

## Revisiting Cass' Theory of Sexual Identity Formation: A Study of Lesbian Development

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### **Abstract:**

An analysis of 12 structured clinical interviews with lesbians ranging in age from 22 to 46 reveals limited support for Cass' stage theory. Implications for theory development, counseling, counselor training, and further research are provided.

### **Article:**

In 1979, Cass published the first model of homosexual identity formation and revolutionized our understanding of sexual minority persons. Her six-stage model has become the classic outline for the study of homo-sexual identity formation (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Proponents of Cass' model note that it is comprehensive (Marszalek & Cashwell, 1999) and provides a "sophisticated approach" to identity formation (Cox & Gallois 1996, p. 8). Frable (1997) noted that it is one of the most affirming descriptions of gay identity" found in the literature. Thus, it forms the basis for a variety of helping interventions with sexual minority populations, including personal and career counseling (Dunkle, 1996 Mobley & Shirley, 1996).

### **OVERVIEW OF CASS' THEORY**

Cass' (1979) six-stage theory developed from a psychosocial perspective (Levine, 1997) and is based on interpersonal congruency theory (Cox & Gallois, 1996). Motivation for development is viewed as the need to ameliorate the incongruence that each stage creates interpersonally and in reference to society (Cox & Gallois). Individuals either work through each stage, remain at a particular stage, or undergo identity foreclosure, terminating forward movement in the homosexual identity formation process (Cass, 1984).

The first stage of Cass' theory is identity Confusion. The onset of this stage is characterized by the first conscious awareness, that homosexuality has relevance to oneself in terms of one's behavior, thoughts, or feelings. During this stage, one realizes that one's behavior or feelings could be defined as homosexual (Cox & Gallois, 1996), which raises the question of whether or not one is gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Inner turmoil and feelings of personal alienation characterize this stage (Cass 1979). Unless identity foreclosure occurs, the confused person naturally moves into the second stage, Identity Comparison.

The Identity Comparison stage is marked by a tentative commitment to the homosexual self. The main task of this stage is to handle the social alienation that results as one becomes increasingly aware of the differences between oneself and others (Cass, 1979). There are several ways people typically handle social alienation. Some respond positively to the notion that they are different and thus become further inclined to accept their homosexual self; while others realize that they are homosexual and therefore different, but find that undesirable kind therefore seek to change their perception of their behavior as being homosexual. People who fall into this latter category often consider a sexual relationship they may be involved in as a special case or believe that they could act as a heterosexual if they chose to do so. They may convince themselves this is a temporary identity, or they may blame someone else so as to maintain their personal innocence (Cass, 1979). Others may recognize that they are gay, but seek to try to change their behaviors because of the perceived undesirability of being gay (Cass, 1979). The final response to the incongruence of Stage 2 is to attempt to change one's perception of oneself as gay, lesbian, or bisexual as well as discontinue any behaviors that are considered homosexual, the client succeeds in making these changes, identity foreclosure occurs and no further progress is made in the

homosexual identity formation progress. If it is unsuccessful, there is usually a dangerous amount (11 self-hatred and increased risk of self-harm (Cass, 1979).

If Stage 2 is managed healthily, then one moves from, "I may be gay," to "I probably am gay," and thus into Stage 3, Identity Tolerance (Cass, 1979). The sense of alienation is heightened and other sexual minorities are sought out to alleviate feelings of aloneness (Cox & Gallois, 1996). The critical factor in this stage is the emotional quality of the contact with other gay, lesbian, or bisexual people (Cass, 1979). If one sees ones homosexual self-image as undesirable, a positive contact in this stage can lead to a reevaluation of the negative perception. If the experience is a negative one, it increases one's negative self-concept. If identity foreclosure does not occur, one is led to a greater commitment to their gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity.

Stage 4, Identity Acceptance, is characterized by increased contact with other homosexuals, and a sense of feeling normal (Sophie. 1986). Other sexual minorities are viewed more positively, and the gay subculture becomes increasingly important in one's life.. The incongruence between how one views oneself and how one thinks others see one is heightened which creates a natural move into Stage 5 (Cass, 1979).

The fifth stage, Identity Pride, is characterized by a nearly complete acceptance of one's gay, lesbian, or bisexual self coupled with an acute awareness of the rejection of homosexuals by society (Cass, 1979). The world is often seen as divided into two camps: heterosexual and homosexual, One's commitment to the homosexual group, or sense of group identity, is very strong. This often leads to activism and purposeful confrontation with the establishment (Cass, 1979). In this stage, one's homosexual identity is the primary identity—superseding all other aspects of one's life. The disclosing of one's sexuality to others is likely to increase; how others' responses are perceived has a great impact on whether or not development continues. When disclosing of a minority sexual orientation results in an unexpected positive response on the part of a heterosexual, the individual recognizes the inconsistency of their thoughts and moves naturally into the final stage of development.

The last stage, Identity Synthesis, is reached when the sexual minority individual is able to integrate their homosexual self with other important aspects of their identity. Being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is no longer seen as one's sole identity, but a part (though an important one) of the whole picture of who they are (Cass, 1979). There is increased contact with supportive heterosexuals, and one's personal and public sexual identities become more unified.

### **CRITIQUE OF CASS' MODEL**

Although Cass' model has been said to have in intuitive appeal (Radonsky & Borders, 1995) and has been widely used, only a limited number of studies provide empirical, support for the theory. Cass (1984) presented the results of a study with 109 males and 69 females based on questionnaires and self-ratings. She reported support for a linear model, although there was a lack of definitive boundaries between Stage 1 and Stage 2 and between Stage 5 and Stage 6. Additional studies conducted by Kahn (1991) and Levine (1997) provided some support for Cass' model in both instances, research participants self-rated their stage using a assessment instrument developed by Cass (1984). the Stage Allocation Measure (SAM). Kahn included several additional tests to assess gender and family attitudes as well as internalized homophobia. Levine incorporated the Brady Sell Identity Questionnaire (Brady & Busse 1994), designed for use with gay males, in a separate study along with the Tennessee Self Concept Scale, Both studies provided limited support for Cass' model. Lark and Croteau (1998), using a sample of gay and lesbian graduate students in counseling, provided additional support for the six-stage model. On the other hand, a review of these studies reveals equivocal results with respect to factors such as the order in which the stages are reached and the effects of age on the progression through each stage.

Cass developed her model based On the experience of gay males, which some researchers (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999 Whitam, Daskalos, Sobolewski, & Padilla, 199) believe may limit its usefulness in interpreting the sexual identity formation of lesbians. Recent research (Whitam et al., 1998) indicates that while Cass stated that

lesbian sexuality began at puberty, there is evidence that lesbian attractions and sex play may commence in early childhood.

In response to the lack of support for some aspects of Cass' theory, a number of other theories have been proposed to explain the process of homosexual identity formation. Some stage models of formation have focused exclusively on the development of lesbian identity (Chapman & Branhock, 1987; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Sophie, 1986). Faderman (1984) postulated a developmental trajectory for lesbians that focused on the politics of lesbianism. Other stage models have been developed that are either based loosely on Cass' model (Coleman, 1982) or exist as Syntheses of other models of development (Minton & McDonald, 1984: Troiden], 1989). However, no empirical evidence is available to support these theories. The Cass model has been criticized as being too rigid in its linear progression (Akerhind & Cheung, 2000), not applicable to lesbian identity development. and dated (Nichols, 1999). However, after more than two decades of research and theory building, Cass' model remains the most widely used model of homosexual identity formation (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

The achievement of Stage 6, the final stage in Cass' model, is accompanied by a sense of internal congruence and positive mental health. Counselors who work with sexual minority clients using this model will assess the client's current stage and implement interventions to move the client to and through subsequent stages. If Cass' stages are valid, then the potential for successful outcomes is enhanced, and a priority can be placed on the development of interventions specific to each successive stage. On the other hand, if the model is not valid, continuing to use the six stages as a basis for counseling interventions will result only in continued incongruence, frustration for the client, possible damage to the client's self-esteem and sense of self, and early termination.

Given the importance of Cass' model in the literature, determination of the current relevance of the six stages to the development of gay and lesbian individuals is imperative. Societal changes in the last 20 years, including increased public acceptance of gay and lesbian populations (Papalia, Camp, & Feldman, 1996), have at the very least created a different societal context for sexual minority development. It is unknown how this changed context may affect the identity development process for these special populations. In this article, we report the results of a study with adult lesbians that is designed to assess the accuracy of Cass' six stages for understanding sexual minority identity development. The six-stage model Cass described formed the theoretical basis for the study.

Cass proposed that sexual minority identity evolves in a linear fashion through the six stages described here. Positive mental health is experienced, by implication., for those who successfully transition through each stage and achieve the final outcome of identity synthesis. Extensive social changes over the past two decades, particularly greater public acceptance of gay and lesbian individuals, may have created a climate in which the linear progression Cass proposed is no longer valid: however, due to the lack of empirical data, it is not known whether this conjecture is valid. The two research questions addressed within this study challenge the current validity of this widely taught and dominant theory. Firstly, is a model of sexual identity formation that was developed over two decades ago for gay men, during a greatly different social climate., relevant for lesbians today? Secondly, does sexual identity formation follow a predictable linear progression, as described by the Cass model, or is its development unique to each individual? Counseling implications that generated from the research are discussed in a later section.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Protocol**

A structured interview protocol was developed based on Cass' model. Using the descriptions of each stage, open-ended questions were created that reflected the particular issues and feelings that Cass associated with each stage. The list of questions was reviewed and critiqued by two doctoral-level counselor educators who have conducted extensive research in developmental theory and methods, gay and lesbian issues, and assessment. These two professionals were selected based on their combined knowledge of human development

and familiarity and research experience with gay and lesbian theory. The questions were subsequently revised based on the feedback received. Examples of the questions used for each stage follow (a complete set of questions may be obtained by written request to the authors):

**Stage 1:** Identity confusion. Think about when you first became aware of a connection between homosexuality and yourself. What happened to cause that awareness and how did you feel?

**Stage 2:** Identity comparison. Once you began to believe that you might be lesbian, how did you perceive yourself in relation to peers? Family? Co-workers? Society at large? As you came to accept that you might be homosexual, did you feel a sense of social Alienation (perhaps not outright rejection) but a general sense that heterosexual privileges may no longer be assumed? Tell me about these feelings.

**Stage 3:** Identity tolerance. Tell me about when you first thought, "I probably am gay," and describe your first attempts to meet/interact with other homosexuals and the feelings that accompanied these experiences.

**Stage 4:** Identity acceptance. Tell me about when you first accepted the self-label of "lesbian" and the feelings that accompanied this. What feelings did your first experiences with other homosexuals create for you?

**Stage 5:** Identity pride. If you've ever seen your homosexuality as your main identity, what circumstances led to this view? Tell me about any activities in which you've participated that you view as homosexuals activism.

**Stage 6:** Identity synthesis. Describe how you currently view yourself as a gay person in the predominantly straight world.

Face-to-face, individual interviews of the participants were conducted by two of the authors (with only a single researcher being present at each interview). Because the researchers challenge the notion that sexual identity formation is a linear process, all of the questions developed for each stage were asked at each interview, regardless of current level of sexual identity formation of each participant. Each interview lasted approximately one to one-and-a-half hours. Researchers used tape recordings and written transcriptions to chronicle each interview. The interviewers took care to use client-centered and reflective-listening skills to allow each individual to respond fully to the questions as they were asked in sequence. No self-rating instruments were included. The authors reviewed each taped interview segment and determined if the participant had experienced and worked through each of the six stages. This determination was made by researcher consensus based on the complete interview transcript and the researchers' knowledge and comprehension of the Cass model.

## **Participants**

Participants in this study were a convenience sample of adult women who identified themselves as lesbian. Initially, the researchers contacted nine individuals they knew personally who identified themselves as lesbians and requested their participation in the study. The snowball technique of gathering participants (inviting the initial participants to refer acquaintances who also identified as lesbian) resulted in the acquisition of three additional participants.

The 12 participants ranged in age from 22 to 46 years, with a mean age of 33.4 years. Although the sample consisted only of Caucasian women, there was great diversity in level of education and socioeconomic status. Regarding the highest level of education completed, 58% of the women had completed college, 25% had completed high school, and 17% had completed a graduate degree. Careers of the participants included computer programmer; business owner; full-time student in graduate schools including medical school; university staff; school counselor; speech and language pathologist; director of a battered women's center; maintenance/housekeeping staff at a community college; and factory worker. Among the participants were adoptive ( $n = 2$ ) and biological ( $n = 1$ ) mothers. Eight of the participants were in committed, long-term relationships at the time of the study and four were not. Two of the participants were divorced women who had previously been in heterosexual marriages lasting 5 years for one and 13 years for the other.

## RESULTS

A total of 12 women were interviewed for this study. Following a description of the participants and an overview of their responses, a detailed discussion of their responses according to each of Cass' stages is provided.

Of the 12 women who were interviewed, the age at first awareness of being different spanned the years from 6 to 18. Two women were elementary school-aged (6 and 8) when they first realized they felt affectionate towards other girls. One was 12-years-old, one 13, and one 14 when this first realization occurred. Two women were 15 years old, one was 16, one 17, and three were 18. Each participant passed through the first stage of Cass' model, identity Confusion. All but two of the women passed through the second stage, Identity Comparison. The two exceptions to this were the women who were the youngest to experience awareness of being different, and their experiences also did not meet the description of Stage 3, Identity Tolerance. They both moved from the first stage directly into Stage 4, Identity Acceptance. Seven women experienced the third stage, Identity Tolerance. The fourth stage, Identity Acceptance, was experienced by all of the women. Five women exhibited aspects of behavior typical of the fifth stage., the Pride stage, All but three of the women either completely or predominantly exhibited the behaviors and attitudes of Identity Synthesis, the final stage. Three of these nine women cannot be out at their workplace and cannot exhibit total identity synthesis in all sectors of their lives.

### *Exploration of Stage 1 - Identity Confusion*

Consistent with Cass' model, that the first stage of identity formation is confusion, all of the participants confirmed their sense of confusion and incongruence as they began to sense their homosexual feelings, whether they were in their early childhood or late adolescence when these feelings surfaced. The woman who had been 8-years-old at first awareness responded positively to the realization that some of the things she felt could have been considered lesbian feelings. Other women perceived the lesbian feelings as undesirable. Some of the comments were "I felt like a freak," "I believed I was a sinner and was 'going to hell,'" "I did not fit in," and "[I] thought something was wrong with me." Individuals were put off balance by this side of themselves and virtually all of them felt compelled to move onto further exploration, most within a few years., others after a longer period. In order to maintain congruence with society's expectations, one respondent stated "What you don't understand you hide outwardly. I was the all-American girl." Another woman said that she dated boys and was sexually active to try to "understand the feelings other girls were talking about." One participant reported that she entered counseling to help her inhibit her homosexual feelings and that she felt very self-conscious of these feelings. Alienation, confusion within the self, and not fitting in with the rest of the world were certainly the most noticeable markers of the initial stage.

### *Exploration of Stage 2 - Identity Comparison*

All participants did not uniformly endorse the feelings and activities described by Cass' model for this stage, Notably absent from the group of women whose responses were classified as expected for this stage were the two women who were 6 and 8 when they first experienced feelings of same-sex attraction.

Those ten women who were adolescents as they began to "try on" a lesbian identity indicated a sense of being out of step with the rest of their social circles. Four women found themselves in relationships with other women and expressed feelings that their relationships were special cases," and that they were not really lesbian. One lesbian respondent attempted suicide as a result of an exploratory relationship with another woman. The word "different" was used by almost every participant. Other words were "sad," "alone," "left out," and "ashamed." The sense of social incongruence was intense for these lesbians as they first moved to accept themselves. This is characteristic of those moving through the second stage, Identity Comparison. Unfortunately, as they compared themselves to the straight majority, they felt themselves to be very "different."

The participants reported that social pressures created a great deal of stress for them, reflected in responses such as: "I withdrew." "I did not feel worthy of success ... sabotaged myself at work and school," "stayed



depressed and quiet." "told coworkers I had a boyfriend," "tried harder to make people like me," and "kept a lot locked up inside myself." One lesbian stated that she "continually strove to perform well (academically, athletically, and behaviorally) to get noticed."

For the women who first self-identified as lesbians as young girls, being different from their peers seems to have been incorporated into their self-concepts as they grew and matured. Their lesbian attractions did not create the cognitive dissonance displayed by the women who were in their teens when they acknowledged their lesbian tendencies. Interviewee responses indicate that the second stage, Identity Comparison, is more likely to occur if the lesbian first becomes aware of her same-gender attractions during their adolescence or teen years.

### *Exploration of Map 3 - Identity Tolerance*

Cass' model places the Identity Tolerance stage as the third stage, in which an individual seeks the company of other homosexuals but remains uncertain of the desirability of a homosexual identity. The responses of the lesbians interviewed indicate that they generally did not seek out other lesbians until they had first developed acceptance of their own lesbian identity. All of the women interviewed sought out other lesbians for community, although this most often occurred only after coming to peace with themselves and their acceptance of their lesbianism. The women sought other lesbians at such diverse places as churches, gay bars, college dorms, sporting events, and through lesbian friends. As the participants were asked about their feelings upon meeting other gays and lesbians, the words they used to describe their experiences were indicative of their success at moving through this stage: "excitement," "self-understanding," "relief," and "I could get support from the other [homosexuals]." Although one lesbian stated that she did not seek out other gay individuals until she had "accidentally fallen in love with a woman," her reaction to finding an accepting community echoed others as she stated that the experience "felt very healing."

At the time Cass developed her theory, gay men and lesbians might have felt the need to seek out others to alleviate alienation due to the stigma attached to homosexuality and the invisibility of lesbians and their culture. This divergence from the original model may result in part because the historical cultural marginalization and invisibility of sexual minorities has been altered. The current culture may allow newly identifying lesbians the opportunity to come to self-acceptance of their lesbianism before feeling a need to seek out other lesbians. In past decades, the primary method for learning what it meant to be gay or lesbian was through direct interaction with other gays and lesbians. Today, men and women who are wrestling with their sexual orientation have a plethora of resources (e.g. books, magazines, support groups, and hot lines) available that do not require them to seek out the homosexual subculture for information or validation.

Although all of the participants had met and formed positive relationships with other lesbians, this development did not necessarily precede self-acceptance. Age and social circumstances may also contribute to the need to interact with gay men as well as lesbians. For the women who were moving out of the second stage during their late adolescent and early college years, seeking out the homosexual subculture may have been important in establishing friendships and first romantic relationships. In the same way that conformity is important to heterosexual adolescents as they begin the process of defining their own selves, gay males and lesbians may undergo a parallel process. Other lesbians, for example, those who are developing within nonsupportive social or family systems or in the midst of settled and heretofore unchallenged heterosexual lives, may devote their energy to self-understanding and self-acceptance before they will seek out other lesbians. Finding community among gay men and lesbians may be an important aspect to healthy development, but the timing does not strictly follow the order proposed by Cass.

### *Exploration of Stage 4 - Identity Acceptance*

Cass' model states that a sign that the Identity Acceptance stage has been reached is when one can say to oneself, "I am definitely gay." All of the women interviewed knew when they had reached this point. Another mark of the fourth stage is when one feels at home with other lesbians and gay men. Because the homosexual community is so varied, all the women felt like they had found some pocket of the community that was a good

match for them, however, reaching this level of comfort was not easy. One lesbian noted that to feel “comfortable with the new me” she resorted to increased use of alcohol and marijuana. Two lesbians reported that within the lesbian subculture they felt a little out of step at first. For example, one was an admitted “country hutch” trying to fit in with “city lesbians.” Another woman stated that the majority of the lesbians she first met were “athletic and masculine” and that she tried to emulate them for a short time until she became comfortable being herself, a more “feminine lesbian.” Again, the women came to a place of acceptance within themselves before they sincerely felt they belonged with other lesbians and gay men.

Some participants jumped from Stage 2, Identity Comparison, to beginning a process of accepting themselves that resembles the work of the fourth stage. It is important to realize that most of women needed to experience more self-acceptance before seeking out a place of acceptance within the homosexual sub culture. However, once they were at peace within themselves, the sense of belonging that was found among other lesbians was, as one woman said, “healing.”

Overall, this stage provided a sense of normalcy for the women in the study. Yet, they were aware that their newfound acceptance of themselves was in sharp contrast to the way the majority of the world viewed them. Thus, the heightened discrepancy between how one views oneself and how one is viewed by others, hypothesized by Cass as the trigger for movement from Stage 4 to Stage 5, was experienced by all of the women interviewed.

Perhaps this stage would be a better representation of the experience of lesbians if it was divided into two stages, one stage representing the more reflective inner process that lesbians may go through, and the second stage being a more external process where lesbians seek out community with each other. These potential revisions are reflective of the changes that our society has undergone in the past 20 years. Though there is still much more progress that needs to be made, sexual minorities have moved from hiding in the shadows to running for public office.

#### *Exploration of Stage 5 - Identity Pride*

None of the women that were interviewed had been involved with radical confrontations with the straight world. Five of the women did have an “us vs. them” attitude for a short time, yet, the majority of those interviewed did not show the major signs of this stage, and most had never seen their sexual orientation as their main identity. Overall, this sample of women had not felt the need to advertise their sexual orientation. As one woman said, “I am who I am. Why do I need to wear a sign around my neck?” The pride type of activity that was found in the sample involved wearing gay pride jewelry and using gay pride key rings or lighters. One woman filed a complaint because she felt discriminated against in a job situation, however, it could be argued that her action was not a purposeful confrontation with the establishment as much as an expression of the self-acceptance she had achieved in the previous stage.

This stage, as the one stage least frequently experienced by our participants, seems to be the one with the least validity for lesbians today. Perhaps this stage was relevant 20 years ago when coming out was a new and, from a social perspective, somewhat different process. Today, it seems to be a phenomenon that, because it is not universal, may be an unnecessary part of a stage model of minority identity development.

#### *Exploration of Stage 6 - Identity Synthesis*

Nine of the 12 women interviewed showed clear signs of the Identity Synthesis stage. All of these women had significant relationships with both sexual majority individuals and sexual minority individuals. They saw their sexuality as only one part of who they were—not the sum of their identity. Although three women had not reached this stage, all 12 shared concerns about being targeted for hate crimes. One woman said that she tried to “keep to herself” so she did not “get killed.” These concerns for personal safety prevented all 12 women from complete public integration of their homosexual identities.

This stage still seems to be intact and a crucial part of healthy development. The way that lesbians move into this stage, however, seems to be different than what Cass described. Most of the women disclosed their sexual orientation to an individual friend when they felt they were ready to do so. The majority of our sample moved from the fourth stage, Identity Acceptance, directly to Stage 6, Synthesis. It seems that the heightened discrepancy experienced in the fourth stage naturally moves people to tell one or two heterosexual friends they think may understand, in hopes that they will be accepted and the gap between their private and public life, will be lessened. Indeed, when a lesbian has a positive experience disclosing to a heterosexual friend, the process of synthesis has begun, and the need to separate people into camps of straight and gay is greatly lessened. Hence, the fifth stage is no longer necessary for those individuals. This seems to be what happened for the majority of the women we interviewed.

## **DISCUSSION AND COUNSELING IMPLICATIONS**

The results presented here provide evidence that the formation of sexual identity is a multi-stage process and that there is some validity to inclusion of several of the stages proposed by Cass. Discrepancies exist, however, in the order in which the stages are experienced and with the implied inevitability that all lesbians must pass through each stage sequentially in order to reach synthesis.

The results of this study give the mental health counselor working with lesbian clients more information about what may be expected of their clients' sexual identity development. The counselor should be aware that a client may not move through Cass' stages sequentially and, indeed, may not experience some of the stages at all. This knowledge may be especially helpful for the counselor whose only exposure to sexual identity formation has been the Cass model. Accepting that variance from the structured model does not prevent successful identity formation may preclude a counselor's tendency to question a client's developmental progress when the proposed mode is not followed closely. For example, our research suggests that Identity Acceptance, in the form of self-acceptance, may precede the Tolerance stage. Mental health counselors should not be surprised to observe nonlinear paths of development in their clients.

Another way in which this information can inform the practice of mental health counseling is the use of the interview questions developed by the authors to assess a client's current stage. These questions can be used by counselors to help facilitate the lesbian client's disclosure and discussion of the history and status of her sexual identity development. Simply by asking these questions, the counselor will help to normalize the client's experience by showing familiarity with the subject matter and indicating experience with this often sensitive developmental issue. Using the interview protocol, the counselor can gain information about a client's developmental progress and then employ appropriate interventions that will tacitly give the client permission to continue on their unique developmental path.

For counselors working with this population it is important to be familiar with resources for lesbian clients in the community. Clients would be well served by counselors informing them of local support groups, the local gay and lesbian hotline, the local gay newspaper, and gay friendly places of worship in the area. Knowledge of these resources would serve as helpful interventions for various stages of development. For example, a counselor who determined that his or her client was currently in the Identity Comparison stage could recommend that the client attend a local support group. This would facilitate the client's opportunity to actually see and interact with other lesbians, which is an important milestone for passage through this stage.

Clients in the Identity Acceptance stage, who may be struggling with long held beliefs regarding the sinfulness of homosexuality, may be well served by a counselor who provides a list of gay friendly places of worship. By attendance, a client would have the opportunity to have some of her previous assumptions about herself and her spiritual beliefs challenged in a safe environment and perhaps assist her in finding affirmation and empowerment.

Clients who enter counseling during the Identity Pride stage may display much anger and frustration. By assessing a client's sexual identity formation history via the interview protocol, a counselor may be able to



determine if the client has experienced self-acceptance and tolerance of her sexual identity, two integral components of successful identity formation. As illustrated in this and the preceding examples, these questions can be used by counselors to assess clients' development and normalize clients' individual developmental paths, regardless of the stage in which they find themselves.

## CONCLUSION

Developmental theories offer a sense of normalcy for the individual going through the processes of development and a foundation for counselors to understand and facilitate developmental growth. Theories provide a sense that others have passed this way before and made it, and that what one is experiencing in a given stage is "normal." Cass' theory of sexual identity development offers that to some degree, and it is likely that the life experiences of some lesbians today fit with the model very closely. However, it seems to be time to update this theory or at least expand on it. Stage 1, Confusion, and Stage 4, Acceptance, seem to be universal aspects of lesbian development. However, the evolution from confusion to acceptance seems to be more complex and less linear than Cass originally proposed. Further, the stage of Acceptance itself seems to be more varied than Cass suggested, and may actually represent two discrete stages. Stage 5, Pride, may be an historical artifact that today is experienced by only a small minority of homosexual individuals. Synthesis, the final stage, may need to be redefined in light of the increasing prevalence of hate crimes and the realistic, even preserving, response of fear related to indiscriminate coming out among sexual minorities.

Due to the small size of the sample and the nonrandom selection of participants, the results cannot necessarily be generalized to the lesbian population as a group. These limitations are those that are endemic to most research studies with lesbians and gay males due to the difficulty of obtaining large, representative samples of the total groups. Although the participants within this study were a fairly diverse group across socioeconomic and educational strata, additional research is needed to determine the relevance of Cass' theory with a broader sample, including ethnic minority lesbians and gay males. Both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms may yield useful information. The structured interview developed for the current study was effective in testing the tenets of Cass' theory and may be useful in future studies. Based on the richness of the personal narratives elicited from our participants, we believe that the interview protocol could be used by counselors and counselors-in-training to promote awareness as well as understanding of the unique developmental processes and experiences of sexual minority individuals.

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