REWORKING DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY: 
THE CASE OF LESBIAN IDENTITY FORMATION

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ABSTRACT: Numerous theorists and researchers have challenged the underlying assumptions of traditional, psychoanalytically based developmental theories. Many of them imply that the internal and interpersonal experiences typified by these models as pathologically regressive may actually be normative variations of human experience. Efforts to include the formation of lesbian identity as a normal outcome of early development serve as a paradigmatic case study of the broader endeavors to rework traditional theory. Several recent theoretical and empirical works are integrated, with an examination of common themes and implications for Social Work practice and research.

In the last two decades, theorists and researchers from a variety of disciplines have challenged many aspects of the major psychodynamic theories of personality development. Criticisms have targeted both specific tenets and larger categorical biases of the theory. To date, there has been little integration of these challenges and proposed revisions into more comprehensive, theoretical models that can be applied to clinical practice. A substantial body of new theory and research raises questions about the theoretical and empirical premises upon which clinicians and researchers have traditionally assigned pathology to certain identificatory and relational experiences.

As a case study in theory reconstruction, this paper will examine the implications of a range of theoretical works for reconceptualizing the highly problematized and controversial processes of lesbian identity formation. Integration of these sources reveals themes that reflect the more global efforts to rework traditional theory. Postulations regarding the development of the self, in terms of individual identity, relational experience, and the roles of gender and sociocultural context, form the primary focus of the works examined here. For the purpose of definition, "traditional theory" encompasses the range of psychodynamic theories...
that utilize psychoanalytically based developmental lines, as represented by object relations theory (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975), and the original theory of psychosexual development set forth by Freud (1905/1961). "Lesbian identity" is defined as an individual's orientation toward, or tendency to choose, same-sex erotic and/or emotional relationships, whether or not this occurs exclusively, or in the context of female bisexuality. The terms "lesbian" and "bisexual" will be used interchangeably, as the phenomena of bisexuality is considered here only in its inherent inclusion of a lesbian orientation.

TRADITIONAL THEORIES

The psychoanalytic tradition views development as a linear process that occurs in discrete, sequential phases. Difficulty negotiating a particular stage is causally linked with fixation in a previous stage. Lesbian identity has traditionally been characterized as pathologically "fixated" along various developmental lines (Bergler, 1962), according to two basic tenets. The first, from the line of psychosexual development (Freud, 1905/1961) is that sexual identity, or sexual preference, is formed in the oedipal phase, and that heterosexuality represents "successful" negotiation of this phase. For females, this is based on the transition of the primary libidinal cathexis from mother to father, whose impetus is the "castration complex" (1933/1964, p. 110). Freud termed lesbian orientation a "masculinity complex" (1933/1964), resulting from the failure to acquire a "feminine," i.e. heterosexual, identity. The second tenet, articulated by several traditional theories (Socarides, 1978), is that homoerotic attraction is rooted in preoedipal fixations. These are described as narcissistic attempts to mirror the undifferentiated self (Freud, 1914/1961), or as pathological strivings to recreate the symbiotic fusion of infancy. The latter forms the basis for pathological interpretations of the particularly intense lesbian relational phenomena that have been termed "merger" experiences (Burch, 1986; Krestan & Bepko, 1980).

CONSTRUCTING NEW THEORIES

Bruner (1990) notes that psychoanalytic theories typically do not acknowledge the existence of their own sociocultural specificities, the biases of the "meaning makers," and that this fact sets the discipline apart from other social sciences that have integrated such self-examination into theoretical praxis (Geertz, 1973). In the past two decades, emerging consciousness of the role of gender bias in theory construction