



## WHO IS INFLUENCING WHOM? THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDENTITY, SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND INDIGENOUS PSYCHOLOGIES

VIVIENNE CASS

### Abstract

Despite calls in some quarters for a greater flexibility in our notion of sexual orientation, the belief that individuals *are* lesbian/gay or 'straight' is still strongly held in the general community. Research on lesbian/gay identity has sometimes been criticised for being one of the major forces constructing and influencing the idea that lesbian/gay sexual orientation is about who one *is*, and that this *is-ness* is a fixed entity residing within the individual. In this paper I will examine whether this criticism is justified. To do this I will look at my own work and processes as a so-called 'identity researcher' and the way this linked into early historical developments and the Western 'indigenous psychology' of the 1970s. By examining the interconnections between these variables, it is possible to address the question of whether identity research did indeed have the power to formulate our current views on lesbian/gay sexual orientation (and whether identity researchers should be drawn and quartered or praised).

### Introduction

I recently gave an interview to a journalist who was writing an article on dating behaviour in young women. In my usual fashion, I attempted to frame my comments so as to be relevant to all young women, and at one point mentioned the commonalities and distinctions between those of differing sexual orientations. Enthusiastically seizing upon my use of the term 'sexual orientation', the journalist then began questioning me about homosexuality.

If you think that automatically linking 'sexual orientation' with homosexuality is to be found only amongst the media, think again! Only last year I was speaking to an academic colleague with some experience in sexuality research who, in the course of discussing the definition of sexual orientation, immediately stated, "It's the feeling of being gay or lesbian". Sexual orientation is not only taken

to mean 'homosexuality' or how someone *behaves*, but more specifically, and probably more emphatically, it has also come to mean *being* gay or lesbian, that is who someone *is*. We shouldn't be too surprised, therefore, to find that the general community largely thinks along the same lines. Despite increasing openness and discussion around the area of sexuality, the assumption that sexual orientation refers to homosexuality and homosexual identity remains strong.

### Criticisms of identity research

Some have criticised research into homosexual identity (and I should also add, the researchers themselves) for the situation wherein the term 'sexual orientation' is taken as referring to a state of being. The main concerns of these critics can be summarised very simply as follows:

1. Discussion of the different identities of gay, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual reinforces the belief that sexual orientations are discrete, fixed psychological entities.
2. The emphasis on how people find, form and experience a gay or lesbian identity promotes the concept of identity as something 'real' and encourages individuals to choose a particular identity, regardless of whether it entirely fits or not.
3. The continued focus on how gay or lesbian identity is developed and expressed, while ignoring heterosexual identity, leads to undue emphasis on gay and lesbian identity formation as a clinical issue requiring attention.
4. When people nominate a particular sexual orientation identity as appropriate for themselves, they then direct their behaviour to fit with that identity, ignoring and reframing any thoughts, emotions or activities that are incongruent with it. Identity research pays too little attention to this phenomenon.
5. Researchers do not take account of the negative social, legal and other consequences that can arise from holding a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity in communities where

homophobia is an insidious and destructive influence.

The question I wish to address in this paper is whether these criticisms are justified. Has the concept of sexual orientation, and societal thinking, really been so influenced by homosexual identity research and researchers as these critics claim? I would like to refer to my own work to explore this question.

For those who aren't familiar with my ideas (Cass, 1979, 1983/4, 1984, 1990, 1996, 1999) I first published my theory of gay and lesbian identity formation in 1979 in which I outlined the psychological process of cognitive and emotional change that leads individuals to adopt a self-image of 'homosexual', 'lesbian', 'gay'. The six-stage model I proposed has also been applied to the adoption of a 'bisexual' identity as well as to the identities of other negatively-valued minority groups, and continues to be used in research and clinical practice. The theory essentially looks at the way the individual shifts from seeing homosexuality from a third person perspective (ie, "other people are gay/lesbian") to a first person perspective ("I am gay/lesbian"), with the gradual changes in self-understanding being divided into six stages of cognitive and emotional development.

So, back to the question: Have I really had the power to change the way we think and behave? Let me begin to answer this by going back in time.

### **Development of the concept of homosexual identity**

The concept of a 'homosexual identity' first began to emerge in the nineteenth century. At this time, there was a gradual shift in the way homosexuality was perceived. The first wave of change saw a shift from the idea of seeing homosexual behaviour as amoral and criminal to seeing it as symptomatic of a psychiatric disorder. The second wave of change then shifted the focus from the symptomatic *behaviour* to the disordered *person*, and the notion that a person acting sexually towards someone of the same sex could be described as *a* homosexual was born. The philosopher Foucault's now famous quote summarises this development very clearly when he states, "The nineteenth-century homosexual became a

personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood" (1978, p. 43). By the way, I use the term 'homosexual' quite deliberately here since this is the terminology of that historical period. It is of interest that the term 'homosexual' was coined in 1869 and the term 'heterosexual' sometime later, the former being equated with pathology and the latter with normality. This terminology was intended to reinforce the rightfulness of the majority group and marked a significant step in the formation of what Western culture came to understand by the term sexual orientation.

Indeed, this is where our understanding of the sexual orientation identity concept begins, for the very idea of identity rests upon the belief that there exist particular *types* of persons, the 'homosexual' and the 'heterosexual'.

Now, let me jump to the 1960s, another interesting historical period in the development of the concept of sexual orientation identity. In the 1960s there was a significant push for human rights. At this time, groups such as women, Black Americans and homosexuals began to gather, organising collectively to protest at their lack of rights and acceptance in society. In the public arena these groups became known by the broad identity terms of 'women's collectives', 'Black organisations', 'homosexual groups' and so on. Reflecting a growing integration between public and private aspects of minority identity, the members of each group referred to themselves by the personal identity expressions, "I am Black", "I am a feminist", "I am gay". However, this was not the submissive, secretive or negative voice of previous eras. Rather, these expressions of identity were increasingly those of individuals and groups who experienced pride in themselves and felt equal to the majority.

These developments continued into the 1970s. At this time, books and magazines began to publish the personal stories of individual homosexuals (who were beginning to refer to themselves as gay or lesbian). These were stories about identity, about "who I am". What began as a trickle soon became an avalanche of stories about coming out, oppression and struggle. And whereas there was no reference to the concept of 'identity' in the homosexual literature before 1970, by the late 1970s it was

fast becoming a part of the gay and lesbian lexicon.

It was around this time that I became interested in identity formation. In 1974, while a psychology student, I founded the Homosexual Counselling and Information Service, and throughout the 1970s became intensely involved in working with people from various sexual minorities, both within the counselling service and as a psychologist employed with the Western Australian Health Department.

It was in this latter position that I had what I call a defining moment. A young woman, who disliked herself intensely for being attracted to other women, came to see me. She was the most self-hating person I had ever tried to counsel and at the end of the session I stood at the door of my office in despair, watching her leave, and knowing I had been unable to help her in any way. I remember asking myself the clinician's questions, "Why can't I help her?", "What is going on"? How is it that some people readily accepted themselves as lesbian or gay while this woman was in such torment about the very same thing?"

And so began my quest to try and find answers. I started by listening more carefully to my clients, noting how different people spoke about their experiences. I compared young and old, men and women, religious with non-religious, accepting with non-accepting. And then one day I had another defining moment. I realised that certain phrases were being expressed repeatedly, simple phrases such as "I don't want to be different" and "I'm only a lesbian because of this particular woman". After writing down these phrases, and staring at them long and hard, I suddenly realised that there was actually a pattern to the way in which they were expressed. Or, to be more precise, not so much a pattern as an order. Some of the cognitive insights I was hearing, it seemed to me, only ever appeared in people's speech after other particular thoughts were expressed. Some cognitions were linked with particular emotional states but not others. I took to listening and observing further, and although I tried to find alternative patterns of thought processing in my clients, I kept coming back to my original ordering.

This simple list of phrases of speech then became the basis on which I developed my model of the six stages of homosexual identity formation. After the publication of my first paper in the *Journal of Homosexuality* in 1979, I received a considerable amount of feedback, mostly from individuals, psychologists and counsellors in North America, the UK and Western Europe, telling me how much the model helped them to understand their clients, and expressing amazement that a theory developed on the other side of the world could so closely fit their own experiences.

It was several years later before I realised that what I had been doing was actually a field study, a piece of research in which I attempted to simply observe what was there, and then tried to find a broad framework in which to make sense of it all. Much later, I came to see that, through this field study I had, in fact, tapped into the Western indigenous psychology as it related to homosexuality.

### **Indigenous psychologies**

For those not familiar with the concept of indigenous psychology, it is defined as the unique body of psychological knowledge that exists in each sociocultural setting, forming part of the entire knowledge base of the culture in which it occurs.

An indigenous psychology consists of everything that each sociocultural environment holds as the truth about human nature or psychology. It includes knowledge about the psychological concepts which form the foundation of that culture (e.g., in Western indigenous psychology the concept of 'maturity'), the psychological processes, the behaviours that define these concepts and processes, and even what is considered a psychological problem and the solutions for such problems.

In other words, an indigenous psychology defines the psychological reality of the members of any particular culture. Since each sociocultural setting has different indigenous psychologies, the psychological realities of each is unique. Hence, a concept found in one setting may not exist or be perceived in the same way in another culture.

The psychological realities of each culture are generally taken for granted by the culture's members since they have been socialised into them from birth. Of course, moving out of one culture into another, as any immigrant will know, can quickly bring an awareness of how one's own viewpoint differs from those of the new culture.

Let me make two final points about indigenous psychology before linking this back to sexual orientation. Firstly, the psychological reality created by an indigenous psychology is not static, but evolves over time as the body of psychological knowledge changes. Secondly, the position of those calling themselves social constructionist psychologists is that behaviour is produced or constructed as a result of the reciprocal interaction between three factors: the psychological capacities of the individual, the biological capacities of the individual, and the specific indigenous psychology of the culture.

The concept of sexual orientation, and all that goes with this, is part of our Western indigenous psychology, and hence, our psychological reality. There are, however, many indigenous psychologies that do not include the ideas of 'homosexual', 'heterosexual', 'sexual orientation', or even 'sexual' with which those of us who live in Western societies such as Australia are so familiar, despite there being members of such cultures who engage in sexual and emotional activities with those of the same sex.

Drawing upon our present-day Western indigenous psychology, we grow up perceptually 'set' to see sexual orientation in our world. Hence we assume without question the existence of something called 'sexual orientation', and just 'know' what is meant by this. Our knowledge about human nature includes an understanding of the existence of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, and we talk about 'coming out' and 'finding one's true sexual identity' as recognised psychological processes. Included in this knowledge base is also the notion of sexual orientation identity.

In summary, the Western indigenous psychology sets the psychological stage for how we perceive sexual orientation, defining what is psychological reality and guiding our

thoughts, emotions and actions to fit with the model of human nature proposed.

### **Who is influencing whom?**

Let me now return to the observational study which formed the basis on which I developed my theory. As I mentioned earlier, it seems clear to me that in this preliminary work I was, in fact, identifying those components of the Western indigenous psychology of the 1970s relating to identity. I was able to detect patterns in the behaviour of those I was observing only because that behaviour was never random, but rather set by the parameters of the indigenous psychology.

What I called homosexual identity formation was, as I saw it, a psychological process by which individuals translated their everyday understanding of the concepts of 'lesbian' and 'gay', provided by the Western indigenous psychology into personal or *self* knowledge, emotions, behaviours, beliefs and experiences. In other words, my interest was in the psychological processes by which *social knowledge* became translated into *self-knowledge* in which the individual was left with a self-image based on a particular sexual orientation category. The need to adopt such a self-image was, itself, part of the directive of Western (or Western-influenced) indigenous psychology.

Furthermore, I view the ordering of phrases that I identified, following my observational work, as the overt verbal expression of the cognitive processes my clients were going through in order to make this shift from social to personal knowledge.

By the way, there has been some criticism levelled at stage models of identity formation, including my own, for being too rigidly linear in their approach to the way identity is acquired, with various critics noting that the so-called 'milestones' of behaviour which often mark the different stages, according to certain theoretical models, do not always follow the order suggested by theorists. While such comments ring true for some stage models, in the case of my own, regrettably, they show a complete lack of understanding of the complex social construction process that is being described and hence fail to see the purpose behind the cognitive and emotional changes

taking place within the individual. From my perspective, only in the most superficial of ways can identity formation be described as a series of milestones such as 'coming out to parents', 'meeting other gay or lesbian people', 'joining a gay march', and I have never proposed that my stages are based on a series of such events.

To return now to the question of whether I have exerted some influence on the way society thinks about sexual orientation: To say that my so-called 'field experiment' had simply tapped into the Western indigenous psychology and that this action was the sum total of the part I have played in the study of sexual orientation identities would not, however, give the complete story. After all, clinicians, researchers and theorists are also socialised in the indigenous psychology of their culture. There is nothing we do, in our professional positions, that is not directed by our indigenous psychology. The subject matter we choose to study, the research questions we ask and the way we test them out, the theories we develop and the assumptions underlying our therapy are all defined and limited by our present-day Western indigenous psychology. Hence, we play a powerful role in carrying the message of our culture, and in perpetuating certain psychological realities.

We can also play a role in changing these realities. It is clear that the focus on gay, lesbian and bisexual identity grew stronger in the 1980s and 1990s, both in the general as well as the academic community. This is an example of the evolving nature of indigenous psychologies which are continually changing, leading in turn to shifts in our psychological realities. There is, I believe, no doubt that theories of gay and lesbian identity formation, including my own, have played a part in these changes. For such theories not only describe ways in which people behave, they also highlight and promote these psychological realities. The mere act of gazing in conscious fashion upon the notion of sexual orientation and identity, is likely to have directed and accentuated the focus on these concepts.

In developing my theory, I identified and summarised elements of a Western indigenous psychology, keeping in mind that I was also operating from within this learned knowledge

base. Once published, my theory, and others like it, then served to reinforce the concepts and ideology embedded within it. The irony for me is that I have never had a vested interest in promoting the concept of gay or lesbian identity and in my clinical work I am always at pains to give my clients an open space in order to explore their sexual/romantic attractions without the need for labelling of self in any way. My clients, however, think differently, wanting to know if they are "gay or straight". Other clinicians say they have the same experience. Who is influencing whom, we could ask.

We could also ask whether, in fact, there is something wrong in the strengthening of our focus on sexual orientation identity as reality. Critics often point to the destructiveness of fixed and unambiguous sexual orientation identities, and it is true that this has often brought negative attention to those calling themselves lesbian, gay and bisexual. Nevertheless, it is also true that the presence of groups of individuals identifying themselves as lesbian, gay and bisexual has also made it easier to achieve legal reforms. Of course, such reforms, in turn, strengthen our ideas on sexual orientation, and continue the on-going shifts in our indigenous psychology

Who is influencing whom? The answer is that we have all played a part and will continue to do so. It is not criticism or scape-goating that is required at this point but, rather, the development of a critical understanding of the contribution we all make in the evolution of our culture.

### **Author Note**

Dr. Vivienne Cass is a private practitioner working in Western Australia, and is also the founder of Brightfire Press ([www.brightfire.com.au](http://www.brightfire.com.au)), publishers of texts on sexology. Vivienne is well known for her work on homosexual identity formation and can be contacted via: [contact@brightfire.com.au](mailto:contact@brightfire.com.au)

### **References**

Cass, V.C. (1979). Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 4, 219 - 234.

- Cass, V.C. (1983). Homosexual identity: A concept in need of definition. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 9, 105 - 126.
- Cass, V.C. (1984). Homosexual identity formation: Testing a theoretical Model. *Journal of Sex Research*, 20, 143 - 167.
- Cass, V.C. (1990). The implications of homosexual identity formation for the Kinsey model and scale of sexual preference. In D. McWirter, S Sanders & R. Reinisch (Eds.), *Heterosexuality - homosexuality: Concepts of sexual orientation*. New York: Oxford Press.
- Cass, V.C. (1996). Sexual orientation identity formation: A Western phenomenon. In R. Cabaj & T. Stein (Eds.), *Textbook of homosexuality and mental health*. Washington: American Psychiatric Press.
- Cass, V.C. (1999). Bringing psychology in from the cold: Framing psychological theory and research within a constructionist psychology framework. In J. Bohan & G. Russell (Eds.), *Psychology and sexual orientation: The meanings we make - Conversations about psychology and sexual orientation*. New York: New York University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *History of sexuality*. London: Lane.