HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY FORMATION:
A THEORETICAL MODEL

Vivienne C. Cass, MPsych, MAPsS

ABSTRACT: A six-stage model of homosexual identity formation is outlined within the framework of interpersonal congruency theory. Stages are differentiated on the basis of the person's perceptions of his/her own behavior and the actions that arise as a consequence of this perception. The person is seen to have an active role in the acquisition of a homosexual identity. Alternative paths of development are proposed within each stage. The notion that people can accept homosexuality as a positively valued status is assumed. Several factors believed to be influential in determining whether a person takes one line of development or another are discussed. The model is intended to be applied to both female and male homosexuals.

This paper describes a theoretical model of homosexual identity formation, the process by which a person comes first to consider and later to acquire the identity of "homosexual" as a relevant aspect of self.

The model, like several others (e.g., Cross, 1971; Lofland, 1969; Richardson, 1957; Taft, 1957), is based on two broad assumptions: (a) that identity is acquired through a developmental process; and (b) that locus for stability of, and change in, behavior lies in the interaction process that occurs between individuals and their environments.

Although the 1970s have seen many serious studies of homosexual identity, these have focused on delineation of types of homosexual identities (Bell, 1973; Weinberg & Williams, 1974) and on identification of the types of problems encountered by homosexuals in managing their homosexual identity (Warren, 1974; Williams & Weinberg, 1971). Little empirical study has been made of *how* an individual acquires a homosexual identity, although several authors have offered theoretical models of the process (e.g., Hencken & O'Dowd, 1977; Lee, 1977; Plummer, 1975; Schafer, 1976).

The model presented in this paper provides a more adequate account of the identity formation process. Although similar in some ways to other models of identity formation, the present model was generated independently during several years of clinical work with homosexuals.

OVERVIEW OF THE MODEL

It is proposed that there are six stages of development that all individuals move through in order to acquire an identity of "homosexual" fully integrated within the individual's overall concept of self. The length of time taken to proceed through the stages will differ from person to person. The several alternative paths of development, or strategies of action, within each stage are described. The distinctions between stages are based on the individual's perception of his/her own behavior and on the actions that arise as a consequence of this perception. By endorsing a link between assigned personal meaning and behavior, the model proposes an interactionist account of homosexual identity formation and recognizes the significance of both psychological and social factors.

At each stage in the developmental process *identity foreclosure* is possible: The individual may choose not to develop any further. The model, therefore, assigns a person (P) an *active* role in the acquisition of a homosexual identity.

A distinction is made between private (personal) and public (social) aspects of identity. The development of private and public homosexual identities is recounted and portrayed as two separate but related processes. It is possible for P to hold a private identity of being homosexual while maintaining a public identity of being heterosexual. With increasing identity development comes a growing consistency between the two identities, giving rise in the final stage to an overall and integrated homosexual identity.

The model rests within the framework of interpersonal congruency theory (Secord & Backman, 1961, 1962, 1974; Secord, Backman, & Eachus, 1964). Taking an interactionist perspective, interpersonal congruency theory is based on the assumption that stability and change in human behavior are dependent on the congruency or incongruency that exists within an individual's interpersonal environment. In the present context it is hypothesized that movement from one stage of homosexual identity formation to another is motivated by the incongruency that exists in P's environment, the result of assigning homosexual meaning to P's own feelings, thoughts, or behavior. Growth occurs when P attempts to resolve the inconsistency between perception of self and others.

The model comprises the experiences of both female and male homosexuals. It is expected that because of differing sex-role socialization, females and males will show different approaches to the development of a homosexual identity. Similarly, because of the marked contrast between past and present societal attitudes and expectations, an individual's age has considerable influence on his/her mode of coping with the developmental process.

INTERPERSONAL CONGRUENCY THEORY

The development of a stable homosexual identity is held to arise from the interaction between individuals and their environment. P acts in accordance with the way P perceives the surrounding world. The social structure establishes P's interpersonal environment by regulating the way in which others behave toward P. From this environment P develops a perception of how P is regarded by others. This perception plays a crucial role in the maintenance of behavioral patterns. The basic unit in the model, and the source of stability and change, is the intrapersonal matrix. This consists of three elements:

1. P's own perception of some characteristic that P attributes to self (S).
2. P's perception of P's own behavior directly the result of that characteristic (B).
3. P's perception of another person's view of that characteristic (O).

An intrapersonal matrix is a recurring functional relation between these three components. Each component has an affective element. The affect given to the component is either positive or negative. Each component also has a cognitive element since P will assign some value to perceptions.

P strives to achieve congruency (both cognitive and affective) between S, B, and O. A state of congruency exists when both B and O are in accord with S. Incongruency may be resolved either by the formation of a new (congruent) matrix involving a different perception of self or by restoration of the matrix to its original (congruent) state so that no change in perception of self is required. Resolution of incongruency may in turn prompt P to act in a way that will modify P's interpersonal environment.

Where a matrix is supported by one or more similar matrices (known as an intrapersonal *system*), it will be more resistant to change. "Similarity" between two matrices exists where one or more components of each are cognitively identical. This similarity may exist whether the matrices are congruent or incongruent. Another factor that influences resistance to change is the degree to which specific others (e.g., family, peers) who may strongly affect the O component are valued. The more P values others, the more P will resist change.

STAGES OF HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY FORMATION

Homosexual identity formation is viewed as a process in which the individual comes to change the intrapersonal matrix (and, subsequently, the

intrapersonal system) from one congruent in defining P as nonhomosexual to one that defines P as homosexual. Given current Western attitudes toward homosexuality, it is probably impossible for P to achieve a homosexual-defining matrix that is *totally* (cognitively and affectively) congruent. It is possible, however, for incongruency to be reduced to a level both tolerable and manageable.

Prior to giving personal meaning to homosexuality, P holds an image of self as being nonhomosexual and heterosexual. Generally speaking, P has been socialized by and into a society that is antihomosexual and heterosexual in its outlook. Heterosexuality and, in certain circumstances, asexuality are portrayed as the only acceptable outlets for sexual expression. P's first perception of P's sexual orientation is therefore strongly supported by the social structure of the culture in which P lives. At the same time, homosexuality is given little, if any, positive value and is usually presented as a stigmatized status.

At this stage P's intrapersonal system strongly supports the notion that P is heterosexual and a part of the "majority." Cognitive congruency exists between S, B, and O since they all define P as as heterosexual. (Affective congruency need not necessarily exist since it is possible for P to accept but not to like the assignment to heterosexuality.)

Stage 1: Identity Confusion

Throughout their daily lives, people encounter information about homosexuals and homosexuality. The majority probably perceive such information as personally irrelevant, but some find themselves attentive to any input on homosexuality and assign personal meaning to it. A conscious awareness that homosexuality has relevance to themselves and their behavior (either overt, as in kissing, or internal, as in the case of thoughts, emotional, or physiological response) marks the beginning of the identity formation process. In other words, simply to encounter information on homosexuality (even where others label a person's behavior as homosexual) is not enough to begin the developmental process. The process begins only when P is able to label P's own behavior and say, "My behavior may be called homosexual."

Individuals may differ in the significance they initially attribute to this first encounter. With continuing personalization of information, however, awareness grows to the point where it cannot be ignored.

The realization that feelings, thoughts, or behavior can be defined as homosexual presents an incongruent element into a previously stable situation. P's perception of P's own behavior is now at odds with both the perception of self as a heterosexual and the perception of others' view of P as heterosexual. Affective incongruency may also exist. Paradoxically,

the more clearly P is able to define P's behavior as homosexual, the more that incongruency is heightened.

As a result of this incongruency, P experiences confusion and turmoil, and is forced to ask the question "If my behavior may be called homosexual, does this mean that I am a homosexual?" P arrives at a self-identity *potentially* that of a homosexual. Since this is at odds with the previous view of self as nonhomosexual and heterosexual, P begins to experience doubts. "Who am I?" is the burning question. Feelings of personal alienation are paramount.

In an attempt to resolve this confusion P adopts one of three available approaches. The first approach is used when the meaning attributed to P's behavior is perceived as both correct and acceptable (i.e., P likes the idea of P's own behavior being called homosexual). There is no attempt to alter B; however, in order to alleviate the present incongruency, P begins to change the S component. A heterosexual identity is now questioned, and P asks: "Am I a homosexual?" In order to answer this question and reduce the confusion that exists, P characteristically begins searching for further information (e.g., reading books, listening carefully to any discussion of homosexuality, consulting a professional counselor). The more certain P becomes about the homosexual meaning of P's own behavior, the more acute becomes the incongruency. Attempts to resolve this force P into Stage 2 of identity formation.

A second approach is adopted when P perceives the homosexual meaning of P's behavior as correct but undesirable. In this approach, P attempts to restore the intrapersonal matrix to its original state in three ways: (a) the inhibition of all behaviors that have been assigned homosexual meaning; (b) the restriction and control of any information on homosexuality; and (c) denial that such information has personal relevance. P is then able to reject the self-portrait of a potential homosexual. Where P succeeds in applying this strategy, conflict and confusion are removed, and identity foreclosure takes place. The success of the strategy may be strengthened by denying the existence of past homosexual behavior and by adopting a strong antihomosexual stance (e.g., the moral crusader). Some individuals adopt a position of asexuality and avoid confronting information likely to create further situations in which personalization can occur. Some people attempt to bolster and reaffirm their heterosexual identity by involvement with members of the opposite sex.

Whether P is successful in these attempts to inhibit behavior will depend on: (a) ability to withdraw from potentially provocative situations (i.e., it may be relatively easy to stop going to meeting places but more difficult to prevent the occurrence of erotic dreams or physiological responses to people of the same sex); (b) ability to use successfully the de-

fense mechanism known as "denial"; (c) ability to adopt and maintain a stance of asexuality or heterosexuality. A heterosexual role may be difficult to adopt if sexual and emotional responsiveness is neither adequate nor appropriate. In some cases, there may be family pressure to drop an asexual image.

Where P finds it difficult to inhibit behavior, P may engage someone else (particularly a therapist known to view homosexuality as undesirable) for help in doing so.

If P is completely unsuccessful in restoring the intrapersonal matrix to its original state, then S begins to change from "heterosexual" in order to effect a greater congruency with B. P accepts the potentiality of a homosexual self, but unwillingly. This marks the beginning of what may become a negative or self-hating identity.

Sometimes the inhibition of behavior can act as a moratorium during which P may consider the meaning of P's behavior and the consequences of that meaning without having to make any changes in the intrapersonal matrix. If B is then seen as acceptable, P may voluntarily surrender the inhibition strategy.

The third approach used to reduce the incongruency of Stage 1 is adopted when P sees the meaning of P's behavior as both incorrect and undesirable. Where this is the case, P works to redefine the meaning of B as nonhomosexual. In this way the original matrix is restored (without requiring any change in actual behavior) and identity foreclosure occurs. Examples of the use of this strategy can be found in the prison situation, where inmates may engage actively in homosexual sexual behavior without defining it as such or seeing themselves as potentially homosexual. Where a supportive reference group, such as a prison population or the fellowship of male prostitutes, exists, there is greater stability in the redefined B because P is insulated and protected from testing out alternative meanings.

P may achieve redefinition by cognitively restructuring either P's own behavior or the nature of the situation itself. Where the former occurs, homosexuality becomes redefined and restricted to certain boundaries that do not include P's own behavior. For males, showing emotion, mouth kissing, and repeated contacts with the same person may be perceived as homosexual, whereas genital contact is simply "fooling around." For females, genital contact is considered homosexual, but strong emotional feelings for another woman are not. P may define a homosexual according to a narrow stereotype that excludes P and use this as a basis for defining P's behavior as nonhomosexual (e.g., all homosexual males walk in a mincing manner).

In misperceiving the situation, P changes the context of the behavior. The meaning of the behavior is no longer homosexual but rather "an experiment," "a means of earning money," "a favor for a friend," "an acci-

dent," "being taken advantage of," or "going along with everyone else." This strategy assigns P to a position of personal innocence that allows P to disown responsibility for the behavior.

When cognitive restructuring is successful, the original meaning of B is restored, and P rejects the notion that P is potentially homosexual. Identity foreclosure occurs.

In Stage 1 it is rare for P to disclose innter turmoil to others, primarily because the task at hand is so nebulous and because it is such an intensely personal matter. Except where help is required to maintain or to initiate strategies for coping with the incongruency, most individuals attempt to resolve their confusion on their own.

Stage 2: Identity Comparison

By the end of Stage 1, if identity foreclosure has not taken place, P has moved from a heterosexual self-portrait and has accepted the possibility that P's identity *may be* homosexual. This marks the first tentative commitment to a homosexual self.

With greater acceptance of self as potentially homosexual there is increased incongruency between S and B. P is now able, at the beginning of Stage 2, to state, "I may be a homosexual," indicating that the confusion and turmoil of the previous stage is considerably reduced. P can now examine the wider implications of that tentative commitment. Where the task of Stage 1 was to resolve the immediate personal identity crisis of "Who am I?" the task of Stage 2 is to handle the social alienation that now arises. P becomes aware of the differences between P's perception of own behavior and self and P's perception of how others view that behavior and self. In other words, increased congruency between the S and B components of the intrapersonal matrix results in greater incongruency between these two elements and the O component.

As a result of this increased incongruency, P comes to feel alienated from all others and has a sense of "not belonging" to society at large as well as to specific subgroups such as family and peers. "I'm different," said by P, is a summative expression of these feelings of alienation.

Factors such as geographical and social isolation may heighten the experience of alienation. The individual who feels "I'm the only one in the world like this" will know intense anguish at this stage. On the other hand, reference group membership may work to increase alienation (e.g., religious groups) or decrease it (e.g., feminist groups).

Accepting the self as "not heterosexual/homosexual" leads P to realize that all the guidelines for behavior, ideals, and expectations for the future that accompany a heterosexual identity are no longer relevant to P's life and, most importantly, have not been replaced by others. The continuity between past, present, and future that was based on the hetero-

sexual model has now gone, and P must attempt to find new meanings for life.

The alienation that accompanies this loss of familiar structure may lead P to make contact with other people. Those individuals who feel most keenly alienated often seek professional counseling with the plea "I do not want to be different." The traditional therapeutic approach to this situation, focusing on homosexuality per se, would prove irrelevant and unhelpful since it is the issues of alienation, "differentness," and loss of old and familiar structures that need to be examined.

Four approaches are open to P in attempting to reduce the feelings of alienation evident at Stage 2. The first approach is adopted when P reacts positively to the notion of being different and is able to perceive both the S and B components of the intrapersonal matrix as desirable. There are, generally speaking, three groups of people who react this way:

1. There are those who feel that they have "always been different" by virtue of having had what were later labeled homosexual feelings, thoughts, or behavior. The early stages in identity formation merely confirm this difference and identify its source, leading P to the realization that there is a group (homosexuals) to which P properly belongs.
2. There are those who have felt "different" throughout their lives on the basis of nonconformity to the heterosexual role (e.g., rejection of the need for marriage or children). For such people, a homosexual image of self may offer positive legitimization of this nonconformity (e.g., it is acceptable as a homosexual to reject marriage and children).
3. There are those who find "being different" exciting, out of the ordinary, as adding something special or extra to their lives. As with the other two groups, the felt difference between themselves and others is given a positive evaluation.

P handles the incongruency within P's matrix by devaluing the importance of others. Being able to say "I do not care, as I once did, what others think of me" lessens the impact of the O component and reduces the incongruency.

At the same time, P continues to present a public image of heterosexuality, for dissembling prevents P from being confronted personally with others' negative evaluation of homosexuality. Passing also allows P time to absorb and manage an ever-growing commitment to a homosexual self-image. Passing can be a relatively easy task because it entails simply

continuing in old patterns of behavior. (The acquisition of a public image of homosexuality may be more difficult than maintaining an image of heterosexuality.) Whether or not P can utilize a passing strategy effectively will depend primarily on the ability to play roles in social situations.

There are four ways of successfully utilizing the passing strategy: (a) by avoiding threatening situations (e.g., a party to which P is expected to take a partner of the opposite sex); (b) by controlling personal information (e.g., presenting only select aspects of self; avoiding dressing and behaving in ways that could be labeled homosexual); (c) by deliberately cultivating and presenting the image of heterosexuality or asexuality; and (d) by "role distancing," adopting a stance that conveys detachment from the homosexual situation.

When passing is undetected, incongruency is reduced but not eliminated. Attempts to reduce it lead P into Stage 3 of the identity formation process.

The second approach to reducing incongruency at Stage 2 occurs when P accepts the homosexual meaning of P's behavior but finds a homosexual self-image undesirable. P engages in strategies to change the S component in a way that will not necessitate altering actual behavior. Four strategies are available that enable P to reduce the importance of the homosexual S:

1. *Special case strategy.* P restructures the meaning of behavior so that it is now perceived as homosexual only in relationship to a particular person. "If it were not for this special person I would be a heterosexual" is the argument. Even where P is involved in a full-time homosexual relationship, this strategy may be used since it allows some congruency to be maintained with O ("I am partly like I think others see me") as well as with B.

2. *Ambisexual strategy.* P perceives self as both homosexual and heterosexual. Actual heterosexual behavior does not have to take place as long as P perceives P as *potentially* heterosexual ("I could act heterosexually if and when I wanted to"). This is a common strategy because it offers the easiest way to cope with feelings of alienation. Strategies that focus on perceiving others as ambisexual allow further reduction of these feelings by minimizing the perceived difference between P and others. Labeling well-known public figures as bisexual, giving select attention to theories that maintain that "everyone is bisexual," and getting involved in a sexual situation that allows both homosexual and heterosexual behavior all help P to feel "like [some] others."

3. *Temporary identity strategy.* P accepts the homosexual self-image as only temporarily applicable. The understanding is that at any time in the future P may choose to act heterosexually.
4. *Personal innocence strategy.* This strategy is commonly used by individuals who view a homosexual S very negatively. They accept a homosexual self-image but refuse to acknowledge responsibility for it. "I was born this way," "I cannot help it," "It's the way I was brought up" are examples of this. However, although such a strategy allows P to accept P's homosexual behavior and to adopt a homosexual S, it provides little reduction in the feelings of alienation. Along with the negative feelings attached to the S component, this situation leads P to develop a negative identity characterized by self-hate.

As with the first approach, passing as a heterosexual is used to reduce social incongruency. With greater attention now being paid to the sexual identity matrix, P may decide to increase or strengthen these efforts at passing: P may take great pains to present an image of conformity in order to appear more acceptable to others (and self) or may compartmentalize the sexual identity in order to perceive it as separate from and unrelated to all other aspects of P's life. Some individuals find these exacting new situations too difficult to manage and avoid them in an effort to pass effectively.

The third approach to the incongruency of Stage 2 occurs when P accepts S as homosexual and B as having homosexual meaning but, because of strong feelings of social alienation, views the B component as undesirable. This approach is to be expected when P anticipates strong negative reactions from others, particularly from family, peers, and church group. The reason for this is that P's behavior is seen as likely to expose the homosexual identity and, therefore, as the means by which P will be confronted with the reactions of others. "I might be a homosexual but I'm not going to engage in homosexual acts anymore" and "I might be a homosexual but I do not intend doing anything about it" are typical statements from individuals in this situation.

Strategies are adopted to change actual behavior. Professional help may be sought in carrying this out. The strategies can involve the inhibition of both overt and covert or simply overt behaviors. Covert behavior may be regarded favorably because it does not threaten to expose P and because it is also congruent with S.

The inhibition of all homosexual and heterosexual behaviors allows P to adopt an asexual role and subsequently an asexual self-image. The asexual role reinforces the inhibition strategy in turn by removing P from

potentially provocative situations. Successful inhibition leads to identity foreclosure. A breakdown in the strategy, however, may lead P to renew efforts to inhibit P's behavior (perhaps with professional help) or to adopt the alternative strategy of simply inhibiting overt behavior. When this is done, incongruency is reduced within the matrix to the extent that B (covert) and S are congruent, and B (overt) and O are congruent. However, the incongruency still remains, creating tension for P. Tension leads to further action. Two paths of action are possible: (a) P may choose to inhibit overt and covert behaviors, so bringing about identity foreclosure; or (b) P may try to reduce the impact of others so that the B component of the matrix becomes more desirable. Moving to another city or country and giving up membership in a church group are examples of ways in which P can alter P's interpersonal environment and subsequently the strength of the O component.

The fourth approach available at Stage 2 is used when P perceives the S and B components of P's matrix as undesirable and wishes to change both. This is to be expected when extreme alienation has occurred. This is done by the inhibition of all homosexual behaviors, the devaluation of homosexuality, and positive portrayal of heterosexuality. This permits the rejection of self as homosexual. P now sees P as either asexual or heterosexual. Where these strategies are successful, identity foreclosure occurs. Where they are not, P is left with such a degree of self-hatred that, should continual attempts to renew the strategy fail, P could commit suicide.

Stage 3: Identity Tolerance

By the end of Stage 2 (and where identity foreclosure has not taken place) P has turned the self-image further away from "heterosexual" and more toward "homosexual?" This increased commitment is commonly expressed in the statement "I probably am a homosexual."

The greater level of commitment has important consequences. On the one hand it frees P from the task of having to manage a state of identity confusion and turmoil, thus allowing P to acknowledge social, emotional, and sexual needs. On the other hand it accentuates for P the difference (incongruency) between the way P sees self and the way others are seen to view P. This in turn heightens alienation. In order to alleviate these feelings, P seeks out homosexuals and the homosexual subculture.

At this stage, contacting homosexuals is viewed as "something that has to be done" in order to counter the felt isolation and alienation from others. The individual tolerates rather than accepts a homosexual identity. Such contacts serve to bring about a modification in the intrapersonal matrix component structure.

P broadly perceives homosexual others as accepting of P's homosexual behavior and self-image. P no longer feels as alienated as before, realizing that there are others who positively accept P as a homosexual. At the same time, this accentuates the feelings of "not belonging" with heterosexual others. In order to lessen this feeling, P becomes increasingly detached from them, choosing very carefully those with whom to interact. The helplessness felt previously is gradually shed as P realizes the ability to take responsibility for P's own life situation.

Although making contact with other homosexuals is important at this stage, a more critical factor is the emotional *quality* of that contact. The effect of an experience perceived as negative will be quite different from one perceived as positive. Many factors may contribute to making an experience negative: poor social skills; shyness; low self-esteem; and fear of exposure, of the police, of the unknown. In addition, the individual's notion of what constitutes a negative experience is important. One person, for example, may find a bar or nightclub exciting, whereas another may find it depressing.

In outlining the effects of positive and negative contacts, two primary groups of people may be differentiated: those who perceive both the S and B components of their matrix as desirable; and those who perceive B but not S as desirable. The latter group continues to use the strategies outlined in Stage 2 (special case, ambisexual, temporary identity, and personal innocence) in order to make the S component more acceptable. However, contact with homosexuals who are seen to view P as a homosexual and who confront P with P's use of these strategies creates considerable tension. How this tension is resolved will depend on whether contacts with homosexuals are perceived as rewarding or punishing.

Positive contacts have the effect of making other homosexuals appear more significant and more favorable in P's eyes. P perceives homosexual others as viewing P's homosexual behavior and self-image in a positive light, and so through congruency processes comes to feel more positively about self. This leads to greater commitment to a homosexual identity and a desire for further contacts with the homosexual subculture.

Where P finds a homosexual self-image undesirable, the effects of a rewarding contact experience will similarly lead to a reevaluation. Now that P feels less alienated from homosexual others and supported by the experience of a positive contact with individuals similar to P, a homosexual self-image seems much more acceptable. Commitment to a homosexual identity is increased.

Unrewarding contacts result in a devaluation of the gay subculture. By the use of congruency mechanisms, P devalues S and B (resulting in a self-hating individual). An expression of this reaction heard frequently is, "If this [the negative experience] is what being a homosexual is all

about, then I do not like being a homosexual." If, prior to the contact experience, P had viewed a homosexual S negatively, further devaluation of self leaves P with a marked negative identity.

In order to handle the self-hatred, P uses one of two available strategies: reduction of contacts with homosexuals, or inhibition of all homosexual behaviors. The latter is likely to be used when P feels extremely negative about self ("I don't want to be a homosexual"), the former when P is less so ("I probably am a homosexual but I don't like it"). When inhibition of behavior is carried out successfully, identity foreclosure occurs. When contact with homosexuals is only reduced, P is indicating that as a probable homosexual P has certain social, emotional, and sexual needs that must be met and, therefore, acknowledges continuing commitment to a homosexual self-image.

Mixing with the gay subculture offers P the chance to observe that it offers several positive features such as opportunity to meet a partner, provision of role models who present homosexuality as acceptable, the chance to learn techniques for better management of a homosexual identity, practice in feeling more at ease by socialization to subculture behavior, and a ready-made support group. Therefore, even where contact with other homosexuals is minimal, it still allows P to observe the potentially rewarding aspects of mixing with homosexuals.

At the same time, P is made aware of the negative aspects of these contacts: the demand for greater commitment to a homosexual identity; the possibility, by disclosure to homosexuals, that P's identity may be made known to those outside the gay subculture; and a potentially greater involvement with the police. Where P is maintaining minimal contact, overemphasis on these negative aspects may encourage P to continue this strategy.

By the end of Stage 3 (and if identity foreclosure has not occurred), P's commitment to a homosexual self-image has increased to the point where P can say, "I am a homosexual."

Stage 4: Identity Acceptance

This stage is characterized by continued and increasing contacts with other homosexuals. These allow P to feel the impact of those features of the subculture that validate and "normalize" homosexuality as an identity and way of life.

P now accepts rather than tolerates a homosexual self-image. Contacts with other homosexuals become gradually more frequent and regular as P discovers preferences for homosexual social contexts and begins to develop friendships within them. These activities lead P to evaluate other homosexuals more positively and to give them equal significance in

P's life. The questions "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?" generated in the early stages of development have now been answered.

The gay subculture now plays an increasingly important part in P's life and subsequently in the restructuring of an interpersonal environment. The types of groups within the subculture that P mixes with have an important influence on the way that P progresses through the remaining stages. Some groups hold a philosophy that fully legitimizes homosexuality (homosexuality is valid both publicly and privately), whereas others offer only a partial legitimization (homosexuality is valid as a private identity but should not be "displayed" before the rest of society).

Where P accepts the philosophy of full legitimization, inner tension is felt. Until now, considerable weight has been given to others outside the gay community, and to their nonlegitimizing policy. The difference between how P sees self and how others are believed to perceive P is now accentuated more than ever. Attempts to resolve this incongruency lead P into Stage 5 of identity development.

On the other hand, a philosophy of partial legitimization creates no such tension since its emphasis on "fitting in" is in keeping with the existing intrapersonal matrix. P's efforts are now devoted to handling the incongruency. Three strategies may be used for these purposes: passing, limited contact, and selective disclosure. The first two strategies prevent incongruency from being heightened, and the third acts to reduce it.

By Stage 4, passing has become a routine strategy for compartmentalizing a homosexual way of life and reducing the likelihood of being confronted with the reactions of heterosexuals.

In addition to passing, P may play down the incongruency by limiting contacts with those heterosexuals who threaten to increase it (e.g., families). Living and employment arrangements may be altered to give P the desired escape from contact.

In order to reduce the existing incongruency, P may selectively disclose a homosexual identity to significant heterosexual others. They in turn function in a protective way by keeping P's secret.

When these strategies are carried out successfully, incongruency is reduced to a manageable level. The matrix remains unchanged, and identity foreclosure occurs. With incongruency low, a homosexual identity positively formulated, and considerable stability existing in the interpersonal environment, P is able to "fit in" both with gay and with established institutions. For many homosexuals this proves to be a satisfactory way to live their lives.

For some individuals, the strategies are applied unsuccessfully. P may then choose either to renew efforts (e.g., have nothing more to do with the family) or to reject the philosophy of partial legitimization (e.g., decide that passing is now unacceptable). Incongruency is then heightened, leading P to move into Stage 5.

Stage 5: Identity Pride

P enters Stage 5 with an awareness of the differences (incongruency) that exist between P's own concept of self as being totally acceptable as a homosexual and society's rejection of this concept.

In order to manage this incongruency P uses strategies to devalue the importance of heterosexual others to self, and to revalue homosexual others more positively. This program allows P to give less weight to a perception of how heterosexual others see P and more to how homosexual others see P.

In order to maintain these strategies, P dichotomizes the world into homosexuals (creditable and significant) and heterosexuals (discredited and insignificant). Commitment to the gay group is strong, generating a sense of group identity ("These are *my* people") and of belonging. P characteristically immerses the self in the gay subculture, voraciously consuming gay literature and culture. P mixes primarily with gay groups that espouse the same philosophy as P and perceives other homosexuals as the only real source of companionship and emotional fulfillment. There is a strong sense of pride in being gay, typified in slogans such as "Gay is good" and "Gay and proud."

With the devaluation of heterosexual others, P also rejects those values P classifies as heterosexual (e.g., marriage, sex-role structures) since they are seen to promote the concept of homosexual inferiority. The strong identification that P now has with the gay subculture provides an alternative and more satisfying set of values. P not only accepts a homosexual identity but prefers it to a heterosexual one.

At this point, incongruency is reduced to manageable levels. In daily living, however, P is constantly confronted with, and forced to adhere to, an established frame of reference that serves to heighten the inconsistency between heterosexual and homosexual values. The resulting conflict (incongruency) creates feelings of anger born of frustration and alienation.

The combination of anger and pride energizes P into action against the established institutions and creates an "activist." The slogan "How dare you presume I'm heterosexual" is indicative of feelings at this stage. Purposeful confrontation with the establishment is seen as the only way to validate the belief that homosexuality is good. This strategy helps P to perceive the gay subculture as more significant, thereby maintaining incongruency at a manageable level.

Confrontation leads P to abandon deliberately those strategies previously used to conceal personal identity. With rejection of the established institutions, P is now far less concerned about how heterosexuals perceive P. This in turn gives P the freedom to choose disclosure as a strategy for coping.

Disclosure has two positive effects: (a) it creates more situations in

which P's homosexual identity is known and so lends support to P's view of self as a homosexual; and (b) it brings P's public identity into line with P's private identity. On the other hand, disclosure leads P into situations in which incongruency is likely to be heightened. Where this becomes unmanageable, P may choose to disclose on some occasions, but not on others.

If P perceives disclosure to be personally threatening (e.g., likely to cost P a job), P may find self in conflict between the ideal and reality. In order to relieve the frustration generated by this situation and to maintain congruency, P may find it necessary to alter P's life situation (e.g., change jobs). Nonconcealment rather than disclosure may be considered a compromise strategy here.

Disclosure of a homosexual identity naturally brings about a reaction of some kind. P's perception of that reaction plays an important part in whether or not development continues.

Perceived negative reaction is seen as consistent with P's intrapersonal matrix, and P is able to say, "This is what I expected to happen." Where P regularly perceives others' reactions to be negative, there is no attempt to change the matrix as it now stands, and identity foreclosure occurs.

However, where reactions are perceived as positive, this is inconsistent with P's expectations. Attempts to handle this inconsistency lead P into the final stage of homosexual identity formation.

Stage 6: Identity Synthesis

P enters Stage 6 with an awareness that the "them and us" philosophy espoused previously, in which all heterosexuals were viewed negatively and all homosexuals positively, no longer holds true. This realization forces P once again to alter the component structure of P's intrapersonal matrix. P acknowledges that there are some heterosexual others who accept P's homosexual identity in the same way that P does. Greater congruency is now possible within the matrix.

With increasing contact between P and supportive heterosexuals, P comes to trust them more and to view them with greater favor. Unsupportive heterosexuals are further devalued.

The intrapersonal matrix is now characterized by maximal possible congruency, with incongruency at an easily manageable level. P still experiences the anger of Stage 5, but with less intensity because of the reduction in incongruency. Similarly, feelings of pride are still present, but felt less strongly as P comes to see no clear dichotomy between the heterosexual and homosexual worlds. P accepts the possibility of considerable similarity between self and heterosexuals, as well as dissimilarity between self and homosexuals.

P's personal and public sexual identities become synthesized into one image of self receiving considerable support from P's interpersonal en-

vironment. With this development process completed, P is now able to integrate P's homosexual identity with all other aspects of self. Instead of being seen as *the* identity, it is now given the status of being merely one aspect of self. This awareness completes the homosexual identity formation process.

The model is presented as a broad guideline for understanding how an individual comes to adopt a homosexual identity. It is not intended that it should be true in *all* respects for *all* people since individuals and situations are inherently complex. Further, it is expected that over time, changes in societal attitudes and expectations will require changes in the model.

REFERENCES

Bell, A. Homosexualities: Their range and character. In J. Cole & R. Dienstbier (Eds.), *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973.

Cross, W. E. Discovering the black referent: The psychology of black liberation. In V. J. Dixon & B. Foster (Eds.), *Beyond black or white: An alternative America*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1971.

Hencken, J. D., & O'Dowd, W. T. Coming out as an aspect of identity formation. *Gay Academic Union Journal: Gai Saber*, 1977, *1*(1), 18-26.

Lee, J. A. Going public: A study in the sociology of homosexual liberation. *Journal of Homosexuality*, Fall 1977, *3*(1), 49-78.

Lofland, J. *Deviance and identity*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969.

Plummer, K. *Sexual stigma: An interactionist account*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975.

Richardson, A. The assimilation of British migrants in Australia. *Human Relations*, 1957, *10*, 157-165.

Schafer, S. Sexual and social problems of lesbians. *Journal of Sex Research*, 1976, *12*(1), 50-69.

Secord, P. F., & Backman, C. W. Personality theory and the problem of stability and change in individual behaviour: An interpersonal approach. *Psychological Review*, 1961, *68*, 21-32.

Secord, P. F., & Backman, C. W. Interpersonal congruency, perceived similarity and friendship. *Sociometry*, 1964, *27*, 115-127.

Secord, P. F., & Backman, C. W. *Social psychology* (2nd ed.). Tokyo: McGraw-Hill-Kogakusha, 1974.

Secord, P. F., Backman, C. W., & Eachus, H. T. Effects of imbalance in the self-concept on the perception of persons. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1964, *68*, 442-446.

Taft, R. A psychological theory for the study of social assimilation. *Human Relations*, 1957, *10*, 141-156.

Warren, C. *Identity and community in the gay world*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974.

Weinberg, M. S., & Williams, C. J. *Male homosexuals: Their problems and adaptations*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

Williams, C. J., & Weinberg, M. S. *Homosexuals and the military: A study of less than honorable discharge*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.