MODELS THAT CHANGE: THE STUDY OF GAY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Dr. John Fryer made his historic presentation at the 1972 American Psychiatric Association meeting. Wearing a full face mask, a voice distorting microphone, and adopting the persona of Dr. H. Anonymous, Dr. Fryer spoke about the difficulties of being a gay doctor in a discipline that still considered homosexuality to be a mental illness. So powerful was the message that the following year the APA formally removed homosexuality as a mental disorder from the DSM. This was just one of the many milestones in gay and lesbian history.

The declassification of homosexuality from the DSM was credited as one factor leading to the explosion of research on gay identity development. While evidence of homosexuality has existed since ancient times, and there has been much speculation as to the etiologies of homosexuality, relatively little attention has been paid as to how one develops a homosexual identity.

For the marginalized, identity development is described against a backdrop of stigma. Fortunately, our current society is very different from the world that Dr. Fryer gave his presentation to: homosexuality is more tolerated and accepted, laws are less discriminatory and successful gay role models are more abundant and accessible. As society has evolved, so too have its theories. From implications of shame and reluctance in the 1970s to emphasizing pride in the development of a positive gay identity in the 1990s, and all the models in between, these theories are like time capsules containing clues as to the social conditions of the time.

As the rate of social evolution increases, it can be argued that no model regarding marginalized individuals will ever become definitive. As homosexuality becomes less stigmatized, one can argue that the need for models of gay identity development may eventually be replaced by other models that simply examine general sexual identity development.

While homosexuality has existed within society since ancient times, theoretical research has only recently boomed (Beard and Glickauf Hughes 1994). Furthermore, while much of that research has dealt with the etiologies of homosexuality (Gottschalk 2003), little attention has been focused on how a gay individual comes to develop their identity.

Identity development, as many researchers suggest, is a product of experience (Alderson 2003; Lee 1977; Troiden 1989). While only a small percentage of researchers have focused on the development of a specifically "gay" identity in particular, many researchers have focused their attention on particular facets of the gay experience. Some particular facets have included victimization (Hershberger and D'Augelli 1995), minority stress and mental illness (Meyer 1995), resilience (Nesmith, Burton, and Cosgrove 1999) and religion (Goodwill, 2000). One of the most common themes found within gay and lesbian research is that of feeling different in a negative way – in many cases so much so that one researcher had written that "most models see homosexual identity formation occurring against a background of stigma" (Flowers and Buston 2001).

However, as will be discussed in later sections, both society's level of tolerance and acceptability for homosexuals have increased over the decades. With such an improvement in the quality of life for gay individuals, it can be argued that individual personal experiences are dramatically different between the 1960s and present day. As such, gay identity development is a typical field where the theory never stands still, where the right answer continues to evolve and where snapshots of social climates can be preserved in research.

Decriminalization and Depathologizing of Homosexuality

Societal attitudes and conceptions of homosexuality have changed over time leading towards greater acceptance and tolerance for gay and lesbian individuals. It was only in 1973 that homosexuality was declassified as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association (Frankowski and The Committee on Adolescence 2004). Since then, Canada has sought measures in support of equality for homosexuals despite public opposition towards such action (Queer Marriage 2007). In 1969, Canada had passed a bill that decriminalized homosexuality. In 1977, the province of Quebec included sexual orientation in its code of human rights, making it illegal to discriminate against gays and lesbians. In 1992, Canada began to allow gays and lesbians to serve in the military. In 2000, Bill C-23 passed that extended the benefits and obligations previously reserved for other unions to same-sex couples. Finally, in 2005, parliament voted to make gay marriage legal in Canada. One can easily see that the political situation is improving over the long term for homosexuals in Canada. Furthermore, other countries are also realizing this trend, such as the Netherlands and Belgium; incidentally, they were the first two in the world to legalize same-sex marriage (Macionis and Gerber 2005).

The typical experience of the gay individual has also been improving. It was only in 1972 that Dr. John Fryer spoke at the American Psychiatric Association about the difficulties of being a gay doctor in a discipline that still considered homosexuality a mental illness (Kirby 2003). To give such a presentation, he wore a wig, a full face mask and used a voice-distorting microphone to hide his identity. Indeed, such elaborate actions were very necessary at that point in time. In a survey reported by Bibby (1995), respondents were asked their opinions regarding the sexual relations between two adults of the same sex. In 1975, the percentage of respondents who chose "always wrong" or "almost always wrong" was 71%. However, by 1995, that percentage had fallen to 53%. This trend continues: in a poll conducted in 2003, 52% of Canadians agreed that there is nothing morally wrong about homosexuality (NFO CFgroup 2003). As a note of caution, while these statistics show that things are improving for homosexuals, it goes without saying that society still has a long way to go before being deemed "fully accepting" of gays and lesbians.

The media's portrayal of gay individuals has also changed over time. In 1967, a documentary titled, "The Homosexuals" was aired on television (Hart 2004). This communicated a wide range of harmful stereotypes about gay men: the average gay man was inherently promiscuous, was unable to form lasting relationships, and gay men were very commonly female impersonators. The program contained interviews with gay men hidden in shadows or lying on a psychiatrist's couch, which implicitly suggested that "they were either filled with shame, perpetually unhappy, or – to use the word of one closeted gay subject – even 'sick'" (Hart 2004).

The media was kinder to gays and lesbians in the 1980s, although not by much. In 1985, NBC aired "An Early Frost," which was the first television movie about a young gay man with AIDS. And while it increased awareness and sympathy for gay people, it perpetuated the idea of the "gay plague" – gay people were now further stigmatized as being lethally contagious threats to "innocent" heterosexuals (Hart 2004). In the 1990s, more numerous and more positive representations of gay people appeared on television. Shows such as "Ellen" and "Will and Grace" became the first shows with superior gay lead characters. Given how important role models can be for gay and lesbian individuals, television show characters can become the role models when other "real life" role models are absent (Fenaughty and Harré 2003). Furthermore, access to such role models may help to promote a more tolerant society. With this help, gay individuals today are more willing to come out at a younger age than before (Alexander 2002; Troiden 1989).

Gay Identity Development: A Starting Point

Perhaps one of the earlier models of gay identity development can be found in Dank's 1971 research (Alderson 1998). For his research, Dank conducted qualitative interviews focusing mostly on the act of disclosure ("coming out") by his gay male

participants. In reporting his results, Dank laid out the basis for what could be considered a model of gay identity formation.

In his model, he theorized that there were two stages of identity acquisition: identification and self-acceptance (Alderson 1998). Identification involves being exposed to homosexual material, and self-acceptance involves changing the meaning of "homosexual" into something more positive than its originally negative meaning.

While Alderson (1998) understood that the primary purpose of Dank's work was to understand the coming out process, Alderson did question the simplicity of Dank's model of identity development. It was not explained whether everyone underwent both stages of development, and if having two stages was enough to fully grasp a phenomenon so complex. However, Dank's model is included in this paper because he may have been one of the first authors to have dealt somewhat directly with the concept of a homosexual identity.

Plumer (1975)

Attitudes towards homosexuality were chilly in the 1970s. Plumer, though supportive of gay individuals, still shows this negativity through his theory of development. His theory consists of four stages (Alderson, 1998). Sensitization, the first stage, occurs when the individual gains an awareness of his homosexual inclinations. Signification, the second stage, sees the individual gaining an awareness of having a homosexual identity. His third stage, coming out, is marked by disclosure and contact with gay others. Stabilization, Plumer's final stage, sees sociological forces working to keep the individual continuing to define himself as homosexual. Plumer uses the term "role imprisonment" to describe this stage. Alderson (1998) writes that "the final step in [Plumer's] process is hardly a positive or celebrated function of self. It reads more like a punishment into eternal damnation."

Lee (1977)

Lee's (1977) theory, based on interview data from gay male participants, is almost completely behavior-oriented. He breaks down identity development into three stages: signification, coming out and going public. In his first stage, individuals move from primary (a one-time occurrence) to secondary (continuous) deviance. This is accomplished through "secret" masturbation while focusing on same-sex individuals, followed by anonymous sexual encounters with other homosexuals. The third part of his first stage is optional and very rare: a long-term, monogamous relationship with a member of the same sex. This is a secret relationship. The final part of this stage involves making long-term contacts with other gay friends without engaging in the gay world.

Lee's (1977) second stage has five steps. The first step involves secretly stalking the gay establishments of town (most often the gay bars) to see what kinds of people frequent it. The second step involves simply walking through the front door of such establishments without worrying about who may see them enter. It is at this point that they realize that the stigma associated with gay establishments is very effective at keeping heterosexual people away. The third step involves telling a few selected heterosexual friends, swearing each of them to secrecy and making their friends promise not to speak a word about homosexuality in the presence of others. From there, the fourth and fifth steps involve expanding their gay network until finally joining or expressing interest in a gay liberation movement.

The third stage, going public, is one that most people do not go through. This involves cognitive choices about the decision to come out and weighing that against the costs of not coming out. From there, choices regarding changes in lifestyle and the degree of going public are also weighed (Alderson 1998).

As described, this is almost a completely behavior-oriented model of identity development. There is virtually nothing said regarding emotions and cognitions. The world at that time was filled with many stereotypes especially regarding promiscuity and the inability to form monogamous, meaningful relationships. Through the first stage of Lee's model (1977), these stereotypes are validated. It also captures the social atmosphere very effectively: through Lee's writing, readers can almost feel the sense of paranoia that the prototypical gay individual of the 1970s must be feeling when going from the first to third step of Lee's second stage. This only serves to reinforce the idea that it was a very uncomfortable time to come out.

Hencken and O'Dowd (1977)

The 1970s were a time marked with progressive legal changes in North America despite public disapproval for such measures. Hencken and O'Dowd, in 1977, incorporate this into their theory. In their theory, a three-step process of gay identity development is proposed (Alderson 1998). First, the individual becomes aware of his feelings. In the second stage, individuals who are aware of their feelings find self acceptance and are now free to act on their desires. The third stage of the theory is the most relevant to social change. Their third stage is that of public identification which, upon closer reading, is really a call to action. So much emphasis is placed on the third stage that Alderson writes: "I doubt after reading Hencken and O'Dowd's (1977) article that they intended it to be used for theory building … I view their paper as mostly a 'call to action' for gay people to step out and be counted. In other words, it is a call for political activism."

Cass (1979)

Cass (1979) continues the idea of activism in her developmental model but, unlike Hencken and O'Dowd, explores the processes in greater detail. Her proposed stage model places heavy emphasis on resolving the incongruencies found between the characteristics that individuals attribute to themselves, the perceptions of one's behavior as a result of those characteristics and one's perceptions of other's view of those characteristics. In Cass' model, her six stages deal with sources of incongruence and methods of its reduction.

Cass' first stage is labeled as identity confusion. In this stage, individuals are first introduced to the idea of homosexuality and realize that homosexuality is relevant to them in some way. The second stage, identity comparison, is marked by feelings of alienation from others in the larger society. Admitting that one is a homosexual and tolerating it rather than accepting it marks stage three: identity tolerance. To combat the feelings of isolation created in stage two, individuals seek out other homosexuals from the homosexual subculture. In doing so, relationships with heterosexuals become less important. Stage four, identity acceptance, involves the individual fully accepting the fact that they are gay and evaluates homosexuality and gay others in a positive light.

Stage five is labeled as identity pride. Individuals in this stage evaluate other homosexuals more positively than heterosexuals. In fact, individuals are likely to devalue heterosexuals and heterosexual norms and ideals. However, despite the values of the individual, that individual is still living within the constraints of a heterosexually-dominated society. The individual is thus forced to adhere to the established frame of reference that is inconsistent with their views. This incongruence between the ideal world and the reality of the world creates feelings of anger.

The combination of anger and pride energizes [the individual] into action against the established institutions and creates an "activist." The slogan "How dare you presume I'm heterosexual" is indicative of feelings at this stage. Purposeful confrontation with the establishment is seen as the only way to validate the belief that homosexuality is good (Cass 1979).

Like Hencken and O'Dowd before her, she acknowledges the role of anger in identity development that creates an activist. Alderson (1998) suspects that many today would find the generalization of the activist role invalid. However, Sophie (1985-1986) suggests that this particular stage is very reflective of the historical changes in the gay liberation movement at the time.

Finally, stage six is known as identity synthesis. It is at this point that homosexuals re-integrate heterosexuals into their lives. They understand that there are supportive heterosexuals who are to be valued. They also manage to integrate their personal and public sexual identities into one being, and then integrate that into the larger portrait

of themselves. With this integration, they manage to understand that sexuality, including their homosexuality, is only a small part of who they are (Cass 1979).

Troiden (1989)

Troiden's (1989) four-stage model is unlike most other models in that it is not linear (Alderson 1998). One stage does not lead to another predictably; rather, progress through the stages is up and down, and back and forth. Sexual development is fluid, not static, and the individual's progress is unique.

The first stage is sensitization. Occurring before puberty, individuals at this stage still believe that they are heterosexual. However, they do have general feelings of marginality and a feeling of being "different" from their same-sex peers. The next stage is identity confusion. Occurring during adolescence, individuals begin to realize that their feelings and behaviors may be regarded as homosexual. They also come to realize that the feelings that they had in the sensitization period were indicators that they were gay even in childhood. By mid adolescence, one begins to believe that they are probably gay. The following stage is identity assumption. At this stage, homosexual identities are tolerated and perhaps even accepted by the person. They disclose their sexual orientation to other homosexuals, sexually experiment with other homosexuals and explore the gay subculture. The last stage is commitment. The entry point for this stage is marked by entry into a same-sex love relationship. At this stage, one is comfortable with and accepts his homosexual identity.

Compared with Lee's (1977) theory, Troiden speaks much about the feelings and cognitions of the individual. Less is said about sexual activity in and of itself, and an entire stage is devoted to the concept of a same-sex love relationship. Alderson (1998) criticizes Troiden's final stage, suggesting that such a relationship is not necessary to develop one's homosexual identity. After all, Alderson argues, a heterosexual identity is not dependent on an opposite-sex relationship. While this may be true, it is important to highlight this stage in light of this paper's discussion. Troiden's inclusion of a romantic relationship recognizes the fact that such relationships are possible and quite prevalent in the 1980s, as compared to the stereotypes of the 1960s and 1970s.

Finally, Troiden proposes that people might progress at different rates through these stages. Social factors can help to increase one's speed towards the final stage, such as having supportive friends and family. Alternatively, other factors factors may slow or stop one completely from progressing, such as stigma. Quite contemporary for his time, he lists the fear of AIDS as one such factor in the prevention of progression (Troiden 1989).

Alderson (1998, 2003)

In his ecological model of gay male identity, Alderson (2003) combines mental processes with stage models of gay identity development. This new model was based on his empirical findings (Alderson 1998). His model describes three main stages: before coming out to self, coming out to self and beyond coming out.

In the first stage, individuals are primarily impacted by societal influences. These individuals often have a feeling that they may be gay, although whether that feeling progresses to the point of self-identifying as gay depends on the struggle between catalysts and hindrances. Hindrances work to suppress the homosexual identity, such as internalized homophobia and negative views of homosexuality, while catalysts serve to do the opposite. Of note are some of the things that Alderson lists as potential catalysts. Relocation from a rural area to an urban centre, or from a conservative city to a more liberal one, can serve as a catalyst. This highlights the fact that societal influences, possibly for the first time, have been cited as a potential catalyst for gay identity development. Alderson (2003) also suggests that religious influences have the potential to be either a hindrance or a catalyst, citing certain religions and various denominations within certain religions as being very accepting.

When the individual finally self-identifies as being gay, it marks the entry into the coming out to self stage. A reduction of internalized homophobia occurs and individuals learn what it means to be gay. Furthermore, the extent of an individual's homosexual cognitions, behaviors and affect are analyzed. In doing so, he determines that his combined homosexual orientation is greater than that of his heterosexual orientation. Cognitive dissonance is at play if cognitions, behaviors and/or affect are not all in the same orientation.

In the final stage, beyond coming out, the new potential challenge for gay individuals is to find connections between the self, the gay world and the straight world (via disclosure). In making these connections, they consolidate their identities. Alderson's endpoint is different from that of Cass's (1979). In Cass's model, she suggests that homosexuality now becomes but a minimal component of the individual. People, generally speaking, calm down from being activists and lobbyists. It could be further interpreted that under Cass's model, they quietly blend back into society as homosexual members. Alderson suggests that rather than calming down, they continue to be involved in the gay community, celebrate their unique identities and act as an ambassador of fundamentally positive change within society.

Conclusion

Identity development for individuals from any marginalized group of people has been described as being accomplished against the backdrop of stigma and opposition. We know that society has changed considerably over the years, and the models that have

been selected in this paper show such changes. We see hints of the difficult living conditions and the societal stereotypes present in the early 1970s. There are threads of activism and anger at the social injustices located in models in the latter half of that decade. There is the appearance of emotional love in models of the 1980s, theoretical recognition that such love can exist. There is the mention of the individual's struggle with AIDS in the research that also coincides with society's struggle with AIDS in the later half of the 1980s. Finally, in the 1990s, society's thawing climate towards gays and lesbians is reflected.

While the models certainly contain different themes influenced by society, we see that there are many aspects that do not change. For instance, the feelings of difference, sensitization, and alienation are common in virtually all models. However, this may not always be the case. As society is changing to become more tolerant and accepting, and as the rate of that evolution is accelerating, the future of gay identity development models progressively becomes more uncertain. If and when stigma is removed, then the defining feature of gay identity development is also removed. It is plausible that in its place will be a general model of sexual identity development, where homosexual and heterosexual paths diverge innocently and quietly in a society that does not value one over the other.

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