

Cass Identity Development

This model can be used to understand aspects of identity development, but are not generalizable to every experience. Individuals can move through these stages of identity in different orders and may return to stages or skip stages through their lives. Bisexual individuals may have additional stages after identifying as straight or lesbian/gay. Gender is societally considered much less fluid, and has its own complicated steps of identity development. Cross-culturally, gender and sexual identities have different significance and meanings. There may be additional steps of identity development, coming of age traditions, and/or more/less cultural significance attached to certain identities. Socioeconomic status, religion/spirituality, age, abilities, race/ethnicity, and other factors also effect identity development and cohesion. The first stages of identity development are often experienced through a denial of homosexuality because of heteronormativity, heterosexism, and/or homophobia.

Identity Development Stages by Vivienne C. Cass, MPsych, MAPsS:

1. Identity Confusion:

Generally, but not in every case, individuals have assumed an identity with the heterosexual or gender conforming (cisgender) majority. This identity comes into question, through thoughts, emotions, physical reactions, and other experiences may bring the individual to question their identity as heterosexual (cisgendered). There may also be a search for information in this part of identity formation. This stage may continue if the individual can avoid identity-questioning situations, can continue in denial, or continue on with ideas of asexuality, heterosexuality and/or cisgender identity.

2. Identity Comparison:

If stage one does not end with denial or avoidance, the individual may move on to identity comparison. This stage involves social alienation, a feeling of being out of place, or difference. There are many different routes examined in this stage, the individual can create strategies in order to deal with difference. This is a stage where:

- 1) acceptance of an identity and further exploration of the identity in question may emerge
- 2) creative denial of the identity may continue despite evidence to the contrary; 3) acceptance of the personal application of identity may emerge alongside coping mechanisms for passing, with no intention of revealing the identity in the future,
- 4) the identity is accepted as the individual's identity, but is seen as totally unacceptable, and inhibition of behavior is attempted. In route 4), if strategies to inhibit behavior routinely fail, the individual may attempt suicide.

3. Identity Tolerance:

This stage exemplifies a greater level of commitment to an LGBTQ+ identity. This stage is where an individual may begin to think "I am *probably* gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered/etc." This is a stage where individuals sometimes seek out LGBTQ+ subculture, as they begin to ask if they fit within the culture and feel more alienated from their heterosexual or cisgender identity. Contacting people within the subculture is seen as an option to lessen overall alienation or loneliness. The new identity is seen as something to tolerate at this stage, it is not treated with total acceptance. Though alienation is less prevalent, the individual may not have a sense of belonging with heterosexual others.

4. Identity Acceptance:

This stage involves more interaction or connection with the LGBTQ+ community. They start to validate their identity and may begin to have a preference to be around others who are LGBTQ+. There are two general ways that the legitimacy of their identity can be interpreted at this stage:

- 1) Identifying oneself as LGBTQ+ is legitimate in private, but should not be displayed in public.
- 2) Identifying oneself as LGBTQ+ is legitimate in public and in private, and expression of LGBTQ+ subcultures are desirable.

The second way generally leads to Identity Pride. The first way can lead to attempts at:

- 1) Passing for heterosexual/cisgendered
- 2) Limiting contact with LGBTQ+ community
- 3) Disclosing sexuality/gender identity only to select individuals who will keep it confidential

5. Identity Pride:

This is a stage where the individual clearly identifies within the LGBTQ+ community and chooses it over the heterosexual/cisgendered community. In this stage, because of societal rejection of homosexuality/gender non-conformity, the individual may devalue heterosexual/cisgendered individuals and institutional values in order to revalue LGBTQ+ individuals. Frustration and anger may occur in everyday life when feelings of alienation and having to adhere to heterosexual/cisgendered norms do not disappear. The total acceptance and public activism associated with this stage can:

- 1) Make more legitimate the individual's identity in their own eyes as they begin to become 'out' to many others and/or in public.
- 2) Align public and private identities and allow the individual to recognize themselves as having intersectional identities.

External reactions to this stage may either lead the individual to stage 6, or keep them in the previous five stages.

6. Identity Synthesis:

The dichotomy created in stage five, where LGBTQ+ individuals and institutions are always good, and heterosexual/cisgender individuals and institutions are always bad, is no longer true to the individual. Rejecting heterosexual/cisgender individuals are still devalued, often further than in stage five, but accepting, supportive heterosexual/cisgender individuals are now valued. Pride is still felt, but no longer emphasized as there is no clear dichotomy between heterosexual/cisgender and LGBTQ+ worlds. The developed LGBTQ+ identity is considered a part of many identities, no longer the singular defining identity of the individual. The awareness that comes with this realization brings the development process full circle, and the individual integrates the identity.

These stages of identity are not the same for everyone, as everyone's identity development has unique components to it. Not everyone visits these steps in the same order, if at all.

Cass:

<http://www.brightfire.com.au/wp-content/uploads/Journal-of-Homosexuality-1979.pdf>