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Exploring Gay Identity Development and Support on a College Campus

Communities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other groups related to sexual orientation and gender identity (LGBT) are gaining a noticeable presence on college campuses. Colleges and universities are becoming ideal places for students to explore their identities and also find others who similarly identify. As these students come to college and encounter people with varying levels of awareness and acceptance towards the LGBT culture, it is becoming more imperative that institution staff and faculty are aware of these issues to support students. LGBT students face high levels of harassment and discrimination both on campus and in their larger communities, both before and after coming out. College campuses are a breeding ground for new ideas to form and acceptance of diversity to grow. As students go through the process of becoming a part of the LGBT community, they are in need of support from their university community.

College years are a crucial time for people exploring their sexuality and finding their place in the LGBT community. Students frequently come out during their college years by either changing or solidifying their previously perceived sexuality (Evans and Broido 658). Many students, regardless of their identity, come to college with some goal of finding themselves or reinventing themselves. What differs for gay students is that they must also consider the environment they are in before coming out and publicly

acknowledging their identity (Stevens 186). Students must watch out for homophobia and heterosexism present on campus and consider their safety before coming out. Beyond the college environment, gay students must consider their community surroundings. No one is solely in a college environment, which could be perceived as more accepting than most, but also in an environment that includes a town and state that might not be as accepting (Stevens 202). The harassment these students face creates the need for institutional support.

Students in a less-than-accepting environment for their gay identity can struggle academically and socially while in college. When students are faced with harassment because of their LGBT identity, they are often prevented from achieving their full academic potential and from participating fully in campus activities (Rankin 17). While many might consider colleges to be some of the most accepting areas in the country, research on campus' homophobic tendencies shows otherwise. Over 70 percent of faculty, students, administration, and staff from several institutions described their campuses as homophobic (Rankin 19). As a result, students can expect and predict that they will be faced with harassment if they come out as gay to their campus community (D'Augelli 392). Creating a positive climate that accepts diversity is an important mission for institutions of higher education.

This exploration will primarily look at gay male students and their experiences coming out and living gay while in college. A handful of theories have been posited regarding gay identity development and this paper will explore some of them briefly and will then go in-depth on one theory and apply other research to support it. While men will be the focus, the theory could apply to women and non-binary LGBT people as well,

though there are some differences worth noting. Gay men tend to experience greater levels of verbal harassment from non-family members as well as more physical violence (Berrill 280). Lesbian women, on the contrary, experience more verbal harassment from family and face more discrimination than gay men (Berrill 280). Furthermore, gay men are more likely to be victimized in a school or publicly-identified gay area, such as a gay bar or neighborhood; lesbian women are more likely to be victimized in non-gay areas such as parks or restaurants and in the home (Berrill 280). As a result, gay men are more desirable of a target audience for this exploratory research given that it focuses on the college environment and how the LGBT community can be supported by university staff.

Before introducing the main study of this exploration, it is important to first address some preceding theories and their flaws to understand how it connects. First, dating back to the 1970s and 1980s, the Cass theory consisted of six stages: a) identity confusion, b) identity comparison, c) identity tolerance, d) identity acceptance, e) identity pride, and f) identity synthesis (Stevens 185). This linear progression was thought to be linear and primarily focused on a person's self-acceptance of their identity and ending with the integration of their gay identity with their own identities, such as race or religion. The Troiden theory, coming in the late 1980s, worked off of Cass to create a 4 stage model of similar steps but adding there could be a "spiral movement" back and forth between the stages (Stevens 185). Finally, and separate from the previous two, the D'Augelli theory uses six stages once again but notes that they are achieved over one's life span rather than in a few months or years (Stevens 185). These theories, though varied, laid the groundwork for a later theory to be developed on gay identity development.

Richard Allen Stevens developed a conceptual model of gay identity developed that is not linear, but is not a spiral or simple motion either. Stevens' model acknowledges the complexity of beginning to understand one's gay identity and therefore says that there are multiple ways to move through the model and even multiple areas at which to begin moving through the stages. The conceptual model consists of a central theme, finding empowerment, and five integrative categories that are connected to each other and to the central category: a) self-acceptance, b) disclosure to others, c) individual factors, d) environmental influences, and e) multiple identities (Stevens 191). Each of the five categories have implications in a college environment and the support a gay student receives from institution staff can impact their ability to reach the central category and find empowerment within their identity.

The first category, self-acceptance, is where most would find themselves entering the model, though Stevens acknowledges that does not have to be the case. Self-acceptance is acknowledging and beginning to incorporate one's gay identity into everyday life (Stevens 191). This step does not include coming out to others, which is another category by itself, but instead mostly involves recognizing that being gay is possible and accepting that it is okay. One gay student in Stevens' research said he thought it was "just a phase" and "part of sexual exploration" (191). This was a common theme found in this category and therefore underscores the importance of peers and mentors accepting the idea of being gay, even if you do not know that a particular person is in fact a part of the community. Positive, supportive experiences increased comfort in gay individuals in the self-acceptance stage (Stevens 191). As students feel more

comfortable with their own identity, they will move on to exploring the other categories, including coming out to others.

While self-acceptance can begin before a student comes to a college campus, the second category, disclosure to others, is one that frequently occurs while a student is in college. Disclosing to others is either the verbal or written acknowledgement of being gay (Stevens 193). The importance of a safe, accepting environment is seen here because gay students first assess their environment to determine when, how, or even if they will disclose their identity to others (Stevens 202). Due to the high rates of harassment and violence targeting the LGBT community, gay students rarely focus on coming out to the general heterosexual community whether it is on a college campus or not (Evans and Broido 662). Students do, however, tend to prefer coming out to those who are also a part of the LGBT community to reduce their fear of rejection (Stevens 193). Herein lies the necessity of having LGBT faculty and staff members present on campus for students to reach out to if they choose to disclose their identity. Coming out as a gay person is not a single step process either and that also has implications for how staff work with this community.

Gay students will often come out to various groups in their life at different times. Family members are seldom the first people a gay student will disclose to, unless there is a family member that is also in the LGBT community (Stevens 193). When staff find themselves dealing with a student's family in either professional or casual interaction, they should be careful to not "out" the student before the student is ready. Additionally, students who have accepted their identity and perhaps disclosed to a few people but not the broader campus community might find themselves in need of additional support.

Students who have not disclosed experience guilt, anxiety, loneliness, and isolation and also tend to report thoughts of suicide, self-doubt, and self-hatred (Evans and Broido 659). This should raise a red flag for any staff member working with these students. Particular groups of staff that should be aware of the needs of students who are in the process of coming out are those working in the residence halls.

A student's residence hall community adds another group to the list of who a student wants to come out to and that includes their roommate. Coming out to the roommate, no matter what their own sexual orientation is, presents challenges for the gay student (Evans and Broido 662). If the roommate is not accepting of the gay lifestyle, there can be complications in the living environment and even threats of harm from the roommate. Despite the risks, coming out to a roommate is important for a gay student due to the frequency of being around that person and wanting to be able to be out in one's own room. Residence hall staff should be knowledgeable on the LGBT community and prepared to facilitate difficult conversations post-disclosure. While other students, including roommates, have been found to be the most frequent harassers of gay students (D'Augelli 390), there are still benefits to coming out. Disclosing one's gay identity to others allows a gay student to develop the important support network they need to continue their process of finding empowerment.

The third category, individual factors, is heavily rooted in finding strong support networks as well as assessing personal liabilities in being gay. Gay students will first consider their feelings of rejection, invisibility, and isolation even after disclosing to others (Stevens 194). Students often feel like they are the "only gay person" on campus after coming out, which is why it is important to develop support networks to counter

those feelings of isolation (Stevens 196). When a student comes out to a staff or faculty member, that trusted mentor should connect them with groups and peers that can support them in their new identity and help them continue to be successful despite the hurdles ahead of them. One student reported that "it was not until I started developing more gay relationships and friendships that I realized I need them" (Stevens 194). The student also said that support groups "helped" and "strengthened" him in his process (Stevens 194). As students become more out on campus, the environmental influences they once assessed begin to expose themselves for better or worse.

As students disclose to more of the campus community, the harassment and discrimination they face tend to increase as well. The environmental influences in their gay identity, both external and internal to the university, include relationships, locations, signs, symbols, resources, discrimination, and stereotypes present in the community (Stevens 196). A college environment can either be open, hostile, or null toward LGBT students (Stevens 186) – though most campuses tend to fall somewhere on a spectrum in between the three. In one study, 41 percent of students said their college did not thoroughly address issues related to the sexual orientation or gender identity (Rankin 19) and, in another study, 77 percent reported being verbally assaulted with 49 percent of them being assaulted more than once (D'Augelli 387). One environment students must assess is in the classroom.

The primary reason students are on a college campus is to go to class and to get a degree, so negative environments in classrooms towards gay students is a serious issue to address. The greater the trust and power that a student places in an individual equates to a greater influence over the students' life and faculty members tend to possess a lot of

power, if not trust, over students by controlling their grades (Stevens 197). Therefore,

negative comments and actions from faculty can have serious, harmful repercussions on

gay students in their process of development. An instructor's lack of action regarding

other students' behavior in classrooms can also have an impact. Stevens (197) found that

most students believed it is the instructor's responsibility to create a "nurturing

atmosphere" and to confront "homophobic behavior." Stevens also found (187) that

large classes made gay students more wary due not knowing classmates or the professor

as well as in smaller classes. Upper level classes as well as those taught by self-identified

gay instructors were much more desirable for gay students (Stevens 187). In addition to

having present LGBT staff on campus, it is important to have LGBT faculty in as many

departments as possible beyond gender or women's studies courses. Environmental

influences expand beyond the classroom, however, to the campus at large.

Gay students want to feel comfortable and safe where ever they are on campus,

beyond their classrooms and residence halls. Comfort tends to have more to do with the

people in them rather than the actual, physical space of the location (Stevens 197).

Comfort can be increased by displaying symbols of gay pride on doors, wearing of gay

paraphernalia by staff members, and general positivity and support towards gay students

(Stevens 197). While those displays increased feelings of comfort, vandalism and

destruction of gay-related materials and anti-gay actions led to a decrease in comfort and

an overall lesser feeling of safety at the university (Stevens 197). Even if one area of

campus is deemed comfortable for gay students that does not mean all areas are the same.

Each new setting presents a new environment that must be assessed for its influences on

one's gay identity (Stevens 191). That assessment heavily relies on one's current feeling of empowerment.

In line with the idea that this is not a linear model, the central category finding empowerment is often reached in the middle of the model instead of at the end. Stevens presents the central category as next to last, but also acknowledges that it the way one moves through the process can totally vary for each person (Stevens 198). Finding empowerment changes gay men from having inner strength only when certain environmental conditions are met to having inner strength that can weather more various environments and situations (Stevens 198). As gay students become more accepting of their own identity, disclose to more peers and social groups, find their support networks, and learn how to live in their environment, they become more capable of feeling empowered in multiple situations – even new ones. Finding empowerment moves men from simply accepting their identity to embracing it and integrating it into their identity dimension as a whole. This leads gay students to the fifth category, multiple identities, which have implications for the diversity of a campus culture.

A student having multiple identities is the idea that they are complex, diverse people with more than one group with whom they identify. All students, gay and otherwise, can be faced with challenges when incorporating their multiple identities together – race, religion, sexuality, and so on – but gay students face significant hurdles. Gay men in Stevens' study did not always explore the intersection between their identities (199). Due to the smaller number of people that pursue this category and the complexities regarding it, exploring multiple identities is usually a consequence or result of finding empowerment rather than being like the other four categories and leading to

the central category (Stevens 199). For those that do explore how their identities overlap and how they can all exist at once, there are numerous complications and more calls for support from staff.

Students tend to explore the intersection of their multiple identities either due to the prominence of those identities or for the purpose of finding or keeping community. The complication, however, is due to the fact that development of one identity often leads to regression in another (Poynter and Washington 42). Gay students are already faced with harassment and violence, so exposing themselves to non-gay groups with the hope of being included poses additional risks. Rejection, due to the combined power of racism and homophobia, can be incredibly damaging to a gay student (Poynter and Washington 44). Students of color are highly likely, regardless of the risk, to explore the intersection of their sexuality and race (Stevens 199). Gay students of color desire to be a part of both communities but race communities are not always accepting of the LGBT lifestyle. Religion is also a common identity explored by gay students, due to the heavy contradictions between the two groups in many cases (Stevens 199). Not surprisingly, no gay man in Stevens research (199) was able to fully integrate all of their identities.

When sexual orientation, race, and religion collide, finding or creating community can be incredibly difficult. One student, as a result, described community as "something you have to create for yourself" (Poynter and Washington 42) and this should concern professionals. Students cannot be expected to go through this process alone or to find a community on their own, so connecting gay students with the support they need continues to be important on a college campus. Campus administrators can also support students by helping to educate the campus about LGBT issues. Students with multiple

identities, especially multiple minority identities, need to be recognized on campus and the campus needs to provide learning opportunities about this diversity (Poynter and Washington 43). Partnering with religious leaders and multicultural offices can also be beneficial for supporting gay students (Poynter and Washington 46). Furthermore, if a student cannot find a community that they fit with, allowing them to create their own groups with support can be helpful (Rankin 318). These are only a few of the implications of gay identity develop for student services staff; there are many more to be explored.

Many implications for working with gay students have already been explored and mentioned, but there are more to be noted. Stevens (204) provides several possible ideas for how to best support gay students, including: giving staff the opportunity to become more knowledgeable about sexual orientations, including sexualities in definitions of diversity and diversity statements, displaying safe space and supportive signs, having LGBT faculty and staff present on campus, and confronting homophobic behavior to curb harassment and violence toward the LGBT community. Another study also found that students who were involved in leadership roles on campus were "more out" than their gay peers (Renn 317). Nearly all students studied were prompted to be involved by a mentor, advisor, supervisor, or other staff or faculty member (Renn 317). The value of mentoring students, including gay students, cannot be understated.

Mentoring gay students can provide many benefits for the student, including helping them to further develop their gay identity. The struggles gay students face, as seen in Stevens' model, are daunting and having the support of a trusted staff or faculty member can help the student to feel more safe and empowered. Staff members need to

find a way to help students feel more secure in their identities (Evans and Herriott 316).

Mentors on a college campus can play a role in both the individual's development but

also in the group's development – by supporting and challenging the groups a staff

member advises, works with, or is a part of on a regular basis to be more inclusive of

LGBT students (Evans and Herriott 317). The staff member's role goes beyond

supporting the gay community itself but also the campus community as a whole.

Educating the campus about LGBT issues and creating allies on campus among

both students and staff is an important role for college administrators to play. A popular

training program, safe zone or safe space training, exists to educate participants and give

them the opportunity to become allies for the LGBT community. Ally programs first

started gaining popularity on campuses in the 1990s and have grown since (Woodford et

al 317). Campuses can partner with local equality or social justice organizations to

provide resources during the training programs and should adapt the program to their

individual campus needs (Woodford et al 320). As students become more educated on

LGBT issues, it is the desire that they become more tolerant of LGBT people. Research

has posited that an increase in awareness among heterosexual students develops more

positive attitudes about LGBT people and they become more supportive of LGBT rights

(Evans and Herriot 317). As that positive attitude spreads, the campus climate becomes

more open and safe for gay students.

Colleges and universities are breeding grounds for discovering one's sexuality

and other identities as well. As the LGBT student population grows on campuses, it is

becoming more important than ever for university faculty and staff to be aware of these

students' needs and know how to best support them. Students can benefit in many ways

from coming out on a college campus due to the support mechanisms in place, but also

face significant threats as well. University administrators should be aware of these

threats and create a campus environment that is safe and positive toward LGBT people.

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