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The Social Implications of Sexual Identity Formation and the Coming-Out Process: A Review of the Theoretical and Empirical Literature

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Current research on publicly communicating one's sexual orientation (heretofore referred to as "coming-out") and sexual identity formation models are examined within the two prevalent theoretical orientations: essentialism and social constructionism. Aspects of both theories find support in the empirical literature reviewed. Carrion and Lock's stage model of sexual identity formation is described and used as a template. The discovery process will be discussed and three coming-out audiences identified. Relationships between the individual coming out and the identified audiences exist in a dynamic and fluid environment. Data suggest that perceptions of the relationship climate can affect the coming-out process. Implications for family therapists and couples counselors are provided in the conclusion of the article. More research with diverse samples is needed to further understand the process of coming-out and identity formation.

INTRODUCTION: DIALOGUE OF THEORIES

Essentialism

One dichotomy dominating the theoretical and research literature on sexual identity formation is the essentialism versus social constructionism arguments. Having its origins in a biological model, essentialist theories depict homosexual identities as core, fundamental ways of being that are determined either prenatally or in early childhood (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Specifically, this model purports that there are two behavioral expressions of innate sexuality, either homosexuality or heterosexuality. Coming-out "is merely a process of learning to recognize and accept what one was all along" (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995, p. 95). Based on the essentialist position, coming-out consists of the ability to successfully resolve internal struggles with sexuality, leading to internally identify one's sexuality, and finally to come out, or

self-disclose sexual identity (Carrion & Lock, 1997). Supporting an essentialist point of view, Whitman, Daskalos, Sobolewski, and Padilla (1998) stated:

The emergence of lesbian sexuality in childhood without socialization into such behavior suggests an underlying biological basis for this behavior even as attempts by all societies to socialize emerging lesbians into heterosexuality are only partly successful for particular kinds of behavior at certain points in lesbian development. (p. 54)

In a study of self-identified gay Belgian men, Vincke and Bolton (1994) provided a similar account of the internal process of identifying sexuality. The majority of the gay Belgian men in their study reported experiences of discovering both the erotic and emotional attractions to other men despite living in a heterosexist society. Discovering what one already is (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995) leads to a restructuring of identity, and ultimately to the possibility of self-disclosure (Vincke & Bolton, 1994). Essentialist arguments of the coming-out process, often lending support to stage models (Eliason, 1996), consist of universal—though not necessarily linear—stages, or phases. Most stage theories specify developmental tasks the individual must master, understand, or resolve before successive stages can be entered (Carrion & Lock, 1997; Eliason, 1996). Essentialist models propose that coming-out, the ultimate stage, is the external declaration of the internal conflict resolution, resulting in the full identity formation and integration (Carrion & Lock, 1997; Eliason, 1996).

Essentialist models lack the ability to explain the fluid and dynamic nature of sexuality (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Sexuality does not exist in a vacuum but rather in a changeable societal context. Declaring one's sexuality to another creates new dimensions to relationships. Reactions to the disclosure often dictate whether climate of the relationship will

be positive or negative. For instance, parents may at first find it hard to accept their child's homosexual or bisexual identity, only to become more accepting over time (Eliason, 1996). Parental reactions, as well as the reactions of others, may influence the individual's identity, as well as the decision-making process to come out in the future. The internal resolution of sexual struggles alone does not dictate the decision to disclose sexuality to others, especially considering the often harsh and brutal environment one comes out in. Essentialist models assume an ideal coming-out environment, one without intolerance or hostility. It is unrealistic, therefore, to expect that all gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning individuals declare their sexuality publicly. Stage models alone are insufficient in describing a universal coming-out experience.

As it is beyond the scope of this article to review each coming-out model, please refer to Michele Eliason's (1996) article for a thorough review of models influential to both research-oriented and theoretical literature. In contrast to previous stage models, Carrion and Lock's (1997) model defined the coming-out process within an essentialist context while incorporating a developmental schema with biological and psychological components. Fundamentally, their model offers insight into the continually evolving awareness and formation of identities existing in dynamic social contexts (Carrion & Lock, 1997; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Although previous models offered behavioral, social, or cognitive explanations to the coming-out process, Carrion and Lock (1997), having psychodynamic influences, defined "the term coming-out [as having] definitions ranging from the outward expression of one's sexuality to the process by which sexual orientation is incorporated in the individual's identity" (p. 370). Indeed, Vincke and Bolton's (1994) research supported Carrion and Lock's model by defining "coming-out [as] the socially 'visible' part of the development of the gay identity" (p. 1051). Vincke and Bolton's assertion of coming-out in a social context, combined with Carrion and Lock's model, explains the fluidity of sexual identity as the essentialist models do not.

Carrion and Lock's (1997) model consists of eight universal and dynamic stages, moving from internal discoveries and struggles, through self-disclosure, to the eventual integration of a dynamic, fluid relationship with individuals and society. The first stage contains four core emotional experiences fundamental to the process. As evident in the name given to each stage, there is a movement from internal processes to external disclosures. Unique to their stage model is the inclusion of the final two stages, which account for the dynamic nature of identity in society. Identity formation does not stop after coming-out, but in fact continues to develop throughout life. The integrated self may provide a sense of pride through the mutual enrichment of identity between the self and society. Their model is as follows:

Stage 1: Internal discovery of the sexual orientation

- bewilderment: a healthy reaction to confusion
- shame: feeling different is threatening, fears rejection and abandonment
- minimization: diminish or ignore sexual feelings; possibility of bisexuality or testing phase
- denial: bombardment of internal conflicts causes lack of sexual exploration, pass as heterosexual

Stage 2: Inner exploration of attraction to sexual object

- responses dependent on responses from previous stage

Stage 3: Early acceptance of an integrated sexual self

- congruence of self, identity, and sexual orientation

Stage 4: Congruence probing

- sexual behavior or other ways of testing sexual identity
- realization that there are others who are homosexual

Stage 5: Further acceptance of an integrated sexual self

- coming-out to others if and when prior stages are completed

Stage 6: Self-esteem consolidation

- social perceptions versus internal perceptions of self

Stage 7: Mature formation of an integrated self-identity

- acceptance of identity fosters pride

Stage 8: Integrated self-identity within a social context

- mutual enrichment process between self and society (p. 373)

As Carrion and Lock's (1997) model is relatively new to the coming-out literature, there are no references made to their model in any of the literature researched for the current article. Research is lacking on the validity and usefulness of the Carrion and Lock model. This, however, is consistent with other stage models proposed by previous authors (see Eliason, 1996). Cass's (1984) and Troiden's (1989) models are the exceptions in that both models have been empirically tested and stand as the most often cited models in the sexual identity literature (Eliason, 1996).

Support for aspects of Carrion and Lock's (1997) model, however, does exist. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning individuals may experience or perceive themselves as different from their heterosexual friends or family, as characterized in the first stage (Carrion & Lock, 1997). Feelings in the first stage—bewilderment, shame, minimization, and denial—may contribute to individuals hiding their sexuality, often by attempting to pass as heterosexual (Carrion & Lock, 1997). In a study of lesbian high school students, Black and Underwood (1998) noted that higher rates of depression and suicidal ideation were reported during the "passing" or "confusion" stages of their lesbian identity formation.

In his research with young gay males between the ages of 14 and 20, Anderson (1998) noted that participants who had perceptions of being different in preadolescence also self-reported higher perceptions of self-esteem. As indicated in

the Carrion and Lock (1997) model, the four core emotional reactions encompass the awareness of being different. Bewilderment, according to Carrion and Lock, is a healthy reaction to the identity formation process. Anderson's data, suggesting a positive correlation between preadolescence perceptions of being different and high self-esteem, support Carrion and Lock's assertion that bewilderment is a healthy and vital feeling during the coming-out process.

Social Constructionism

Essentialism explains a biological reason for nonheterosexual identities within a heterosexual society (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Bisexuality is viewed to be either a phase or a "passing" technique used to mask the true, essential homosexual identity (Carrion & Lock, 1997). Youth questioning their identity are then placed within a phase of identity acceptance often labeled "confusion" (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Matteson, 1995; Smiley, 1997). Essentialist theories cannot and do not account for the fluid nature of sexuality identity as it has been documented in the research and conceptual writings of other researchers (Edwards, 1996; Harry, 1993; Hollander, 2000; Matteson, 1995; Moorhead, 1999; Rosario et al., 1996; Segal, 2000; Smiley, 1997; Vincke & Bolton, 1994).

Social constructionism challenges the dichotomous concepts of sexuality and gender identity. Influenced by post-modern approaches to human development, social constructionism accounts for all variances of sexual identity as well as the variations of personal experiences in the identity formation process (Moorhead, 1999; Segal, 2000). In their qualitative study of gay fraternal organizations, Yeung and Stomblor (2000) captured one social constructionist point of view when they stated:

Our research attempts to move beyond simple dichotomies such as assimilation/liberation; we seek to map out the complex and paradoxical process of identity negotiation that allow groups both to emulate and change the oppressive culture. (p. 134)

From a social constructionist point of view, the process of sexual identity formation, as theorized by Carrion and Lock (1997), is framed within the hierarchy of heterosexuality and masculinity. Sexuality expressed through behaviors that accompany fluid identity roles finds neither definition nor placement within Western societal standards of masculinity and heterosexuality (Edwards, 1996; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Moorhead, 1999; Rosario et al., 1996), ultimately creating a dichotomy and classification of gender and sexuality (Segal, 2000; Yeung & Stomblor, 2000). Essentialism, though an attempt to normalize sexual identity differences through biological explanations, is dualistic by nature and imposes an either-or classification system that may deny or invalidate the

experiences of many gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning people.

Social construction theorists offer alternative and diverse insights, usually based on the experiences of individuals, into the coming-out process. Over the past 5 years, there has been a shift in research from documenting the etiology, treatment, and psychological adjustment of gay men and lesbians "[to an] interest in understanding different experiences and situations in their lives" (Ben-Ari, 1995, p. 89).

INTEGRATING THE DICHOTOMIES

Internal Exploration, or a Search for Definitions

Aspects of the internal exploration of sexuality, as described by Carrion and Lock (1997), are supported by Kitzinger and Wilkinson's (1995) study of the transitions women made from heterosexuality to lesbianism. Their study consisted of interviews with 80 self-identified lesbians with a past history of heterosexual relationships of 10 years or more (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). A common theme among the women interviewed concerned the societal expectations that women have to follow compulsory heterosexuality, thereby defining internal struggles with nonheterosexuality within a heterosexual construct (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Continuing within this context, the term *lesbian*, which has potential to describe the sexual feelings of some women, is virtually nonexistent and meaningless in a heterosexist language (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Furthermore, "denied access to accurate information regarding their same-sex orientation, they [youth] have little opportunity to learn about what it means to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual" (Dempsey, 1994, p. 161). It is little wonder that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning individuals feel isolated or alone in their quest to learn about their own identity.

The inability to define one's sexual feelings within the language of the majority creates common defenses used to deny, negate, minimize, or ignore nonheterosexual feelings (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). A parallel is found in Carrion and Lock's (1997) conceptualization that bewilderment, shame, minimization, and denial are typical feelings within the early stages of the coming-out process.

Data from Kitzinger and Wilkinson's (1995) research yielded the following results: The average age participants reported having heterosexual feelings and interactions was 18, whereas the age for identifying with a lesbian identity, on average, was 34. The discrepancy between ages of heterosexual feelings and ages of eventual lesbian identification suggests a correlation between the dominance of heterosexist language and the delayed development of a lesbian identity.

In a unique study of the sexual identity and sexual behaviors of lesbians and heterosexual women, data were collected from a total of 429 women, 205 lesbians and 224 heterosexu-

als (Whitman et al., 1998). The questionnaires were collected between 1981 and 1989 from the following four countries: Brazil, Peru, the Philippines, and the United States. Results indicated that women in the United States were more likely than the other women to identify sexual feelings well before they identified their sexual orientation (Whitman et al., 1998). Additional evidence of the affects of dichotomizing sexuality into a heterosexist model is that "lesbians in all four societies were considerably more likely to experience attraction to men than heterosexual women to other women" (Whitman et al., 1998, p. 52).

Similarly, other data suggest that although individuals may question their sexual identity through sexual behaviors, the discrepancy between identity and behavior creates a fluid conceptualization of sexuality (Edwards, 1996). Urban youth, between the ages of 14 and 21 years old and self-identifying as either gay, lesbian, or bisexual, were asked to fill out sexual risk assessments as well as meet with researchers for interviews regarding their sexual development (Rosario et al., 1996). One trend found was that youth often declared a bisexual identity before finalizing on either lesbian or gay identities (Rosario et al., 1996). Their findings validate and support fluid concepts of sexuality, rather than stigmatize and label the questioning youths as "confused."

Youth who may identify as gay or lesbian in the future are likely to experiment with other-sex partners and to entertain or strive for a bisexual identity presumably because they are raised to believe that they are heterosexual and they are keenly aware of society's displeasure with same-sex liaisons (Rosario et al., 1996, p. 122).

Stage models define the testing of sexual and emotional attractions and behaviors as "identity confusion" (Eliason, 1996). Confusion is relevant only within an essentialist view of identity formation, where choices are either heterosexual or homosexual. Either choice, however, is defined within a heterosexual context (Matteson, 1995; Segal, 2000; Smiley, 1997). Dualistic models, which define exploration as confusion, create problems for both a lesbian identity (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Moorhead, 1999) and the bisexual identity (Matteson, 1995; Smiley, 1997). Reframing the term *confusion* is necessary to understand the complex, ambiguous, and often misunderstood internal development of bisexual or questioning identities.

A similar reframing is needed to conceptualize the experiences of individuals questioning their sexuality (Hollander, 2000). "They [questioning youth] can be conceptualized as holding up for self-inspection the culturally bound roles assigned to females and males and/or for their own sexual disposition toward the same or other sex" (Hollander, 2000, p. 174). It is necessary for professionals working with individuals questioning their sexuality to place their sexual identity, or lack thereof, in a social constructionist frame of sexual fluidity rather than stigmatize and force a "confused" phase on them.

External Influences, or Creating a Space Within the Cultural Majority

As previously mentioned, a component of the internal processing of sexual identity often includes the influences of external factors such as language, concepts of sexuality, and availability of knowledge about sexual issues. Upon entering Carrion and Lock's (1997) stage called "congruence probing," "the individual has now attained the minimal psychological, biological, and social preparedness to begin testing the congruence of sexual orientation with self-identity" (p. 375). A way to test the congruence of sexual identity is through the exploration of sexual behaviors (Carrion & Lock, 1997). Sexual activity alone, however, does not dictate or imply one's immediate or ultimate identity. Responding to the health needs of gay men, Paradis's (1997) conceptual article addressed the dangers and precautions of experimental sex between men in the era of AIDS. Ignoring the sexual concerns of the individual exploring their identity will also ignore the dangers of unsafe sex (Paradis, 1997). Recommended is a hypervigilant stance on safe sex precautions when working with gay men (Paradis, 1997).

Lack of gay, lesbian, and bisexual models of sexual appropriateness creates a void for the individual exploring their sexuality. Gay men may struggle with ways to initiate social and sexual contact with other gay men (Paradis, 1997). Though not explicitly described in Paradis's article, it could be assumed that bisexuals and lesbians also struggle with ways to initiate sexual or romantic contact. In fact, the existence of gay, lesbian, and bisexuality without socialization of any kind in a heterosexist society causes researchers to wonder how exactly experimentation, initiation, and identification can occur (Segal, 2000; Whitman et al., 1998; Yeung & Stomblor, 2000).

Also on the minds of some researchers are the psychological or medical factors associated with self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning youth (Anderson, 1998; Dempsey, 1994; Edwards, 1996; Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison, & Nye, 1999; Hollander, 2000; Lock & Steiner, 1999; Segal, 2000; Vincke & Bolton, 1994). In his unique research with Black gay men between the ages of 16 and 21, Edwards (1996) examined the youths' self-identity, family relation, school/work relations, and social adjustment using a Likert-type scale. Despite the constraints society creates for sexual and racial minorities, gay youth were found just as likely to be as well adjusted as heterosexual youth. Edwards's assertion that not all gay men internalize societal homophobia to the point of dysfunction may be correlated to his subjects reporting a passing identification. Passing as heterosexual, or not claiming a homosexual or bisexual identity, may actually be a self-preservation technique in a society often violent and hostile with homophobia. Essentialists attribute passing behaviors as being untrue to one's essential being (Carrion & Lock, 1997). In support of Edwards's conclusion, Anderson's

(1998) study of gay males emphasized the strengths of overcoming stigmas and homophobia by recognizing the need some gay men have to keep their sexuality private, or pass.

To assume that gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning youth are free from intolerance or discrimination would be dangerous. Not all individuals are able to turn their sexual identity processes into positive sources of strength as suggested by Anderson (1998). In a comparative study of heterosexual and nonheterosexual youth (Lock & Steiner, 1999), results indicated that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning youth have higher chances for greater mental or general medical health risks than their heterosexual counterparts. Coming-out in a heterosexist culture often isolates and stigmatizes individuals, which may lead to greater symptoms of distress than in heterosexual individuals. Depression, often prevalent in the coming-out process, may eventually lead to fewer relationships if depressive symptoms are not tolerated among certain friends. Rejection from peers leads to further isolation and depression, thereby leading to deeper depression, and the cycle continues (Vincke & Bolton, 1994). For individuals questioning or declaring nonheterosexual identity, feeling confused is more apt to describe ambiguous situations of rejection. For instance, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning individuals may be rejected because of homophobia, intolerance for depressive symptoms, or for reasons not related to sexuality at all (Segal, 2000). Because rejection can be perceived as being either related or unrelated to sexuality, it can be confusing and alienating for the gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning youth to sort through and process alone.

COMING-OUT AUDIENCES

Coming-out to others creates new identity awareness for both parties. Carrion and Lock's (1997) model defined this point of discovery as evidence of acceptance of an integrated sexual self. Carrion and Lock's definition of coming-out seems to emphasize the essential nature of sexual identity. Other researchers emphasize coming-out as it exists in a dynamic social environment. For example, Vincke and Bolton (1994) described coming-out as the publicly visible portion of a fluid, evolving, and changeable identity. Another view suggests that coming-out provides a rational explanation for same-sex feelings and behaviors (Edwards, 1996).

The makeup of the coming-out audience has a considerable impact on the continuation of sexual identity formation. Evans and Broido's (1999) qualitative study, which examined the effects coming-out has on college students living in residence halls, identified the following three audiences typical for students to come out to: themselves; other gay, lesbian, or bisexual students/faculty; and heterosexual students/faculty. Similar studies identified other audiences, including friends and coworkers (Oswald, 2000), parents (Ben-Ari, 1995; Boon & Miller, 1999; Eliason, 1996), and fellow high school students (Evans & Broido, 1999; Rhoads, 1995; Segal, 2000).

Audiences can be divided into three comprehensive categories: familial, heterosexual, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual audiences.

The Familial Audience

Parental involvement in the coming-out process is a concern for all lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. Adolescents living with or near their parents will typically have a fixed and limited audience and therefore must negotiate their coming-out process in a way that is best suited to integrate their individual needs with the needs of the culture and family (Edwards, 1996). Because most parents are heterosexual, their worldviews are influenced with heterosexist biases and values, with little to no contact with gay, lesbian, or bisexual individuals (Ben-Ari, 1995). Parental expectations and desires for heterosexual offspring may be met with shock, denial, shame, guilt, anger, or rejection when their child comes out (Ben-Ari, 1995). Floyd et al.'s (1999) qualitative research examined the effects the parent-adolescent relationship, specifically separation-individuation of the youth, parental attitudes, identity consolidation, and overall well-being, had on the decision to come out. It was found that perceived parental attitudes about sexuality, specifically traditional values of sexuality, have the ability to affect the child's decision to come out (Floyd et al., 1999). Attitudes about sexuality are often formed by traditional family values found in and upheld by the cultural majority. Therefore, the presence of traditional family values is related to the youth's ability to accept and cope with their gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning identity (see Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993).

Perceptions of positive parental attitudes toward homosexuality are associated with a greater sense of a consolidated sexual identity for those in such a family (Floyd et al., 1999). Conversely, perceptions of positive parental attitudes in Floyd et al.'s (1999) study had no correlation to independent and autonomous feelings the youths had at the time of disclosure. These findings indicate that perceived parental attitudes can either positively or negatively affect the coming-out process, as well as influence future conditions in the familial relationship (Floyd et al., 1999).

The decision to come out to parents is sometimes fueled by the fear that they will find out anyway (Ben-Ari, 1995; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). To test the reactions of coming-out, it is not uncommon for people to come out to siblings, or other close relatives, before their parents are told (Edwards, 1996). Despite their fears of rejection, disturbing the family dynamics, or the threat of possible hostility, individuals, young and old, still do come out. Being honest about one's life by choosing not to hide their identity seems to compel some individuals to come out to parents (Ben-Ari, 1995), friends, and classmates (Evans & Broido, 1999; Rhoads, 1995). Boon and Miller (1999) interviewed gay Canadian men between ages 18 and 47 and employed content analyses to understand the son-mother relationship as influenced by

the coming-out experience. More men decided to disclose to their mothers than not to disclose at all (Boon & Miller, 1999). Pessimistic expectations of the coming-out process were indicated by those men who did not come out, although those who did come out wanted to continue an honest and loving relationship with their mother (Boon & Miller, 1999). Though their small sample size was 50, Boon and Miller (1999) indicated that their results concerning the role trust in the mother-son relationship has in the decision-making process to come out are consistent with other research results on the topic.

Children's perceptions of either their parents' acceptance or rejection seem to influence and motivate their child to come out. "Parents who felt their son or daughter had disclosed in order to be more honest about him or herself were significantly more likely later to acknowledge and accept their offspring's homosexuality" (Ben-Ari, 1995, p. 104). Interestingly, Ben-Ari (1995) found that fathers were more apt to initially accept their child's sexual identity before mothers and that gay males were more likely than lesbians to be accepted by either parent. On the other hand, the same-sex parent-child relationship prior to coming-out has been shown to significantly affect the future of the relationship (Floyd et al., 1999). Specifically, daughters with self-reported autonomy from their mothers yielded a higher sense of self-esteem, even as sons with self-reported autonomy from their fathers reported a stronger and more stable sense of their sexual identity (Floyd et al., 1999).

The Heterosexual Audience

Coming-out to any audience may be either voluntary or involuntary and achieved in a variety of ways. In some environments, school for instance, youth may not always have the choice to come out. Rumors, gay pride paraphernalia, membership to gay organization, and so forth involuntarily out the student. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning youth could potentially be left to forge their own identity with little to no social support (Black & Underwood, 1998; Segal, 2000). In contrast, voluntarily coming-out to heterosexual audiences involves the realization, on some level, that hiding one's sexual identity is tiring and burdensome (Evans & Broido, 1999). Sometimes, the disclosure of a long-held secret can improve lives, as reported by Rhoads's (1995) sample of college students: "Coming out significantly changed the life of nearly every student involved in this study. Many experienced an improved sense of self, as evidenced by increased openness, self-confidence, and understanding of their lives." (p. 70)

The above quotation could support the essentialist premise of coming-out as a resolution of internal struggles leading to the integration of their essential, biological identity (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Reality for the gay, lesbian, or bisexual individual may not always involve coming-out to everyone. Considering people have unique levels of heterosexual and homophobic acculturation, audiences may

not always be as accepting or supportive as assumed in essentialist models of sexuality. Coming-out is a choice. Sexual attractions are not a choice. The decision not to come out has both positive and negative effects. "The principal reason for not being out is that the audience would react punitively through sanctions which can be economic, violent, or ones of social disapproval and loss of prestige" (Harry, 1993, p. 28). Whereas individuals choosing to be out may have a sense of peace, authenticity (Evans & Broido, 1999), or "improved sense of self" (Rhoads, 1995), remaining in the closet is based on self-protecting or self-preserving choices.

Continuing to hide sexual identity from one's spouse and family, if the newly identified gay, lesbian, or bisexual is still married, may be more damaging than coming-out (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Matteson, 1995; Smiley, 1997). Coming-out to a spouse or family may create legal changes such as divorce or custody hearings for children (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Voluntary coming-out has its share of rewards and dangers. Hence, most gays, lesbians, and bisexuals live both in and out of the closet, depending on their discretion and involvement with the various audiences.

Harry (1993) contended that stage theories are inadequate in describing the reality of living both in and out of the closet:

As a result of personal desires to disclose and structural pressures to conceal the individual typically lives in a situation where some of their audiences know and others don't. This pattern bears little resemblance to a model of stages in which one gradually moves toward a situation of greater and greater disclosure and therefore integrity and authenticity. Probably the most normal situation is one in which one remains partly in and partly out of the closet and adapts one's set of disclosures to audiences as those audiences change. (p. 28)

As Harry questioned the definitions of integrity and authenticity, a similar study attempted to redefine integrity and belonging.

Moorhead (1999) extracted themes common to her interviewees for a reconceptualization of the meanings of integrity and belonging. Her qualitative social constructionist study involved interviews with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning adults in New Hampshire. Integrity and belonging, then, is the ability to live one's life with multiple identities, not just a sexual identity, while also realizing the importance of individual agency and autonomy as integral to decision-making process about whether to be out, and if so, to whom (Moorhead, 1999).

Segal's (2000) social constructionist account of the experiences of Swedish and Dutch youth echoed Moorhead's (1999) article. His interviewees discussed the usefulness of multiple identities in societies attempting to normalize the status of sexual minorities. Somehow, in trying to normalize the status of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning individuals the experiences of the coming-out process were invalidated or minimized (Segal, 2000). Many of his interviewees

did not find it compulsory to come out, not because of fear of rejection or fear of hostility, but because their identity was still marginalized by the larger society. As long as society reinforces dichotomous definitions for sexual identities with a heterosexual-masculine model, nonheterosexuals will continue to choose whether they are out and, if so, to whom (Harry, 1993; Moorhead, 1999; Segal, 2000). Some societies may try to normalize gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning people, but not necessarily homoeroticism or nonheterosexual expressions (Segal, 2000).

The Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual Audience

Seeking out other people with similar sexual identities is one developmental task in Carrion and Lock's (1997) model. Coming-out to other gays, lesbians, and bisexuals has the potential to provide a sense of well-being and authenticity, while also normalizing and validating the sexual identity process (Evans & Broido, 1999). Participation in a gay subculture, whether it is a youth group, adult group, student organization, bar scene, or other social group, can provide both a sense of valuation and outlet for social support not found in the family (Vincke & Bolton, 1994). Only one article included in the research reviewed for this current article addressed the reactions lesbian and bisexual individuals have to another nonheterosexual coming-out (Oswald, 2000). Oswald's (2000) article addressed the coming-out experiences of 6 college-aged women and 25 of their friends and family. Though the reactions from nonheterosexuals were not the goal of Oswald's research, a few of the participants happened to be either bisexual or lesbian. More research into the interpersonal reactions of coming-out within the gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities is needed for a further understanding of the effects of coming-out.

Positive experiences of coming-out to a gay, lesbian, or bisexual audience may be extracted from the literature reviewed for this article. Having multiple identities and perspectives as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning individuals may help to provide multiple levels of acceptance (Moorhead, 1999). Indeed, coming-out to other gay, lesbian, and bisexual people may help maintain and encourage a positive sense of identity for both individuals (Evans & Broido, 1999; Moorhead, 1999; Oswald, 2000). Sometimes the participation in a gay/lesbian activity or organization involuntarily discloses sexual identity and grants immediate acceptance within the gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities (Nesmith, Burton, & Cosgrove, 1999; Yeung & Stomblor, 2000).

On the other hand, though not often discussed in the literature, gay culture exists with its own set of covert discrimination. Taking Moorhead's (1999) multiple identity perspective, gay culture may accept the individual as gay or lesbian, but not necessarily their racial, religious, or even gender identity differences. In a personal account of her coming-out experience, Alex Wilson (1996) stated, "As an Indigenous

woman, I could not find a positive place for myself in the predominantly White, gay scene" (p. 312). Relatively few studies in the sexual identity literature account for the experiences of non-White, nonheterosexual individuals within the heterosexual world, let alone the gay/lesbian world. Of the literature researched for this article, one contained a representative sample of racial minorities (Rosario et al., 1996), and one focused exclusively on Black men (Edwards, 1996). Perhaps the gay subculture is representative of the cultural majority in that racial, gender, and other identities are not always accepted or tolerated.

Behaviors often acceptable in one gay or lesbian subculture may not be tolerated within a same-sex couple relationship. For example, the degree of "outness," as measured by the amount of involvement in the gay community, had a negative affect in the relationship of a male couple quoted in a case study about identity issues (Paradis, 1997).

Sometimes difficulties arise when the partners are discordant in their stages of coming-out (Mattison & McWhirter, 1998; Paradis). Many relationships suffer because of differing needs for openness and candor. Families of origin might have different levels of knowledge about their relative's sexual identity or relationship status. (Paradis, 1997, p. 305)

Hoping to be recognized and accepted by other fraternities, the national fraternity for gay men, Delta Lambda Phi (DLP), has had to denounce behaviors that could be interpreted as "too effeminate" in order to subscribe to the established heterosexual standards of what a fraternity is (Yeung & Stomblor, 2000). As individuals, the gay and bisexual male members of DLP are accepted within the provisions and privacy of the fraternity (Yeung & Stomblor, 2000). However, the same behaviors or actions tolerated privately are not necessarily tolerated publicly if the heterosexual-masculine construct enforced by the cultural majority is perceived to be threatened (Yeung & Stomblor, 2000). The paradox exists, as Yeung and Stomblor (2000) conceptualized, when belonging to a gay organization and assuming an out identity does not always mean that members can express their identity and live out in a straight world.

Bisexual men and women have an added issue in deciding whether to disclose to other gay or lesbian people. One stigma associated with bisexuality is that somehow they are in denial of either a homosexual or heterosexual identity (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Matteson, 1995; Smiley, 1997). That false assumption invalidates the bisexual experience as its own separate and viable sexuality. Similarly, there is a stigma that the deceptive or "transitory" nature of bisexuals creates polygamous relationships (Matteson, 1995). Though multiple partners may be necessary for the "emotional, sensual, and sexual gratification" (Smiley, 1997) of the bisexual person, it is incorrect to assume it is a standard value. Myths and stigmas about bisexuality create a covert environment of dis-

crimination from the gay/lesbian and heterosexual cultures alike.

Despite the stigmas and difficulties in coming-out, it still does not stop people from doing so. Coming-out to other gay, lesbian, or bisexual people can be positive and actually unify the community one comes out to (Moorhead, 1999; Yeung & Stomblor, 2000). Similarly, negotiating a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning identity within a heterosexual society is a necessary accomplishment if the identity is to be a fully integrated one (Moorhead, 1999).

CONCLUSION

Implications for Family and Couples Counselors

Families entering counseling because of their child's disclosure or potential disclosure of a nonheterosexual identity have specific concerns and needs. Although it is important to provide a trusting, supportive environment for the child at whatever stage he or she may be functioning in (Boon & Miller, 1999), it is equally as important to assess how family and family culture define nonheterosexual identities (Coenen, 1998). Families may enter counseling because a child has come out and they do not have the abilities to cope or handle the disclosure. Seeing the identified person separately from the family may be necessary to build the therapeutic alliance, as well as thoroughly assess the extent of the presenting concerns from the parents' point of view (Coenen, 1998).

When assessing the emotional environment of the family, it is important to consider the overall history of family relationships. For instance, if there appears to be a strong, supportive relationship between the parents and the child, coming-out may only reinforce the already existing vital relationships (Boon & Miller, 1999). The coming-out process may be seen as a crisis if the family has not had the education to conceptualize, understand, or define the issues involved in identifying as or being nonheterosexual (Coenen, 1998; LaSala, 2000). One role the therapist can take is to ethically educate the parents about gay, lesbian, and bisexual realities. Hearing about the realities of sexual minorities from a professional may be helpful in redefining and placing nonheterosexual identities within the family's cultural values and awareness. Communicating through the coming-out "crisis" involves listening with educated and nonbiased ears.

Anticipating the emotional climate of the family will assist the therapist in facilitating a nonjudgmental tone to communication in and out of session. Equally as important is the preparation of the child to understand that parents may need to grieve the loss of their heterosexual child before acceptance can take place (Ben-Ari, 1995; Eliason, 1996). If coming-out was voluntary, it is likely that the individual had time to deliberate, question, and accept their identity. Parents also need time to accept their child's sexuality. Indeed, some

families experience a parallel stage process toward acceptance of their child's sexual identity (Coenen, 1998).

Family and individual therapists must not assume that all youth need treatment for their sexual identity alone (Edwards, 1996). Though connecting individuals and families to social or school supports can strengthen the therapeutic alliance (Black & Underwood, 1998), overreacting to the disclosure of a nonheterosexual identity may damage the therapeutic relationship. Reacting to the disclosure as something that needs to be fixed or immediately taken care of will model and reinforce society's negative reactions to sexuality. As mentioned earlier, the therapist's role as educator will diminish negative stereotypes, validate the struggles of the coming-out process, and provide future-based problem-solving skills for the family of origin (Coenen, 1998). Normalizing the process of identity formation by pointing out that age increases the acceptance and tolerance of nonheterosexual identities may have long-lasting effects for the family (Ben-Ari, 1995; Coenen, 1998; Eliason, 1996).

As many youth create extended families from supportive friends and close relatives (Edwards, 1996), the therapist is advised to assess the school and social supports of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning youth without assuming that the gay, lesbian, or bisexual youth is receiving the support needed for psychological well-being from his or her friends alone (Black & Underwood, 1998; Segal, 2000). Racial minorities have the added problem of not fitting into either subculture, and particular sensitivity to this issue will create a more trusting and supportive therapeutic relationship (Black & Underwood, 1998; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993; Paradis, 1997; Rosario et al., 1996; Wilson, 1996).

Couples counselors could be presented with a variety of challenging scenarios. If one partner in a heterosexual relationship is coming-out, legal and custody issues could surface. The counselor is advised to maintain a nonjudgmental, neutral position for the facilitation of acceptance for both partners. Carrion and Lock's (1997) model may serve as a reminder that coming-out and acceptance is a process that takes time and psychological adjustment. Both partners may need to be educated about the process as well as other more practical information of gay, lesbian, and bisexual life. Homophobia observed in either partner could be reframed to be a part of the grieving process necessary for the acceptance of a nonheterosexual identity.

Similarly, bisexuals in either a heterosexual or homosexual relationship may be best served if the counselor addresses the identifying problems, being careful not to assume the negative stereotypes and stigmas society has imposed on the bisexual community. Matteson (1995) and Smiley (1997) addressed the unique needs of the bisexual client. The nonbisexual partner may not have a tolerance for the other to have multiple partners. The couples counselor must maintain an ethical and supportive stance for both partners regardless

of the counselor's feelings or values about sexuality and monogamy (Matteson, 1995).

These are but a few of the many different scenarios that could present themselves for the couples counselor. Both articles (Matteson, 1995; Smiley, 1997) articulated the need for a couples counselor to be open to sexually diverse topics, open to who is allowed in the session, and consistent in the belief that bisexuality is a legitimate identity and not a phase of coming-out. As stipulated by ethical codes of conduct, the couples counselor needs to maintain accurate and reliable education on the needs and resources for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning individuals. As sexuality is often an ambiguous and confusing discovery process, family and couples counselors need to have an accepting and tolerant view of sexual ambiguity if treating gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning individuals.

Call for More Research

One problem facing the research of sexual identity formation is finding the samples needed to represent the gay, lesbian, and bisexual populations. For instance, samples are often gathered from either clinical/counseling environments or gay establishments. These locations alone do not account for universal or representative data for the entire population. Data from clinical/counseling settings tend to provide data representative of other psychological issues rather than of universal experiences involved with identity formation and the coming-out process. Community samples tend to have participants with higher levels of education, higher senses of overall psychological well-being, and underrepresentation of non-White cultures. More research is needed for inclusion of racially, ethnically, culturally, and economically diverse samples. Similarly, data have typically been gathered in urban, or semiurban, settings. More research is needed to describe the coming-out issues in rural or suburban centers.

Coming-out involves the reactions of a second party. Studying the reactions of the second party may be useful to further understand the coming-out process. Though family reactions have been researched, assessing their prior relationships has not been studied. Similarly, no research included disclosure within sessions, which may also yield interesting results. Thus, researching the reactions of friends, family, other relatives, and teachers would provide further data and results that strive to describe the experience of identity formation. Therapists and practitioners of all types are urged to write about their experiences with gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning individuals.

This article has examined the available research on coming-out and identity formation. Carrion and Lock's (1997) stage model of coming-out was used to conceptualize the process, and the empirical and qualitative research served to support aspects of their model. Essentialism and social constructionism dominate the literature, though no attempts

have been made to integrate the two. As long as a dichotomy exists within the literature, the debate will continue as to which is more closely representative of the coming-out experience. Carrion and Lock's model appears to attempt an integration of theories, incorporating the dynamic and fluid concepts of sexuality. Further empirical data are needed to support the clinical, conceptual, and theoretical writings on the coming-out process and identity formation.

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