A PERSONAL CONSTRUCT PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE ON

SEXUAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines four of the most widely known homosexual identity development

models, as well as some of the literature that explores sexual identity as a fluid process.

The suggestion is made that sexual identity can be created and recreated based on current

individual feelings and experiences rather than by forcing identity to fit into already

existing socially constructed categories. Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) is

introduced as a theory that can be used to transform sexual identities over a lifetime. A

Sexual Identity Cycle is presented using several PCP transitional construing concepts.

INTRODUCTION

A Personal Construct Psychology Perspective on

Sexual Identity

How do individuals come to define their sexual identities? Identity development models have been proposed to explain the trajectory of those individuals who do not conform to a heteronormative mold (Plummer, 1975; Ponse, 1978; Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Troiden, 1989). But what about those who do not feel their sexual identities and experiences reflect either a heterosexual or a homosexual orientation? How do these individuals identify? A more interesting question might be: why is there a need to identify with a particular sexual orientation? Could the mere existence of these categories create a desire for human beings to squeeze into them even when they do not feel right?

As human beings, we have a tendency to construct systematic categories that are used to explain and classify our feelings and behaviors, thus allowing us to label our identities. Subsequently, developmental models are created as tools that can help us anticipate the proper directions in which to move in an orderly fashion to successfully reach a designated category. Somewhere along the way we forget that these categories are essentially made up. Once they become commonplace, we marginalize the experiences of those who do not or cannot conform to them. Muehlenhard (2000) questioned the value of labeling people *homosexual* or *heterosexual*, "as if these were real categories, as if they somehow exist inside of people rather than being labels made up to describe people, as if everyone has to fit into one of these" (p. 102). These labels cultivate the expectation that human sexuality is a simple, definitive concept. This

expectation places limits on human sexual experience and can be psychologically harmful to individuals who feel they do not fit into one specific category of sexual identity.

Several sexual identity development models suggest a number of stages that one should move through in order to replace the default heterosexual identity with a homosexual identity (Plummer, 1975; Ponse, 1978; Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Troiden, 1989). The static nature of the categories and linearity of identity development models can potentially be problematic to individuals who do not feel that heterosexual *or* homosexual identities necessarily fit their experience. The idea that dividing sexuality into heterosexual and homosexual is limiting is not new. In a controversial and now infamous study on male sexual behavior, Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948), contested the perceived bipolarity of human sexual experience:

> Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeon-holes. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. The sooner we learn this concerning human sexual behavior the sooner we shall reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex. (p. 639)

Kinsey et al. (1948) questioned the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy and developed the Kinsey Scale, or K-scale, which marked 7 points on a continuum along which sexual experiences could be more accurately measured. They found that the majority of male sexual experiences reported in their study fell in the gradations between the polar opposites. Consequently, they incorporated the elusive concept of bisexuality as an alternative to exclusive heterosexuality or exclusive homosexuality. Bisexuality is the

idea that women and men can and may respond sexually to and form intimate sexual relationships with both the opposite and/or same sex. Similarly, Epting, Raskin, and Burke (1994) have suggested "it might be more productive to label all persons as bisexual (or, perhaps, 'multisexual'), and to eliminate the heterosexual-homosexual distinction entirely by attending instead to the infinite varieties of sexual experience" (p. 357). This suggestion allows for more fluidity among existing sexual categories and supports the notion that human experience is continuously changing and growing.

Likewise, Rust (1993) has suggested that linear, stage-sequential models of sexual identity development require dichotomous thinking about sexuality and inhibit bisexual identification. Rust proposed that, instead of models that view unidirectional movement toward homosexual identity acquisition as the goal, a social constructionist model that embraces change and variation of self-identity over a lifetime might represent human sexual experience more accurately. In other words, a dichotomous view of sexual orientation ignores the diversity of human sexual experience in the present day sociopolitical context. Sexual identities have been reconceptualized from unidimensional to multidimensional models (Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985; Berkey, Perelman-Hall & Kurdek, 1990). Researchers are continuously finding that sexual identity is far too complex to limit human beings to binary categories and monosexuality; consequently, human beings are increasingly challenging these assumptions and boundaries (Queen & Schimel, 1997).

This paper examines the similarities between several of the most well known models of homosexual identity development and discusses how these models ignore other aspects of human sexual experience. In addition, it takes a look at the concept of

bisexuality and how it has traditionally threatened monosexual identities to the extent that many of the early researchers refused to acknowledge bisexuality as an identity itself. While giving bisexual identity ample credit as a good starting point, the need and desire for even more permeable sexual identities is examined by exploring how a Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) perspective conceptualizes sexual identity in a way that permits one to create and recreate one's own sexual identity by embracing the multidimensionality of human sexual experience.

HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT MODELS

The four developmental models reviewed constitute the most significant early efforts to bring the experiences of homosexual identity formation out of the closet. The development and evolution of these early models coincided with the depathologizing of homosexuality. In the late 1960's, the civil rights and women's movements paved the way for gay rights. The Stonewall riot on June 28, 1969 was the impetus for a full blown gay liberation movement. Thereafter know as the Stonewall Rebellion, the movement grabbed the attention of the media; gay organizations and publications emerged, and the voices of gay minorities could no longer be ignored (Faderman, 1991, 194-197).

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed the diagnosis of homosexuality from the official list of mental disorders (Adam, 1987). This monumental event paved the way for new research focusing on the unique issues of individuals going through the coming out process. It is no surprise that one of the first homosexual development models was introduced in 1975, shortly after the removal of homosexuality from the *DSM*. Plummer's (1975) account of the contemporary male homosexual experience was presented as a case study and the author acknowledged the need for

further exploration. Although this study was non-empirical, it laid much of the groundwork for subsequent research and many of the homosexual identity development models that followed were influenced by Plummer's theory.

Over the next decade, several other homosexual identity development models were introduced (Ponse, 1978; Cass, 1979; Coleman; 1982; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Troiden, 1988). Each of these models presented homosexual identity formation as a stage sequential experience, beginning with an assumed default heterosexual identity and ending with a fully actualized homosexual identity. Although each of the models has varying stages and uses slightly different vocabulary, the similarities are quite evident. Figure 1 condenses the information from four of the models in order to allow for a side-by-side comparison.

Sexual identity is generally considered a static condition within these models. Heterosexual and homosexual identities are considered mutually exclusive opposites. Any vacillation among the middle stages or outright abandonment of the "process" is considered to be a sign of uncertainty and/or unwillingness to commit to a homosexual lifestyle. These models do not consider that one who does not acquire a homosexual identity might be exploring or creating other, more fitting alternatives.

Below, a brief overview of four models of homosexual identity formation is presented. These models were chosen because the researchers were pioneers in the field of homosexual identity development and each of these models is still discussed today. Plummer's (1975) model was one of the very first accounts of male homosexual identity development. Ponse (1978) focused on lesbian identity development. Cass (1979) generalized homosexual identity formation for both gay men and lesbians. Troiden's

(1988) model was influenced by Plummer's (1975) model; however, like Cass (1979) Troiden described the homosexual identity formation experiences of gay men and lesbians. In addition to the description of the four homosexual identity development models, the notion of bisexuality as understood by these theorists is discussed. The lack of validity given to bisexuality as a separate but equal category of sexual expression is clearly illustrated in each of the following models.

Figure 1
Side-by-Side Comparison of Four Homosexual Identity Development Models

Stage Descriptions	Plummer (1975) *Male Homosexual Identity Development*	Ponse (1978) *Lesbian Identity Development*	Cass (1979) *Homosexual Identity Formation*	Troiden (1988) *Homosexual Identity Formation*
Feelings that one is somehow different from heterosexual others	Sensitization	Subjective sense of being different	Identity Confusion	Sensitization
Increased awareness of same-sex attractions	Signification & Disorientation	Feelings have homosexual significance	Identity Comparison	Identity Confusion
Begins to self-define and disclose new identity	Coming Out	Acceptance of feelings & their implications	Identity Tolerance	Identity Assumption
Seeks out others for support and same-sex exploration		Lesbian community sought out	Identity Acceptance	
Commitment to homosexual identity is made	Stabilization	Involvement in same sex relationship	Identity Pride	Commitment
Homosexual identity viewed as one aspect of whole self			Identity Synthesis	

Plummer's Interactionist Account of Male Homosexuality

Plummer (1975) suggested that an *interactionist* approach to sexuality would address the socially constructed nature of sexual meanings and he used this approach in the development of his account of male homosexuality. Interactionism proposes that the world is socially constructed by human beings through language, signs, and symbols that attach meanings to objects, ideas, and behaviors. Human beings react towards objects and each other based on the meanings they have for them and the symbolic meanings given to objects, ideas, and behaviors are communicated through this interaction (Howard, 2000). For the interactionist, the roles that others play in influencing individual thoughts, actions, and personal meaning cannot be underestimated.

Plummer's Four Career Stages

Plummer (1975) proposed four *career stages* through which the male homosexual progresses. *Sensitization* is when an individual comes to potentially perceive himself as homosexual. Some possible sources for homosexual interpretation could be gender confusion or feeling different from other males, a same-sex "crush," or a sexual experience with another male. *Signification and Disorientation* is an increasing self-awareness and the resulting anxiety and confusion surrounding the identification with homosexuality. Because distinctions between male and female behavior are so valued and reinforced, this stage can result in confusion regarding the individual's core-identity. The devaluation and deviant status of homosexuality may result in feelings of guilt, shame, and isolation. *Coming Out* is when, through self-recognition, the individual adopts a homosexual identity and begins to explore the homosexual community. Through interactions with other homosexuals he begins to legitimize his experience and resolve

the problems that had arisen during the previous stage. *Stabilization* is when an individual makes a permanent commitment to a homosexual identity and the homosexual way of life.

Plummer (1975) stressed that homosexuality is socially created and can only be understood as an interactive event because the experiences of the male homosexual are directly related to the reactions of others in his culture. As a result, once one consciously perceives of oneself as potentially homosexual, coming out is the process by which one begins to construct new sexual meanings for oneself. This process, according to Plummer, ends when one displays a stable commitment to a homosexual identity. Although Plummer claims to have been promoting a social interactionist account of homosexual identity formation, we have been left with a four-step developmental model that ends with the final goal of stable homosexual identity adoption.

Bisexuality in Plummer's Theory

Plummer (1975) mentioned the notion of bisexuality briefly when referring to neutralization or "not going homosexual" (p. 137). This is when men exhibit homosexual behaviors but do not adopt a homosexual self-concept. In fact, most of the examples describe what might be considered bisexual behavior. However, heterosexual identities remain stable. One example of this type of person is the male hustler who engages in homosexual acts for money. A second situational context that allows male homosexual behavior without homosexual identity is that which occurs among prisoners. The lack of sexual gratification for the hustler and the unavailability of heterosexual contact in prisons sanction homosexual behavior without homosexual identity. Therefore, in Plummer's model, bisexuality is presented as nothing more than homosexual acts that

occur in situational contexts. This perspective implies that bisexuality is a less than fully developed sexual identity.

Ponse's Theory of Lesbian Identity Development

Ponse (1978) made one of the first attempts at describing a model of homosexual identity development for lesbians. She used a *social interactionist* perspective to explain lesbian identity formation, maintaining that identity is constructed through social interactions. How one perceives one's own identity is often incongruent with other's perceptions of one's identity. Ponse claimed that incongruence can result in significant psychological strain, leading to repeated identity reconstructions.

Ponse's Five Elements of a Gay Trajectory

Ponse (1978) framed lesbian identity development as five elements of a "*gay trajectory* and the process of coming out" (p. 124). Ponse noted that the proposed five elements of the gay trajectory were not to be perceived as linear. A wide variation among "women-related-women" was to be expected and acknowledgment of the possibility that elements may arise simultaneously or in any order was required. *Element one* is a subjective sense of being different from heterosexuals. The first recognition of sexual-emotional attractions toward other women occurs. *Element two* is the understanding that these feelings have homosexual significance. *Element three* is the acceptance of these feelings as well as their implications. This is the point when the individual comes out as a lesbian. *Element four* is when the lesbian community is sought out. *Element five* is when the individual becomes involved in a same-sex sexual-emotional relationship.

Bisexuality in Ponse's Theory

Through structured interviews with women-related-women, Ponse (1978) found four types of lesbian identities. These activity/identity combinations are based on the degree of congruence between one's feelings, activities, and self-proclaimed identity. The first combination, *lesbian identity with lesbian activity*, occurs when *women perceive their lesbian identities to encompass every aspect of their lives and their sexual-emotional relationships are exclusive to other women*. The second combination, *lesbian identity with bisexual, heterosexual or celibate activity*, is when *women self-label as lesbians in order to express their political alliance with other women*; however, their sexual-emotional relationships are not exclusive to women. Combination three, *bisexual identity with lesbian activity*, occurs when *women perceive their sexual identities as fluid and dependent upon the situation and/or personality of their sexual partner(s)*. The fourth combination, *heterosexual identity with lesbian activity*, is when *sexual activity with other women occurs in the context of heterosexual relationships*. Same-sex sexual behavior does not influence how these women define their sexual identities.

Although Ponse (1978) described bisexual identity as a variation of lesbian identity, she spent a fair amount of time discussing how bisexuality is perceived by lesbian-identified women. Ponse introduced the concept of bisexuality as problematic and stigmatized within the lesbian community. Many lesbians perceived bisexuality as a transitory state during the process of coming out. Continued sexual activity with men is tolerated only during the period of *identity lag*. *Identity lag* is the time it takes between an individual's first awareness of being different and the acceptance of a lesbian identity. This period of time is also commonly referred to as the process of *coming out*. Within the

lesbian community, it is expected that the process of coming out will take a considerable amount of time. However, the authenticity of the individual's same-sex behavior is questioned if the process seems to take longer than is tolerable. If a woman declares a bisexual identity she is viewed as confused and subject to disapproval and/or rejection by the lesbian community. Incongruency between an individual's same-sex behavior and the reluctance to self label as a lesbian is seen as demonstrating a lack of identity stability. This often leads to distrust among lesbian-identified women. Bisexual-identified women are accused of experimentation, fence-sitting, and being unwilling to relinquish heterosexual privilege. Although bisexual identity is discussed in terms of lesbian's perceptions of and responses to bisexual identified women, Ponse (1978) explored the subject more thoroughly than most other theorists during this time. While bisexual identity is not perceived as a valid category of sexual orientation, acknowledgment of it as a variation of lesbian activity/identity is notable.

Cass's Theory of Homosexual Identity Formation

One of the most often cited, studied, and critiqued models of sexual orientation development is Cass's (1979) six-stage model reflecting the experiences of both males and females. Cass focused on the psychological development one progresses through from the first time personal meaning is assigned to the concept of homosexuality until a homosexual identity is fully integrated into one's sense of self. Because heterosexuality is assumed in western culture (Cass, 1996), incongruency occurs the first time one perceives one's behavior as having potential homosexual meaning and believes that others may perceive the behavior as potentially homosexual. In the quest to achieve a congruent and stable identity, one progresses through different stages of homosexual

identity formation, leaving behind the erroneously assumed heterosexual identity. This process helps one to maintain consistency between one's private and public sexual identities. The more similar these two identities become, the closer one is to acquiring a fully integrated and stable homosexual identity.

Cass's Six Common Stages of Homosexual Identity Formation

Cass (1979) suggested that all individuals move through six common stages by which a homosexual identity is acquired. *Identity confusion* is the first conscious awareness that the concept of homosexuality may have relevance to oneself. Perception of self and behavior is incongruent with the former understanding of self as heterosexual. *Identity comparison* occurs when one has accepted that one's behavior and identity may be homosexual and feels that the heteronormative model of sexuality no longer fits. *Identity tolerance* is when one's perception of self is leaning more toward a homosexual identity. Feelings of alienation result in the seeking out of other homosexuals and the homosexual community. *Identity acceptance* is the point when the transition to a homosexual identity continues through the restructuring of one's social life and personal contacts. Internal legitimization of a homosexual identity begins and one selectively discloses one's newly acquired identity. *Identity pride* occurs when one adopts an "us versus them" position towards heterosexuals. The lack of public acceptance results in frustration and anger, leading to a strong commitment to the homosexual community. Activism and public disclosures are used to validate one's experience. *Identity synthesis* is the final stage when, through public disclosures, one encounters many accepting heterosexuals and a sense of trust evolves. Homosexuality no longer holds a master status. Rather, it is perceived as just one aspect of oneself.

Bisexuality in Cass's Theory

Cass (1979) stated that variations in the amount of time it takes one to proceed through the stages should be expected. Cass also proposed the concept of *identity foreclosure* as an alternative path to development. Identity foreclosure is the process of consciously halting homosexual identity development at any stage when incongruency occurs. If one's feelings of same sex attraction and/or behaviors are not in line with the personal meanings assigned to oneself, incongruency can result and the decision not to develop any further can be made. This prevents the acquisition of a homosexual identity.

In Cass's (1979) original theoretical model of homosexual identity formation, bisexuality is briefly referred to as a strategy used to alleviate the incongruence that is experienced in stage two, *identity comparison*. Cass referred to this as the *ambisexual strategy*, where the individual has a perception of oneself as simultaneously homosexual and heterosexual. Cass stated that this strategy is fairly common because it allows the individual to cope with alienation. Cass also suggested that the individual may begin to perceive others as ambisexual and focus on theories that propose "everyone is bisexual" in an attempt to reduce feelings of alienation (p. 227).

In a later article, Cass (1996) proposed the same model, this time titled *Sexual Orientation Identity Formation*. Cass stated,

> although the following description applies to the development of lesbian and gay self-understanding, the psychological process of confronting personal information that relates to membership in a stigmatized social category is considered a generic one. Informal adaptations of the model have already been made to bisexual and cross-dressing individuals. (p. 233)

Besides intermittently adding the term *bisexual* to the discussion of gay men and lesbians, it seems that the same homosexual identity formation theory is being proposed and generalized to apply to bisexual-identified individuals as well. Again, the only time the concept of the *bisexual* is discussed is in stage two as a strategy to "make the lesbian or gay account of themselves more palatable" (p. 237). Cass claimed that the use of *bisexual* in this context is "distinct from the process of bisexual identity formation" (p. 237), but the idea of bisexual identity formation as distinct from homosexual identity formation is not discussed.

Troiden's Ideal-Typical Model of Homosexual Identity Formation

Troiden (1988) proposed a four-stage model of homosexual identity formation to portray the experiences of males and females. He introduced this model as an *ideal type*, or a "general framework for ordering observations logically…at best, [to] capture general patterns encountered by many individuals" (p. 35). Troiden stated that this model describes the general patterns of "committed homosexuals" only. Committed homosexuals are defined as women and men who perceive themselves to be homosexual and adopt homosexual lifestyles.

Troiden's Four Stages of Homosexual Identity Formation

Sensitization begins in childhood when lesbians and gay males begin to feel that their interests and behaviors do not conform to social gender expectations. Because sexual orientation categories do not hold any meaning for preadolescents, their major feelings of marginalization result from their gender-inappropriate desires and behaviors. *Identity confusion* begins once one recognizes one's feelings to be potentially homosexual. The bipolar constructs of homosexuality and heterosexuality are already in

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place and a paradigm shift must occur. When one develops the ability to label one's experience as homosexual, *acceptance* has occurred. *Identity assumption* occurs when one begins to self-define as homosexual and presents this new identity to other homosexual people. Sexual exploration and involvement in the homosexual community take place at this stage. *Commitment* occurs when one has accepted one's homosexual identity, is comfortable with the new identity, and adopts a homosexual lifestyle. Increased involvement with the larger homosexual community gives one's experience a sense of validation and an increased desire to disclose one's homosexual identity to heterosexual people.

Bisexuality in Troiden's Theory

Troiden (1988) described homosexual identity development as "a horizontal spiral, similar to a spring lying on its side," which allows for progression to take place in a "back and forth, up and down fashion" as opposed to a linear, sequential, developmental change (p. 42). Troiden noted that homosexual identity is never fixed or absolute; it is ever emergent and variations in the proposed stages are to be anticipated.

Troiden (1988) discussed strategies to deal with the identity confusion that takes place in stage two. Among these strategies he very briefly described *redefinition*, a concept originally introduced by Cass (1979). Redefinition in Troiden's model means defining oneself as *ambisexual* (bisexual). This particular strategy could be sustained for months, years, or indefinitely. By this logic, individuals who permanently adopt a bisexual identity are really just employing a strategy to cope with their actual homosexuality.

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In Chapter 6, *The Identity-Construct Approach*, Troiden (1988) again briefly discussed bisexuality and the lack of validity given to bisexual identity. Troiden stated that sexual orientations are viewed as dichotomous in American culture and the polarization does not allow for bisexuality to exist as a valid option. Americans are socialized to develop heterosexual identities, or alternately, homosexual identities. Troiden commented,

> [the lack of acknowledgement for] bisexual preferences makes it more difficult to maintain and validate these preferences than heterosexual identities, which are supported continuously by sociocultural institutions, or homosexual identities, which are recognized and reinforced by institutional arrangements within the homosexual community. (p. 82)

Troiden (1988) recognized the lack of acknowledgement for bisexuality and proposed that this issue is compounded by the idea of competing loyalties. He suggested that bisexual individuals run into a multitude of difficulties because of concurrent sexual relationships with both sexes. The problems stem from intimate partners' requests to choose one path or the other and/or the guilt bisexual individuals feel from keeping their other sexual involvements secret. Troiden concluded that competing loyalties and the lack of social acceptance result in many bisexuals choosing to lead exclusively heterosexual or exclusively homosexual lifestyles because "the emotional costs of a bisexual lifestyle outweigh the benefits" (pp.82 – 83).

TOWARDS A PROCESS ORIENTATION OF SEXUAL IDENTITY

As quickly as homosexual identity formation was being researched and developmental paradigms were becoming popular models for defining the coming out

process, analyses of the generalizations of these models were underway. Klein, Sepekoff, and Wolf (1985) suggested that variables other than behavior must be taken into consideration when discussing sexual orientation. Sophie's (1986) critical examination of stage theories of lesbian identity development questioned the inherently linear nature of these models. Berkey, Perelman-Hall, and Kurdek (1990) advocated for more of a focus on bisexuality.

Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG)

In his book, *The Bisexual Option: A Concept of One-Hundred Percent Intimacy*, Fred (Fritz) Klein (1978) was one of the first researchers after Kinsey to discuss the concept of bisexuality at great length. Klein challenged the long held assumption that bisexuality was "disguised" homosexuality (p. 3). He stated:

> [Bisexuality] is another way of sexual expression. Although it contains elements of both heterosexual and homosexual behavior, it is a way of being, in and of itself…No matter what sexual orientation a person has, he or she lives on a continuum. During the course of a lifetime, each individual plays a number of roles: father, mother, soldier, teacher, heterosexual, homosexual, and so on. We take comfort in the labels; they help us define our relationships with one another and with the world at large. Yet with each label we acquire, we limit our infinite possibilities, our uniqueness. (p. 6)

Klein et al. (1985) went on to develop the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG) as a valid research tool to measure the multivariable aspects of sexual orientation.

Klein et al. (1985) contended that, while the Kinsey scale (Kinsey et al., 1948) assessed sexual orientation as a continuous phenomenon and expanded upon the notion of

bisexuality, it was limited to measuring sexual *behavior* only. They proposed that sexual experience could not be the only variable considered while studying sexual orientation. Consequently, they identified seven variables that they perceived as important components and, in addition, added the dimension of time. The seven variables are sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, self-identification, and sexual lifestyle. Using these seven variables, Klein et al. (1985) developed the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG) in the form of a questionnaire. Subjects were meant to rate each variable as applying to the past, present, and ideal (see figure 2).

Figure 2
Klein Sexual Orientation Grid

Variable	Past	Present	Ideal
A. Sexual Attraction			
B. Sexual Behavior			
C. Sexual Fantasies			
D. Emotional Preference			
E. Social Preference			
F. Self Identification			
G. Hetero/Homo Lifestyle			

The KSOG was circulated in an article entitled, "Are you sure you're Heterosexual? Or Homosexual? Or Even Bisexual?" in *Forum* magazine in 1980 (Klein et al., 1985). Three hundred and eighty four people responded to this questionnaire. Of this number, 213 were male and 171 were female. One hundred and twenty eight identified as heterosexual, 172 identified as bisexual, and 62 identified as homosexual. The study revealed that sexual orientation was not static for this sample of respondents.

Klein et al. (1985) identified three points for consideration. The first is that it is important to recognize that sexual orientation is a process that can and often does change across the lifespan. Secondly, each of the 7 variables on the KSOG is equally important when trying to understand sexual orientation. Finally, the descriptive labels of "homosexual," "bisexual," and "heterosexual" are one-dimensional and inadequate when attempting to comprehend or explain sexual orientation.

Sophie's Critical Examination of Stage Theories of Lesbian Identity Development

Sophie (1986) asserted that the experiences of those who do not proceed neatly through linear developmental stages, or those who further modify their homosexual identities after initially adopting them, tend to be ignored. Sophie conducted an exploratory study with 14 women who were undergoing changes in their sexual orientation identification. She developed a generalized four stage model that reflected stages in various developmental models in order to test the applicability of stage models on the 14 women in the study. The stages were, 1) *First Awareness*, 2) *Testing and Exploration*, 3) *Identity Acceptance*, and 4) *Identity Integration*. Sophie found great variability among the women in the study. There was evidence of linearity in the early stages of development. However, once participants passed these stages, greater variability was witnessed, many unanticipated directions of change occurred, and lesbian identity was not always the final stage of development. An option that had not been anticipated in early stage models was the re-incorporation of attraction to the opposite sex. In many of the earlier lesbian identity development models, attractions to men were no longer acceptable once an individual adopted a lesbian identity. For one to re-incorporate

attractions to men, a fixed sexual identity must be abandoned for a more flexible sexual identity.

Multidimensional Scale of Sexuality (MSS)

Berkey, Perelman-Hall, and Kurdek (1990) suggested that the lack of a universal definition of bisexuality has limited the assessment of sexual orientation. These researchers criticized the Kinsey Scale for presenting sexual orientation as bipolar and unidimesional where "bisexuals are literally seen as half heterosexual and half homosexual" (p. 70). They further explained that, due to the lack of consideration given to the multiple variables and the changes in life situations, the Kinsey scale assumes that sexual orientation is static and therefore an insufficient instrument. The researchers mention the KSOG as a dynamic instrument that takes a multidimensional approach yet assesses sexual orientation generally without any particular focus on bisexuality (p. 70).

The Multidimensional Scale of Sexuality (MSS) was developed to assess what the researchers perceived as 6 categories of bisexuality. The first category is *homosexual orientation prior to exclusive heterosexual orientation*. Second is *heterosexual orientation prior to exclusive homosexual orientation*. The third category is *predominant homosexual orientation (frequent homosexual desires and/or sexual contacts) with infrequent heterosexual desires and/or sexual contacts*. The fourth category is *predominant heterosexual orientation (frequent heterosexual desires and/or sexual contacts) with infrequent homosexual desires and/or sexual contacts*. Category five is *equal orientation toward members of both sexes, where desires for, and/or sexual contacts with members of both sexes occur on a fairly regular basis (also called concurrent bisexuality)*. Finally, category six is *equal orientation toward members of*

both sexes, where exclusive homosexual orientation is followed by exclusive heterosexual

orientation (or vice versa), on an on-going basis (also called sequential bisexuality).

The MSS questionnaire was meant to identify the respondent's sexual orientation

as exclusively heterosexual, exclusively homosexual, or asexual, as well as distinguish

among the six types of bisexuals. The MSS also asked the respondents to rate themselves

based on the descriptions of each of the nine categories. Included in the scale were

measures that considered the cognitive/affective and behavioral components of the

respondent's answers. Lastly, subjects were asked to rate themselves on the 7-point

Kinsey Scale.

One hundred and forty-eight questionnaires were returned. None of the

respondents described their sexual orientation as *asexual* or *heterosexual orientation*

prior to exclusive homosexual orientation. As expected, individuals who rated themselves

in one category on the Kinsey Scale were distributed across several different MSS

categories. The correspondence between self-description and behavior rating was

significant only for the heterosexual, past heterosexual now homosexual, and homosexual

groups. The self-descriptions of the four groups representing different types of

bisexuality did not conform to corresponding patterns and in fact revealed a great deal of

diversity in behavior. The self-descriptions and cognitive/affective ratings showed a

significant corresponding pattern across the board.

Berkey et al. (1990) found, in this sample, a great deal of variability between

people's self-labeling and their actual behavior. Conversely, people's self-labeling

strongly corresponded with their cognitive/affective identities. In conclusion, aside from

most self-labeled heterosexuals, there is much heterogeneity within both the homosexual and the bisexual categories of sexual orientation.

Bisexuality

In cultures where heterosexuality is assumed at birth and socialization from that point on is directed by this assumption, it makes sense that models of homosexual trajectories have been developed. These models help to guide those who do not feel heterosexuality explains their sexual identities. They offer validation of gay and lesbian experiences by offering a clear-cut sexual orientation with which to identify. Sexual orientation refers to the object of one's sexual desire. Objects of sexual desire are differentiated by the gender of the other person. Therefore, we have heterosexual (attraction to different gender) and homosexual (attraction to same gender) orientations. Of course, as discussed earlier in the examination of the KSOG and the MSS, it is clear that sexual desire is only one dimension of many when attempting to understand the complexities of sexual identity. Schwartz and Blumstein (1994) explain that "sexual orientation is an abstraction designed to make simple a complex social reality (p. 183)." For this reason it tends to be an untidy process when attempting to locate a person in a specific dichotomous and mutually exclusive sexual orientation.

This assumed dichotomy becomes especially problematic for those attempting to define a sexual identity for themselves that is not exclusively heterosexual or homosexual. Because the heterosexual and homosexual categories do not overlap, bisexuality is added as a third category. Bisexuality was intended to describe the experiences of all those who do not fit into either of the other categories. Epting et al. (1994) suggested that the bisexual category can be viewed as an indication of how

limiting the homosexual-heterosexual distinction can be. Clearly, the vast numbers of "others" who do not fit into either the homosexual or heterosexual categories need to be grouped elsewhere.

Although bisexuality is considered a valid category of sexual orientation, there remains a lack of concrete identity development models for bisexuality (Fox, 2003). Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994) conducted qualitative interviews with one hundred bisexual-identified people living in the San Francisco Bay are between April and June of 1983. The results of this study suggested four stages of bisexual identity development. The first stage is *initial confusion* when one experiences sexual feelings for both sexes. The inability to categorize these feelings leaves one struggling with one's unclassifiable sexual identity. The second stage is when one *finds and applies the* [bisexual] *label*. For many, the discovery that the bisexual category exists helps to make sense of their feelings. Also, the recognition that one does not have to or want to deny sexual feelings for both sexes leads to the application of the bisexual label. The third stage is when one *settles into the* [bisexual] *identity*. This stage occurs when one finds support and becomes less concerned about the negative perceptions of others. The fourth stage is *continued uncertainty* about the bisexual identity. The uncertainty stems from a lack of social validation of the bisexual identity by the homosexual world. Most common was the tendency to call one's bisexual identity into question after being exclusively involved with one partner for a period of time. When involved with a same-sex partner, many respondents questioned the heterosexual part of their identity. When involved with an opposite-sex partner, many respondents tended to question the homosexual piece of their identity. This suggested stage model of bisexual identity development begins and ends

with confusion and uncertainty. It seems that an attempt to define developmental stages leading to the adoption of a bisexual identity falls short due to the fact that a bisexual identity is, by definition, fluid.

As the Weinberg, et al (1994) study showed, many self-identified bisexuals change their identity label based on the gender of their present partner. The bisexual label becomes acceptable, and accepted by others, only when they are not involved with a romantic partner. Rust (1993) suggested that bisexually identified individuals experience their sexual identity as changing back and forth between heterosexual and homosexual based on partner gender because they are trying to fit their varied attractions and experiences into a dichotomous model. Rust proposed that a social constructionist lens be used to view homosexual identity formation in a nonlinear fashion.

Rust (1993) claimed that earlier research on homosexual identity formation using a developmental paradigm only pinpointed milestone events or psychological changes that individuals experienced during the process of coming out. Developmental models typically imply a goal-oriented process beginning with a starting point, emerging through a series of sequential steps, and ending at a position of relative maturity. These models suggest linear movement and ultimately the attainment of a finite homosexual identity. Rust's critique of earlier homosexual identity formation models focused on two main areas: the linearity of the models and the omission of bisexuality as a valid sexual identity.

Many of the early theorists acknowledged that sexual identity formation was not consistently a linear progression for all people during the coming out process. Rust (1993) suggested that the feedback loopholes, alternate routes, and dead ends the early

theorists used in linear models only allowed room for deviation from the course, still suggesting that sexual identity formation is fundamentally linear. Rust criticized these models for not effectively describing the formation of sexual identity and suggested a new model; one that would treat bisexual identity and homosexual identity as equal alternatives to heterosexuality.

Rust (1993) conducted a survey with over 400 women who identified as lesbian or bisexual. There were a series of questions about their sexual identity histories including changes in identity, milestone events, and current identity. Rust found that most of the women in the study did not progress through a series of stages in an orderly sequence. Individuals often switched back and forth between identities and had periods where they did not adopt any particular identity.

When this study was conducted in the early 1990's, bisexuality was not the readily available construct it is today. At the time, the concept of bisexuality was still often discussed as a transitory phase one went through while coming out, fence-sitting, the unwillingness to surrender heterosexual privilege, and promiscuity. Bisexuality may be available as a third category of sexual orientation. However, this category is replete with its own unique limitations.

A Social Constructionist View of Sexual Identity

Rust (1993) proposed that a social constructionist model, where variation and change are the norm, replace developmental models altogether. Social constructionism is the idea that individuals form their identities using the collectively created constructs available within their cultures, social contexts, and historical location (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1991, 1999). Rust suggested that a social constructionist perspective would

counter the developmental model of sexual identity formation in that the end "goal" would not be the attainment of a different fixed sexual identity. The "goal" would be the recognition and acceptance of change in sexual identity in order to adjust to a constantly shifting sociopolitical context. This perspective would allow, and in fact be necessary, for one to accurately describe one's sexual identity across one's life span within a world where the social context is constantly changing (p. 68).

Ultimately, Rust was not introducing a new model of sexual identity development. Rust was optimistically advocating for a social constructionist perspective to replace developmental models. This calls for a shift in the perception of the formation of sexual identity to an ongoing process, one to be devised and revised as needed, in relationship to one's social location. One need not be limited to following an already mapped out trajectory leading to already "existing" sexual identities that happen to be available within one's culture. However, the "freedom" to choose from available sexual identities in present popular discourse falls short. As Rust (1993) stated, "one cannot change if categories of meaning have not been constructed on the experiential space one traverses" (p. 73). The problem remains when one cannot find adequate language, or labels, to describe one's sexual feelings and/or experiences within one's social context.

Cross and Epting (2005) acknowledged the limiting nature of labels, as well as their usefulness. They stated that on the one hand, labels can "wipe out possibilities and crush creativity," while on the other hand, they can provide an "answer to a puzzling question" (p. 54). For questioning individuals, the availability of labels can be a relief. For in the label, commonalities of experiences may be found. This could prove extremely useful to one who may be feeling alone, confused, and different. In an effort to normalize

one's experience, one may seize a socially available label and use it to self-define. At first the adoption of a new sexual identity label may be comforting and provide a sense of belonging, but after some time the limiting nature of the new label may very well be recognized.

Rust (2001) conducted another study, which explored how 917 participants defined their bisexual identities. In this study, Rust attempted to clarify the position of individuals who do not claim monosexual identities. Rust stated, "individuals who do not fit neatly into culturally produced heterosexual, lesbian, and gay categories seek to claim the experiential space that can form the basis for bisexual identity" (p. 34). This sample of individuals claimed non-monosexual identities. Many of these participants used alternative, compound, and multiple sexual identities that were easiest to explain under the umbrella term of bisexual. Alone, the term bisexual rarely sufficed to fully describe the respondents' conceptions of themselves.

Out of the 917 respondents only 30.5% identified with a same-gender monosexual identity such as lesbian, gay, homosexual, or dyke. Bisexual identities were used by 68.5% of respondents who used terms like bisexual, bi, and bisexual-queer. Of those who employed bisexual identities, other compound identities were also used such as bisexual lesbian, gay bisexual, bisexual-identified gay man, lesbian-identified bisexual and heterosexual-identified bisexual. Some alternative identities were pansexual, pansensual, polysexual, ambisexual, and queer. Rejection of identities was also present and these individuals used the categories "not sure of orientation" and "prefer not to label self." There were also 136 respondents who opted for the response of "other" and

individualized their own identities. Some of these identities were sexually omnivorous, unisexual, humansexual, bi-dyke, bi-lovable, multi-queer, normal, and sexual.

Rust's (2001) study is an example of how non-monosexually identified people constructed personal sexual identities in the absence of descriptive and accessible language. Realizing the limitations of socially available labels of sexual identity, this sample of individuals creatively used pieces and/or combinations of already existing categories of sexual identity to more accurately describe their personal experiences. The uniqueness of these self-created identities epitomizes George A. Kelly's (1955/1991a, 1955/1991b) Personal Construct Psychology (PCP).

Kelly's (1955/1991a) statement of constructive alternativism makes the claim that, there are always alternative constructions available to choose among in dealing "with the world. No one needs to paint himself into a corner; no one needs to be completely hemmed in by circumstances; no one needs to be the victim of his biography" (p. 11). PCP offers a liberating perspective to those who feel that the available socially constructed categories of sexual identity do not accurately represent their feelings and/or experiences. PCP can also address the dilemma that may arise when descriptive language is wholly unavailable within social contexts; it allows for the creativity and flexibility to construct and reconstruct sexual identity as needed. PCP permits the view of sexual identity to take on a permeable form and offers an alternative lens with which to view sexual identity. A PCP view of sexual identity is explored in the remainder of this paper.

PERSONAL CONSTRUCT PSYCHOLOGY

What we think we know is anchored only in our own assumptions, not in the bedrock of truth itself, and that world we seek to understand remains always on the horizons of our thoughts. (Kelly, 1977, p. 6)

Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) is a theory of personality that was first introduced by George A. Kelly in his two volume set, *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (1955/1991a; 1955/1991b). Kelly claimed that a real world exists but one can only access that world indirectly through one's personalized observations and interpretations. In other words, we as human beings perceive and experience reality in our own unique and individual ways. Kelly (1955/1991a) described constructs as "transparent patterns or templets which [individuals] create and then attempt to fit over realities of which the world is composed" (p. 7).

Personal Constructs Defined

According to Kelly (1955/1991a), the basic nature of a construct is bipolar, that is, "a construct is a way in which some things are construed as being alike and yet different from others" (p. 74). The bipolar nature of personal constructs is not to be confused with the dichotomous view of sexual identity. From a personal construct perspective, *homosexual* and *heterosexual* are two poles of a construct dimension, not a preexisting duality. Kelly (1969) described the idea of constructs as "reference axes" created by individuals to organize events by their similarities and differences. Kelly (1966) explained that constructs are not "intrinsic properties of events" (p. 27). Constructs are created by the individuals who use them as tools to understand and give meaning to personal experiences of events. Therefore, the same event may be construed differently by different people and organized differently within each person's construct system. The homosexual-heterosexual distinction, like all construct dimensions, was invented by people to make sense of events (Epting et al., 1994).

Landfield and Leitner (1980) explained that "even if two people use the same verbal symbol, they may organize it differently within their construct system" (p. 8). For example, Susan and Robert both use the same bipolar construct dimension of *angry* vs. *calm* but they organize it differently within their own personal construct systems. Susan believes that getting angry in a situation displays force and power, while remaining calm displays weakness and inferiority. Robert uses this same construct dimension of *angry* vs. *calm*. However, he believes that remaining calm displays power and control while getting angry displays desperation and loss of control. Susan and Robert use the same words to convey very different personal meanings.

Core Constructs

Core constructs "govern a person's maintenance process – that is, those by which he maintains his identity and existence" (Kelly, 1955/1991a, p. 356). Core constructs are the foundation of self identity; they are the means by which one understands oneself. One behaves in accordance with one's core constructs as they reflect values and define interpersonal relationships (Landfield & Leitner, 1980). Core constructs often revolve around gender, biological sex, race, religion, and sexual identity. Core constructs are the most meaningful within one's personal construct system; they stabilize identity and are not readily changed.

Hierarchical Nature of Construct Systems

Constructs are systematically hierarchical. That is, one arranges one's construct system based on the significance the constructs hold in one's life. Kelly (1955/1991a) asserted that, within personal construct systems, there are *superordinate* and *subordinate* constructs. Core constructs are the most superordinate in a person's construct system;

they are the basis of identity and govern how the individual perceives and understands the world. Subordinate constructs are subsumed by and organized under superordinate constructs.

Returning to the example of Susan and Robert, we can take a closer look at how they each hierarchically organize their construct dimension of *angry* vs. *calm* within their respective construct systems. For Susan, *angry* vs. *calm* is a subordinate construct that is organized in relation to her superordinate construct of *strong* vs. *weak*. One of Susan's core constructs is that of a strong woman. For Susan, remaining calm in a heated situation reinforces the idea that women should be passive and placating. Getting angry shows others that she is a no-nonsense woman who demands respect. For Robert, *angry* vs. *calm* is subsumed by the construct of *powerful* vs. *unimportant*. Robert views himself as a powerful man with tremendous self-control. If he were to get angry during difficult situations he would not be taken seriously and would not be considered an influential man. Susan's core construct of a strong woman and Robert's core construct of a powerful man serve to guide their behavior and relationships as well as organize events within their personal construct systems.

Person as Scientist

Kelly (1955/1991a, 1955/1991b) put forth the concept of "person-as-scientist"[1] because people are always testing the constructs they create during the course of daily living. An active role is taken to form our own hypotheses (or constructs) about the world, test these constructs, revise as necessary, and adopt or abandon them based on the

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[1] Please note that the masculine pronoun was used throughout Kelly's original text of *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (i.e., "man-as-scientist"). While "person-as-scientist" is used by the author when referring to this idea, the author has decided not to alter original quotes and hopes the reader will realize that Kelly was writing during a time when the masculine pronoun was accepted as a generic term to describe people of all genders.

viability of their predictions (Epting, 1984). Therefore, a person's construct system forms the basis for prediction. The idea of person-as-scientist emphasizes the ways in which individuals are constantly posing questions and experimenting so as to gain a clearer understanding of the world (Landfield & Leitner, 1980).

Person as Process

PCP embraces the idea of the person as process. That is, we use our constructs to predict future events, discovering along the way whether our constructs work or not. When they do not work, a revision of constructs is in order. The world consists of constant and continuous change, thus human beings must constantly modify their conceptions of the world, their environments, and their relationships (Epting, 1984). The constructions we use to define the world today may become ineffective tomorrow. Kelly (1955/1991a) stated:

> If it were a static world that we lived in, our thinking about it might be static too. But new things keep happening and our predictions keep turning out in expected or unexpected ways. Each day's experience calls for the consolidation of some aspects of our outlook, revision of some, and outright abandonment of others. (p.10)

Fundamental Postulate and Anticipation

Kelly (1955/1991a; 1955/1991b) based his psychology of personal constructs on what he termed the "fundamental postulate" which holds, "a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events" (Kelly, 1955/1991a, p. 32). Anticipation is a key component to Kelly's theory. Kelly's idea of person-as-scientist introduces the importance of hypothesis formulation and active

prediction. When a construct is maintained based on the success of one's prediction, that construct is often employed in the anticipation of future similar events. One uses past experiences with successful constructs to anticipate future events.

We learn from experience how to anticipate certain events. If time and again we use the same construct to successfully predict an outcome, it is doubtful that we will question the usefulness of the construct. However, when one of our trusty constructs fails to predict the anticipated event, there is a strong possibility that we will become confused. If the same construct continues to fail us there will come a point where we will clearly need to reconsider the effectiveness of this construct.

Once a construct is in place it is likely that recurring themes will stand out and be used to predict new events of a similar nature. Kelly (1955/1991a) contended that "a person anticipates events by construing their replications" (p. 35). One uses the constructions one has developed to predict the outcomes of situations. For example, when I decide to go to the theater to see a movie, I anticipate my experience will play out as follows: I settle on which movie I would like to see and find out what time it is playing. I get to the box office 15 minutes before the movie begins and purchase my ticket. I make my way to the concession stand and I buy popcorn and a soda. I then find the theater that is showing my movie, enter, choose a seat, and wait for the movie to begin. Because my predictions of this experience have been validated each time I go to the movies, there has never been any reason for me to anticipate that future movie going would be any different than described.

We also anticipate consistency in our own and others' behavior. The same principle is applied within interpersonal relationships. We usually anticipate that our roles

within our interpersonal relationships will remain steady and our interactions will be relatively predictable. When our relationships do not play out as anticipated, we may experience confusion and uneasiness. These feelings may result in uncertainty about how we should anticipate future interactions. For example, Kristina has been using the university library frequently over the past few years and she thinks many of the librarians are very friendly and accommodating, especially when it comes to her overdue book fees. However, there is one librarian who is consistently unpleasant and unwilling to help Kristina, so she tries to avoid having to interact with him. On her most recent trip to the library she needed to renew several books and the unpleasant librarian was the only person on duty. Kristina anticipated having a difficult time dealing with him. When Kristina got to the counter this librarian noticed that she had a history of overdue fees and Kristina immediately expected that she would have to argue with the librarian in order to renew her books. Instead, the librarian simply renewed the books for her and gave her an extension on the due date. Although Kristina left the library pleased with the experience, she was also confused. Because of her unpleasant past experiences with the librarian, she had anticipated that whenever she would have to deal with him the new experience would be unpleasant as well. The next time Kristina has to renew her books with this librarian she may do well to anticipate the experience differently. If the librarian is helpful and pleasant again, Kristina may consider revising and reconstruing these interactions and consequently alter her anticipation of future similar events.

Now that some of the basic philosophy has been introduced, let us explore how PCP can be used to perceive sexual identities. As stated earlier, core constructs are the most superordinate and comprehensive within personal construct systems. They govern

one's maintenance processes, as they are used to organize a broad range of life events (Epting, 1984). People use core constructs to self-define. However, changing core constructs can be an extremely complex task. Using PCP ideas about transitional construing, we can view core sexual identity changes through a PCP lens. PCP contends that sexual identity is not fixed; it is a process that demands personal choices and actions. A lack of satisfaction with one's sexual identity does not mean that one is trapped by one's current self constructions. Alternative ways of construing are available. Sexual identity reconstruction is a process that can lead to new ideas and perceptions, more generative anticipations of life events, and a greater understanding of oneself.

SEXUAL IDENTITY CYCLE

Knowing a little something for sure, something gleaned out of one's experience, is often a way of knowing one's self for sure, and thus of holding on to an identity, even an unhappy identity. And this, in turn, is a way of saying that our identities often stand on trivial grounds. (Kelly, 1977, p. 7)

PCP can be used as an alternative approach to sexual identity formation. The techniques and cycles within Personal Construct Psychology are central to identity construction. They can be used to create a process oriented understanding of sexual identity formation. In contrast to the linear stage-sequential models put forth by developmental theorists, PCP can be used to outline a Sexual Identity Cycle. This cycle consists of several non-linear, ongoing processes that permit and encourage the creation and revision of sexual identity throughout one's lifetime.

Process vs. Stages

The developmental models of sexual identity that have been reviewed describe movement from a heterosexual identity to a homosexual identity. They focus on a series of stage sequential steps with the end goal of attaining a stable homosexual identity.

These developmental models do not allow for recurring movement among various sexual identities. Once a stable homosexual identity is reached, commitment is assumed and further changes or revisions of one's sexual identity are beyond the scope of the models.

By comparison, a PCP model questions the linearity of developmental models and asserts that sexual identity is a more complex issue that can move in many directions and consist of many variables. Dividing sexual identity into heterosexual, homosexual, and even bisexual ignores the multi-faceted nature and uniqueness of human sexual experience (Klein et al., 1985; Sophie, 1986; Berkey et al., 1990; Rust, 1993; Epting et al., 1994; Schwartz & Blumstein, 1994; Muelenhard, 2000; Rust, 2001). While it can be argued that human beings find comfort and commonalities in labels, it is also true that the very labels chosen to self-define one's sexual identities may eventually stunt one's growth as a sexual being. PCP gives one the tools to elaborate one's sexual identity construct system as often as needed.

The elaboration of one's construct system is a process that occurs when one is feeling a lack of satisfaction with one's current means of construing. Questioning individuals likely experience dissatisfaction with their current sexual identities. From a PCP perspective, one would assert that a questioning individual's anticipation of events relating to sexual identity is proving unsatisfactory. That is, the predictions the individual is making along various construct dimensions related to sexual identity are not being validated.

A PCP model allows for a fluid sexual identity by emphasizing processes versus stages. Again, the process of sexual identity formation is ongoing throughout one's life. Therefore sexual identity is not viewed as a static phenomenon. One is not tied to an idea

or a category that society has already created. Nor is a permanent commitment to any one sexual identity expected in every instance. PCP shifts away from the sequential stage developmental paradigm by allowing individuals to move among various established sexual identities and/or to construct their own idiographic sexual identities. PCP does not insist that sexual identity formation correspond to set stages or steps. That is, there is no rigid order by which sexual identity construction processes occur.

Sexual Identity Constructs

Sexual identity consists of a finite number of bipolar personal constructs. Individuals apply these constructs to their sexual experiences and their sense of self. PCP asserts that construing is channelized. That is, when thinking about a subject or event, we employ a network of constructs that we have already created. These networks structure our thinking. New ideas and constructs are created by recombining old channels (Kelly, 1955/1991a).

Like all constructs, sexual identity constructs are organized hierarchically. Some are superordinate and others subordinate; some are core and others are peripheral. Core sexual identity constructs are organized as superordinate constructs. Core sexual identity constructs are comprehensive and not too permeable. In PCP, the permeability of a construct refers to the degree in which that construct allows new experiences into its range of convenience (Kelly, 1955/1991a). All personal constructs have a focus, or range of convenience. This means that a construct cannot be applicable to everything; it has a certain range to which it is relevant.

Core Sexual Identity Constructs

Because core sexual identity constructs are superordinate, they are less permeable than subordinate sexual identity constructs and therefore are more difficult to revise. Suppose a core sexual identity construct for a woman who only feels sexually attracted to other women is *lesbian* vs. *straight*. This woman's lesbian identity could be used to determine who she sleeps with, who she chooses as friends, where she works, how she introduces her partner to others, what businesses she patronizes, where she goes on vacation, how she intends to start a family, and so forth. To this woman, "lesbian" is the identified pole of a core construct organized superordinately. She uses it to understand a wide range of events and maintain a sense of her own personality. Her *lesbian* vs. *straight* construct influences how she uses those constructs subordinate to it when construing herself. Thus, the other constructs in the woman's meaning system get filtered through the *lesbian* vs. *straight* construct. For example, perhaps this woman holds a more subordinate construct of *obedient* vs. *rebellious*. In her manner of construing, lesbians are rebellious. Therefore because she strongly identifies with the lesbian side of the *lesbian* vs. *straight* construct, she also construes herself as rebellious.

Peripheral Sexual Identity Constructs

Peripheral constructs are "those which can be altered without serious modification of core structure" (Kelly, 1955/1991a, p. 356). Peripheral constructs are organized subordinately. For example, suppose a man who identifies as gay holds the core sexual identity construct of *gay man* vs. *straight man*. This core sexual identity construct is organized superordinately in his personal construct system. This superordinate construct subsumes his subordinate construct of *activities that gay men enjoy* vs. *activities that*

others enjoy. This man is passionate about opera music and is completely unfamiliar with football. He holds the construct dimension *passion for opera* vs. *being a football fan*, which is subsumed by the construct *activities that gay men enjoy* vs. *activities that others enjoy*. Upon attending his first Super Bowl party, he is shocked to discover that he is completely enthralled with the game. He leaves the party as a newly self-proclaimed football fan. He is still passionate about opera music, but now knows that he is a fan of football as well. Because of its subordinate status, he can readily alter his peripheral construct of *passion for opera* vs. *being a football fan* without disrupting his core sexual identity.

Any change, whether to core or peripheral constructs, serves to increase our range of convenience and extend the personal construct system. Every event and experience we encounter shapes who we are. We can choose to limit ourselves with impermeable constructs or we can allow ourselves to experiment with our constructs, reconstrue, and entertain new ideas. When we allow ourselves this freedom our systems become more comprehensive and more of our experiences become personally meaningful (Dalton, 1993).

Transitional Construing and Sexual Identity

The extension of one's personal construct system increases one's capacity to predict future events. Remember that Kelly's fundamental postulate states that "a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events" (Kelly, 1955/1991a, p. 32). In addition, Kelly (1955/1991a) writes that "a person anticipates events by construing their replications" (p. 35). The ways in which people anticipate events and construe their replications is the basis by which they form their

dimensions of meaning. When a construct fails to predict an event one may do well to make a transition within one's personal construct system. This transitional construing may result in more permeable constructs, a broader range of convenience, or entirely new construct dimensions with which to construe events. This is an ongoing process, which is constantly structuring and restructuring a person's individual personal construct system.

Elaborative Choice

Kelly's (1955/1991a) *choice corollary* states that a person chooses the alternative in a dichotomized construct that offers the greatest possibility for the extension and definition of the construct system. The choices that individuals make are intended to better anticipate future events. A person chooses the alternative in a dichotomized sexual identity construct that provides the best basis for predicting ensuing events. One choice may ensure security and certainty while another may result in ambiguity. However, the latter may eventually lead to a wider understanding of one's sexual identity. Whichever alternative is chosen, the choice is made essentially to enhance one's anticipations. This is called *elaborative choice*. When the system is elaborated, its range of convenience increases to make experiences and events more personally meaningful.

CPC and Creativity Cycles

In PCP there are two cycles of construction that are necessary for construct revision to occur. The first cycle is the *Circumspection-Preemption-Control* (CPC) *Cycle*. The CPC cycle has to do with how individuals take action in their lives through decision making. The second cycle is the *Creativity Cycle*. The Creativity Cycle is the process used to create new dimensions of meaning that did not previously exist in a construct

system. Both of these processes serve to elaborate the personal construct system and are essential in formulating one's own sexual identity.

Circumspection-Preemption-Control Cycle

The CPC cycle (Kelly, 1955/1991a) is used in transitional construing and relates to decision making. Circumspection, preemption, and control are the three key elements of this process. The circumspection phase is when one surveys one's constructs to decide which to apply in a particular situation. This allows one to examine all possible ways to construe the matter. Next, one or more specific constructs are preempted, or chosen, for making sense of the situation. The control phase of the cycle is the point of action; one pole of a selected construct dimension is chosen and applied to the situation. This choice is made for the purpose of increasing the efficacy of the personal construct system.

Dilation and Constriction

When inconsistencies in construing sexual identity occur, elaboration of the personal construct system may be necessary. *Dilation* and *constriction* are key elements of the CPC Cycle. The process of *dilation* is when "a person broadens his perceptual field in order to reorganize it on a more comprehensive level" (p. 352a). In contrast, *constriction* is a technique used to limit one's perceptual fields in order to allow one's world to remain unchanged. Kelly (1955/1991a; 1955/1991b) explained the process of constriction as when one "draws in the outer boundaries of one's perceptual field" (p. 352a).

If an event transpires that results in the questioning of one's current sexual identity, one's current means of construing one's sexual identity is, in effect, incompatible with the event that is taking place. Dilating the perceptual field allows one

to consider a wider range of events that may be involved in the incompatibility. Dilation lets one reorganize or adjust one's construct system so as to eliminate the incompatibility. While the process of dilation permits one to consider a vast range of events as related to the incompatibility, constriction can be used to minimize the incompatibility. Conversely, constriction is used to narrow the perceptual field after dilation, so as to regain focus. It may also be used as a strategy to avoid experiencing anxiety related to an event. Constriction would allow one to deal with one issue at a time and retain the ability to make consistent anticipations.

Circumspection

If an event calls one's sexual identity into question, circumspection enables one to observe and consider multiple aspects of the situation. Consider a lesbian identified woman who construes her sexual identity along the dimension *lesbian* vs. *heterosexual*. She suddenly finds that she is physically attracted to a man. She dilates her perceptual field and begins to consider other events in her life that could be related to this one. She might remember a boyfriend she had in high school, think about a crush she has on a male actor, reflect on her girlhood dreams of marrying and starting a family with a man, consider other physical attractions she has had towards different men in the past that she had chosen to ignore, and so on.

Preemption

When this same woman begins to constrict her perceptual field and focus on the sexual identity construct dimension most relevant to this situation, preemption has occurred. Of all the sexual identity construct dimensions she holds within her system, she must choose one. Just because she is experiencing a physical attraction towards a man

does not mean that she is any less attracted to women. In this case, her construct dimension *lesbian* vs. *heterosexual* might not be the one she chooses. Instead, she may decide to revise this sexual identity construct dimension as *lesbian* vs. *bisexual* and then preempt it as most relevant to making sense of her current situation.

Control

It is at this point when one pole of the construct dimension *lesbian* vs. *bisexual* is chosen. The relative position of this construct within this woman's sexual identity construct system must be considered. If this is a superordinate construct, subordinate constructs must be considered (Dalton, 1993). She may decide to incorporate her attractions to men into her construct system but maintain a lesbian identity. She also may do the same but choose to assume a bisexual identity. There is also the possibility that she could decide neither pole of this sexual identity construct dimension works for her and return to the circumspection stage so she can explore other alternatives that may better extend her construct system.

Creativity Cycle

The Creativity Cycle is used in transitional construing as a way for individuals to create new constructions and new dimensions of meaning within their personal construct systems. This process expands the personal construct system by introducing variations on current constructs. This expansion is achieved through *loosening* and *tightening*. The creativity cycle begins with the loosening of constructs so that new experiences can be made sense of within the individual's world. The cycle ends when new constructs have emerged and are tested, validated, and tightened. Therefore, the process of the Creativity Cycle involves alternating between loosening and tightening in order to create new

constructions that had not previously existed (Epting, 1984; Winter, 1992; Leitner, et al., 1993).

Loosening

During the loosening phase of the Creativity Cycle, sexual identity constructs are free and unstructured, thus leading to varying predictions. An individual is able to freely consider different forms of sexual expression without assigning personal meaning to each new idea. In the loosening phase, sexual identity constructs become more permeable and open to change. The permeability allows the opportunity for other ways of construing sexual identity to be recognized, examined, and comprehended. This increased permeability allows new experiences to enter the personal construct system, expanding its range of convenience (Winter, 1992). During the loosening phase, predictive ability decreases, but eventually new ideas regarding sexual identity take on a more structured form so that they may be tested.

It is possible that one may construe too loosely. Loose construing is useful when it is part of the Creativity Cycle and is followed by tightening. A positive example of loose construing could be the process of brainstorming – throwing out ideas without regard to how strange or unconventional they might seem. However, construing too loosely could become a problem. A person in the midst of an "identity crisis" exemplifies problematic loose construing. Pop star Britney Spears's recent bizarre behaviors, which have included delirious dancing and awful lip-syncing, getting publicly intoxicated while scantily clad and exposing her bare genitalia to the paparazzi, walking into a salon and buzzing off all of her hair, and attacking a car with an umbrella (Sanneh, 2007), can be considered an extreme case of loose construing. Her behavioral predictions are chaotic

and lead to varying and unreliable predictions; consequently, they do not allow her to effectively expand her meaning system in productive new ways.

Loose construing may occur in sexual identity formation when one begins to question whether one's current identity is actually a comfortable fit. Loosening takes place and the person allows in different ideas and experiences that might not have ever been considered in the past. Remaining in this phase of the cycle for too long may make it seem like one does not have any sense of one's self. Experimentation with too many sexual identities can be perceived as reckless and irresponsible behavior. If one is unable to tighten up one's construing, then one may not be able to make accurate predictions and may lack a sense of self-control.

Tightening

As new sexual identity constructs begin to take on a more structured form, the Creativity Cycle moves into the tightening phase. During this phase the individual tests the predictive ability of the new constructs. The testing results in either validation or invalidation of those constructs. If the experience is validated, the individual may tighten the new construct and organize it within the personal construct system. If the experience is invalidated, the individual may do well to move back into the loosening phase for further exploration.

Construing too tightly can result in problems, as well. Tight construing ensures that social predictions remain consistent. It allows one to maintain a relatively narrow range of convenience and retain a sense of control. In terms of sexual identity, tight construing is not necessarily a problem when the events anticipated are validated. Problems occur when social predictions result in invalidation. If a heterosexually

identified man has never questioned his sexual identity and suddenly feels physically attracted to other men, the predictions he makes based on his heterosexual identification are invalidated. If his construing is extremely tight, he may have difficulty acknowledging the inconsistencies between his predictions and their outcomes. Consider men who claim to be on the "DL," or "Down Low." Many of these men have female partners but regularly have sex with other men. For many men on the DL, "masculine" is their first and foremost identity. Their masculine identities are so tightly construed that, even though they engage in same-sex intercourse, their heterosexual identity remains intact because, for them, male heterosexuality equals masculinity (Denizet-Lewis, 2003).

Anxiety, Threat, and Hostility in Transitional Construing

The Creativity Cycle is a process that can be used to elaborate and expand sexual identity as often as necessary using the techniques of loosening and tightening. From a PCP perspective, the very process of questioning one's current sexual identity likely elicits the transitional concepts of anxiety, threat, and hostility. These issues may be experienced at all levels during the course of these cycles, but are more pronounced when a core construct is in question. Often times these concepts are linked or intertwined. Anxiety, threat, and hostility are discussed next as they pertain to sexual identity revision.

Anxiety

"Anxiety is the recognition that the events with which one is confronted lie outside of the range of convenience of one's construct system" (Kelly, 1955/1991a, p. 365). In the case of sexual identity questioning, Kellian anxiety would arise if one had little or no experience with or information about alternative forms of sexuality. Any time one begins to traverse unchartered territory, anxiety tends to be a common response. The

feelings of confusion and panic that often result from anxiety are often the impetus for one to gather more information, thus expanding the range of convenience of one's constructs.

A man who construes his superordinate heterosexual identity in an exceptionally tight manner may experience anxiety when he suddenly experiences attractions towards other men because same-sex attractions lie outside of his range of convenience. He anticipates his physical attractions to be based upon his understanding of himself as a heterosexual man. His heterosexual construct is not permeable enough to allow incompatible construing. Let us assume that he holds the construct dimension *heterosexual* vs. *homosexual*. His other option for construing himself is as homosexual. As he understands himself, he is heterosexual and has always been heterosexual. To construe himself as anything else, homosexual or otherwise, would be an immense change requiring a significant overhaul of his personal construct system and anxiety would likely ensue.

Threat

"Threat is the awareness of an imminent comprehensive change in one's core structures" (Kelly, 1955/1991a, p. 361a). Threat is experienced when one understands that the current means by which one construes one's world are no longer effective. Yet one knows that taking the next step could mean significantly altering the life one currently lives. Kelly (1969) described the experience of threat as the moment when "we stand on the brink of a profound change in ourselves and can see just enough of what lies ahead to know that much of what we are now will be left behind forever, once we take the next step" (p. 155-156).

In a culture where heterosexuality is more often than not assumed and fostered from birth, it is understandable how it becomes part of one's core structure. The likelihood of a shift or reconstruction of one's core self is impending once one questions one's heterosexuality. Therefore, Kellian threat is a natural response. It is probable that Senator Larry Craig experienced threat when his sexual advances towards an undercover police officer in an airport men's room resulted in his arrest for disorderly conduct. This conservative Senator, married with three children, was publicly accused of trying to solicit homosexual sex and ended up in the media defending his heterosexuality (Murphy & Stout, 2007). Several of this man's core identity constructs were called into question. In addition to his sexual identity, his conservative political positions, and his role as a husband were under public scrutiny. Whenever central constructs that govern one's maintenance processes are on the brink of a comprehensive change, the experience of threat is a likely response.

Hostility

Kelly (1955/1991a) used the term hostility to describe the "continued effort to extort validational evidence in favor of a type of social prediction which has already been recognized as failure" (p. 375). If we use our constructions to anticipate and predict future events, it can be frightening when certain constructs cease to do so. This is particularly true when we do not have viable alternative constructions in place to which we can turn. Hostility involves clinging to constructs that no longer account for events. It is experienced when one wants to hold on to constructs that, if lost, will significantly alter the perception of one's own world.

If heterosexual identity is part of one's core construct system, which it often is by default, then refusal to consider alternative interpretations may follow. For example, Ted Haggard, the evangelical minister of the New Life Church, confessed to have engaged in "sexual immorality" with a hired male escort for several years. The Reverend admitted to struggling all his life with "repulsive and dark" impulses (Banerjee, 2006). After being dismissed as pastor of New Life Church, Mr. Haggard underwent three weeks of intensive counseling and came out claiming he was "completely heterosexual" (Banerjee, 2007). Surrendering his core sexual identity constructs would have meant having to reorganize his entire personal construct system at the core level. Under these circumstances it may have been easier for Mr. Haggard to do whatever was necessary to force his experience to fit with his beliefs than to abandon these beliefs and then have to deal with the inevitable turmoil of exploring alternative constructions (Bannister, 1977).

The CPC and Creativity Cycles are two cycles of construction that allow people to execute decisions and develop new ideas. It is important to note that these cycles occur at various levels of awareness. Both can take place numerous times and in a variety of ways relating to sexual identity. These processes are often interconnected during the elaboration of one's sexual identity construct system. A PCP Sexual Identity Cycle might consist of any combination of the CPC Cycle/dilation and constriction and/or the Creativity Cycle/loosening and tightening. One may experience transitional issues such as anxiety, threat, and hostility at any point when questioning one's current sexual identity. Loosening and tightening may be used to create new sexual identity construct dimensions. If one comes to a point where a decision needs to be made dilation and constriction may be used to reorganize and elaborate one's system. One may or may not

assume a new sexual identity label; however, the internal processes will leave one with a new and deeper understanding of one's present sexual identity.

CONCLUSION

The PCP Sexual Identity Cycle incorporates individual experiences which are used to define one's own sexual identity at any given point in time. When new experiences warrant revisions to one's current sexual identity, PCP permits one to make changes within the sexual identity construct system. These changes can occur again and again. The processes are universal, but individual experience varies from person to person.

The aim of this thesis was to review models of sexual identity development and then to describe a Personal Construct Psychology perspective on sexual identity. The idea of a Sexual Identity Cycle using fundamental processes and techniques of PCP was suggested. It can be argued that this cycle would best serve individuals whose experiences do not conform to traditional concepts of "coming out" as illustrated by the many homosexual identity development models. This initial sketch of a Sexual Identity Cycle may be used to further explore how PCP processes can be used therapeutically with individuals struggling to express a multitude of unique sexual identities.

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