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The Layer Cake Model of Bisexual Identity Development

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Bisexuality is a mysterious concept in today's society. Extensive confusion and myth surrounds bisexual identity due to a lack of research and therefore understanding of bisexual attraction, behaviors and feelings. Many people hold stereotypes, both negative and positive, about bisexual people. Often these stereotypes are derived from the media and other reflections of society without a true comprehension of what it means to identify as bisexual. Homosexuality is gradually being recognized and tolerated by some members of society, but we are still a long way off from acceptance and assimilation. Consequently, bisexuality specifically is even less understood and recognized as it encompasses elements of both heterosexual and homosexual identities.

The researchers chose to study bisexuals based on this lack of knowledge and research. None of us identify as bisexual or homosexual. We wanted to educate ourselves and clarify our preconceived notions on a somewhat misunderstood topic. We also hoped that our research and discussions with bisexual college students would better inform our practice in working with this population, and with other students who are questioning their sexual identity, and with heterosexual students in terms of awareness and education..

Participants

Our study focused on college students who self-identify as bisexual. To obtain participants for our research, we spoke to friends and colleagues, contacted the Office of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Student Services at our institution and reached out to other colleges and universities in the region. As a group, we chose nine institutions and contacted the LGBT or Student Affairs offices, as well as the LGBT student organizations on each campus. We created a flyer to attract willing contributors

which was posted around these local institutions. In total, we received 19 responses from students at local institutions who wanted their stories and experiences to be heard.

Eight undergraduate student participants were interviewed. Of our sample, seven students were female and one student was male. All of the students were between the ages of 19 and 21. Two students were in their first year of college, four of our participants were sophomores and two were juniors. We had a wide range of self-reported ethnicities among our students, including White, White/Jewish, Chinese, Jewish, White/Latin American and White/Russian.

As for the students' backgrounds, five of our participants reported being from a suburban hometown and three students reported growing up in an urban area. Five of these students were born in the Northeast portion of the United States, one student was from New England, one from the Pacific Northwest and one student was international. The international student in our study was born in Hong Kong but spent some of her life in the United States. Most of the students we interviewed attended public high school (six of the eight), one student attended a private secular high school and one student attended a private non-secular school. Our students came from high schools ranging in size from 280 to 4,000 students. College majors included Biology/Pre-Med, Child Development, Medicine/ Visual Arts, Theatre/Lighting and Undecided. Three of the eight participants reported pursuing a major in some aspect of theater.

We developed a series of open-ended questions to ask our participants in the hour-long interview sessions as a way to streamline our interview process across multiple interviewers. Questions ranged from topics about family, friends and roommates to some topics regarding sexual orientation and experiences related to their bisexuality. We chose

to leave the questions open-ended in order to decrease the level of bias for both the interviewers and the participants. We wanted our participants to answer the questions openly and honestly without leading as to what we might be looking to gain from the interview. By asking a wide variety of questions, we aimed to examine many aspects of these students' lives and college experiences. We thought this to be the best way to identify themes and develop a grounded theory.

It was extremely important during the interview process for us to maintain a 'safe' environment for our participants. Prior to their interview the participants were issued a disclaimer, stating that their responses would never be used in conjunction with their names. In addition, we suggested to the participants that we conduct the interviews in a setting where they would feel most comfortable speaking about their bisexuality and allowed them to select the location. The eight students that we spoke with proved to be very helpful and cooperative. At the end of each interview all eight participants agreed to be contacted for clarification or further discussion.

The Grounded Theory

After conducting our interviews and evaluating the information we had gathered, we discovered trends in the responses from students. It seemed that most of our participants went through comparable processes when developing their bisexual identity. They made similar comments about how they felt at different points in their lives, and many of them also had done a great deal of reflection when considering how they became who they are today. Considering these similarities, we developed our grounded theory.

Assuming that bisexual students never leave behind a part of their original identity, we developed a model to symbolize that retention. We like to think of our model as a layer

cake, where each subsequent layer builds upon the previous layers, yet each layer is equal in size. The layers of a cake are all eaten at the same time, and no layer has any more importance than another (see appendix A for illustration). We developed five layers that signify the components of bisexual identity development for our participants. The process begins at birth and continues to the point at which the participants fully identify as bisexual.

Layer #1: Develops a Heterosexual Identity

The first layer of the bisexual identity model takes place from birth up until the point of a first encounter or experience with homosexuality. During this layer, students develop an assumed heterosexual identity. It is an uncontested fact that our culture is inherently heteronormative. For the majority of our society, a person is the product of a heterosexual relationship and is raised in a mostly heterosexual environment. This world includes a mother and a father, aunts and uncles, brothers and/or sisters, and grandparents, most of who are also products of a heterosexual relationship and identify as heterosexual.

All of our participants had traditional nuclear families; all parents were still married and most had at least one sibling. As one participant stated, “I have a very nuclear family – mom, dad, sister and dog.” To these students it was understood, starting from a young age, that the life process includes birth, childhood, marriage, birth of children and grandchildren, and eventually death. This cycle will then repeat itself, promoting socialization into a heterosexual world. One participant noted, “My mom said that as long as I have a husband and a child she doesn’t care what I do.”

The media also helps perpetuate the stereotype of a “nuclear” or “normal” family through film, TV and written publications. These mediums portray a family as a mother, a

father, 2.5 children and a family pet. Students often derive their conceptions of self and identity through their families and through the media. As another participant said, “I look like a straight girl.”

For many of our participants, being exposed to different sexual orientations was uncommon. “I wasn’t exposed firsthand to many homosexual people growing up,” explained a participant. This can lead to misinformation about sexual identities. Another participant noted that, “a popular idea is that bisexual women are straight but having fun.” Labels such as gay, lesbian or bisexual foster the notion that any sort of homosexual relationship is not the norm and therefore in need of a label. Other participants who grew up in conservative religious or cultural households believed that homosexuality was wrong, bad or a sin. They were often fearful of the idea of different sexual orientations. As one participant noted, “I thought it was a curse.” This too, lends itself to reinforcing the heterosexual identity norm that all of our participants were exposed to in the early part of their lives.

Layer #2: Experiences Homosexual Thoughts, Feelings and/or Behaviors

In this layer, student’s original conception of their heterosexual self is questioned. Students may find themselves attracted to members of the same sex, they may have a homosexual experience, or they may simply accept or legitimize their homosexual thoughts and feelings. One female participant shared, “I began to realize my attraction to girls in the 7th grade.” Another female student reported, “I was making a dance in response to a lesbian friend and realized that I was in love with another female dancer.” Often, this is the first time that students realize that they may not be heterosexual as they had originally thought. Although they may have had homosexual feelings all along, this is the

first time that they consciously recognize and affirm them.

For some students, this layer is a revelation or an ‘ah ha’ moment where they confirm the homosexual feelings and thoughts they may have had for a long time. One student noted that, “it just made sense” when she consciously acknowledged her homosexual feelings. This layer may answer many questions or uncertainties for students that have been lingering for some time. It can also be a time of significant reflection. Looking back, students begin to realize that they may have been attracted to members of the same sex all along. “When I reflected on it, I can remember being attracted to girls back in kindergarten and throughout my life, although I dated guys,” explained one participant. Another female participant admitted, “I think I always had an attraction to girls.”

For other students, this layer may be a time of great uncertainty, fear or repression. Especially with those students who were raised with culturally or religiously conservative backgrounds, they may find themselves uncomfortable or unsure of their feelings. One participant said, “I knew about my sexuality in high school, but I didn’t believe in bisexuality because it was not accepted by others.” Students who do not readily recognize and affirm their homosexual thoughts tend to spend more time in this layer.

Layer two is generally characterized by a realization and a growing understanding of a student’s homosexual feelings. This is a time when students may seek clarity for the meanings of their feelings and thoughts. It may also be a time of same-sex experimentation in order to further solidify homosexual thoughts and attraction.

Layer 3: Acceptance of Homosexual Attraction While Maintaining Heterosexual Identity

In layer three, an acceptance of homosexual feelings, thoughts and behaviors

occurs, yet individuals continue to identify as heterosexual. For many students, it seems that since they are socialized into a heterosexual world and they still have an attraction to the opposite sex, it is not only uncomfortable but viewed as unnecessary to openly recognize their queer identification. One participant said, “I didn’t call myself bi or lesbian at the time despite this experience because I guess I didn’t see anything long-term coming out of it.”

Many individuals are raised in environments that are not conducive to coming out, and others do not believe that bisexuality even exists. They continue to maintain a ‘straight’ identity due to lack of perceived choice in the matter. Because heterosexuality is the norm in our society, and these students do experience heterosexual attraction at least some of the time, they may not feel the pressure to come out in comparison to the coming out processes of gay or lesbian individuals. These students can remain attracted to both sexes without the stress of having to come out to others because a public heterosexual identity is maintained. Many students in this layer may feel that both the homosexual and heterosexual communities may not accept their sexual identity. This concern may encourage these individuals to identify with only one community. Another participant elaborated, “I am unsure of the whole LGBT group scene. Maybe due to some distrust in myself of the bi thing.” For many individuals, the heterosexual community is the ‘easiest’ to identify with because it is congruent with the status quo.

Layer #4: Integration and Assimilation of Heterosexual and Homosexual Identities

In this layer of development, students do not see themselves as gay or straight, but as being attracted to both sexes. Many times students see their sexuality as a continuum; some days they are more attracted to persons of the same sex, and other days to persons of

the opposite sex. One student described, “Me and my friends use numbers instead of words to describe how we are feeling, like 1 through 10 – 1 being queer and 10 being straight.”

For most students, this layer involves a fusing of their identities. They are no longer a straight person with homosexual experiences, but they realize that each component is a fairly equal part of themselves and their sexual identity.

Students in this layer commonly experience feelings of anger and frustration due to the constant labeling and categorization by those who are uninformed about bisexuality. One participant lamented, “I hate that bisexual people are labeled as confused.” Another reported, “A lot of people don’t believe that bisexuality exists. I hate labels of anything and I try to avoid using them in my life.” Often, students in this layer explore and examine labels such as bisexual, lesbian or gay. They may seek out definitions of what these terms actually mean for others as well as for themselves. Students are often unsure of labeling themselves, as they frequently do not see themselves specifically falling into one category or another. While in this layer, students may seek out people they view as similar to them to help clarify their new identity. They may also turn to various mentors, support groups or to an LGBT office on campus for support or reassurance.

Finally, students in this layer may start the coming out process, usually beginning with close friends or family members. The reaction of these people could encourage students to continue coming out or could push them back into the closet. One participant recounted, “I came out to my friends at 16. They all said it was obvious and that they always thought I was a lesbian. This prompted me to tell my parents.” Another participant elaborated, “Everyone here is open. I came out (at this campus) in my first year which helped me gain more confidence and I’m more able to express myself.”

Layer #5: Identify as Bisexual

In this final layer, students find themselves comfortable with identifying as bisexual. Following the search for an appropriate label, students finally develop their own definition of bisexuality that most clearly illustrates their sexual identity. One participant noted that, “Bisexual means different things to different people.” Students use their own definition to express their particular understanding and representation of their sexuality. Many students in this layer see beyond the limits of societal constructions of sex and gender. They find themselves attracted to people on a case-by-case basis, not just because they are a man or a woman. One participant explained, “I’m open-minded, I accept all sexuality and sexes and and accept new experiences. If you are attracted to all different kinds of people, why not think about them sexually? They are just a person.” Another participant noted, “If I marry a man, it doesn’t mean that I’m straight, it just means that I love that man.”

The five layers of the Layer Cake Model of Bisexual Identity Development encompass the formation process of a bisexual identity. Students will continue to experience the feelings, lessons and realizations they have had in previous layers. Like a layer cake, each layer both supports and is connected to the next. Each layer represents the establishment of an important part of bisexual identity.

Comparison to Other LGB Models

In comparing the Layer Cake Model to existing models of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) Identity Development, we found many similarities and even more differences. Our comparison to formal research strengthens the need for future studies with a focus on LGB identity development, as well as for specific research on bisexuality.

Weinberg, Williams and Pryor's 4 Stages of Bisexual Identity Development

In the 1980's, Weinberg, Williams and Pryor (1994) used previous research from three studies to develop their model of bisexual identity development, resulting in a four stage model. Stage one identifies a time of initial confusion, followed by a period of finding and applying the label of bisexual (stage two). The person then begins to settle into the identity of being bisexual (stage three). Weinberg, Williams and Pryor (1994) then found that many bisexual people move to a fourth stage where the uncertainty continues due to a "lack of validation of this sexual orientation" (103).

In comparing our Layer Cake Model to Weinberg, Williams and Pryor's model, we found two major similarities. Both models are based on the notion that bisexuals experience heterosexuality before homosexual attractions are realized. They both also recognize the frustration around labeling oneself as bisexual, as seen in stage two of Weinberg, Williams and Pryor's model and in layers three through five of the Layer Cake Model.

Despite these similarities, the models are inherently different from one another. Through our research and in the construction of our model, we did not discover any notion of continued uncertainty for our participants. Layer five of the Layer Cake Model, during which students identify as bisexual, reflects our finding that our participants were solid in their bisexual identification and embraced their attraction to and sexual interest in people of all sexes. We believe that bisexuality is becoming much more accepted as a sexual orientation than it was in the 1980's when Weinberg, Williams and Pryor conducted their research. Our use of a layer model is based on the premise that no one layer is more important than another layer, while Weinberg, Williams and Pryor use a linear stage model

that suggests universality and a structured progression through the stages of development. Finally, their model was based on a demographic in San Francisco in the 1980's, while ours is based on college students in the New York metropolitan area in 2003.

Cass's Model of Homosexual Identity Formation

Vivienne Cass (1979) developed a model of homosexual identity formation based on clinical work with people who identified as gay or lesbian in the 1970's in Australia. Cass's model, like Weinberg, Williams and Pryor (1994), began with a stage of Identity Confusion followed by a stage of Identity Comparison. In these stages the person first begins to experience homosexual thoughts, attractions or feelings, and moves on to accept that they may be gay or lesbian. These stages are followed by Identity Tolerance and Identity Acceptance, where the person has acknowledged that they are probably gay or lesbian and seek out other members of this community to reduce isolation and eventually accept that they are gay or lesbian. Stage five is Identity Pride. In this stage the person is proud of the fact that they are gay or lesbian, become active in causes for gay/lesbian rights and begin to minimize contact and experience anger with the heterosexual society. Cass's final stage, Identity Synthesis, occurs when the person sees less of a dichotomy of heterosexual and homosexual worlds and begins to judge people on personal qualities rather than on sexual identity.

Cass's model is similar to our model in that both recognize a level for identity confusion as well as a time for acceptance of homosexual thoughts, feelings or experiences. Both models also deal with less dichotomized homosexual and heterosexual worlds and work towards an integration of these two worlds. Our model differs from Cass in that we believe in a strong integration of the two, while Cass sees a stage for separation

from the heterosexual world. We did not see any evidence of separation from the heterosexual world with the students we interviewed. Our model is specific for bisexuals, while Cass's model is more generally focused on the formation of a homosexual identity.

D'Augelli's Model of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Development

Anthony D'Augelli (1994) developed a model of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual development that, some believe, overcame the weaknesses of earlier LGB identity models (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 93). His attempt is a lifespan model in which "the individuals shape their environments as well as react to them" (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 95). D'Augelli's model begins with the person exiting a heterosexual identity and developing a personal LGB identity status. This is an area of identity development in which the individual recognizes feelings and attractions that are not heterosexual and begins to 'come out' and challenge internal myths and stereotypes about what it means to be a part of the homosexual community. The individual then moves on to develop an LGB social identity where a support network of people who support his/her sexual orientation is sought out. Following the development of an LGB social identity, the individual enters a stage where he/she becomes an LGB offspring. In this stage, the individual 'comes out' to their parents and begins to redefine that relationship after 'coming out'. The final two stages of D'Augelli's model are developing an LGB intimacy status and entering an LGB community.

D'Augelli's model is similar to the Layer Cake Model in that they both acknowledge the presence of an inherent heterosexual identity due to socialization by a heterosexual society, as well as both recognizing the importance of a self-defined sexuality. However, differences arise between the two models when considering that our

model is specific to bisexuals while D'Augelli's model encompasses LGB identity development as one experience. His model covers the lifespan, where our model is specific to college student development. Finally, like in Cass's model, D'Augelli includes a stage for exiting a heterosexual identity. Our model insists on an integration of both heterosexual and homosexual identities to form a 'new' bisexual identity.

Limitations and Implications

It is important to consider the biases of the researchers and the limitations of the study when conducting research, due to the effect that these biases and limitations may have on the outcomes and results. Our research team all identify as heterosexual White Americans. We are all graduate students and are socially liberal due to our environment in New York City and to our field of study, student affairs. Many student affairs professionals typically have socially liberal perspectives. Even for those who do not hold socially liberal views, tolerance and acceptance of all viewpoints is necessary to successfully and appropriately challenge and support the students. Each researcher also began the research process with personal conceptions of bisexuality and was influenced by society's way of viewing and reacting to bisexual people.

We identified several limitations to our study when considering our participant pool. All of the students that were interviewed attended college on a socially liberal campus in New York City or in the New York City metropolitan area. Only eight total students were interviewed, and only one of those eight students was male. The majority of the participants identified as White and were freshmen and sophomores in college. Also, the students who responded to our solicitation efforts were self-selecting and interested in sharing their experiences as a bisexual college student.

In addition to the themes that contributed to the development of the Layer Cake Model of Bisexual Identity Development, we did discover some other themes that might lead to interesting conclusions if more research is conducted. The study of religion and spirituality, and their relation to bisexual identity might produce interesting results. We found that many of our participants had questioned religion at some point in their lives, and many of the students have altered their religious affiliation and practice since attending college which for many was also close to the time of coming out. We also found it interesting that so many of our participants had theater-related majors or participated in co-curricular theatrical activities. This relationship of bisexuality identity to theater might yield some significant research outcomes. We feel that the relationship may be rooted in the identification with more than one type of sexuality and the opportunity created by participation in theater and drama to further explore numerous identities. Another area of suggested future research is a study of the age at which bisexual people tend to identify as bisexual. We project that the coming out process for bisexuals may happen later in life than for lesbian and gay populations. This might be a result of an identification with the socially acceptable heterosexual community. According to the Layer Cake Model, bisexual persons might not feel pressure or necessity to begin the coming out process earlier in life because of their identification with both the homosexual and heterosexual communities.

Our findings from these interviews led us to develop several implications that are directly relevant to student affairs programming and practice. First, professionals should support students who identify as bisexual by accepting that bisexuality is a 'true' sexual orientation for some students. Any prior assumptions that bisexuality is a confusing,

transitional phase for homosexual students or an experimental phase for heterosexual students need to be re-examined. In addition, bisexuality is a broad term that requires redefinition and refinement depending on the individual student. Before making assumptions about a bisexual students' identity, ask for clarification of the label from their perspective. Even though a student may openly identify as bisexual, it is important to ask what that identity means to them personally.

Frequently student affairs professionals are unaware of the sexual identities of the students with whom they work. Sensitivity when programming, as well as the use of inclusive language, should be a priority to ensure that all students are fairly represented and that students are educated about lifestyles and identities that may differ from their own. Also, it should be recognized that many aspects of American society are inherently heteronormative, meaning that it is often assumed that all people are heterosexual, and that bisexuality and homosexuality do not exist. Acceptance of homosexuality is a consequence of knowledge and experience. Professionals should educate themselves about bisexuality and homosexuality and the various orientations that comprise the LGBT community so that they can educate their students through non-heteronormative programming and interactions. It should also be recognized that there is great diversity in the homosexual, bisexual and transgendered community. Often, bisexual and transgendered identities and issues are neglected, even when programs are inclusive of homosexuality.

The interview process and the development of our grounded theory model will be invaluable in our future interactions with college students. We now have a much clearer picture of the experiences of bisexual students, as well as a better understanding of the

meaning of bisexuality. We will be more sensitive to the differing developmental paths of all of our students. As a result of this study we have determined that while students may be labeled under a specific category, such as bisexual college students, they are individuals with completely separate histories, needs and goals. We have come to realize that it is our responsibility, as student affairs professionals, to make the feelings and experiences of bisexual students known in order to promote understanding and inclusiveness among all students.

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Appendix A

The Layer Cake Model of Bisexual Identity Development

