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Sunday January 27, 2008

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In the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), by Tennessee Williams, one of the characters, Blanche DuBois, ponders; “What is straight? A line can be straight, or a street, but the human heart, oh no, it’s curved like a road through mountains”. While this quote was not written as a reference to homosexuality it has become a mantra for some gay/lesbian groups claiming that no one has the right to tell them that they have chosen an inappropriate lifestyle. The idea of being “straight” or “gay” has become a hot topic in our society today. In many ways the conflicting views of heterosexuality and homosexuality have polarized our society resulting in many individuals being marginalized because of their identity. This has created obvious challenges on college campuses across the country. How do students, staff, faculty and administration create safe environments for students practicing a homosexual lifestyle? How do student affairs professionals encourage holistic growth and development within this minority group? Theory can serve as an important resource to help direct our thoughts and actions when we working with students who are different than ourselves. Theory then proves to be a valuable resource to us as we work with students who identify themselves as homosexual; specifically Vivienne Cass’s theory, a model of homosexual identity formation.

Who is the Vivienne Cass?

Vivienne Cass is a well respected clinical psychologist and sexologist from Western Australia. Cass has been working in the area of psychology for much of her life. Her education began in 1969 when she received her teaching certificate from Edith Cowan University. She continued to pursue her education receiving her Bachelor of

Psychology in 1973 and Master of Psychology in 1975 both from the University of Western Australia. Finally, in 1986 she was awarded her doctorate of philosophy (psychology) from Murdoch University. Cass is a registered and practicing psychologist in Western Australia; she also serves as a member of the editorial board for the *Journal of Homosexuality*. In addition, Cass is a member of six highly-respected societies in Australia, two societies based in the United States and two international societies. All of these societies are linked to psychology, women's health or sexuality. Finally, she serves the Australian Psychological Society as a media contact having developed a reputation for being able to speak in the language of the general public after 30 years of media experience (<http://www.brightfire.com.au/public/pages.php?id=18>, 2003).

As a psychologist, Dr. Vivienne Cass draws from more than twenty-five years of experience with more than 20 of those years in a private practice working primarily with adults. She has specialized in the area of human sexuality offering help, support, and services to people struggling with or coping with sexual dysfunction, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual offenses, and sexual abuse. It is from her interactions with people struggling with their sexual orientation that she drew her original ideas for her theory of homosexual identity formation (<http://www.brightfire.com.au/public/pages.php?id=18>, 2003).

Dr. Cass has published numerous articles and books regarding her philosophies and ideas as they pertain to human sexuality. Perhaps she is most well known for her late 1970s/early 1980s articles on homosexual identity development but she is also respected for her writings on AIDS. For sixteen years Dr. Cass was involved in learning more about HIV/AIDS which culminated in her publication of the book; *There's More to Sex than*

AIDS: The A to Z Guide to Safe Sex in 1988. In 2003, Dr Cass released her most recent work, *The Elusive Orgasm*. Cass's has been publishing articles since the late 1970s and many of her writings are referenced by other psychologists and researchers as reputable sources (<http://www.brightfire.com.au/public/pages.php?id=18>, 2003).

Aside from her duties as psychologist, a writer, and her responsibilities with various organizations Dr. Cass has also managed to find a way to lecture at all universities in Western Australia since 1978. She primarily speaks to masters and bachelors psychology students on the topic of sexual therapy. Prior to becoming a lecturer she held tutoring positions at the University of Western Australia (WA) and Murdoch University (<http://www.brightfire.com.au/public/pages.php?id=18>, 2003). Dr Vivienne Cass is a highly respected member of the psychological community; whose works have been largely well received and embraced by the community. Specifically, Vivienne Cass's work regarding homosexual identity formation has had long lasting influence and impact on the field of student affairs.

How was Cass's theory developed?

Cass's theory, like many homosexual identity formation theories, was based on little other than written testimonies from homosexuals that were describing their process of identity formation. Her initial theory was based on testimony and not on empirically founded evidence. In order to better understand where Cass's theory came from, it is necessary to examine a decade, the 1970s, of changing and developing ideas regarding homosexual identity formation. Early researchers and theorists, including Cass, published individual testimonies of homosexuals' "coming out" stories; these researchers operated under the assumption that common ideas, struggles and themes existed between these

individual stories. But it was not until the mid 1970s that the unwritten assumption began to appear in literature (Cass, 1984).

By the early 1980's eleven different identity models had been proposed for homosexuals, one of which was Cass's model. These early models varied in sophistication, from three-phase descriptions to detailed six stage structures. Interestingly, only two of the early models were developed as a means of explaining data obtained from a research study; Miller (1978) and Schafer (1976). Troiden (1977) was the third researcher to include data in his model after he modified the work of Plummer (1975). Yet despite the lack of research and data used to develop the theories; all the proposed models share similar ideas and themes as it relates to change and growth (Cass, 1984). "Almost uniformly, identity formation is conceptualized as a development process marked by a series of changes, growth points, or stages along which certain experiences can be ordered" (Cass, 1984, 145-146).

As of 1984 only three of the models proposed in the 1970 rush had been tested; McLellan (1977), Troiden (1977), and Weinberg (1977). These theories were each tested using interview techniques which upon review were obviously missing necessary protections against subjectivity. In many cases the validity of the tests were called into question resulting in the theories being recognized as biased (Cass, 1984). Beyond these early attempts, however, "neither the accuracy nor the generalizability of the various models of homosexual identity formation [had] been submitted to rigorous testing" (Cass, 1984, 146).

Cass, was no different her model of homosexual identity formation was based on little more than the readings of life stories and the study of other models. Her work had

little statistical backing and was designed under the assumption that there were common themes and ideas in all “coming out” stories of homosexuals. However, in 1984 Cass set out to test the validity of her own theory. She tested her theory using a cross-section test that would hopefully provide data indicating the degree of validity of Cass’s model. In essence this was her major follow-up study after writing the initial theory. In her research there were two main ideas being tested; the validity of the stage descriptions, and accuracy of the linear model. To test the first Cass developed a questionnaire and contacted individuals inviting them to be a part of a study designed to evaluate people’s adjustment to homosexuality. She contended that the design of the study did not require a random sample so she invited people she met at private social functions, homosexual rights marches, homosexual counseling services and she spread the word through newspapers and advertisements. Of those invited to participate 227 were issued questionnaires; of the surveys sent out 178 were completed and returned. Of the 109 male participants 103 were able to define themselves into one of the stages proposed by Cass; 63 of the 69 female participants were also able to define themselves into a stage. The other twelve felt that they fit into more than category.

Through these questionnaires and an array of statistical tests, including an analysis of comparison, scatter plots, line plots, statistical data, and correlation tests, Cass came to conclude that she had validated her stage descriptions. However Cass recognized that her study offered little in the way of support for her stage sequence (Cass, 1984). She instead offered Allen’s (1980) study as a support of her stage citing that the “results indicated that subjects acknowledged experiencing the relevant stages in the chronological order I have predicted” (Cass, 1984, 165). Cass’s theory has been largely

upheld; it is perhaps the most recognized theory in literature and has been acclaimed as the most frequently used by student affairs professionals (McEwen, 2003).

Summary of the Homosexual Identity Formation Theory

The homosexual identity formation theory consists of six stages; each individual moves through stages in a linear fashion beginning with a tentative exploration of the gay/lesbian identity and ending in synthesis of identity. It is important to note here that this theory was written specifically for those people identifying themselves as either gay or lesbian; however, many researchers believe that this formation theory may also hold true for those individuals identifying themselves as transgender or bisexual. In this theory individuals move through six different stages on their quest to define their identity at each stage the individual must successfully navigating their current stage (See Appendix I) (McEwen, 2003). In order to simplify the theory further many people have summed up the stages into tasks that individuals must reconcile before they can move on.

Cass's theory does not allow for the back and forth movement between stages but rather assumes that individuals will always move in a linear fashion. This concept of a perpetual forward motion through stages has been challenged by other identity theorists including; D'Augelli (1994), Troiden (1988), and Fassinger and Miller (1996) all of which have their own homosexual identity theories (Stevens, 2004, 185 – 186). Yet despite her unwavering devotion to a linear model Cass (1983–1984) recognized that homosexual identity varies “from person to person, from situation to situation, and from period to period” (110). Further Cass stressed that there are times when individuals will not move through all the stages, they may enter identity foreclosure. Individuals play an active role in their identity formation by the choices they make (Evans, et al., 1998, 92).

Further, Cass's theory recognized that the individual's development as a homosexual was greatly influenced by interpersonal relationships in each stage. The influence of interpersonal relationships could result in either the completion of a given task or could result in the individual going into identity foreclosure (Stevens, 2004, 185-186). An individual in identity foreclosure fails to make further progress toward developing a homosexual identity. This often results in a growing sense of self-hatred as the individual finds that they can not function well in either a homosexual or heterosexual world; in extreme cases identity foreclosure may even lead to suicide (Cass, 1979). The possibility to enter identity foreclosure exists at each stage but can be avoided if the individual finds themselves supported in positive relationships.

Cass's six stages are entitled; identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride and identity synthesis. Prior to entering these stages the individual recognizes themselves as a heterosexual and assumes all the responsibilities and beliefs that come along with that identity (Evans, et al., 1998). Identity confusion is characterized by an individual's consideration of homosexuality as a possible lifestyle for themselves. Individuals in identity confusion begin to recognize their own assumptions and inherent beliefs of heterosexuality; additionally, the individual recognizes that society maintains certain expectations for a heterosexual lifestyle. It is the conflict of these long held beliefs and assumptions combined with the new prospect of a homosexual identity which results in an individual entering the identity confusion stage. The primary task of this stage is to determine "who you are, and accepting, denying or rejecting it" (<http://www.arr-the-kraken.com/straight/Cass.php>, n.d.). Refusal to at least consider the idea of a homosexual identity results in identity foreclosure; however,

individuals that at least consider the new identity are propelled into the next stage of Cass's theory.

The second stage of Cass's model, identity comparison, is the time when individuals begin to seriously consider homosexuality as a possibility for their lives. The homosexual identity has become more than a label for other people. It is often in this stage that the individual begins to alienate themselves from both heterosexuals and homosexuals. Therefore the primary task of this stage is to deal with the social alienation of their sexual orientation. Individuals in this stage will have a range of possible responses; everything from grief to compartmentalizing their lives. Often the grief is over the things that will, presumably, be lost as a result of accepting their new found sexual orientation. On the other hand some individuals may begin to compartmentalize their lives deceiving themselves into believing that their homosexuality is just a phase. They tend to think believe that their feelings are isolated to one or two individuals. It is imperative that people in this stage develop their own definitions of homosexuality and do not simply accept the commonly held beliefs of society in order to progress to the third stage (http://www.ecu.edu.au/equ/resources/docs/Sexuality_cass_model.pdf, n.d.).

The beginning of identity tolerance, stage three, is marked by the individual's recognition that they are probably a homosexual. These individuals begin to seek other gay and lesbian people as a means of curbing their sense of isolation. Interactions with others will greatly determine whether or not a person will go into identity foreclosure at this point. Positive interactions with other gay or lesbian people will help propel the individual into stage four; negative interactions could abruptly end the development

(Evans, et al., 1998). For people to successfully navigate this stage it is vital that they discover community and resources among other homosexuals.

It is finally in stage four, identity acceptance, that the individual is able to view their homosexuality in a positive way. Individuals have convinced themselves that they will be okay despite their, seemingly, counter-cultural sexual orientation. The primary challenge for these individuals is to “deal with inner tension of no longer subscribing to society’s norm, [and attempting] to bring congruence between private and public view of self” (<http://lgbt.unc.edu/allies/articles/stages.html>, 2001). The interactions with other gay and lesbian people that were developed in the previous stage have a great impact on how an individual chooses to present themselves in this stage. Some may decide to fly under the radar and continue to attempt to “pass” as a heterosexual, others will selectively come out with safe people and still others will become very public about their identity (Evans, et al., 1998). It is typical of people in this stage to begin withdrawing from the heterosexual community as they become more and more comfortable with men and women who identify themselves as gay or lesbian. Cass contends that it is most important that people in this stage are encouraged to continue making decisions about who, when and where to disclose themselves (<http://lgbt.unc.edu/allies/articles/stages.html>, 2001).

The mantra of the fifth stage, identity pride, is; “I’ve got to let people know who I am!” (http://www.ecu.edu.au/equ/resources/docs/Sexuality_cass_model.pdf, n.d.). It is typically in this stage that a dichotomy between homosexuality and heterosexuality develops in the mind of the individual. Everything within the homosexual world is considered to be good while things of the heterosexual world often evoke feelings of anger. An us-them mentality becomes the rule for political and social decisions and

ideals. Individuals often become less and less willing to “blend in” as they view the homosexual culture as their only support. Thus the primary task of this stage is to deal with incongruent beliefs of the heterosexual community. People in this stage need friends and family to support them by encouraging them to explore their feelings of anger without becoming defensive (http://www.ecu.edu.au/equ/resources/docs/Sexuality_cass_model.pdf, n.d.).

In this final stage, identity synthesis, the individual is finally able to integrate their gay or lesbian identity as a single aspect of their self rather than as their defining identity; in other words, they have reached a place where they are capable of developing a holistic view of self. While there may still be feelings of anger and hostility toward heterosexism the intensity of these feelings has been greatly diminished. The individual often attempts to move back into the larger community building and maintaining relationships with people outside the gay and lesbian community (<http://www.arr-the-kraken.com/straight/Cass.php>, n.d.).

Strengths and Weaknesses of Theory

One of the major strengths of this theory lies in the final stage; when an individual’s sexual orientation is integrated into the overall sense of self. It is recognized in the theory that the individual’s sexual orientation does not define who they are, it is simply one aspect. The ability to accept and define one’s sexual orientation is an important step in helping to develop an individuals overall sense of self. The goal in student affairs is always to help a student develop holistically; so it is beneficial that this theory recognizes that need to integrate a homosexual identity as a piece of the greater puzzle that makes up identity.

Another asset of this theory is that it addresses all the major questions and struggles that an individual might face as they move through the stages. Cass provides details such as, triggers or environmental factors, that might help move an individual into the next stage of development or that could result in an individual going into identity development. Cass's theory recognizes the predominant emotions and thoughts of each stage and states them succinctly in a way that is straight forward. Additionally, the theory recognizes the affective, cognitive and behavioral strategies that must be developed and used as an individual adopts their new identity (Cass, 1984). Perhaps Cass's greatest strength is that her theory is one of the few homosexual identity formation theories that has been tested and upheld empirically. It is more than a theory based on "coming stories" it has been supported by statistical evidence to be accurate, at least to some degree (Evans, et al., 1998).

As with any theory Cass's has its weaknesses as well. The greatest criticism of Cass's work, and thus its greatest weakness, is that the model does not allow for movement back to a previous stage. It allows only for forward motion or disclosure; there is no such thing as limbo (Stevens, 2004). Many theorists believe that is possible to return to previously answered questions and dilemmas; self-doubt or a bad interpersonal experience may cause a person to circle back to a previous stage without necessarily forcing them into identity foreclosure. It seems almost too cut and dry to assume that people always move forward or upon a few setbacks will permanently shut down and stop progressing period. The perpetual forward motion of Cass's model is an obvious weakness of this model.

Abes and Jones (2004) asserted that a further flaw in Cass's theory is that it fails to "consider how the construction of lesbian identity interacts with other dimensions of identity, such as race, social class, and religion" (612). This is an important point to consider because it is true that individuals may view these stages differently depending on their background. For example, a young woman who has grown up in a conservative Christian home from the Deep South may find it much more challenging to move through Cass's first four stages than a young man who was raised in a liberal home just outside of Los Angeles. There are many environmental factors that influence how we perceive the world around us and influence how we determine right and wrong. However, while it may be a flaw that Cass's theory does not explicitly recognize these outside influences it is important to recognize that Cass does not place her theory on a timeline, expecting individuals to move through each stage in a set period of time. This could be her way of accounting for the different dimensions of identity that do play a role in their development as a homosexual being but are not explicitly mentioned in her theory.

Integration of theory into student affairs practice

There are many ways that this theory can be integrated into many student affairs practice; perhaps the most obvious, however, is simply using this theory as a reference for helping and supporting students who are beginning to, or already have, identified themselves as homosexuals. Students in the early stages of Cass's model are often scared, which is to be expected as they are often living in a manner that is contrary to what they have been raised with. Student affairs professionals can act as a support system as well as a safe person for students who are beginning their journey to discover their sexual

orientation and identity. A basic knowledge of Cass's theory, and others like it, can help student affairs professionals better meet the needs of the students they are serving.

The value of this theory and the tools, guidance and resources it offers are probably all the more valuable to student affairs professionals working in Christian environments; where homosexuality is often still a taboo topic. In recent weeks this theory has become an invaluable tool for me as a student confided in me that she was in a homosexual relationship. While her partner is not here on campus with her, she feels herself struggling to survive in an atmosphere and community that she believes would turn hostile toward her if they knew her true identity. I struggled at first to determine how to respond to and encourage this student, as I knew very little about what she was experiencing or what she may experience in the future. However, as I have researched homosexual identity development for this paper and simply in an effort to better support her I have been able to better understand what she is experiencing and what problems may arise in the future. Of course I am not using the theory to tell her what she will experience but it is helpful for me because I no longer find myself completely lost for words and blindsided by the struggles she shares. I am sure that she will at times surprise as she continues to explore her new identity but I feel that I at least have a picture for where she is headed. Being at a Christian school there are plenty of other complications and difficulties as we also aim to challenge her to grow and develop spiritually. So often religious views and views on homosexuality are at odds with each other; it is nice to feel like there are at least some guidelines to help direct conversations with my student.

Love, et al. (2005) contended that homosexual identity development theory paired with faith development theory can serve as a strong tool in helping students to develop

more than their sexual identity. The study conducted by Love, et al. concluded that gay and lesbian students sensed a stall in the spiritual development largely because of the sexual orientation and their interactions with organized religious groups. It was interesting that a number of the students felt so caught up in forming their identity as a homosexual that they failed to find the freedom to explore other aspects of their identity. Student affairs professionals could benefit from knowledge of Cass's theory so that they can watch for signs of development that are specific to homosexual identity model. Then in addition to encouraging students to find their sexual identity student affairs professionals can simultaneously encourage growth in other aspects of the student's life, like spirituality. The goal of the student affairs professional is always holistic growth and development; knowledge of this theory can serve as one piece of the puzzle to help foster growth in another student.

Cass's theory could also be used as resource to give to people who are trying to support friends or family members that are wrestling with their sexual orientation. Many university campuses, for example the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, have offices or clubs specifically for students who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). Within these clubs or offices resources should be offered to heterosexual students who are simply trying hard to understand the struggles and joys of their friends or family members who identify themselves as LGBT. Offering resources, such as this theory, will serve two purposes. First, it will create an atmosphere of deeper understanding for students of the LGBT lifestyle. Students even in the heterosexual community can learn more about how to support their friends and what issues are specific to homosexual students. Second, it will allow for greater resources available to the LGBT

community. The more information is circulated the more students can begin to help each other. Of course, this may sound like a student affairs professional is “passing the buck” but in reality students are more likely to tell their friends their struggles than they are to talk to a staff member. If this is the case than it makes sense that students should be equipped to help their peers; offering resources like Cass’s theory can be helpful in this process.

A recent article by Evans and Herriott (2004) highlighted the value of heterosexual students learning about struggles and issues that homosexual students face. Not only does exposure to another lifestyle, such as homosexuality, make people more caring and understanding but it also challenges them to think about their own beliefs and ideas. At times this will result in a modification of beliefs and other times it will reaffirm what the person already believed; either way it is an exercise of growth for the individual. In the article Evans and Herriott found that exposure to the homosexual lifestyle and the ideas and struggles that accompany it actually encouraged some students to completely re-evaluate their beliefs and become more active in social justice issues. If this is the case than perhaps exposure to another lifestyle is also beneficial because it forces people to think outside their comfort zone and often their commonly accepted beliefs.

Cass’s theory has become foundational to understanding homosexual identity development. Her work is among the few theories that have been tested and upheld with statistical evidence; its strengths are many. It is important as student affairs professionals that we come to recognize the value and benefit of this theory as it applies to our work. While it may not be perfect it does allow us to possibly gain insight and understanding into the minds of students that are, potentially, very different than ourselves. In order to

help these students we must understand their unique needs and struggles; it is theories like Cass's that enable us to do this – enable us to serve our students more adequately.

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