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Queer Stories of Coming Out in the 21st Century

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Queer Stories of Coming Out in the 21st Century

By

Bradley Max Wolfe, M.S.

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

Communication Studies

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Queer Stories of Coming Out in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Queer Stories of Coming Out in the 21st Century was written by Bradley Wolfe for his Communication Studies master's capstone project. The research was conducted at Minnesota State University, Mankato during the 2015-2016 school year. The research problem was to analyze the relevance of the Cass Model of queer identity development in a cultural environment which has shifted greatly since its origination. 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand what aspects of the model still held true and if other models better describe the identity development process for queer individuals. The research found the Cass Model was not correlating with the data collected. An alternative model was introduced, which better fit the data, by bringing together eudaimonic theory and Hecht's communication theory of identity development.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Individual identities evolve throughout childhood and into adulthood.

Communication from families, peers, and others influences the construction of one's identity (Hecht, 1993). In the field of communication studies, the cultural identity of the individual is often the focus of identity research. One of the cultural identities a person can claim is a queer identity. While published articles use different terminology when referencing queerness (Savin-Williams, 2011), being queer equates to being non-heterosexual, often through taking the identity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or a variety of newer terms for specific sexual orientations and gender identities. The current research seeks to understand the identity development process of queer individuals in light of the cultural shifts taking place which are creating a more accepting environment for the queer community.

An individual's identity expresses the intersection between personal, enacted, relational, and communal frameworks. Each framework is a different layer in identity. The layers overlap and interrelate to express one's identity in a variety of different ways (Hecht, 1993). The fluidity of the layers of identity is very prominent during the coming out process. One's personal identity is adapting to newfound characteristics, which may be in sync or at odds with relational and communal frameworks. Queer individuals need to learn how they want to express and navigate their queer identity in the relationships they hold (Nicholas, 2006). The expression of the queer identity impacts beyond the personal contact queer individuals have. As gay rights advocate Harvey Milk once said, "Coming out is the most political thing you can do." The sharing of one's sexual identity

through personal contact has been shown to be a significant factor in public support of queer rights (Barth, Overby, & Huffman, 2009).

Unlike other cultural traits, queer youth are frequently raised in heterosexual households. Some households may be supportive of their queer child's construction of identity. Others families are more resistant to their child's queer identity, which often causes negative psychological impacts (Bregman et al., 2013). Either way, the cultural identity is not passed down from parent to child. Queer individuals construct their own perceptions and expressions of identity within the influence of those in the world around them (Nicholas, 2006).

Theoretical models of identity formation among the queer population can provide many benefits. Some organizations use coming out models to train participants in creating safe spaces for queer people in the community. The models help queer communities express shared experience, which helps heterosexual allies increase their understanding of queer struggles. Most frequently identity development models are used by practitioners working with queer youth (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014).

There have been significant shifts in culture regarding the acceptance of queer identities (Pew research Center, 2013a; 2013b). The shifts create an academic necessity to reexamine and recreate identity development models for members of the queer community. While non-model approaches have been used to describe the coming out process (e.g. Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001), various model approaches to queer identity development continue to influence the work of practitioners working with queer youth (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). The current research will examine new interview data to

analyze the contemporary relevance of the Cass Model of identity development and a eudaimonic alternative of queer identity development, focusing on self-realization.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The identity of queer individuals is often discovered and constructed through discourse with others. Individuals can be agents of the construction of their own identity, or they may feel they are constructed by their cultural environment. The contrasting influences on identity are processed through the development of a unified sense of identity (Bamberg et al., 2011). The queer community has had an especially tense relationship between their sexual orientation and the heteronormative society. The cultural environment attempts to form a heterosexual identity, which has to be overcome through the process of self-discovery.

First, the current research will be placed in the appropriate historical context by reviewing the history of queer culture from the beginning of the gay rights movement up through the current state as an American subculture. Next, the defining language will be covered, which has shaped the conversation around queer rights even in the current cultural context. Then queer identity research, including the Cass Model, will be reviewed. Lastly, eudaimonic identity theory will be brought in to provide an alternative vantage point of looking at the queer coming out process.

Historical Background

On June 26th, 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States of America legalized marriage between partners of the same sex (Obergefell v. Hodges, 2015). The official recognition of same-sex love came after a watershed of shifting public opinion towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. In just over a decade past the turn of the century, Americans have gone from opposing same-sex rights to viewing gay men and lesbians favorably. Surveys have found almost twenty percent increase in

favorability towards gay men and lesbians (Pew Research Center, 2013a, 2013b). The culture has transitioned significantly from when queer identities first were brought to the attention of the general public during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Coming out models of identity development were established in response to the American Psychological Association removing homosexuality from their handbook of disorders in 1973 (Clendinen & Nagourney, 1999). The gay rights movement was underway and academics were beginning to document coming out stories. The Stonewall Riots marked the occasion where queer culture developed from isolated, hidden communities to open stories of struggle for the rest of America to hear (Rupp, 1999; Armstrong & Crago, 2006). The event became a highlight in the collective queer memory of the importance of not being afraid to stand up for who you are (Armstrong & Crago, 2006). Once the message of Stonewall spread throughout queer communities across America, other queer people decided the time was right to be public about their identity as a form of advocacy of the rights the community deserved.

The Stonewall Riots started the movement for homosexual individuals to publicly express one's sexual identity. Organizations were established in major urban centers across the United States to promote gay rights. The organizations were political in nature and focused on getting the public aware of the discrimination faced by homosexuals and other sexual minorities. Gay rights advocated this often through telling their stories in the media in ways to catch the public's attention (Clendinen & Nagourney, 1999). Unfortunately, the expression of queer identity to the general public had overlapped with the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States. Conservatives deemed the medical crisis as a punishment from a higher power to the queer community. They created a narrative of

queer romantic partnerships as threatening to family values (Eaklor, 2008). While many advocates continued promoting queer rights in America, potential allies and closeted queer individuals feared association with values labeled as immoral (Clendinen & Nagourney, 1999).

Queer advocates decided to break down the stereotypes by sharing narratives of same-sex couples upholding otherwise traditional family values. Other advocates believed the assimilation to the established culture undermined the ability of the community to have its own identity. Media in the 1980s and 1990s began portraying queer characters from either of these two perspectives. At first, queer characters were minor parts of the stories and often expressed an outsider culture unique to the queer community. As media became more comfortable sharing the stories of the queer community, the major characters were shown in same-sex relationships (Eaklor, 2008). These first stories began creating room for acceptance of the queer community.

The public attitude towards queer individuals can be demonstrated through the Clinton administration's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy in the military. Queer people were accepted in many sectors of society – as long as they did not publicly identify as queer (Eaklor, 2008). The policy continues to prevent transgender individuals from serving in the military, although the policy is currently under further review (Johnson, 2016). Nonetheless, the telling of stories allowed the heterosexual majority to have a clear understanding of the plight of their queer friends and neighbors. Communicating about queer identity slowly legitimized homosexuality and other sexual identities (Clendinen & Nagourney, 1999). Internet technology and new media representations of queer characters have coincided with the most substantial gains in queer acceptance in

American society (Pew Research Center, 2013a, 2013b). With more ways to communicate collective queer stories, the more successful the campaign to find acceptance in American culture has been for the queer community.

Defining Language

As the gay rights movement has progressed through history, so has the language used to describe the community. In order for people to identify with a group, in this case the queer community, a label needs to be ascribed to the group as a whole and understood by the members. The community needs to define which identities fit within the group share these identities so new people can join the group (Hecht, 1993). Queer people have the opportunity to assume a range of identities which are included in the queer community.

Researchers studying queer culture empowered participants to self-identify their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in the beginning of their research (Savin-Williams, 2011). When historical records or diaries are used as a research artifact, “same-sex love” has been used to describe people with seemingly queer behaviors (Rupp, 1999). Modern scholars and queer individuals have increased their vocabulary to describe non-heterosexual traits (Savin-Williams). “Gay” and “lesbian” have replaced “homosexual” to refer to individuals who are romantically attracted to others of the same gender. “Bisexual” and “pansexual” respectively refer to individuals who are attracted to both genders or to people regardless of gender. “Transgender” encompasses people whose gender identity does not match the sex they were identified as at birth (glaad, n.d.).

The variety of language used to describe individuals within the queer community speaks to the complexity of identity development for queer individuals. Even the

umbrella label of “queer” used in this paper can be problematic to many, especially of older generations (International Spectrum, 2016). Community members need to discover their identity being outside of the heteronormative culture and then conclude which of the non-heterosexual identities best describes who they are. The current research, looking at the commonalities in identity development, will use “queer” as an overarching identifier for everyone who belongs in the non-heterosexual community.

Hecht’s Communication Theory of Identity Development

Hecht (1993) established his Communication Theory of Identity Development to look at the complexity of identity through a layered approach. The layers can be combined in multiple ways to create many perspectives of understanding. The frames of identity established by Hecht are personal, enactment, relationship, and communal. Instead of analyzing communication as an expression of identity, Hecht saw the process as mutually influential. The frames of identity can be analyzed individually or combined, looking at both the overlaps and gaps, to gain a richer understanding of an individual’s identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004).

The personal framework of identity focuses on the internal beliefs people have about themselves. This includes the self-concepts they may hold and how the individuals define themselves (Hecht, 1993). For queer people, the personal framework can give understanding of how their queer identity interactions and combines with others personal identity people associate with themselves. A queer identity exists with various racial, cultural, religious, and other identity markers. The various identity held have internal combinations, but become more complex as the other layers of identity are brought into account.

The identities held can be enacted through communication. Which identities come to the surface in the interactions had with others depends on the social roles being performed (Hecht, 1993). Queer identities can be enacted in overt or covert ways (Nicholas, 2006). A person can hold a personal framework of being queer, but enact a heteronormative identity in communication. The gap and contrast between the two layers can bring new understanding of the individual's identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004).

The third layer is identity within the relationship. The enacted identity is one-direction communication; whereas the third frame is looking at how identity is negotiated in relationships. People define themselves based on the social relationships they have and the others around them (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004). During the coming out process, negotiation is vital between queer individuals and their relational others. The relationship can strengthen or become tenser depending on how the negotiation goes. Again, the relationship layer can be combined with and analyzed against the other layers to understand more about identity development.

Lastly, the communal layer is identity held by a group of people bonding them together (Hecht, 1993). The queer community is one example of a communal layer. Sexual orientation and gender identity are both personal frames of identity. The communal level is an added dimension when queer individuals have come together throughout history to create a defined community. Communal identities have hierarchies of which specific identities are more central to the community (Hecht). The history and language development of the queer community can show how homosexual identities have been the core of the hierarchy to which other non-heterosexual identities have been welcomed.

Hecht (1993) emphasizes the combination of layers to fully understand identity. The layering brings overlaps and gaps to the surface to get a more complex understanding of identity. Even if the layers of identity have some contrast, they can complement the overall understanding of queer identity (Nicholas, 2006). Hecht's theory is able to bring more dimensions to directional identity models, like the Cass Model and the Eudaimonic Model proposed later in the paper. Other theories also can enhance the understanding of queer identity development.

Eudaimonic Identity Theory

Eudaimonic identity theory analyzes the self-construction of identity within the realm of a plurality of identity choices. Theorists view the identity formation process as a journey towards happiness and self-actualization through the discovery of one's true self (Waterman, 2011). Eudaimonia is here defined as contented state of full self-realization. Queer identity formation can be viewed through this standpoint on how the coming out process aligns the internal true-self with the individual expression of their/her/his sexuality in the community. People go through stages of self-discovery and self-disclosure when coming out, which co-aligns with identity formation models. However, the journey of eudaimonic, queer self-discovery can also be theorized without the use of stages.

Davis' (2011) auto-ethnographic research is one example of how eudaimonic identity theory can be applied. She recognized and accepted her sexual orientation as a young adult, but her early recognition came with contradiction to the beliefs of the religious community with which she identified. The community pressured her to choose between her religious identity and her sexual identity. With help from a therapist, she

gained the confidence to actualize her sexual identity in her life. As Davis lived her life free to be herself, her ties with family and friends began to strain. Her coming out story ends with both losing one community and gaining a new one, a new community of lesbians who accepted her the way she was meant to be.

The plurality of identity choices gets more complicated than choosing between a queer identity and other potential identities. Cass (1979, 1984) explained in her model seeing the complexity of one's identity beyond just being queer was a progression from identity pride to identity synthesis. Lasala (2008) also researched the integration of queer identity with other aspects of a person's sense of self. Gay male couples specifically noted higher levels of romantic satisfaction when the relationship was disclosed their other family members. Even when the couples received negative reactions to the disclosure, choosing to integrate both the queer identity and family identity created stronger self-actualization.

Having higher levels of self-actualization allows queer individuals to adapt to the changing environment (Flower, 2011). New identity crises are always being created through communication with others in our life and the cultural shifts taking place around us (Erikson, 1968). Instead of having to construct different identities for heteronormative and queer presentations of self, individuals will have to freedom to only choose how their true identity will be self-actualized within the current circumstances. Eudaimonic theory and Hecht's identity theory are not specific to queer identity, but other academics have focused specifically on how queer identity develops.

History of Queer Identity Research

Erikson (1968) published a collection of articles detailing his beliefs on identity development in the adolescent population. Youth go through an identity crisis when trying to balance individual uniqueness with wanting to fit in with social groups in our culture and society. He proposed an eight-stage cycle of development, which many queer identity theorists used as the foundation of their models (Cass, 1984). However, in regards to queer youth, Erikson emphasized heterosexuality as having a positive view of identity and non-heterosexuality as a negative view of identity. Only after his prominent work in youth identity theory was published did the prevailing view of the time start shifting away from viewing heterosexuality as natural (Savin-Williams, 2011).

In the 1970's, the American Psychological Association made a clear policy shift in treating homosexuality as a legitimate identity, instead of a mental disorder to be treated. Clendinen and Nagourney (1999) found the opposition to the proposition to list homosexual as a disorder focused on the need for individuals experiencing difficulties with their sexual orientation to receive support for those feelings, not further pressure to oppress their sexuality. They noted the real psychological harm homosexuals face from the societal pressures, which is not innate to being a homosexual. The shift in perspective created the intellectual space for queer identity research to understand how people naturally adapt into a queer identity in a heteronormative society (Cass, 1984).

The Vivienne Cass's queer identity formation model has been the most prevalent identity formation model for queer studies since its creation in describing how queer people construct their identities (Savin-Williams, 2011). The theory was founded on two main assumptions. First, identity is formed through a developmental process, which can

be described in a progression of stages (Cass, 1979; Erikson, 1968). Second, the construction of identity is created through interaction between the individual and their environment (Cass, 1979). Cass set herself apart from her contemporaries by being the only theorists to empirically test her model (Savin-Williams, 2011). She was able to accomplish the empirical test because of an emphasis on specific cognitive, behavioral, and affective traits for each stage (Cass, 1979; 1984).

Six Stages of the Cass Model

Cass (1984) describes queer people as starting out in “Pre-Stage 1” where they do not question the heterosexual assumption placed on her/himself by the cultural environment. Then individuals can progress through the follow six stages.

Stage 1: Identity Confusion

In stage 1, queer people see their behaviors in actions, thoughts, and/or feelings as potentially being defined as homosexual, or another queer label. They begin to question their identity and eventually accept or deny it as their own. Individuals may have a positive or negative view of themselves as queer when they accept the potential label for themselves (Cass 1979, 1984). Erikson (1968) and other identity theories also focus on confusion as a main aspect of identity development.

Stage 2: Identity Comparison

Once individuals accept the possibility of being non-heterosexual, they transfer to stage 2. The stage consists of comparing behaviors, thoughts, and feelings with heterosexual counterparts. Queer individuals can feel isolated at this time as they discover more differences between themselves and heterosexuals (Cass, 1979, 1984). Erikson (1968) viewed the comparison as valuing heterosexuality in a positive light and

homosexuality negatively. Cass (1979, 1984) acknowledges individuals can view their identity positively or negatively during the comparison stage, which can impact whether they move forward to the next stage.

Stage 3: Identity Tolerance

Once the individual becomes more committed to a queer sexual orientation, they seek out other queer people to fulfill social, sexual, and emotional needs. The outreach feels necessary and may not even be desirable. The isolation caused in stage 2 needs to be reconciled with comfort of finding others like oneself. The quality of interaction during stage 3 can impact how one adopts and expresses a queer identity in their life (Cass 1979, 1984).

Stage 4: Identity Acceptance

The increased contact with the queer community helps individuals create a queer lifestyle. The stage includes selective disclosure and maintaining a passing appearance of being heterosexual at certain times, usually around those seen as potentially not being accepting of their newfound identity. The interaction in society outside of the queer community put increased tension on the individual's life. A conflict between wanting to maintain a queer identity in all aspects of life and fearing the rejection from certain others in society needs to be carefully managed by the individual (Cass 1979, 1984).

Stage 5: Identity Pride

Instead of managing their identity, individuals become prideful of their queerness at this stage. They will purposefully disclose their identity to confront heteronormative assumptions and fight for equality for their cultural group. Individuals dichotomize the world between homosexuals and heterosexual, with the former being great and the latter

being devalued (Cass 1979, 1984). Other models based off of Cass have dropped stage 5 or incorporated it into stage 6 for lack of clear boundaries (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014).

Stage 6: Identity Synthesis

A balance gets struck between the homosexual community and the heterosexual one. Individuals have more opportunity to have positive contact with heterosexuals, which reestablishes respect between the two worlds. People start to see their sexual orientation as only one facet of their identity, instead of it being the primary one (Cass 1979, 1984). Stage 6 is seen as an end point of queer identity development for Cass.

Critiques of the Cass Model

Vivienne Cass (1984) was one of many researchers who came up with models of identity formation. Cass' model has stood the test of time because of her emphasis on the cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions describing the above six stages.

Kenneady and Oswalt (2014) summarized the lengthy discussion surrounding the model since Cass' initial study. Using many of the same dimensions as Cass, other researchers have argued two to five stage models, usually combing some of Cass stages which were not found to have strong boundaries in between. They also saw fluctuation between the stages, arguing the process may not be as linear as Cass initially proposed. Cass (1979, 1984) did recognize individuals may not complete all six stages and instead shut down the development process at any stage.

Cass (1984) herself acknowledged a four-stage model may be more accurate. Stages 1 and 2 both fit within the confusion Erikson (1968) discusses. Stages 5 and 6 both include queer individuals being completely out of the closet, which limits the specific labeling of the two sections. Queer identity development models which use

stages have four generalizable stages: confusion, exploration, commitment, and synthesis (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2002). Using a stage model in itself brings along certain limitations (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2002; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014).

Eliason (1996) and Weinberg (1984) have both critique the idea of having identity development models. They argue participants are being forced into stages, instead of models organically being created around the stories being told. Cass attempted to quantitatively prove the validity of her model, but each attempt could not recruit a large enough sample for each of the six stages (Savin-Williams, 2011). Each of the study took predetermined stages of development attempted to classify participants in those stages, without much success.

In Kenneady and Oswalt's (2014) critique of Cass' Model, they argue the theory is limited by not taking into account the complexity of identity development. They see a variety of social and environmental factors, which may not be seen when conducting a quantitative analysis. McDonald (2013) argues identity is fluid so following strict categorization decreases the authenticity of the research. Cover and Prosser (2013) also see authenticity as an issue. In order to fit within the LGBT community, they see young gay men as framing their coming out to follow a certain pattern.

Horowitz and Newcomb (2002) argues identity models portray the process as eventually coming to an endpoint. They see, like McDonald (2013), identity as an ever-ongoing process which never fully concludes. Cass (1979) used an interactionist approach within her model, but failed to take into account the potential changes in the cultural environment. If identity is constructed through interaction, we need to also recognize the negotiation taking place with the wider culture (Orbe & Roberts, 2012).

As our culture changes, so will be strategies queer individuals use to adapt to the majority culture. With more and more people accepting the queer community (Pew Research Center, 2013a, 2013b), the group will have less tension in the coming out process. Orbe and Camara (2010) found most discrimination to be perceived, even when no clear motivating factors are present in the perpetrator of the alleged discrimination. With the experiences of the individuals being more pleasant, there will be a decreased perception of situational oppression. With less costs and more rewards involved in disclosing one's sexual orientation, the coming out process should be easier for queer people (Orbe & Roberts, 2012).

Cass (1979, 1984) described actualization of one's true self as identity synthesis. The current research critiques the six stage model towards self-actualization through interviews taking place over three decades past the model's original development. Eudaimonic identity theory will also be used to understand the construction of queer identity over time into a unified sense of self. Self-actualization will serve as a state of being where new identity choices are most easily navigated, or an end point in the coming out journey.

Research Questions

1. Does the Cass Model continue to describe queer coming out journeys in the 21st century?
2. What other identity development models best fit queer coming out journey?

Chapter 3: Methods

The complexity of cultural shifts on the identity development of queer individuals requires qualitative data to understand the breadth of influence the shifts could have on the process. Scholars studying sexual orientation most frequently rely on qualitative data to develop sexual identity development models (Savin-Williams, 2011). Cass (1979) used anecdotal information from clinical work with homosexuals to theorize her original coming out model. She used quantitative surveys to test each stage of her model in a later publication (Cass, 1984). Many critics of the Cass Model have used qualitative inquiry to critique the limits of her identity development model (Kenneady and Oswalt, 2014).

The current research looks at identity development over the lifetime of participants to analyze whether (1) each stage in the Cass Model adequately expresses contemporary aspects of queer identity development and (2) each participant transitioned through all six stages of the model as Cass described. While Cass (1984) used her surveys to look at each stage independently, the current research analyzes the course of development for queer individuals. Qualitative interviews are better suited to look at the long-term identity development. Further, the data was used to find other patterns in queer identity development Cass may have overlooked in her model.

Procedure

Upon approval by the Institution Review Board at Minnesota State University, Mankato, a semi-structured interview approach was selected to capture the complexity of the queer identity development process. Interviews were conducted either in-person or via a secured phone conversation. All interviews were recorded for data analysis, with

the permission of the interviewees. The interviews took place between November 2015 and January 2016. The length varied from fifteen to half an hour.

Interview questions were developed based off of the six stages of the Cass Model. Additional questions were added to discover stories which encourage participants to share core memories which frame their coming out journey. A semi-structured approach gives additional flexibility for participants to express their journey through their own words and perspectives (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008), which creates the most authentic representation of the participants' perspectives. The following ten questions, along with follow-up inquiries, were used to understand each participant's identity development process:

1. How do you define your sexual orientation?
2. When did you first start thinking of your sexual orientation as different from the heteronormative society?
3. What is your best memory which helped you through your coming out journey?
4. Do you remember any events that hindered or delayed your coming out process?
5. Who was the first person you came out to? What was that like?
6. Was there anyone who it was difficult to come out to?
7. Who was the most positive influence in your coming out journey?
8. Are there any people or situation in which you currently do not feel comfortable disclosing your sexuality?
9. Are you currently involved with the LGBT community at all?
10. Are there any other events or memory, which you are comfortable sharing, which impacted, for better or worse, your coming out journey?

Participants

Ten participants were recruited for the study. Recruitment was completed through Facebook calls for participants, with email assistance of the university's LGBT center, and by snowball sampling from initial participants. Six men, three women, and one female-to-male transgender participant shared their stories through securely recorded interview. Participants ranged in age from nineteen to sixty-one. Seven participants were between nineteen and twenty-six, with two outliers at forty and one who was sixty-one years of age. Two participants identified as racial/ethnic minorities.

Analysis of Interviews

Interviews were manually transcribed by the researcher before undergoing thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were first coded deductively by the six stages of the Cass Model (1979, 1984). The investigator used the cognitive, behavioral, and affective descriptions given by participants to determine during what stage the story examples took place. The first stage, confusion, was coded by thoughts and feelings of being different. As Cass (1979) described, the feelings of difference has yet to be directly associated with having a queer identity. The second stage, comparison, is when that takes place. The stage was coded by thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of comparison between a heterosexual and queer identity.

Stories were coded as tolerance when the behavior focused on initial disclosures of the queer identity, but the thoughts and feelings of the participant were still uneasy about the queer identity being disclosed. The acceptance stage was coded when the thoughts and feelings aligned positively with the behaviors of discloser. Stories were coded as prideful when the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings surrounding the queer

identity were amplified. Lastly, the sixth stage, synthesis, was coded by stories where the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the participants put the queer identity as secondary to other identity variables.

Some stories were coded to describe multiple stages of the identity development process. The coding was compared for similarities for each stage across participant data. The cumulative data from each stage was then coded for common themes expressed across interviews. Each participant's data was also analyzed according to the continuity between the six stages of the Cass Model.

The second independent coding was completed to discover common themes across interviews, focusing on the eudaimonic self-construction of identity. The interviewer coded for reoccurring examples of self-discovery leading towards greater happiness and self-actualization of participants' respective identities. As the coding was being completed, the research noticed some decision points were internal consideration of identity development. Other stories focused on how participants expressed their identity in interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the research decided to split the analysis into internal discovery and interpersonal performance. After the results were coded as such, common themes within the two coding results were reported and analyzed for broader theoretical implications.

Chapter 4: Results

The ten interviews were first coded following the six stages of the Cass Model in order to answer the first research question: Does the Cass Model continue to describe queer coming out journeys in the 21st century? Representative examples have been brought out to demonstrate the themes found within each stages. The themes were assessed to see if they strongly correlated with the original 1979 Cass Model.

Cass-Based Thematic Results

Stage 1: identity confusion.

All participants went through some degree of confusion, but did not necessarily follow the stage as Cass explained. Some participants shared experiences of knowing something was different about them at a young age and, therefore, did not necessarily assume heterosexuality as a default.

“I always knew that... I always felt different, even as a kid. Five years old. I didn't know what it was, but I always felt different. I had an idea, but I didn't know what it was.” - Gay Female, 23

“I just always thought I was different.” - Gay Male, 24

“I just knew I was not heterosexual at a young age.” - Gay Male, 25

Once they participants grew older, they begin noticing attractions to people of the same gender, as Cass (1979) noted is part the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings at the confusion stage. The attraction came at different ages for different people, but it always was a noticeable transition into a new identity.

“When I was in the fourth grade, I had some hot counselors and I had to change in the locker rooms with them. I noticed myself checking out the hot counselors.”

- Bisexual Female, 25

“I would only go to straight clubs, but I would find guys attractive, especially once I got more drunk.” - Gay Male, 40(B)

“Sophomore year I met my best friend in high school and I was totally in love with her. Yeah, I guess, it was kind of like, I didn’t know I was gay right away, but I knew that I liked her.” – Lesbian Female, 19

One of the barriers to assuming an identity with the feelings they had was finding the language to express it. Cass did not address the limitations of language on identity development. A few participants shared confusion about the language used to describe their predisposition.

“I think it was overall a little bit more difficult not necessarily to accept it, but to put words to it.” – Gay Male, 26

“At that point, it wasn’t a question of who was I, but what do you call it. It wasn’t you know... When you are 14 you know what sex is, but the idea of sex when you are young is that you’re being taught, at least I was taught, sex meant heterosexual sex. In public health class, there were discussions about pregnancy and condoms, but there was never discussion about sex between boys or sex between girls. I knew that was not what I wanted to do. Then the issue was what do you call whatever it is I am.” – Gay Male, 40(A)

“We saw characteristics in me that she saw in her ex’s that were trans guys. [...] I could just tell something was missing. I went to a doctor and everything came together after that.” – Transgender Male, 24

The confusion phase lasted for various extents of time for the participants from months to decades. Participants did not reaffirm all aspects Cass (1979) described during the confusion stage. A more accepting culture is one potential explanation for the minimized stage of confusion, as there were less barriers to assuming their queer identity. One factor of evidence for the cultural shift argument is how participants who expressed learning more negative associations with the queer community had the most difficult stages of confusion.

Stage 2: identity comparison.

Not all participants went through a clear stage of identity comparison. Cass (1984) and other scholars have discussed whether this second stage should be integrated into the confusion stage for the lack of supporting evidence (Savin-Williams, 2011). Some research participants jumped right from confusion to feeling confirmed in their newfound identity, lacking any apparent comparison between heterosexual and homosexual lifestyles. Other participants had pronounced comparisons when trying to come to terms with their identity. Some of the comparisons were between intimate relationships and/or attraction they had with people of different genders.

“I would say my real thing that happened that made me positively sure that I was homosexual was that I was in a relationship with a really nice lady for a year and a half. During intercourse, it just wasn’t right. I didn’t like it. I liked her, but it just wasn’t what I was looking for. I just couldn’t get into it.” – Gay Male, 24

“I was working at the writing center. To be perfectly frank, one of my appointments was one of the hottest men I have ever seen in my life. And I had that, you know, again perfectly frank, that very strong sexual urge. I have never felt that sexual urge before in such a really strong way.” – Gay Male, 26

“I had a girlfriend, we were sexually active and all that stuff. It was just sex. It wasn't really any emotion or anything. Like, when I first had sex with a guy, first kissed a guy, I had this whole extreme feeling come over.” – Gay Male, 40(B)

The comparison between heterosexual and homosexual intimate behaviors was a development Cass (1979) acknowledged could occur. Participants also shared a level of denial surrounding their identity which led them to attempting heterosexual relations. Cass recognized, at each of the stage, participants would decide whether to continue pursuing queer identity development, which would include denying the newfound identity. The influence towards denial was caused by the cultural environment the participants were raised in.

“No, I basically just hid from the world because during school and stuff like that, everyone was so against it. It wasn't really accepted. Anyone who was officially known was beaten up. You know... just terrible things ended up happening all the time.” – Gay Male, 24

“I really was, I really did try to be as Catholic as I could be up to that point. I think that initial feeling really threw me off.” – Gay Male, 26

“I knew I was different. I didn't want anyone else to know. Coming from the background I come from, I was always too scared.” – Gay Male, 40(B)

As can be seen from the quotes, the same participants were the ones who went through a clear stage of identity comparison. The cultural environment was a major determining factor in whether participants went through a comparison stage in their identity development. Participants growing up in more positive cultures made swift progressions from confusion to tolerance.

Stage 3: identity tolerance.

The stage of identity tolerance was marked by a transition between often unspoken bonds to the first utterances of coming out. All participants went through a phase of tolerating their identities, although the stage was fairly brief. The stage was found to be not as significant as Cass (1979) established in her original theory. The changing culture has created new opportunities for queer people to make smooth transitions into their identity. For example, a few expressed the phase beginning with finding other queer individuals who they could bond with through implicit, unspoken acceptance.

“We’d just get together to talk about how the day was. It wasn’t anything sexual we’d talk about. We knew we were all the same. We felt comfortable around each other.” – Gay Male, 24

“I had a few friend who knew that I was, but they didn’t address it either. And I never talked to anybody about it. But they just knew.” – Gay Male, 25

*“I’m glad I didn’t rush it because, the nice thing was, by the time that I came out, my mom wasn’t surprised. There wasn’t a period of transition where everything was weird and uncomfortable. She was just like kinda said the right things.”
– Lesbian Female, 19*

“It was unspoken. It was unspoken till we got drunk. Then it was like, “Well, what do you have to say.” And I was like, “What do you have to say?” So, yeah, that’s basically how it happened.” – Gay Male, 40(A)

Some participants were not as lucky to find those relationships. They had to build – and sometimes break – relationships through beginning to disclose the queer identity they found for themselves. The first experiences of coming out were most nerve racking but were with accepting people, which made future coming out opportunities easier.

“I just, I knew. Just more of my life I knew that... it was eating me up inside and she knew something was going on. And I finally realized that I had to tell her. I remember I was crying the whole way home and I had to tell her. Needless to say, she was shocked. But she’s now my biggest supporter, or one of my biggest supporters. It was difficult.” – Gay Male, 61

“It was fine because she already came out as liking both boys and girls. We talked about it and cried a little bit. She’s the one who actually convinced me to come out to my parents.” – Transgender Male, 24

“She didn’t understand. She always kind of suspected. She was hoping that wasn’t the truth, but at the same time I am her son and she loves me no matter what.” – Gay Male, 24

After the initial disclosure, participants shared a growing confidence with their queer identity. Only two themes were found within stage 3, which does not support a clear stage of tolerance. The first utterances were clear turning points in participants’ lives from a hidden identity to coming out and accepting themselves.

Stage 4: identity acceptance.

The stage of acceptance was the stage most discussed among participants and correlated best with the Cass Model of identity development. Acceptance came with coming out to a greater number of individuals, which included receiving backlash from some of the disclosures. Participants shared experiences with homophobia, but also the growing support they received from others. One of the themes of acceptance was the ease being created with coming out to new people.

“If I was gay and I knew it, why deny it? When someone asked me and that’s the truth, yeah, you know... So it was just like that since [my first disclosure].”

– *Gay Male, 25*

“My mom and my step-dad were super supportive when I came out to them and they were supportive the whole time. It’s a lot easier when you have a support system like that, especially in the family.” – *Transgender Male, 24*

“If somebody asks me when I’m gay, I’ll tell them. Sometimes when I hear someone make a derogatory comment and I should stand up, I don’t. I’m still coming to grips with it.” – *Gay Male, 61*

Participants shared the difficulties dealing with homophobia from others in society.

Sometimes the oppression was direct and other times they referenced broader experiences they witnessed.

“There are times too when I have friends who we hang out a lot [...] She would always make sure whoever we were talking to in the store she would make sure to say she had a boyfriend. She would always find a subtle way because she doesn’t want people to think we’re together.” – *Gay Female, 23*

“When I told my family, when I finally did come out, it was ten times the shame, ten times harder and they disowned me, stuff like that. I come from an abusive family.” – Gay Male, 40(B)

“Some people are just like that, you know [...] Some of my siblings have like friends. I’ve heard like... I’ve been called faggot by one of my sister’s friends. I never really had any person who I choose to have a relationship with say anything negative about it.” – Gay Male, 25

The homophobia in society created expressed hesitation from participants when deciding whether to come out to new people. While most acknowledged they will share their queer identity if directly asked, many shared situations in which they would prefer to avoid the disclosure.

“Even when I walk into a classroom for the first time, I know that there could be other people like me and I just don’t know it. It’s not as obvious as the way I look, but there’s still that possibility that I am different and I feel different, even if people are accepting – because I don’t know that. It’s this whole back and forth thing.” – Gay Female, 23

“And it still, even today, scares the hell out of me when I tell somebody I am gay. Because I don’t know what their reaction is going to be.” – Gay Male, 61

The hesitation surrounding the reactions from other people caused most of the participants to come out to some people through somebody else sharing their identity. The participants discussed the perceived negative reaction from certain individuals in their life as a reason they did not want to discuss their queer identity directly. However, most of the situations ended up with reaffirming feedback.

“I ended up not telling him personally. I had my mother tell my grandma who then told my grandpa. I didn’t want to do it directly because I thought he would be super ashamed and not want to talk to me anymore. [...] It was difficult for me, but he did I guess cry for a little while and then he went into the basement for a while and thought about it. He came back up and told my grandma he didn’t care, that I was his fishing pal and no matter what he still loves me.”

– Gay Male, 24

“One thing is I have not said out loud to my parents. I know they know. I ran across a conversation on Facebook with my mom and with some relatives. It was positive, but they just knew.” – Gay Female, 23

“And to be perfectly honest, I have learned over the course of time I didn’t have to come out to my family, necessarily. It something that just sort of got shared one way or another; it wasn’t a formal announcement. And so, it slowly became, if you want to talk about it, fine. If not, we don’t have to talk about it sort of thing. I know they know.” – Gay Male, 26

The indirect disclosure was a great comfort for many participants. They can have mutual awareness of the identity with others without necessarily dealing with the discomfort around it. At the same time, participants then needed to manage their identity in multiple situations. Identity management between accepting and non-accepting others was a point of difficulty for many participants because they wished to include others, often their family, in the queer relationships they have established.

“It’s not that [my family doesn’t] know, but still something that’s not a comfortable thing and we really sort of push it away. They’ll turn around

questions around my grandparents because they are getting up into, they are also very Catholic and they are getting on in years.” – Gay Male, 26

“I think it’s about the fear of rejection, even people in my own family. They think it is a matter of choice or they should just kill all the gays [...] But I haven’t talked to them about it. And I know how people’s attitudes are. You’re going to burn in hell. At this stage in my life, I don’t need rejection.” – Gay Male, 61

“If I don’t talk about it or ask about it, my family don’t care [...] I was cleaning, cooking, doing all these chores, driving – they were fine with me. When I wanted to be myself or go out, they kind of attacked me on it. My mom started attacking me on it, she was always the worst one.” – Gay Male, 61

Nonetheless, all participants shared appreciation for the supportive community they have found and sustained in their life.

“Then when I went to college I met a bunch of people and they’re like, ‘We don’t care’ and ‘we love you.’ They’ve been very supportive and we’ve been friends ever since I started college.” – Gay Female, 23

“[My brother] was super happy about it. He thought it was great that I met somebody. He shook my hand and gave me a big old hug and told me he would be there for me not matter what.” – Gay Male, 24

“I have a few close friends who are gay. We get along in general and I think, with most other gay people, there is a shared sense of community.”

“I also think that some of the people that I met at [university] through our graduate program there. It was just nice to express that identity and become a lot more comfortable with it.” – Gay Male, 26

“I would say the most significant thing was having a friend you was also gay. We came out together and experienced what the forming of the identity meant.”

– *Gay Male, 40(A)*

While participants all experienced some negative communication surrounding their queer identities, most expressed a certain ease or smoothness in their coming out journey. They were grateful for the support and positive relationships they found while coming to terms with being queer. Cass (1979) the above qualities in her original theory. The stage of acceptance has, for the most part, stayed stable since her initial exposure.

Stage 5: identity pride.

Only one participant clearly expressed a desire to be prideful of his identity and to be actively involved in the queer community. He also was the participant with the most difficult coming out journey, experience abuse from his family and romantic partners.

“One day, I decided to go to the club, I thought [my family wasn’t] home, so I got dressed up kind of gay looking and my family was home and my mother was just in tears, screaming at me, calling me names. It was embarrassing.”

– *Gay Male, 40(B)*

“I am finally getting comfortable enough with myself to get back into the community, in the gay world.” – *Gay Male, 40(B)*

Other theorists have also questioned the stage of identity pride, sometimes blending it into identity synthesis (Savin-Williams, 2011). Other participants expressed casual involvement in the queer community. Many participants shared they attend their local pride festival on an annual basis. There were a few other low-commitment involvement opportunities participants took advantage of.

“I try to help out with support groups on Facebook and we go to pride every year, but that’s about as far as it goes.” – Transgender Male, 23

“I have considered trying to be an advisor for, maybe not an advisor, but a faculty resource for our LGBT peer groups on campus, but I am [job position] so I don’t really have a lot of time outside of that. But one thing I have done, I have gotten safe-zone certified.” – Gay Male, 26

“One time I gave \$10 to a guy on the street who was like, ‘Do you have a minute for gay rights?’ And I saw like, ‘Sure.’ And that’s about all I’ve ever done.” – Gay Male, 25

Overall, participants did not express strong correlations with being prideful of their identity. The current research does not support a stage of identity pride within the development process. Arguably, some participants may have stopped at identity synthesis, or may not have yet progressed to identity pride. However, multiple participants reached identity synthesis without experiencing a clear stage of identity pride.

Stage 6: identity synthesis.

Only a few participants expressed an established synthesis of their identity. Cass (1979) noted not all queer people may reach the final stage of her identity development process. One of the common themes coded within the stage is how queer identity is just a normal aspect of self, along with other identity traits.

“All my friends have been gay since sixth, seventh grade. So, being gay is very normal to me.” – Bisexual Female, 25

“I don’t think it’s anything, it’s not a huge thing, it’s who I am, it’s part of your life. To another person, one of my sibling saying they met somebody that’s the opposite sex of them.” – Gay Female, 23

Other participants focused on their queer identity. Other identity factors were seen as influences on the queer identity, without the influence being mutual. One participant eloquently discussed why the queer identity stands out among other aspects of self.

“But I think really in terms of my lived experience I fall into this very typical deal where my gay identity is the one piece of me which fall outside of the norm, the hegemony. Otherwise I am white, cis-gendered, middle class. And so, those things in our culture tend to sort of be pulled to the center and become invisible. In practice, yes, my gay identity is probably the biggest factor in my identity that I really talk about and I recognize obviously that’s not true. It’s not the largest part of my actual identity, but in terms what I social construct it really is.”

– Gay Male, 26

No other participants clearly expressed the intersectionality of their identity, but rather focused on the queer identity throughout the interview. There was not enough participants who clearly reach identity synthesis to fully analyze the stage within the Cass Model.

Eudaimonic Thematic Results

The second set of results brought forward themes throughout the ten interviews pertaining to identity choices being made. The themes were used to answer the second research question: What other identity development models best fit queer coming out journey? As the research was being coded for common themes, the identity decision

were noticed to be either internal or external. Therefore, the common results pertaining to identity choices were grouped into intrapersonal discovery and interpersonal performance. No current queer identity development model has a clear separation between internal and external identity development. A new model was created using the data, and is described in the discussion.

Intrapersonal discovery.

The younger male participants in the study often described their coming to terms with their identity as a switch flipping on. Often there was confusion leading up to the awareness, but the males described clear decision points of accepting their queer identity.

“I just kind of knew at one point. It wasn’t like a big deal for me particularly.”

– Gay Male 25

“No, once I knew for certain, I was certain and then I had to pursue it and move on. There was no going back thinking it was just a fluke. I knew it was for certain and I had to find somebody.” – Gay Male, 24

Both females and males in the interviews expressed a need to learn the language to describe their feelings. Many times participants felt different at an early age, then assumed a queer identity once they learned the language for it.

“At that point, it wasn’t a question of who was I, but what do you call it [...] The only alternative I knew of at the time was gay.” – Gay Male, 40

“But it’s definitely made me more secure in myself, especially just having a word for what I am.” – Transgender Male, 24

“So, I think I started recognizing it when I was a junior in high school. I don’t think, for some reason I wasn’t able to put a label to it until four years later when I was a junior in college.” – Gay Male, 26

Some participants needed further confirmation beyond a label to understand their identity. Often the confused participants attempted heterosexual romantic partnerships prior to accepting a queer identity.

“When I fell in love with my best friend, it was more than I felt towards any guy, like, ever. And even just having crushes on girls was a lot less shallow.”
– Lesbian Female, 19

“I had a girlfriend, we were sexually active and all that stuff. It was just sex. It wasn’t really any emotion or anything. Like, when I first had sex with a guy, first kissed a guy, I had this whole extreme feeling come over.” – Gay Male, 40(B)

The participants who did attempt other lifestyles were not following their natural identity, which created lower levels of satisfaction in their relationship. The participants experimented with and decided between the identity choices to figure out which felt more natural. Opting into a queer identity led to greater fulfillment in their romantic life.

Interpersonal performance.

Even after participants were able to acknowledge their queer identity, some shared experiences of finding the correct label to express in their interpersonal relationships.

“I think I initially came out as bisexual, just acknowledging I was willing to date men.” - Gay Male, 26

“For me personally, it was harder for me to say ‘I don’t like guys’ than it was for me to say ‘I like girls.’” – Lesbian Female, 19

“Even when I said I was a lesbian, it didn’t feel right. I didn’t fit in with that whole group.” – Transgender Male, 24

All participants shared experiences of selectively expressing their queer identity.

Participants reserved the right to blend in with the heterosexual assumption in specific situations in which they were unsure of the reactions others would have.

“In nine out of ten cases, well, in fact it’s still true. If someone asks me, I’ll say, ‘Yes, I’m gay.’ There are very few occasions where I make that part of my introduction.” – Gay Male, 40(A)

“I’d say that I don’t know how people I don’t personally know, how they are going to react or what they think or it. I would just to prefer not to address it to them.” – Gay Male, 25

Some participants explicitly stated a fear of harassment or violence as the reason they avoid disclosing their queer identity.

“I don’t mind letting people know if I know they are going to be in my life, type deal. But I don’t say anything when I am back home [...] I don’t tell strangers. Sort of a safety thing.” – Transgender Male, 24

“Sometimes I worry with my lesbian button, walking home from campus and there’s a group of guys walking, I’m like ‘don’t talk to me.’ It’s not just about being gay, but also about being a woman.” – Lesbian Female, 19

Other participants specified a hesitation in disclosing their identity to older generations.

“It sounds terrible, but I’m still in between whether we should wait out the clock, if you will, or if it something I need to actively bring forward to them.”

– *Gay Male, 26*

“Well we haven’t told my great-grandparents yet, just due to religious reasons and due to the fact they are 88 and 89 years old and they wouldn’t understand.”

– *Gay Male, 24*

Adapting to a heterosexual performance in specific situations was a theme across all the interviews. Some participants shared they attempt to avoid situation where they feel the adaptive performance is necessary so they can stay true to their identity. Eudaimonic theory suggests people make identity choices based on what will create the greatest amount happiness (Waterman, 2011). In some cases, an internal acceptance of one’s identity and an external expression of heterosexuality is preferred. The intrapersonal discovery can appear fully formed while, in interpersonal relationships, people perform their identity as heterosexual. The factors surrounding identity choices are complicated, but always come down to what queer individuals believe will create the greatest happiness in the situation.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The selected quotes from the interviews provide key themes for analysis. The themes were created according to the Cass Model and eudaimonic theory's focus on choosing among different identity choices. The Cass Model had results within all six stages, although not all participants went through each stage. The eudaimonic themes were easily divided among intrapersonal discovery and interpersonal performance.

Theoretical Implications for the Cass Model

The stages of identity comparison and identity pride were both found to have the least relevance to the data taken from the interviews. Few participants made clear references to undertaking either of the two stages. Other research has also pointed to a four stage model, combining or leaving out stages two and five, as being more accurate for the coming out process (Cass, 1984; Kenneady and Oswalt, 2014; Horowitz and Newcomb, 2002). The data was still able to reinforce some of the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings associated with the two stages. Therefore, a consolidation of the stages, as other theorists have done, would most accurately describe the range queer people can experience during identity development.

While all six stages had data, most participants did not have stories to share from all six stages. Most of the data collected related to stage four of the model, identity acceptance. Even when excluding stages two and five, the interviews did not follow through the Cass Model. Some participants shared experiencing only two or three of the stages. A number of the participants, arguably, have not yet progressed to identity synthesis and are currently in stage four of the model. However, some participants did not make clear associations with being confused about their identity, beyond waiting to

put a word to the difference they felt. Identity tolerance also could not be coded in some of the interviews, as participants shared quick transitions from understanding their identity to accepting it.

When coding the participants' experiences, some of the Cass Model coding felt forced. As other research has pointed out, many identity models lack heuristic value in how the stories are made to fit the models, instead of the models being made around the stories (Eliason, 1996; Weinberg, 1984). Cass (1979) did base her model off of experience working with queer people struggling with their identity. The stories known by Cass were from the early stages of queer people fully coming to terms with their identity and expressing it in public. The change in the cultural environment may have created less authenticity for the Cass Model.

The participants who did have stories closely relating to the Cass Model expressed more barriers in coming to terms with their queer identity. Two of the older participants, forty and sixty-one years old, shared emotional stories of the open disregard towards the queer community expressed by their families. The other forty year old in the study had found acceptance very early in life, which made avoiding the oppressive community much easier for him. Younger participants also shared the open support they were able to find from peers early on in their identity development, which created smoother transitions into publicly assuming a queer identity.

While the Cass Model may not be as relevant in a more accepting cultural environment, some of the specific behaviors, thoughts, and feelings described in her 1979 theory still have relevance today. Practitioners still use the Cass Model when creating safe spaces for the queer community (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). Non-model

approaches have been proposed for over a decade (e.g. Horowitz and Newcomb, 2002), but alternative theories of identity development have not been adapted by practitioners. Therefore, an alternative model approach of identity development adapted for the current cultural environment would enhance the quality of services for queer people struggling with their identity.

Eudaimonic Model of Queer Identity Development

Eudaimonic theory of identity focuses on finding the greatest happiness among a variety of identity choices. The eudaimonic coding of the data focused on finding these key decision points among choices in identity development, which created results in two general categories: intrapersonal discovery and interpersonal performance. The Cass Model attempts to bridge a transition between the two aspects of queer identity development through her models; however, the intricacies of the coming out process may be better described a dual-model approach looking at the separate but intertwined processes occurring during queer identity development.

Intrapersonal: Confusion → Resolution → Synthesis

Interpersonal: Heteronormative Assumption ↔ Implicit ↔ Indirect ↔ Direct

Intrapersonally, queer individuals go through two main stages while coming to terms with their identity: confusion and resolution. Confusion can consist of feeling different in a heteronormative culture. Many participants shared feeling different early in their life, even when they did not have a label to associate with the feeling. Some participants allowed the confusion to continue later into their life, usually because of fear and denial. Cultural pressure can prevent individuals from reaching the resolution stage, as seen by early examples of same-sex love in America (Rupp, 1999).

The resolution stage can be completed very quickly for some people. Usually male participants were the quickest at coming to peace with their identity, once they understood what the confusion was about. Other participants took longer to resolve the correct language for their identity. The transgender participant originally came out as a lesbian before discovering a transgender identity more accurately described his situation. Other participants experimented with various degrees of bisexuality before assuming a purely homosexual identity. As seen by the social and sexual experimentation with identity labels, the confusion and resolution stages can extend and overlap with the interpersonal stages of identity development.

The interpersonal aspects of queer identity development are ongoing, with no finite ending. Every new interpersonal communication partner comes with a new opportunity to approach one's identity. Four types of interpersonal identity performance were found: heteronormative, implicit, indirect, and direct. Heteronormative would be the default in a culture with a heterosexual assumption. Some participants shared a preference for continuing the assumption even when their queer identity is fully integrated into their life. They will share their queer identity, if explicitly asked, but otherwise leave the decision to communicate about their queerness up to the relational partner.

Personal beliefs about identity are the strongest factor expressed when deciding how to approach a queer identity in social situation. Participants expressed a preference for implicit understanding of queerness from relational partners, especially early on in the coming out process. Once the participants were more confident and comfortable with their identity, verbal references to their sexual orientation became easier. Even when

participants began coming out to relational partners, indirect approaches to coming out were still used, especially among family. Some participants choose to have other people disclose their identity so they would not have to experience any potential backlash. Personal beliefs about identity are just one layer of Hecht's (1993) identity theory, mentioned earlier in the literature review as a way to see new more dimensions of identity development. Other of Hecht's layers can help understand the complexity of the identity development process as well.

The second layer, enacted identity, also influence what interpersonal approach is used. Some participants considered themselves as having clearly queer traits which can be identified by others. While they may have been more comfortable using the heteronormative assumption or an indirect approach, the participant disclosed their identity being either implicit enough for others to pick up on or a fairly direct indicator of their queer identity. However, stereotypes may falsely lead someone to be considered having a queer identity, which can lead to backlash similar to that experienced by the queer community.

Interpersonal identity created in relationships with the individuals also had clear influence on how queer individuals perform their identity. Participants shared stories of families members making explicit references to acceptance or rejection of one's queer identity prior to coming out to them. Preexisting feelings on being queer influenced how comfortable participants felt performing their queer identity in front of those relational partners. One participants shared a story about being unaware his family was home when he was performing a direct queer identity in the way he dressed prior to going to a club.

The confrontation between the identity he wanted to assume and the identity he felt comfortable with around his family was fairly emotional.

The communal layer of identity is a key aspect to care of creating safe spaces for the queer community. A few participants shared appreciation for finding an accepting community where they could be themselves. Some were able to find belonging in their school environment, whether in high school or college. A couple shared stories of changing schools and being able to have a better experience after the transition. The communal aspects can also be a barrier to identity development, as some participants shared regarding their previous experiences with religion. The four layers of identity all interrelate and influence each other, which creates decision points for how participants choose to perform their identity.

Eudaimonic theory is focused on finding happiness among potential identity choices (Waterman, 2011). Queer people go through both intrapersonal and interpersonal exploration when deciding what identity choice creates the most happiness for them. The influencing factors on identity create a necessity for further self-discovery as to what identity performance the participants feel most comfortable with.

Recommendations for Future Research

The current research opens up multiple avenues for future study. Scholars should feel free to diverge from Cass to discuss new models of queer identity development. The Eudaimonic Model splits the process into two layers, which can give a more accurate portrayal of the complex factors influencing the coming out process while still keeping the constructivist format which practitioners utilize. A larger study to understand

accuracy of the Eudaimonic Model would be useful to determine whether the model can replace the Cass Model.

Other research can be done to determine why practitioners prefer constructivist models of queer identity development, as opposed to other theoretical explanations. As theorists attempt to transition away from model approaches to identity development, there needs to be open communication with people who help struggling queer individuals to ensure the community workers have the resources they need to best understand the development process. Theorists need to work with practitioners to make theories approachable to put into practice.

Limitations

The results and discussion were grounded in current research and theories in the field. The research was limited by the sample size and sampling methods, but has opened doors to further research verifying the theoretical claims made. The research was also limited by having only one researcher coding the interviews. Further research on the Eudaimonic Model should have both a larger sample size and multiple coders to verify the accuracy of the coding.

The Eudaimonic Model is also limited by the lack of specificity in describing the complex factors of the coming out process. This is a limitation on identity development models in general, especially when they attempt to speak for an entire community. The theory attempts to be open to the complex factors, but deferring to the practitioners to take the additional step in each situations to analyze everything else involved. Other research has and can assist in creating a better understanding of these complexities.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Vivienne Cass' (1979, 1984) queer identity development model "has become, by near unanimous acclaim, the standard bearer of sexual identity models" (Savin-Williams, 2011, p. 674). The current research has found the Cass Model may not be the most accurate description of the coming out process in 21st century America. As the culture and language has shifted, so too should the queer identity development models being used to describe the coming out process. Practitioners still rely on Cass to understand queer identity development, even with the standing critiques and other non-model approaches suggested (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). There is a strong need for a new constructivist model to be created, which is easy to adapt into practice.

The Cass Model continues to be useful, especially among queer individuals who have more barriers to success in their coming out process. The confusion process was limited in some cases to finding the language to describe the difference sensed by participants at a young age. Identity comparison, tolerance, and pride all had less data upholding the notion of distinct stages. Other research has also questioned comparison and pride as clear stages within the model (Savin-Williams, 2011). Acceptance was the stage with the most data. Younger queer individuals seemed to accept their identity much quicker and smoothly than the older participants in the study.

A eudaimonic alternative has been suggested to better examine the intricacies of the coming out process. The model brings together eudaimonic theory with Hecht's (1993) Communication Theory of Identity Development. Eudaimonic theory is a practical way to look at the identity choices being made by queer individuals during the coming out process. Hecht's theory acknowledges the complexity of identity

development, which many critics of model approaches have emphasized (e.g. Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001). The Eudaimonic Model of Queer Identity Development attempts to bridge the gap between current theoretical ideas of queer identity development with the needs of practitioners in the field.

The ten interviews were more accurately described following the Eudaimonic Model. Participants decided between many identity choices during their coming out process to decide which would bring the most happiness and/or authenticity. The process began intrapersonally with understanding their own identity. Eventually interpersonal aspects came forth as to how to disclose their queer identity and who to disclose it to. Future research on the new model of queer identity development would be able to discover whether the descriptions given can replace the Cass Model, as the current research is only a beginning point to work off of.

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