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On the Out and Out

Timothy R. Shiner

Several student development theories directly address the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, the Cass model being the most well-known. However, most of these models assume that involvement and integration in the larger gay community is vital to the development of the gay individual. This article explores the flaws in such assumptions through the experiences of one gay man who has not found a home in the gay community and how we, as student affairs professionals, can be of support to similar students.

For gay, lesbian, and bisexual students, college continues to be a time of intense change and challenges. Those within the student affairs community have generally accepted for some time that “coming out,” and the stresses which accompany it, are very likely to occur in college. Though there is evidence that the age of coming out is, on average, decreasing, college continues to be a time where the major identity development of individuals in the traditional 18-22 year-old age bracket takes place. Away from home, amongst new people, and without past expectations, the individual is allowed to explore his or her identity as never before. Thus, regardless of sexual orientation, identity development is a primary task of this age group (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1968).

Several models exist to help professionals understand the identity development of gay individuals that may or may not be as applicable to lesbians and bisexuals. I briefly present two of those models here. Vivienne Cass (1979) continues to hold the largest influence over how we think about minority sexual orientation identity. In her model of Homosexual Identity Formation, the individual begins in a state of *identity confusion* where they first become aware of thoughts and feelings which are different than the heterosexual norm. This stage is often accompanied with feelings of confusion and anxiety, though a more positive reaction to newly identified feelings is possible. In the second stage, *identity comparison*, the individual begins to accept that she or he may be lesbian or gay and to consider the potential societal consequences of identifying as such. The individual may begin to seek out other gay and lesbian people at this time to learn what it means to be gay or lesbian. Next, the individual moves into *identity tolerance*. During this stage, he or she may seek out other gay and lesbian people to reduce feelings of isolation. Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito (1998), in their description of this model, note that, “The nature of this contact can determine how individuals come to feel about themselves and their newfound identity” (p. 93). Thus, if individuals find like-minded friends and role models in the gay community, they are more likely to come to view themselves in a positive light. However, if they find frequent conflict or discrepancy between themselves and the community, they are likely to struggle with their own self-image.

In the fourth stage of Cass’s model, *identity acceptance*, a positive connotation is placed on homosexual identity, contacts with other gay and lesbian people increase, and the individual begins to decide how to present themselves in a heterosexual society. Next, the individual moves to *identity pride*, in which they minimize contact with heterosexuals and become immersed in the gay community. In this stage they may display anger at things which are outside this community such as heterosexuals who hold hands in public or the definition of heterosexual marriage as the only type of legitimate relationship. These individuals are privately and publicly “out.” Finally, the individual may move into *identity synthesis* in which their homosexual identity becomes integrated in their larger identity and they begin to judge people as individuals based on their behavior rather than based on their sexual orientation.

Another model, which has failed to achieve Cass-like prominence but may be more relevant to some students, is the Inclusive Model of Lesbian/Gay Identity Formation proposed by McCarn and Fassinger (1996). Their model resembles the Cass Model in its basic flow of development, however, it is reduced to four stages: *awareness, exploration, deepening/commitment, and internalization/synthesis*. The basic concepts are the same, however, this model separates out individual and community-based identity and does not make one dependent on the

other. Thus, an individual could be at synthesis with their individual identity, but only at exploration with the community.

Most student affairs professionals would agree that these models and other identity development models are intended to inform and guide practice, rather than to provide infallible answers or to box students in. However, when we view our practice with these models, we inevitably make some assumptions about how we should interact with students and what the best ways to support them will be. Wall and Washington (1991), in their look at gay and lesbian students of color, wrote that there is always “at least one stage of complete separation from and rejection of the dominant society” (p. 69). This notion, explicit in Wall and Washington and implied in Cass, is one of the primary assumptions made by student affairs professionals in regards to gay, lesbian, and bisexual students.

When one considers the Cass model in light of the alternative provided by McCarn and Fassinger, several questions arise in regard to the above assumption. Most important, in my mind, are those students for whom the Cass model is inappropriate. There are inevitably students who, for one reason or another, do not wish to be involved in the gay community. They may be frightened or unwilling to fully accept their identity. However, they may also be getting the support they need elsewhere and developing a healthy identity through other means, as the McCarn and Fassinger model informs us. Additionally, there are students who may seek out existing gay communities and find that those communities are not supportive or, for one reason or another, that the individual is not welcome there. Both of these students present student affairs professionals with situations they may not be prepared to address. I believe those responsible for creating gay communities on campus and their allies need to rethink the inclusiveness of their communities, and more importantly, need to challenge themselves to consider new ways to support gay and lesbian students.

Out and Outside: My Own Experience

As an out gay man working with a variety of social justice issues, including anti-heterosexist causes, over the past four years I am also both of the students described above. My experience is that of a gay man. As such, my points are limited to the experiences of gay men. My language will reflect this, though I hope that some questions will be raised for how to support lesbian and bisexual students as well. In addition, my early involvement was limited to gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) groups and I do not exclude transgender issues for any reason except that they were not involved in my own experiences until later. Finally, I use the term “gay community” to describe the general campus and town community I have encountered. I recognize that there are many different communities which are primarily comprised of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) individuals and do not wish to imply the existence of an overarching, monolithic community.

In a slightly stereotypical fashion, I had been at my undergraduate institution about three weeks before I came out for the first time, to a friend I had only just met. She provided me with the support she was capable of and for that I am ever grateful. I continued to come out to those with whom I lived and worked over the next several months and by the beginning of my sophomore year I was out to anyone who would listen. I never went through an extensive immersion in all things gay such as Cass’ *identity pride* stage would suggest. However, I did begin to actively seek out social justice movements, both related and unrelated to GLB issues. Though I was not involved in a GLB organization or any other GLB focused event, I found ample opportunity to explore my identity with heterosexual friends and colleagues and was quite happy with my identity overall.

In October of that year, living less than an hour away from Laramie, Wyoming, I heard of the beating of Matthew Shepard and the subsequent days were frightening and extremely taxing for me. A new GLBT Student Services office, scheduled to open in the spring semester, opened instead, under emergency status to respond to the needs of students affected by Matthew’s murder. I knew the director of the office as I was a resident assistant at the time and she was transitioning from a position in residence life to this new office. Feeling the need to do something, I went to her and volunteered to work in the office a few hours a week, hoping that my increased involvement in the gay community would help me to deal with the tragedy that had occurred and my own emotions. Over the next two years I became “knowledgeable” in the theory and practice of supporting GLBT students. During my two years working in the GLBT Student Services office, I coordinated the speaker’s bureau program, helped to organize a regional conference, guest lectured on gay

identity development and homophobia in several courses, and met the general public as they came to the office seeking resources. I did, in many ways, become immersed in this community.

I gained many things from my time working with the office, not the least of which were confidence as a speaker, organizational skills, and friendships with many of my co-workers. However, I continued to find the environment slightly uncomfortable and often found a better-fitting support system outside the gay community. Gay men in particular left me feeling uncomfortable. Though promiscuity, a primary stereotype of gay men, did not seem any more prevalent than in our heterosexual peers, a sexualization of general interactions did seem more prevalent. It was not that there was more sex in the gay male community, but sex as a general theme in conversation, sexual punch lines in jokes, and other forms of sexual innuendo seemed the preferred and most comfortable form of interaction for many gay men. When I viewed films which showed groups of gay male friends or read fiction and magazines related to gay male experiences, sex was, and continues to be, almost always prominent. Browning (1993) celebrates this sexualization in his book, *The Culture of Desire*, noting the many benefits resulting from the subversive nature of putting our sexuality in the public. One could open his book to almost any page and find the overt sexual stories that he defines as gay culture. As a young gay male, trying to decide what it meant for me to be gay, I was left with few role models or options in line with my personal beliefs and feelings, but I was unwilling to accept the options I did find. I sought to understand why this sexualized community seemed the only one available.

Through this seeking, I found many theories as to the sexualization of the gay community. Historically, a relationship between two men was near impossible due to the legal and societal consequences of being a known homosexual. A mere four decades ago, the only way to experience intimacy was through casual sexual encounters guarded by complete secrecy (Jennings, 1994). One theory is that this historical behavior has carried over, to some degree, to today's gay community. Though the same level of secrecy is no longer needed, a historical echo exists and the community may be reduced to sex and only sexual discussions.

In addition, as gay individuals are frequently forced to hide this aspect of their identity, it seems only appropriate that discussions of sex appear in a disproportionate quantity when gay men gather in a safe space. When, as a gay man, I am rarely allowed to talk about sex in the common casual way that heterosexual young adults do, without risking a negative reaction, I am, perhaps, more likely to release this hidden part of myself when with others who will understand. Gay (and lesbian and bisexual) young adults may also be eagerly seeking intimate relationships just like many of their heterosexual peers. However, expressing interest in a potential partner is also a risky endeavor in the general world. When gay individuals gather in groups, this flirtatious, relationship-seeking behavior thus seems ever present, as there are few other places to safely explore potential relationships. When one is forced to ignore the body's need for sleep, he or she will collapse into sleep when finally allowed to do so. Likewise, my peers, forced to ignore this basic human emotion during its young adult high, broke into it rampantly when it was finally safe. The basic functions of oppression thus contribute to the condition of the gay male community as well.

Finally, it occurred to me that there were surely many others, like me, who were uninterested in this type of sexualized environment. They, too, did not feel that they fit in the traditional gay community. They, like me, may have decided not to be involved beyond an educational level or not to be involved at all. As an invisible minority, their existence is therefore kept hidden and these men have a difficult time finding one another to form a different type of gay community. As I came to better understand these historical and oppression-related reasons for the prevalence of sexualization in the gay male community, my feelings about the community grew more positive.

However, these theories and explanations provided me with little solace as I sought my own place within the gay community. In fact, I began to feel more trapped by my understanding than before. I did not want to take away the one safe space my peers had or ask them to repress what they had to repress in every other situation. These communities were important for that reason. But as they were, the communities systematically excluded those who were looking for something else and we had no way to find one another elsewhere. No amount of understanding would allow me to find the support I was seeking. I was in a trap created by many forces and I could not find a way out on my own. I began to separate myself from the gay community and instead sought support from straight allies and friends.

I fully acknowledge that I was responsible on some level for this separation. However, it is equally important to note how unpopular my views on the gay community were and continue to be. Understandably, my direct assertion that the gay community was fixated on sex was upsetting to many, especially before I understood its importance. However, even when I sought to move past this situation, to delve for something different, I was often met with anger and resistance. I became less welcome with some who felt that this was the only outlet for their sexuality. I believe that as a pattern of behavior and norms developed in this safe space, people became unable to see different possibilities. Seeking out other groups seemed futile as they consistently seemed to have the same characteristics.

A pattern of repetition seemed to make impossible any other alternative. It seemed that many gay men sought out these communities as a place to express what they were otherwise asked to hide and indirectly reinforced their gay identity as a purely sexual identity in the process. After a time this norm became set in stone. I recall sitting with a group of gay men that was convened to discuss mentoring in the gay male community and one group member commenting that he could not be a mentor because he felt uncomfortable discussing his sex life with students. He, like so many, has been taught to ignore the possibility that the many facets of his life are interconnected and that his gay identity is not inseparable from sex. Thus, to him and many others, to discuss what it means to be gay could only mean discussing his sex life. When I have challenged this attitude, searching for a more multifaceted way of viewing myself and my peers, I have frequently been met with negative reactions and thus felt even more outside the gay community.

Some authors even want to deny me the right to call myself gay. Frank Browning (1993), for example, writes on page one of his book, "Though homosexuality is everywhere, gayness has been and remains mostly an urban phenomenon." He implies that gay individuals who do not live in gay ghettos and fully participate in "gay life" are not really gay, but merely homosexual. I thought they were synonyms. But for Browning, and the men he spoke to in his research, to be gay means to embrace that, "gay men's obsession with sex, far from being denied, should be celebrated" (p. 91). Browning's assertion is far from out of the ordinary.

As such, I have never felt truly part of any gay community and I have had to create healthy support systems and identity in other ways. Whereas the Cass model would assume that I would be fixated at lower stages of development because of my lack of involvement with community, I believe I have come to a very healthy place. In my own assessment, I am quite comfortable being a gay man. I have sought to define what that means for me and I am out in all aspects of my life. I do frequently question what I have missed out on by being separated from a community of people like me, by choosing mostly heterosexuals as my support system, but I cannot change these aspects of my development. My story, I believe, is far more characteristic of McCarn and Fallinger's model of identity formation than of that described by Cass.

The larger issue, as mentioned above, is thus twofold. First, how do we create more inclusive communities and opportunities for discussions, which allow differing views to be expressed, and thus different types of relationships to develop? Secondly, how do we support students who do not feel comfortable in the gay community, due to their own choice, rejection from the community, or some combination of the two factors?

Meeting the needs of the Out and Out

Suzanne Pharr (1996) writes that it does not "follow from the thrownness of group affinity that one cannot define the meaning of group identity for oneself; those who identify with a group can redefine the meaning and norms of group identity" (p. 27). Thrownness, she says, is that state where "one finds oneself as a member of a group, which one experiences as always already having been" (p. 26). This is a very important set of quotes for the gay individual. Thrownness is important because the gay individual should know that they are not alone in their emotional orientation. There is a history, political and social, of which they are a part. More importantly, and an idea I believe we have not given enough credence to, is that the individual may redefine the group for their current time and should this fail, must be given the right to define what it means for them to belong to that group identity. I am gay, but what that means is different for me. Although we have common experiences, self-identity is different for every gay person. We need to allow these differing experiences to be part of the group, rather than asking them to be checked at the door.

One of the primary ways, I believe, we can move to supporting GLB students more fully in their identity development is to stop thinking of their identity as solely a sexual one. Recent works have suggested replacing sexual orientation with the term affectional orientation. The change implies that one's identity as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual has more to do with emotion (affect) than it does with sex. This is especially relevant to GLB persons for though heterosexual is a sexual orientation, one thinks of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals far more often when the term is used. Their psychological, emotional, physical, and sexual attraction to members of their own sex is thus reduced to the sexual. In addition, emotion has far less of a negative connotation than sex. Many heterosexuals may describe their discomfort with gay people when they are really uncomfortable with gay sex. They, like some of the gay men I have described, are unable to dissociate sexual orientation from sex and no doubt the term sexual orientation does not help. Affectional may still be a box, but it is a larger box with more space to move and define oneself.

I also believe that gay male faculty and staff need to work harder to provide a variety of role models for students. The more role models a student has, the more they will see that there are many ways to be gay. However, I struggle with this responsibility as I feel it is in some ways a further oppression to expect someone to be a role model. Deborah Waire Post (1995) believes that "a rejection that takes the form of lack of participation in the life of the community is defined as inauthenticity" (p. 420). Inauthenticity, she goes on to say, is a form of dishonesty and is thus unethical. "Abandoning people who depend on you or are members of your community is immoral" (p. 421). Post thus establishes a moral and ethical responsibility for role modeling. I would not go as far as Post as I believe people have choice, however, her writing inspires me to examine why I have chosen to separate myself from the community and to consider whether or not my reasons are sufficient when the costs to current youth are weighed.

Most importantly, I believe that allies to the gay community within the field of student affairs need to move past referral. Referral to GLBT student groups or support offices is a helpful way to get students connected to the community. However, the ally must also provide the student with other options. Does the ally know people across campus, who are not active in the gay community, who can provide support and alternatives to the dominant paradigm? Is the ally able to ask the student, what do you think it means to be gay? Is the ally then able to follow-up by saying that being gay means that your primary emotional, physical, and sexual attractions are toward the same sex— it means little else, unless you find you want it to? Allies must support students in seeing themselves as self-defined.

Finally, there is little in our literature as a field which addresses the differences within the gay community. Many viewpoints are surely available, however those who do not fit in the dominant viewpoint, I imagine, have traditionally written about topics other than GLBT issues. In addition, there are added difficulties in surveying and studying the experiences of gay individuals. Those students who are readily available and willing to participate in such studies are usually those students who are involved in gay communities. Thus, it seems inherent that they would identify such communities as important. This is a difficult obstacle when surrounding an issue that requires such confidentiality and sensitivity. These difficulties, however, do not absolve us from delving deeper. A diversity of perspectives will not only help us better to understand that there is no monolithic gay, but also will help us to better see the humanity of these students.

Internalized Oppression and Horizontal Violence

I understand, in many ways, the reasons why my expectations have been fulfilled whenever I enter a group of gay men, not the least of which is the fact that I do, at times, expect the worst. Many of the other reasons were explicated above when I discussed my personal story. However, I feel it is only fair to acknowledge some additional possibilities. Though I feel these are not the reasons for my personal feelings, I must accept that some will view these reasons as plausible and I must continue to examine their validity.

The most relevant of these reasons is internalized oppression. I, like all gay and straight individuals, have learned the stereotypes, lessons, and negative perceptions of gay people in our society. In addition, I was certainly raised to believe that being gay was wrong. Though I feel I have confronted many of these stereotypes and have deconstructed the messages I have learned, it is possible that my discomfort with the gay community and subsequent separation from it is due to my own internalized oppression. I may be projecting negative feelings and learnings on my peers unconsciously.

It is also important for me to note that others may perceive my reactions as a form of horizontal violence. It is well documented that within oppressed communities, members will seek to attack one another in place of attacking the dominant group, as an attack on the dominant group holds greater risks. I acknowledge that this, too, may be a possible reason, unconsciously, for my discomfort and professed feelings. However, I have actively confronted the dominant community as well as the gay community on the stereotypes and oppressions of gay people. My actions do not seem to support this theory. I cannot, however, discount it outright and must continue to examine this possibility. My hope is that I will not diminish the experience or needs of other gay individuals who do find great support and comfort in the gay community and that my desire to create a more expansive community will not be a form of horizontal violence.

Conclusion

In another world, being gay might be entirely about intimate relationships. To me, at my current stage of development, my sexuality is my own business and my discussion of sex with others is reserved for rare occasions and not for casual discussion. The society in which we live has based many things on my sexuality and thus my gay identity has expanded. My sexuality will remain private. For me, in this world, being out and gay means that I have empathy for other "others," that I am politicized, that I must examine my friendships and familial relationships in different ways, that I must examine the way difference cuts across difference, that I must worry about my safety. It means, most basically, that I must define myself or risk being defined. I cannot just be. My choices about my limits and my expression of those have left me outside the gay community. I am out and out. My goal is to be many things and to be seen as such. If the student affairs field is to support students like me, we must hear more stories of difference for there are more available. As we hear more stories of difference we will redefine, as a field, what it means to be gay (or lesbian or bisexual) and be able to produce more inclusive communities. In the meantime, we must encourage young gay individuals to define for themselves what it means to be gay, even in the absence of role models and alternatives. This is no easy task, but it is one that is worthwhile. All of the students we encounter will be more wholly themselves, richer, fuller, and more human, when self-defined.

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