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# Using Queer Theory to Explore Lesbian College Students' Multiple Dimensions of Identity

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*By introducing queer theory to Abes and Jones's (2004) constructivist narrative inquiry of lesbian college students' perceptions of their multiple identities, we retell the developmental narrative of one participant's negotiation of her sexuality, religion, gender, and social class. This queer retelling of a developmental story shows how identities are constantly forming and reforming and challenges heteronormative assumptions underlying student development theory, including the construct of self-authorship. We propose a fluid perspective on student development that accounts for lesbian college students' resistance of heteronormative structures. We also encourage student affairs practice that centers lesbian college students' agency and resistance.*

Student development theory literature must include more attention to the ways in which social power structures, such as racism, classism, and heterosexism, mediate student development. In the context of heterosexism, D'Augelli (1994), Rhoads (1997), Talburt (2004), and Renn and Bilodeau (2005) argued that gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity development theories that do not account for heterosexism reify heterosexual privilege. This research explores the relationship between heterosexism and student development theory by using queer theory to study the nature of lesbian college students' intersections of sexual orientation identity with other identity dimensions, such as religion, social class, and gender. What new insights about college

students' negotiation of multiple identities are gained through the use of queer theory? What new insights into student development theory might queer theory uncover? To explore these questions, we focus on two tellings of the identity story of KT, one of the participants in a longitudinal study of lesbian college students' perceptions of their multiple dimensions of identity (Abes & Jones, 2004). Elisa tells a story of KT's perceptions of her multiple identities using constructivist-developmental theory as the theoretical framework (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Kegan, 1994). Dave then applies a queer theoretical framework to KT's developmental story and retells her narrative through this perspective. Together, we hope to offer new understandings of how lesbian students' negotiate their multiple identities and how educators can support students in these identity negotiations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

We review the two theoretical frameworks that we use to tell and then retell a narrative about the relationships among KT's sexual orientation identity and other dimensions of her identity: constructivist-developmental theory and queer theory.

### Constructivist-Developmental Theory

Constructivist-developmental theorists suggest that people develop through a relatively linear trajectory of increasingly complex meaning-

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making structures, which are sets of assumptions that determine how an individual perceives and organizes life experiences (Kegan, 1994). Building on Kegan's constructivist-developmental theory of self-evolution, Baxter Magolda (e.g., 2001) described a framework for understanding young adult development. Specifically, Baxter Magolda described a process whereby young adults move from external to internal ways of making meaning of knowledge (cognitive domain), relationships with others (interpersonal domain), and who they are as individuals (intrapersonal domain).

Cognitive development theory describes how people perceive the nature of knowledge. Complex cognitive capacity enables a person to internally generate knowledge and beliefs rather than uncritically accepting knowledge claims from external authorities (e.g., Perry, 1970). Interpersonal development describes how people construct relationships. Mature relationships are characterized by mutuality (Jordan, 1997). Mutuality involves respect for both self and others' identities and the integration of multiple perspectives and needs. Intrapersonal development describes how people construct their identities. Complex identity construction requires the ability to reflect on and choose enduring values and beliefs that allow a person to internally develop a sense of self rather than relying on external influences to define identity (Baxter Magolda, 2001). These three domains are integrated; development in one domain typically fosters development in another. Complex meaning making in all three domains is necessary for a person to reach self-authorship, which is the internal capacity to construct one's beliefs, sense of self, and relationships with others (Baxter Magolda; Kegan, 1994). Kegan also described postmodern development beyond self-authorship, the fifth order of consciousness, in which individuals demonstrate an ability through relationships to recognize their

incompleteness and simultaneously author multiple forms of self-authorship. Kegan suggested that achieving the fifth order is rare and the earliest an individual does so is typically in his or her forties.

Writing about the first phase of the longitudinal study that provides the data for this analysis, Abes and Jones (2004) explored the relationship between constructivist-developmental theory and lesbian college students' perceptions of their sexual orientation identity and its relationships with other identity dimensions. They found that how context influenced participants' perceptions of their identity was related to the complexity of their meaning-making capacity. Participants with complex meaning-making capacity were able, more so than those with less developed capacity, to filter contextual influences, such as family background, peer culture, and social norms, and determine how context influenced their identity. Also based on the results of the first phase of that study, Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) focused in more depth on the role of meaning-making capacity in students' understanding of the salience of and relationships among their multiple identities. They found that meaning-making capacity mediated participants' perceptions of relationships among multiple identities and the ease with which sexual orientation was integrated or peacefully co-existed with other dimensions.

### Queer Theory

Unlike constructivist-developmental theory, which explains development toward complex ways of understanding identity, queer theory critically analyzes the meaning of identity, focusing on intersections of identities and resisting oppressive social constructions of sexual orientation and gender. Queer theory is built from the poststructural theories of Foucault (1976/1978), Derrida (1967/1978), and Lyotard (1984). Sullivan (2003) stated:

“Poststructural theorists such as Foucault argue that there are no objective and universal truths, but that particular forms of knowledge, and the ways of being that they engender, become ‘naturalised,’ in culturally and historically specific ways” (p. 39). Queer theorists apply these ideas to gender and sexuality to suggest they are socially constructed (Butler, 1990). Genders and sexualities reflect the time and place in which they exist and the individuals who enact them. The expression of gender and sexuality is unstable, changing as the individual affects society and as society affects the individual. To narrow our focus within queer theory, we isolated three concepts that resonated with the development of multiple identities: heteronormativity, performativity, and liminality.

Heteronormativity is the use of heterosexuality as the norm for understanding gender and sexuality (Warner, 1991). Queer theory offers a threefold critique of this dominant social construction of gender and sexuality. First, heteronormativity creates a binary between identification as heterosexual and nonheterosexual in which nonheterosexuality is abnormal and measured in its difference from heterosexuality. This binary suggests that individuals separate into two distinct groups with identifiable differences. Second, heteronormativity consolidates nonheterosexuality into one essentialized group (Muñoz, 1999). The use of the label *LGBTQ* to represent students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer as one group is an example of consolidating nonheterosexual identities. Essentializing this diverse group of students reinforces the binary. Third, by privileging heterosexuality, society does not acknowledge gender and sexual orientation as reflections of social power structures (Foucault, 1976/1978). Heterosexuality’s hegemony creates the perception (or lack thereof) that heterosexuality defines what is natural or

acceptable (Britzman, 1997). Queer theory provides a framework for resisting heteronormativity.

The second concept that informs this analysis, performativity, uses heteronormativity as a point of tension. Performativity describes how individuals create genders and sexual identities through everyday behaviors or performatives (Butler, 1990). As performatives, actions do not represent identity; instead, actions create identity (Butler). As such, an individual’s gender and sexuality do not exist before she or he performs them; they are not predetermined by physiological sex or attraction to a specific gender. Instead, the individual learns how to perform gender and sexual identity and socially constructs them into being through her or his behavior. Because individuals enact genders and sexualities that do not exist prior to their enactment, performatives provide the potential for resisting dominant social constructions of gender and sexuality. This process depends on creating an identity through repeating actions; however, an individual never repeats actions precisely the same. Thus, identity is always changing.

The third concept supporting this analysis is the idea of liminality, a transitional period of indeterminacy (van Gennep, 1909/1960). Liminality represents a state of flux between two distinct and stable stages of being. This idea is critical to understanding how heteronormativity and performativity play out in students’ lives. For example, heteronormativity creates a binary of two fixed sexualities: heterosexuality and nonheterosexuality. Liminality is a resistance strategy in which elements of heterosexuality and nonheterosexuality are incorporated into one identity that rejects normalized definitions of either heterosexuality or nonheterosexuality. Liminality, as resistance, is a state of becoming (Grosz, 2004). It facilitates flexible genders and sexualities and reflects how an individual

may perform a seemingly contradictory performative in ever-changing ways. As such, liminality provides a framework for understanding the complex ways in which an individual performs sexuality in resistance to and as part of heteronormativity. The “becoming” quality of liminality emphasizes the unstable meaning of gender and sexuality (Halberstam, 2005), reflecting queer theory’s resistance to stable identities.

A key connection among these three ideas is the use of resistance as a primary force behind queer theory. Foucault (1976/1978) noted, “where there is power, there is resistance . . . and this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (p. 95). Queer theory creates complex intersections of identities through multiple strategies of resistance.

## STUDY DESIGN

The data upon which the two tellings of KT’s identity story are based came from the first two phases of Elisa’s longitudinal study of lesbian identity development (Abes & Jones, 2004). That study was guided by a constructivist theoretical perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and a narrative inquiry methodology (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). There were 10 participants, identified through purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) in the first phase, and 8 in the second, all of whom were ages 18-25 over the span of the two study phases. These women, who identified as lesbian or queer, attended the same large public research university in the Midwest at the time of the first phase of the study. Data were collected through open-ended interviews that lasted between 1 and 3 hours. Interview questions elicited stories about how participants experienced their multiple identity dimensions. Examples of questions included: “Tell me what it means to you to be a lesbian,” or “Tell me about a time that you were aware of

your gender.”

For this project, we chose to feature one participant, KT. By focusing on only one participant, we are able to richly analyze her identity stories. Focusing on only one participant is also a way to honor the unique story of one student typically considered on the margins, thus subverting the essentializing to which lesbian students are often subjected, which is one of the aims of queer theory (Muñoz, 1999). We chose to feature KT for several reasons. We identified a participant whose experiences might resonate with other lesbian or queer students. KT was not actively involved in queer student organizations, but instead, explored her identity through her family, work, and social life. She did not take courses that provided her the language to analyze her identity from an academic perspective; instead, she explored her identity and developed her own language through her lived experiences. KT earnestly, even if sometimes without realizing she was doing so, tried to integrate her multiple identity dimensions. She wanted an integrated identity so she could be honest with herself and others and reach her personal and professional goals. Although KT was initially tentative about participating in this study, explaining she had not thought about these issues, she deeply considered each question and thoughtfully articulated each response. Clearly, she had done more prior identity work than she realized. We now believe queer theory provides insights into why KT was unknowingly working so hard to understand her identity: She was living within the ambiguous liminality of her multiple identities.

For data analysis, we reanalyzed the data collected in both study phases. To create the constructivist-developmental narrative, we analyzed KT’s interview transcripts using a categorical content approach to narrative analysis, which utilizes constant comparative

analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998). We first reviewed each line of the transcript, focusing on KT's words, and then grouped these words into concepts representing the same phenomena. We grouped these concepts into more abstract categories. We then considered these abstract categories in relationship to cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development.

To create the queer narrative, we reanalyzed KT's interview transcripts using queer theory. For purposes of this paper, we introduce queer theory as a new theoretical perspective only for data analysis to "queer" the constructivist narratives. We realize it is not typical practice to analyze the same data using different theoretical perspectives. However, rereading an existing text to analyze how queer notions undergird and drive the text is a common queer theory methodological approach (Plummer, 2005). To conduct the queer analysis, a process that does not have a fixed approach (Plummer), we reread KT's transcripts to understand how the queer notions of heteronormativity, performativity, and liminality were present in KT's stories.

Peer debriefing and member checking ensured trustworthiness (Patton, 1990). As part of peer debriefing, we conducted individual analyses of the data and then discussed our interpretations. We discussed how queer theory did and did not apply, challenging our notions of what is queer, while making sure that we were consistent with both bodies of literature and the language of KT's interviews. For member checking, KT read both the constructivist and queer narratives. She commented that she readily saw herself in the constructivist narrative and was interested in the use of the three domains of development to explain her experiences. Not surprisingly, she found the queer theory analysis harder to get her head around, but the more she thought about it, the more she could see it as an intriguing way to describe her experiences.

## KT's Constructivist-Developmental Narrative

Thoughtful and mature, KT is a goal-oriented person, proud of her educational and professional accomplishments. She received her undergraduate degree in physical education at age 22 during the first phase of the study, and then completed a master's degree in physical education in the time between the two phases. During the second phase, KT was in her first year as a physical education teacher. A White woman raised as a devout Catholic, KT realized she was a lesbian near the end of high school. Her mother conveyed immense disapproval, telling KT that as a lesbian she could no longer practice Catholicism, be professionally successful, or be feminine, each of which was important to KT. In the face of this critique, KT was proud of her decision to come out as a lesbian, a decision from which she has derived significant strength.

At the time of the first study phase, 4 years after that initial conversation, KT had not again discussed her sexual orientation with her parents, an avoidance which distressed her because she believed they deserved to know the truth. As KT was tentatively coming out to friends about her sexual orientation, everything she knew about what it meant to be a lesbian was based on negative stereotypes she heard from other people, especially her mother. During college, it became important to KT to be her own person as a lesbian rather than a stereotype. Before she could consider that possibility, however, she had to figure out whether or not the stereotypes were true, especially those related to the relationship between her sexual orientation and her religion, social class, and gender.

The first study phase was marked by KT experiencing dissonance between her mother's perspectives and the new perspectives she was exploring. This dissonance spurred cognitive,

interpersonal, and intrapersonal development. Although KT was encouraged by glimmers of possible perspectives different from those of her mother, she was not ready to develop her own perspective on what it meant to be lesbian and how that related to her religion, gender, and social class. Over the next 18 months, KT experienced much development. Continuing to investigate multiple perspectives on what it meant to be a lesbian, KT was tentatively developing her own perspectives and starting to understand that her multiple identities were not mutually exclusive. KT's development in how she made meaning of some of these identity dimensions is described below. By writing about only sexuality, religion, social class, and gender, we are omitting identity dimensions that shape KT's perceptions of each of the other dimensions, in particular, her identity as a White person. In telling KT's story, we decided, despite the limitations of doing so, to describe development only for dimensions of identity most salient to KT.

### Sexual Orientation and Religion

KT was raised as a Catholic and had a deep faith in God; reconciling her religion and sexual orientation was among KT's most significant challenges. During the first study phase, KT reflected on a time when she believed others' perspectives that identifying as a lesbian precluded her from being religious. She explained: "My mother told me I can't be a lesbian [and Catholic]. I still want to be in touch with God. I want to go to church. . . . I felt that because of my mother I couldn't do that." KT sought out reading material to help her understand that her mother's interpretation of the Bible is not the only correct one. She cast her desire for religion as a future goal though still uncertain whether or not she could adopt a perspective different from what others taught her. Cognitively, she experienced some dissonance as she learned about multiple

perspectives, but was not yet prepared to adopt her own perspective.

KT's interpersonal development also interacted with her understanding of the relationship between her sexual orientation and religious identities. Because of her friends' attitudes toward religion, KT described herself as a "religious closet case": "None of my friends go to church. Knowing that I want to go to church, I really keep that a secret because everything that they say about religion is bad. I'm in the closet about religion." Although KT tentatively believed she could be religious and a lesbian (demonstrating her intrapersonal development), she had not yet developed agency in her relationships with her friends and thus hid her religious beliefs.

During the second study phase, and a result of continuing to seek out multiple perspectives, KT developed in how she understood her identity as a lesbian for whom religion is important. She more confidently believed there were multiple ways to be lesbian and religious, and started creating her own perspectives on this relationship. She explained:

I know I can have God in my life and be gay and be everything I want to be. I can still put God first. I don't have to be in the church to pray. . . . I consider myself Catholic . . . but I go to a church where I'm welcome because of who I am.

For KT, a new supportive relationship mediated her intrapersonal and interpersonal development because her girlfriend respected her religious beliefs. This support allowed KT to reflect on prior relationships and see how she had allowed others to define her identity. KT explained that if her current girlfriend did not support her faith, "I would have issues with that. . . . It would be an issue with me right now if I just didn't see any kind of religious beliefs in [my girlfriend]." KT demonstrated development in all three domains. She was

coming to understand multiple perspectives on the relationship between religion and sexual orientation (cognitive development); gaining a stronger sense of how she wanted to reconcile these two aspects of her identity (intrapersonal development); and hoping to maintain her religious beliefs in a relationship (interpersonal development).

### **Sexual Orientation and Social Class**

KT also sought out concrete examples to help her learn that the stereotype that lesbians typically inhabit a lower social class was not necessarily true. Again, she was exposing herself to and seeing validity in multiple perspectives (cognitive development). Based on comments from her mother and exposure only to lesbians who were college students, KT believed for many years that identifying as a lesbian and as an upper-class professional were mutually exclusive. Through a relationship at the time of the first study phase with a “professional” woman, KT attended parties at nice homes owned by lesbians. Seeing these professional women allowed KT to consider, albeit tentatively, the possibility that identifying as a lesbian might not preclude her from achieving her professional and financial goals (intrapersonal development).

During the second phase, KT was more confident that her sexual orientation need not dictate her social class. KT attributed her new perspective that “you can be gay and successful” to her growing confidence that resulted from graduating from college and becoming a successful teacher. By accomplishing her educational goals, which her mother told her she could not do as a lesbian, KT gained the confidence to accept perspectives different from what her mother taught her and to believe in her own thinking (interpersonal development). KT’s evolution in how she perceived the relationship between her sexual orientation and social class demonstrates devel-

opment in all three domains as she is integrating into her sense of self (intrapersonal) her own perspectives on the relationship between her sexual orientation and social class (cognitive), rather than defining these possibilities through her mother (interpersonal).

### **Sexual Orientation and Gender**

One of KT’s obstacles in her journey toward reconciling her social class ambitions with her sexual orientation was her assumption that other people perceived lesbians to be masculine women. It was important to KT to always be professional in all aspects of her life, and she associated being professional with being feminine. From her perspective, especially during the first study phase, “masculine women” were not perceived as professional women. Even though she considered herself “a feminine woman who can be a little butch sometimes,” KT assumed many people would think that because she was a lesbian she was also masculine and therefore unprofessional, which would hurt her career. This perception, again based on what others told her, was especially troubling as a physical education teacher because of the stereotypes about lesbians associated with this position. KT spoke to the pressure she felt teaching: “You almost have to be perfect in the schools as a teacher. So I don’t want to be portrayed as a lesbian because I don’t know where they stand, and I’m scared to death I’m going to get fired.” However, by meeting other lesbians she considered to be professional and feminine, in particular one of her professors, she was coming to realize, again tentatively, the possibility of being perceived by others as feminine. Although KT still held onto gender stereotypes, she was starting to juggle multiple perspectives and entertain new possibilities for her identity.

KT did not give as much thought to her gender at the time of the second phase of the

study. Still, she related gender and social class. When asked to describe her gender, KT, who was confident wearing short hair and stylish, athletic clothes, responded by saying “professional.” Although she continued to equate professional with feminine, she was starting to define her own meaning of feminine rather than defining it through stereotypes. She explained: “When I am professional I try to be feminine. But feminine to me is more on the plain side. Just, you know, clean, nice clothes, sophisticated if you have to dress up, feminine in that way.” Although she worried about being fired from teaching if others knew she was gay, she grew more comfortable portraying her gender in a way that makes her comfortable and in which she feels professional, rather than according to other people’s standards. As with religion and social class, KT was not only entertaining the possibility of multiple perspectives, but was starting to develop her own perspectives (cognitive development) and defining her own identity (intrapersonal development), rather than losing herself in others’ perceptions of her (interpersonal development).

At the end of the first phase, KT explained that she wanted her sexual orientation, gender, and social class to “come together” so she could be the person she aspires to be. Between the two study phases, KT’s development toward self-authorship contributed to her multiple identities in fact coming closer together. Closer to self-authorship than before, KT reflected at the end of the second study phase that by gaining the ability to define her identities for herself and in less conflict with one another, she was “allowing [her] true self to evolve.”

### Queering KT’s Constructivist-Developmental Narrative

Retelling KT’s story from a queer theory perspective recasts it to reflect KT’s resistance to stereotypes, as well as queer resistance to

the linearity and heteronormativity of constructivist student development theory. KT’s queer narrative is complex. Her life forms a text of resistance to heteronormative social constructions that exclude or oppress her sense of self (e.g., her mother’s statements about how lesbians cannot be Catholics). It is a story of her enacting an identity performative in which she fluctuates between heteronormative constructions of self and constructions of self that resist heteronormativity. Initially, these fluctuations may appear to be a type of identity negotiation between heteronormative and nonheteronormative, but KT’s struggle is different from a simple negotiation. Instead, as detailed in the following narrative, KT is redefining the meaning of heteronormative and nonheteronormative identities.

Prior to identifying as a lesbian, KT identified as a Catholic from a working class family and as a woman who conducts herself in a professional manner. Once identifying as a lesbian, the meaning of these prior identities became problematic for KT and caused her to question her sense of self. She formed her earlier identities based on a heteronormative understanding of the world (e.g., Catholics are straight, hard work can change a person’s class status, and professional women must be feminine) and struggled to understand her conflicting experiences of these identities. KT’s new primary identity as a lesbian created resistance to the stereotypes of lesbians her mother promoted because KT continued to engage each of these identities and be a lesbian, which her mother suggested was not possible. Still, she feared some of her own resistance, explaining:

I was like one foot in the closet and one foot out of the closet. . . . I would tell certain people that I trusted. And I would not tell other people that I didn’t trust because I felt that they would use it against me.

Heteronormativity, performativity, and liminality provide a framework for understanding how KT queered religion, gender, and social class.

### Queering Catholicism

KT understood Catholicism to be exclusive of lesbians and to be a lesbian meant that she could no longer be a Catholic. This understanding was problematic because KT's faith was a pillar of how she understood herself. Her faith in God offered KT a cohesive sense of self, a sense of self built on the idea of only heterosexual partnerships. When KT first identified as a lesbian, she necessarily excluded herself from the opportunity to have a relationship with God under this framework. This pushed KT into a liminal state, where she knew she believed in God but could not live her faith as she knew it. Instead she needed to create a new performative that resisted the idea of faith and God only supporting heterosexual relationships.

The constructivist narrative discussed KT's process of seeking support for a new understanding of religion that included her as a lesbian. KT sought out people, churches, and readings that resisted her mother's messages about the church's limited acceptance of lesbians and the gay community's limited acceptance of organized religion. These actions demonstrated KT's new performative of religion. Through this dual resistance she enacted the performative of "religious closet case." KT struggled to find acceptance in either community because she wanted to be part of both communities. KT explained:

There were bad moments in my life, and it was when I didn't have religion, I didn't believe in it. When I think about it, I need it. So, I feel that's very important to who I am as a lesbian.

This quote reflects KT's complex construction

of religion and sexuality: She believes in God as a lesbian. Her understanding of God depends on her understanding of her sexuality and her understanding of her sexuality depends on her understanding of God; the two identities are interwoven. This interwoven quality emphasizes an important queer feature of KT's new understanding of faith—her performative of faith changes as her understanding of her sexuality changes and vice versa. This conflation of religion and sexuality creates a unique identity in which KT is constantly redefining what it means to be a lesbian and what it means to be Catholic. She is performing a strategy of liminality in which these identities share the same identity material. Her faith in God is intelligible to her only as a lesbian because, for KT, the two are based on the same threads of identity.

### Queering Social Class with Gender

One of the most complex identity constructions that KT describes is that of her gender. In the first study phase, KT defined gender as "professional." When pushed further about what professional means to her, KT connected hard work and social class. Professionalism, then, was the performative reflection of her work ethic based on a feminine gender: "I think gender and social class kind of go together for me because I always want to be portrayed as a woman and professional and lesbian." Gender for KT, then, is part of social class and sexual orientation. Through a physical performative, KT linked representations of woman, professional, and lesbian into one complex expression of identity. In doing so, KT is resisting the stereotypes that lesbians are masculine and masculine women are not professionally successful.

KT's understanding of sexuality and professionalism is another example of infused identities. No longer financially dependent on her family because of her post-college salary,

KT explained: “I pay everything. I even pay a loan that my mom took out for me. . . . So, I’m taking more ownership of my sexuality now.” For KT, professionalism and sexuality help to define her sense of self. Being a professional (gender/social class) and having income (social class) allow KT to “own,” or create the meaning of, her sexuality. KT’s sense of professionalism and gender influences how she understands the relationship between sexual orientation and social class and vice versa. The two groups are mutually influencing.

The meaning of KT’s gender and sexuality are not pre-existent. KT brings them into being through the process of enacting them described in the idea of performatives. What is significant about this gender/social class performative is that it resists multiple constructions of heteronormative and nonheteronormative genders and sexualities at the same time. By defining her gender through social class, KT has subverted conventional understandings of gender. KT noted, “I guess when I am looked at as a lesbian, I want to know that my job is something that I’m very happy with, I have a good living, I can make it on my own or with a partner.” To KT, being a lesbian is now more than just a sexual orientation; it has an impact on work, happiness, and relationships. In subtle ways, KT’s performative of social class and gender is defining work, happiness, and relationships through and with her sexuality.

### Queering Identity Intersections

KT transformed the meaning of social class by combining social class with gender to create “professionalism.” This performative of professionalism also depends on KT’s construction of what it means to be a lesbian because this construction informs how she understands her gender. Given this relationship, KT’s social class/gender is also a reflection of her Catholicism because her religion is

important to who she is as a lesbian. As a result, the intersection of social class and gender in professionalism is also an intersection of religion and sexuality. Through professionalism, KT is enacting a time and place, a unique reality of identity, specific to her. By enacting an identity that combines all of these identity dimensions, she is performing an infused identity.

From one perspective, KT’s infused identity appears to be a negotiation of identities (e.g., a balancing of lesbian and Catholic, lesbian and professional) rather than interconnected identities; however, it is not that simple. This “negotiation of identities” perspective considers all of these identities as distinct but connected. KT’s infusement, on the other hand, makes these elements of identity inseparable in her sense of self. KT’s infusing of identities is a departure from simple intersections of identities. It reflects something more like “intra-sections,” where identities do not simply connect with each other, but rather they share the same identity material. In other words, each of these threads of identity (i.e., Catholic, professional, lesbian) are all the same identity. KT’s infused identity is not evidence of progressively complex development, as constructivist-development theory suggests; it is a performative of inseparable identities.

KT’s creation of infused, intrasectioned identities is a complex example of her resistance to heteronormativity through the performative of a liminal identity. For example, in her developmental narrative, KT’s understanding of heteronormativity is inseparable from her understanding of her mother. To resist her mother’s stereotypes of lesbians is to resist heteronormativity. KT created intrasections of identity that incorporate, build from, and refuse definitions of identities from her mother. KT used the definitions of lesbian, Catholicism, and professionalism she learned from her mother and changed them to create her own

unique identity that reflected KT's enactment of Catholicism and professionalism as a lesbian. KT redefined the meaning of each of these labels into one coherent intrasected identity by creating a singular identity that neither confirmed her mother's definitions nor created counter definitions.

### Queering the Relationship Between KT and her External Environment

So far, this queer narrative has resisted the traditional structuralist framework of a binary between KT and society in which KT has the ability to affect society, society has the ability to affect KT, or the two influence each other. This structuralist binary is common in constructivist-developmental narratives (e.g., internal/external sources of authority). From a queer (poststructuralist) perspective, this binary is an artificial construction imposed upon KT and society. The binary does not exist until a third party chooses to locate KT and society as distinct and opposing entities. In using this KT/society binary, the subtle complexities of KT's performative, or the intrasections of KT's multiple dimensions of identity, are obscured, and a false sense of stability to the meaning of identities is created. Using a constructivist lens, KT's construction of identity initially appears to be a negotiation between heteronormative and nonheteronormative. It denies KT's queer development and the insight queer theory has into KT's on-going resistance to definitions of identity that obscure her "evolving" sense of "true self."

KT's queer narrative demonstrates the on-going performative of one woman creating an intrasected identity that resists engagement in traditional binaries. Using a queer perspective, both KT and the social constructions of identity become liminal, unstable, and constantly in states of becoming. These "becomings" resist binary frameworks in which the

individual is abnormal in relation to her heterosexual environment. From the perspective of queer theory, KT's story is one of resistance to heteronormativity. By identifying as a lesbian, KT unknowingly began a process of resisting the heteronormativity of her mother and society. As KT's identification as a lesbian intensified, and her perception of the intersections between other identity dimensions and being a lesbian increased, her resistance to heteronormativity also intensified. KT also became increasingly aware of her resistance to heteronormativity and used that sense of awareness to develop her personal sense of agency. Rather than a story of developmental arrival, KT's queer narrative is a story of continued resistance and an ever-changing network of complex intrasections within dimensions of identity.

## DISCUSSION

### Implications for Student Development Theory

*Queer-Authorship: Identity Construction as Social Change.* From a constructivist-developmental perspective, KT is developing an increased capacity to construct the meaning of and relationships among her multiple identities through internally defined perceptions rather than defining herself through external expectations. From a queer perspective, KT was reconstructing external authority by resisting heteronormativity and destabilizing structures it created. KT was enacting an identity that redefined her own identity *perceptions* in relationship to external influences (i.e., developing toward self-authorship), as she simultaneously redefined the *meaning* of those same external influences (i.e., deconstructing and reconstructing power structures). KT's performatives were creating a sexual orientation identity that no longer precluded her religious, social class, and gender identities

because she changed the meaning of religious, social class, and gender identities to include her lesbian identity.

A queer theoretical perspective on development thus illuminates that for students who do not identify as heterosexual, identity development as part of the journey toward self-authorship requires resisting power structures that define one as abnormal. Whereas self-authorship focuses on how students construct internal frameworks to navigate external influences, queer resistance focuses on how students deconstruct and reconstruct external influences. Rather than challenging heteronormativity, self-authorship describes the developmental capacities students need to make meaning of their lives within a heteronormative society. When students necessarily deconstruct the heteronormative framework in order to reconstruct their identities, they offer a resistance that is development toward a form of self-authorship as social change, a type of development we call “queer-authorship.”

Queer-authorship is the necessary deconstruction of heteronormativity that enables lesbian students to change the dominant social order in order to redefine the meaning of their multiple identities and the contexts in which their lives are situated. Queer-authorship suggests that self-authorship alone is an incomplete theoretical framework to describe the experiences of lesbian college students. It suggests that the developmental process looks different for lesbian college students, an observation suggesting that the nature of the developmental process might also be re-examined for other dimensions of identity, such as social class, race, and ethnicity.

To understand the social change aspect of queer-authorship, it helps to distinguish queer-authorship from the findings of other literature that explores how dissonance associated with marginalized identities fosters development

toward self-authorship. Pizzolato (2003) described how high-risk college students who encountered challenges to their abilities developed self-authoring ways of knowing earlier than many participants in Baxter Magolda's (2001) longitudinal study. She found that students' encounters with provocative experiences, such as choosing to attend college despite a lack of community or family support, often prompted the disequilibrium needed to construct their own self-perceptions. Using a similar framework, it could be argued that the external influence of heteronormativity fostered complex development in KT, allowing her to develop toward self-authorship. Although likely true, this describes only part of KT's story. It describes only how KT positively defined herself in relationship to heteronormativity, accommodating this power structure rather than changing it. The queer view shifts the gaze from how KT is changing her self-perceptions within a heterosexist society, to how KT is changing the heterosexist society and thus her identity. Using a constructivist perspective, Pizzolato focused on the individual's development in response to marginalization, not how her participants changed the meaning of high risk, race, and class; however, her work suggests that a similar process may be taking place for high-risk students.

Further, it is insufficient to argue only that marginalization is an external factor that fosters development toward self-authorship because the theoretical framework of self-authorship does not wholly describe KT's development. Indeed, our research began with our mutual sense that student development theory was missing part of the developmental story of lesbian students. We encountered this concern when initially analyzing KT's interview transcripts using a constructivist-developmental framework. Our analysis resulted in thinking that heterosexism was contributing

to KT's complex cognitive capacity but stalling her interpersonal development given her tendencies to define herself through her mother, peers, and girlfriends. It felt wrong to describe KT's experiences as stalled interpersonal development, even though at first glance the way she defined herself in relationship to others was reminiscent of Kegan's (1994) third order or Baxter Magolda's (2001) early crossroads. It was evident that KT was trying to push back against dominant social structures, engaging in sophisticated interpersonal pursuits, and slowly defining herself in relation to others who tried to define her identity for her. Stepping outside of the self-authorship framework allowed us to incorporate KT's efforts at deconstructing heteronormativity into her development. Doing so led us to understand her development as more complex than what the language of self-authorship allows.

*Queer-Authorship as Fluid, Nonlinear Development.* The queer-authorship of KT serves as an example of how she must first form a resistance to heteronormative structures in her life before she exhibits development typically understood as self-authorship. Although we critique the heteronormativity of development toward self-authorship, Kegan's (1994) fifth order of consciousness, which he describes as a postmodern view of the world, explains some aspects of queer-authorship. He described the fifth order as:

[Moving] form or system from subject to object, and brings into being a new "trans-system" or "cross-form" way of organizing reality. . . . the good working of the self and its recognition by the other begins with a refusal to see oneself or the other as a single system or form. The relationship is a context for sharing and an interacting in which both are helped to experience their "multipleness," in which the *many* forms or systems that *each self* is are helped to emerge. (p. 313)

In the fifth order, people recognize that the relationship itself creates the individual elements rather than the individual elements creating the relationship. Differences among individuals are necessary for the relationship, and through the relationship, people recognize these differences within themselves. As described in KT's queer narrative, KT and the contexts in which she lives are a mutually influencing relationship; they are part of a "trans-system," with each bringing out "multipleness" of the other. As a social change agent, KT is changing the meaning of the context that influences the meaning of her multiple identities, while that changing context changes the meaning of her identity. The relationship between the two create multiple and changing meanings.

KT is exhibiting aspects of the fifth order at the same time that she has not yet reached the fourth order, or self-authorship. The concept of queer-authorship therefore suggests that the linear developmental trajectory associated with Kegan's (1994) orders, and upon which the concept of self-authorship is based, is insufficient to describe the experiences of all students. Rather than a linear developmental trajectory, queer-authorship suggests that people simultaneously exhibit qualities from multiple orders. This argument differs from the constructivist-developmental perspective that people don't always exhibit their most complex ways of making meaning. Although linear trajectories allow students to enact elements of previous stages of development, there remains a general notion that once a student achieves self-authorship she or he will be able to maintain or return to that higher level of development. This assumption suggests that student development is finite and measurable and that changes in students' expression of their identity reflect development along a trajectory. Using the notions of liminality and performativity, queer theorists argue that

identities are always in flux and development does not accommodate “arriving” at a stage of development (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 2005; Sedgwick, 1990). Sullivan (2003) offered a similar observation about identity multiplicity:

One’s being in the world is always marked, molded, formed, and transformed in and through encounters with others and with a world. . . . Identity is never simply a question of self-authorship. . . . Identity categories are . . . continuously fracturing, multiplying, and metamorphosing. Identity, one could argue, is already always haunted by the other, by that which is not “I.” (p. 149)

We recognize that according to Kegan (1994) most people do not reach the fifth order, and doing so is extremely unlikely for a traditional-aged college student. We are not suggesting that KT arrived at the fifth order. Instead, we are suggesting that this linear trajectory does not describe KT’s development because her queer resistance causes her to interact with society in a manner similar to the fifth order, even though she might not have reached the fourth order. KT’s development is more fluid than the process described by Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (2001). Our argument is consistent with Talburt’s (2006) proposed “queering of our ideas of development” in which “development does not occur in a straight line, so to speak,” but is about “multiple practices, complex relations, and dynamic positionings across contexts” (p. 90).

Kegan (1994) acknowledged that his theory would not survive a deconstructive postmodern critique because it, like most theories, is not universally applicable. Citing Burbules and Rice (1991), Kegan distinguished between what he calls deconstructive and reconconstructive postmodernism. Unlike deconstructive postmodernism, reconconstructive postmodernism uses the products of decon-

struction to create better theory that is constantly reforming. He argues that subject-object theory supports the reconstructive postmodern perspective because it avoids ideological absolutism, and meaning-making complexity allows for supporting others’ positions on their own terms. Nonetheless, KT’s queer narrative demonstrates that development toward self-authorship does not encompass the resistance and social change necessary for queer-authorship, thus resulting in an incomplete understanding of how lesbian college students experience their multiple identities.

*The Fusion of Multiple Identities: Rethinking the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity.* Queer theory also challenges the portrayal of multiple identities offered in the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000), a conceptual depiction of students’ perceptions of their identity. The model portrays how students’ perceptions of the saliency of each of their multiple identity dimensions, portrayed as dots on ellipses surrounding a core sense of self, changes depending on contextual influences. Recently reconceptualized, the model includes meaning-making capacity, explained through constructivist-developmental theory, as a filter between contextual factors and students’ perceptions of their multiple identities (Abes et al., 2007). Through the model’s depiction of identity, Jones and McEwen remind educators the importance of “seeing students as they see themselves” (p. 412). In part a result of meaning-making capacity, students often see themselves as a combination of distinct and sometimes conflicting dimensions of identity (Abes et al.).

Queer theory, however, starts from the perspective that multiple identity dimensions are always fused (Fuss, 1989) intrasections rather than intersections. Although students might perform certain aspects of their identi-

ties more prominently than others at different times, depending on context, identities cannot be separated. By starting from this fused perspective, queer theory prompts an exploration as to why when lesbian students “see themselves,” they often see identity dimensions as distinct. Starting from the perspective that students’ identities are fused prompts a focus on how heteronormativity contributes to students’ perceptions of identity dimensions as distinct. Connecting queer theory with the model draws attention to social power structures with which students must contend in developing their multiple identities.

Further, when queer theory informs the model, the result portrays students as changing, through resistance, the meaning of the contextual factors that shape their identity. Thus, the interaction between context and identity dimensions is mutually influencing, which is not portrayed in the current model. Still further, viewing the model through a queer lens, the identity “dots” surrounding the core no longer could be portrayed as distinct, currently a possibility in the model, but merge together and change in meaning, depending on the meaning of each of the other changing identities. Because KT and society are simultaneously changing and mutually influencing, not only are KT’s self-perceptions changing, but so too are the meaning of each of her multiple identities, each of which is in constant motion. This queer perspective opens up new possibilities for depicting the relationship between students’ multiple identities and contextual influences. The queer perspective also challenges the heteronormative meaning-making filter recently incorporated into the reconceptualized model that filters external influences depending on development toward self-authorship (Abes et al., 2007).

The fusion of identities brings to light one of the limitations of this study. By choosing to focus on only the four identities most salient

to KT, sexuality, religion, social class, and gender, we do not address how the meaning of each of those identities depends on the meaning of each her other social identities less salient to her, in particular her identity as a White woman. Not addressing KT’s whiteness could contribute to one of the critiques of queer theory, namely that it has been blind when it comes to race (Sullivan, 2003).

### Implications of Queer Theory for Student Affairs Practice

By describing how lesbian college students resist heteronormativity to construct their identities, this research raises the question as to how educators can support students’ resistance, helping them identify and deconstruct heteronormative obstacles within and between identities. At the same time, it challenges educators to identify and deconstruct these same obstacles.

One of the challenges in KT’s queer narrative is a call to re-examine how educators see and interact with students. Educators act as viewers and interpreters of students’ life experiences. Aspects of KT’s queer narrative are about the viewer, not the viewed. It is the viewer’s perception of KT’s identities that constructs distinctions and unities among KT’s dimensions of identity. The identity dimensions themselves do not change, but the viewer’s perception of the relationships among the dimensions changes. One of the implications for practice, then, is the need to reconsider how educators frame students. Do educators align students along a trajectory and measure their development through a process of stages, or do educators move outside of linear models to consider the influence that students are having on their environment to reshape their contexts? KT’s developmental and queer narratives are examples of how one student met situations in which she was on the subordinate side of power and what she did to

resist larger heteronormative structures. KT's experiences can help sensitize educators to issues that students may face and offer insight into how educators can challenge their own understanding of student development theory and the heteronormative assumptions upon which it is built.

Perhaps one of the subtlest implications of queer theory for work with students is the commentary on power in the relationship between students and educators. How student affairs educators see students' development reflects how they position themselves in relation to the students. This is not a simple matter of trying to do no harm, but moving beyond that to carefully consider how they establish, maintain, and share power in relationships with students. One measure of how student affairs professionals build power relationships with students can be seen in how students cooperate or offer resistance to those relationships. This is a call to check and challenge the ways in which cultural power is expressed with students. As KT's narratives reflect, how "normal" is constructed can create tremendous obstacles and difficulties for students. Abes (in press) demonstrated the transformations that occurred for one college student in how she thought about relationships among her sexuality, ethnicity, and gender when educators intentionally challenged heteronormativity and the meaning of normal through classes and co-curricular experiences. One approach to helping students deconstruct heteronormativity is supporting and perceiving student organizations and experiences as sites of resistance rather than only means to help students (Blackburn, 2004; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Talburt, 2004). For instance, allowing students increased levels of freedom to define the purpose and mission of student groups, challenging school policy structures that expect students to all behave in similar ways (e.g., clothing, social attitudes, interests, and co-

curriculars), and assuming that the pedagogical relationship between student and advisor moves from advisor down to student.

Where student affairs professionals have to exert caution is in making sure that the support offered to students does not create resistance groups that are reflections of the professionals' power rather than that of the students. This is not to say that students are always victims of power relationships. Talburt (2006) offered the challenge to move beyond the use of queer theory to reify a victimology of queer students; we take that challenge seriously. KT's queer narrative offers an alternative view of victimization. It offers a hopeful relationship in which educators help students define themselves in positive terms of what they value, rather than as survivors or victims of power structures they cannot control. It is a fundamental shift from being an onlooker with students to being an ally with students on their terms. When educators view students from a distance, imposing their own perspectives on how students are negotiating their multiple identities, they are too far removed to develop the caring relationships that nurture students. This reflects an "educator knows best" mentality in which students are passive receptors of knowledge or development. It is only where educators share a closer space with students, allowing students invested control of the relationship, that the real transformative work of helping students resist and influence heteronormativity occurs. Consistent with Noddings' (1984) ethic of care, in which care is demonstrated through "feeling with" (p. 30) another by receiving another into oneself rather than projecting oneself onto the other, it is important that educators work *with* students to identify and deconstruct the social constructions of their multiple identities rather than imposing their own power and perceptions onto the students. For instance, does the school define expectations

of students based solely on administrators' interests? Do students have a participatory role in defining what is expected of them? Without empowering students within the culture of a school, the focus on administrators' interests eliminates significant potential for student development because it rewards identities that conform to administrators' definitions of students and punishes expressions of identity (performatives) that challenge how the school's culture defines what a "student" is. As in the case of KT, such a restrictive definition of identity would miss the critical intrasections of resistance that make KT's narratives such a compelling example.

### Implications for Research

We encourage more research that uses post-structural and critical perspectives, queer or otherwise, to study college student development. Critical approaches, such as critical race theory, lend themselves to telling resistance narratives (e.g., Delgado & Stefanic, 2001) that address power structures. Critical perspectives should be applied to the study of dimensions of identity beyond sexual orientation, such as social class, race, and ethnicity to explore how other dominant structures, such as classism and racism, might be embedded within student development theories. We also encourage research that further explores possibilities for partnering queer theory and student development theory. We urge the design of student development research that utilizes queer theory as the theoretical perspective guiding all phases of the research. No doubt that process will bring with it methodological challenges that will be fruitful in

uncovering more of the nuances of juxtaposing a poststructural perspective with the lived experiences of college students. Such challenges might spur educators to think differently about student development.

### Conclusion

By exploring the intersection of queer theory and constructivist-developmental theory, we are responding to calls within student development literature for attention to the relationship between power structures and student development. Just as gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity development theories that do not account for heterosexism reify heterosexual privilege (D'Augelli, 1994; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Rhoads, 1997; Talburt, 2004), KT's queer narrative shows that student development theory does not yet adequately account for how heteronormativity contributes to lesbian students' negotiation of their multiple identities. Constructivist-developmental theory suggests that students are less developmentally complex if they are unable to overcome the heteronormativity that defines and separates their multiple identities. We do not intend to undermine the constructivist approach to development, which provides a rich understanding of the development of college students, but only to challenge its normative assumptions so that educators can more effectively work with the intrasections of students' identities.

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