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Jesenia Gervacio

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A Comparative Review of Cass's and Fassinger's Sexual Orientation Identity Development Models

Jesenia Gervacio

As the student affairs profession continues to develop, it is imperative to remain aware of the changing demographics of college and university students' various identities. Given the changing landscape of higher education, it is extremely important to take sexual orientation identity formation and its influence on student development into account. In this paper, I will explore Cass's (1979, 1996) and Fassinger's (1998) sexual orientation identity formation models and provide a comparative analysis of each theory. I will also identify how knowledge of these theories can inform the work of student affairs educators in creating more inclusive college and university environments.

According to Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010), colleges and universities in the United States have seen an increase in the diversity of their students. As student affairs educators strive to provide students with adequate support, it is important to remember that the development of students' multiple identities often occurs simultaneously and impacts their experience. Acknowledging this reality raises the question: how can student affairs educators provide support to students in their identities while creating inclusive college and university campuses? Having a foundational basis of developmental theories will help student affairs practitioners better serve students. However, these theories should not serve as a catchall for every student as individual development may not be fully explained by the various theories (Evans et al., 2010).

Literature Review

The following section provides an overview and comparison of Cass's (1979, 1996) and Fassinger's (1996, 1998) sexual orientation identity formation models including critiques, strengths and limitations of each.

Cass's Sexual Identity Formation Model

Though multiple sexual orientation identity formation models have been devel-

Jesenia Gervacio is a second-year HESA student who received her B.A. in Psychology and Spanish with a minor in Education from Bryn Mawr College in 2007. She is very passionate about working with students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students, and students of Color to increase access to and successful completion of higher education.

oped to describe gay/lesbian¹ identity formation (e.g., Hencken & O'Dowd, 1977; Lee, 1977; Plummer, 1975; Schafer, 1976), Cass's (1979, 1996) sexual orientation identity formation model has been "the first model to remain in use over a period of time" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 307). Cass's (1979) model presents six stages to describe the process a person undergoes when developing a homosexual identity. This model was developed "based on two broad assumptions: (a) that identity is acquired through a developmental process; and (b) that the locus for, stability of, and change in behavior lies in the interaction process that occurs between individuals and their environments" (p. 219). Cass (1979) also clarified that "by endorsing a link between assigned personal meaning and behavior, the model proposes an interactionist account of homosexual identity formation and recognizes the significance of both psychological and social factors" (p. 220). Given the diversity in individuals' psychological and social backgrounds, there will be a vast array of difference as individuals proceed through their sexual orientation identity formation.

Cass's (1979) model consists of the following six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. Cass also introduced the idea of "identity foreclosure," meaning that a person can decide not to develop a homosexual identity at any given stage as they progress through the model. Another important aspect of this theory is the distinction made between private and personal aspects of identity. Cass believed that as individuals progressed in their development, the private and personal aspects of their identity would converge. The following summarizes Cass's identity development model:

1. *Identity Confusion*: characterized by feelings of turmoil, in which one questions previously held assumptions about one's sexual orientation.
2. *Identity Comparison*: characterized by feelings of alienation, in which one accepts the possibility of being gay and becomes isolated from nongay others.
3. *Identity Tolerance*: characterized by feelings of ambivalence, in which one seeks out other gays, but maintains separate public and private images.
4. *Identity Acceptance*: characterized by selective disclosure, in which one seeks out other gays, but maintains separate public and private images.
5. *Identity Pride*: characterized by anger, pride, and activism, in which one becomes immersed in the gay subculture and rejects nongay people, institutions, and values.
6. *Identity Synthesis*: characterized by clarity and acceptance, in which one moves beyond a dichotomized worldview to an incorporation of

¹ The terminology used reflects the terminology utilized in the literature.

one's sexual orientation as one aspect of a more integrated identity (Fassinger, 1991).

In the above model, Cass (1979) used the term *identity* to describe what each stage can present for an individual in the process of developing a gay/lesbian identity. However, Cass did not provide a definition of identity. Ironically, this is a critique Cass (1984a) makes of the literature on gay/lesbian identity formation. In a review of the effect of Cass's identity development model on the work performed by Alfred Kinsey, Cass (1990) distinguished that identity formation is a process independent of sexual preference formation but one that can influence sexual identity development. Cass (1990) stated:

Some of the ways in which identity formation could influence sexual preference development are narrowing opportunities for sexual/social/emotional expression, building attitudes that attach a fixed quality to identity and preference, reinforcing behaviors that are consistent with identity, and providing a system of rewards that encourages commitment to a particular mode of behavior. (pp. 252-253)

Cass (1984b) garnered support for the model after conducting a study using 166 male and female candidates. Cass's findings indicated that although "the model provides a valid picture of homosexual identity formation, some stages may be depicted more accurately than others" (p. 163). Another finding from this study indicated similarities and differences between the male and female subjects suggesting more work was necessary to better explain the sexual orientation development of women (Cass, 1984b).

The societal context in which Cass's (1979) model was developed is an important consideration. As Evans et al. (2010) noted, most of the early sexual identity development models, including Cass's, "reflect the social and political forces of the 1970s when they were developed and may not reflect current social realities" (p. 311). This societal context informs the way the model was developed and the stages individuals were perceived to experience in the formation of their sexual orientation. Later research conducted by Eliason (1996b) indicated that progressing through a period of anger towards heterosexuals, included in most early models of sexual identity formation, was no longer necessary for individuals to develop "an integrated sense of identity" (as cited in Evans et al., 2010, p. 311). As Cass (1979) aptly noted, "it is expected that over time, changes in societal attitudes and expectations will require changes in the model" (p. 235). As dominant society becomes more or less accepting of the range of diversity in sexual orientation, it is important to consider how sexual orientation development models will reflect this difference.

In Cass's (1996) revision of the model, Cass makes important distinctions that

were not originally present. One of the first changes made was the name of the model; in the revised version Cass changed the name from homosexual identity formation to sexual orientation identity formation. Cass also noted that the models of sexual orientation identity formation, including Cass's own model, detailed this process as "universal 'truths' or 'facts' that may be found in the psychology of all people, regardless of culture and social background. This viewpoint has been called the 'essentialist approach'" (p. 228). Given the societal context in which Cass's model was developed, Cass acknowledged the role that social constructionist psychology played in its original formation. Another change in Cass's (1996) model was the incorporation of a pre-stage. Here, Cass posited that individuals adopt a view of themselves as:

supposed to be heterosexual; they consider themselves more or less part of the majority group (heterosexuals) or recognize that they should be; and they understand that heterosexuality is desirable and acceptable and homosexuality is stigmatized and has minority status. (p. 233)

However, Cass further acknowledged that individual differences exist in each person regarding their perceptions of homosexuality and heterosexuality. These differences are based on their needs, social support structures, conflict management and communication styles, gender, and race.

Critiques of Cass's (1979) model and other early models include their lack of sensitivity towards diversity such as race/ethnicity, class, and age; the linear developmental pattern; and the idea that a public identity must be achieved in order to reach full development of sexual orientation identity (Fassinger, 1991). An additional criticism was that the models do not distinguish between a "self-identification process regarding sexual orientation and a group-membership identification process involving the awareness of oppression" (Fassinger, 1991, p. 168). According to McCarn and Fassinger, early models were also criticized for their emphasis on male behavior as the norm (Fassinger, 1991). Another critique of these models is the use of biased samples (e.g., individuals belonging to gay social or political groups) to test the models (Fassinger, 1998).

Cass's (1996) model underscored the importance of listening to how individuals describe their identities, clarified that sexual orientation formation development intersects with other facets of development, and highlighted the important role of peer group interaction in the formation of sexual identity (Evans et al., 2010).

Fassinger's Sexual Identity Formation Model

McCarn and Fassinger's (1996)² original sexual identity formation model was de-

² Generally referred to in the literature as Fassinger's model of sexual identity formation.

veloped in an attempt to address the critiques of previously existing models. This model was created to describe the sexual identity formation of lesbians. This differs from other preexisting models in that the authors “clearly distinguish between the two processes of personal development of same-sex sexual orientation and redefinition of group membership and group meaning” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 521). In contrast to other models, this model uses phases versus stages in order to provide flexibility and to demonstrate that the process of development is continuous. Another major distinction in the model is that disclosure behaviors are not seen as “evidence of developmental advancement, except, to some extent, at the last phase of group identity” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 522). Given the impact of oppression based on sexual orientation, the authors believed that “to use it as an index of identity development directly forces an individual to take responsibility for her own victimization” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 522).

The model is divided into four phases and two separate processes. The four phases are awareness, exploration, deepening/commitment, and internalization/synthesis. Each individual can progress through all four phases in their individual sexual identity development and/or the group membership identity development process (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). The following summarizes the individual sexual identity development process:

1. *Awareness*: This phase begins with the individual realizing that she may have desires or feelings that are “different from the heterosexual norm and therefore from the predicted self” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 522).
2. *Exploration*: The authors hypothesized that women in this phase would have “strong relationships with or feelings about other women or another woman in particular...but will not necessarily involve exploration of sexual behaviors” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 522).
3. *Deepening/Commitment*: During this phase women can identify as bisexual, heterosexual, or as lesbians after exploring their sexual identity. For the emerging lesbian this phase causes her “to recognize her desire for other women as within herself and, with deepening self-awareness, will develop sexual clarity and commitment to her self-fulfillment as a sexual being” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 523).
4. *Internalization/Synthesis*: In this phase “a woman experiences fuller self-acceptance of desire/love for women as a part of her overall identity” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 523). McCarn and Fassinger (1996) acknowledged that although women in this stage may remain “closeted” in different areas of their life, they “believe it is unlikely that one could reach the final phase of individual sexual identity development without beginning to address the group membership questions in the parallel branch of the model” (p. 523).

The following summarizes the group membership identity development process:

1. *Awareness*: Women in this phase realize that there is a community of lesbian/gay people and that they have been living under the assumption that heterosexuality was the norm.
2. *Exploration*: This phase “is characterized by active pursuit of knowledge about lesbian/gay people, in terms of both the group as a whole and the possibility of one’s belonging in the group” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 524).
3. *Deepening/Commitment*: During this phase women become more aware of the value and oppression of being part of the lesbian/gay community and commit to forming a personal relationship to the lesbian/gay community.
4. *Internalization/Synthesis*: A woman in this phase “has moved through a process of conflict and reevaluation, identified herself as a member of a minority group, redefined the meaning of that group, internalized this new identity, and synthesized it into her overall self-concept” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 525).

Though McCarn and Fassinger’s (1996) model was initially created to describe the sexual identity formation of women, in later work, Fassinger (1998) found empirical support indicating the model could describe the sexual orientation identity formation for lesbians, gay men, and bisexual individuals. A study conducted by Fassinger and Miller (1996) utilized a diverse sample to validate the model. Because McCarn and Fassinger’s (1996) model was influenced by race/ethnic identity development models as well as gender identity development models, it offers a more inclusive perspective of various individuals in their sexual orientation identity formation. However, it is not entirely inclusive as it does not account for other factors such as class, religious upbringing, or cultural context.

Comparative Review of Cass’s and Fassinger’s Models

Despite the critiques of Cass’s (1979, 1996) sexual orientation identity formation model, this model has persisted in the student affairs profession to account for the development of gay, lesbian, and bisexual student identity development (Fassinger, 1998). Though McCarn and Fassinger (1996) and Fassinger (1998) moved the model forward to include different aspects of diversity in identity formation, Cass’s (1979) work set the stage for other development models. Although the models are different in their approach, both helped change the common perceptions of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity formation. Cass’s (1979) work in particular helped normalize the experiences of gay/lesbian/bisexual individuals undergoing sexual orientation identity formation (Fassinger, 1991).

Although Cass’s (1979, 1996) model is one of the most widely used in student

affairs, Fassinger's (1998) revision of this model details the role of lesbian/gay/bisexual identity formation in student development theories. In the revised model, Fassinger provides specific examples and ways that student affairs practitioners can incorporate the use of this theory and other theories when working with college students. Fassinger extends the information from these theories to practical implications for making college and university campuses inclusive by incorporating sexual orientation identity formation with other aspects such as psychosocial and cognitive development. This model challenges student affairs professionals to consider the needs of this population when planning and programming campus events such as safer sex workshops and to include appropriate alternatives for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students.

Implications

An emerging challenge for student affairs educators is considering how Cass's and Fassinger's theories interact with one another as well as the other developmental processes students may be undergoing. Though these models, as well as other identity formation models, have their limitations, how can we apply their strengths to the field?

As alluded to in the previous descriptions, it is apparent that sexual orientation identity formation is not static. Individuals can redefine their sexual orientation throughout their lifetime. Given the spectrum of sexual orientation identities, it is important to reconsider how these models can and cannot account for other sexual orientation identity formations. When considering the developmental trajectory of students, we must also determine how to support students who are questioning their sexual orientation but do not see themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. If a student comes out and then no longer identifies as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, how do we support them as they go through another sexual orientation identity formation process?

Knowing where the different support services are located and how students can access them are important considerations when determining how to best support students on college and university campuses. The location of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Ally/Advocate (LGBTQA) center or similar structure can send mixed messages to students. For students who proudly identify as members of the LGBTQA community, having a center located on the outskirts of campus can send a message that they are not valued members of the community. However, for students who are beginning to question their sexual orientation but are not ready to disclose this information to their peers, having a LGBTQA center located in a highly visible area may deter them from seeking the support services offered by that center. How do we balance the separate needs of these students?

Considering how sexual orientation identity formation intersects with other types of cultural and social identity formation, student affairs educators should examine how their college or university can provide students with enough support. When working with students who may not be familiar with Western ideologies of sexual orientation, what support can student affairs educators provide these students who may find themselves part of a “minority” outside of their social context? Given the diverse student population, it is important that other support services, such as the counseling center, know how to work with students from various backgrounds. Having counseling staff available to help students navigate their identity formation while being sensitive to their different backgrounds and cultural upbringings is essential to providing support to students.

Concluding Thoughts

Increasing awareness of the differences in sexual orientation and challenging the notion that particular behaviors imply connection with a certain identity are areas that need to be further developed in student affairs. While it is tempting to label individuals as gay, lesbian, or bisexual based on their behavior, it is important to learn how they themselves identify. In moving forward, conducting more research and developing support services to be more inclusive is extremely important. To achieve a more inclusive and supportive college or university campus, it is essential to know the needs of the students and the various identities represented. Student affairs educators need to commit to better understanding the sexual orientations present in a campus community in order to effectively support students.

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