanings they create from their personal experiences all are issues individuals face as they try to identify as GLB.

The Coming-Out Process for Adolescents

Today’s youth and adolescents are embarking on the journey to developing their sexual identity at younger ages. Nowadays teenagers and adolescents are breaking the silence about their sexual attractions and interests in more comfortable and supportive environments before they face society and the repercussions that may come. With most research into GLB identity and coming out, “the process of coming out is seen as a desired outcome whereas failure to come out is seen as a form of resistance, an indication of self-hatred, shame, embarrassment, or some other negative psychological phenomenon” (Grov, Bimbi, Nanin & Parsons, 2006).

The Gay Teen explores a number of stages one goes through when they come to terms with their gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity. Most GLB people realize that they feel different and this can occur as early as childhood. Soon after they realize they have an attraction to others of the same sex. Some may go through a time of confusion where they experiment with members of the same sex and opposite sex. In the final stages of their identity development, which may take many years to complete, many students are now disclosing to people close to them, they are engaging in same-sex relationships and are committed to
their gay, lesbian or bisexual identity (p. 23). Most of these stages are similar to those illustrated in the models of Cass and D’Augelli, however contributors of this book included gay teens and their perspective on the stages are important to note.

Since more and more individuals are coming out at younger ages, by the time most reach college they have already identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. However, for those that have not completed the stages or phases of identity development, college can be a terrifying place to “out” oneself. Documented issues that LGB students face on campuses include harassment, social isolation, chronic stress and verbal and physical abuse. With the onslaught of these issues individuals find themselves contemplating suicide, developing eating disorders or resorting to substance abuse (D’Augelli & Patterson, 2001). Most GLB people face discrimination on a regular basis and as a result school failure, poor psychological well-being and an increased likelihood of self-harming behavior have all been associated with discrimination (Coyle & Kitzinger, 2002). Not only do individuals have to face the homophobia that society possess, some have to be concerned about the possibility that their family may display the same types of attitudes and this will ultimately have an effect on their sexual identity development.

The language that we use for ourselves and for others shapes how groups and individuals develop their identity. The same holds true to people who are gay. Society implements certain labels that some have chosen to embrace and others have dismissed. An individual has the right to use words as personal identifiers; society does not have that right. Slang is not just for race differences, it can also be found in the GLB community. Words such as gay or queer have been the most used identifiers and some people have used it to forge political rants. As one student said “being queer involves a certain attitude about one’s sexual identity. Identifying as queer represents a sense of pride and openness about one’s same-sex desires…” (Rhoads, 1994, p. 3). However, similar to that of racial slurs, queer has been used as an oppressive term to represent all GLB people.

Although the risks that GLB students may face are stifling, the positive outcomes from “coming out” are freeing. When a person discloses their sexual orientation publicly, they can find comfort with the GLB community. They become more comfortable within themselves and hopefully improve any strained
Sexual Identity Development

relationships, better any new ones, reduce their stress, increase self-esteem, and also give the GLB community a voice (D’Augelli & Patterson, 2001). Coyle and Kitzinger (2002) suggest that it is only when [individuals] weighed up the pros and cons of living as a lesbian, gay man or bisexual man or women that the process of identity formation and, ultimately, disclosure can begin.

**Minority Groups Commitment to Several Identities**

It is estimated that students from “minority sexual groups were four times more likely to be victims of assault or harassment than any other group on a university or college campus” (Coyle & Kitzinger, 2002). When a person chooses to identify whether based on their race, gender, sexual orientation or by any other method they class themselves into certain communities. An issue counselors must be aware of and prepared to analyze when they are working with minority students who are also struggling with their sexual identity development, is if they can belong to more than one community. At this point, the individual may have gone through the stages of identity development within their race and now they are faced with the development of a sexual identity. At the core of ethnic development, “race appreciation is a lifelong developmental process, which begins with a healthy sense of one’s own racial/ethnic identity” (Ponterotto & Pederson, 1993). Once a person can gain an appreciation for one community that they belong to, they can then start the journey to accepting and becoming engaged in another community. A main issue that may prevent or delay the process of ethnic identity development is if the individual will choose between their own culture and its values or those of the dominant society, this goes for sexual identity development as well. According to research results from Grov et al. (2006), “disclosing one’s sexual orientation to family members presents challenges to ethnic families who tend not to discuss sexuality issues and presume a heterosexual orientation.”

With a multicultural understanding, counselors should be aware that “sexuality holds different meanings for each culture and ethnic group, which is based on attitudes, values and beliefs (D’Augelli & Patterson, 2001). Living in a society that discriminates people based on their race and sexual orientation, connections that individuals have with their family and ethnic community may be critical in their life.
People struggling with their sexual identity may not want to disappoint the other communities in which they belong to and therefore resist coming out. A difficult issue to overcome may be the pressure on the person to choose one identity over the other (D’Augelli & Patterson, 2001). Referring back to Maslow’s basic human needs, in order for one to meet their personal needs they may have to interact with their ethnic community, their professional community, and their GLB community. Conversely, there is a degree of variability by which people identify with their same-sex attraction as well as with ethnic groups. Ethnicity or sexual orientation may be central for some, but not for others (Rhoads, 1994). Another issue, in which individuals may struggle with, is which community better represents them and which community is more important to them; can they be in multiple communities? Rhoades (1994) stated these very questions that spark debate in how societal views may categorize people whom they feel are different. Society places gays with other gays, and people of color with other people of color. When the two are interconnected, does a singular gay community exist or are the communities further divided into race, gender, or age? Based on research conducted, it is suggested, “coming into a GLB identity is not hindered or delayed by being a racial or ethnic minority, however barriers of disclosure are still evident” (Grov et al., 2006).

**Social Media as a Means for Identity Development**

The specific environments that we speak of where one may disclose or their actions may be impacted by include the many social media outlets we use every day. Using social media has become a means of communicating what someone may not be able to do in normal social settings. Sites such as Facebook and Twitter can specifically link you to other people with the same interests or perhaps the same sexual identity. D’Augelli and Patterson (2001) stated that “self-identification which occurs at younger ages means that youths will be experiencing and expressing same-sex feelings in settings that are ill prepared to deal with their needs at school, home, and in the community” (p. 226). With that said it is imperative for student affairs professionals to be aware of the alternative support systems students and adolescents are utilizing, including groups on the Internet. Since most high schools and community activities have not yet incorporated GLB education within their curriculum, young people have had to
find other places and people for support and understanding. The Internet has become a place of infinite resources to find other GLB teens, meetings, and events. It has also been a means for adolescents to come out in a way that takes the pressure off and for them to join thousands more people in their choice to identify as GLB via social media. According to an article on the Daily Dot (Culture-Come out, 2011) the Human Rights Campaign marketed a new Facebook app that allowed those who identified as GLBTA to come out via the Internet in a national coming out day. On October 11, 2011 national coming out day stimulated over 10,000 tweets on Twitter.

What these technological advancement and statistics show is that people are using social media as their way of coming out to the world and that they are not alone. Being a part of such a socially condemned minority, strength and bravery can be found in numbers and in different forums of communication. According to Rhoades (1994) National Coming Out day on the Clement University campus, strived to create a space where the GLB students could be safe and visible and to not fear discrimination. One student said “coming out is more than saying the word. It’s about celebrating yourself” (Rhodes, 1994). This powerful statement has been the motivation for many individuals to come out whether on college campuses or on the Internet. The Internet has become a new way of life and in this case a new way of seeking and developing a personal identity that would otherwise be condemned in a normal social setting. GLB groups and many other types of virtual groups are “united by their shared activity, engaged in working with information and communicating on interests and priorities that they care about” (Rimskii, 2011). When a person logs onto their computer and sees other people on Facebook or blogging with the same values and interests as them a bond is created because of the ease and normality of these types of virtual connections. Once a person becomes engaged in virtual groups or communities, they soon develop what their roles and responsibilities will be for this group. Unlike a real community, these virtual communities are more accepting and they share many of the same interests and intentions as the person surfing the web. The more involved one gets with the Internet, social media and his or her role in these social platforms, their identity begins its development. Rimskii (2011) wrote that “the construction of identities takes place under the influence of combinations of verbal descriptions and
video and audio images”. In today’s society the influence that the media and Internet sources have on people is what is shaping their perceptions, thoughts, and how they use the Internet. People can read or say whatever is on their mind and most of them do this anonymously, with a nickname or fake email address. With the anonymity the Internet provides, people can take advantage of it and therefore experiment and create their own identities that differ from their real ones (Ramskii, 2011). The pressure that Internet takes off of someone to have to be themselves can be a factor as to why so many people utilized the National coming out day on Facebook and why so many people have created other identities online which are different then the ones they lead in everyday life. In an article examining the effects of using Twitter on college campuses, some of the positive outcomes that resulted from the study included the students feeling comfortable with their candid expressions and their feelings, they were also able to build relationships across diverse groups based on their similarities in what they wrote, the students were also able to interact with each other around academic and other issues which deepened their interpersonal connections (Junco, Heibergert & Loken, 2010). The results that article provided supports the notion that individuals feel that they are protected and safe from the normal backlash they would receive if they were to express themselves in an environment that is not accepting and not ready to hear what they have to say. Most people after coming out online or finding support groups online became motivated and empowered to bring their virtual identity to the surface based on what they accomplished via social media. “When a person chooses to hold back their personal information they end up suppressing any real interests and values they hold and end up having to accept and maintain a fake persona, just for public acceptance” (Unks, 1995, p. 24). Through their exploration of Internet identities, people have been able to create either a new identity or work on their real one without restrictions and therefore having the ability to come to a realization of who they truly are.

**The Role of Counselors as Facilitators to Identity Development**

What may seem like common knowledge is imperative for a counselor to be successful at their work, they must be aware of and have knowledge of what issues the client may bring to session. Dealing with sexual identity issues requires the counselor to have an understanding of the backlash, the process,
and the effect “coming out” has on a client. The client may not disclose immediately to the counselor because of those very reasons, and “most individuals will only disclose their sexuality when they feel it is safe to do so” (D’Augelli & Patterson, 2001, p. 237). The role of the counselor is that of a support system that students may not have therefore the importance for the counselor to have adequate training and be able to facilitate developing positive coping skills and creating a safe environment is critical. Not only can the counselor be utilized as a support system but also as a source of information. The counselor can introduce the student, or client, to supportive environments on or off campus. These environments can enhance self-esteem, further develop coping skills and be able to understand that the stigma against LGB people is induced by society (D’Augelli & Patterson, 2001).

Ponterotto and Pedersen (1993) particularly stated, “counselors have a social responsibility to help individuals accept and appreciate themselves and others” (p. 87). In many situations of communities and schools seeking help on how to educate students and the community regarding homosexuality, counselors are called upon to be that voice. Specifically in schools, a counselor’s role usually has to do with providing educational and developmental information that will facilitate personal growth. A criticism of such assumed work is that counselors should be more involved in the prevention aspect of anti-gay violence, prejudice, and negative attitudes (Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993). A widely used and accepted form of counseling involves the active participation of the entire family unit. Whether the issue may be substance abuse issues or marital concerns, having the whole family present has a higher affect on the success rate of the individual(s) in counseling. This is the same when educating the community or school children about LGB issues and preventing prejudice. A counselor should also be aware of the complexities people of color face when they are going through racial identity development. A counselor would have to assess their understanding of this process and if they have adequate training to facilitate identity development with their clients.

Applications of this idea include working with parents on a one-on-one basis or providing workshops and meetings to bring awareness to the GLB community. Other examples specifically on a college campus would include integrating training or discussion topics to students and family during
orientation about GLB awareness and their struggle to formally identify themselves. School based programs which provide education and counseling to students on the subject of sexual orientation has been utilized in schools, for example Project 10 which supports programs, both in and out of school, which emphasize nondiscrimination and equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. Teaching multicultural issues to students in grade schools and in colleges is also a positive tool to integrate GLB issues into public education. By teaching and making students aware of GLB issues alongside the issues of other diverse cultures, such as race, this can normalize the issue of GLB and minorities.

Implementing these ideas and providing new information to those who never thought of others’ struggles is transformative to the entire process of identity development. As stated above when a counselor assumes the role of an educator, it is important to “teach [students and communities] the differences and similarities of cultures and that humans are very alike. Differences, through proper education, can be taught are as equality valid and important as similarities in cultures” (Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993).

**Conclusion**

The process of identity development for adolescents occurs at varying times in their life and at various rates. Social factors as well as personal factors all contribute to how one develops their personal identity. Nowadays there are means for people to explore and experiment with different identities without having to face the repercussion of social discrimination or the disapproval from those close to them. Through various social media platforms, people are finding groups of other people with similar values and interests, and are able to communicate and develop relationships with them, which may have otherwise not been possible in the “real” world. In terms of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people and the process of sexual identity development one may go through stages coinciding with Cass’s model or D’Augelli’s model or a combination of both. Research suggests that for people of different racial backgrounds, sexual orientation may not be as high in their priorities for identity development as it may be for other cultures. Numerous factors exist that can help or hinder the process of identity development
Sexual Identity Development

for GLB individuals. Factors hindering the process include and are not limited to societal and familial pressure, discrimination, lack of support systems, and low self-esteem. Factors which may help the process include seeking information and counseling from counselors and locating support groups on campus or online. Social media has been a prevalent resource for GLB individuals in being able to make connections and personal relationships with people facing the same issues all around the world. It also has given GLB people an opportunity to develop their sexual identity in a safe environment where they can come out anonymously or personally. In order for student affairs professionals to help with this process on college campuses they must be aware of the stages/phases of identity development and how it may change from person to person. It is also imperative to have an understanding of minority identity development and how this may be a person’s primary concern or secondary concern in relation to their sexual identity development. An important role of the counselor is also to be an educator to communities, schools, and individuals about homophobia and how differences between people are just as important as their similarities. Alongside that responsibility, counselors must embrace and understand that the use of social media outlets as a form of communication, education and identity exploration is prevalent with students and adolescents and therefore should be incorporated in counseling plans. The importance of incorporating a multicultural educational model that includes sexual orientation is something that educators and counselors alike should be aiming towards now and in the future.
References


