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Revisioning Sexual
Minority Identity Formation:
A New Model of Lesbian Identity and
Its Implications for Counseling and Research

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This article describes a new, inclusive model of lesbian identity formation. A rationale for the model is presented, which includes a review of relevant literature in lesbian/gay identity, racial/ethnic identity, and gender issues related to identity development. Three case studies are presented to elucidate the applications of the model to counseling, and the article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the model for research.

Although societal awareness of the existence of lesbian and gay people has increased dramatically over the past decade or so, most lesbians and gay men still grow up within a context of pervasive environmental and internalized homophobia and expectation to be heterosexual. This fosters a specific struggle with identity awareness, acceptance, and affirmation, a process known as *coming out* to self and others (see Fassinger, 1991, for more detailed discussion). Models of the identity formation or coming out process, an important recent theoretical development, assume the primacy of oppressive contextual influences on normative developmental and psychological processes (Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991). These models can help counseling psychologists in their work with lesbian and gay clients because they seek to predict, articulate, and normalize common experiences in developing and managing a stigmatized identity. If, for example, identifiable phases of the coming out process are found to be predictive of specific problems of living (career indecision, depression, sexual acting out), they may be properly

recognized and treated as normative developmental issues, rather than as indications of pathology.

Although a common general progression of identity development is implied in all of the existing lesbian/gay models, many have been conceptualized around the experiences of White men, and the extent to which they deliberately incorporate gender, race, and other demographic differences is variable (Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991). Most existing lesbian/gay models also tend to ignore the critical difference between personal and reference group components of identity, a distinction that is central to conceptualizations of identity found in general theories of the development of the self (e.g., Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Taylor & Dube, 1986; Triandis, 1989). The model presented in this article is an attempt to address some of the limitations in the current lesbian/gay identity literature. It is intended be inclusive of the diverse experiences of self-identification in lesbians and differs from previous models in that it posits a dual nature of lesbian identity as an *individual sexual identity* that results in *membership in an oppressed minority group*.

This article begins with a review of existing models of lesbian and gay identity, followed by a brief examination of literature and research in racial minority and women's identity development, from which our model is derived. We then present our model, offering several case examples that elucidate the application of the model to practice and conclude with recommendations for future research.

MODELS OF LESBIAN/GAY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Perhaps the most widely cited of the existing models of lesbian/gay identity development and one that has formed a foundation for much of the subsequent work in this area is that of Cass (1979). Intended to apply to both women and men, her model encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioral components into a six-stage process of integrating a lesbian/gay identity into the self-concept:

1. identity confusion, involving questioning assumptions about one's sexual orientation;
2. identity comparison, involving feelings of isolation and alienation from both prior assumptions and nongay others;
3. identity tolerance, involving seeking out other gay people and tolerating a lesbian/gay identity;
4. identity acceptance, involving selective identity disclosure to others;
5. identity pride, involving immersion in lesbian/gay culture and rejection of heterosexual values; and

   6. identity synthesis, in which lesbian/gay identity becomes one aspect of the self
      instead of an overriding independent identity.

Cass (1984) attempted to validate this model using a questionnaire she developed, concluding that individuals can be distinguished by stage characteristics, that they follow the order predicted in the model, and that blurring present in earlier and later stages suggested four developmental stages rather than six. Cass' pioneering attempt to quantify and validate a model of lesbian/gay identity formation is important because few such studies exist even at present. Problems inherent in Cass' work, however, include the methodological confounding of self-designated stage allocation and instrument completion in the implementation of the study, the conceptual limitation of exceptional political awareness and identity disclosure required in the final stage of the model, and the fact that her work using Australian samples has been widely utilized in the United States with little discussion of contextual differences.

   Based on many of the assumptions in Cass' work, Coleman (1982) outlined a similar five-stage model:

   1. precoming out
   2. coming out
   3. exploration
   4. first relationships
   5. integration

Like Cass, he included widespread identity disclosure as a developmental task of the final stage but without the overt politicization of Cass's model. Coleman also discussed the force of social pressure at different stages of the coming out process, articulated the need to return to earlier stages repeatedly throughout adulthood, and described clear counseling implications associated with each stage. This model, however, has not been empirically validated.

   Troiden (1989) synthesized several models of lesbian/gay identity formation into a sociological model with four stages:

   1. sensitization
   2. identity confusion
   3. identity assumption
   4. identity commitment

Troiden noted the critical importance of a supportive lesbian/gay environment in facilitating self-definition and self-acceptance within the context of social stigma and postulated identity disclosure as an option rather than a

characteristic of any specific developmental stage, allowing for social realities that may prevent disclosure. He also acknowledged the differential effect of gender role socialization on identity formation in lesbian women and gay men. However, like Coleman's (1982) model, no empirical support exists at present for Troiden's model.

In another synthesis of existing models, Minton and McDonald (1984) used ego development theory to build a model based primarily on males and consisting of three stages, labeled egocentric, sociocentric, and universalistic. Like Coleman, Minton and McDonald implied the need for circularity in coming out models because changing life situations always hold anew the possibility of rejection, and they discussed the costs and benefits of disclosure. Problems with their model, however, include the collapsing of many developmental tasks into one final ego-identity stage and the lack of empirical validation.

Faderman (1984) critiqued the Minton and McDonald (1984) model based on lesbian feminist literature, asserting that "new gay" lesbians exist who begin with a critical evaluation of heterosexual social norms, which they then internalize in a commitment to women that includes lesbianism as an active choice. Thus, although Faderman's conceptualization is not a formal model, she implied a developmental trajectory for new gay lesbians that directly reverses the process described in the Minton and McDonald model. Faderman accurately notes the unique sociopolitical context existing in women's communities that supports lesbianism as a creative choice for women and thus has made an important contribution to a literature that has been built largely on the experiences of men. However, Faderman's equation of political and sexual identities may be inappropriate in that the philosophy of feminism, which may equip some women with prolesbian beliefs facilitative of the coming out process, probably has little influence on the affective power of internalized homophobia that hinders development of a positive sexual and relational self-concept (MacCowan, 1987).

Attempting to synthesize existing gay identity theory into the first known model developed specifically for women, Sophie (1985-1986) proposed and tested four stages:

1. first awareness
2. testing and exploration
3. identity acceptance
4. identity integration

Results obtained through structured interviews with 14 women experiencing sexual orientation confusion indicated that although many participants'

experiences fit the early stages of the model, later changes were less closely linked to theoretical predictions and some women did not fit the model at all. Predictions supported by the interviews included late rather than early disclosure to nongays, exploration of the lesbian/gay community preceding acceptance, and acceptance characterized by a preference for lesbian/gay social interaction. However, contrary to prediction, first awareness did not always precede lesbian/gay contact or lead to alienation, identity disclosure and entering relationships occurred in the second stage for some women (suggesting that first relationships occur earlier in the developmental process for lesbians than for gay men), negative identity did not always precede positive identity, disclosure levels in the third stage were mixed, and little support was found for movement to an integrated worldview or of lesbianism as a static identity. Sophie concluded that the linearity of existing models may be useful for describing early stages, but there is a great variety in the order and timing of events further into the process, rendering a linear model inadequate. However, although Sophie's use both qualitative and quantitative approaches is commendable, the adequate testing of her model is compromised by a small sample of what appear to be homogeneous, predominantly feminist women who are unusually free of predicted conflicts associated with coming out.

A second model developed specifically for women is that of Chapman and Brannock (1987), who described a five-stage conscious process by which lesbians come to self-label (vs. come to terms with attraction to same-sex people, as in other models):

1. same-sex orientation
2. incongruence
3. self-questioning/exploration
4. identification
5. choice of lifestyle

They tested their model by surveying a sample of 197 self-identified lesbians regarding their experiences from first awareness of same-sex inclinations to their status at the time of the research. The majority of participants referred to strong emotional or physical bonds with women as the reason they first questioned their sexual orientation, indicating that most of these women experienced self-questioning in relation to others. Although 89% had had sexual contact with men and heterosexuality was not abandoned until an average of 4 years after first same-sex experiences, most (82%) also believed they had always been lesbians; the duration of heterosexual involvements suggests support for the authors' inclusion of these as part of a lengthy period

of self-questioning/exploration in their model. Chapman and Brannock concluded from their results that sexual orientation precedes awareness, that awareness is the first step in self-labeling, and that labeling results from interaction with the heterosexual environment. However, although the survey information in this study is useful in understanding women's experiences, it is not clear how it coincides with the model being tested.

All of these models describe a lengthy process of coming to terms with homoerotic desire and changes in self-concept required to act upon, accept, and internalize that desire. Each begins with a phase in which the nature of attraction is unclear to the individual, a turning point that involves recognizing a difference, and progressive movement toward self-affirmation and disclosure to others. All describe a linear path in three to six stages, along which lesbian/gay identity moves from the recesses of the self-concept to the very center and finally emerges as one acknowledged part of the self. Whereas empirical validation of these models is scant and methodologically compromised, attempts to put these ideas to test are useful in providing a foundation for further theoretical efforts, such as the present work. In addition, lesbian/gay identification is linked to other forms of minority identity by their common roots in the context of societal prejudice and oppression. Little has been written explicitly about these interconnections, particularly the integration of diverse gender and racial/ethnic experiences into models of the coming out process. In an effort to begin to articulate the interplay of these forces, we next briefly explore racial/ethnic and gender issues in identity development.

EXPANDING THE INQUIRY: RELATED RESEARCH

Racial/Ethnic Issues in Identity Development

There have been attempts in the literature to document the complications of multiple oppressions in the coming out experiences of racial/ethnic minority group members. Loiacano (1989), for example, conducted structured interviews with six Black lesbians and gay men and identified several themes related to dual identity. Because of difficulty in finding validation as Blacks in the predominantly White gay/lesbian community and the lack of support as lesbians/gays in the predominantly heterosexual Black community, a need was expressed to find life contexts in which to integrate dual identities. Loiacano also noted that Blacks may place less emphasis on coming out than Whites because of a need to maintain support within their racial communities and that lesbian/gay identity formation in Blacks is likely to be related to

racial identity. Unfortunately, although these are interesting results, the sample consisted of a very small number of unusually well-educated and politically active individuals, suggesting that Loiacano (like Cass, 1984, and Faderman, 1984) may have mistaken politicization for self-acceptance.

In another study of dual identities, Chan (1989) conducted a survey of 35 Asian American lesbians and gay men who were attending race-specific lesbian/gay events. Similar to participants in Loiacano's (1989) study, Chan's sample reported conflict between needs associated with their two identities. Though 26 of the 35 subjects indicated attending lesbian/gay-only events, none reported attending Asian-only events, and over half noted that the existence of lesbians/gays was denied in their culture. Unfortunately, Chan's sample (like Loiacano's) was unusually political, limiting the generalizability of her findings.

Morales (1989) proposed an identity model for visible racial/ethnic gay and lesbian individuals that attempts to incorporate their dual statuses. This model proposed five states (vs. stages) possible for an individual in integrating multiple identities:

1. denial of conflicts
2. bisexual vs. gay/lesbian
3. conflicts in allegiances
4. establishing priorities in allegiance
5. integrating various communities

This model builds upon the strengths of previous models of identity development (e.g., Cass, 1979), highlights the notion of flexible states or statuses (vs. linear stages), focuses on family and cultural issues, and clearly addresses the irony of invisibility within two (or more) communities faced by lesbian/gay people who also are members of visible racial/ethnic groups. However, the model has not yet been tested in empirical studies and its heuristic and practical usefulness is unclear.

Although there is scant empirical work regarding racial/ethnic minority lesbians and gay men, a growing literature addressing general racial identity issues exists and contributes to understanding the role of oppression in shaping identity formation in stigmatized groups. Moreover, Cross's (1971) seminal model of racial identity formation influenced Cass's early (1979) work, thus having indirect influence on much subsequent gay/lesbian identity scholarship. Cross's model, developed within the context of the civil rights movement, described the stages of liberation traversed by Black activists in moving from devaluation to affirmation of Black identity and has sparked considerable research and theoretical work.

Cross (1971) described the "Negro-to-Black conversion" as consisting of five stages:

1. pre-encounter, involving political naivete and dependence on White dominance;
2. encounter, involving a challenge to the individual's view of self and other Blacks;
3. immersion-emersion, involving immersion in the Black world and hostility toward Whites;
4. internalization, involving the incorporation of learnings into the self-concept; and
5. internalization-commitment, representing a transformation to conscious anger, self-love, Black communalism.

This model was validated using a Q-sort methodology, and support was found for the existence and ordering of the stages (Hall, Cross, & Freedle, 1972). Further empirical work based on this original model has produced increasingly refined theoretical statements regarding racial/ethnic identities, measures of racial identity attitudes, studies of the effects of racial identity on counseling, and increased interest in multicultural research, counseling, and training (see Helms, 1990; Mio & Iwamasa, 1993; Parham, 1989; Pedersen, 1991; Ponterotto & Sabnani, 1989; Ridley, Mendoza, & Kanitz, 1994). It seems clear that the heuristic richness of the Cross (1971) model provides a useful template for generating, operationalizing, and testing models of identity development related to race, ethnicity, and culture.

Attempting to apply Cross's (1971) ideas to the identity development of any cultural minority, Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1979) offered a similar five-stage model that addresses four attitude areas at each stage: views of self, others of the same minority, those of another minority, and majority group individuals. The five stages are

1. conformity
2. dissonance
3. resistance and immersion
4. introspection
5. synergetic articulation and awareness

Their final stage of minority identity development involves self-fulfillment regarding cultural identity, characterized by individual control, objectivity, flexibility, and the willingness to fight all oppression.

Myers and her colleagues (1991) offered a general, holistic model of self-identification in oppressed people. Based on optimal theory, this model represents an attempt to address the oversimplification of linear developmental models. The Myers et al. model configures the identity process as an

expanding spiral of six phases (rather than stages), representations, and language choices that are intended to reflect the fluidity of integrating and expanding one's sense of self, the core process described in their model.

The final conceptual framework presented in this section is that of Reynolds and Pope (1991), who proposed a multidimensional identity model built on Root's (1990) work in biracial identity. This model offers four possible options for identity resolution in those who are members of multiple oppressed groups:

1. passive acceptance of societally assigned identification with one aspect of self;
2. conscious identification with one aspect of self;
3. segmented identification with multiple aspects of self; and
4. intersecting identification with multiple aspects of self.

Reynolds and Pope indicate clearly that these options are dynamic and fluid, as well as strongly linked to personal needs, reference groups, and environmental demands. This model is notable in its attempt to build upon racial identity work that is specifically focused on the intersection of dual statuses. However, like the models of Atkinson et al. (1979) and Myers et al. (1991), it has not yet been subjected to empirical validation.

As is evident in the selected models described here, the process of racial/ethnic minority identity development is thought to be similar to the process of sexual minority identity development. Common to both processes is moving the reality of the experience of oppression from unconsciousness to consciousness, then addressing the issues raised by a changed awareness of oppression. For women, who also experience pervasive oppression and discrimination, similar processes regarding the development of gender consciousness are likely to occur and are discussed in the following section.

Gender Issues in Identity Development

Models depicting the process of psychological development of women vis-à-vis their gender recently have been formulated. Peck (1986), for example, offered a model of women's self-definition in adulthood that, although untested, is one of the few attempts to translate theoretically the assertion that linear models do not adequately describe the multiplex nature of self-creation. Her model, illustrated in conical form, describes a dialectical relationship among myriad forces in a woman's life to shape an emerging identity, rather than a series of discrete tasks and stages. These forces include sociohistorical time (era and age), influences of the woman's relationships, and an emerging core self-definition. Peck's model contributes to conceptu-

alizing lesbian identity development in its explicit attention to the interplay of external and internal forces. Sociohistorical time, for example, indeed defines the context for establishment of an oppressed identity, and flexibility or rigidity in family relationships is likely to determine whether a developing lesbian identity will be released or strangled.

Downing and Roush (1985) offered a model of feminist identity development explicitly based on Cross's (1971) work and consisting of five stages:

1. passive acceptance of discrimination against women;
2. revelation of contradictions being avoided;
3. embeddedness-emanation in close connection with other women and caution with men;
4. synthesis of positive aspects of womanhood, gender role transcendence, and evaluation of men individually; and
5. active commitment to a role-transcendent future through personal action.

This model is useful in expanding the conceptual framework of lesbian identity development in its attention to the uniquely intimate relations between subordinate and dominant group members that exist for lesbians in relation to heterosexual family members. In addition, as a model of political identity change, this model relates closely to Faderman's (1984) work rooting lesbianism in feminist identity development, again suggesting that it may be easier for feminist than nonfeminist women to develop lesbian identities because of the valuing of woman-identified choices.

Ossana, Helms, and Leonard (1992) proposed a model that is similar to the Downing and Roush (1985) work in using as its foundation the Cross (1971) model but focuses on the development of "womanist" identity, which the authors define as movement from external to internal standards of gender identity. This model also differs from the Downing and Roush model in its deemphasis of a feminist political orientation. The four stages in the model are

1. pre-encounter
2. encounter
3. immersion-emersion
4. internalization

Using a measure of womanist identity attitudes based on Helms' work in racial identity (see Helms, 1990), the authors found relationships among womanist identity, self-esteem, and environmental gender bias in a study of college women; this suggests the usefulness of the model in empirical studies, particularly as a conceptual alternative to more politicized notions of women's development.

An important area of crossover between lesbian and feminist/womanist identity development is the experience of sexism that affects women's identities. Although many of the existing models of lesbian/gay identity development describe a process thought to be common to both women and men, most rest on androcentric assumptions; that is, they were attempts to document male experience, they represent syntheses of earlier (male-biased) models, or they simply do not attend to women's experience and thus perpetuate the oft-noted invisibility of lesbians in the sexual orientation literature. Little rationale has been offered for either the inclusion or separation of the sexes in these models, but we believe that there are elements of female socialization that uniquely and profoundly affect the experience of lesbian identity formation: the repression of sexual desire, the interrelationship of intimacy and autonomy, and the recent availability of reinforcement for nontraditional role behavior.

Much has been written regarding the repression/expression of women's sexuality and the complex interrelationship between intimacy and autonomy in both lesbian and heterosexual women (Butler, 1993; Daniluk, 1993; Fassinger & Morrow, 1995; Frye, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Vance, 1984). A few models, such as Peck's (1986), explicitly incorporate these ideas. In addition, some writers have begun questioning the very foundation of accepted views of human sexuality based on attention to the unique features of lesbian relationships (e.g., Fassinger & Morrow, 1995; Frye, 1992). This new theoretical work offers insight into commonly noted differences in the identity development process for lesbians and gay men. Women attempting to incorporate a lesbian sexual identity face a struggle that their male counterparts do not: First, they have been taught that sexual desire itself is dangerous and wrong, then they find that the object of their desire is devalued. This may help to explain why women tend to come out later in life than men and why women are more likely to come out in the context of a relationship as opposed to an independent process of articulating and acting on sexual desire (Fassinger & Morrow, 1995; Troiden, 1989). Accurate models of lesbian identity development must therefore account for the generation of sexual identity in women in relation to intimacy with others, rather than in relation to sex.

A final element affecting the developmental process of lesbians is a context that now exists whereby nontraditional role behaviors (e.g., working in traditionally male jobs, initiating sex, showing strength) are somewhat reinforced and supported in women. Whereas the common stereotype that only nontraditionally sex-typed women become lesbians is inaccurate, it may be true that the presence and expression of same-sex desire requires some nontraditional role behavior (Browning, Reynolds, & Dworkin, 1991; Fass-

inger & Morrow, 1995). In models of identity development, this might be manifested in feeling fundamentally different from other girls or women, although this awareness would not necessarily provoke the intense role anxiety suggested in models of gay male development, again indicating the overriding salience of gender in sexual identity development.

SUMMARY AND CRITIQUE OF EXISTING LITERATURE

The identity models outlined above describe a process that begins by questioning previously held, socialized assumptions regarding the self, one's place in society, and dominant and minority group attributes. In the case of lesbian identity development, a two-fold process occurs: On the one hand, desire is becoming articulated in the self and a personal sexual identity is developing; on the other hand, that experience is causing a shift in self-defined group membership and group meaning. Existing models of lesbian/gay identity formation conflate these personal and social developmental trajectories, a weakness Cross (1987) has written about extensively in regard to racial identity models, as well. Indeed, Cross recently (1987) has described racial identity as having two different sectors: personal identity, including self-evaluation and self-esteem; and reference group orientation, which includes race awareness and racial identity and which can be self-defined or ascribed. Moreover, Cross criticized existing racial identity research for not adequately distinguishing between personal or reference group sectors of identity, positing this problem as an explanation for the mixed and confusing outcomes that pervade the racial identity literature.

This confounding of two different developmental trajectories also may be one reason why the lesbian/gay models tend to be less reliable descriptors in the later stages and why they do not overlap more with other minority identity models; the individual sexual identification process falls into the first two or three stages of existing lesbian/gay models, whereas the group identification process tends to fall in later, more sociopolitical stages. First, there is a process that involves individual sexual awareness and identification (Am I lesbian/gay?); then there is a process involving reference group identification (What does it mean to be lesbian/gay in society?) that is similar to other minority identity development.

The conflation of these two processes in existing models results in an odd tyranny in which political activism and universal disclosure become signs of an integrated lesbian/gay identity (e.g., Cass, 1979). The models deal little with the meaning of homoerotic intimacy, addressing mostly accommodation to minority group membership. There is, of course, merit in the idea that

social activism and interpersonal openness are positively associated with mental health and successful internalization of lesbian/gay identity as well as some evidence for the benefits of being out to others, at least selectively (see Fassinger, 1991; Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991). However, the implication that lacking these qualities signals developmental arrest fails to account for the social realities of diverse groups of lesbians and gay men. Such factors as occupational environment, geographical location, racial/ethnic group membership, family situation, legal and economic realities, and support systems determine the extent to which disclosure and politicization are even possible for many lesbians and gay men (Fassinger, 1991). Models of lesbian/gay identity formation that describe a common developmental process must be inclusive of diversity in these populations.

Moreover, both the process and the content of lesbian/gay identity development are oversimplified in linear models that postulate immutable same-sex relational orientation as the final stage. As identity research suggests, individuals may be in several stages of development simultaneously, not all individuals will negotiate all stages, and the process of moving from early awareness to identity integration is a lengthy one (e.g., Sophie, 1985-1986). Linear models tend to ignore the paths of those who do not progress predictably through the stages or to view alternative outcomes (bisexuality, heterosexuality) as developmental arrest (Sophie, 1985-1986). Models of racial/ethnic minority identity development do not place the burden of political awakening on the individual and imply negative judgment of members who have not reached advanced stages in quite the same way that the lesbian/gay models do. This may be due to an element that these identities do not share: Lesbians/ gays in the early stages of sexual minority identity formation can deny membership in the minority group (both to self and others), which members of visible racial/ethnic groups may not find possible. Other minorities step onto the path toward raised consciousness with an identity that usually is apparent to themselves and others, and the transformation involves changing attitudes toward the meaning of that identity. Lesbians and gay men step onto two paths at once—they must acknowledge their membership in an invisible minority group and change their attitudes toward the meaning of a group that was not previously relevant. Accurate models must account for these dual demands.

PROPOSED MODEL OF LESBIAN IDENTITY FORMATION

The model described here represents an attempt to address the deficits noted in existing models and is intended to be broadly inclusive of the diverse
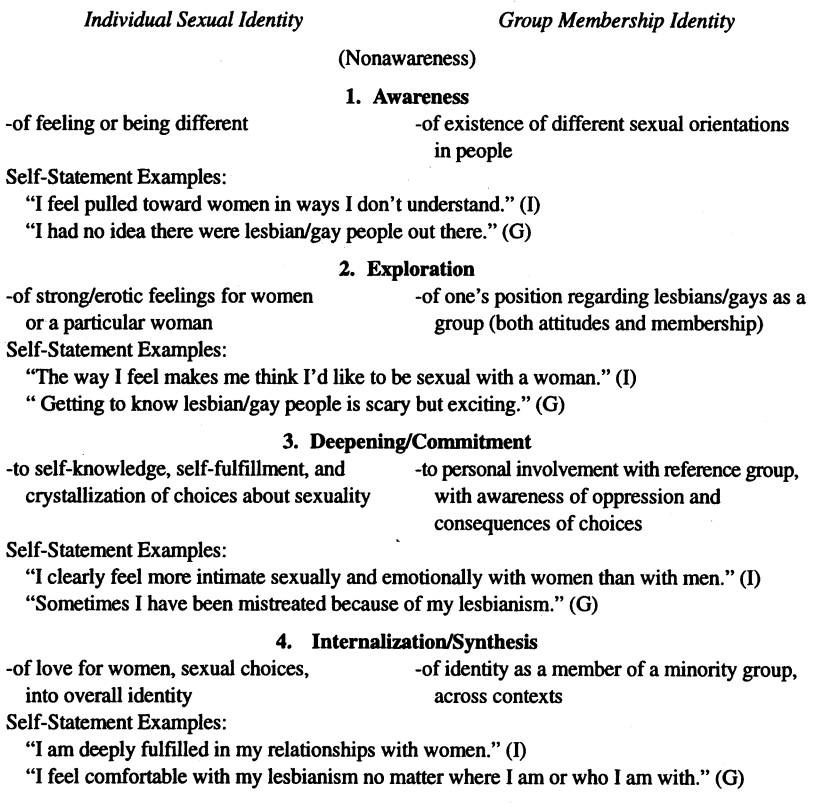
Individual Sexual Identity	*Group Membership Identity*
	(Nonawareness)

1. Awareness
-of feeling or being different	-of existence of different sexual orientations in people

Self-Statement Examples:
   "I feel pulled toward women in ways I don't understand." (I)
   "I had no idea there were lesbian/gay people out there." (G)

2. Exploration
-of strong/erotic feelings for women or a particular woman	-of one's position regarding lesbians/gays as a group (both attitudes and membership)

Self-Statement Examples:
   "The way I feel makes me think I'd like to be sexual with a woman." (I)
   " Getting to know lesbian/gay people is scary but exciting." (G)

3. Deepening/Commitment
-to self-knowledge, self-fulfillment, and crystallization of choices about sexuality	-to personal involvement with reference group, with awareness of oppression and consequences of choices

Self-Statement Examples:
   "I clearly feel more intimate sexually and emotionally with women than with men." (I)
   "Sometimes I have been mistreated because of my lesbianism." (G)

4. Internalization/Synthesis
-of love for women, sexual choices, into overall identity	-of identity as a member of a minority group, across contexts

Self-Statement Examples:
   "I am deeply fulfilled in my relationships with women." (I)
   "I feel comfortable with my lesbianism no matter where I am or who I am with." (G)

Figure 1.   Proposed model of lesbian identity formation.

paths one may take to comfortable, integrated lesbianism. We clearly distinguish between the two processes of personal development of same-sex sexual orientation and redefinition of group membership and group meaning; our work is thus somewhat similar to the attempt of Ossana et al. (1992) to separate internal from sociopolitical processes. We propose a four-phase model with two parallel branches that are reciprocally catalytic but not simultaneous: individual sexual identity and group membership identity. An initial state of nonawareness precedes both branches of the model, and the four subsequent phases follow in the same progression for each branch (see Figure 1).

    The model is built on several assumptions held in common with other identity models. We prefer the term *phases* to *stages* because of the greater flexibility implied, and although we outline phases in a progression, we

conceptualize the process as continuous and circular; every new relationship raises new issues about individual sexuality, and every new context requires renewed awareness of group oppression. We borrow from the racial/ethnic minority identity literature the concept of three relevant attitude areas at each phase of group identity development: attitudes toward self, other lesbians/gays, and nongays. Also, based on current conceptions of women's identity and gender effects in the coming out process, this model reflects the self-definition of homoerotic desire in terms of a relational identity. Unlike most other lesbian/gay identity models, however, our model does not assume disclosure behaviors as evidence of developmental advancement, except, to some extent, at the last phase of group identity. We believe that disclosure is so profoundly affected by environmental oppression that to use it as an index of identity development directly forces an individual to take responsibility for her own victimization. The model is outlined in the following section.

Individual Sexual Identity Development

Phase 1: Awareness. The dawning of a minority sexuality is likely to begin with awareness of a difference, a general feeling of being different or awareness of feelings or desires that are different from the heterosexual norm and therefore from the predicted self. Nonconscious ideologies become conscious; the previously held assumption that all persons, including the self, are heterosexual is called into question. Same-sex thoughts and feelings, however, do not imply self-labeling. This phase encompasses experiences similar to Coleman's (1982) Stage 2, Sophie's (1985-1986) Stage 1, and Cass's (1984) Stage 1.

Phase 2: Exploration. The second phase involves active examination of questions arising in the first phase. For women, it is explicitly hypothesized that this phase involves strong relationships with or feelings about other women or another woman in particular. This phase will involve exploration of sexual feelings but will not necessarily involve exploration of sexual behaviors or a variety of partners. Some issues from Sophie's (1985-1986) Stages 2-3 and Chapman and Brannock's (1987) Stage 3 will be addressed by women in this phase, as well as some from Stages 3-4 (particularly 4) of Coleman (1982).

Phase 3: Deepening/commitment. Exploration leads to a deepening of self-knowledge and to the crystallization of some choices about sexuality. Some may see relationships with women as only one possibility and identify

as bisexual, and others may decide in favor of men as sexual partners. It is here that the emerging lesbian is likely to recognize her desire for other women as within herself and, with deepening self-awareness, will develop sexual clarity and commitment to her self-fulfillment as a sexual being. Intimacy and identity become meshed as the woman recognizes that her forms of intimacy imply certain things about her identity and then moves toward accepting and further examining those aspects of herself. The commitment to self-fulfillment transcends previous assumptions about the self and will necessarily intersect with the woman's socialization to be heterosexual, heterosexist, and homophobic. This commitment, therefore, probably affects the group identity process described in the other branch of this model, implying that completion of this phase of sexual identity development may require addressing some group membership tasks; this may elucidate Sophie's (1985-1986) findings that women in her study waited to identify as lesbian until they had acquired a positive concept of lesbianism. Thus it is at this stage that we would most expect to see the anger and sadness described by Coleman's (1982) Stage 3 and the acceptance and pride of Cass's (1984) Stages 4-5.

Phase 4: Internalization/synthesis. In this last phase, a woman experiences fuller self-acceptance of desire/love for women as a part of her overall identity. Women at this phase of lesbian identity development are likely to have completed many years of emotional and sexual self-exploration and to have resolved difficult decisions about their desires and practices. This internal process of clarification will involve the synthesis of role identity into ego identity (Minton & McDonald, 1984), creating a sense of internal consistency and certainty that may be manifested in unwillingness to change lesbian preferences (Sophie, 1985-1986).

Having examined and transformed the internal concept of self, reformulation of public identity will be necessary as well. Choices will be made about where and how to be open about sexuality, and we believe that it is the process of resolving these questions that creates integration, not the content of their resolution. That is, a woman may choose to be professionally "closeted" for important contextual reasons; as long as the choice has been addressed, this woman may be as developmentally integrated as the woman who is professionally open. However, at some point, as the woman lives in society with a clearly defined alternative sexual preference, she will have to address the meaning of lesbianism in that society. Therefore, we believe that it is unlikely that one could reach the final phase of individual sexual identity development without beginning to address the group membership questions in the parallel branch of the model.

Group Membership Identity Development

Although the previously described branch of this model focuses on the internal process of clarifying and incorporating same-sex emotional and sexual desires, this separate but reciprocal branch consists of tasks that result from the context in which the internal process occurs; that is, it involves addressing social attitudes toward those desires and the tasks of self and group labeling. Because this branch of the model addresses identification as a member of a minority reference group, it resembles the racial/ethnic identity models discussed earlier. Also (as mentioned previously), each phase describes feelings and attitudes towards the self, other lesbians/gays, and nongays.

It must be remembered that both branches of this model emerge from the common root of nonawareness of homoerotic preference and socialized ideologies regarding sexual norms. The content of each individual's non-awareness is very specific—it may range from total ignorance to virulent antigay beliefs—and therefore will shape the process of group identification uniquely for each woman. It is almost certain in present society that strong training in heterosexism and homophobia will have occurred, and the process of group identification involves the unlearning of both. Thus, although a common sequence of development is postulated here, the emotional intensity and difficulty of the process will be determined by the degree of heterosexism and homophobia within each individual.

Phase 1: Awareness. The first phase of group identity is set into motion by a new awareness that heterosexuality is not a universal norm and that people exist who have different sexual orientations. Realization that a community of lesbians/gays exists may force the woman to acknowledge that heterosexism exists and that she has lived under heterosexist assumptions. This initial awareness is likely to resemble the disintegration (Helms, 1990) or revelation (Downing & Roush, 1985) described in other minority identity models. However, the disintegration here is more likely to produce confusion and bewilderment than rage. Unlike the initial phase of other minority identity models, this initial discovery pertains to the very existence of the group, not yet to the meaning or oppression of the group; thus it may be more like an epiphany than a confrontation.

Phase 2: Exploration. At this phase, a woman seeks to define her position in relation to the reference group along two dimensions: attitudes and membership. The phase is characterized by active pursuit of knowledge about lesbian/gay people, in terms of both the group as a whole and the possibility of one's belonging in the group. For example, a woman developing feminist

consciousness may move through this phase of group identity, develop increased knowledge and a positive view of lesbians, and yet not self-identify as a member of that reference group. Moreover, clarification of attitudes toward lesbians may be a complex, affectively charged process for a woman who has held strong homophobic feelings or who has limited access to information and resources. As in the Downing and Roush (1985) model, women in this phase are likely to feel anger and guilt for being "duped" by and participating in heterosexism. On the other hand, exploring the existence of other lesbians also will be likely to produce driving curiosity and exhilarating joy.

Phase 3: Deepening/commitment. This phase involves a deepening awareness of both the unique value and oppression of the lesbian/gay community. It involves a commitment to create a personal relationship to the reference group, with awareness of the possible consequences entailed. Some women deepening their commitment to lesbian identity are likely to experience the ideological and emotional transformation described in immersion or embeddedness stages of other models (e.g., Cross, 1971; Downing & Roush, 1985), including an intense identification with lesbian culture and rejection of heterosexual society. Not all, however, will pass through such an intensely dichotomous phase (Sophie, 1985-1986). Whether coupled with a rejection of the dominant group or not, this phase will include some version of the "discovery of sisterhood" (Avery, 1977, cited in Downing & Roush, 1985, p. 701), and this experience is likely to be affectively reflected in a combination of excitement, pride, rage, and internal conflict.

Phase 4: Internalization/synthesis. In this final developmental phase, the lesbian woman has moved through a process of conflict and reevaluation, identified herself as a member of a minority group, redefined the meaning of that group, internalized this new identity, and synthesized it into her overall self-concept. This synthesis will be reflected in feelings of fulfillment, security, and an ability to maintain her lesbian sense of self across contexts. This does not necessarily mean that she has become politicized, though it does mean that she has become socially aware of her own oppression as a lesbian. If she experienced a dichotomized worldview in the previous phase, she will now move toward a more integrated view, and it is likely that some identity disclosure will have occurred. It is assumed that women at this phase will evaluate both gays and nongays individually rather than stereotypically (Downing & Roush, 1985) and also may be sensitive to the distinction Cross (1971) makes between individuals and institutions. She will have traversed the path from rage, anxiety, insecurity, and rhetoric to directed anger, dedication, and self-love as a lesbian woman.

As previously noted, the two branches of the model, though reciprocal and mutually catalytic, are not necessarily simultaneous. Some lesbians living in isolation, for example, may have fully developed lesbian relationships long before coming to understand that there are other women in the world doing the same. We believe, however, that it probably is not possible to proceed completely through either branch of this model without to some degree addressing the other (e.g., it is unlikely that an individual could be fully integrated into the lesbian community without having clarified her emotional and sexual feelings for other women), and one process may trigger the other at almost any point. For example, suddenly falling in love with a woman (individual, Phase 2) may spark the beginning realization that a population of persons with same-sex orientation exists and is of personal relevance (group, Phase 1); or, a woman who is politically and socially involved in the lesbian community (group, Phase 3) may only later realize that she is sexually attracted to women (individual, Phase 2).

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING: CASE EXAMPLES

In this section, we explore the implications and usefulness of the proposed model in planning counseling interventions, particularly in facilitating accurate assessment. Conceptualizations of identity that distinguish between the developmental tasks of individual sexual identity formation and group membership identity formation can help therapists select more appropriately and efficiently targeted interventions. For example, without noting this distinction, it is easy to assume that confusion signaling early phases of individual sexuality development implies lack of experience with lesbian/gay culture, as well, or that strong ties to lesbian/gay people are indicative of internal struggles with homoerotic preferences. Planning counseling interventions around presumed parallel internal and reference group developmental trajectories can lead to, at best, wasted time and energy by both therapist and client and, at worst, perceptions of therapist insensitivity and lack of knowledge on the part of clients. We present here several fictional case examples to further elucidate the important distinction between individual and group identity development and to suggest possibilities for treatment implied by our model.

Case 1: Carol

Carol's dearest friend has just come out to her, and Carol is slowly realizing that she is in love with her friend. Carol, a 22-year-old African American

woman attending a conservative Christian college, is confused because her strong religious background has taught her that these feelings are wrong. However, she cannot shake them and has sought a counselor's advice. Carol appears unaware of the existence of lesbian/gay people as a group and would not label her current feelings as anything but strong, loving feelings for her friend. She is reluctant to tell her friend of these feelings because she is terrified of their losing control over the situation.

In terms of the model, it is clear that Carol is just becoming aware of her strong feelings for a specific woman (individual, 2). She has no awareness or experience of a lesbian/gay community (group, 1), and added to her burden of ignorance is a homophobic religious background. Carol faces important challenges in the intersection of her individual and group identities. She has several group affiliations that may feel contradictory to her nascent inner feelings, and in whichever arena she acts, her actions affect both her relationship to herself and her experience of her community. Clients often feel trapped into inaction in such situations, and much therapeutic benefit can result from maintaining separation of developmental tasks related to individual and group identities until feelings are clarified, accurate information is provided, and reality testing regarding consequences has occurred.

Carol is confused and afraid; it may help her simply to know that these are common feelings in the first phases of questioning an assumed identity. This, of course, is an appropriate, affirming therapeutic response to any client questioning her individual sexuality, as is the provision of accurate information, resources, and referrals regarding reference groups, particularly those that support dual minority status for women of color. Our model suggests, however, that caution and sensitive timing are critically important to group identity interventions in a case such as Carol's, in which fears regarding reference group identification can swiftly destroy fragile sexual and emotional feelings or bonds. Moreover, Carol's case makes clear the assumption in our model that emerging sexual identity is likely to be relationally defined, and there is much therapeutic work to be done in clarifying those feelings and locating them within the self, to strengthen individual identity and prepare for the considerable risks of involvement in the lesbian/gay community and possible ostracism from existing reference groups. Carol's case also points to the need for counseling psychologists to broaden their arenas of intervention (Fassinger, 1991) to include those crucial to healthy group identity development; that is, to create a context in which Carol (and others like her) may grow, it is important to work proactively within religious and other cultural communities to change attitudes and build contacts with sympathetic and informed leaders in those communities.

Case 2: Carla

Carla, a 31-year-old Latina, has served in the military for 10 years. She has been with her lover, Angela, for 4 years, and they live off-base, restricting physical intimacy to their home. Carla has been aware of her same-sex attraction since childhood and has been comfortable maintaining a sense of privacy about this aspect of her life. Recently, however, the media attention to gays in the military triggered many new emotions in Carla. At first, she was frightened and angered by her more open peers, then she began to imagine the possibilities of a freer lifestyle. Carla began reading lesbian books and talked to Angela about having a holy union in the presence of selected friends. Carla was furious with the presidential "don't ask, don't tell" mandate, has become belligerent and resistant at work, and has provoked conflict with Angela. Carla reveals to the counselor that she "can't stand hiding anymore," is angry at Angela for "acting ashamed of who we are," and does not feel she can be herself anywhere.

In terms of our model, Carla is in an ongoing relationship with another woman and has accepted her orientation for some time (individual, 4). She is currently experiencing a heightened awareness of her position in society as a lesbian and has changing feelings about her commitment to that group, including a mixture of conflict, anger, and pride (group, 3). Carla's deepening commitment to her lesbianism has resulted in a widespread dissatisfaction with life choices she made at a time when she was comfortable being more closeted; as a result she is in conflict both at work and at home. She has just become more acutely aware of a pressure she has lived with all her life, but Angela and the military appear to be the sources of constriction, and Carla likely feels that the only choices that will allow her to feel congruent are options that may threaten her career and her relationship.

Our model suggests that developmental tasks related to group identity present the most pressing foci for intervention in Carla's case. In fact, sharing the model with Carla may help her to understand the process she is moving through and to caution her against making decisions about her life that she may regret at a later phase, much as she now regrets the constriction she feels from the demands of an earlier phase. In exploring ways to meet Carla's growing need to identify with other lesbians/gays within the context of her realistic job concerns, there may be arenas in which she can begin to lead a more overtly lesbian lifestyle, for example, immediate and extended family, selected co-workers, or safe lesbian support groups and events. Of course, Carla's increased disclosure poses a challenge for the couple in that it threatens Angela's privacy, as well, and each may newly experience the other as a source of painful personal and social pressure. This case thus demon-

strates clearly our assumptions regarding the reciprocal nature of the individ-
ual and group identity processes described in our model and suggests that
this, too, is an area that can be addressed by helping both members of the
couple understand the developmental process in which they are engaged and
clarifying the position of each person to facilitate negotiation and compro-
mise. Finally, it would be useful to further explore Carla's anger, which may
obscure underlying guilt. As we have suggested in our model, lesbians
embracing their community also face the history of their own heterosexism
and homophobia and may have many experiences and relationships to
reevaluate as their vision shifts.

Case 3: Emily

Emily's mate of 18 years recently has died. She was Emily's first and only
relationship, and the two women lived a private life in the rural Midwest,
isolated from any kind of lesbian community. Emily, a 52-year-old Caucasian
woman, has always accepted her lesbianism as an integral part of her identity,
without much notice paid to it. Now she reluctantly seeks out a counselor
because she is feeling extremely lonely and in need of support and does not
know where else to turn.

In terms of our model, it would appear that to have sustained this primary
relationship for so long, Emily probably has fully integrated her sense of
herself as lesbian in terms of her personal sexuality (individual, 4). Her
attitude toward lesbians as a group is less clear and seems characterized either
by ignorance or by avoidance (group, 1-2). In her group identity develop-
ment, Emily faces a challenge both internal and external, because of the
unique strain of having had only her mate as a group referent. Thus, as our
model suggests in positing a relational identity, Emily may be grieving both
the loss of a mate and a loss of safety in her identity. Also congruent with our
model's assumption of reciprocal individual and group identity processes,
Emily may well have to address hitherto unexamined aspects of her group
identity to gain support for grieving the personal loss of her mate.

Clearly, our model suggests that group identification represents a major
developmental task for Emily. However, careful assessment must first iden-
tify the components of Emily's loneliness. Her isolation may be rooted in
deeply internalized homophobia and secrecy despite availability of lesbian
community, or it may result from simple lack of awareness of or access to
other lesbians. Each of these possibilities requires a different kind of inter-
vention and will determine how she is introduced to the lesbian community.
Moreover, it is likely that immediate individual grief work with Emily

initially will take precedence over concerns related to group identity, except insofar as involvement in the community facilitates her healing.

As the foregoing cases illustrate, each woman has experienced a strong connection to another woman that has strongly affected her individual sense of self. In addition, all three women are coping with some form of social isolation related to that personal identity, although the form and effects differ for each. Carol has no awareness of a social context that could be supportive of her dawning individual feelings, and she is not yet able to internally support them herself. Emily and Carla are comfortable with their personal sexual orientation but face different types of social isolation; Emily's loss confronts her with the unique aloneness of grieving, and Carla's changing awareness has left her feeling alone within a set of life circumstances that no longer fit. All three women face challenges to both individual and group identity, dividing their life tasks into questions about how they will understand themselves and how they will achieve a sense of belonging in the world. Although interventions for these women may include commonly used activities, such as individual and couples counseling, psychoeducation, group treatment, bibliotherapy, and referral to lesbian/gay community resources, it is important to note that accurate assessment and appropriate attention to distinct developmental needs inherent in individual and group identity processes can help counseling psychologists to plan their interventions more efficiently and effectively.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

In terms of theory and research, accurate models of lesbian/gay identity development are necessary to help clarify within- and between-group similarities and differences, as well as to assess the needs and predict the challenges facing this population. Sexual minority models first must be validated then further tested through research designed to relate phases of the coming out process to other mental health variables, such as relationship satisfaction, career development, and self-esteem. Future research also must focus on elucidating intragroup differences among lesbians, so that the models we use are truly inclusive of the diverse experiences of women in our society.

The model of lesbian identity proposed here represents an effort to advance scientific work with this population by positing and articulating a dual process of identity formation and by explicitly grounding lesbian/gay identity theory in work in race/ethnicity and gender. The model already has been initially validated using the Q-sort methodology recommended for early work in model development (Hall et al., 1972). Preliminary results suggest

its usefulness in describing the experiences of diverse lesbians, as expected (McCarn, 1991). Perhaps surprisingly, the model, somewhat modified to reflect greater sexual exploration and activity, appears to describe the experiences of diverse gay men, as well (Fassinger & Miller, in press); this may be due to the increasingly relational orientation of gay men being anecdotally reported in the literature or to the general utility of a model that distinguishes between group and individual processes. Instrument development based on the model is needed (and already under way by the present authors); an assessment tool that distinguishes individual sexual identity from group membership identity could enhance research efforts—for example, by aiding in the formulation and evaluation of more specifically targeted interventions with this population.

One area requiring research attention is the relationship between disclosure and lesbian/gay identity development. The present model, unlike most models, does not implicitly assume a strong relationship between these variables. However, empirical research in this area is virtually nonexistent, in part because of the lack of instrumentation to measure identity disclosure. If we organize our interventions around disclosure as an index of identity development and personal maturity, we may unwittingly exacerbate internal and social tensions already experienced by lesbian/gay individuals. Again, a strong research base in this area would be helpful in guiding intervention efforts.

Burgeoning empirical work in the area of multicultural awareness and cross-cultural psychology suggests another possibility for the use of lesbian/ gay identity models. As the research foundation regarding models of racial/ ethnic identity has grown, Helms and colleagues (see Helms, 1990) have begun writing with increased clarity about the absence of cultural identity awareness in members of dominant racial/cultural groups. Similarly, it is important to speculate about what our theoretical and empirical explorations of lesbians and gay men can teach us about nongays. How might a deepened understanding of this area change the lenses through which we view adult development generally? Have we adequately explored the development of a fully integrated sexual identity that is not associated with strong social stigma? How might our developmental understanding of human sexuality and intimacy be affected if we attended to the relational experiences of same-sex individuals? Brown (1989, p. 451) described the "normative creativity" necessary in choosing and living a lifestyle that requires formulating rules as they are lived. Greater empirical attention to the personal and social behavior of lesbians and gay men in designing and living their lives can teach us developmental lessons that have important implications for understanding all people.

CONCLUSION

We have presented what is intended to be an inclusive, heuristically useful model of the development of lesbian identity. It is our hope that the present model begins to address the complexity of developing self-acceptance and comfortable group membership in sexual minority people. By separating the experience of clarified internal desire from that of altered group definitions, we remove from the model an onus of pressure and politicization applied to the individual in other models. We must at all times remain aware that it is the context of homophobia that defines the meaning of lesbian or gay identity. We would hope that all persons in our society eventually move through a process of reevaluating the meaning of the groups *gay* and *lesbian*, but it is the discovery of their potential membership in those groups that forces lesbians and gay men to begin this process more urgently than heterosexuals. We look forward to a day when models for internalizing self-acceptance will be irrelevant and obsolete because we will have ceased to perpetuate a context that fosters self-loathing—to a day when the word *homosexual* has lost its power to label and stigmatize people and has become merely a descriptor of one of a wide variety of acceptable forms of loving.

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