

LGBTQ+ Ally Identity Development in Religiously Affiliated Institutions

Jaelyn Millon

Abstract

The focus of this research is based on the existing LGBTQ+ Ally Identity Development Theory as it relates to existing theory regarding students at religiously affiliated institutions. Through examination of the currently existing literature regarding allies, religious, and spiritual development, the focus of this research stems from the role that ally development plays during this developmental process at religiously-based institutions. The research concludes that there are four stages to LGBTQ+ Ally Development Theory at Religiously Affiliated Institutions: Introduction of Oppression, Individual Reflection, Uprooting of Views, and Conjunction of Values. The implications of this theory help to provide context to the developmental stages of individuals undergoing this particular development as it relates to a student's institutional environment.

Keywords

LGBTQ+, ally development

Jaelyn Millon (she/her/hers) earned her Bachelor of Arts in Spanish with Chemistry and Biology minors at Hanover College. At Indiana University-Bloomington, Jaelyn earned her Master of Science in Education in Higher Education and Student Affairs with a certificate in College Pedagogy and served as

a Graduate Supervisor with Residential Programs and Services. Additionally, Jaelyn completed a practicum as the Bias Response Assistant and served as a Title IX Hearing Panelist.

Suggested citation:

Millon, J. (2021). LGBTQ+ ally identity development in religiously affiliated institutions. *Journal of the Student Personnel Association at Indiana University*, 89-97.

Purpose

Individuals undergo a plethora of student development during their time as college students. Student development theory is defined as an explanation of the processes that students undergo throughout their complex journey through postsecondary experiences in colleges or other higher educational institutions (Patton et al., 2016). These theories cover many different aspects of a student's life. Aspects that have an existing student development theory may range from theories explaining different identities that students hold all the way to their moral and psychosocial development. Chickering and Reisser (1993), for example, identify seven vectors of development that assess the growth that college students experience during this critical time. The common goal that many individuals in the Student Affairs profession aspire for is to find ways to best support our students so that we can help see them through graduation. In order to fulfill these aspirations, student affairs professionals use theory that results from observable phenomena.

It is important to note that new theories emerge when multiple existing theories are analyzed to intentionally focus on the gaps to find connections to articulate existing phenomena. Just as theories are used to explain a certain phenomenon, theories can also be used to help make predictions about a process. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on utilizing existing theories to build and create a new theory. Specifically, the new theory will examine how external forces, such as family and environment, and an institution's theologically centered academics affect a student's development as an LGBTQ+ ally during their undergraduate career.

Though higher education institutions are increasingly becoming more LGBTQ+ affirming through means such as gender-inclusive housing and having a greater investment of healthcare for their trans students, the number of these types of institutions are quite low. Additionally, students in this community still experience various levels of discrimination or hostile relationships with their peers (Nicolazzo, 2015). Students may experience very blatant or subtle forms of discrimination in their social experience in college. For example, Seelman (2016) established that transgender students will experience a larger amount of discrimination and hardships compared to their peers who are cisgender. Transgender students may be the target of microaggressions when these students are not given the opportunity to have accommodations for campus housing or bathrooms (Seelman, 2016). Students who identify as LGBTQ+ may also experience curricular hardships and discrimination based on institutional type. Catholic institutions, for example, often express the importance of Catholicism in the institution's mission (Love, 1998) which oftentimes excludes or harms individuals who are transgender or who have sexual orientations that are not heteronormative. Thus, members of the institution likely have traditional Catholic values in which "homosexuality" is abominable which creates an extremely hostile environment for students who identify in this community. Through examination of currently existing literature regarding allies within religious development, the focus will be on the role that ally development plays during this developmental process at religiously-based institutions.

Religiously affiliated institutions can be extremely toxic and emotionally draining environments for anyone who identifies in the LGBTQ+ community due to the internal conflict that these individuals who may have been raised in a religious environment may feel. Adams (2014) explains the toll that these environments may have on someone in this community:

"many of us [gay males] have rejected our inherent spiritual natures along with the religious traditions we felt forced to disavow in order to accept our sexual nature' (p. 6). The conflict between the two concepts (religion, faith, and spirituality and gay male identity) presented a problem for gay males on multiple levels including society's negative view of being gay, religious doctrine condemnation of gay males, and feeling of meaning" (p. 8).

When an institution's mission and values statement are grounded strongly in traditional Christian views, it becomes very difficult for anyone who identifies in this community to experience a sense of belonging at that institution. Adams (2014) also explains that undergraduate gay males perceived religiously affiliated campus environments "to be even less friendly" and they face an "oppressive, non-supportive, homophobic cultures in which they are made to feel invisible and isolated" (p. 8).

Wentz and Wessel (2013) explore further experiences that gay and lesbian students had during their collegiate experience at a religiously affiliated institution. From the study that they presented, students expressed a general dissatisfaction or disapproval of individuals who attended the university and identified as LGBTQ+. Wentz and Wessel (2013) found that “each student expressed that extremely negative perceptions of homosexuality were perpetuated within the general campus culture”.

Relevant Terms

There are many terms that are important to define in order to fully understand the various themes and ideas of the studies that have been proposed. Astin (2011) states that a limitation involved with assessing spirituality and religion is that there is not necessarily a distinction between spirituality and one’s theological views that an individual may have. Thus, this presents a challenge when analyzing this topic; though there are some similarities, there are quite a few differences between the two. Hill et al. (2000) explain that distinguishing the differences between spirituality and religion is imperative due to the “veritable flood of interest in spirituality . . . [which] has resulted in disagreements and perhaps even confusion about what is meant by such terms as religion and spirituality” (p. 52).

Religion can be defined as a “social institution in which a group of people participate rather than an individual search for meaning” (Steiger & Lipson, 1985, p. 212). Many individuals typically use the terms spirituality and religion interchangeably. An alternative definition of religion is a collective group of doctrines that originate from and are in honor of a being that is beyond anything of earth (Love & Talbot, 2009). Spirituality can be defined as believing in a being or force that is greater than oneself, exploring life’s purpose, and having a relationship with God (Dirkx et al., 2002). Spiritual development can also be defined very broadly as “. . . how students make meaning of their education and their lives, how they develop a sense of purpose, the value and belief dilemmas they experience, as well as the role of religion, the sacred, and the mystical in their lives” (Astin, 2011).

Another notable term for the purpose of this study is ally. An ally can be defined as “members of the dominant population who advocate for the oppressed, [who] offer a unique voice to any debate as their motives cannot be questioned by the dominant hierarchy as being self-interested or self-seeking” (Clark & O’Donnell, 1992). Lastly, religiously affiliated institutions are those that are classified as such under the Carnegie Classifications. These terms will be prominent throughout this paper, so one may refer to the definitions listed above in order to understand the context of the paper.

Theory and Literature Review

The primary focus of the new theory in question represents aspects of a combination of self-authorship, faith development, and ally development theory. The focus will be on these theories since collegiate institutions are called to creating this environment of academically stimulating their students. As a result of considering these theories, the new theory will address how colleges with a standardized set of expectations for religious development may not best support all students going through this developmental change when they begin to develop their own religious ideas and experience self-authorship and ally development.

Self-Authorship

The theory of self-authorship is defined by the capability of an individual to determine one’s social relations, beliefs, and identity (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Baxter Magolda discussed the three dimensions that students encounter through their path to self-authorship. The three dimensions are epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal which, respectively, explore how an individual knows what they know, how they understand who they are, and how they develop relationships with others. The four phases of self-authorship include following external formulas, crossroads, becoming one’s own author of oneself, and internal foundation. Baxter Magolda (2001) discusses the self-authorship

developmental theory as, “developmental tasks and challenges for young adults in their twenties, including values exploration, making sense of information gained about the world in previous years, determining the path one will take, and taking steps along that path” (Patton et. al, 2016). Baxter Magolda’s Self-Authorship theory at religiously affiliated institutions focuses on the interpersonal dimension.

Fowler’s Faith Development Theory

Fowler (1981) developed a theory that explains the six stages that individuals undergo as they mature in their faith. Stage 1, the intuitive-projective stage, explains the development that occurs when children are in preschool and tend to have trouble distinguishing between fantasy and reality. During this stage, children will tend to learn about the foundational and basic ideas about God from their guardians or society. The second stage, mythical-literal, is when school-aged children begin to understand how the world works a bit more logically and mostly accept the stories told to them about their faith. The synthetic-conventional stage comes next and typically occurs when an individual becomes a teenager. They have developed various social circles; however, individuals at this stage tend to have trouble seeing the world outside of their own perspective and do not realize that they are in a belief system. The next stage, individuated-reflective, is a difficult stage that occurs when individuals begin to recognize various other perspectives that exist outside of their own. The conjunctive faith stage is typically not reached before an individual’s mid portion of their life. They begin to realize that there are limits of logic and start to see life as a mystery. Lastly, the universalizing faith is a stage that very few people reach. These individuals will live their lives in complete service of others, carefree and without doubts. Faith Development at religiously affiliated institutions focuses on the individuated-reflective as it connects to a student beginning to learn about and understand perspectives outside of their own as they are developing into their faith.

Ally Identity Development

Though the theme of ally identity development is quite new and under-researched, understanding the development is crucial to moving forward with issues involving social justice in our society. Bishop (2002) explains the six steps that are involved with the model of becoming an ally. It begins with a process of truly understanding what oppression entails and how it is currently impacting individuals. The next step involves more of an individual learning process that occurs. The third step involves engaging with one’s consciousness in order to begin a process of healing. The fourth step introduces the idea of uprooting the societal norms in one’s own experiences. The fifth step allows for a deep understanding of the historical context of oppression and how it correlates with current context. The final step of ally identity development occurs throughout the course of an individual’s life (Bishop, 2002). Ally Development at religiously affiliated institutions focuses on the third step and a student’s journey of reclaiming their life as it connects to their healing process and uprooting of their personal values that allies navigate as they develop into allies.

Literature Integration: LGBTQ+ Ally Identity Development Theory

LGBTQ+ Ally Identity Development at religiously affiliated Institutions Theory is aimed towards cisgender, heterosexual individuals. This new theory will introduce the relevant intersections between the Theory of Self-Authorship, Fowler’s Faith Development Theory, and Ally Identity Development Theory. This new theory will also examine how the intersection of self-authorship with religion correlates in order to present a theory including four developmental stages as it relates to LGBTQ+ Ally Identity Development at religiously affiliated institutions. Stages were selected to represent this theory in order to smoothly and clearly present the various aspects of the theory.

Stage 1: Introduction of Oppression

As Bishop (2002) states in the first step of becoming an ally, one must first understand that the system of oppression exists and has an impact on people. Before students enter college, they rely on the values and teachings that they were exposed to through various external forces. These students may then enter a religiously affiliated institution. Fowler (1981) acknowledges that due to their external forces, these individuals have not seen the world from a perspective other than their own. During this first stage that introduces oppression, students begin to view the world from a different perspective while simultaneously relating it to their religious background and experiences and the general religious environment that they have just entered.

Stage 2: Individual Reflection

Once students have been introduced to the system of oppression, they begin to reflect internally in order to process the new information. Bishop later introduces the stage of ally development that allows for time to reflect so that personal healing can begin. Fowler's (1981) individuating-reflective stage occurs once students have been introduced to the new religious perspective. During the Individual Reflection stage, students who attend religiously affiliated institutions spend time processing the new understanding of the world that they have. The students manage the new emotions that may arise as they take time to reflect on their own perspective in light of new information from the first stage.

Stage 3: Uprooting of Views

Next begins the process of these college students uprooting the values that they gained from external forces. Bishop explains that the fifth step of Ally Identity Development is diving deep into understanding the historical context of oppression. When a student enters a religiously centered environment and has begun to internally reflect, they will undergo the Uprooting of Views stage. Understanding that this student is in a religiously affiliated institution, they will begin to put the new perspective into context so that they can uproot the previous perspective they held. Once an individual reaches this stage, they will have accepted, rather than denied, the privileges they have which will lead to a new sense of self for the individual.

Stage 4: Conjunction of Values

The final stage of LGBTQ+ Ally Identity Development at religiously affiliated institutions involves the beginning of a life-long journey. Bishop's final step of Ally Identity Development occurs when individuals begin their life-long path of having hope and fighting for justice. Fowler's (1981) fifth stage of Faith Development involves the acknowledgment that logic has limitations. Students who reach the Conjunction of Values stage simultaneously fight for LGBTQ+ justice in our society and dive deeper into their own religious identity and understanding of the world. At this point, students may choose to reject the idea of becoming an ally, particularly for the LGBTQ+ community in religiously affiliated institutions.

Conclusions and Implications for the Future

As presented above, the three theories have been combined in order to articulate the new theory. The objective of creating this theory is to examine the influence that attending a religiously affiliated institution has on students as they develop into allies and navigate their own religious and spiritual

development. The theory of self-authorship has been evaluated to show how religiously affiliated institutions may help to develop allies for the LGBTQ+ community.

There are various ways to collect data on this topic. For example, it would be beneficial to implement a survey to students. Though the survey would not disclose characteristics to specifically identify them, it would require students to disclose identities that they hold. A potential limitation to gathering this data would be that some students may not feel comfortable disclosing the identities they hold. However, this could still serve as a wonderful starting point for the process of testing this theory if researchers do not collect personally identifiable information in an effort to make participants more comfortable sharing their identities.

Information gathered from surveys can be quite helpful when it comes to gathering information about the student population, but it is also important to include a sort of matrix that will allow the researcher to analyze the institutions that will be considered. This matrix could be in the form of a survey as well that calls for the disclosure of institutional norms that exist. Another possible limitation may exist since the focus of this theory would most likely involve religiously affiliated institutions that are typically private. This type of institution may most likely be hesitant to share certain information about their institution that may be challenged by the theory that is being presented. Lastly, an additional limitation is that religiously affiliated institutions may not provide or be willing to provide the space or opportunities for the theory to be implemented.

Along with student and administrative focused data about the institution, it may also be important to include some method of collecting data from the faculty and staff perspective of the institution. Pipelining data from all three of these different functional areas of an institution will help one to be able to further analyze the data necessary to test the theory. It is important to gather as many different perspectives as possible; thus, it may be helpful to reach out to these different areas of a campus. This will not only help to gauge the culture of a campus, but it will also help to provide the resources necessary to learn how to begin the process of creating the conditions in an educational setting for students to be most successful.

It is important to recognize that students typically have a different, or at least a more unique, perspective on religion or spirituality after attending a collegiate institution, regardless of the religious affiliation, and interacting with students who hold different identities, beliefs, and values than they do at the time that they enter this new environment. However, the effect of an institution's religious focus and lack of support for individuals who identify in the LGBTQ+ community is an important aspect for religiously affiliated institutions to consider. It is important to further one's own understanding on how a student's developmental experience is influenced based on the religious representation an institution has, including the religious affiliation of the institution, the religious identities faculty and staff hold, and even religious holidays that are celebrated and recognized on a campus.

Another important acknowledgement is that the development of LGBTQ+ allies is crucial in order for progress to be made for various social justice issues involving this community; thus, I urge religiously affiliated institutions to take this new theory into consideration and incorporate it into their practices. One method of incorporating this theory and fostering a sense of community in a collegiate institution would be by ensuring that a mentoring system would be in place. This would be a productive and engaging way of helping to provide support for the oppressed community, but this would also be important for ensuring that the individuals helping to advocate for this community are able to work together on these issues. It is also important to understand and recognize the existence of "otherness" that exists on college campuses, but in the United States in general. One must understand the implications of otherness in order to become an ally for any community.

In order to better inform individuals of the future implications of this subject, it is urged that more research be completed on this subject. One method of applying this information to future practice is exploring methods of educating individuals on otherness so that they may be as best informed as possible about the climate of these oppressed communities. It is also important to consider the value of immersion trips that students can attend in order to further their knowledge on the theme of otherness. These trips

will allow students to have the opportunity to recognize their privileges and the true impact that can be made on social justice issues (Munin, 2008).

References

- Adams, M. D. (2014). The religious and spiritual experiences of undergraduate gay males attending a religiously affiliated institution of higher education [Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University]. Northeastern University Library.
<https://repository.library.northeastern.edu/files/neu:1125/fulltext.pdf>
- Astin, A. W., Astin, H., & Lindholm, J. (2011). Assessing students' spiritual and religious qualities. *Journal of College Student Development* 52(1), 39-61. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2011.0009>
- Baxter Magolda, M. V. (2008). Three elements of self-authorship. *Journal of College Student Development* 49(4), 269-284. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cssd.0.0016>
- Bishop, A. (2002). *Becoming an ally: Breaking the cycle of oppression in people* (2nd ed.). Fernwood.
- Braskamp, L. A. (2007). Fostering religious and spiritual development of students during college. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Larry_Braskamp/publication/251296150_Fostering_Religious_and_Spiritual_Development_of_Students_during_College/links/55febcb708ae07629e4bbe63.pdf
- Burrows, M. (1929). Religion in the college curriculum. *The Journal of Religion*, 9(3), 436-445.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1196978>
- Clark, C., & O'Donnell, J. (1999). *Becoming and unbecoming White: Owning and disowning a racial identity*. Bergin & Garvey.
- Chickering, A. W., & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Dirkx, J. M. (1997). Nurturing soul in adult learning. In P. Cranton (Ed.), *Transformative learning in action: New directions for adult and continuing education*, no. 74. Wiley InterScience.
- Fowler, J. (1981). *Stages of faith*. Harper and Row.
- Hill, P., Hood, K., McCullough, M., Swyers, J., Larson, J., & Zinnbauer, B. (2000). Conceptualizing religion and spirituality: Points of commonality, points of departure. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 30(1), 51-77.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Harvard University Press.
- Kimbel, T., & Schellenberg, R. (2013). Meeting the holistic needs of students: A proposal for spiritual and religious competencies for school counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, 17(1), 76-85.
www.jstor.org/stable/profschocoun.17.1.76
- Love, P. G. (1998). Cultural barriers facing lesbian, gay, and bisexual students at a Catholic college. *Journal of Higher Education*, 69(3), 298-323.
- Love, P., & Talbot, D. (2009). Defining spiritual development: A missing consideration for student affairs. *NASPA Journal*, 46(4), 614-628.
- Munin, A. (2008). *Ally identity development of college students at a religiously affiliated institution* [Doctoral dissertation, Loyola University Chicago]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/304556781?accountid=11620>
- Nicolazzo, Z. (2015). "Just go in looking good": The resilience, resistance, and kinship-building of trans* college students [Doctoral dissertation, Miami University of Ohio].
https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_olink/r/1501/10?clear=10&p10_accession_num=miami1426251164
- Seelman, K. L. (2016). Transgender adults' access to college bathrooms and housing and the relationship to suicidality. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 63(10), 1378-1399.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1157998>
- Steiger, N. & Lipson, J. (1985). *Self-care nursing: Theory and practice*. Brady Communications.
- Wentz, J., & Wesse, R. (2013). Experiences of gay and lesbian students attending faith-based colleges: Considerations for improving practice. *The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*, 11(11), 40-58.