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Shifting Sands or Solid Foundation? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Identity Formation

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1 Introduction

How do some individuals come to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender? Is there a static, universal process of identity formation that crosses all lines of individual difference, such as sexual identities, sex/gender, class, race/ethnicity, and age? If so, can we describe that process in a series of linear stages or steps? Is identity based on a rock-solid foundation, stable and consistent over time? Or are there many identity formation processes that are specific to social and historical factors and/or individual differences, an ever-shifting landscape like a sand dune? The field of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) studies is characterized by competing paradigms expressed in various ways: nature versus nurture, biology versus environment, and essentialism versus social constructionism (Eliason, 1996b). Although subtly different, all three debates share common features. Nature, biology, and essentialistic paradigms propose that sexual and gender identities are "real," based in biology or very early life experiences and fixed and stable throughout the life span. These paradigms allow for the development of linear stages of development, or "coming out," models. On the other hand, nurture, environment, and social constructionist paradigms point to sexual and gender identities as contingent on time and place, social circumstances, and historical period, thus suggesting that identities are flexible, variable, and mutable. "Queer theory" conceptualizations of gender and sexuality as fluid, "performative," and based on social-historical contexts do not allow for neat and tidy stage theories of identity development. Most of the linear stage models today are based on the assumption of an essential sexual orientation, but moving through the stages is predicated on responses from the social and cultural environment.

This chapter critically reviews research and theory on LGBT identity development, considering the positive aspects of both social construction and essentialist paradigms. We propose that the field needs

theories that are broad, inclusive, and interactionist, taking into account potential biologic, psychological, historical, and sociocultural factors. We briefly review early research/theory on sexual identity formation, and the plethora of stage theories that appeared during the 1980s and 1990s, choosing a few of these models to describe in more detail to highlight the key features or themes of stage models. Other models are presented in a table for the reader's convenience. These models generally focused on gay and lesbian identity. There has been much less work on bisexual and transgender identities, but the little theory available often provides a challenge to gay and lesbian identity models. We also summarize some of the major challenges to linear stage models, propose a compromise model, and suggest some future directions for theory and research.

Before proceeding, it is important to address changes in language: In the years since identity models began to appear, there have been staggering changes in Western society. Those changes include the language we use to describe gender and sexuality. Early theories describe "homosexual" identity formation and are often focused on the (white) gay male experience. Later theories are somewhat more inclusive and describe "gay and lesbian" identities, or even lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities (theories have not advanced to include transgender identities as of yet). Most of the theories are derived from a Eurocentric, Western science perspective and thus are not inclusive of all the people who develop minority sexual and gender identities. We use the terms "sexual identities" or "sexualities" in the place of "homosexuality" here unless quoting from one of the earlier works. Early theories also used language that seems dated or even offensive today, such as "gay life-styles." We try to avoid this language but recognize that any attempts to find inclusive language are bound to fail in these ever-changing times. There is no consensus about the best terms to describe gender or sexual identities. Ringo (2002) found that 19 female-to-male trans-men used 33 combinations of labels to describe themselves. The terms gay, lesbian, and bisexual are equally contested terms.

2 Identity Development Models

2.1 In the Beginning

One of the most important early works dealing with minority self-identity is Erving Goffman's (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Social stigma, which is learned and internalized through childhood socialization, shapes the minority individual's identity. Because of this internalization, Goffman proposed that minority individuals share the majority's belief that they are a failure and abnormal. This knowledge leads to self-hate and self-derogation. Because they are stigmatized persons, minority individuals are uncomfortable during interactions with the majority and often try to limit such contacts. The formation of the minority sexual identity involves dealing with social expectations of what is normal.

Dennis Altman and Ken Plummer were among the first to offer explanations for the development of a stable "homosexual" identity. Altman (1971) discussed the potential costs and benefits of disclosing one's homosexuality in a hostile environment. Although perhaps giving too much emphasis to the role of sexual encounters, he was one of the first to describe coming out as a long process where one has to weigh satisfying emotional and physical needs with the resulting stigmatization. Altman suggested that coming out involved dealing with the socially learned "internalization of oppression." Society might for some time remain hostile to homosexuality and homosexuals, but the author believed that individuals could and should seek "liberation" from their own internalized oppression.

Plummer (1975) went further, using symbolic interactionism as his theoretical basis for examining homosexuality (at least in men). Unfortunately, much of his work remains rigidly mired in the sociology of deviance of his time. Thus he talks of individuals adopting a "homosexual way of life" or a "career type" of sexuality. Plummer did recognize, however, that homosexuality was a social construct developed by the majority to restrict and pathologize a sexual minority. He argued that all forms of deviancy need to be viewed within a historical and cultural context. Moreover, he stated that current social hostility to homosexuality (homophobia) was responsible for many of what he labeled "pathologies," such as promiscuity and exaggerated effeminacy.

Plummer's advice for "sexual deviants" was that they should find acceptance and support from others within the "gayworld." The author was one of the first to present a process of identifiable stages. In his first two stages, the homosexual individual moves from pondering sexual identity (sensitization) to accepting the deviant label with all the potential social consequences (significance and disorientation). Plummer argued that social oppression creates disequilibrium where the homosexual becomes stalled (perhaps for the rest of his life) in this second stage. In Plummer's third stage (coming out), the homosexual individual "goes public" with his rebuilt sexual identity. Disclosure, however, was specifically linked by the author to the person's willingness and ability to join the homosexual community. When the homosexual person no longer even questions his homosexual identity, he has reached Plummer's last stage (stabilization). Plummer stressed that the individual is now trapped in this deviant sexual identity by his own continued desire for sexual pleasure and by pressure from the homosexual community itself. Like all groups, the gayworld protects its boundaries by trying to prevent any attempt by members to "retrace their steps" back to heterosexuality or even bisexuality. Thus the author concluded that the homosexual individual who makes it to the last stage finds himself imprisoned by his deviancy and suffering a new form of oppression by his own sexual subgroup.

2.2 Plethora of Stage Models

Building on Plummer and others, the 1980s saw the creation of a variety of models of sexual identity based on the individual's progression

through specific stages. Fortunately, most of these theories moved away from the deviance model of Plummer and focused on the healthy consequences of accepting one's sexuality. Most stage model authors assumed that one is or is not gay or lesbian; thus they embrace the argument through an Essentialist lens. The question for them is the individual's recognition of one's own sexuality and the building of a stable sexual identity based on one's innate physical or emotional attractions. Most of the stage models incorporate both the individual's psychological development and real or expected societal reactions to the individual's sexuality. Stage model authors explored the variety of social factors affecting the individual and the enormous choices the individual could make based on those factors. Table 1 summarizes some of the stage models that have appeared in the literature. Most of the models are based on a review of the literature, but they are not empirically tested or are based on only a single, small sample of participants. Stage theories are clearly still at a formative stage and much work needs to be done to validate the processes that lead toward adoption of a gender or sexual identity. The models in Table 1 describe anywhere from three to fourteen stages, phases, or cycles of identity formation and have a great deal of overlap. A few of these theories are described in more detail in the sections that follow.

2.2.1 Eli Coleman

Coleman (1982) presented a five-stage model but rejected the idea that gay individuals all move predictably through the process stage by stage. Rather, the author contended that each person works on the tasks that seem most pressing, which could include working on tasks from two or three stages at the same time. Although Coleman adhered to some linearity (his stages are clearly presented as movement toward a psychologically healthy self-identity), he proposed that individuals in the final stage may still be working on tasks from earlier stages.

In Coleman's model, individuals move through stages driven by an ever clearer awareness of their same-sex feelings. His first stage (before coming out) is characterized by the individual's sense of being different and that others sense this differentness. Unsure what this difference is, the individual often develops low self-esteem and behaviorally acts out trying to avoid dealing with the real cause of the difference. Failure to resolve this growing crisis could result in mental illness or suicide, whereas resolution of the conflict leads the person into Coleman's second stage (coming out).

Coming out to self is clearly the most important task of the second stage. Disclosure to others is also a task of this stage, but to Coleman coming out does not necessarily lead to adopting an openly gay life. Many authors have been critical of stage models that include the necessity of disclosure to others, but Coleman countered that an individual needs the acceptance of others to build self worth and self acceptance. A positive reaction to disclosure provides support against the unending assault by a homophobic society. Coleman suggested that acceptance by heterosexual friends may be more valuable in the struggle to reverse negative self images than acceptance from sexual minorities.

Table 1. Summary of Stage Theories

Study	Basis of stages	Stages or phases of identity formation
Plummer (1975)	Theory about gay men	Sensitization Significance Coming out Stabilization
Ponse (1978)	Interviews with 75 lesbians	"*Gay trajectory*" Subjective feeling of difference from sexual/emotional desire for women Understanding feelings as "lesbian" Assuming a lesbian identity Seeking the company of lesbians Engaging in lesbian relationship (sexual and/or emotional)
Cass (1979, 1996)	Gay and lesbian development; some empirical validation (Cass, 1984)	Confusion Comparison Tolerance Acceptance Pride Integration
Coleman (1982)	No empirical validation	Pre-coming out Coming out Exploration First relationship Integration
Minton & McDonald (1984)	From ego development theory; surveys of 199 gay men	Egocentric Sociocentric Universalistic
Faderman (1984)	Lesbian feminist identity; no empirical validation	Critical evaluation of societal norms and acceptance of lesbian identity Encounters with stigma Lesbian sexual experience (optional)
Sophie (1985/1986)	Lesbian identity; interviews with 14 women	First awareness Testing/exploration Acceptance Integration
Chapman & Brannock (1987)	Lesbian identity; surveys of 197 lesbians	Same-sex orientation Incongruence Self-questioning Identification Choice of life-style
Troiden (1989)	Gay and lesbian development: interviews with 150 men (Troiden, 1979)	*Spirals rather than linear* Sensitization Confusion Assumption Commitment
Morales (1989)	Racial/ethnic minority LGB; no empirical validation	Denial of conflicts Bisexual vs. gay/lesbian identity Conflicts in allegiances Establish priorities in allegiances Integrate various communities
Reynolds & Pope (1991)	Multiple identity formation; no empirical validation	Passive acceptance of society's expectations for one aspect of self Conscious identification with one aspect of self

Table 1. *Continued*

Study	Basis of stages	Stages or phases of identity formation
		Segmented identification with multiple aspects of self
		Intersection identities with multiple aspects of self
Isaacs & McKendrick (1992)	Gay male identity; no empirical validation	Identity diffusion Identity challenge Identity exploration Identity achievement Identity commitment Identity consolidation

Siegel & Lowe (1994)	Gay male identity; no empirical validation	Turning point
		    Aware of difference
		    Identify source of difference
		Coming out
		    Assumption
		    Acceptance
		    Celebration
		Maturing phase
		    Reevaluation
		    Renewal
		    Mentoring

Fox (1995)	Bisexual identity formation; no empirical validation	First opposite sex attractions, behaviors, relationships First same-sex attractions, behaviors, relationships First self-identification as bisexual Self-disclosure as bisexual
McCarn & Fassinger (1996); Fassinger & Miller (1996)	Lesbian and gay identity; study of 34 gay men and 38 lesbians	Awareness Exploration Deepening/commitment Internalization/synthesis

Eliason (1996a)	Lesbian identity; no empirical validation	*Cycles/not linear*
		    Preidentity
		    Emerging identity
		    Recognition/experiences with oppression
		    Reevaluation/evolution of identities

Nuttbrock et al. (2002)	Transgender identity; no empirical validation	Awareness Performance Congruence Support
Devor (2004)	Transgender identity; no empirical validation	Abiding anxiety Confusion Comparison (birth sex/gender) Discover trans identity Confusion (trans) Comparison (trans) Tolerance (trans) Delay before acceptance Acceptance Delay before transition Transition Acceptance of posttransition gender/sex Integration Pride

Forming positive self concepts is needed (or is highly desirable) as one moves into and through the third stage (exploration).

Having accepted the label "homosexual," the person in this stage sets out to discover what it means. Often for gay men, it means having sexual contact with many partners. Coleman, however, does not present this stage as simply one of fun and sexual adventure. Frequently individuals during this period may turn to drug use to cope with the stress. Although many of the person's behaviors in this stage may be judged as age-inappropriate, Coleman argued that they are working through issues that most heterosexuals addressed as adolescents. At some point, the individual starts to contemplate the possibility of more serious connections and relationships with others. Coleman's fourth stage (first relationships) is relatively unique among stage models and answers the call that identity development should focus more on relationship development (e.g., DeCecco & Shively, 1984). Coleman emphasized that many early relationships flounder because the individual is controlled by internalized homophobia. The lack of a stable self identity may mean the individual has yet to develop empathy and social skills. Moreover, being in a relationship may "out" the person before he or she is prepared to deal with the consequences. Pressures resulting from these early relationships may make the adventures of sexual experimenting sound enticing, and there may be movement back into the previous stage.

In Coleman's last stage (integration), the individual consolidates private self with public self. This task is highly stressful, and many do not succeed. Unlike many stage theorists, Coleman does not believe that reaching this stage means all the tasks of the previous stages have been resolved. However, he states that it is unlikely that one could achieve identity integration with the early crises still in conflict. Reaching the integration stage opens up the possibility of more successful relationships and the exploration of new and potentially more satisfying social networks.

2.2.2 Richard Troiden

Troiden (1988, 1989) firmly stated that sexual identities are socially learned, although he did not completely dismiss biology. His emphasis was on how social scripts of gender role behavior affect adoption of a sexual identity. Troiden stressed that individuals are not fixed into neat categories of "homosexual" or "heterosexual" but develop sexual identities along any point on Kinsey's scale; thus theoretically this theory can accommodate bisexual identities. Sexual identities form as individuals learn to interpret what their sexual feelings mean to themselves and to society as a whole. Troiden emphasized that no one fits perfectly into any one stage, that his stages are only clusters of characteristics; he rejected linear stage models, stressing that the process is more like a "horizontal spiral" where individuals move in all sorts of directions. Troiden's first stage (sensitization) refers to feelings of being different during puberty, focusing on gender difference, such as not fitting into typical boy and girl behaviors or interests. These feelings of being different are not understood by the child as implying a sexual

differentness. When the feelings do start signifying the sexual aspect, one has entered Troiden's second stage (identity confusion). Troiden emphasized that as gender roles become more rigid during adolescence the teen, overwhelmed by guilt, usually desperately tries to hide his or her feelings. Like Plummer and Coleman, Troiden used "coming out" as a stage (his third) but not necessarily in the same way. In Troiden's coming out stage, individuals accept their self identity and presented identity as being the same. This acceptance often results in a new sense of belonging to a group, with possible anger against those in the heterosexual group. Troiden also included sexual experimentation (for gay men) and emotionally charged relationships (for lesbians) in this stage. He argued that these different gender behaviors come out of one's socialization of males as seekers of quick gratification and females as seekers of emotional security. When the individual firmly adopts this new identity and is willing to disclose this identity to others, he or she enters Troiden's last stage (commitment). Although the author contended that persons in this stage most likely disclose to a large number of people in their environment, he also discussed strategies used to evade detection by others. Troiden proposed that even individuals who have stable sexual identities may have to remain hidden because their particular social environment is especially homophobic. Moreover, the formation of a sexual identity is never fully complete as new challenges may strengthen or weaken the individual's commitment to the sexual identification.

2.2.3 *Vivienne Cass*

Vivienne Cass (1979, 1990, 1996) has become one of the most often cited stage model theorists. The author repeatedly emphasizes the importance of the interaction between the individual and the environment. Her six stages have become more and more elaborate as she seeks to demonstrate the impact of family, friends, and other social players on the individual's movement through the stages. In response to the multitude of studies and critiques since her 1979 model was unveiled, Cass clearly has recognized that what is regarded as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity is rooted in the culture and history of Western society.

The six stages developed by Cass are levels through which the individual moves, driven by incongruence between self-perception, sexual behaviors, and the perception of how others would view the person if they knew of those behaviors. Each stage is characterized by a struggle to find an acceptable balance but does not necessarily lead to further growth and the next stage. Identity foreclosure is a possibility in every stage as the individual evaluates the costs of continuing the process. According to Western psychologies, the healthiest response at each stage is to meet the challenges involved and evolve into a stable, openly gay individual who is at peace with self and society. Cass's own testing has only partially validated the six stages (Cass, 1984). Still, even those stages with less empirical support, especially her pride stage, make sense as they often are included in other minority identity models (e.g., Cross, 1991).

The individual remains to a large extent in the closet through the first four of Cass's stages. In the first stage (identity confusion), the individual has become aware that he or she has thoughts or has acted in ways that may be identified as "homosexual." This prompts the person to recognize a need to redefine either one's identity or behavior. The reaction to this incongruence leads either to identity foreclosure or movement into the second stage (identity comparison), where the individual accepts that his or her behavior is indeed homosexual in nature. Redefining the behavior is no longer a viable option. Most important, the person is aware of the gap between identity as seen by oneself and identity as presented to others. In stage three (identity tolerance), the individual grudgingly adopts a gay, lesbian, or bisexual self-concept but remains resistant to this identity because of the internalized stigma and fear of negative reactions from others. The individual's options include identity foreclosure, living a life of self-hatred, or movement into the fourth stage (identity acceptance). During this last closeted stage, the individual learns to accept the sexual identity as positive but is still well aware of the social stigmatization. Passing often becomes a more conscious act to avoid the social costs of disclosure. Membership in gay organizations and frequenting of gay bars is now more acceptable as one builds a "second" life rather than the secret life of previous stages.

Incongruence in identity acceptance may lead to Cass's first "open" stage (identity pride). In this stage, the individual determines to reconcile identity as seen by self with identity presented to others through extensive self-disclosure. Cass stresses that this stage may include a rejection of heterosexual society, a reflection of one's anger toward having to bear the burden of the stigma for years. Individuals in this stage also tend to make their sexuality the center of their lives, making it (to use Goffman's words) as obtrusive as possible. Identity foreclosure may leave the individual continually struggling against society. Movement into the sixth stage (identity synthesis) brings balance and peace as the individual becomes more accepting of others and of self, and one's sexuality is no longer the central focus of life. Because the anger over the social stigma is no longer overwhelming, one is equally comfortable around heterosexual and sexual minority individuals.

2.2.4 A Few Other Theories

South African authors Isaacs and McKendrick (1992) presented a different twist on gay male identity formation by emphasizing sexual behaviors and feelings. They based their stages of identity growth on ego development in response to the presence of male and female sexual images. They provided prospective ages for each of their six stages. The first two stages, identity diffusion (age 0 to 9) and identity challenge (age 10 to 15), are characterized by primitive, unclear sexual fantasies, resulting in confused self-esteem. Stage three, identity exploration (age 16 to 19) is a testing phase with confusion over which sexual fantasies to use for masturbation. Beginning identity achievement (age 19 to 65)

finds the individual fixating on same-sex fantasies, resulting in a "coming out crisis." Self-acceptance develops during the identity commitment stage (age 19 to 65), which also includes new and open participation in the "homosexual" subculture. Isaacs and McKendrick emphasized the critical role of this subculture and its power over its members. In the last stage, identity consolidation (age 19 to 65), there is full ownership of one's sexual fantasies. Moreover, the subculture becomes even more important, demanding behavioral changes in accordance with shifting norms. In some ways, the authors see the individual as being victimized by the need to adapt oneself continually to subcultural roles and values, reminiscent of Plummer's model.

In stark contrast to Isaac and McKendrick, Lillian Faderman (1984) discussed the lesbian feminist identity, whereby women can come to identify as lesbians through politics, rather than any innate feelings, drives, or sexual experiences. Indeed, the lesbian feminist may never have a sexual experience with another woman at all. Faderman described three stages that are the reverse of Minton and McDonald's (1984) stages, beginning with a commitment to a lesbian identity and progressing to possibly having a sexual relationship with a woman (although it is not required for a lesbian feminist identity).

Fassinger and Miller (1996) and McCarn and Fassinger (1996) presented a stage model with familiar stages: awareness, exploration, deepening/commitment, and internalization/synthesis. What makes their theory different is that they hypothesize two "branches" to the model. The stages can describe a person's individual process of grappling with internal feelings, behaviors, and attractions; and/or it can describe a process of adopting a group membership, stages toward defining oneself as a member of an oppressed minority group.

Devor (2002) proposed one of the few theories to explore transgender identity formation, basing the stages on Cass's model. Devor's sociological work has focused primarily on female-to-male transsexuals (Devor, 1997). With 14 stages, the theory explores identity comparisons with one's birth sex followed by identity comparisons with a transgender notion; it identifies certain stalled or arrested developmental stages as "delay" stages. Although the stages themselves may or may not be inclusive of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, Devor notes two concepts that underlie all identity formation: witnessing and mirroring. Witnessing refers to the longing we all have to be witnessed by others for who we believe ourselves to be. Witnesses are objective, external validation of the self. Mirroring involves seeing oneself in the eyes of someone who is similar, a person with an insider perspective on the group with which we identity. Identity formation hinges on these two social processes. For transgender or transsexual to be social categories at all, societal assumptions must hold that there are two clearly distinct categories called male and female. The transgender individual must traverse two of society's deeply entrenched belief systems: that men and women are distinct and mutually exclusive categories, and that sex/gender determines sexuality. Coleman et al. (1993) also studied a small group of female-to-male transsexuals who identified as gay men after transition. These authors suggested

that transgender individuals go through two developmental stage processes: first for gender identity and then for sexual identity.

2.3 Common Themes of Stage Models

It is clear that linear stage models have a number of similarities and differ primarily in the subtle details. Some of the common themes are described below.

2.3.1 Identity Development Begins with a Feeling of Differentness

The differentness varies somewhat from one theory to another, ranging from gender role deviations (Troiden; Devor) to same-sex attractions (Cass; Chapman & Brannock) to gender of sexual fantasy objects (Isaacs & McKendrick). For all theorists, the difference is motivated by comparison to others or social norms. At first, there is no language for the difference. Rarely do the stage theorists speculate as to the origins of this difference, whether it is innate, generated from early life experiences, the result of name-calling on the playground, or other beginnings.

2.3.2 Identity Formation Is Developmental

The stages are a journey from lack of identity (with poor psychological adjustment) to solid identity and acceptance of one's identity (with good psychological adjustment). That is, later stages are healthier or more advanced than earlier stages. Many theorists refer to the coming out process, whenever it occurs, as similar to adolescence in that the individual must learn dating norms and explore their sexuality and/or gender. In general, the stage models describe a sequence from immaturity and unhealthy adjustment to maturity and good health.

2.3.3 People Need to Disclose

A common belief among many of the stage theorists is that the closeted individual is less healthy than the open individual, who has successfully achieved the ability to live openly and comfortably with his or her sexuality. In Cass's last closeted stage (identity acceptance), the fear of exposure remains for many the focus of their lives, and the person often is dominated by self-hatred. Wells and Kline (1987), like many stage theorists, argued that disclosure to others is an essential part of the coming out process because "each time homosexuals deny their sexual orientation, they hurt themselves slightly, which has a cumulative effect" (p. 192).

2.3.4 The Need for a Stage of Pride/Cultural Immersion

Cass's identity pride stage is perhaps her most controversial because it focuses on the initial anger felt by many LGB individuals against heterosexual society (see also Plummer and Troiden). Before coming out, much time and energy has been lost grappling with society's prejudice. Long forced to pretend to be someone they were not, LGB individuals often respond with rejection of heterosexual society and even most heterosexual persons. For many, coming out feels like the world has become open to them. According to Cass, though, it may at the same time shrink because the initial phase of coming out most often involves

a submersion in gay society. Heterosexual friends are often abandoned as untrustworthy; and, ironically, as it has since early childhood, the individual's sexuality or gender continues to dominate his or her life. Now, however, the driving force is to affirm one's identity rather than to desperately hide it.

According to many stage theorists, the pride stage often involves behaviors that would have been considered quite outrageous and unthinkable before coming out. Sexual promiscuity may become a way of constantly reaffirming one's sexuality, especially for men. It also confirms that one no longer accepts society's right to set the rules of behavior. This may be when one is more likely to become involved in political organizations that directly challenge or even threaten the dominant system. Most authors believe that these later stages of coming out force the discomfort in social situations and the psychological work of adjustment from the gay person to the heterosexual person (Brooks, 1981). Certainly, gay individuals in the pride stage are determined to force heterosexuals to feel the discomfort that had long been oppressing the gay person. Goffman (1963) stressed that coming out is a movement from being "discreditable" to "discredited" (openly stigmatized). Yet, although the pride stage is where the person has become discredited in the eyes of society, it is also when the individual is unwilling to accept the stigma as his or her problem. Without confronting the pain of stigma, homophobia will continue to damage society as a whole (Blumenfeld, 1992). Not surprisingly, individuals in the pride stage are most criticized not only by heterosexual persons but also many LGBT individuals, who are uncomfortable forcing the majority to share the discomfort. Heterosexual individuals may express bewilderment at the term "gay pride," arguing that they do not talk about "straight pride," whereas some LGBT people urge their more visible counterparts to try to blend in and "act normal."

2.3.5 *Need for Identity Integration/Synthesis*
The final or highest stage of most models requires that gender and sexual identities become integrated into the whole personality, so they are no more and no less important than any other aspect of identity. Integration means lessening of the anger against societal norms and a greater emotional balance. According to McCarn and Fassinger (1996), achieved lesbian development means that, "she will have traversed the path from rage, anxiety, insecurity, and rhetoric to directed anger, dedication, and self-love as a lesbian woman" (p. 525). Loiacano (1989) also stressed the need to integrate identities in African American gays and lesbians, citing the struggle for validation of both stigmatized identities as a "challenge to sanity" (p. 23).

3 Challenges to Linear-Stage Models of Identity

Throughout the 1980s to the present, there have been challenges to stage model theories of sexual or gender identity formation. The critics noted that sexual identities are cultural constructs of fairly recent origin and are not universal. There are a wide variety of cultural views of

gender and sexuality that differ from our Western notions. Even in Western societies such as the United States, there are subcultural differences based on race/ethnicity, religion, or even age that demonstrate the shaky ground of social identities. For example, many middle-aged and older lesbians have difficulty understanding why many young women are hesitant to call themselves lesbians, preferring instead to call themselves "fluid" or defy categories. As another example, the concept of two-spirit in Native American communities is not synonymous with gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender concepts in Western society. Many subcultural groups continue to define sexual identity by active/passive terms rather than gender of partner—that is, the passive or receptive partner is "gay" but not the active or dominant partner. Most of the stage theories do not account for bisexual identity formation, as they are based on the assumption of same-sex desires in opposition to other-sex desires (an exception is Fox, 1995, who provided a stage model of bisexual identity). Finally, few theories have attempted to include transgender identity or theorize the role of gender in identity processes in a more sophisticated manner (Devor, 1993). This section describes some of the major categories of challenges to linear stage models.

3.1 Changes in Social Context

There have been enormous changes in pop culture and media images of gender and sexuality during the past three decades, with an explosion of images and information about alternative gender and sexual roles that the early stage theorists scarcely could have imagined. The youth's of today have access to unlimited information on the Internet and are exposed to a plethora of sexual styles and behaviors. These changes are bound to affect identity formation models in a variety of ways, from earlier age of labeling one's difference to the wider variety of ways gender and sexuality can be expressed. These changes are evident when 7-year-olds "come out" as transgendered on Oprah, junior high kids identify as "genderqueer," straight men allow themselves to be "made over" by a team of gay men, and books proclaim, *The End of Gay* (Archer, 2002). Theoretical models of sex and gender need to accommodate these changes in the culture.

Furthermore, one has to consider the influence of research on the biological underpinnings of gender and sexuality. How is the debate about biology related to cultural notions of sexual and gender identity and to societal attitudes? The question of whether one is born with a sexual orientation or acquires it later needs to figure into discussions of identity formation. Whisman (1996) found that lesbian and bisexual women were more likely to think their sexuality was a choice than men. Many identity models presuppose an innate sexual orientation and have little room for choice, except whether to express sexuality.

3.2 Changing Notions of Sex/Gender

Some stage theorists spend considerable time discussing gender-atypical behavior or feelings during childhood (most notably, Troiden),

which leaves out LGBT people who had gender-conforming child-hoods, and dismisses the possibility of transgender identity in some individuals who do have gender-atypical childhoods. The role of sex/gender has been debated. It is widely recognized that women and men are socialized differently in most cultures and that gender has dif-ferent meanings in different cultural groups. Even within LGBT com-munities, gender has quite varied meanings. Consider a femme lesbian, a transgender woman, a drag queen, and a butch lesbian. Are these all separate identities or variations on the theme of "woman?" Do butch lesbians have the same identity formation processes as femme lesbians (e.g., Levitt, 2003)?

Bisexual identities challenge the foundation of gay and lesbian iden-tities on the sex/gender of the sexual partner, creating anxieties in lesbian and gay communities. How does bisexuality, having a physical attraction to, or choosing sexual or romantic partners on the basis of some characteristic other than their sex/gender, disrupt monosexual identities that are firmly defined by the sex/gender of partners? Most linear stage theories are unable to accommodate the flexibility of a bisexual identity (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001).

Transgender identities challenge the stability of biologic categories such as sex, which underlie gay and lesbian identity. Kate Bornstein astutely pointed out: "What makes a man—testosterone? What makes a woman—estrogen? If so, you could buy your gender over the counter at any pharmacy" (Bornstein, 1994, p. 56). Other "biologic" markers of sex, such as chromosomes, genitals, and reproductive capabilities, are similarly ambiguous. Again, transgender identities challenge the via-bility of an identity based on the sex/gender of partners.

Finally, male and female socialization about sex/gender and sexual-ity in most cultures is quite different and challenges the idea of whether one could ever develop a model of sexual identity formation that cap-tures the experiences of women and men (or even more difficult, people who never felt comfortable in the roles assigned to women and men). In a culture that devalues women and femininity, prejudice against "effeminacy" in men exists in both the dominant culture and in LGBT subcultures (Taywaditep, 2001); and it must play a role in individual development of men. The very different ways that men and women in Western society are socialized about sex and love may affect the tra-jectories their sexual identity formation may take. Men may be more likely to experiment sexually and define themselves in terms of their sexual behavior, whereas women may define themselves in terms of love relationships, regardless of whether they are sexual. Much of the criticism of linear stages theories has come from women, and there is growing evidence that men experience their sexuality as more linear and less fluid than do women.

3.3 Challenges to the Stability of Identity

Queer theory, an increasingly influential theoretical framework in the humanities, has begun to filter more into the social sciences (it has had a minority voice there all along—see Mary McIntosh, 1968, and various

sociologists through the years). These frameworks view social iden-
tities of all kinds as contingent on time, place, and circumstances.
According to queer theory, identities are always tentative, fragmented,
and essentially figments of our imagination attempting to create some
order out of the chaos of our lives (Fuss, 1991).

Identities can create problems for individuals when the categories,
labels, or stages they choose are too confining and rigid to contain their
individual differences. LGBT communities are often shocked when one
of their members "leaves the fold." Identity change is threatening to
the whole community as it challenges the stability of gender and sex-
uality (Rust, 1993). The literature is full of stories of rejection when les-
bians have relationships with men, when gay men transition to women,
when butch lesbians identify as trans-men, and so on. These events are
only unsettling if we make the assumption that gender and sexual iden-
tities are fixed and stable.

3.4 Challenges to the Developmental Sequence of Stage Theories

Do people have to pass through a series of stages, or can they experi-
ence only one stage? Can they go through stages in different orders?
Skip stages? Regress? Joan Sophie (1985/1986) reported that women
who were questioning their sexual identities often did not fit into stage
theories—they skipped stages or went through stages in different
orders. Because many of the theories parallel developmental theories
of child and adolescent development, they may not be as applicable to
adults who adopt a different gender or sexual identity when they are
older. The focus on childhood and adolescent experiences leaves out
those who form an LGBT identity later in life, who may have never
struggled with identity issues during adolescence or young adulthood.

Cox and Gallois (1996) noted that the highest or final stage of many
linear stage theories is integration, consolidation, or synthesis of sexu-
ality with other identities, such as gender, race, and age. This privileg-
ing of integration as the ultimate state "suggests the existence of a best
identity, specifically, an identity that supports the dominant heterosex-
ual hegemony, or at least, is not antagonist to it" (p. 9). Other com-
mentators (Celia Kitzinger, 1987, in particular) have pointed out the
apolitical nature of sexual identity stage models in that they focus on
individual adjustment so the person can ultimately "fit in" society
rather than alter it.

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) noted that most identity models focus
on the individual's internal developmental processes; but if sexual
identity is socially constructed in response to societal oppression and
stigma, it can also be a political identity. Theories that focus on the per-
sonal tend to emphasize erotic desires and intimacy needs, where dis-
closure may be less important. If the theory focuses on social group
membership, identity disclosure is a key element. This schism in the
definition of identity can also be seen in individuals. In one study, les-
bians were asked to define what it meant to be a lesbian. Thirty-five
percent gave a nonpolitical, personal definition, such as to love or have
sex with women or sexuality is a part of core personality, whereas 65%

gave a political definition, such as to be a lesbian is to have a world-view associated with feminism or civil rights issues (Eliason & Morgan, 1998). Stage theorists often equate sexual identity formation with other developmental processes in humans, such as cognitive and affective development. Some internal processes, such as motor development, perception, sensation, and cognition, are more biologically hard-wired and may unfold in predictable patterns. However, social identities are much more context-bound and may not follow any "rules" of development.

Another issue has to do with the retrospective nature of most research—asking people with variant sexual or gender identities to recall their childhood, adolescence, or feelings/attitudes that occurred in the past. As humans, we tend to reconstruct our past to make sense of our current situations, and so we may impose an order on our lives that is not actually present. This makes it difficult to understand what the early phases/stages of the process might have been like, as most research has focused on people who have already accepted a sexual or gender identity. Swann and Anastas (2003) tried to capture data from young women who were earlier in the developmental process, and they identified three dimensions of lesbian identity. The early phase seemed to be associated with consideration of new identity possibilities, and the later phases were associated with identity consolidation and stigma management.

3.5 Need to Disclose

Goffman (1963) noted that "because of the great rewards in being considered normal, almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent" (p. 74). The individual sees how society treats those who are discredited, such as racial minorities, and may choose not to expose oneself to such pain. Disclosure is not a simple matter of being in or out of the closet. LGBT people are out to some but not to others; out in some situations but not in others (Eliason & Schope, 2001; Schope, 2002). Disclosure is a complicated phenomenon. Schope (2004) reported that some gay men who were closeted did report experiencing less discrimination—realistically, withholding disclosure can be safer. As Fassinger and Miller (1996) suggested, "disclosure is so profoundly influenced by contextual oppression that to use it as an index of identity development directly forces the victim to take responsibility for his or her own victimization" (p. 56). Examples of groups or individuals who may have same-sex relationships or different gender identities and not publicly disclose them may include older individuals who were socialized to consider "passing" as a sign of identity competence (Grossman, 1997; Rosenfeld, 1999); members of racial/ethnic groups who need the support of their families and communities to sustain them in a racist world (Loiacano, 1989; Conerly, 1996; Rosario et al., 2004); and deeply religious individuals whose churches would reject them if they disclosed or whose religious value systems cannot incorporate an LGBT identity (Yarhouse, 2001).

3.6 Rigidity of Labels

Kristin Esterberg (1997) noted, "identities are coercive; they pin people down in both intended and unintended ways . . . identities are accompanied by a freight of social baggage, some of which—perhaps for some women, much of which—may be undesired" (p. 170). She pointed out that identities provide an anchor for some women, a stability and a social validation they need. Identities are particularly useful for political organizing. A main challenge to postmodern theory has been its lack of any solid foundation for political organizing around gender and sexuality (Beemyn & Eliason, 1996). However, for the individual, identities can be restrictive. Paula Rust (1993, 1996b) pointed out the fluidity of sexual identification, particularly in women, as they move between lesbian and bisexual identities. She argued, contrary to stage model theorists, that identity flexibility is more psychologically healthy than identity stability. Rigid identification does not allow adaptations to changes in one's "sexual landscape."

3.7 Role of Other Cultural Identities

Many individuals have dual or multiple social identities that intersect in diverse ways. Those other social identities may involve belief systems that view gender and sexuality differently than Eurocentric Western world views. For example, the term "two-spirit," adopted at a conference in 1990 as a "pan-Indian" term that encompasses both contemporary forms of gender and sexualities in Native American people and traditions of multiple gender and sexuality categories. The term privileges the spiritual aspect of life over the sexual (Jacobs et al., 1997). The term was deliberately selected to distance from non-Native American LGBT individuals who view gender and sexuality differently, although the term does not have universal acceptance.

Other writers have discussed various cultural differences in LGBT identities, such as how butch/femme identities are expressed in Asian American women (Lee, 1996), and how African Americans answer the question, "Are you black first or gay?" (Conerly, 1996). Conerly noted that "there are a multiplicity of potentially valuable black lesbigay identities, rather than just one 'right' one" (p. 141). These, and other authors, discuss the impact of race, class, gender, (dis)ability, and other factors on the development of sexual identities, noting that a model that describes only sexual identity formation in isolation of these other cultural identities is bound to be limiting (Chan, 1989; Espin, 1987; Alonso & Koreck, 1993; Eliason, 1996a; Rosario et al., 2004; Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999). Some cultural values that may affect how an individual defines or expresses his or her gender and/or sexuality may include whether the culture focuses on the individual or the group (family or larger group); how acceptable it is to talk openly about sexuality; the degree of separation of public and private realms; the social organization and definitions of gender; the role of religion within their own culture; and the degree of assimilation into the dominant society (Rust, 1996a).

4 Conclusions and Future Directions

Stage theories have been very popular among human service profes-
sionals, such as teachers, social workers, and psychologists who work
with LGBT individuals because they provide guidelines for what inter-
ventions the individual in therapy may need. They are simplifications
of complex developmental processes. However, rigid linear stage
models are unlikely to apply to all or even most LGBT people. What
are the potential effects on clients in emotional distress who learn
that they did not even "come out" right according to the therapist's
favorite stage model? How can the challenges to linear stage models
be addressed in ways that are still helpful to treatment providers who
must deal with real-world concerns of people who choose to use the
labels of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender or some variation of
these terms? Instead of using linear stage theories, the best parts of
these stage models could be combined to produce a series of processes
or common themes that individuals may or may not experience at
some point in their identity evolution. Identity formation is a lifelong
process, rather than some discrete event with a clear beginning, middle,
and endpoint. Some potential themes of identity evolution are pre-
sented below as a starting point for developing a more flexible and
inclusive, nonlinear model of sexual and gender identity formation.

Differences: Many LGBT people report feeling "different" as children
or adolescents. However, the difference can take many forms such as
gender atypical interests, not feeling like they fit into any peer group,
or not meeting parents' or society's expectations. A common experi-
ence is a lack of language to describe the difference. Feeling different
often results in alienation and isolation.

Confusion: Many LGBT people report feeling confused at some point.
The confusion can be because of incongruence between internal feel-
ings and how one is perceived by others, and/or it can be related to
gender-role behaviors, physical appearance, sexual or emotional attrac-
tions, mannerisms (such as the way one moves one's hands). Confu-
sion can be an unsettling emotional state.

Exploration: Individuals use many methods of identity comparison to
others in the mainstream or to those with sexual/gender minority iden-
tities, including reading, surfing the Internet, using chat rooms, cruis-
ing for sex, joining a social support group or political organization,
watching pornography, trying out new hair styles, experimenting with
clothing choices, hanging out in gay neighborhoods or bars, learning
to ride a motorcycle, or practicing walking in high heels. There are no
right or wrong ways to explore, but some forms of exploration carry
greater risks than others, for example unsafe sexual practices and
making one's difference more obvious to others, which increases risk
for violence.

Disclosure: All LGBT people must make some conscious decisions
about whether to disclose information about their gender or sexuality
to others, and they must consciously weigh the risks and benefits of

disclosure in each new situation. The costs of disclosure may be too great. For example, some racial/ethnic minority LGBT people need the support of their families and/or racial/ethnic communities to survive and do not risk disclosure of sexual/gender identities. The adolescent who still depends on family emotional and financial support may not be able to risk rejection. These decisions must be respected. Disclosure decisions can be separate from internal identity processes.

Labeling: Some individuals ultimately decide on an identity label such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, whereas others choose queer, genderqueer, fluid, kinky, two-spirit, or other designation; or they refuse to engage in labeling at all. There is no empirical evidence that adopting a label for one's gender or sexuality is more psychologically healthy than not adopting a label. Labels are culture-bound concepts. Whereas white mainstream individuals may use, and find comfort in, labels such as gay and lesbian, others may not relate to these terms at all.

Cultural Immersion: Some individuals who live in sufficiently large cities may immerse themselves in LGBT communities. Although commonly reported in identity models, this option is not available to most LGBT people, who must live in many worlds and communities. Rather than cultural immersion, some individuals may experience cognitive and emotional immersion in their identities that manifests as a preoccupation with identity issues. James Marcia (1987), describing adolescent identity, suggested that people often enter an intense period of thinking about identity options (moratorium) before adopting an identity. One problem that can arise is when the psychological establishment mislabels this immersion as "egocentric," "narcissistic personality disorder," or some other pathologic condition without examining the context in which the preoccupation occurs.

Distrust of the Oppressor: Part of developing a political awareness of sexual and gender identities involves recognizing the role of oppression on the group and the individual. Many individuals react with anger, distrust, disappointment, or rejection of groups that have acted in a discriminatory way toward them. LGB people in general may distrust heterosexuals; transgender and bisexual individuals may distrust gays and lesbians; LGBT people of color may distrust white LGBT individuals; lesbians may distrust gay men; and so on. The oppressor and the oppressed are changing social phenomenon, dependent on context. Of course, it is possible to develop a personal sexual or gender identity without a group membership or political identity at all and not recognize the impact of societal oppression.

Degree of Integration: Although most identity models end with integration of sexual identity into the personality as a seamless whole, the reality is that our social circumstances change constantly; and experiences of oppression, discrimination, and violence may trigger the privileging of certain identities at certain times. To be acutely aware of one's sexual identity when a string of murders of LGBT people has occurred is normal. For LGBT people of color, racism may be a much

stronger force in their lives, leading to a privileging of racial identity. For some women, sexism is the salient factor. All people have multiple intersecting identities, and full integration all the time is unrealistic. Most people, however, seek validation of all parts of their identity and do not want to be seen as only one facet of who they are.

Internalized Oppression: All members of stigmatized groups are exposed to negative stereotypes and internalize them to some degree. Overcoming the effects of racism, sexism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, and so on, are lifelong processes in many people's lives. Assisting clients to recognize that some of their problems are due to systemic oppression (developing a political consciousness) often helps to relieve the guilt, shame, anxiety, and fear about personal responsibility for victimization. The political awareness is empowering.

Managing Stigma: LGBT people must learn to negotiate their social contexts. Attitudes about LGBT people are influenced by many types and degrees of stigma, which may vary considerably in an individual's life or over time. For example, attitudes in the general public are influenced by beliefs about whether sexuality is chosen. Public opinion polls show a positive correlation between the belief that sexuality is chosen and homophobic attitudes. Other public discourses that shape attitudes are notions of sick/healthy, unnatural/natural, abnormal/normal, and secrecy/openness. A given individual may experience more of one type of attitude in the family, another in the military, and yet another in the streets outside the gay bar. In addition, the individual's personal beliefs about the causation of gender or sexuality may influence their own identity processes. Those who believe they were "born this way" seem to offer more coherent, continuous stories of having always been LGBT and learning to come to grips with it. Those who believe they chose their gender or sexuality may offer more discontinuous narratives, with more heterosexual and gender-conforming behavior in their younger days.

Identity Transformation: Change is difficult for individuals and their social networks no matter the direction of the change, whether from heterosexual to gay, from lesbian to bisexual, from bisexual to transgender, or more controversially from gay to heterosexual. Although there is no evidence that reparative therapies are effective in changing one from gay to straight, there are individuals who do perceive that their sexuality changed. As Paula Rust (1996b) noted, changes in our sexual landscapes do occur; and to be psychologically healthy we must learn to adapt to these changes.

Authenticity: For many individuals, the identity formation process means moving from a position of hiding, secrecy, and denying to being able to fully accept and express oneself. That expression of authenticity may involve the choice of sexual and/or life partners, dressing or appearing the way one feels inside, or choosing hobbies, jobs, and interests according to one's likes and dislikes rather than the expectations of family or society. Living in an authentic manner does not

necessarily require labeling oneself in any particular way but follows the philosophy "to thine own self be true."

We have provided a critique of linear stage models that have appeared in the social science literature since the mid-1970s and explored the challenges to these theories. Stage models have been enormously valuable during the early years of LGBT studies by beginning to explore how sexual and gender identities may form. These linear stage models are less useful, however, as the field evolves. We have presented an approach that blends the best of the stage model theories with the critiques they have engendered, proposing that sexual and gender identity formation is a highly individual process with many components. Recognition of these diverse components allows a more flexible identity model that can adapt to the changing times. Research using these themes could explore how often they present overall or in specific subsets of the LGBT population. Perhaps some themes are more often found in biologic women's identity development and others cluster together for male-to-female transgenders. Maybe some aspects of the themes are developmental and/or linear in nature, whereas others are tied to specific life circumstances that can occur at any point.

In conclusion, the impetus toward linear stage models of sexual and gender identities have stimulated interesting and challenging questions about the nature of identities and have been extremely useful to clinicians who work with LGBT clients. We have proposed a way of retaining the best elements of stage models while at the same time addressing some of the more serious challenges to them.

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