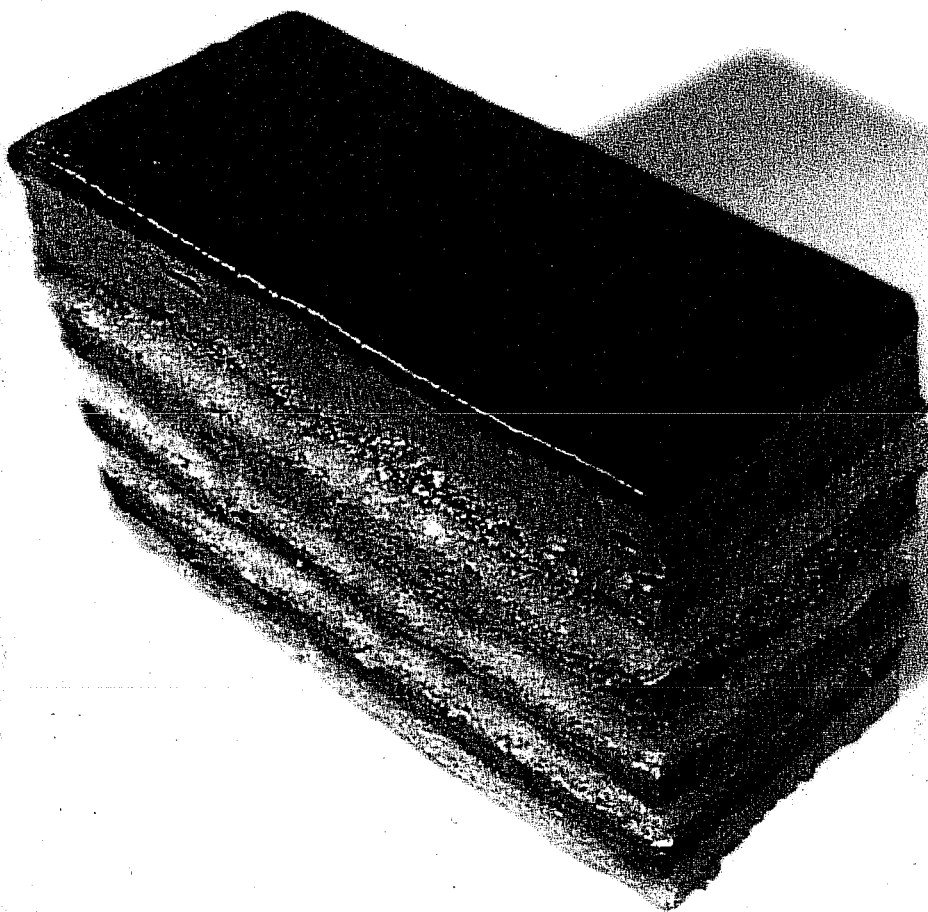


The Layer Cake Model of Bisexual Identity Development: Clarifying Preconceived Notions

Part One: Defining the Layers



LAYER 5
Identifies as Bisexual

LAYER 4
Integrates and Assimilates
Heterosexual and
Homosexual Identities

LAYER 3
Accepts Homosexual
Attraction while Maintaining
Heterosexual Identity

LAYER 2
Experiences Homosexual
Feelings, Thoughts and/or
Behaviors

LAYER 1
Socializes into a
Heterosexual World;
Develops of
Heterosexual
Identity

By Sara Bleiberg, Adam Fertmann, Ashley Todhunter Friedman and Christina Godino

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 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 our research and discussions with bisexual college students would better inform our practice in working with this population, as well as with other students who are questioning their sexual identity, and with heterosexual students in terms of awareness and education. We feel it is our responsibility to make the feelings and experiences of bisexual students known in order to promote understanding and inclusiveness among all students as they develop as leaders and participate in student affairs.

In Part One, we share how we found participants for the study, how we gathered information from them and define the layers of our model for bisexual identity development. In Part Two, which will appear in the May 2005 *Programming*, we compare the Layer Cake model to other established models of bisexual identity development and identify implications that are directly relevant to student affairs programming and practice.

Extensive confusion and myth surrounds bisexual identity due to a lack of research and, therefore, understanding of bisexual attraction, behaviors and feelings.

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 New York University 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

that was posted at these institutions. (The flyer is available on the NACA Web site at www.naca.org under Publications/Current Programming Topics.) In total, we received 19 responses from students who wanted their stories and experiences to be heard.

Eight undergraduate student participants were ultimately interviewed. All were between the ages of 19 and 21. Two were in their first year of college, four were sophomores and two were juniors. See the box below for more information on the participants.

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. (The interview questions are available on the NACA Web site at www.naca.org under Publications/Current Programming Topics.) 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 them as to what we might be looking to gain from the interview. By

About the Study Participants

- All self-identified as bisexual.
- Seven were female, one was male.
- Ethnicities represented included white, Jewish, Chinese, Latin American and Russian.
- Five were from suburban hometowns and three from urban areas.
- Five were born in the Northeast US, one in New England, one in the Pacific Northwest and one abroad.
- Six attended public high schools, one attended a private secular high school and one attended a private, non-secular school.
- Participants attended high schools ranging in size from 280 to 4,000 students.
- Participants' majors included biology/pre-med, child development, medicine/visual arts, theater/lighting and undecided. Three of the eight reported pursuing some aspect of theater.



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 interviews, 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 locations. The eight students proved to be very helpful and cooperative. At the end of each interview, all agreed to be contacted for clarification or further discussion.

The Grounded Theory

After conducting our interviews and evaluating the information we gathered, we discovered trends in the students' responses. It seemed most had gone through comparable processes when developing their individual bisexual identities. 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. 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: Development of a Heterosexual Identity

The first layer of our 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 usually includes a mother and a father, aunts and uncles, brothers and/or sisters and grandparents, most of whom 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



NACA Northeast Presents

The Fifth Annual Ross/Fahey Golf Challenge

Thursday, June 30th
Wayland, MA

Great course! Great date!
A great way to raise money for
a great cause!

Contact **Michelle Delaney** at 401-598-1150
or **Ken Abrahams** at 781-340-0180
for information on how to
sponsor and how to **play!**

Proceeds benefit the NACA Foundation.

4001 JJ 2/05

one participant said, "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 media 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: Experience of Homosexual Thoughts, Feelings and/or Behaviors

In this layer, a student's original conception of their heterosexual self is questioned. They 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 seventh

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 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 they consciously recognize and affirm them.

For some students, this layer is a revelation or an aha 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 that have been lingering for some

We feel it is our responsibility to make the feelings and experiences of bisexual students known in order to promote understanding and inclusiveness among all students as they develop as leaders.

time for students. 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 those students who were

raised with culturally or religiously conservative backgrounds 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 still have an attraction to the opposite sex, it is not only uncomfortable but also viewed as unnecessary to openly recognize their sexual 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 them 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 said, "My friends and I use numbers instead of words to describe how we are feeling, like one through 10—one 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 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 might

It's Time to Party...

Gotta call

Any Excuse for a PARTY!



Money Machine



Magazine Covers



Interactive Inflatables



Recording Booth



Foam Dance Party



Carnivals



Black History Month Programs



Photo Key Chains



Moonwalk

- Foam Dance Party
- Non-Alcoholic Tiki Bar
- Super Imposed Photos
- New Photo Flip Cards!
- Music Videos
- Drive In-Movies
- Entertainers
- Carnivals
- Casinos
- Game Shows
- Stuff Your Own Teddy Bear
- Novelty Items
- Big Butt Battle
- Karaoke
- Psychic Fairs
- Arcade Games
- Fun Foods
- Photo Options & More Photo Options!

And Much More!

201-530-1292

www.anyexcuseforaparty.com

encourage students to continue coming out or, conversely, 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: Identification as Bisexual

In this final layer, students find themselves comfortable with identifying as bisexual. Following the search for an appropriate label, they 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 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.

Comparisons to Other Models

In Part Two of this article, which will appear in the May 2005 issue of *Campus Activities Programming*, we will explore how the Layer Cake Model compares to other models of bisexual identity development. We will also share our perceptions on how a study such as ours can impact student affairs professionals as they strive to promote inclusiveness among all students.

References

- Cass, V.C. (1979). Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 4, 219-235.
- D'Augelli, A. R. (1994). Identity development and sexual orientation: Toward a model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development. In E.J. Trickett, R.J. Watts, & D. Birman (Eds.), *Human diversity: Perspectives of people in context* (pp. 312-333). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Evans, N.J., Forney, D.S., & Guido-DiBrito, F. (1998). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Weinberg, M.S., Williams, C.J., & Pryor, D.W. (1994). *Dual attraction: Understanding bisexuality*. New York: Oxford University Press.

About the Authors



Sara Bleiberg is a community development educator in the Department of Residential Education at **New York University**. She received a bachelor's degree in psychology and music from Washington University in St. Louis (MO) and a master's degree in student personnel administration from NYU. She is actively involved in the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), the College Student Personnel Association (CSPA) of New York State, and the Association of College and University Housing Officers International (ACUHO-I).



Adam Fertmann is a residence director at **Bentley College (MA)**. He holds a bachelor's degree in music education and a master's degree in student personnel administration from New York University. Professionally, he is involved in the Association of College Personnel Administrators (ACPA), the Northeast Association of College and University Housing Officers (NEACUHO) and the Boston Area College Housing Association.



Ashley Todhunter Friedman is director of Student Activities at the **College of Mount Saint Vincent (NY)**. She holds a bachelor's degree in political science from Emory University (GA) and a master's degree in student personnel administration from New York University. She is actively involved in NACA, the Association of College Personnel Administrators (ACPA), and the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA).



Christina Godino is currently an admissions officer at **Rutgers University (NJ)**. She holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Delaware and a master's degree in student personnel administration from New York University. She is involved in NACA, the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) and the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO).