

# 7 Young people, coming out and identity development

## Overview

- Young people, sexuality and gender identity
- Models of LGBTQ identity development
- Sexual fluidity
- Disclosure to family and friends
- LGBTQ young people in school
- Exploring identity and finding a community

## Young people, sexuality and gender identity

Identifying as LGBTQ can occur at any stage of the lifespan. However, the vast majority of research has tended to focus on young people. For this reason, this chapter will predominantly focus on identifying as LGBTQ as it applies to young people.

Much of the work on identity development in relation to sexuality (e.g., Savin-Williams, 2005) and gender identity (e.g., Grossman *et al.*, 2006) suggests that LGBTQ young people can be recognised from an early age by characteristics such as childhood feelings of ‘difference’ and gender atypical behaviour, appearance or interests. Moreover, Gender Identity Disorder (GID) of childhood is believed to be more strongly associated with homosexuality than with trans in adulthood (deVries *et al.*, 2007). The reality is that LGBTQ people represent as diverse a range of backgrounds and experiences as is the case for all people. Often the scripts of ‘childhood difference’ and ‘gender atypicality’ are a product of the research questions asked and the social imperative to construct sexual and gender identities coherently. In other words, because lesbians are assumed only to be sexually attracted to women, and gay men only to men, they are assumed not to have (had) sexual experiences with, or feelings for, people of another sex. Likewise, because gender is assumed to be innate, trans people are expected to have experienced their gender as incongruent from an early age. It is therefore common for people to present their own sexuality and gender identity in such a way as to include information which is consistent with commonly held assumptions about that identity and to omit information which is not. For instance, telling

the story ‘I’ve always been lesbian’, ‘I was born gay’ or ‘I always felt like a woman trapped in a man’s body’ (or vice versa).

Almost without exception, psychological theory and research on LGBTQ identity development is premised on the notion that young people who are not out or who resist coming out are either ‘in denial’ about their sexuality or gender identity, or are not able to come out but want to. However, as Ritch Savin-Williams (2005) highlights, with increasing visibility of diverse sexualities, young people attracted to the same sex appear less willing to adopt labels for their sexuality and gender identity. Whereas there may be a number of reasons why young people don’t or are reluctant to use labels such as ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’ (e.g., they are not out; they don’t feel that they fit the label; they have not engaged in same-sex sexual practices), many young people today reject labels ‘in defiance of social identity labels which would suggest the primacy of sexuality in their personal identities’ (Cohler and Hammack, 2007: 48). For every young person who identifies as LGBTQ, there are many more who do *not* identify as LGBTQ but are attracted to people of the same sex and/or engage in same-sex sexual practices. Some may later come to identify as LGBTQ, while others who currently identify as LGBTQ may later drop those labels. Others still will continue to engage in a range of sexual behaviours, including same-sex practices, yet resolutely identify as heterosexual. Likewise, work on people from marginalised racial and cultural groups suggests that young people from these groups tend to resist using sexual identity labels, perceiving them as westernised constructs which don’t apply to them (e.g., see Chan, 1996). Therefore, sexuality and gender identity is often a poor criterion for researching the experiences of, and issues affecting the lives and development of, young **people with same-sex attractions** and those who are trans. This level of diversity suggests that the ‘choice’ to come out (or not) is quite complex. It also calls into question the relevance of coming out for all LGBTQ young people.

A related issue is that many young people today experience their sexuality as fluid. Whereas some young people will have no clear sense of their sexual selves, but are seeking this, and may even be exploring different identities and practices, for others, same-sex attractions and relationships are not considered to imply anything permanent about their sexuality (Savin-Williams, 2005). For these young people attractions are viewed as fluid beyond what might be expected by sexuality and gender identity labels and they pursue sexual partners relatively independently of sex/gender. Although some young people identify as LGB, for many others same-sex attractions, desires and behaviour are viewed as a form of ‘sexual freedom’ or ‘sexual choice’ – a trendy ‘add-on’ to otherwise conventional heterosexuality (Diamond, 2005). For a number of young people **sexual fluidity** may facilitate identity exploration; for others it makes coming to identify as LGB a difficult (or even confusing) path to navigate.

Another problem with much of the existing psychological research is that it commonly compares LGB young people with heterosexuals as if they were two distinct populations. However, the sexual experiences of LGB young people are markedly similar to those of their heterosexual peers, including a diverse range of

sexual experiences with people of the same and a different sex. To characterise LGB young people as a homogeneous group conceals this diversity and fails to recognise important differences between people in relation to factors such as gender, class and culture (Savin-Williams, 2001).

For trans young people, gender identity development can be even more complex. While some young trans people may experience their gender as fairly rigid or fixed (just different from their natal sex), others may experience their gender as fluid or changing. Gender fluidity extends beyond behaviour and interests to the experience of multiple, and sometimes contradictory, gender identifications. For example, some young people describe themselves as *feeling* like a ‘girl’ on one day and a ‘boy’ on another, or even that neither term describes them accurately. However, there is little opportunity for young people to engage in gender identity exploration, in a society which is rigidly structured around two, and only two, sex/gender categories (i.e., male/female and masculine/feminine) and where gender diversity is seldom embraced. The lived experience of gender fluidity presents a challenge to dualistic ways of thinking about gender, and this is something which has remained largely unexplored in psychological research.

What is clear is that the socio-political landscape has changed considerably since the 1980s, and research has struggled to keep up with the impact of these changes on the identity development and sexual practices of contemporary LGBTQ young people. Owing to a relative lack of high-quality research on LGBTQ young people, the field has been dogged by limited samples, and (often) poor research design, resulting in a somewhat patchy and partial picture of the identity development and experiences of LGBTQ young people. Furthermore, research on LGBTQ young people has tended to be hyperfocused on the negative aspects of identifying as LGBTQ. This may in part be because researchers want to effect positive social change, but in so doing the field is impoverished by a lack of understanding of the strengths and resilience of LGBTQ young people (Savin-Williams, 2001). The lived realities and experiences of LGBTQ young people today are profoundly different from those of even a decade or so ago, and there is also considerable variability cross-nationally and cross-culturally. The vast majority of existing research on LGBTQ young people looks extremely dated and does not reflect the sexual and gender diversity we have just described. Moreover, it represents an overwhelming bias towards a white western perspective and towards sexuality over gender identity. As much as possible within this chapter, we have drawn from recent studies. However, as you engage with the theories and research presented here, we encourage you to bear in mind the limitations of the samples and other methodological issues which may impact on the findings.

## Models of LGBTQ identity development

Identifying as LGBTQ (sometimes known as ‘coming out to self’) has typically been constructed by psychologists as a process through which people

pass in coming (personally) to define their sexuality/gender identity. Like other developmental psychological processes using an essentialist approach (see Chapter 2), it has been theorised through the creation of stage models. From 1979 until the mid-1980s several stage models of ‘homosexual’ identity development were published (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1979). Vivienne Cass’s (1979) six-stage model of ‘homosexual identity formation’ – the most frequently cited model – was the first to be published and is the archetype on which most subsequent models have been based. Cass, an Australian psychologist, developed the model during several years of clinical work with lesbians and gay men (see Box 7.1).

**Box 7.1** *Highlights: Vivienne Cass’s (1979) model of homosexual identity development*

**Stage 1 Identity confusion** – A conscious awareness that homosexuality is relevant to oneself and/or one’s behaviour.



**Stage 2 Identity comparison** – Incongruity between perception of self as homosexual and others’ perceptions of one’s homosexuality results in feelings of alienation from peers and a sense of self as not belonging or being different.



**Stage 3 Identity tolerance** – A greater level of commitment to self-image as homosexual and acknowledgement of social, emotional and sexual needs results in heightened alienation from the heterosexual world and active seeking out of other homosexuals and the homosexual subculture.



**Stage 4 Identity acceptance** – Contacts with other homosexuals become more frequent and regular. A preference for homosexual social contexts and the development of friendships within them is established.



**Stage 5 Identity pride** – Commitment to the gay group is strong, generating a sense of group identity. Preference for homosexual identity rather than heterosexual identity.



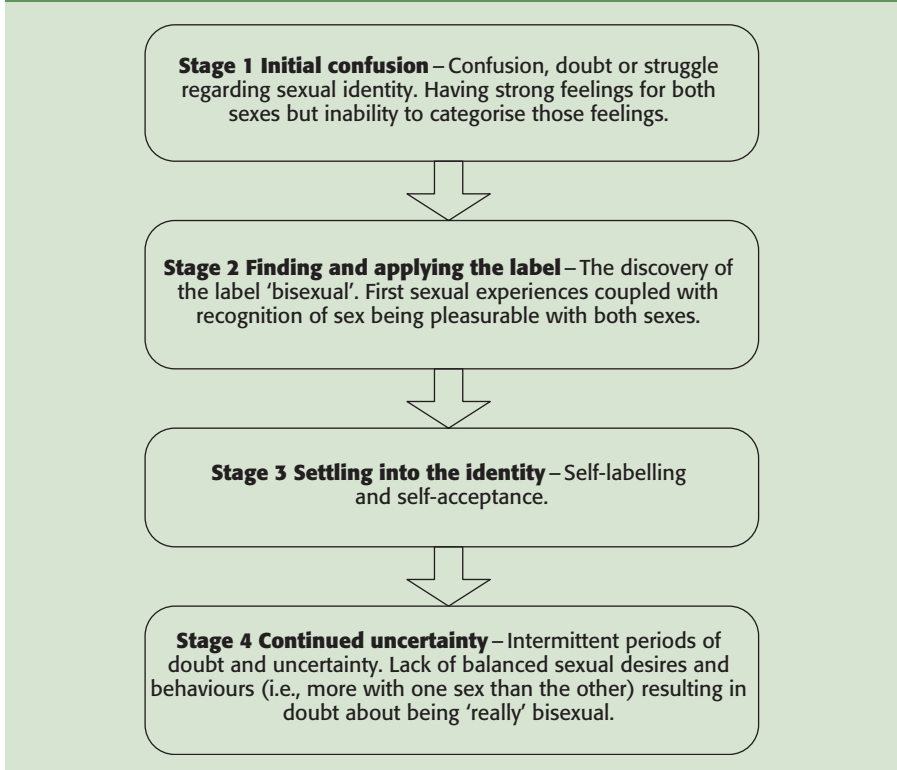
**Stage 6 Identity synthesis** – Homosexual identity is integrated into other aspects of self. Rather than *the* identity, it is seen merely as one aspect.

By the mid-1980s there were a number of models describing the process of coming to identify oneself as lesbian or gay, and there are four main elements common to all of the models: (1) an awareness of homosexual feelings; (2) exploration of homosexuality; (3) taking on board a lesbian/gay self-identity; and (4) integrating one's lesbian/gay identity into one's broader sense of self. Each of the models is underpinned by what Cohler and Hammack (2007) call the 'narrative of struggle and success'. That is, coming to identify as lesbian or gay is constructed as normative, but entwined with the challenge of managing stigma in order to emerge with a secure and positive sense of one's sexuality. However, because sexuality has typically been conceptualised as a simple heterosexual/homosexual binary, these models do not take seriously the notion of bisexuality, and because their focus is exclusively on sexuality – ignoring the intersections of gender and sexuality – the development of trans identity is absent. It is also worth noting that to date there does not appear to be a parallel model of heterosexual identity development.

In the 1990s, bisexuality began to appear on the psychological agenda. Following the models established within lesbian and gay psychology, early work on bisexual identity development also adopted a process-based stage model approach. The most widely cited model is that devised by US sociologist Martin Weinberg and colleagues (1994); see Box 7.2. Whereas identifying as lesbian or gay was characterised by the rejection of the label 'heterosexual' in relation to oneself, bisexuality involves the rejection of *both* the category 'heterosexual' and the category 'lesbian'/'gay'. For this reason, it would be expected that identifying as bisexual brings with it related, but different, challenges from identification as lesbian or gay. The main difference between this model of identity development and models of lesbian and gay identity development lies in the final stage of the model. Weinberg suggests that, rather than attaining a secure sense of self as bisexual (which is the case in models of lesbian and gay identity development), identifying as bisexual is characterised by ongoing uncertainty about one's sexuality. Work by Canadian psychologist Maria Gurevich and colleagues (2007) reinforces this, but interprets this 'uncertainty' to reflect a resistance to and questioning of the label 'bisexuality', and striving to find a suitable alternative.

As already highlighted, trans identity development has tended to be ignored in the psychological literature because the focus has been on 'causes' and treatment of transsexualism and GID rather than on the lived experience of trans people and the development of identity as trans. However, some work exploring the process of trans identity development has been undertaken by British clinical psychologists Clair Clifford and Jim Orford (2007). Clifford and Orford collected data from twenty-eight trans women and men (nineteen MTF and nine FTM) in the UK, recruited through trans and LGBTQ networks. In Clifford and Orford's research, eight people participated in semi-structured interviews and provided detailed accounts of their experiences of identifying as trans. A preliminary model was developed on the basis of these interviews. A different group of twelve trans people were provided with a diagrammatical representation and description of the model and a list of questions to consider. Their

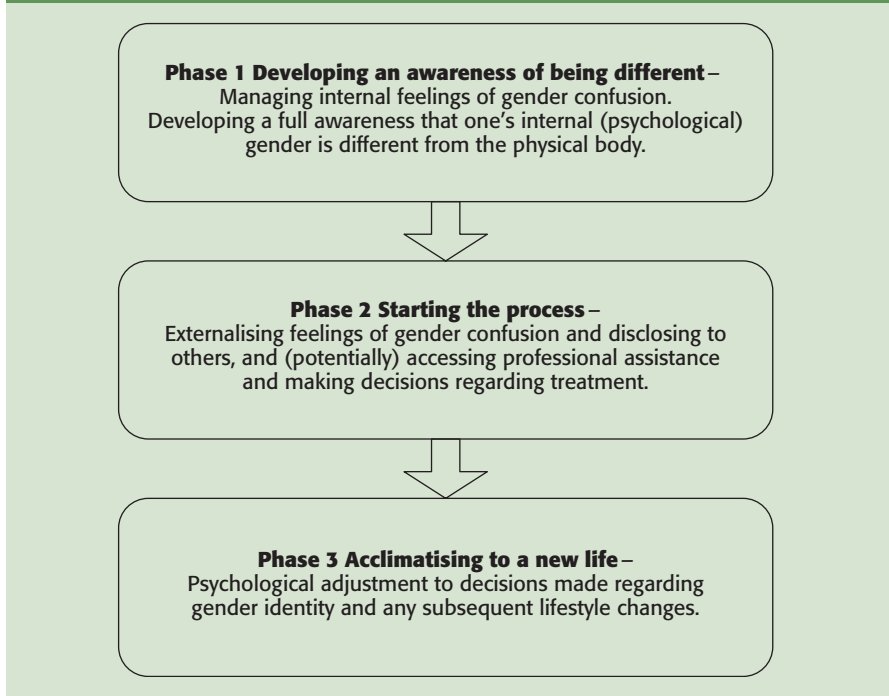
**Box 7.2 Highlights: Martin Weinberg and colleagues' (1994) model of bisexual identity development**



feedback was used to refine the model (some categories were collapsed; others were split into two or more categories). Finally, a further group of eight participants were invited to comment on the refined model. The model consists of three main phases, as illustrated in Box 7.3.

Despite their popularity, stage models of sexuality development have been heavily criticised. As well as the conflation of identity development with identity disclosure (and, in the case of trans, with a physiological change of sex), one of the main problems with a stage theory approach is that it assumes that sexuality is innate and that through introspection people can come to discover their 'true' identity. In short, coming to identify as an LGB person is seen as a journey of self-discovery, whereby individuals come to shed their 'false' identity as heterosexual and correctly identify as LGB. Conversely, if there were stage models of trans identity development based on similar assumptions as those underpinning stage models of lesbian/gay identity development, transitioning would be seen as a journey whereby a person sheds a false identity as 'male' (if born male) or 'female' (if born female) and correctly identifies either as 'gender variant' or as other than their natal sex. This approach assumes that sexuality and gender identity are fixed and fails to account for (potential) fluidity in those identities.

**Box 7.3** *Highlights: Clair Clifford and Jim Orford's (2007) model of trans identity development*



In addition, social context is seen largely as a backdrop against which self-reflection occurs. As a consequence, the role of social context (e.g., family; peers; community) and historical processes (e.g., the women's and gay liberation movements; the AIDS/HIV crisis) in facilitating or impeding development is not explicitly included in the models (as stage model theorists themselves have acknowledged, e.g., Cass, 2005). Socio-historical factors may be responsible for considerable differences in experiences of identity development between cohorts. For example, a gay man coming out in the UK in the 1940s when socio-political attitudes were very conservative and gay male sex was illegal would have had a markedly different experience from a young gay man coming out today when the socio-political climate is much more liberal, and LGBTQ people have greater freedom of self-expression. Similarly, a young person living in a (**socio-centric**) non-western society may have a different experience of identifying as trans from a young person living in a (individualistic) western society.

A third major criticism has been the rigidity of these models, in that they assume that developing an LGBTQ identity is a linear, sequential and unidirectional process. Although proponents of the models suggest that individuals may vary in the degree to which they follow the sequence of stages, the structure of the models themselves implies that people pass through the stages in a set order. People who do not pass through all the stages are viewed as having failed to



complete the developmental process. There are, however, many people whose path to sexuality and gender identity development does not fit this rigid framework. For example, longitudinal work with women suggests that reconsidering and (re)discovering (or reconstructing! – depending on what theoretical approach you take) different sexual identities is an important, and indeed common, part of many women's more fluid sexual attractions, practices and relationships (Diamond, 2006). The stage model approach therefore lacks a sense of the possibility of moving within and between different identities and stages, where the instability of sexuality and gender identity is as normative as stability of sexuality and gender identity (Griffin, 2000). This framework also favours a liberal integration of identity into one's overall sense of self, and therefore problematises alternative constructions of sexuality and gender identity which may assert the primacy of sexuality (i.e., where sexuality/gender identity are politicised; see Kitzinger, 1987). Similarly, for those from marginalised racial and cultural groups where sexuality/gender identity may be compartmentalised, sexual identity may be constructed as separate from other aspects of identity (see 'disclosure to family and friends' below).

Another problem is that models of sexuality/gender identity tend to place an emphasis on experiences (e.g., sexual practices; association with the LGBTQ community; transition) as the catalyst and/or defining characteristic of the development of sexuality/gender identity. However, coming to identify as LGBTQ does not necessarily involve these aspects. Anecdotal accounts of coming out often report LGB people having come to identify as such without having ever had a same-sex relationship or sexual experience and/or having interfaced with an LGBTQ community. When considering trans identity development it is important to note that not all trans people explore the possibility of transitioning, and not all those who do actually undergo transition. Adolescents diagnosed with gender dysphoria may have a strong and persistent wish for reassignment, be ambivalent about it, be confused or change their mind (de Vries *et al.*, 2007). For this reason, the identity development process for some trans people will simply comprise 'transgender emergence' (Lev, 2004): the process of realising, discovering, identifying and naming one's gender identity. Transgender emergence differs markedly from coming out as LGB in that trans is not as widely understood, and the use of gender pronouns (i.e., 'he', 'she') don't make trans identities visible. Consequently, trans people often struggle to find a way to articulate their gender identity (Lev, 2004). In an interview study with sixty-five MTF trans participants (aged 24–68 years), US sociologist Patricia Gagné and colleagues (1997) found that in addition to childhood events which marked their cross-gender feelings as wrong, the main catalysts for participants identifying as trans were discovering that there was an identity label for their feelings and that there were others who had similar experiences.

Finally, stage models construct the coming out process as inherently negative. They all imply that identifying as LGBTQ is fraught with personal struggle and lack of self-acceptance. For example, Coleman (1982: 471) stated that 'the



awareness of same-sex interests and feelings is usually a slow and painful process'. While this may be the experience of some LGBTQ people, the process of identifying as LGBTQ is hardly universal in the way that the models might suggest. Stage models therefore serve to perpetuate assumptions of LGBTQ pathology and undermine the attempts of contemporary LGBTQ psychologists to promote more positive models of sexuality/gender identity. In essence, stage models over-simplify the process of sexuality/gender identity development and are inadequate for capturing the complex process of coming to identify as LGBTQ.

In the main, the LGBTQ psychological literature on coming out suggests that the typical pattern of sexuality development begins with an awareness that one is not heterosexual, followed by same-sex sexual experience (which acts as confirmation), and culminates in disclosure of an LGBTQ identity to family and friends. However, recent research by US psychologists Shira Maguen and colleagues (2002) found considerable variation in the developmental paths of LGB people surveyed. For a significant minority of participants, first same-sex sexual experience occurred simultaneously with awareness of LGB identity, whilst 33 per cent disclosed their sexuality prior to having any same-sex sexual experience. Maguen and colleagues also found significant differences in developmental pathways as a function of sexuality and gender identity. Of those respondents reporting having had sexual experiences, only 14 per cent of gay men as opposed to 45 per cent of lesbians and 46 per cent of bisexuals (male or female) had their first sexual contact with someone of a different sex. For lesbian participants this initial different sex encounter was followed a year or two later by a first same-sex encounter.

## Sexual fluidity

In contrast to the essentialist constructions of sexuality and gender encapsulated in models of sexuality and gender identity development, some research has suggested that sexual attractions, experiences and identities are subject to change over time, a phenomenon known as sexual fluidity (or sexual plasticity). Until relatively recently, psychology has lacked a way of talking about individuals whose sexual attractions, experiences and identities have changed rather than remained stable. Although the term 'bisexuality' has often been used to describe notions of sexual fluidity, we suggest that it inadequately captures the diversity and complexity of individual sexual trajectories (and also potentially conflates the experiences of bisexual people with those of people who identify as gender fluid, two categories that may be both distinctly different and at times overlapping). As understandings of sexuality have increasingly moved away from a dichotomous approach, it has become more common to encounter people who see no contradiction in moving between relationships with men, with women or with both. For these people sexual attraction, behaviour and identity have more to do with the

characteristics of the person or the relationship itself than they do with gender (Diamond, 2003; Peplau, 2001). As highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, for many young people this is the dominant framework employed in thinking about their sexuality and gender identity, and is largely the reason for their resistance to adopting sexuality and gender identity labels (Savin-Williams, 2005).

For example, the notion of sexual fluidity described above appears to be more readily adopted by women than it is by men (e.g., see Baumeister, 2000). However, this does not presuppose that most women's sexual identities and practices *will* change over time. Some women may exhibit such changes, but others will adopt patterns of heterosexuality or lesbianism that remain stable across time (Peplau and Garnets, 2000). At least in the West, sex differences in sexual fluidity may be largely attributable to the different ways in which men and women are socialised to interact with those of the same sex. In particular, women are socialised to privilege emotional and affectionate (but not sexual) aspects of relationships with other women, which opens up the potential for unexpected experiences which blur the boundaries between love, romance, friendship and sexuality (Thompson and Morgan, 2008). Men, on the other hand, are socialised to maintain strict emotional and affectionate boundaries, which clearly demarcate the differences between friendships and sexual relationships.

Among young people terms such as 'lezzie' and 'poof' are used as a put-down for those who do not conform to heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality. Primarily, for this reason, and because it is associated with the unpopular 'F' word (feminism), young women appear reluctant to use the label 'lesbian' to describe themselves. While some may identify as bisexual and retain this identity for life, others may adopt the label 'bisexual' as a temporary alternative to lesbian. However, a recent proliferation of newer and 'safer' alternatives (e.g., 'mostly heterosexual'; 'heteroflexible'; 'bicurious') allows young women to keep their heterosexual label while simultaneously experimenting with same-sex attractions and desires (Thompson and Morgan, 2008). Despite a concerted effort to explore sexuality and gender identity development in (young) women, there is a paucity of comparable work exploring how young men construct their sexual identities or of any in-depth explorations of the ways in which discourses of masculinity militate against sexual fluidity in young men.

Regardless of the identity labels that individuals may or may not choose to use, much psychological theory and research has focused on sexual fluidity: that is, change in attractions and behaviour across time independent of the way in which individuals define themselves. This approach dates back to the early work of Alfred Kinsey and colleagues (see Chapter 1). Building on Kinsey's work, Fritz Klein operationalised the Kinsey Scale by developing a measure of sexual fluidity: the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (Klein *et al.*, 1985). This measure was designed to explore a range of aspects of sexuality including individuals' same- and other-sex attractions, behaviours, fantasies, preferences and identities across time (past, present and ideal). Recent research using this scale (e.g., Amestoy, 2001; Weinrich and Klein, 2002) has empirically demonstrated that sexuality is not a one-dimensional construct. For example, in a study of 250 postgraduate students in

the USA (Amestoy, 2001), participants' labels for sexual attraction, sexual practices and self-identification were consistent with their current sexuality, but considerably less consistent with their sexuality in the past. Only three participants (all Asian American) demonstrated total consistency across time (past, present, ideal) and aspect of sexuality (behaviour, fantasy, preference, self-identification).

The construct of sexual fluidity offers a way forward from the very rigid ways of thinking about sexuality typically espoused by psychologists. For example, one of the main problems with an essentialist approach to sexuality and gender identity is that it means accounting for (or discounting) experiences that are incongruent with one's sexual or gender identity. For this reason, it is not uncommon to hear heterosexually defined people accounting for previous same-sex encounters as 'experimentation', 'a phase' or even 'practice for heterosex'. Likewise, it is not uncommon to hear lesbians and gay men constructing previous heterosex in terms of repression/denial or the following of social conventions. It is also common in lesbian and gay coming out stories for people to construct previous heterosexual experiences in a negative way (e.g., as unfulfilling; as not proper sex) or even to omit such experiences altogether, and to present their same-sex experiences as overwhelmingly positive. Since identity categories can be contested, people employ these rhetorical devices in order to construct their sexual identity as both authentic and above question. This is clearly illustrated in the accounts of lesbians coming out after an extended period of heterosexuality (see Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1995; Rickards and Wuest, 2006).

In most cases, research about sexual fluidity has relied on data from one-off samples where adults have been asked to recall retrospectively their past sexual attractions, behaviours and identities. While there is considerable evidence of sexual fluidity among young people, sexual identity development is best understood by studying change across time. Although such studies are fairly uncommon, US psychologist Lisa Diamond has recently published a study that explores the sexual identity development of seventy-nine women over a ten-year period (see Box 7.4).

**Box 7.4 Key study: Lisa Diamond (2008) on female bisexuality from adolescence to adulthood**

Across the psychological literature there is considerable debate about whether bisexuality is a temporary stage of denial, transition or experimentation, a sexual orientation category characterised by attraction to both men and women, or a capacity for sexual fluidity. Each of these models encompasses a different perspective on change over time in sexual attractions, behaviours and identities. Lisa Diamond's (2008) study is the first to study temporal change in sexuality longitudinally.

In this study, Diamond interviewed a sample of seventy-nine non-heterosexual women approximately every two years over a ten-year period. Participants were aged 18–25 at the initial interview and recruited from LGB community events, youth groups and university-based groups located in and around New York.

By the end of the study, 67 per cent of participants had changed their identities at least once since the initial interview, and 36 per cent had changed their identity more than once. The study found little evidence to support the model of bisexuality as a transitional stage in that those initially identifying as 'bisexual' or 'unlabelled' were more likely to switch between these labels than to settle for 'lesbian' or 'heterosexual' labels. The overall number of women adopting the labels 'bisexual' or 'unlabelled' remained relatively consistent (at 50–60 per cent) throughout the study, and after ten years 80 per cent of participants had adopted one of these labels at some point during the study. Therefore the shift was predominantly *towards* rather than away from these identities, running contrary to the model of 'bisexuality' as a transitional identity.

The study did, however, provide clear evidence for bisexuality as a distinct orientation and as a capacity for fluidity. 'Bisexual' and 'unlabelled' women reported consistently lower percentages of same-sex attractions than did 'lesbian' women, and largely the same pattern of same-sex and other-sex attractions as they had reported at the outset. Furthermore, those who changed to a 'lesbian' identity did not show significant increases in their same-sex attractions over time, and those who switched to a 'heterosexual' identity did not show significant decreases. Although the balance of same-sex to other-sex attractions/behaviours may vary as a function of interpersonal and situational factors, the findings suggest that bisexuality may be interpreted as a (relatively) stable attraction to both sexes.

Changes in attractions and behaviour over time were observed in both 'lesbian' and 'bisexual/unlabelled' women, which supports the notion of sexual fluidity. By the end of the study, 60 per cent of 'lesbians' had had sexual contact, and 30 per cent romantic involvement, with a man, and this explains why transitions to 'bisexual/unlabelled' identities were more common than transitions away from them. Overall, women's identity changes reflected their own shifting experiences and provided a way of resolving the contradictions between a lesbian identity and their other-sex attractions/behaviour. These 'post-coming-out' identity changes challenge the taken-for-granted assumption that sexuality questioning is resolved as soon as an individual initially identifies with a category. Rather, sexuality and gender identity would appear to be much more susceptible to re-evaluation than is suggested by essentialist models of sexuality and gender identity development, which posit that people have fixed sexual identities that are consistent throughout their lives.

### Disclosure to family and friends

For LGBTQ young people, the disclosure to family and friends of a non-heterosexual or trans identity is often experienced as an important developmental milestone. Disclosure typically signifies exiting conventional heterosexual and gendered social expectations and making a commitment to a LGBTQ identity.

This process can be experienced as very stressful for the individual as well as for their family and friends, but to date it has not received much research attention. Where it has been investigated, studies overwhelmingly focus on negative parental responses and consequently little is known about young people who have (relatively) positive experiences of coming out (Gorman-Murray, 2008).

Research in the US suggests that young people today are more likely to disclose their LGBTQ identity than were young people in previous generations (Savin-Williams, 2005). While this may in part be due to an (arguably) more 'gay affirmative' societal climate, young people today also receive much greater exposure to issues of sexuality (including LGB sexualities) than in the past. It is therefore more common for young LGB people to disclose their sexuality in secondary/high school, around the age of 16 (Clarke and Broughton, 2005; Maguen *et al.*, 2002).

Disclosure of a trans identity to family and friends has not (to date) been a subject of research. However, because trans can be more stigmatised in society, disclosing a trans identity is potentially more difficult for a young person than disclosing an LGB identity. For instance, in US sociologists Gagné and colleagues' (1997) study, the sixty-five MTF trans participants reported disclosing their identity to their parent(s) out of a sense of obligation and most experienced difficulty in doing this.

With regard to disclosure itself, the research is remarkably consistent in highlighting that young people typically discuss their same-sex inclinations with their peers prior to disclosure to parents. In Savin-Williams and Ream's US (2003) study, of those who had told both parents in heterosexual-headed families, 54 per cent had indicated that they told their mother first, while 35 per cent told their mother and father simultaneously. Although there is the potential for a range of responses from parents, few participants in this study felt that the quality of their relationship with their parents had changed as a result of their disclosure. However, this study and others which explore parental responses to coming out have tended to draw on very limited samples. It might therefore be the case that there is more variation in coming out experiences than has been captured in research to date. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that the disclosure of an LGBTQ identity has for some young people resulted in physical abuse or being thrown out of home.

Parental and sibling responses to coming out can all have a significant bearing on the young person's subjectivity as an LGBTQ person. For example, in Andrew Gorman-Murray's (2008) analysis of Australian coming out stories, affirmative parental and sibling responses facilitated the coming out of LGB young people and changed their perceptions of the family home as a wholly heteronormative environment. However, the ability of families to respond positively to a family member's coming out depends heavily on characteristics of the family itself. Using family stress theory as a framework, US psychologist Brian Willoughby and colleagues (2008) reviewed empirical evidence on parental reactions to disclosure of sexuality. Their review identified three main factors on which

responses to coming out as LGB were contingent: family-based resources to manage the disclosure (e.g., positive relationships among family members; strong problem-solving abilities), pre-existing beliefs and attitudes about same-sex attraction and practices, and other family pressures at the time of disclosure.

In a study of parents of trans adolescents, British clinical psychologist Bernadette Wren (2002) found that parents often had an inkling of their child's gender identity issues prior to disclosure. Consequently, within the family, gender identity issues were handled with enormous care. While some of the parents Wren interviewed did not receive the news positively (seeing it as a sign of immaturity or an indicator of other difficulties), many were accepting of their child's atypical gender identity. However, even those who were accepting went to great lengths to justify their acceptance to Wren in the interviews on grounds of biological causation (their child was born with a gender problem), unconditional love (that a parent should love their child no matter what) and continuity (that their child was the same person that they knew and loved prior to disclosure).

In choosing to come out or not, LGBTQ young people have to consider who to come out to and how to come out, as well as weighing up the perceived costs and benefits of doing so. Studies of the disclosure of an LGB (e.g., Hillier, 2002; Lasser and Tharinger, 2003) or trans (e.g., Gagné *et al.*, 1997) identity consistently show that LGBTQ people are acutely aware of the potential stigma associated with non-heterosexuality and trans and the potential consequences (good or bad) that their disclosure might bring for themselves and for their parents. In these studies, young people reported assessing their environment (home, classroom, peer group) by gathering information about attitudes and actions towards LGBTQ people in order to determine to whom it might be 'safe' to come out, and whether disclosure to that person might result in an 'unsafe' person finding out. However, in some cases the decision to tell or not was taken out of their hands. For example, in Hillier's (2002) study some respondents reported their coming out being pre-empted by parents who either asked directly if they were 'gay' or unwittingly encountered evidence of their child's non-heterosexuality (e.g., finding love letters; finding them in bed with a same-sex lover). Likewise, some teenagers with GID actively live as the sex they consider themselves to be (rather than their natal sex) yet choose not to disclose (Holman and Goldberg, 2007), running the risk that their trans status will be discovered by others (e.g., in the changing rooms at school).

Despite the lack of research on the social and psychological benefits of disclosure to family and friends, it is commonly assumed that affirming one's identity as LGBTQ is a positive step. However, explicitly coming out to family and friends is not always viable or even safe. For example, the initial findings of the Safra Project ([www.safraproject.org](http://www.safraproject.org)) show that for many Muslim LBT women coming out (or being 'outed') may result in negative reactions from family and friends (e.g., complete rejection; intensified pressure to get married; domestic violence). Similarly, for those who are financially and emotionally dependent on their families, the loss of support systems through coming out may affect matters



such as housing, education and employment. Therefore, the gains of coming out do not always outweigh the potential losses or risks. For many members of marginalised racial and cultural groups, maintaining a close relationship with family and the family's respect in the community is valued very highly. Consequently, LGBTQ young people within these communities have to manage carefully the cultural values and expectations of their family and wider community in relation to their identity as LGBTQ. For this reason, many LGBTQ young people from racially and culturally marginalised groups maintain impermeable boundaries which segregate their LGBTQ life from other aspects of their life.

One of the problems of research on disclosure to family and friends is that it focuses solely on initial disclosure, ignoring the way in which for LGBTQ people disclosure is an ongoing phenomenon rather than a one-off event (e.g., see Kitzinger, 2000b). Moreover, while LGBTQ people may choose to come out in some instances they may also choose not to in others. For the most part, coming out in these mundane situations has been overlooked in psychological research. However, as Victoria Land and Celia Kitzinger (2005) highlight, because disclosure of an LGBTQ identity disrupts commonly held assumptions about the social world, disclosure (particularly in institutional settings) is interactionally difficult. Considerable identity management work is therefore done by LGBTQ individuals when they correct (or pass up opportunities to correct) the assumption that they are heterosexual (see also Chapter 5).

### LGBTQ young people in school

Exploring one's sexuality, developing a sense of self and coming out (or not) are central to the sexuality and gender identity development of young people in adolescence. However, successfully negotiating this developmental task is unnecessarily complicated for many LGBTQ young people because the social contexts within which they find themselves (i.e., home, school) provide inadequate social support in relation to their sexuality and/or gender identity development.

Research in the UK (Hunt and Jensen, 2006; Ryan and Rivers, 2003), the USA (Ryan and Rivers, 2003), Australia (Hillier *et al.*, 2005) and New Zealand (Nairn and Smith, 2003) consistently reports that schools are particularly problematic places for LGBTQ young people. In particular, homophobic bullying by other students (and in some cases teachers) means that many LGBTQ young people spend a significant proportion of their day in an environment which is detrimental to their learning as well as to their health and well-being. A British survey of 1,145 LGBTQ young people (Hunt and Jensen, 2006) found that 65 per cent of respondents had experienced homophobic bullying in school. Almost all respondents had heard words and phrases such as 'dyke', 'poof' and 'you're so gay' used in a derogatory way, and of those who had been bullied, 92 per cent had experienced verbal homophobia, 41 per cent had been physically bullied and



17 per cent had received death threats. LGBTQ young people also frequently report being ostracised or excluded by peers. These incidences contribute to the creation of a hostile climate which leads to the alienation of LGBTQ young people (see Box 7.5).

### Box 7.5 Key researcher: Ian Rivers on why I study homophobic bullying

In 1987, a study was published in the *Journal of Personality* that purported to show that young men who were victims of bullying at school experience difficulties in forming lasting intimate relationships in adulthood. As I intended to do my honours dissertation on the very same topic not only was this study of great interest to me but, as I read on, I was intrigued by the sampling frame used by the author. Like many other studies, the author surveyed American college undergraduates. However, in his analysis and write-up he only included those students who identified as heterosexual, setting aside those (some 13 per cent) who had identified otherwise. I conducted various literature searches to see if a follow-up study had been conducted with this small group to determine whether or not they exhibited similar findings and I was surprised to find that, despite a clear gap in our knowledge, no such follow-up had been conducted. My research agenda was set.

When I took up my first post as a lecturer in 1993, I was lucky enough to have a Dean of Faculty who gave me a small budget to conduct an exploratory study. Her reasoning for giving me this money was simple: 'I suppose they (lesbians and gay men) get bullied too.' From a budget of £500 grew the first study of homophobic bullying and its long-term correlates (Rivers, 2001). Over a period of three years I collected data from 190 former victims of bullying who recounted their experiences at school, providing me with evidence of the long-term and systematic abuse they experienced. Participants were then asked to complete further questionnaires that focused on long-term correlates (depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, relationship satisfaction, suicide ideation and bullying in the workplace). Finally, I conducted a series of interviews.

A decade later and this study has yet to be matched. There are larger and more comprehensive prospective and retrospective surveys of homophobic bullying, but none it seems captures the sadness, anger, frustration and torment that pervade this first study. I continue to study homophobic bullying because I have watched how my own research (e.g., Rivers, 2000; 2001) has been used by policy makers to move the UK from a position of ignorance to one of complacency. Does ticking a box in a school inspection really mean that schools are now safe? I continue with my work because I see policies drawn up which fail to understand the subtleties of my own and other studies. Do victims of homophobic bullying really fail to achieve academically at school? I never said so. Finally, I continue with this work because I am constantly in search of a better way to measure homophobic bullying and to assess its long-term effects.

Although there is widespread incidence of homophobic bullying in schools, it is reported that little if anything is done to address the issue. In the UK, fewer than 6 per cent of schools have a bullying policy that specifically addresses homophobic bullying, despite a government directive (DfEE Circular 10/99) which notes that head teachers have a legal responsibility to 'prevent all forms of bullying – including that related to sexual orientation' (Warwick *et al.*, 2001: 133). Similarly, despite significant investment in programmes aimed at promoting acceptance of gender and sexuality diversity and the reduction of homophobia in Australian schools, there is little evidence that these interventions have had any impact (Hillier *et al.*, 2005). Since teachers fail actively to promote sexual and gender diversity, infrequently address homophobic bullying when it occurs, and in some cases perpetrate prejudice themselves, it is hardly surprising that homophobic bullying in schools is under-reported and that LGBTQ young people do not feel supported.

This is compounded by the lack of engagement with LGBTQ issues and concerns in curriculum content. In the UK, fewer than 30 per cent of LGBTQ young people have ever been taught about lesbian and gay people or issues in class (Hunt and Jensen, 2006), while in Australia it is reported to be fewer than 20 per cent (Hillier *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, in directly relevant subject areas such as Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) in the UK and Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) in Australia, LGBTQ issues and concerns are seldom discussed. Similarly, while information and advice about **different-sex relationships** and safer heterosex are freely available, information about same-sex relationships and safer same-sex sexual practices are non-existent.

Although LGBTQ people may be bullied for reasons other than their sexuality/gender identity, the problem of specifically homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying should not be underestimated. The targets of the bullying may not necessarily be LGBTQ, because one of the purposes of homophobic bullying is reinforcing gender conformity and the construction of heterosexuality as the norm (Sharpe, 2002). For example, girls whose appearance or behaviour is not stereotypically feminine ('butch girls') and boys whose appearance or behaviour is not stereotypically masculine ('effeminate boys') may also be subject to homophobic bullying. While its effects are often felt more acutely by LGBTQ young people, it creates a climate of prejudice which is experienced by all young people regardless of sexuality or gender identity. Although much homophobic bullying centres on name calling – i.e., using terms such as 'poof' and 'lezzie' as put-downs – some forms of bullying are much more serious. Such incidences include physical violence (being hit, punched or kicked); sexual assault; and theft of, or damage to, property.

As a result of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying many LGBTQ young people develop strategies to avert victimisation. There is significant evidence to suggest that some resort to absenteeism to avoid being bullied (see Carragher and Rivers, 2002; Rivers, 2000) and many engage in 'visibility management'. US psychologists Jon Lasser and Deborah Tharinger (2003) define visibility management as the ongoing process by which LGBTQ adolescents

make careful, planned decisions about whether they will disclose their sexuality and gender identity, and to whom, and how they will monitor their self-presentation to avoid being identified. This may include modifying one's dress, speech and body language or dating individuals of a different sex, to ensure that they conform to gender stereotypes and can 'pass' as heterosexual. (Interestingly, recent research indicates that dress and appearance are important factors in the formation of LGB identities for young people, see Clarke and Turner, 2007.)

However, one of the biggest challenges facing LGBTQ young people in the school setting is a lack of support from teachers. In some cases, there is evidence of teachers actively and passively supporting negative attitudes and even participating in acts of physical, verbal and emotional aggression (Rivers, 2000). In addition, LGBTQ young people frequently encounter teachers who are confused about, unable or unwilling to address their needs. Although in the UK this may in part be due to the legacy of Section 28, a Canadian interview study (Mishna *et al.*, 2008) of people who work with LGB young people (e.g., teachers, counsellors, social workers) indicated that the main reasons for not addressing homophobic bullying were a denial that LGB young people exist, not viewing homophobic bullying as a serious problem, and a fear of being victimised themselves.

A recent survey of LGBQ young people in UK schools (Hunt and Jensen, 2006) suggests that in schools which affirm that homophobic bullying is wrong, where teachers respond to homophobic incidents, and where pupils are taught positively about lesbian and gay issues, LGBQ young people are significantly less likely to have been bullied, and more likely to feel safe and happy in school. Although not included within the sample, it would seem likely that this would apply to young trans people as well. In the absence of school-based support, community-based LGBTQ youth groups have sought to promote emotional well-being and provide a space in which young people can safely meet and come to understand themselves and their sexuality/gender identity (Crowley *et al.*, 2007; Warwick *et al.*, 2001). However, in the main these initiatives are located in a few large cities, and therefore are not readily accessible to the majority of LGBTQ young people.

The psychosocial effects of homophobic bullying and lack of social support for LGBTQ young people are cause for concern. For example, Canadian psychotherapist Faye Mishna and colleagues (2008) indicated that homophobic bullying typically resulted in both psychological effects (e.g., low self-esteem, anxiety and depression) and social effects (e.g., being 'silenced', feeling alienated from peers). LGBTQ young people appear to be significantly more at risk of suicidality and are over-represented in statistics for alcohol and substance abuse, absenteeism (truancy) and dropping out of school (Rivers, 2000). Despite the limitations of work in this area (e.g., small samples in localised settings) it can confidently be concluded that there *are* negative outcomes of homophobic, transphobic and biphobic bullying and a school climate that is unsupportive of LGBTQ issues/concerns. However, there is limited information about the extent to which LGBTQ young people are 'at risk' and which LGBTQ young people are particularly vulnerable.

## Exploring identity and finding a community

As we have highlighted, opportunities at school and at home to discuss LGBTQ issues can be extremely limited. There are also few safe social spaces in which to explore sexuality and gender identity. For example, although there are – in larger towns/cities, at least – ‘gay’ nightclubs, these can be highly sexualised (and noisy!) environments. They are therefore far from ideal social contexts for the development of emotional and social aspects of sexuality and gender identity; and provide little opportunity to establish social and support networks and to seek information. For these reasons it is common for LGBTQ young people to seek alternative sources of support and friendship.

Historically, as we noted above, the main way in which young people have met other LGBTQ young people has been through community-based LGBTQ groups (e.g., coming out groups; LGBTQ youth groups). Such groups have served an important function in supporting young people through the coming out process, being a source of information, and providing a point of contact for connecting with the wider LGBTQ community. Although these groups continue to thrive in some places, they are often unfunded and staffed by volunteers, so may not be readily available or even accessible to many LGBTQ young people. As well as typically being located in large urban areas, in-person attendance requires a certain level of independence and outness; and, in most cases, to have reached a minimum age such as 14 or 16.

For many LGBTQ young people, the advent of the Internet has revolutionised the ability to explore sexuality and gender identity, seek information and support, and connect with other LGBTQ people. Research in the USA and Australia (e.g., Hillier and Harrison, 2007; Thomas *et al.*, 2007) has explored the role of the Internet in the identity development and coming out of LGB young people (see also Chapter 8). One of the main advantages offered by the Internet is the ability to seek out information and connect with others while maintaining anonymity. This is particularly important for young people who are still exploring their sexuality as well as for those who don’t feel safe to come out in their immediate social and familial environment. The Internet provides a space in which young people can feel more confident to be themselves, and where they can explore what it is like to be LGBT through practising disclosure, building online friendships, and even engaging in cybersex without risking their anonymity. It also provides an important function as a repository of information about LGBTQ issues such as coming out and safer sex – information which is largely non-existent elsewhere.

In particular, chat rooms have been found to provide an effective social tool for overcoming emotional (e.g., shyness; fear) and social (e.g., geographical location; living with parents) barriers. In this respect, chat rooms appear to provide a central role in the coming out process by aiding self-discovery, reducing anxiety about LGBTQ life, receiving social support, entering LGBT communities, and searching for potential partners. In many cases, young people have reported using such

forums as a way to develop new social circles which subsequently developed into offline friendships and relationships.

Trans people are particularly vulnerable to isolation and social exclusion. For young trans people, the Internet offers additional potential in that it does not involve face-to-face contact, so there is the opportunity to interact with people without the complication of physical cues. This is illustrated in the following excerpt where Billy (FTM trans) describes his experiences of using the Internet to connect with other trans people:

I can be myself. I can think before I type so I don't screw things up as I find it hard to talk to others. I can communicate with people around the world who are in a similar situation to me. I can communicate as myself, a boy and learn of other people's experiences. The fact that I am (ugh) biologically female is no matter (neither). My face nor voice is projected so the only thing they get is what is on my mind. (quoted in Hillier *et al.*, 2001: 56)

It would seem then, that the very aspects of internet chat rooms that are often viewed by parents and teachers as problematic because of the potential for vulnerable young people to be exploited are those which provide a liberating opportunity, especially for trans people. Furthermore, as Australian social scientists Lynne Hillier and Lyn Harrison (2007) highlight, LGBTQ young people demonstrate a great deal of agency in choosing how far to take friendships and relationships established online. This of course does not mean that LGBTQ young people are not at risk of becoming victims of predatory adults (sexual or otherwise), but because they are already exposed to identity-related risks in the physical social world they appear to have a more acute awareness of the potential risks of the virtual world. However, issues such as these have not been well researched, so it is difficult to establish the extent to which there is a match between actual and perceived risk in both physical and virtual contexts.

Although the Internet is widely used by young people, it is important to remember that access will vary considerably. For example, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) only an estimated 57 per cent of households in the UK have access to the Internet, which means that a sizeable minority of young people (including LGBTQ young people) will not easily be able to access Internet-based communities and information. Furthermore, even for those who do have access at home, in most instances this is via a PC shared with other family members, which may considerably limit the extent to which they feel able to access LGBTQ specific information.

## Gaps and absences

- There is very limited information about the experiences of trans young people in identifying as trans and coming out to others.
- Psychologists have paid little attention to the way in which sexuality and gender intersect with other factors (e.g., race, culture, religion, ability, socio-economic

status and social class) and the impact of these other factors on the process of identity development and disclosure.

- Virtually nothing is known about the experiences of LGBTQ young people who have left education (either working or unemployed) and the issues specific to that particular group.
- Most research on coming out as non-heterosexual has focused on younger people; less is known about coming out later in life (but see Chapter 10).

### Main chapter points

This chapter:

- Outlined some classic models of LGBTQ identity development and critiqued the stage model approach to coming out.
- Discussed sexual fluidity as it applies to young people and more generally across the lifespan.
- Overviewed the experiences of LGBTQ young people in disclosing their sexuality/gender identity to family and friends.
- Explored the school experiences of LGBTQ young people with particular reference to homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying.
- Reviewed the ways in which LGBTQ young people explore their identity and find community.

### Questions for discussion and classroom exercises

1. Are the experiences of LGBTQ young people inevitably negative? What evidence is there to suggest that LGBTQ young people have positive experiences of being/becoming LGBTQ?
2. When did you first recognise that you were heterosexual/lesbian/gay/bisexual/trans/queer? How did you know? What explanation (if any) do you have for your sexuality and gender identity?
3. Could you ever envisage your sexuality and gender identity changing at some point in your life? What leads you to draw the conclusion that you do? What theoretical assumptions about gender/sexuality are your conclusions based on?
4. Imagine you have been asked to design an anti-homophobic, -biphobic and -transphobic bullying campaign for your local schools. What information would it include? How would you raise awareness of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in schools? What measures would you introduce to combat such bullying?



5. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of theorising LGBTQ identity development in terms of a series of stages? Try devising your own model for one or all of these identity categories. How would it improve on existing models?

### Further reading

Gagné, P., Tewksbury, R. and McGaughey, D. (1997) Coming out and crossing over: identity formation and proclamation in a transgender community. *Gender and Society*, 11(4), 478–508.

Drawing on data from interviews with sixty-five MTF trans people, this paper examines the coming-out experiences of transgendered individuals, and the extent to which trans identities provide challenges to the binary system of sex/gender.

Griffin, C. (2000) Absences that matter: constructions of sexuality in studies of young women's friendships. *Feminism and Psychology*, 10(2), 227–45.

This article reviews research on young women's friendship groups in western societies, arguing that much of this work has relatively little to say about the sexual and erotic dimension of such relationships and the construction of young women's sexualities. It also explores the way in which research on young women's lives often overlooks the possibility of same-sex female desire, and also lesbian (or bisexual) existence, thereby assuming that young women are always already heterosexual.

Maguen, S., Floyd, F. J., Bakeman, R. and Armistead, L. (2002) Developmental milestones and disclosure of sexual orientation among gay, lesbian and bisexual youths. *Applied Developmental Psychology*, 23, 219–33.

This research paper presents findings from a US questionnaire study of coming out, disclosure and self-esteem for LGB young people. The findings suggest diverse individual trajectories of coming-out experiences and highlight the need for greater attention to individual differences in sexual identity development.

Rivers, I. (2002) Developmental issues for lesbian and gay youth. In A. Coyle and C. Kitzinger (eds.), *Lesbian and gay psychology: new perspectives* (pp. 30–44). Oxford: BPS Blackwell.

This chapter offers a good overview of the issues encountered by lesbian and gay youth in coming to identify as lesbian/gay and in negotiating the social aspects of living as a lesbian/gay adolescent.

Savin-Williams, R.C. (2001) A critique of research on sexual-minority youths. *Journal of Adolescence*, 24(1), 5–13.

This paper reviews psychological research on LGB young people and offers a critique of this body of work.