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Questioning Youths: Challenges to Working with Youths Forming Identities

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Abstract: Youths who question their affectional orientation are increasingly identified as a group of young people with needs for support. These questioning youths are often included in groups intended for sexual minority youths, but may be ill served by them if the groups' developers fail to conceptualize their status as developmental. Rigid social expectations about sexual identity development may further complicate the experiences of these youths in schools and communities. This article reviews definitions of sexual orientation, identity, and questioning youths and suggests implications these have for youths and programs. Recommendations are made for school programs that support the alliances among youths regardless of sexual orientation and that include both social activities and group support.

Working with young people whose sexual orientation is not fixed is complicated by a variety of issues. The conceptual models currently used for considering sexual orientation and identity formation and the discomfort of those working with youth whose identity may likely be nonheterosexual (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993) can obfuscate the system and practices that support healthy youth development. The discomfort and anxiety experienced by many adults when faced with issues of sexual orientation—even those whose work is focused upon youths in need—compromises their ability to provide effective assistance.

School personnel and community-based organizations concerned with the mental health and well-being of youths targeted with bias and violence associated with their sexuality have increasingly added the designated *questioning youths* to the list of such young people. The lack of clarity regarding the meaning of this term may contribute to the development of programs and practices in schools and communities that are poorly equipped to address the needs or interests of young people responding to this label. For many years excellent programs (e.g., Project 10 in Los Angeles and elsewhere, Harvey Milk School and the Hetrick Martin Institute in New York, and OutRight in Durham, NC) have been developed to meet the needs of sexual minority youths: gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents. Programs such as those are appropriately organized around the specific needs of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths who have made some progress in identity development as nonheterosexuals. For questioning youths, this organizational feature may prematurely presume homosexuality and also fails to address the developmental tasks associated with sexual identity formation.

To more adequately address the needs of questioning youths, the present discussion defines the essential terms of sexual orientation and sexual identity and reviews numerous meanings associated with the term *questioning youths.* Three models of sexual identity development (Cass, 1979; Cox & Gallois, 1996; Troiden, 1988) are considered in view of their implications for increased understanding of questioning youths. Finally, recommendations are made for designing programs to address needs and interests of questioning youths.

Definition of Key Terms

Sexual Orientation

Although some prefer the term *sexual*

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preference to the term *sexual orientation* to connote that homosexual identity is chosen (Baumrind, 1995), sexual orientation is still the more commonly used expression when referring to the innate predisposition for the gender—either same or other— of one's sexual partners (Eliason, 1996). This predisposition involves sexual or erotic feelings, desires, thoughts, fantasies, and behaviors toward people of the same sex or the other sex (Savin-Williams, 1994). In contrast to other dichotomous views of orientation, such as homosexual/heterosexual, monosexual/bisexual, or heterosexual/nonheterosexual, Garnets and Kimmel (1993) have used the term sexual orientation to refer to the relative balance between one's same sex and other sex attractions. Coleman (1987) has noted that sexual orientation is not static; rather, it changes in complex ways during the development of the individual. During the course of adolescence, individuals may increasingly admit same-sex attractions (Remafedi, Resnick, Blum, & Harris, 1992) in addition to same-sex behaviors. In their large sample of Minnesota Public School students, Remafedi et al. identified a decline in the proportion of students who stated they were unsure of their sexual orientation from about 1 in 4 at age 12, to 1 in 20 by age 18. Thus, while sexual orientation may be fluid across the lifespan, young people appear to come to label their orientation with greater specificity during adolescence.

Sexual Identity

Biological sex, gender identity, sex role, and sexual orientation comprise one's sexual identity (Shively & DeCecco, 1977). Sexual identity can be viewed as self-labelling related to these sexual features. Questioning youth are not apparently evaluating their biological sex (anatomically male or female) or their gender identity (that inner sense of being male or female). They can be conceptualized as holding up for self-inspection the culturally bound roles assigned to females and males and/or their own sexual disposition toward the same or the other sex.

In the United States, people with gay and lesbian identities are most often viewed as a diverse group of individuals who share some commonalties. Gonsiorek (1995) has argued that among gay and lesbian people these similarities are found in the social pressures they experience and the resulting psychological processes. It is unlikely that questioning youth can be similarly viewed as a group, sharing pressures and psychological processes in quite the same way. Rather, questioning youth are in the process of deciding what identity labels best match their experiences and aspirations.

Questioning Youth

Although questioning youths are often referred to in school and community programs as part of the increasingly long abbreviation used to include all sexual minority youths (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youths), little has been done to define to whom specifically the term *questioning* youths refers. Still, school-based interventions or supports for these youth may require that they be more clearly understood as a group and as individuals if resources are to be successfully allocated to address their needs. Savin-Williams (1994) noted that researchers generally assume that all adolescents are heterosexual. In the case of questioning youths, it would seem that many programs seeking to include these youths assume that they are all nonheterosexual.

A review of the use of the term *questioning youth* in internet resources, community support groups, school programs, as well as in interviews with school personnel and leaders suggests that a variety of meanings are currently in use. In many programs that include questioning youth, brochures and announcements suggest that questioning youth be viewed as having a homosexual orientation but an unformed gay or lesbian identity. In these situations, the term questioning may be preferred instead of the term *confused* used in several homosexual identity development theories (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988). At other times, questioning youth are included by association with bisexual youth in phrases like *bisexual and questioning youth looking for information.* In these circumstances both bisexual and questioning youth also might be viewed as having homosexual orientation with an unformed congruent identity, or the questioning youth might be viewed as having a bisexual orientation with an unformed bisexual identity.

Gonsiorek (1995) has described the impact of internalized homophobia on the disclosure or "coming out" process of gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults. For some questioning youths, their analysis of the costs and benefits of disclosing a nonheterosexual identity suggests

that it would be too risky to disclose in the context of their families, schools, or communities. By describing themselves as questioning, they elect to remain somewhat more congruent with their nonheterosexual status, but also achieve a sort of neutrality from which they could retreat in any direction, if necessary.

For leaders of some youth programs and services, questioning youth "are aware of the vast possibilities of their sexual identity and aren't going to be too quick to place a label on themselves" (Hungerford, 1997, personal communication). Questioning youth are rejecting the trichotomous labels of heterosexuality, bisexuality, and homosexuality by deferring the application of these labels to themselves. Their questioning then appears to be about personal identification and social categorization on sexual orientation lines as a whole (Richter, 1997, personal communication).

Models of Sexual Identity Development

Given the many ways in which program leaders conceptualize questioning youths, especially as these notions appear to intersect with issues of development and identity, a brief overview of several developmental models of gay and lesbian sexual identity is provided here. For more comprehensive reviews of these models see Gonsiorek and Rudolph (1991) and Eliason (1996).

Cass (1979)

Cass (1979) developed a model of homosexual identity formation based upon the assumptions that identity is acquired rather than inborn. This developmental process of acquisition involves the interaction between individuals and environments. The model is stage dependent and involves processes through which individuals move in linear fashion striving for congruence between self-perception and perceptions of others' views. In the model an individual moves from Identity Confusion (experiences and feelings are disruptive in that they are not heterosexual) and Identity Comparison (behaviors are compared to feedback to others or gay people in general) to Identity Tolerance (limited disclosure and tentative self-labeling) and Identity Acceptance (expanded disclosure and self-identification). After these four stages, the individual may resolve the apparent discrepancy between societal condemnation and personal acceptance in a stage called Identity Pride in which anger and pride prompt the individual into activist behaviors. If these stages are successfully completed, the individual may move to the final stage called Identity Synthesis in which she or he integrates both the personal and public sexual identities into one that comprises one aspect of the self.

Cass's model (1979) has some implications for the understanding of questioning youths. These implications derive, in part, from the model's limitation of considering not the development of a sexual orientation identity, but specifically of a homosexual orientation identity. First and most clearly, the model would suggest that questioning youth are either in the stage of Identity Confusion or in Identity Comparison. Youths who associate with community groups for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning young people avail themselves of environments in which they can compare their feelings and experiences to those of youths who have identified in some way as nonheterosexual. It also is possible that they are associating with a group of youths who are perceived to have the courage to challenge and question, thus creating an environment of acceptance (Havens, 1998, personal communication). Second, the model allows that, given changes in social attitudes, the application of a fixed dichotomous label as gay or lesbian may be inaccurate for some or even many youths. Therefore, the issue being challenged by questioning youths may be the limited availability of accurate identity labels and their poor fit with these youths' emerging self-identifies.

Troiden (1988)

Troiden (1988) presents a four-stage "ideal-typical model of homosexual identity development" (p. 105) based upon common themes of personal histories of gay and lesbian people intended as a heuristic device to assist in organization and comparison. Although the model is linear and stage-dependent, movement through the stages can be affected by relative youth, gender atypicality, high school homosexual experience, and a supportive environment (all of which are said to facilitate development). High school heterosexual experience and non-accepting family or friends might slow development.

The model's four stages are Sensitization,

Identity Confusion, Identity Assumption, and Commitment. Prior to puberty the individual does not see homosexuality as personally relevant, but rather has generalized feelings of being different from same-sex peers and not usually in any specifically sexual way. During adolescence, lesbians and gay males move from this stage of sensitization, to the Identity Confusion stage. At this time they begin to personalize homosexuality, creating confusion and anxiety secondary to the dissonance created between this new insight and previously held images of heterosexuality. Confusion also is thought to stem from social condemnation of homosexuality and general misinformation regarding sexuality and sexual orientation. During this time, many lesbian and gay youths have experienced both same-sex and other-sex arousal and behaviors.

In the Identity Assumption Stage (Troiden, 1988), individuals in their late teens or early adulthood self-define as gay or lesbian and explore their culture through contacts with other gays and lesbians. If these contacts are positive, identity formation is facilitated and individuals move to the Commitment Stage in which they adopt being gay or lesbian as a way of life, reflected in a fusion of same-sex behavior and affect. This fusion is often externally reflected in the development of meaningful same-sex love relationships and disclosure of orientation to a variety of heterosexual audiences.

Troiden's model (1988) has some implications for questioning youths. Most obviously, questioning youths would be described in the Confusion Stage, experiencing possibly both heterosexual and homosexual feelings and behaviors. Social condemnation and misinformation may prompt questioning individuals to defer assuming a nonheterosexual identity, while still having the opportunity to socialize with gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Finally, Troiden states that stigma evasion strategies are likely situational in that personal or social factors may cause individuals to be covert at times. The realities of adolescents regarding school and families would prompt youths to be selective in their disclosure.

Cox and Gallois (1996)

Social identity theory, which explores the effects of society on identity processes and the effects of these processes on broad social structures, is central in the gay and lesbian identity development model developed by Cox and Gallois (1996). Key to the model are two processes: self-categorization and social comparison, both of which also are included in Cass's model (1979). Self-categorization includes both the act of self-labeling and the adoption of the normative behaviors and values associated with group membership. The model is not stage dependent, but rather provides a process-oriented perspective.

Everyone has many social identities, including gender, religious affiliation, race or ethnicity, and sexual orientation identity (Cox & Gallois, 1996). All these social identities, both at the level of social group and the individual person, contribute to one's self-concept. Moreover, the individual's estimation of the self-concept, his or her self-esteem, stems from comparing one's group to other groups and one's self to other individuals inside and outside the group. In the case of sexual orientation identity, self-categorization may be made on the basis of sexual behavior, feelings, and attractions (Cox & Gallois). This model allows application to sexual identities, and "a large range of identities which can change over time, in terms of increasing sophistication in the cognitive representations of social groups" (p. 16).

This social identity model holds many implications for understanding questioning youths. First, like Cass's (1979) model, the social identity model allows that there may be an increase or shift in the available labels open to youths questioning their orientation. Therefore, they may be both in a self-categorization process and simultaneously developing new cognitive representations for the groups with which they identify, some of which may not now share a common label. Thus the terms *sexual minority youths, queer youths*, or *non-gay identified youths*, which do not currently enjoy popular use, could be early efforts to describe groups of youths who are not adequately represented by the terms *gay, lesbian, bisexual*, or *heterosexual*.

Second, the social identity model (Cox & Gallois, 1996) includes consideration of dependence (the degree of need for membership in a group) and distinct group memberships (clear separateness of norms and values of memberships). For example, in adolescence, individuals may have significant dependence upon family as well as school peer membership. However, the differences between these groups may cause intrapersonal conflicts as well as intergroup

conflict. For the youth with a same-sex orientation, describing one's self as *questioning* may provide a means to preserve dependence in high prestige, dominant groups like family, sports teams, or racial group, while maintaining some benefits of association with a lower prestige, nonheterosexual group.

Finally, the social identity model considers the interesting intersection of individuals, individuals within groups, the effect of the groups on the individuals, and social construction overall. Questioning youths, therefore, may be viewed as engaging in a process of categorization at the individual level, resolving a process of self-estimation within a group, managing dependence needs for a group, and shaping new information and representations for sexual orientation identity.

Designing Interventions for Questioning Youths

The courageous efforts of program developers who have pioneered programs and implemented initiatives to assist sexual minority youths are laudable. Many programs and their personnel do an excellent job assisting these young people through the difficulty of coping with bias during adolescent and sexual identity development (Anderson, 1997; Singerline, 1993; Uribe, 1994). The commitment and resourcefulness of these responsible risk-takers has made it possible for thousands of young people to learn the information and social survival skills they need as lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents and young adults. Although these programs are often underfunded to meet their objectives, staff have been, at times, willing to extend offerings to questioning youths.

Programs that offer support groups and social activities for sexual minority youths appear to become resources to both participants and nonparticipants in that schools and communities experience changes in attitudes among their constituents' programs (Anderson, 1997; Singerline, 1993; Uribe, 1994; Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). The programs also appear to benefit when they enjoy the unqualified support of administration through funding and other resource allocation. Furthermore, youth who are empowered to participate fully in the development and implementation of programs (e.g., District 202 in Minneapolis, MN; Diverse and Resilient Project in Milwaukee, WI; and GALAXY in LaCrosse, WI) learn important life skills while building powerful interventions for themselves and their peers.

However, there can be significant psychological and social costs associated with the threat of compromising one identity that may be perceived as incompatible with another (Cox & Gallois, 1996). Snider (1996) questioned whether the Triangle Program, designed for lesbian and gay youth at risk of dropping out of school in Toronto, can really work for youth of color. Snider continued, suggesting that if schools are not to force youths to choose between their sexual identity and ethnic identity, they must work within the mainstream educational structure to eliminate both homophobia and racism. Programs that include questioning youths in the group of sexual minority youths may be requiring them to elect prematurely a label to achieve a sense of belonging.

Because as many as one in four early adolescents may be reasonably considered questioning (Remafedi et al., 1992), school and community programs would do well to devote the human and financial resources needed to address their identity development needs. Lewis and Karin (1994) have noted that sexuality issues are "seemingly nowhere and everywhere" (p. 204) in schools, but they are not something about which questions are asked, curriculums are implemented, or policies are highlighted. School psychologists can have a useful role of advocacy in policy development and curricula reviews, recommending inclusive language and comprehensive approaches to human growth and development programs.

As a foundation for effective school and community programs for questioning youths, organizational policies should be implemented to eliminate the ongoing threats of hate epithets or slurs associated with orientation or gender (Rienzo, Button, & Wald, 1997; Telljohann & Price, 1993; Treadway & Yoakam, 1992; Unks, 1993). Administrative supports and community funds to develop programs, train leaders, and prepare the entire staff of an organization or school may demonstrate to youths their importance and value as individuals and as a group—a sharp contrast to the devaluing statements in their daily experiences. The use of facilitation teams consisting of a school psychologist and two or more faculty or community adults including both openly disclosed heterosexual and gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals allows questioning youths to experience the human alliances that can

and do exist among various identity groups.

Gay and straight alliances (GSAs) are youth groups, usually school-based, which permit identified heterosexual and gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths to enjoy each other's support and companionship in an inclusive milieu that affords the opportunity to not disclose sexual orientation identity (Bass & Kaufman, 1996). Similarly, GSAs also enable questioning youths to benefit from the group without identifying at all. Some GSAs have noted the benefits of having occasional caucuses within the group. These subgroups may be episodic meetings by gender groups or orientation groupings that allow youths to enjoy each other's support within the context of the safer umbrella of the mixed identity group. Heterosexual youths also have commented that they, too, benefit from a more accepting group of peers in GSAs. School psychologists can work effectively with other school officials to ensure support for GSAs during their development. They also can provide accurate information about sexual orientation and community resources as the groups mature.

Although support groups appear to be favored among program developers (Anderson, 1997; Bass & Kaufman, 1996; Rienzo et al., 1997; Singerline, 1993; Uribe, 1994; Uribe & Harbeck, 1992), young people involved in program development also have encouraged activities such as dances, adventure challenges, educational programs, movies, and outreach initiatives. These activities may benefit questioning youths by assisting their process of comparison to other youths on variables in addition to sexual identity. These activities also challenge the association that might be drawn between support groups and psychotherapy—an association that implies pathology among participants. Here, too, school psychologists can assist in program design, consulting on the activities and variables most likely to promote prosocial learning.

Ongoing support for programs for questioning youths is facilitated by qualitative and quantitative needs assessments, formative evaluations, and summative evaluations. Each gathering of group members, as well as individual participant contacts, can be easily evaluated through a short instrument with Likert-scale items and short-answer questions. Similarly, quarterly or semiannual organizing meetings can be devoted to written program evaluations and a focus group of participants. In addition to being helpful in modifying program elements, these data can represent useful support of program outcomes. Commentary solicited from parents, faculty and staff, and community leaders also are useful additions. The development of these evaluation tools and the reporting of their results are clearly within the range of the competencies of the school psychologist.

Conclusion

Questioning youths can be viewed in numerous ways, but may be seen as either at a stage of identity development when youths (a) are uncertain of their sexual identity or (b) in the process of self-categorization and navigating seemingly competing identities. Because a significant number of youths are uncertain of their sexual identity, schools and communities can have an important role in assisting these questioning youths in their developmental process through implementing programs that address their needs for safe affiliation and support. Gay/Straight Alliances offer questioning youths the opportunity to meet these needs in the context of youths that have identified, but may not have disclosed, their sexual identity. If these alliances enjoy visible support from organizational or school leadership and consist of both support programming and social activities, then questioning youths may favorably compare themselves to their peers. School psychologists possess the competencies to assist in the development, implementation, and evaluation of school and community programs for these youths.

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