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## **Using Fowler's Faith Development Theory in Student Affairs Practice**

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*This article provides a review and analysis of James Fowler's (1981) theory of faith development, while also describing the literature that surrounds his theory. Drawing from the work of Kohlberg, Erikson, and Piaget, Fowler developed a stage theory of faith development that has been continuously referred to by those interested in the faith development process, both in praise and criticism. While it was not initially intended to be a student development theory, Fowler's work can certainly be applied to the context of higher education. The author explains the relevance of faith development theory to the field of higher education and its applicability to day-to-day student affairs practice.*

*Keywords: Faith development Fowler, faith development, student development theory*

When discussing spiritual development, it is nearly impossible not to discuss the work of James Fowler and the impact he has had on the study of faith. Fowler not only explained the concept of faith and differentiated it from religion, but also mapped out the process by which individuals progress in their development as faithful individuals through a stage theory. As a result of his work's influence, numerous individuals have responded to his theory with criticism, modifications, and discourse on how it can be applied to various populations. Though Fowler's faith development model is not categorized as a student affairs theory specifically, it is quite applicable to undergraduate college students and can be examined within the context of higher education. This paper aims to not only discuss the basic tenets of Fowler's theory, the existing literature surrounding it, and its various strengths and limitations, but also attempts to illustrate how it can best be used in day-to-day student affairs practice and specifically with LGBT college students.

### **Fowler's Theory**

*In Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, Fowler (1981) explained his understanding of faith and laid out the

tenets of his faith development theory. He stated that faith and religion are not synonymous and should not be considered as such, as faith is defined as “a generic feature of the human struggle to find and maintain meaning” (Fowler, 1981, p. 91). However, to Fowler, that meaning does not necessarily have to be found through religion. Questions regarding faith that people ask themselves revolve around what gives their life meaning and purpose, as well as what their hopes for themselves and their loved ones are, among many others (Fowler, 1981). It is through faith that these questions are addressed, and as Fowler stated that faith is “a human universal,” (Fowler, 1981, p. xiii) he considered all individuals capable of reflecting on them during the course of their lives.

It is important to note that Fowler maintained that faith allows human beings to conceptualize what he called the “ultimate environment,” (Fowler, 1981, p. 24) the versions of the world that individuals create in their minds that shape the ways in which they understand and live in the real world. Fowler explained that the differences among belief, faith, and religion are associated with the ultimate environment in that individuals’ beliefs allow them to convey their ideas about this environment. Religion operates as a specific method of faith and its notion of the environment. Faith results from interactions and experiences that individuals have in the various components that make up their lives and unites these components so that they can feel their lives are “whole” (Fowler, 1981, p. 25).

In formulating his theory of faith development, encompassed by six stages (and one pre-stage) that occur throughout the lifespan, Fowler was influenced by the work of many notable theorists, including Lawrence Kohlberg, Erik Erikson, and Jean Piaget (Fowler, 1981). The stage theories proposed by each theorist influenced Fowler’s interpretation of how individuals develop faith, as did his interviews with individuals of all ages regarding their faith conceptions. According to Fowler (1981), the pre-stage, *infancy and undifferentiated faith* occurs during infancy and is characterized by babies’ realization that they are separate beings from their parents and rely on them completely to meet their needs. Thus, Fowler (1981) stated that the “first pre-images of God have their origins” (p. 121) in this stage as individuals begin to develop a sense of trust in others.

In stage one, *intuitive-projective faith*, which spans the ages of two through six or seven, individuals have developed language and are capable of drawing on stories that have been told to them as well as images they have seen to form conceptions of God, though the ways they describe Him are vague and somewhat “magical” (Fowler, 1981, p. 148). In stage two, *mythic-literal faith*, individuals from approximately seven through ten are capable of narrating stories that they understand in literal terms. Thus, descriptions of God rely on the images of Him that they have been exposed to. During this stage, Fowler (1981) also

explained that there is a reliance on the concept of fairness in separating right and wrong behaviors. Stage three, *synthetic-conventional faith*, is influenced by puberty and adolescents' development of self-images that are formed based on how they think others see them. Fowler (1981) stated that during this stage, "a person has an 'ideology,' a more or less consistent clustering of values and beliefs, but he or she has not objectified it for examination and in a sense is unaware of having it" (p. 173). People in this stage have developed conceptions of faith from various influences; yet do not engage in active personal reflection of what these conceptions mean.

Fowler (1981) explained that individuals can remain in stage three or move on to *individuating-reflective faith*, the fourth stage of faith development in which people can adopt new value systems as a result of exposure to different ways of life. These experiences result in their questioning of the faith conceptions that had previously been circumscribed to them. Though this often occurs for people during their twenties, a time characterized for many by immense change, it can also occur later on in their lives. During stage five, *conjunctive faith*, Fowler (1981) stated that individuals are capable of exploring other religions and belief systems in such a way that their own views can be either reinforced or amended. They are able to merge conceptions that previously seemed to be in opposition to one another without feeling that their own belief systems are being jeopardized, with this stage usually occurring during middle-age. Lastly, stage six, *universalizing faith*, is distinguished from stage five in that individuals at this stage are willing to "sacrifice the self and to risk the partial justice of the present order for the sake of a more inclusive justice and the realization of love" (Fowler, 1981, p. 200), while individuals in stage five merely recognize justice without committing themselves to challenge the existing order to ensure it is a reality for all. Fowler (1981) provided Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi as examples of individuals who reached the sixth stage of faith development, as only a small number of people do.

## Literature Review

The literature surrounding Fowler's faith development theory include, but are not limited to, works by Lownsdale (1997), Love (2002), Parker (2011), Stanard and Painter (2004), who focus on the implications of Fowler's faith development theory for counselors and student affairs professionals. Other key works are by Parker (2006) who examined the measure that Fowler used to develop his theory's stages and Daloz Parks (2000) who utilized Fowler's work in order to develop her own theory of faith development, in which she specifically focused on young adults. Prior to addressing these theorists' contributions in understanding faith development theory, the literature specifically surrounding the various strengths and limitations of Fowler's theory will be discussed.

Lownsdale (1997) stated that Fowler's faith development theory allows counselors to understand their own beliefs regarding God or the "ultimate environment," (p. 51) something that everyone has whether they are consciously aware of it or not. This is critical as counselors work with individuals who have different belief systems and must utilize counseling interventions that are not in opposition to their beliefs. As Fowler's theory centers on the idea of individuals possessing belief systems that develop as they move through life, it is able to provide insight as to how faith is acquired, maintained, and altered (Lownsdale, 1997). In discussing the implications that Fowler's theory has for those working as counselors or religious educators, Lownsdale (1997) maintained that they must focus an equal amount of time on understanding how their clients and students develop their beliefs as well as what those beliefs actually are, rather than simply acknowledging the latter.

Like Lownsdale (1997), Parker (2011) also discussed the implications of Fowler's faith development theory for counselors. He stated that knowledge of Fowler's theory is helpful for counselors in determining which stages their clients are in, as this allows them to utilize the strengths associated with the respective stages (Parker, 2011). Parker (2011) indicated that because counselors often see clients who are experiencing problems in their lives, and these problems may result in alterations to their belief systems, knowledge of faith development theory provides them with the ability to "sort out times of faith stage transition from other life crises as well as times when these might co-occur" (p. 113). As a result, counselors who have been educated in faith development theory can draw on it when working with individuals who are simultaneously experiencing life problems and faith stage transitions, whether the transitions are influenced by these problems or not.

Love (2002) discussed how knowledge of faith development theory is useful for student affairs professionals; it allows them to examine their own process of meaning-making, recognize the differences between faith and religion, and provide insight as to how they can assist students in this realm of development. Similarly, Stanard and Painter (2004) discussed how Fowler's theory is specifically useful for college counselors, stating that those who have an understanding of Fowler's stages of faith are "better prepared to facilitate students' growth and to help them resolve their presenting problems" (p. 201) than those without knowledge of Fowler's stages of faith. They maintained that even though a college student may present a problem to a college counselor that may not seem to be related to faith, looking at the problem through the lens of Fowler's theory may indicate that the issue can be explained through a faith perspective (Stanard & Painter, 2004).

Stanard and Painter (2004) included a case study in their work that provided an exemplary scenario in which a college counselor could utilize

knowledge of Fowler's faith development theory when working with a student experiencing difficulty adjusting to resident life at a four-year college. As a result the counselor was able to identify that the student was operating in stage three of Fowler's theory, *synthetic-conventional faith*. Understanding that individuals who are in this stage utilize belief systems they were exposed to by family members and tend to have strict, unwavering ideas of what is right and wrong, the counselor could help expose the student to new ideas and belief systems (Stanard & Painter, 2004). For a counselor who has not been exposed to Fowler's faith development theory may not realize the student's issue is related to a faith stage and would miss the opportunity to help in faith development.

Parker (2006) examined the faith development interview (FDI) that Fowler used as the way of gathering information to develop his theory. He found that while the FDI is the most useful tool for examining Fowler's stages, it is imperfect in that it can require quite a long time to utilize effectively and there is a need to train individuals on how scoring occurs post-interview (Parker, 2006). While Parker (2006) provided alternative measures that could be used as ways of measuring faith development, he noted that because Fowler's conception of faith is quite complex, the shorter alternatives would "likely omit the very aspects of faith that are unique to Fowler's theory" (p. 346).

It is important to note that Fowler (1981) played a critical role in the development of Sharon Daloz Parks's theory of faith development. After years of teaching, counseling, and conducting research in college settings, Daloz Parks (2000) developed a theory in which she focused on how young adults, defined as individuals between 17 to 30, make meaning in their lives. She stated that faith is "the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience," (Daloz Parks, 2000, p. 7) and like Fowler, she did not view faith and religion as the same. Additionally, Daloz Parks (2000) described faith as an experience had by all humans, echoing Fowler's work. She stated that for young adults, experiencing faith involves making new discoveries that differ from previously held assumptions about the world and subsequently altering their structures of faith and meaning (Daloz Parks, 2000). Colleges and universities have traditionally played a role in fostering this faith development by providing students with new experiences and ways of thinking according to Daloz Parks (2010).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Though clearly influential to the study of faith, Fowler's theory is associated with strengths as well as limitations. Fowler's theory provides individuals with a framework to identify where they and others are in terms of faith development (Lownsdale, 1997; Love, 2002; Parker, 2011). This is a characteristic that is especially useful for counselors or student affairs

professionals who may work with individuals who are struggling to understand the role that faith or spirituality plays in their lives. Moreover, as Fowler differentiated between faith and religion, individuals who do not necessarily identify with a particular religion but derive meaning and purpose in their lives through other sources of faith are still recognized in his theory (Dykstra, 1986). Additionally, Dykstra (1986) stated that a strength of Fowler's theory is that it focuses generally on the levels of faith that individuals operate at, rather than on what it means to be practicing respective religions at each stage. In explaining this point, Dykstra (1986) stated that it "is normatively more important to be at, say, stage 5 (regardless of one's religion or lack of it) than to be, say, learning the beliefs, values, and ways of living of the Jewish or Christian or Muslim faith increasingly more deeply" (p. 53).

Despite these strengths, Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) pointed out that researchers have claimed that Fowler's (1981) theory may simply be a statement of what he thought faith development ought to look like, and that researchers have also taken issue with the fact that Fowler seemed to believe that individuals who have reached the last stage of his theory have superior faith experiences than those in the lower stages.

Moreover, Keeley (2010) stated the limitation that because Fowler's theory is encompassed by stages that individuals are said to move through as they develop and too much focus may be placed on the age groups that each stage is associated with. This is limiting because there can be great variation amongst individuals and their developmental processes. For example, while it may be true that some adolescents are associated with the *synthetic-conventional faith* stage, others may be operating in either lower or higher stages. Keeley (2010) also pointed out that because Fowler's theory is based off the work of Kohlberg, Erikson, and Piaget, individuals who developed theories that also have limitations, his theory is thus inherently plagued by these limitations as well. As not all of these limitations are well understood, caution must be exercised when attempting to apply Fowler's theory to real-life scenarios (Keeley, 2010).

Discussions of whether Fowler's (1981) theory adequately explains the faith development stages as they are experienced by women have also been addressed in the literature surrounding his theory. Streib (2003) laid out the criticisms that exist regarding this potential limitation of faith development theory, and he stated that researchers have suggested that women do not move through faith stages in a systematic and linear way, but rather have a "whirlpool experience of faith" (p. 27). Furthermore, researchers have identified Fowler's (1981) fourth stage, *individuated-reflective faith*, as especially problematic for women in that it may not adequately describe the factors associated with movement from the *synthetic-conventional faith* stage to this one (Streib, 2003).

Streib (2003) did mention that Fowler proposed a potential revision of stage four to include women's tendency to experience life in a relational way.

Broughton (1986) also indicated another limitation of Fowler's theory, that being that his last stage of *universalizing faith* may not have been as adequately developed or capable of being supported as his other ones. Broughton (1986) pointed out that while Fowler (1981) mentioned that he met one man who he determined to have reached the stage of *universalizing faith*, he did not provide readers with any further information on him. In addition, when providing examples of individuals who have reached this last faith stage, Fowler (1981) mentioned Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi, people whom he did not interview. Thus, as illustrated by Broughton (1986), Fowler was inconsistent in the methodology that he used to develop his stages (excluding the pre-stage in which interviews could not be conducted due to the verbal limitations of those associated with this stage).

Moreover, Broughton (1986) stated that because the men that Fowler (1981) used as examples of individuals operating at stage six had high levels of education, they may have had the benefit of learning certain concepts that contributed to their perceived high faith functioning, rather than progressively developing. According to Broughton (1986), this possibility "threatens the apparent naturalness of the stage sequence" (p. 97). Due to his failure to find individuals operating at the stage of *universalizing faith* (and failure to provide information on the one person he did claim to have found operating at it), there are methodological differences he used in developing his sixth stage compared to his other ones (excluding the pre-stage). There is a possibility that the individuals he did indicate as operating at the sixth faith stage may not have reached this through the process of development that is fundamental to this theory. These issues certainly limit the usefulness of Fowler's theory in that not all of his stages were developed using the same criteria (Broughton, 1986) and are thus not capable of being equally supported.

In specifically discussing the cultural limitations of Fowler's theory, Clore and Fitzgerald (2002) claimed that although Fowler initially stated in *Stages of Faith* that his faith development theory was universal, research has suggested that "full development as Fowler sees it may occur only in more 'developed' cultures" (p. 98). This is certainly a cultural limitation of Fowler's theory in that it may not be applicable to all individuals, but only to people similar to those he interviewed prior to developing it. Thus, it may be likely that Fowler's theory is best applied to individuals living in highly developed countries.

Additionally, many scholars have criticized Fowler's theory as being based off Western Christian conceptions (Keeley, 2010). In fact, Broughton (1986) pointed out that over 80% of the people that Fowler interviewed and based his theory off of were Christian. This is another cultural limitation of his theory in

that it may not be well suited for non-Christian individuals or those who are Christian but do not live in Western nations. In taking account these two cultural limitations, the cultural group that Fowler's theory most applies to is Christians living in highly developed, Western nations. However, in discussing these cultural limitations, it is important to note that while Fowler did originally state that his theory was universal, he did eventually stop making this claim as a result of the criticisms that this aspect of his theory received (Clare & Fitzgerald, 2002).

### **Application**

A recent research study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) illustrated that 48% of college freshmen state that "it is 'essential' or 'very important' that college encourage their personal expression of spirituality" (HERI, 2005, p. 6). It is clear that college students desire faith development and expect their institutions to assist them in the faith development process. In order to meet this expectation, Fowler's faith development theory can be utilized in day-to-day student affairs practice as student affairs professionals work with different students and develop programs that aim to foster faith development.

Chickering and colleagues (2006) stated that because college students can differ in which faith stages they are associated with, they will experience college in different ways. Having knowledge of Fowler's theory and how individuals can vary in how they conceive and experience faith can allow student affairs professionals to identify which stages their respective students are associated with. By having an understanding of where students are in faith development, student affairs professionals can provide appropriate counseling strategies that will both serve student needs and provide enough challenge so they do not remain stagnant in their faith stages.

Knowledge of Fowler's faith development theory can also be useful for student affairs professionals as they attempt to create and implement faith development programs, as they will understand that certain programs may be more appropriate for students who are in the beginning stages of Fowler's theory, and others may be more beneficial for those in the middle or later stages. For example, programs geared towards individuals situated in the lower faith stages may be developed with the goal to introduce students to new ideas, beliefs, and ways of thinking so they do not continue to blindly accept those that they were exposed to throughout childhood. However, programs developed for students in later stages may seek to introduce social justice concepts and encourage students to actively challenge oppression in their society.

Perhaps most importantly, student affairs professionals can create a campus environment that "supports open conversations about spiritual development by modeling these dialogues with colleagues and students"

(Lindholm, Millora, Schwartz, & Spinosa, 2011, p. 15) in order to facilitate the faith development process. There are several programs being implemented at college and university campuses across the nation that aim to do this. At Cardinal Stritch University, “Mystic Pizza” allows faculty and staff to discuss their personal faith journeys with students over a meal, while Monmouth College’s “Why Am I Here? The Unfolding of Life” includes monthly gatherings in which faculty and staff illustrate to students that life can take many directions, and that this is not a bad thing. Furthermore, the University of Tampa’s “Spiritual Life Through Film” series allows faculty and students to watch movies related to spiritual development, world cultures, and religion and discuss and analyze these themes together (Lindholm et al., 2011). Through incorporating programs similar to these on their own college or university campuses, student affairs professionals can help students conceptualize faith development as it applies to their own lives.

Lindholm and colleagues (2011) also emphasized the importance of student affairs professionals developing programs that focus on “wholeness and holistic education (p. 17) rather than those that have solely academic or social goals. Even existing campus programs, such as those provided by career services or student involvement and leadership offices can be altered to provide opportunities for student faith development. Lindholm and colleagues explained that conversations can be framed within the career exploration process to include emphasis on meaning and purpose as it relates to career choices, while leadership trainings for those in student organizations could integrate reflection exercises. No matter what the program or strategy is, student affairs professionals have the potential to create campus environments that are conducive to faith development through purposeful attempts to do so.

### **Applying Fowler’s Work to LGBT Students**

While Fowler’s theory can be applied to many specific groups of students on campus, his theory can be especially useful as student affairs professionals work with LGBT students. Halkitis and colleagues (2009) illustrated that LGBT individuals may desire a place for religion and spirituality in their lives in order to understand their positions within the larger society. Unfortunately, as religion has “often been used to legitimize the ostracism of LGBT individuals,” (Halkitis et al., 2009, p. 258) some LGBT college students may have been forced to leave their places of worship after revealing their sexual or gender identities. As Fowler’s (1981) theory clearly articulates that faith and religion are not one in the same, and that religion is merely one expression of faith, this allows his theory to be particularly applicable to this group of students. Student affairs professionals can work with LGBT students and illustrate that despite resistance from some religious groups, faith can be a significant component of their lives. By providing these individuals with various opportunities to develop faith and move through

Fowler's stages, student affairs professionals can positively impact their college experiences and provide them with a support that they can utilize throughout their lives.

Moreover, it is important for student affairs professionals to recognize that LGBT students subscribe to multiple identities that impact higher education experiences (Poynter & Washington, 2005). For example, a student may describe herself as bisexual, she may also identify as an African American female that is a practicing Christian. Given that fact that LGBT students must navigate through the process of developing each of their identities, student affairs professionals who are well-versed in multiple identity development theories and how they complement each other may be best suited to foster a community for these students that is conducive to growth (Poynter & Washington, 2005). In specifically explaining how LGBT identity development and faith development overlap, Poynter and Washington (2005) stated that "developing an LGBT identity might create a need to find a faith community or an LGBT community that is affirming and supportive of a person's faith and sexual or gender identity" (p. 43). Thus, it is through providing safe spaces in which LGBT students can reflect on their experiences as members of multiple groups that student affairs professionals can aid in their overall development, as well as in more specific domains as faith and spirituality.

## **Conclusion**

Through his faith development theory, James Fowler greatly contributed to the research that existed on faith and influenced the work of other theorists. As this paper has illustrated, while Fowler's theory is not necessarily categorized as a student affairs theory, it is still quite useful for student affairs professionals as they attempt to foster faith development in their students, something that nearly half of college students rate as important for their institutions to do (HERI, 2005). The applicability of faith development theory to day-to-day student affairs practice, and especially for professionals working with LGBT students, allows this theory to be utilized in conjunction with student development theories. Nonetheless, Fowler's theory is not immune to limitations, both general and cultural. Student affairs professionals must be aware of these limitations when using this theory in order to effectively serve students and contribute to their personal growth.

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