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To cite this article: Christopher K. Belous, Richard S. Wampler & Tristan Warmels-Herring (2015) Gay Male Adaptation in the Coming-Out Process, Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health, 19:1, 55-71, DOI: [10.1080/19359705.2014.921265](https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2014.921265)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2014.921265>



Accepted author version posted online: 03 Jul 2014.  
Published online: 03 Jul 2015.



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## Gay Male Adaptation in the Coming-Out Process

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*Seventeen interviews were completed with self-identified gay men, with the goal of identifying a theory of adaptation through the coming out process. A commonality through the identity-development process emerged, highlighting concerns of stigma and bias. The adaptation to participants' perception of their local gay male communities played a large part in the identity development of participants. Participants cited instances of strictly adhering to gay stereotypes before they were able to coalesce their identities into a more "true" or solid self. Minority Stress Theory provided a way to discuss the results and interpret the data for use in applied settings.*

**KEYWORDS** *gay, qualitative research, stereotypes, coming out, identity formation*

Sexual identity development and perceptions of social support play a major role in the wellbeing of gay men (Gallor & Fassinger, 2010; Meyer, 2003). Recent research has shown that gay men have higher rates of depression and suicide attempts, and they engage more often in risky sexual behavior (Meyer, Dietrich, & Schwartz, 2007; Rhodes, McCoy, Hergenrather, Omli, & DuRant, 2007). These higher rates have been linked inversely with the amount of perceived support from social and familial networks (Gallor & Fassinger; Rossi, 2010; Shilo & Savaya, 2011), which is best explained through Minority Stress Theory (MST; Meyer, 1995, 2003).

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This study examined concepts of identity development and adaptation to participants' perceptions of their local gay male communities through the coming-out process. Using a grounded theory analysis of 17 interviews, the common occurrence of adaptation to identity development was identified. This process fits with the concepts of Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 1995) which provides a framework for identifying and comparing the multiple stresses that accompany a nonheterosexual identity in a heterocentrist society. The main tenet of MST is that a lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) person will experience stress related to their sexual orientation, often as a daily occurrence (Meyer, 1995, 2003). LGB people are seen as subject to a "constant coming-out" process, in which each day they must choose the level of disclosure that they feel comfortable with in their interactions with others. This level is determined by the environment, perceived danger, and the effect that the knowledge of their sexual orientation will have on themselves and others. Internalized homophobia (Malyon, 1982), stigma, and actual experiences contribute to the level of minority stress.

Significant associations have been found between higher levels of minority stress and mental health problems, including suicidal ideation, depression, and anxiety (Kuyper & Fokkema, 2011; Meyer, 1995). Many of the health disparities and stresses are related to the process of adapting to a nonheterosexual identity as an individual goes through the process of coming out. During this time, these issues surface and tend to be most extreme (Kuyper & Fokkema).

### ADAPTING TO GAY COMMUNITIES

Approximately 3.5% of the overall general population in the United States identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Badgett, Lau, Sears, & Ho, 2007; Gates, 2011). This creates an identifiable segment of the overall population that share a common characteristic—identifying with others as a different from the sexuality of the majority. Within sociological constructs this identification can typically be labeled as a "subculture" or as a "co-culture" (Jenks, 2005). For this research, the term "community" is used since it is a more widely acknowledged and accepted vernacular. As a person becomes a member of a subculture, it stands to reason that there would be an adaptation process by which an individual moves from a public identity of assumed heterosexuality to become a member of a nonheterosexual community. This type of adaptation can be defined as separating from the previous culture, adapting to the new culture, and integrating identity (not necessarily in that order) (Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1987; Troiden, 1988, 1989). This is usually completed for gay males through the coming-out process, as a component of sexual identity development.

## Sexuality and Identity

“Identity” as a construct is widely studied in the social sciences. For the purpose of this study, the authors chose to use a wide definition of the term identity that summarized from the work of Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckx (2010): “Identity comprises not only “who you think you are” (individually or collectively), but also “*who you act as being*” in interpersonal and intergroup interactions—and the social recognition or otherwise that these actions receive from other individuals or groups” [emphasis added] (p. 2). Most models of the development of sexual identity are similar to human development theories in that they describe how individuals pass through one stage to reach the next (e.g., Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1987; Troiden, 1979, 1988, 1989). A more well-known stage model of identity development is the Cass Homosexual Identity Formation (HIF) model (Cass). This six-stage model proposes an individual moves through six stages: (1) Identity Confusion, (2) Identity Comparison, (3) Identity Tolerance, (4) Identity Acceptance, (5) Identity Pride, and (6) Identity Synthesis. An individual is described as healthy in this model when able to incorporate sexual orientation into personality and life without sexual identity being the central focus of the self. Individuals in Stage 6 are able to have meaningful relationships with both heterosexual and LGB individuals, something that is often difficult in earlier stages.

In the most recent research, more fluid developmental theories have been developed to account for the diversity of human experience. These models do not rely on stages but rather focus more on the systemic nature of human reality, allowing for variance related to biology and experience. The Multidimensional Model of Sexual Identity Formation (MMSIF; Horowitz & Newcomb, 2002) is embedded in social construction theory and postulates that an individual’s identity is rooted mainly in their behaviors, self-identification, desires, and experiences. Furthermore, this model states that an individual’s sexual identity continues to develop over the course of the lifetime, and is never static or “complete.” Sexual identity is viewed as a process of multidirectional interaction between the individual and the social environment. In addition, individuals have the power to give meaning and understanding to their sexual desires and behaviors that are not categorized or demanded based on socially constructed labels (Horowitz & Newcomb). For the purposes of this research, we utilized the MMSIF model to help guide our understanding of the adaptation process.

## METHODS

Within sexual identity theory and in gay male research literature, there is little information regarding the process of identity development, specifically when going through the adaptation process of their new identity. The present study included men who had come out as gay within five years of

being interviewed. Influenced by the Multidimensional Model of Sexual Identity Formation model, the authors wanted to explore the process by which men in the Midwest go through the process of adapting to a gay male culture. Specifically, we wanted to explore issues of self-described personality characteristics, behavioral expectations and norms, and the perceived support systems that were available to these men.

## Design

A grounded theory qualitative research design was utilized to guide this project (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory methodology was chosen to allow the examination of a sequence of events over a sample population in an effort to develop a well-informed explanation of the process of adaptation (Birks & Mills, 2011; Urquart, 2013). Further, the inquiry listed above is best answered through grounded theory methods, as it will allow for the best possible answer (Goulding, 1998).

## PARTICIPANTS

Participants ( $n = 17$ ) were recruited through online advertisements and flyers that were distributed around a community in the Midwest. Participants self-selected to participate through contacting the author via phone or email to arrange an interview. Participants were compensated \$25 cash to participate in the interview. Not all potential participants were accepted into the study. Participants must have met the following criteria: ages 18–30, identify as male, and self-identified as a man who has sex with men (gay or bisexual, primarily interested in men). Of those who interviewed, 14 of 17 = were under the age of 25, 13 were Caucasian, 2 were Latino, 1 was African American, and 1 was Asian. Of the participants, 15 labeled themselves as “gay,” 2 self-identified as “bisexual – primarily interested in men.”

## Procedures

Interviews were semi-structured with a list of questions and prompts (Appendix A). There were three main domains of inquiry: pre-coming-out, the coming-out process, and post-coming-out. In each of these domains, probes were used to gather information about personality and behavioral characteristics. As it is impossible to be completely devoid of presuppositions (Hycner, 1985), any initial reactions to the interview data were noted in a log by the interviewer which was maintained throughout the research process. These field notes and memos were referenced and included in analysis. Transcription was completed using standard word processing software (Microsoft Office Word), using an audio player that could slow down the rate of speech. Transcription was completed by the first and third authors.

### BRACKETING PROCESS

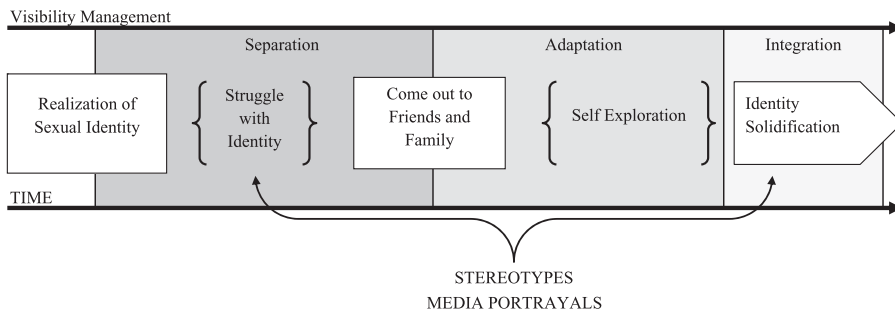
In qualitative research, effort to identify and control for bias should be made so as to cause the least effect on the outcome of the research (Ahern, 1999). The bracketing process for this research consisted of the identification of presuppositions prior to the interview process through group reflection of coders/transcribers, as well as individual journaling related to the research question. Throughout the study, the researchers kept a journal of reflections and reactions to the interviews, the transcription of the data, and the generation of the thematic process. This method of bracketing was recommended by Ahern as an acceptable method of bracketing and allowed for the reflexive analysis of bias by the researchers.

### TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE DATA

Trustworthiness can be defined as the combination of high credibility in the data and results as well as a high level of objectivity from the researchers (Krefting, 1991; Morrow, 2005). Trustworthiness for this study was developed through several processes; bracketing (mentioned previously), checks by research team members, and group thematic development. In order to assure that transcription was completed accurately, each transcriptionist read through the text as the interview played, both for their own interviews and those transcribed by the other researcher. In terms of positionality (Creswell, 2007), the research team comprised three men of varying ages (22 to 67). One identified as gay and two as straight. Two of the researchers (one gay, one straight) transcribed and coded all data. The third member oversaw the project and served as an objective third-party reviewer. Theme development to describe the process of coming-out and the adaptation to the gay community was conducted individually and finalized in a team process, in which members discussed the way in which themes were developed. This indicated higher levels of consistency in the data and the process of the research. As a final measure of trustworthiness, neutrality was established to the best of the ability of the researchers through the bracketing and self-reflection process.

### DATA ANALYSIS

In an effort to secure saturation (Bowen, 2008) and explore the topic in depth, interviews were continued until no new information was gathered in the previous two interviews. Saturation occurred early, with stories repeating and elements becoming apparent as early as Interview 10. Analysis was completed through thematic development utilizing an open coding format first, followed by axial coding. Minor themes were identified, and then combined into thematic elements that covered emergent topics. These themes were



**FIGURE 1** Graphical representation of results.

able to account for the process of the participants' adaptation, as described in the data.

## RESULTS

A model of the adaptation process as described by the participants is presented in Figure 1. This figure depicts the process the participants described as their process of identity development from initial realization of their non-heterosexual status through their current status as gay or bisexual, including influences on their decision to come out and the adaptation process once they came out.

### Pre-Coming Out

Prior to coming out, all participants knew they were "different." Each stated that he knew he was attracted to men before he told anyone, and this contributed to an intense fear of discovery. These fears in turn lead to an overcompensation of hyper-masculinity and attempts to mold themselves into socially acceptable "macho" men.

### TRYING TO BLEND IN

Most participants attempted to date women in an effort to be accepted, or to further determine their sexual orientation. These women and dates might be "covers" to maintain an image of heterosexuality: *"I would still date girls for other people to see"* [P2]. However, these men stated that, no matter how hard they tried to maintain a heterosexual identity, they did not feel accepted or comfortable. For example, *"I don't know, I just feel like, I feel like I don't pass, I feel like when people look at me, it's obvious to them, and so I'm sure they're*

*actually knowing gay people probably were like, yeah, give him a month or whatever” [P5].*

In general, the belief of not fitting in with the mainstream of heterosexual society led to a drop in self esteem and in increase in depression. One man stated, *“I didn’t want to be gay, that’s for sure. . . I struggled with it for a few years. I was even kind of like depressed for a while. I actually did see a psychologist once. . . Umm. I don’t know, the whole process was pretty hard” [P15].* The fear of being exposed without having the ability to control the situation also created a daily necessity for a façade. One participant stated, *“I didn’t want people to think and suspect and wonder and question all the time, so I would try to do things that were more masculine” [P10].* When the depression and daily stress of maintaining their façade combined, it created a sense of shyness or awkwardness in social situations: *“I was depressed and socially awkward” [P3].* Prior to the coming out process, fitting in and giving the appearance of heterosexuality was important to each participant.

#### STEREOTYPES ABOUT THE GAY COMMUNITY

All of the participants held stereotypes about the gay community before they came out, and most often these stereotypes came from their families or the communities in which they lived. Sometimes this was informed by religious sources, and sometimes it evolved from misunderstandings related to the gay community. The strongest predictor of more negative stereotypes was the smaller size and more conservative political atmosphere of the surrounding community. One participant stated that, even before he came out, there were often overt messages about the lack of acceptance about gay people and the gay community, *“I grew up in a conservative area, so there were a lot of negative things that were always thrown at me” [P2].*

When asked to identify some of the stereotypes that they had or had been told before they came out, participants identified three main stereotypes. The first was in regards to promiscuity: *“The gay community is slutty. . . Their morals are wrong” [P7].* The second was about gender expression: *“People always see a lot of gay guys as effeminate, just girly in general” [P3].* And the third was about the capability of gay people to raise and participate in families: *“Two people of the same sex can’t raise a family. . .” [P2].* As one individual stated, *“. . . that breakdown was hurtful” [P2].* During this portion of the interview, the participants would often state that the strength and nature of the stereotypes held by their family and communities had been the major contributing factor to their depression and lower sense of self-esteem.



## THE PRICE OF FAÇADE

When speaking of themselves prior to the coming-out process, the most frequent response was, *"I'm not being myself, so that kind of ate away at me. [P6]"* This sense of being "ate away" frequently would be expressed in negative self concept and an elevated sense of anger, *"Holding it in you know as a secret really made me you know tense, really aggravated. [P5]"* In general, none of the participants had good things to say about their identity prior to coming out. They all stated they were reserved, frequently sad, and constantly tormented by hiding their true selves by hiding their sexual orientation. *"There were times I was reasonably happy, but I was like always carrying around this anguish in my soul, like I'm not really being me" [P16].*

## Coming Out

Whether related to stereotypes they felt they embodied, or a perceived inability to maintain their heterosexual persona, the participants believed that it was impossible for others to not see through their charade. *"I lived in a glass closet, they knew I was giant 'capital G' gay" [P3].* It was participants' belief that others simply did not want to acknowledge the fact that these men were gay, and part of that reflected their own lack of self-acceptance of their sexual orientation. Having spent so much time pretending to be heterosexual led to a more difficult time accepting themselves. *"It was pretty tough for me just because I spent so much time, you know, imagining that I was still attracted to girls" [P2].*

## MEDIA INFLUENCE

One major thematic element that emerged was the influence of the media on the coming-out process, and particularly how the participants found models for themselves. Frequently, participants mentioned the character Jack from NBC's *Will & Grace* television show. *"When I first came out, everything was either super gay or not. Like there was no, like, lines of gray or, like, different types of gay people, they were all just like the stereotypical Jack from Will and Grace" [P7].* This role modeling after more visible (and stereotyped) gay individuals from the media often led to the embodiment of those characteristics. *"Once I was, like, yeah, I'm gay, finding out what gay meant for me was a process, and that started off by me looking at every gay thing in the media and being like, yes, that's what I am" [P13].*

Often, the portrayal of gay men in the media was not positive. This would have a substantial effect on the way that the participants viewed themselves and their future. *"Back then, I could tell in the media there was*

*still not much acceptance of the gay community the way they were portrayed on TV shows and movies*" [P11]. This often increased fear of negative reactions to coming-out and increased their belief in negative stereotypes. A minority of participants stated that they were able to look at media portrayals of gay men and realize that what they were seeing was not necessarily reality. *"Because the way it's portrayed in the media was not really what it is"* [P13]. The men who mentioned the inaccuracy of media portrayals were often from larger cities and had had exposure to the gay community prior to coming out. They also often had more liberal parents and support systems.

#### SOCIAL DIFFICULTIES

Going through the actual coming-out process was a tense and stressful time for each participant. Each had significant fears of rejection from family and friends, and often questioned himself and what his future would hold once he did come out. Mothers were overwhelming the first family member to be told about their son being a gay man. A mother was chosen because the men felt she would be the more supportive of the parenting dyad. However, the reaction of the mother rarely went as planned. At times, it was a positive reaction to the news, but there were also very negative reactions. As one participant stated, *"[U]mm, there was a bit of it [fear] because I wasn't really sure how my mother was gonna to react or anything. And actually that turned out pretty bad, I got called, I don't know, 'fag' about 15 times within like a 10 minute period"* [P14].

It seemed that after some time, the negative reactions of the mother would soften a little, and the true reasoning behind the strongly negative reaction would come out. The mothers in this study held negative stereotypes about the gay community that made them fear for the safety and wellbeing of their sons. *"My mom has this, like, embedded thing from the past, all gay people are horrible, they are going to have a horrible life, people are going to treat them like shit, they are going to get diseases"* [P14]. The mothers in the study also frequently would blame themselves as the reason their son was gay. This would include withholding affection: *"I think she doesn't like to give me affection because maybe she feels if a boy is hugging his mother maybe it is more feminine or something, so she doesn't encourage that"* [P8]. Other mothers attempted to "de-gay" their sons by setting them up on dates with women.

For every negative parental reaction, there was at least one positive reaction from the parenting dyad, and often the participant was surprised by the support. *"She asked me, actually. She finally just said, she kind of just like, 'Does your depression or anything have anything to do with your sexual orientation?' And I'm like maybe... and then she said like she is accepting"*

*and everything else, and that's nice"* [P6]. Fathers were often supportive of their sons, or at least not overtly negative in their reactions. *"My father was much easier. Although I came out to him quite a few years later, he was like 'Oh, I kind of knew already whatev [sic], he was like 'Oh kind of really knew already.' Umm so my father wasn't really a problem"* [P10]. As a way to find acceptance, fathers believed that being gay was biologically based: *"And basically he said something along the lines of, 'Well it's obviously a biological thing, I mean, [I can't] dislike you because of something biological"* [P11]. In general, fathers stated they would accept their child, *"Well if you are gay just tell us and we can accept it"* [P13].

The greatest stress of coming out was related to telling their father about their sexual orientation. *"Basically I was afraid my dad was gonna umm like deny me... Like coming out to your dad, is a huge almost bash on his masculinity"* [P12]. In order to handle this stress, some of the men in the study simply did not tell their father directly, or relied on others to share the information. *"Actually I still haven't told my dad, my dad knows through my mom, and he doesn't care at all. Obviously we don't talk about it, but... he's fine with it"* [P9].

Friends seemed to be the easiest to come-out to, and were the most supportive throughout the narratives given in the study. In consideration of the fear of coming-out mentioned with regard to telling family members, most of the men in the study were able to state, *"All of my friends have been really accepting"* [P8]. Some dealt with the revelation of their sexual orientation in different ways, *"At first when I started telling people I was really scared, and, how do I explain it, I didn't talk to them for a week after I told them, for fear that they wouldn't want to talk to me anymore, but then they you know 'Hey, it's ok we are still your friends' and little by little I started getting more trust you know? I told them, [and] they didn't care so I was really glad and now even now I have straight friends, gay friends and they accept me I'm glad to say. [P1]"* However, each participant was happy with their friends' reactions and stated that a close group of friends was the *"Best support group a gay guy could want"* [P9].

### Post-Coming Out: Embracing Who I Am

Upon coming out, virtually all of the men stated they changed in some way and had some period of time in which they felt they still were not being true to themselves. This period of time was labeled by the participants as a "transitional" phase of their coming out and often coincided with the development of a mentor-like friendship from within the gay community. This transitional phase was characterized by a closer adherence to stereotypes of gay men held by a homophobic society.

## MENTORING FRIENDSHIPS

Most of the men in the study did not have a gay figure who was familiar to them before they came-out, because they had had little or no contact with the gay community. Seeking friendships specifically with gay men and the gay community became important in their identity development. When asked about having any specific relationships that made the transition and adaptation process easier, several men stated that they would form a friendship with someone who was more experienced and had been out longer. These “mentors” often provided incentive to continue developing their own identity and confidence in themselves. One man said, *“Just knowing him and seeing him as out and strong and you know, that kind of motivated me”* [P6].

## COPING WITH STEREOTYPES

As mentioned, the media played a big part in influencing how gay men who had come out recently began to formulate their new personas. Often, the men would be fitted into stereotypes simply by revealing their sexual orientation. One man stated that when he told his friends he was gay, they assumed he liked to shop. However, most often during the transition phase, they selected the stereotypes themselves. For example, appearance became more of a concern after coming out: *“I dress better but that is just a horrible stereotype – but I guess I am just more open to being like, well, I can dress like this and I don’t care if people think I’m gay because, well, I am”* [P3].

Some of the stereotypes were physical or mannered in nature. *“I have a lisp and that’s a gay stereotype”* [P1]. Stereotypes might also be found in the way in which the men interact with others. *“Around a big group of people, like, my theatricality kind of comes out, and, like, the voice kind of goes up here and excited [speaking in high pitch]. Like, if I’m interacting with other gay friends, like, it just kind of comes out, it brings out the sassy gay”* [P4].

The comparison of gay men to women is a homophobic stereotype held by many heterosexually identified people when thinking about the gay community. As mentioned before, not only the gay men themselves, but those around them also believe that gay men are necessarily effeminate. Effeminate characteristics were defined by the men as being overly emotional: *“It’s stereotypical being like girls are emotional, I definitely have these same sort of emotions that girls go to, that girls experience”* [P3]; body image concerns: *“I am becoming like that stereotype of, like, the gay male, like, ‘Oh, I’m gaining weight,’ or you know, like, ‘I’m fat,’ you know, stuff like that”* [P4]; and placing credence in the opinion of others and the way in which they view them: *“Homosexual males are kind of similar to girls where it is kind of like the*

competition, you are always trying to compete to see who is the best looking one, you know fancy and fabulous and all that stuff" [P9].

A portion of the transition phase included risky behaviors, including promiscuity: *"The slutty phase, I feel like that is kind of a huge thing within the gay community"* [P15]. There was also a need to be more social: *"I clubbed every week at the gay bars and stuff like that, that summer [when I came out]"* [P14]. The coming out process resulted in several behaviors and characteristics that the typical gay man in this study said were not "normal." Each stated he was acting in some way that differed from who he became as he passed through the identity development process into a more solid form of persona. However, this is a process and one that continues every day: *"I'm learning to dig deeper and discover who I am and to just be that"* [P10].

#### BEING MYSELF

After the basic coming out process was complete, every participant stated he was happier and more confident in himself: *"Coming out has taken a lot of weight off my shoulders, it has made me less awkward"* [P17]. Being a gay man was seen as something positive, something to be proud of: *"I feel smarter, lucky. Being gay is a really positive thing in my life"* [P3]. Self image and confidence improved dramatically, perhaps because these men did not have to expend energy trying to hide their sexual orientation: *"And so I mean I am really happy now. I am much more confident"* [P12]. This in turn allowed for more positive relationships in which the men could be themselves: *"I have better relationships with people now"* [P9].

#### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study brought together the concepts of sexual identity development and adaptation through the coming-out process for gay men. Gay men in this study tended to enter the gay culture through a strong adherence to stereotypes and media portrayals of how a "typical" gay male should act. The process of embodying these characteristics was labeled by the participants as a "transitional" phase through which they passed through on the way to their "true" identity.

Their "true" identity might or might not include some of these stereotypical characteristics. However, these characteristics were not seen as an adherence to those stereotypes about gays, but as choices that were simply components of their identity. When asked about why he thought he still embodied some of the stereotypes portrayed in the media, one participant stated, *"I mean if I fit a stereotype like so what, stereotypes are based on generalizations of a group anyway so of course some of them are going to be true"*

*of some people some of the time*" [P17]. Participants of this study typically embodied some characteristics defined traditionally as feminine, most notably a dramatic increase in care related to appearance and social interaction.

Stereotypes are used by specific communities for many reasons, for example, to identify fellow community members versus discriminating against individuals or communities. Embodying those stereotypes allows the person to enter the community more readily. The results of this study show that part of the adaptation process includes explaining who you are and trying to share in group behaviors. It makes sense that these men would embrace some stereotypic characteristics in an effort to become an accepted member of the community.

Participants reported that they were depressed, reserved, or angry and bitter prior to coming out, reflecting the effort required to maintain a façade of heterosexuality. They stated that this was the worst part of the process—being forced to continually lie to loved ones and friends. Through the coming-out process, they were relieved of this constant stress. All of the participants also stated that they were much happier and more confident in themselves coming-out.

In this research, we are provided with an alternative to rigid views of identity development, allowing us to conceptualize identity as a fluid and unique process. This view of identity is represented in terms of sexual orientation as well. Most of the participants in this study at one point viewed themselves as at least partially heterosexual. Each participant experienced growth at different times and circumstances. The participants described a state of crisis before and during the coming-out process. Many described a sense of solidarity with the gay community after the experience that implies a sense of comfort with their new identity. The coming-out process, in particular, encompasses a partial rejection of a past "self" in order to accept a new identity. Most of the participants involved in this study described a vast improvement in their life satisfaction after coming-out, a general sense of comfort and acceptance of one's self. Whether this self-acceptance is persistent cannot be addressed without further study.

The stress of this process and the continued stress of the constant coming-out process as described in the research support the position of Minority Stress Theory and the Multidimensional Model of Sexual Identity Formation. The sense and level of perceived stress in their daily life affected the rate at which a man went through the coming-out process, as well as influencing the way in which the individual adapted to his new identity. This research further expands the conceptualization of MST to include the stress of adapting to the gay community and the ability to be accepted by peers.

Knowledge of the "transition" phase of sexual identity development can be helpful when developing programs in communities, in individual or group therapy, and to further the research knowledge of sexual identity development.

## Clinical Applications

These results can help to inform better and more appropriate interventions and programs for individuals going through the coming out process. Indeed, the recent “It Gets Better” project focuses on helping young persons to see past their current state of confusion and distress and see that the future will not always be as difficult (Savage, 2010). For therapists, it is important to recognize the mental health disparity mentioned in the literature review—the gay male population has higher rates of depression and general mental health issues. Many gay men will seek treatment, and a therapist’s knowledge of their process of identity development and adaptation to the gay community can be beneficial. A goal of therapy is to help clients discover who they are, not how the media portrays others with their sexual orientation. Attention to the impact of their social and familial support systems’ acceptance of their sexual orientation is critical. The non-heterosexual client will need to cope with the daily coming-out process and may be under stress related to identity in various settings (e.g., home, work, church).

## Research Applications

Future research related to the identity development process is needed, particularly as it relates to the importance of supportive systems and the ways in which identity is linked to environmental influences. Also, the integration of an initial adaptation process within identity development theories may describe more accurately the actual process of gay identity development. This research supports the dynamic Multidimensional Model of Sexual Identity Formation, rather than the stage-based Cass Homosexual Identity Formation model. The participants described the process of coming out and coming to terms with their sexual identity as a developmental process related to different environmental factors rather than moving from stage to stage as described in the Cass model.

## Limitations

This study was conducted in an urban area with a large university. Most of the respondents were of college age and therefore, this study may not represent the larger population of gay men and their process of coming out and adaptation to a gay male community. The general level of agreement of the participants was quite high, and the research team was in agreement with their thematic schemes. Saturation of the data for this sample was achieved relatively quickly. It would be reasonable to use these results to inform community-based programs and interventions, therapy with those in

the middle of the coming-out process, and as a base to conduct further research.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. How would you describe your sexual orientation?  
DOMAIN: PRE-COMING OUT
2. When did you first know that you were not heterosexual?
3. Did you participate in the gay community before you were ‘out’?
  - a. What were your thoughts of the gay community before coming out?
4. What were your thoughts related to coming out?
  - a. Fears?
  - b. Stigmas?
  - c. Stereotypes?
5. How would you describe yourself before coming out?
  - a. Personality, characteristics, social aspects, etc

DOMAIN: COMING-OUT

6. What was your process of coming out like?
  - a. Who did you come out to first?
  - b. How did your family react?
  - c. How did your friends react?
  - d. Did you feel any support from those close to you?

DOMAIN: POST-COMING OUT

7. After you came out, did you begin to participate in, or did you more fully participate in the gay community?
  - a. Did you have any specific friendships within the gay community that made the transition easier?
8. How would you describe yourself now that you are out?
  - a. Personality, characteristics, social aspects, etc.
9. Do you feel as though you have changed now that you are out?
  - a. How so?
10. What was the biggest life change once you did come out?
11. Looking forward, what do you think the future holds for you?