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The Deepening of Identity: How Leadership Affects Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Student Sexual Identity Development

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Abstract

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students become engaged in a number of leadership opportunities that may have an effect on how they view their sexual orientation. This qualitative study asked lesbian, gay, and bisexual students their perceptions of how their non-LGBT leadership experiences affected their sexual identity. The data was analyzed using an interpretivist process seeking themes that might contribute to a better understanding of leadership identity development for LGB students. Emerging themes suggested a correlation between sexual identity development and leadership identity development.

Keywords: Gay, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual;LGB; identity development; college student; leadership; leadership development



The experience of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students in the collegiate environment is different than their heterosexual peers. While research has documented the differing developmental experiences of LGB college students, the leadership identity development of LGB students has only been explored by a few researchers. Komives, Owen, Longersbeam, Mainella, and Osteen (2005) developed the most commonly used leadership identity development model which served as the basis for this study. Renn (2007) used the Komives et al. (2005) model to explore leadership development within the LGB community; however Renn focused solely on leadership development of participants in the LGB community and not the collegiate community at large. This study explored how LGB students who participated in non-LGBT leadership roles within the dominant heterosexual community developed in both their sexual and leadership identity. The term LGB is used to describe the participants in this study because transgender and non-binary students were not included in the study population.

Literature Review

When students attend a college they interact with each other through residential living, social programming, and leadership opportunities. Through these experiences students develop and incorporate new identities, and for some students that identity includes sexual orientation. In order to understand how sexual identity and leadership development interact a thorough understanding of both is important. Literature on the topic of sexual identity and leadership helps provide a framework to answer the question: Does leadership development affect the sexual identity development of LGB college students?

Cass (1979), Fassinger (1998), and D'Augelli (1994) developed three overarching theories of sexual identity development. The model of homosexual sexual identity development by Cass (1979) was one of the first and broadest models for understanding the sexual identity development of lesbian and gay students. In the Cass (1979) model individuals move linearly through stages, from an unaware stage to an advocacy stage. Fassinger's (1998) model is similar to Cass (1979), but criticized the equation of activism with higher stages of sexual identity development. Fassinger (1998) argued that activism is not necessary for sexual identity development. D'Augelli (1994) presented an interactive model where instead of stages each area



is deemed a process. Each process interacts with other processes in order to develop a unique sexual identity for each individual (D'Augelli, 1994).

The Cass (1979), Fassinger (1998), and D'Augelli (1994) models can potentially be collapsed to include all of the identities within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, spectrum together into one model; however, D'Augelli (1994) broke from Cass and Fassinger by explicitly stating that his model is only geared toward gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Though questions regarding the appropriateness of collapsing lesbians, gays, and bisexual individuals into a single identity development model persist, Dugan and Yurman (2011) argued that identity development of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students is similar enough to create a category labeled LGB.

Leadership identity development theories developed separately from LGB identity development theories. Komives et al. (2005) found that students moved from viewing leadership as apart from themselves to understanding leadership as intentional interactions with others. Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, and Osteen (2006) updated these leadership identity development categories by developing six new stages based on their previous work. Students in this version of the leadership identity development model (LID) begin their journey by first becoming aware of leaders; leadership is still viewed as apart from themselves in this stage (Komives et al., 2006). Through mentorship and experience students move to a clearer vision of how they view themselves, work with others, and are confident in transposing that to other spaces (Komives et al., 2006). Although Komives et al. (2005) questioned participants from diverse backgrounds, the focus was not solely on the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) student population.

Utilizing the LID model, Renn (2007) researched the relationship between LGBT student development and leadership. Renn (2007) focused on LGB students who were actively involved with an LGB organization on campus. Renn (2007) found that there is an involvement-identity cycle where the more students get involved with an LGB organization the greater they will identify with that community. Activism within the community is important to the involvement-identity cycle, but Renn did not mention leadership outside of the community.



This study built on Renn (2007) by studying LGB leadership outside of the traditional LGB community organizations. Exploring how leadership on campus affects the sexual identity development attempts to bridge thinking between leadership identity development theories and the sexual identity development theories.

Methodology

This research was conducted from an interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism focuses on how individuals make meaning and understand the world that they inhabit (Thomas, 2013). Furthermore, contextualizing student accounts, behaviors, and thoughts is important to interpretivism and this study (Geertz, 1975). The interpretivist paradigm was appropriate for this study because of the need to create an understanding of two socially separate notions of identity; leadership and sexual orientation. This paradigm was also chosen as a mechanism to interpret responses by participants into a cohesive understanding of their experiences. Because of the interaction between two identity development models the use of the interpretivist paradigm was essential.

Data for this study was collected at a mid-sized public university in the Northeast, which will be referred to as Northeast State University (NESU). Due to the size of the institution and involvement of the participants, many of the participants overlapped in their leadership experiences and participated in similar leadership opportunities.

Participants were identified through a basic demographic survey. Participants disclosed class year, sex or gender, whether they believed themselves to be leaders on campus, and sexual orientation. Participants then voluntarily disclosed if they would be willing to participate in an in-person interview. Participants were selected to be interviewed if they described themselves as leaders and as a member of the LGB community. A variety of class years, academic programs, and leadership experiences were also included to provide a diversity of perspectives.

Eight interviews were conducted with a variety of student leaders. The first names of the students have been changed in order to preserve confidentiality. The five male and three female participants who were interviewed will be named Max, Steven, John, Tyler, Eric, Alyssa, Laura, and Claire. Each participant varied in age, academic year, race/ethnicity, and leadership



experience (Table 1 describes the participants). Each student who participated in this study had a prior working relationship with the author. This was essential in developing trust with the students. Students knew the author from his position as a graduate assistant at the institution in the Office of Campus Life. The students had worked with the author previously in both a supervisor setting and in an advisor setting.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format and explored: student participation and motivations for involvement in leadership positions on campus; student understanding and definition of leadership; student definition of sexual orientation and development at NESU; and the role of leadership opportunities in student sexual identity development. Given the semi-structured nature of the interview the interviewees directed the

Table 1

Demographics of Participants by Race/ethnicity, Class Year, Age, Leadership Experience, and Thematic Group.

| Pseudonym | Race/Ethnicity | Class Year | Age | Leadership Experience | Thematic Group |
|------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|------------|--|-----------------------|
| Steven | Latino/Puerto Rico | Senior | 22 | Club executive board/ resident assistant/ orientation coordinator | Merging |
| John | White | Senior | 22 | Resident assistant/ orientation coordinator/ social and service fraternity | Merging |
| Tyler | White | Sophomore | 19 | Resident assistant/ orientation coordinator/ social and service fraternity | Merging |
| Max | Latino/Puerto Rico | Junior | 20 | Orientation advisor/ club president/ orientation advisor | Linkage |
| Alyssa | Asian American | Senior | 21 | Club president/ campus center manager | Linkage |
| Claire | White | Senior | 21 | Club vice president/ campus center manager | Linkage |
| Eric | White/Jewish American | Senior | 21 | Service fraternity/ resident assistant | Identity Development |
| Laura | White | Sophomore | 19 | Club president | Identity development |

conversation through their responses to the pre-determined interview questions. Responses to questions were categorized into themes and stages of leadership and sexual identity development



based on the LID (Komives et al., 2006) and sexual identity development (D'Augelli, 1994). The connections and groupings of individuals was also based on these development models.

Findings

The major focus of this study was to explore the interaction between leadership development and the sexual identity development of college students. During the interviews it became apparent that there seemed to be a relationship between students' leadership identity and their sexual identity development. The relationship was most prominent when looking at the progression of Eric, Max, and John's definition leadership. How students define leadership was an important indicator of where they were in terms of their leadership development. A sophisticated definition of leadership was based on the leadership identity model of Komives et al. (2006) and required students to recognize the importance of role modeling and an internalized set of values. This recognition was key for the LID model because it signified students had developed a clear vision beyond themselves and caring for the outcomes of others (Komives et al., 2006). Gerentivity and value translation in the LID signifies that students were more developed in their leadership identity (Komives et al., 2006). An unsophisticated definition focuses on position, power, and job role as leadership.

Eric gives the least sophisticated definition of leadership because of his focus on titles and position as a definition of leadership:

I think that leadership is very goal oriented. A leader finds the macro-goal of an organization and works with those who you are leading in order to accomplish goals. I think that positions in terms of leadership are important because having titles and responsibilities allows you to take goals and move an organization forward. Although titles and positions are not necessary I believe that at the very least being viewed as a leader is important.

Max's definition of leadership was more sophisticated than Eric's:

There are different kinds of leadership. When I think of a leader I think of someone that has a quality that pushes them and the organization to do and be better than they currently are.



John offered a well-defined and systematic understanding of leadership:

Leadership to me is more conversation and personal approach. In order to be a good leader you need to be communicative, build relationships, and foster the next generation of leaders. Leadership is also not tasks driven and just because you have a binder or a Polo shirt does not automatically mean that you are a leader.

The findings do not rest solely with how the participant's view leadership. How each participant views leadership and their sexual orientation within leadership positions proved the most insightful. The progressive sophistication of answers between Eric, Max, and John demonstrated the difference between participants.

Eric did not see a connection between his leadership roles and his sexual orientation:

I don't know if leadership positions have really had any interaction with my sexual orientation. Normally, I don't really discuss my sexual orientation, even though I don't hide my sexual orientation. I try to keep my personal life and leadership life almost separate. I really haven't integrated the two. So I don't really think that there is a connection there.

Max offers this in terms of how his leadership experiences have shaped his view of his sexual orientation:

I think that leadership experiences on campus have shaped how I view my sexual orientation and also how I present myself. Before getting involved in leadership experiences on campus I never hid my orientation, but I never would have presented that as a part of who I am now. I am not trying to hide it. Before my leadership experience I also would have never used my sexual orientation to make people feel comfortable either being here or with myself. Now I like to think that I am a role model and help others come to NESU and allow for an avenue for them to be themselves.

Finally, this is how John interpreted his leadership experience and the effect on his sexual orientation.



Reflecting back on leadership experiences, I think it is difficult to differentiate between the leadership positions and the people that I associate with them. Without those positions and the community that I built I do not think that I would be as comfortable with myself as I am. I definitely think that leadership experiences and the comfort level with my sexual orientation are intertwined.

Some participants gave accounts similar to either John (Steven, Tyler), Max (Claire, Alyssa), and Eric (Laura). In all cases the more sophisticated the version or definition of leadership the more the student felt comfortable with his/her sexual orientation. The students who had the most sophisticated definitions of leadership also expressed the importance of their role as mentors to younger members of the LGB community on-campus.

Discussion

The initial question posed by this study was whether leadership opportunities affect the sexual identity development of students. The findings of this study affirm the work completed by both Komives et al. (2005), and Renn (2007). For example, the first stages in the Komives et al. (2005) model focused on the external or positional expression of leadership. Eric was the only participant to demonstrate this level of leadership identity development. The final stages of Komives et al. (2005) focus on values, synthesis, and generativity. John, Tyler, and Steven all demonstrated these characteristics.

Renn's (2007) leadership-identity cycle became relevant throughout the interactions with the participants. The major question of this study was to determine if this model was also true for students who were involved in leadership opportunities on campus that were not LGB-based organizations. The answer from participants seemed to be mixed. Laura and Eric demonstrated little to no connection between their leadership involvement and their sexual identity development, while John, Tyler, and Steven argued that it was integral.

However, using the Renn (2007) model and the Komives et al. (2005) leadership identity model together, several themes related to lesbian, gay, and bisexual leadership identity development emerged. Like their peers, members of the LGB community get involved on campus and take on leadership positions. Unlike their heterosexual peers, members of the LGB



community may have additional developmental needs which affect their leadership identity development. The correlation between leadership identity development and sexual identity development can best be described using thematic groups. In one group, named identity development, students recognized their identities; however, they only had a basic understanding of both. In the second grouping, named linkage, students had a greater understanding of leadership, sexual identity, and how these identities have impacted each other. In the third grouping, named merging, students viewed their sexual identity and leadership identity as integral to each other and to their identity as a whole.

In the identity development grouping students recognized their sexual identity and their leadership on campus. However, these identities were not clearly defined. Eric and Laura fit in this group, defining leadership as positional, titular, and external. Leadership for LGB students in identity development group was something that was either done to them or something that was a result of positions that they hold within an organization. Leadership was also defined as being in charge. Whether this was being in charge of an entire organization, committee, or even a friend group, leadership was still defined by these participants as having some sort of organizational responsibility. Leadership in was seen as separate from their sexual orientation and not as a part of a complex intersectional identity.

The recognition of a relationship between leadership and sexual identity was a defining factor for the linkage group of students. In the linkage group leadership has become more defined. Students understood that leadership was not something that is external, and that was less focused on power than on relations. Students in this group may view leadership as a process that develops over time. Sexual identity was also more defined. Students demonstrate a comfort with themselves, their orientation, and with the wider community around them. This greater sense of self was facilitated through the leadership opportunities and the community that was built by the students. In the previous group students may have felt the need to hide their sexual orientation from peers, but in this group students no longer hid their orientation from their peers or members of an organization. Although students recognized that involvement in leadership opportunities has played a role in their self-efficacy development and their sexual identity development, they still have difficulty merging the two identities. They view themselves as a member of the LGB



community and as a student leader. Students who demonstrate these characteristics view the two identities as important factors to themselves, but do not view them as a singular identity.

Students in the merging group defined leadership and sexual identity similar to the linkage grouping. Students viewed leadership as a lifelong process and define leadership in a number of ways that deal with the interconnections of people. Having declared their sexual identity publicly, students in the merging group were out student leaders and have a well-defined sense of self in terms of sexual orientation.

The major difference between students in the merging group as opposed to the linkage group is that they recognized the importance of being an out leader on campus. Students viewed their leadership on campus as important for other members of the LGB community and articulate that their presence as a leader on campus can provide an important role in the development of the LGB community. Students in this group also articulated the importance of being an out leader has on the younger generation of LGB student leaders.

Implications for Professionals

There are important implications of this study for student affairs professionals. The first implication is that lesbian, gay, and bisexual student leaders may develop their leadership identity differently than their heterosexual counterparts, through a process that merges their two identities into a singular LGB student leader identity. By recognizing the LGB student leaders develop their leadership identity differently student affairs professionals may be able to adapt their interactions with those student leaders. By providing safe spaces and representation of LGB students in campus leadership positions student affairs professionals can create an opening and welcoming environment. Once LGB students begin their leadership identity journey through experiences on campus student affairs professionals may need to provide additional support. This support can be through conversations regarding leadership and sexual identity with these students or as simple as being inclusive in office spaces and language. Being inclusive through visuals and language opens students to feel comfortable discussing their orientation with professional staff. Research has already demonstrated that it is important for LGB individuals to



create a social network (D'Augelli, 1994). Creating a safe space for LGB individuals to explore their LGB identity along with their leadership identity is consistent with this previous research.

Limitations

Although the findings of this research shed light on the experience of lesbian, gay, and bisexual student leaders on college campuses, there are some research limitations. Research was conducted at a public institution in the Northeast. The Northeast and this institution are at the forefront of supporting the LGB population; therefore, generalization across regions and institution types is difficult. Another limitation is the prior relationship between the interviewer and the interviewees. Although this relationship provided a level of comfort it could have prevented them from disclosing information due to the supervisory power dynamics of some of the participants.

Conclusion

Using the leadership identity development model created by Komives et al. (2005), Renn (2007) articulated a leadership identity cycle for LGB students involved in LGB clubs and activism on campus. As students become involved in activism and the organization it would reinforce their sexual identity and further create a desire to be actively engaged in the community. Renn (2007) focused primarily on LGB students who engaged in LGB activism and organizations on campus. The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a similar connection between Renn's (2007) findings and student participation in non-LGB affiliated clubs and organizations. The major finding was that students who articulated a greater sense of leadership also articulated an integrated view of their sexual orientation with that leadership. Students who were unable to articulate a well-developed sense of leadership on the Komives (2005) model also kept their sexual identity separate from other aspects of their lives.

The correlation between leadership identity development and the integration of sexual identity into a greater sense of self led to the creation of the LGB leadership identity development model. By understanding the differences in their identity development professionals may be more equipped to be a resource for these students and help them become a well-integrated and developed student leader. However, there is much to consider when looking



at the experience of LGB students on college campuses. Other areas of future research include understanding the LGB intersectionality through a host of other contexts including socio-economic status, international status, and ability.



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