

The Many Paths of LGBTQ+ Student Development

There are several theories that describe the sexual orientation development of gay and lesbian individuals. Because people are unique and everyone has his/her/their own story, no one theory describes all people. Some of the factors that influence development, and which are not yet accounted for by theory, include race, religion, culture, gender, and ability. So, please be prepared for differences among students. Theory does, however, provide one explanation of students' identity development and helps us predict some of the development they have ahead of them.

One of the foundational theories of gay and lesbian identity development was developed in 1979 by Vivian Cass. Cass described a process of six stages of gay and lesbian identity development. The stages help explain students' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and therefore help us know how to support students. While these stages are sequential, some people might revisit stages at different points in their life. Following are brief descriptions of the six stages:

Sexual Identity Development: The “Cass” Model

STAGE 1: IDENTITY CONFUSION

“Could I be gay?” Person is beginning to wonder if “homosexuality” is personally relevant. Denial and confusion is experienced.

Task: Who am I? - Accept, Deny, Reject.

Possible Responses: Will avoid information about lesbians and gays; inhibit behavior; deny homosexuality (“experimenting,” “an accident,” “just drunk”). Males: May keep emotional involvement separate from sexual contact; Females: May have deep relationships that are non-sexual, though strongly emotional.

Possible Needs: May explore internal positive and negative judgments. Will be permitted to be uncertain regarding sexual identity. May find support in knowing that sexual behavior occurs along a spectrum. May receive permission and encouragement to explore sexual identity as a normal experience (like career identity, and social identity).

STAGE 2: IDENTITY COMPARISON:

“Maybe this does apply to me.” Will accept the possibility that they may be gay. Self-alienation becomes isolation.

Task: Deal with social alienation.

Possible Responses: May begin to grieve for losses and the things she or he will give up by embracing their sexual orientation. May compartmentalize their own sexuality. Accepts lesbian, gay definition of behavior but maintains “heterosexual” identity of self. Tells oneself, “It’s only temporary;” “I’m just in love with this particular person,” etc.

Possible Needs: Will be very important that the person develops own definitions. Will need information about sexual identity, lesbian, gay community resources, encouragement to talk about loss of heterosexual life expectations. May choose to keep some “heterosexual” identity (it is not an all or none issue).

STAGE 3: IDENTITY TOLERANCE:

“I’m not the only one.”

Accepts the probability of being homosexual and recognizes sexual, social, emotional needs that go with being lesbian and gay. Increased commitment to being lesbian or gay.

Task: Decrease social alienation by seeking out lesbians and gays.

Possible Responses: Beginning to have language to talk and think about the issue. Recognition that being lesbian or gay does not preclude other options. Accentuates difference between self and heterosexuals. Seeks out lesbian and gay culture (positive contact leads to more positive sense of self, negative contact leads to devaluation of the culture, stops growth). May try out variety of stereotypical roles.

Possible Needs: Be supported in exploring own shame feelings derived from heterosexism, as well as external heterosexism. Receive support in finding positive lesbian, gay community connections. It is particularly important for the person to know community resources.

STAGE 4: IDENTITY ACCEPTANCE:

“I will be okay.”

Accepts, rather than tolerates, gay or lesbian self-image. There is continuing and increased contact with the gay and lesbian culture.

Task: Deal with inner tension of no longer subscribing to society’s norm, attempt to bring congruence between private and public view of self.

Possible Responses: Accepts gay or lesbian self-identification. May compartmentalize “gay life.” Maintains less and less contact with heterosexual community. Attempts to “fit in” and “not make waves” within the gay and lesbian community. Begins some selective disclosures of sexual identity. More social coming out; more comfortable being seen with groups of men or women that are identified as “gay.” More realistic evaluation of situation.

Possible Needs: Continue exploring grief and loss of heterosexual life expectations. Continue exploring internalized “homophobia” (learned shame for heterosexist society). Find support in making decisions about where, when, and to whom he or she self discloses.

STAGE 5: IDENTITY PRIDE:

“I’ve got to let people know who I am!”

Immerses self in gay and lesbian culture. Less and less involvement with heterosexual community. Us-them quality to political/social viewpoint.

Task: Deal with incongruent views of heterosexuals.

Possible Responses: Splits world into “gay” (good) and “straight” (bad). Experiences disclosure crises with heterosexuals as he or she is less willing to “blend in.” Identifies gay culture as sole source of support; all gay friends, business connections, social connections.

Possible Needs: Receive support for exploring anger issues. Find support for exploring issues of heterosexism. Develop skills for coping with reactions and responses to disclosure of sexual identity. Resist being defensive!

STAGE 6: IDENTITY SYNTHESIS:

Develops holistic view of self. Defines self in a more complete fashion, not just in terms of sexual orientation.

Task: Integrate gay and lesbian identity so that instead of being the identity, it is an aspect of self.

Possible Responses: Continues to be angry at heterosexism, but with decreased intensity. Allows trust of others to increase and build. Gay and lesbian identity is integrated with all aspects of “self.” Feels all right to move out into the community and not simply define space according to sexual orientation.

(From: Cass, Homosexual Identity Development, 1979)