



# Gay And Lesbian Identity Development: An Overview For Social Workers

By: **Denise L. Levy**

## Abstract

Social work literature on the topic of gay and lesbian identity development is sparse. Although some texts do include sections on social work practice with gay and lesbian individuals, rarely is this information presented within the broader context of the history of sexuality and contemporary gay and lesbian theory. Practitioners, students, and researchers often have to look outside the field to find resources on this topic. In an effort to advance social work literature, this article provides a comprehensive description of gay and lesbian identity development and recommendations for advancing the literature.

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# **Gay and Lesbian Identity Development: An Overview for Social Workers**

Denise L. Levy

## **ABSTRACT**

Social work literature on the topic of gay and lesbian identity development is sparse. Although some texts do include sections on social work practice with gay and lesbian individuals, rarely is this information presented within the broader context of the history of sexuality and contemporary gay and lesbian theory. Practitioners, students, and researchers often have to look outside of the field to find resources on this topic. In an effort to advance social work literature, this article provides a comprehensive description of gay and lesbian identity development as well as recommendations for advancing the literature.

## **ARTICLE**

Core values of the profession of social work include service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 1999). Based on these values, NASW provides ethical principles, including cultural competence and social diversity, in its *Code of Ethics*. The *Code* explains that “social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to . . . sexual orientation” (NASW, p. 9). What do social workers need to know to fully understand social diversity and oppression as it relates to sexual orientation? As a starting point, individuals can become familiar with the history of sexuality as a context for contemporary gay and lesbian theory.

Social workers study theories of human behavior to improve their competence in working with clients at various stages of development. In order to best serve gay and lesbian clients, it is essential that practitioners understand gay and lesbian identity development. This article, however, will not provide an exact map or step-by-step method of the identity development process. In fact, this task is impossible for any population or group, as development is unique to the individual. Instead, this article will present a brief history of sexuality, background information regarding sexual identity development, contemporary gay and lesbian theories, and recommendations for social workers. This broad range of material will provide a foundation that is necessary to fully understand social diversity and oppression as it relates to sexual orientation.

### **A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY OF SEXUALITY**

In order to understand gay and lesbian identity development, social workers must be familiar with the context of sexuality in general (Kaplan, 1997). This section of the article will review the history of sexuality beginning with the identification of heterosexual and homosexual categories. In addition, it will briefly touch on the contributions of Freud, Foucault, and Kinsey to

sexuality studies. The ideas presented will then be developed based on an understanding of the distinctions between sexual desire, behavior, and identity. Note that the term, homosexuality, is used several times throughout this article to describe the understanding of sexuality at various points in history. This term is only used as a descriptor of historical categories of sexuality, and, in today's society, it is preferable to describe individuals as being gay or lesbian.

### ***Defining Heterosexuality and Homosexuality***

Historians agree that same-sex eroticism has existed and has often been severely punished for centuries (D'Emilio, 1998). However, many scholars, including Foucault, make a distinction between same-sex behavior of the "sodomite" and the homosexual whose identity was based on his or her sexual expression (D'Emilio). In general, theorists usually align themselves with the essentialist or constructionist positions. Essentialists "regard identity as natural, fixed and innate, [and] constructionists assume identity is fluid, the effect of social conditioning and available cultural models for understanding oneself" (Jagose, 1996, p. 8). In other words, essentialists view homosexuality and heterosexuality as ahistorical categories while constructionists maintain that sexuality is defined by particular societies at particular points in history (Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007; Sullivan, 2003). Essentialists hold that the dichotomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality "exists in speech and thought because it exists in reality" (Boswell, 1997, p. 41). In this article, I take a constructionist approach, acknowledging that society and culture have a definite effect on our personal ideas and experiences of sexuality. For instance, the scientific examination of sexuality in the late 1800s dramatically affected society's conceptions of homosexual behavior and identity.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the "reproductive ideal was beginning to be challenged" in the United States, and the pleasure of sex became equally, if not more, important than procreation (Katz, 1995, p. 19). Many Americans were exposed to the term heterosexual for the first time in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, a book written by Dr. Krafft-Ebing in 1893 (Katz).

Krafft-Ebing defined a homosexual as someone who desires a member of the same sex. This definition set up a binary of sexual orientation; heterosexuality “remained oddly dependent on the subordinate homosexual category” (Katz, p. 65). In fact, “if it were not for the notion of the homosexual as copy, there would be no construct of heterosexuality as origin” (Butler, 1993b, p. 313).

How did this scientific exploration into sexuality affect conceptions of same-sex eroticism? The philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984), who wrote extensively about knowledge, power, and sexuality, proposed one answer (Spargo, 1999). His text, *The History of Sexuality*, has influenced many contemporary gay and lesbian theorists. Regarding the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Foucault (1990) said that:

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul.

The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (p. 43)

In other words, this scientific exploration of sexuality marked a transition “from a conception of sodomy as a category of forbidden *acts* defined by secular and religious law to that of the pervert as a *kind of person* defined by medical and psychiatric expertise” (Kaplan, 1997, p. 115). Homosexuals were now being defined and identified by their sexual behaviors.

### ***Attitudes Regarding Homosexuality***

It was not until the 1950s that the term homosexual became part of the English and American lexicon due to the publication of the Kinsey reports (Halperin, 2000). Alfred Kinsey, a well respected scientist, meticulously categorized the gall wasp into taxonomies (D’Emilio, 1998). His research in the 1950s included the sexual histories and behaviors of over 10,000 Caucasian American men and women (Kinsey, Wardell, & Clyde, 1997). Although Kinsey’s methodology has been criticized, his continuum model of sexuality marked one of the first

challenges to the heterosexual/homosexual binary (Parker, 2007). In other words, Kinsey's work questioned the notion that individuals were exclusively heterosexual or homosexual by creating a classification system that placed individuals along a continuum based on their sexual behaviors.

In addition to Kinsey, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) influenced modern-day ideas about sexuality. Freud was one of the first scientists to tie sexuality with psychosocial human development (Edwards & Brooks, 1999). Freud wrote little about homosexuality, only referring to it as a step on the path to what he defined as normal sexual activity (D'Emilio, 1998; Edwards & Brooks). However, "Freud's pupils and successors in psychoanalysis placed homosexuality firmly in the sphere of pathology" (D'Emilio, p. 16) and much of the early scientific literature likened it to a disease, defect, and even insanity (D'Emilio).

Throughout history, gay and lesbian individuals have experienced condemnation from religious groups, government, the medical profession, and society in general (D'Emilio, 1998). Although homosexuality was removed from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973, new categories of dysfunction, such as gender identity disorder, were added (Van Wormer, Wells, & Boes, 2000). Some believe that these additional disorders continue to promote adherence to society's rigid categories of "normal" gender behavior (Rubin, 1993).

Why is the history of this medical model of sexuality important in discussing contemporary gay and lesbian identity development? Freud, Foucault, Kinsey, and others have formed and challenged theories of sexuality. Historical and contemporary theories alike provide a framework for understanding gay and lesbian identity development. In other words, these theories offer a lens for addressing what it means to be gay or lesbian in today's society.

## WHAT IS SEXUAL IDENTITY?

In addition to history, we must understand or question what identity is before we can discuss gay and lesbian identity development. In particular, what distinguishes sexual identity from desire and/or behavior? Altman (1971) explained that “the conventional definition of homosexuality has always been a behavioral one: a homosexual is anyone who engages in sexual acts with another of his or her sex” (p. 21). With the move from sexual behavior to sexual identity that occurred in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, has this conventional definition changed? Vaid (1995) proposed that of the individuals who engage in same-sex behaviors, few actually self-identify as homosexual or bisexual. In fact, most theorists make this distinction between behavior and identity (Jagose, 1996).

Contemporary scholars define sexual desire, behavior, and identity in similar ways. Sexual desire, for example, is based on a more biological drive in which we are sexually attracted to certain people (Nussbaum, 1999). Desire is “*about* an object, and *for* an object” (Nussbaum, p. 266). Regarding sexual desire, Parker (2007) differentiated between sexual attraction and romantic attraction, and explained that romantic attraction focuses on the desire for a relationship. Finally, desire includes both the appeal of having sex with others and the attraction to others (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1997). When considering sexual desire, it is important to understand that individuals might not actually *act* on these desires.

According to the literature, sexual behavior is defined as sexual contact of some kind (Johnson & Kivel, 2006; Parker, 2007). “Traditionally, homosexual behavior has been used to categorize specific actions conducted with a partner of the same gender” (Johnson & Kivel, p. 98). However, no prescriptions are provided regarding the type or frequency of contact required. In other words, does one experience of kissing a member of another sex “count” as heterosexual behavior? Further, even if an individual has multiple or regular same-sex contact, they may not necessarily identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Sexual identity is typically defined as how individuals situate themselves within known sexual categories. In other words, “sexual identity is the enduring sense of oneself as a sexual being which fits a culturally created category and accounts for one’s sexual fantasies, attractions, and behaviors” (Savin-Williams, 1995, p. 166). For example, “Do you identify as gay? Lesbian? Queer?” (Parker, 2007, p. 239). Identity applies to how one defines oneself as well as the “reference groups with which one chooses to orient” (Parker, p. 233). Reference groups such as gay, lesbian, and queer are relatively new when considering the history of sexuality. Further, they may be sexual as well as political in nature. For example, Bunch (2001) described lesbianism as a political (not sexual) choice when she said that the “woman-identified-woman commits herself to other women for political, emotional, physical, and economic support” (p. 126).

With these distinctions between desire, behavior, and identity, sexuality becomes “messy.” For example, individuals may experience same-sex desire while only exhibiting heterosexual behaviors. In order to address these issues, Holden and Holden (1995) have created a sexual identity profile which includes five dimensions: (a) sexual orientation / erotic attraction, (b) attitude / beliefs about what is appropriate or acceptable, (c) private interpersonal erotic behavior, (d) public image / social perception, and (e) nonerotic behaviors. Individuals rate themselves on a continuum from homosexual to heterosexual for each of these dimensions.

Obviously, sexual identity is not simple or clean cut, and does not stand alone. It intersects with other aspects of identity such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, education, and so forth (Johnson, 2000; Kivel, 1997; Seidman, 1993). As an individual begins to develop their identity(ies), they are certainly affected by society and its messages about their identity category(ies). Therefore, in studying gay and lesbian identity development, we must look at what it means in today’s society to be gay or lesbian.

## **HETEROSEXUALITY AND HOMOSEXUALITY**

Since the advent of sexuality categories in the late 1800s, two beliefs have remained prevalent: (a) heterosexuality is normal and natural, and (b) homosexuality is the opposite of heterosexuality. This binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality creates “mutually exclusive categories and there is considerable emphasis on the need to identify as either straight or gay” (Altman, 1971, p. 22). Homosexuality has been damned, criminalized, medicalized, regulated, and reformed throughout history (Edwards, 1994). The considerable tension between heterosexuality and homosexuality is evident when examining compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity, homophobia and heterosexism in today’s society.

### ***Compulsory Heterosexuality and Heteronormativity***

Adrienne Rich (1997) coined the term compulsory heterosexuality, and said that “however we choose to identify ourselves, however we find ourselves labeled, [heterosexuality] flickers across and distorts our lives” (p. 61). According to Rich, women are especially disadvantaged by the political institution of heterosexuality because heterosexuality and masculinity are privileged and powerful (Jagose, 1996). Related to compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity refers to the “principles of order and control that position heterosexuality at the cornerstone of the American sex/gender system and obligate the personal construction of sexuality and gender in terms of heterosexual norms” (Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007, p. 98). Not only does heteronormativity assume two genders and two sexualities, but it also leads to dichotomies of heterosexuality/homosexuality and male/female.

The notion that being straight is correct, normal, and desired in our society certainly affects gay and lesbian individuals, particularly in their sexual identity development. With the pressure to conform to the heterosexual norm, gays and lesbians may struggle with their same-sex desires. Further, with this schism between their desires, behaviors, and identities,

individuals may experience isolation, low self-esteem, depression, and anger (Morrow & Messinger, 2006).

### ***Homophobia and Heterosexism***

Homophobia refers to an irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals, which often leads to discrimination and violent acts (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Interestingly, some research has shown a correlation between homophobia and homosexual arousal; homophobia, then, could be seen as latent homosexuality for some people (Adams, Wright, & Lohr, 1996). Heterosexism, on the other hand, is “the system of advantage or privilege afforded to heterosexuals in institutional practices and policies and cultural norms that assume heterosexuality as the only natural sexual identity or expression” (Adams et al., p. 196). Institutional heterosexism is apparent when gay and lesbian individuals are not offered the rights that heterosexuals enjoy such as health insurance for partners, marriage, or hospital visitation. To sum up, “homophobia’ implies an individual pathology while the broader term ‘heterosexism’ refers as well to the denial of rights and privileges to non-heterosexuals on a social level” (Simoni & Walters, 2001, pp. 160-161).

## **THEORIES OF GAY AND LESBIAN IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

With heterosexuality being the norm in our society, gay and lesbian individuals “have as their task the development of an identity that runs counter to the heterocentric culture in which they are socialized” (Morrow & Messinger, 2006, p. 85). This identity development process can last a lifetime. Furthermore, “identities can change within individuals across situations and times” (Johnson, 2000, p. 258).

### ***Coming out***

The literature on gay and lesbian identity development usually includes the term “coming out”. Shallenberger (1996) explained that coming out includes “coming to the awareness and

acceptance of one's homosexuality" and "is a pivotal process in the lives of gay men and lesbian women" (p. 204). Rust (2003) said of coming out that:

It is the process by which individuals come to recognize that they have romantic or sexual feelings toward members of their own gender, adopt lesbian or gay (or bisexual) identities, and then share these identities with others. Coming out is made necessary by a heterosexist culture in which individuals are presumed heterosexual unless there is evidence to the contrary. (p. 227)

Although it is helpful to think of coming out as developmental, it is a lifelong process (Rust; Sedgwick, 1993a).

### ***Stage Models***

What does gay and lesbian identity development look like? Is there some model or process that all gay and lesbian individuals go through as they come out and develop their sexual identities? Although Freud claimed that homosexuality was just a step in the development of normal heterosexual identity, other scientists provide a gay and lesbian affirmative approach. Of the models that have been proposed, Vivian Cass' model (1979) has been the most widely used and adopted. In general, stage models propose a progression from an awareness of same-sex desires to an acceptance and integration of a gay or lesbian identity (Morrow & Messinger).

Based on her work with lesbian and gay individuals, Cass proposed a six stage model of sexual identity development in 1979 (Morrow & Messinger, 2006). The six stages to sexual identity formation include identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. This model is based on interpersonal congruence theory, "which submits that stability and change in a person's life are influenced by the congruence or incongruence that exists in her or her interpersonal environment" (Hunter, Shannon, Knox, & Martin, 1998, p. 58). In other words, as an individual moves through these

stages, they experience interactions between their behaviors, their identity or self, and their heterosexual and homophobic environment.

In Cass' identity confusion, individuals begin to feel dissonance between their assumed heterosexuality and their same-sex desires and/or behaviors (Morrow & Messinger, 2006). Questions arise regarding their sexuality, and individuals wonder if they are really heterosexual after all. Moving to identity comparison, they begin to accept that they might be gay or lesbian and realize that they are somehow different from accepted heterosexuals. In this stage, individuals continue to "present a heterosexual identity to others" (Hunter et al., 1998, p. 60). Next, in identity tolerance, they deal with isolation by seeking out other gays and lesbians (Morrow & Messinger). Moving to identity acceptance, individuals are now sure of their sexual orientation, but only selectively disclose this information. Often, they may "pass" for heterosexual when faced with intolerance from others (Hunter et al.). In identity pride, individuals have a positive sense of sexual identity, and resolve intolerance by becoming angry at the heterosexual and homophobic environment around them (Hunter et al.). Finally, in identity synthesis, gays and lesbians no longer feel an "us" against "them" attitude, and they recognize that their sexuality is only one component of their larger identity (Morrow & Messinger). The "ultimate goal is to attain psychological integration or consistency between perceptions of oneself and one's behavior and between one's private and public identities" (Hunter et al., 1998, p. 61).

### ***Critiques of Stage Models***

There have been many critiques of Cass' and others' stage models. Rust (2003) explained that "although models are developed to *describe* psychological and social phenomena, when they are used in efforts to predict or facilitate the processes they describe, they become *prescriptive*" (p. 239). In particular, theorists and researchers question the linear aspect of these models. Especially problematic is the tendency to view stages as essential in

the “normal” developmental process. Further, with the last phase being the goal, those who do not reach this stage are not viewed as having fully developed sexual identities.

The stage models do not include the possibilities of multiple sexual identities across the lifespan (Rust, 2003). Furthermore, the notion of coming out as a lifelong process does not fit into the stages. This is certainly an important point because “even at an individual level, there are remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them” (Sedgwick, 1993a, p. 46).

Because “one’s sexual identity is intertwined with one’s gender, racial/ethnic, religious, and other identities; a change in one implies changes in others” (Rust, 2003, p. 232). These other identities are not addressed in Cass’ model. In fact, the unique experiences of lesbian women are notably absent from stage models. This is important because women and men may differ in their sexual identity development. In fact, Gonsiorek (1995) found that sexual identity development “appears to be more abrupt for men, and more likely to be associated with psychiatric symptoms; for women the process appears to be characterized by greater fluidity and ambiguity” (p. 31). Degges-White, Rice, and Myers (2000) examined Cass’ model and found that it generally held true in their research with 12 lesbian women. However, they found that women did not go through all of the stages in a linear fashion before reaching synthesis. In response to the absence of women’s experiences in these models, several researchers have focused solely on lesbian identity development. McCarn and Fassinger created a flexible model that included phases of awareness, exploration, deepening/commitment, and internalization/synthesis (Morrow & Messinger, 2006).

Finally, stage models correspond with essentialist notions of sexuality (Hunter et al., 1998). These essentialist views “of cross-cultural differences reveal another bias inherent in linear models of coming out, that is, that they do not adequately account for the role of social constructs in shaping sexuality” (Rust, 2003, p. 243). Viewing these models from a

constructionist approach would allow for individuals to have multiple sexual identities across the lifespan. In fact, “the social constructionist approach views fluctuations in self-identity as a socially and psychologically mature response to one’s changing social contexts” (Hunter et al., p. 64). Coming from a more constructionist or post-structuralist approach, queer theories of identity may be preferred to stage models of identity development.

### **Queer theory**

In the early 1990s, an Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) activist organization, AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), became known as Queer Nation (Blasius, 2001). This marked the beginning of the reclaiming of the term “queer”, which had previously been used as a slur against gay and lesbian individuals (Epstein, 2005). Queer theory has been influenced by Foucault, Sedgwick, Butler, Derrida, and others. Foucault and Derrida’s writings have focused on the historical, cultural, and discursiveness nature of categories, which include sexual identity (Talbert & Steinberg, 2000). Taking this idea one step further, queer theory “teaches that identity is a cultural construction” and places value in unconventional and non-normative sexual identities (Talbert & Steinberg, p. 17). Queer theorists identify Sedgwick’s (1993a) *Epistemology of the Closet* and Butler’s (1990) *Gender Trouble* as significant queer works. In *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1990, 1993a, 2004) discussed how gender is culturally shaped, performative in nature, and privileges heterosexuality (Spargo, 1999). Further, deconstructing normative categories of gender “legitimizes lesbian and gay subject-positions” (Jagose, 1996, p. 83). In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick questioned the heterosexual/homosexual divide and troubled the notion of the closet. She also explained that modern culture has set up binaries of masculine/feminine, natural/artificial, same/different, majority/minority, and so forth.

Queer theory condemns conventional understandings of sexual binaries, and claims that heterosexuality and homosexuality are not the only ways to think about sexual identity (Blasius,

2001; Jagose, 1996). In fact, queer theorists call into question essentialist notions of identity, and instead view sexuality as “fluid, paradoxical, political, multiple” (Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007, p. 8). This position deconstructs sexual categories, creating a space for many non-normative sexual (and other) identities (Rust, 2003). Further, in order to maximize its potential, scholars hesitate to define the term queer, other than to say that it refers to things outside of the norm (Halperin, 2003). In fact, the “vagueness of the term has political advantages” (Kaplan, 1997, p. 6). Queer theory provides a place for a multiple identities in multiple categories, including gender, religion, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so forth. It further submits that “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points of a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (Butler, 1993b, p. 208). In effect, queer politics question the notion of a true or essential gay or lesbian identity (Sedgwick, 1993b), and have “the potential to disrupt and challenge the nature of our cultural assumptions about the development of identity, sexuality, and sexual identity” (Edwards & Brooks, 1999, p. 54).

### ***Critiques of Queer Theory***

Unlike stage models, queer theory does not risk providing a prescriptive model of identity development. However, it does not provide a descriptive model either. Social work practitioners may be more attracted, then, to stage models because they provide a description of sexual identity development. Although the point of queer theory is to disrupt norms, practitioners may find it difficult to incorporate this vague idea into their work with gays and lesbians.

Some gays and lesbians critique queer theory, and one objection “comes from those who cannot accept a once pejorative term as a positive self-description” (Jagose, 1996). Because gay and lesbian individuals have historically fought to have legitimate sexual identities, some believe that queer theory actually diminishes the efficacy of their sexual identity categories (Jagose). On the other hand, those who are proponents of queer theory might argue

that the term “queer” is becoming too widely used or fashionable. As the term becomes more and more vogue, some believe that it loses its radically non-normative meaning (Jagose). This argument extends to even the widespread academic use of queer theory. In the end “queer’s impact on identity politics has yet to be determined” (Jagose, p. 126).

## **SOCIAL WORK LITERATURE**

Are contemporary gay, lesbian, and queer issues and theories covered in the social work literature? In 2002, Van Voorhis and Wagner said that “lesbian and gay issues are barely visible in the social work literature” (p. 345). In a content analysis of major social work journals between 1988 and 1997, these authors found that most articles with content related to gays and/or lesbians focused on HIV/AIDS or coming out. Further “of the 77 articles on homosexuality published during the decade, [only] five addressed practice issues for lesbian clients” (Van Voorhis & Wagner, p. 349). More recently, social work journals have published articles regarding culturally competent practice with gay and lesbian clients. Articles include information regarding a Gay Affirmative Practice Scale (Crisp, 2006), a definition of culturally competent practice with sexual minorities (Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004), and social workers attitudes about and practices with this population (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Krieglstein, 2003; Newman, Dannenfelser, & Benishek, 2002). Finally, two pieces provide a historical overview of gay and lesbian issues in America (Avery et al., 2007; Sullivan, 2003). Of these articles, none focus on the specific issues of gay and lesbian identity development.

Why are social work journals publishing so few articles dealing with this content? One possible reason is that with the *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* and the *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy*, editors may rely on these specialty periodicals to publish content related to this population (Van Voorhis & Wagner, 2001). Additionally, social work is a broad, generalist profession serving many different types of clients. The breadth of information provided in social work journals is vast. Thus, practitioners and researchers looking for specific

content may have to rely on gay and lesbian journals for this information. However, even of the NASW practice specialties, there are none specifically related to sexuality (NASW, n.d.).

In addition to journal articles, textbooks provide some information for social workers serving gay and lesbian clients. General textbooks, like journal articles, include only a limited amount of information regarding gays and lesbians. Social workers must look to specialty texts to find additional information, including *Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youths and Adults* (Hunter et al., 1998), *Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression in Social Work Practice* (Morrow & Messinger, 2006), *Social Work With Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals* (Van Wormer et al., 2000), *Affirmative Practice* (Hunter & Hickerson, 2003), and *Foundations of Social Work Practice with Lesbian and Gay Persons* (Mallon, 1998). Unfortunately, most social work students, professors, and researchers will never read these “specialty” journal articles and texts. The limited information provided in general texts and journals is not enough for social workers to competently serve gay and lesbian clients. Furthermore, for practitioners working with bisexual, transgender, intersex, or queer individuals, information from other disciplines, such as psychology, education, women’s studies, or sociology, might be more helpful.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Social work has borrowed from other disciplines in the past, so why not do the same in this situation? Social workers serve clients at the micro, mezzo, and macro level, with an ecological and systems perspective, and as advocates to change social injustices. The profession reaches out especially to oppressed, vulnerable, and forgotten individuals in our society. We take an empowerment and solution-focused approach with our clients, while working to change the larger systems that discriminate against them. Based on social work unique values, we should fully understand social diversity and oppression as it relates to sexual orientation. I propose that we should not only *understand* but also *advance* the literature, research, and practice related to non-heterosexual clients.

In order to advance the social work literature on gay and lesbian identity development, we must first understand the history of homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, and compulsory heterosexuality in our society. In addition, we should recognize the differences between sexual desire, behavior, and identity. Regarding stage models, such as Cass' sexual identity formation, we can learn from the description of identity development without prescribing the model for all of our clients. Finally, we can learn from the queer theory movement to question sexual and gender norms. Social workers armed with this knowledge will be able to complete more accurate assessments and service plans.

Many social work texts and resources focus on the acceptance of gay and lesbian individuals in general. Certainly this is important, but I propose that social workers should and must be accepting of gay and lesbian individuals. Instead of researching whether or not social workers are heterosexist or homophobic, we should *do something* to address the knowledge gap in our profession. Many social workers were not trained to effectively serve gay and lesbian clients, much less intersex, bisexual, or transgender individuals. Further, with the advent of queer politics, dissemination of current information is important.

Mainstream social work journals ought to include content on gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer populations. Research with these populations, especially queer people, in social work is sparse. Perhaps additional information in general journals and texts will spark the interests of students, practitioners, and researchers to learn more about these individuals. Finally, as a profession promoting social justice, it is imperative that social workers understand concepts such as heterosexism, heteronormativity, and compulsory heterosexuality in order to effectively advocate for our clients. Following these recommendations will facilitate adherence to the NASW (1999) *Code of Ethics* mandate to "obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to . . . sexual orientation" (p. 9).

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