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Developmental Landscapes: Milestones in the Development of Sexual Orientation of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Adolescents in Israel

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Introduction

Studies show that lesbian, gay, and bisexual people have difficulties with their sexual orientation and family and friends, mainly due to lack of social and family acceptance of their non heterosexual orientation [1]. One of the topics that preoccupy the world of research in this context is the process of developing one's sexual orientation, and researchers have attempted to formulate models for the development of sexual orientation that is not heterosexual [2–6]. Developmental theory models around sexual orientation have been particularly useful for work in education in Israel by the education activism organisation 'Hoshen' (meaning 'Education and Change'), which promotes LGBT youth acceptance operating in the sensitive cultural and religious G&S context of Israel. This book chapter—originally

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written in Hebrew and adapted with the aid of translators and editors¹—reports on a survey of 617 gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults, young adults and adolescents in Israel. It considers how developmental sexual orientation models apply to lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people in Israel; and intervention methods suitable for working with young gays, lesbians and bisexuals in light of the study's findings.

Developmental Models for Sexual Orientation

Developmental theorists have attempted to identify a number of stages from the point at which a person feels heterosexual to understand sexual orientation as an integral part of one's life. The developmental theories represented in the works of researchers such as Piaget [7] and Erikson [8], assume that human development is driven by an internal need to advance towards a personal perfection that includes self-awareness and interaction with those around one; and that the surrounding society tends to encourage and support this interaction [9]. Like Erikson did for development broadly (1968), some researchers theorising sexual orientation began to present 'step/stage models' for the development of sexual orientation in which there are several stages, with each conflict in a personal identity having a solution which leads to the next stage in the model [2–6]. Despite the recognition that models of stages of sexual orientation generally describe experiences of most gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals in part [10], this approach to understanding the development of sexual orientation simplifies the range of experiences related to the development of sexual orientation [11]. Critics of the step approach to development of sexual orientation note that there are many cases in which lesbian, gay, and bisexual people do not develop their sexual orientation in a linear way as these models suggest, and a person can go back to previous stages and be in several stages at the same time. In addition, these models ignore individual differences, such as age, race, cultural environment, and location, which can influence development of sexual orientation [12].

Another critique of the step model approach to the development of sexual orientation suggests that in the existence of linear stages the individual

is obliged to reach a final point where sexual orientation is integrated with the other components of personal identity, and that this model represents one way in which a person can feel at peace with his sexual orientation. The stages model approach does not therefore relate to the experiences that are shown in the research and life experience of gays, lesbians and bisexuals in which a person does not feel at peace with oneself even when one is in the early stages of the model [10, 13, 14].

In addition, it was argued that the approach to formulating sexual orientation in stages does not allow for the formation of bisexual sexual orientation [15]. According to the stereotypical assumption, bisexuality is a stage in the process of acceptance of homosexual or lesbian sexual orientation and reflects stages of confusion in the acceptance of gay sexuality [3]. Researchers in the field of sexual orientation who have studied bisexuality recommend that models be used to formulate sexual orientation that does not define steps or stages; but rather focus on the 'tasks' of sexual orientation, recognising the existence of bisexual self-identity. These researchers found that bisexuals were no different from gay and lesbian people in the timing of achieving such milestones in the formulation of their sexual orientation [15].

In recent years, researchers have begun to examine significant milestones in the development of sexual orientation, such as initial recognition of same-sex attraction, same-sex sex, exposure of sexual orientation to others, and exposure of sexual orientation to parents [1]. The researchers attempted to examine the ages at which these milestones appear among young adults and the environmental and social effects of their timing [16, 17]. First sex with the same-sex attracted group takes place at age 16 on average [14, 17, 18]. The youth reveal their sexual orientation to friends after the age of 17 on average, and to one parent at the age of 18 on average [17, 19, 20]. Studies show that there are various tracks in which sexual orientation is formed among young people [19]. These tracks, which differed at the age at which the sexual orientation of the youth developed, were dependent on the young peoples' demographic data (including degree of religiosity, gender, ethnic group), experiences and sociocultural attitudes (such as their participation in LGBT groups, and their personal attitudes towards homosexuality generally and their own homosexuality).

Savin-Williams and Diamond [19] found that girls undergo a different developmental path to boys. Girls first experience feelings towards their own sex and then experience sex with their other girls, whereas in boys the sexual experience with other boys precedes the development of feelings towards their own sex. Some researchers have attempted to examine the development of lesbian sexual orientation in studies based primarily on qualitative research methods [11, 21]. These studies highlighted the different timing of milestones in the development of women versus men, but stressed that lesbian women also go through the same developmental milestones related to sexual orientation as gay men. In addition, recent studies, both in the world and in Israel, have highlighted the intergenerational differences associated with age of exit. In a study conducted in Israel at the end of the 1990s [22], the average age for dating gay men to friends and family was 25, whereas in recent studies, age out of the closet for girls and boys to 16 [23].

Most of the studies described above were conducted in the United States. Since sexual orientation is a process in which social and cultural influences are also evident [1], the examination of the milestones in different societies and in different countries is important. A study had not yet been conducted in Israel that examined the developmental milestones related to sexual orientation. The study reported on in this chapter was intended to bridge this gap.

Research Method

Due to the difficulty in carrying out a probabilistic sampling in Meyer and Wilson [24], a convenience sample was used, and the data were collected using an online questionnaire that was distributed via e-mail to the Hoshen organisation's distribution list and through a range of Facebook social networking pages. The data were collected in June 2009. The study questionnaire included a list of milestones in the stages of sexual orientation [14, 25], and respondents were asked to indicate at what age each milestone occurred (see details in the findings on age, gender, sexual orientation). The final sample included 617 respondents, 51% of whom were women. 43% of the respondents stated that they were homosexual,

41% stated they were lesbian and the rest indicated that they were bisexual men or women. Respondents' age ranged from 14 to 69yrs (average = 27.4yrs; standard deviation = 8.2). Heath [26] offers to focus on young people in their 20s, she adds that very few studies have been conducted to examine the effect of human being on the life experience and expectations of his life in his twenties Bell [27] also offers the 20s as significant years for research. The respondents were divided into three age groups, with the focus being on the group of young people in their 20s. The following is a breakdown of the respondents in each age group:

- youth—up to age 20yrs (19% of the respondents),
- young people—in the age range of 21–30yrs (56%),
- adults—over the age of 31yrs (25%).

Because of the small number of participants who defined themselves as bisexual (32 Men, 64 women), we will refer here to findings related to gays and lesbians only.

Findings and Discussion

This section of the chapter presents descriptive statistics of the findings of the study, which will include a discussion of the findings. Table 4.1 presents the average ages reported for each of the milestones tested for gay men and lesbian women, divided by age groups.

The findings indicate that, similar to related studies conducted in the United States, the data from Israel shows the process of forming the sexual orientation is reduced by age: the youth groups reported that they passed the various milestones between the ages of 10 and 16 on average, while the adult groups reported much of the process throughout their 20s. The findings indicate that the beginning of the sexual orientation process, which begins with a feeling of difference that has not yet crystallised into clear self-definition, takes place at an early age between the ages of 10 and 14, as reported by all age groups. The significant differences in the age averages between the various groups are expressed mainly in the self-definition and behavioural expression of the sexual orientation: the age

Table 4.1 Average age of onset of sexual orientation milestones for gays and lesbians, by age

The Milestone	Sexual orientation and age					
	Gay males			Lesbians		
	Boys (up to 20) N = 54	Youth (21–30) N = 160	Graduates (over 30) N = 55	Girls (up to 20) N = 30	Youth (21–30) N = 139	Graduates (over 30) N = 80
I feel different	10.7	10.8	10.1	11.5	12.2	14.4
I am attracted to people of my sex	11.8	12.4	12.2	12.6	14.3	18.4
I know LGBT people	12.7	14.6	15.4	12.0	14.9	17.7
Maybe I'm LGBT	12.9	14.6	15.7	13.5	16.8	21.6
I'm sure I'm LGBT	14.5	17.0	19.4	15.0	19.8	25.7
I fall in love with people of my sex	14.7	17.5	19.0	13.9	16.0	20.5
I have had an experience with a same-sex sexual partner	14.8	16.8	17.6	15.2	18.7	23.9

(continued)

Table 4.1 (continued)

The Milestone	Sexual orientation and age					
	Gay males		Lesbians			
	Boys (up to 20) N = 54	Youth (21–30) N = 160	Graduates (over 30) N = 55	Girls (up to 20) N = 30	Youth (21–30) N = 139	Graduates (over 30) N = 80
I have had an experience with an opposite-sex sexual partner	15.3	16.4	18.0	14.0	16.5	17.6
I told someone I am LGBT	15.4	17.5	19.8	14.6	18.5	24.6
I have a LGBT friend	15.6	18.5	22.0	14.4	18.6	24.1
I told the family I am LGBT	16.0	20.1	23.0	15.9	20.8	27.5
I have had my first LGBT relationship	16.2	20.1	23.7	15.2	20.3	26.3
I told someone at work I am LGBT	17.4	20.6	24.8	15.9	21.7	28.4

at which sexual intercourse begins, the exit from the closet to the family, and the existence of same-sex couples. In these respects, it is possible to see gaps of about 10 years between the adult group and the youth group.

While the sense of difference and sexual attraction is related to physiological development in adolescence, the other milestones are related to socio-environmental aspects of social acceptance and visibility [1]. In other words, it seems likely that what initiates the process of sexual orientation is biological and related to the onset of arousal and sexual desire in adolescence, while the continuation of the process is related to environmental-social aspects. Another difference between the groups of young people and adults and the youth group concerns the timing of the milestones. While young people and adults reported having sex with their own sex before they were identified as gay or lesbian, the youth group reported that they first defined themselves in terms of sexual orientation and only afterwards had sex with their own kind. In the past, in the absence of social and cultural visibility, the certainty of sexual orientation was linked to the existence of a sexual act that would strengthen the inner feeling. Today, adolescents understand the significance of sexual orientation that is not only related to the sexual act, but as also a component of personal identity [1].

Among lesbian women (in all ages) the gaps between the average ages of sexual experience with men, sexual experience with women, and the certainty that they are lesbians—larger than those among gay men. It appears that the emotional dimension associated with recognising sexual orientation is more significant for women, whereas for men the sexual aspect of sexual intercourse is a sign of certainty regarding homosexual sexual orientation. Moreover, higher percentages of lesbians reported having sex with men, compared to the percentage of gay men who reported having sex with women. This may be related to social processes and social norms, in which women feel social pressure to have sex with men, especially in adolescence. Table 4.2 describes the percentage of respondents on each milestone.

It can be seen that almost all respondents, regardless of age groups, reported a feeling of difference, attraction to their sex, and confidence in their sexual identity. The gaps between age groups are evident in sexual experience, same-sex relationships, and being ‘out of the closet’ to the

Table 4.2 The percentage of respondents for each of the sexual orientation milestones

The Milestone	Sexual orientation and age					
	Gay males			Lesbians		
	Boys (up to 20) N = 54 (%)	Youth (21–30) N = 160 (%)	Graduates (Over 30) N = 55 (%)	Girls (up to 20) N = 54 (%)	Youth (21–30) N = 160 (%)	Graduates (over 30) N = 80 (%)
I feel different	96	85	89	87	82	81
I am attracted to people of my sex	96	95	95	90	96	95
I'm sure I'm LGBT	96	96	100	83	99	95
I fall in love with people of my sex	91	97	95	90	98	100
I told someone I am LGBT	89	99	98	90	100	100
Maybe I'm LGBT	80	95	91	87	94	96
I know LGBT people	80	78	78	77	72	76

(continued)

Table 4.2 (continued)

The Milestone	Sexual orientation and age					
	Gay males			Lesbians		
	Boys (up to 20) N = 54 (%)	Youth (21–30) N = 160 (%)	Graduates (Over 30) N = 55 (%)	Girls (up to 20) N = 54 (%)	Youth (21–30) N = 160 (%)	Graduates (over 30) N = 80 (%)
I have a LGBT friend	80	95	95	93	94	89
I have had an experience with a same sex sexual partner	70	96	100	80	99	99
I have had my first LGBT relationship	57	88	93	77	97	98
I told the family I am LGBT	54	88	94	56	88	91
I have had an experience with an opposite sex sexual partner	44	63	75	50	85	90
I told someone at work I am LGBT	31	83	91	30	93	81

family and work. Young adults, like adults, are less closeted, more likely to be in relationships, and have more sex with their peers, compared with the youth group. These findings correspond to 'normative' developmental milestone, since sex and marital relationships occur more often after puberty. However, it is important to note that although the average age to disclose one's identity to family members is higher among young people and adults, most of them told their families (about 90%). This is in contrast to the youth, about half of whom have yet to tell their family about their sexual orientation. This puts the youth at a high risk and in a complex emotional state. The findings also show that in all age groups more lesbians experienced sex with men compared to gays who had sex with women. In addition, given the percentage of lesbian women of all ages who have sexual relations with men, it is important that sex education be given in relation to sexual relations with men for same-sex attracted women, to instruct young lesbians (and bisexual women) about risks in unprotected relationships and unwanted pregnancy.

The differences between the various age groups show that the group of young people (ages 20–30) undergo the individual stages of sexual orientation (recognising their sexual orientation and accepting it, as well as sexual experiences with their peers) during adolescence, while the stages of sexual orientation associated with getting out of the closet (disclosing identity to family, friends and work colleagues) is more likely to occur during adulthood. These findings are likely related to changes in Israeli society's attitudes towards sexual orientation, including changes in legislation and introduction of equal regulations relating to sexual orientation. Young people between the ages of 20 and 30 were born and raised at a time when LGBT visibility was low, and Israeli society still referred to non-normative sexual orientation as an illness. Only in 1988, the criminalising law banning male same-sex sexual activities was abolished; this may be why coping with coming out of the closet for this generation of young adults takes place between the ages of 20 and 30, as opposed to teenagers who deal with the implications of leaving the closet as early as adolescence.

Professionals working with young people may provide support for young people in this complex process of coming out, which includes coming out of the closet to the family and friends, getting out of the closet

as part of their work, dealing with finding and establishing a relationship with their kind. Fostering the young person's acceptance of their sexual orientation can aid the long-term mental health of young people and adolescents [23]. Therefore, professionals should recognise the unique aspects of LGB sexual orientation and help young people develop positive identities and attitudes towards their sexual orientation. In addition, in view of the findings on the existing relationship between social and family support and mental and physical health in Shilo and Mor [28], intervention programmes at the social and family level are important to help young people create a supportive social and family climate.

Conclusion

The milestones in formulating the sexual orientation or gender identity of young adults in Israel are characterised by emerging from the closet in their young adulthood and in the beginning of their relationships with their peers. Issues related to coming out to the family, and the implications of coming out of the closet on all aspects of adult life, as well as the ability to have meaningful relationships with their same-sex partners, are essential issues that professionals who work with young adults should focus on in their therapeutic work. In addition, social support for young adults is important, in the form of social frameworks that can provide the ability to become acquainted with each other.

The study reported on in this chapter has several limitations. It is a convenience sample, so it is more likely to include participants who are 'out', and does not include participants who are debating their sexual orientation or in the closet. In addition, adult participants reported retrospectively so this may have impacted their recall of the ages in which they experienced milestones in sexual orientation. Finally, the chapter discusses research which is essentially descriptive; we sought to examine the milestones in the formulation of sexual orientation as they are in Israel and while there appears to be overlap in some nations' reports on the topic (such as America) other countries may have other factors influencing transferability of findings (including different cultural beliefs around LGBT people, and different histories for these cultural beliefs). Con-

tinuing studies should examine other aspects of sexual orientation, such as feelings and emotions related to sexual orientation, social influences, sexual behaviours and more contextually specific cultural factors.

Note

1. Originally in order not to exclude any gender group, the Hebrew double suffix was used throughout the chapter, of which there is not a clear English equivalent—the unisex ‘one’ or ‘they’ are used sometimes in its place.

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