

Understanding social constructivism of intimacy and isolation among heterosexuals and homosexuals

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ABSTRACT

The present study explored and understood the psychosocial stage of intimacy and isolation for participants belonging to Indian background. It took a social constructivist perspective to identify the ideas pertaining to “lived experiences” of the participants. The study took place in two stages. The first stage consisted of a focused group discussion with six individuals. Nine participants from an urban background between the ages of 21-35 years were interviewed in the second phase of the study. A thematic model of data analysis was used to explore the ideas from the descriptions provided. Upon analysis, major themes pertaining to their meaning, people involved, emotions felt and the reasons were found for the intimacy and isolation statuses of the participants. A comparison between the constructions of heterosexual and homosexual participants was explored and several important ideas and themes were reported. Among the homosexual participants, issues of identity and self were identified. The study also looked at the thematic differences between male and female participants which only differed on two of the themes, namely the “impact of intimacy and isolation” and “meaning of intimacy”. Implications of the research have been discussed in the light of clinical and healthcare interventions as well as to empower the homosexual community in the country against the prevailing stigma. Further, limitations of the present study and recommendations have been mentioned.

Keywords: *Social Constructivism, Homosexuality, Gender Difference*

Human beings grow and develop in a social environment. The surroundings of an individual play an important role in the healthy development of an individual. It includes his/her family, social circles, social institutions like school, college and the cultural beliefs. These “external factors” may affect an individual’s development either directly or in an indirect way. For example, an individual whose parents shifted homes from one place to another will have a much different personality from an individual who has been living in the same town for years. Hence, the focus of the personality development has now shifted towards an individual’s immediate surroundings and past experiences. Human beings learn certain behaviours by observing others, through trial and error, or either through their interaction with others.

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Received: January 16, 2020; Revision Received: February 3, 2020; Accepted: February 25, 2020

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The social development of an individual goes hand-in-hand with their biological and psychological development. Especially, when an individual attains puberty, he/she has to go through bodily changes, resolve the psychological problems going on in his/her mind and at the same time, meet and respond to the expectations set by the society, again, pointing out towards a bio-psycho-social approach. Across all cultures, the period of puberty or the stage of adolescence is marked by an urge to form interpersonal bonds with members of opposite sex. This urge may sometimes result into healthy interpersonal relationships for some individuals. The period of late adolescence brings new social changes as the individual is somewhat independent and can make his/her own decisions and choices in terms of partners. Some individuals may share different types of intimate bonds with their partners, whereas others are left with loneliness and isolation. This time period of an individual may have positive and detrimental implications for an individual. Either an individual may end up having healthy interpersonal relationships, thus contributing to his/her personality development in a positive manner, otherwise he/she may end up being alone in his/her life and may indulge in self-defeating thought patterns and behaviours, which may lead to his/her personality being rigid and insecure. The social relationships of an individual have a key role to play in his/her mental health. An unhealthy relationship may leave an Individual emotionally and physically exhausted and may change his/her outlook towards life.

Loneliness is the basic root cause for many mental health problems. A recent study found that most of the Americans are lonely. This study gets more surprising as it reveals that millennials (23-37) and generation Z (18-22) are lonelier than older population. This points toward a need of addressing the issue of loneliness around the world (Nemecek, 2018). Younger people are more prone to suffer from loneliness and subsequent mental health issues because they are more influenced and affected by their surroundings as compared to older generation (Coughlan, 2018). Loneliness is not only related to social media accounts or the personality of the individual but it is much more than that. Hence it is important to understand the underlying social causes of this problem.

Merely having interpersonal relationships does not safeguard one from loneliness issues. One can be in a close relationship but still feel lonely due to external factors such as experiencing changes in life such as unemployment, movement to a new place, etc. Hence, the presence of intimacy does not point towards a total absence of isolation in one's life. A person's sense of intimacy develops from his/her interaction with his/her family members, friends, etc. An individual may share an intimate relationship with his/her partner or his/her close friend or even a close family member.

The length of a relationship is a significant predictor of sexual disclosure (Ogunleye & Balogun, 2013). An individual learns a sense of emotional intimacy from his/her family at first. When he/she gets attracted towards another individual sexually, it may result into a form of physical intimacy. Hence, the family and friends may be referred as an Individual's reference groups from which he/she learns about intimacy and its other aspects that one shares with other people. An individual may develop a sense of intimacy from his/her virtual world as well where he/she may share virtual connections with other individuals that he/she feels close to.

Young adults & adults are prone to several behavioural issues such as substance abuse, mental health problems, etc. which may severely affect their physical body as well. In India, there are provisions and support for more severe mental disorders such as Schizophrenia,

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Substance abuse, etc. In the country, nearly 5 per cent of the Indians suffer from depression and most of the suicide attempts are committed by people below 44 years of age. Hence there is a significant need of acknowledging the lack of attention towards the mental health of millennial and generation Z population of the nation.

Intimacy and isolation have been subjected to rigorous research only during recent times. The studies done on heterosexual population clearly ignores and excludes the intake of homosexual participants in their research. This further affects the healthcare provisions for the community as their mental health status is not focused upon which further leads to higher rates of mental problems in the homosexual population across the country. The lack of research in this area needs more attention so as to understand their nature of intimacy and isolation and what can be done in this regard.

In a multicultural environment like that of India, the focus on the social construction of reality hold much value so as to understand the true nature of the situation regarding loneliness and isolation for various sets of people in the country. In a country like India, where marriage is more likely to be arranged, the need to understand the nature of intimacy becomes important as love and satisfaction do not have much role to play in arranged marriages (Madathil, Myers & Tingle, 2005).

According to Erik Erikson, the nature of intimacy and isolation holds the most value for young adults where healthy interpersonal relationships are a key for an Individual's optimum development (Erikson, 1963). It is a unique approach towards understanding different social phases of life in the light of a particular context (Erikson, 1963). He mentioned the ego development of an individual in terms of the opposing forces that exist for a particular stage.. Throughout the ages, his theory has been subjected to rigorous testing and criticism. Some have modified the theory to better fit into the clinical, educational and counseling setups (Marcia & Josselson, 2014; Hamachek, 1988, 1990). In doing so, the universality and stability of the theory has been greatly questioned. But the interconnectedness of the stages has been shown in a few studies (Mackinnon, Pasquale & Pratt, 2015).

The third stage of intimacy vs. isolation is the focus of the study. Various researchers have defined intimacy in terms of observable traits such as an ability to maintain healthy intimate bond with others, committing to another individual (Hamachek, 1988, 1990).

The stage of intimacy and isolation is seen around the stage of 21-35 years of age (Erikson, 1963). This stage especially holds much value for its partial manifestation in other proceeding stages and thus affecting important interpersonal bonds between partners (Weinberger, Hofstein & Witbourne, 2008). There are no studies focusing on the constructions made by Indians in this stage of psychosocial development. Hence, a need for Indian studies for Erikson's psychosocial model is prevalent. Also, recently India witnessed the scrapping of a constitution article that decriminalized same-sex relationships in India. Moreover, it has also been seen that women have shown better achievement of a particular pole in a psychosocial stage (Heller and Wood, 1998; Montgomery, 2005; Hook, Gerstein, Detterich & Gridley, 2003). The present research seeks to explore and identify the themes revolving around the Eriksonian stage of intimacy vs. isolation among Heterosexual and Homosexual participants from India. For doing so, factors such as marriage and relationship status will also be considered. The study is one of a kind research in the field to our knowledge.

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According to Baron and Byrne (1997), India has been listed as a collectivistic culture (as cited in Darwish & Huber, 2003). Therefore, the construction of the concepts of intimacy and isolation are highly influenced by the related cultural and social factors for an individual and the existing literature lacks a comprehensive approach to study the psychosocial constructs in the light of specific cultural and social factors. Research has shown that Erikson's model of psychosocial development is inadequate to be applied in indigenous cultures (Salamone & Salamone, 1993). Hence, there is a growing need for formulation of a modified version of the theory in a unique context of India.

Psychosocial development model has been significantly linked with therapeutic implications (Marcia & Josselson, 2014). The present research will suggest a few more modifications that can be made in the health provisions for the heterosexual and LGBTQIA population of India. The present study tries to understand the psychosocial development from an Indian context and tries to explore the unique and new perspectives on the notions of intimacy and isolation as perceived by homosexuals and compare it with heterosexuals. It focuses on the socially constructed themes of intimacy and isolation for individuals. It will contribute towards the existing literature on intimacy. At the same time, the results will have implications for the mental health interventions designed for the young adults' population, especially in relationship or marriage counseling. It is one of its kind towards understanding the mental health status of Homosexuals living in India. Hence, it is a step towards fighting the stigma that prevails in our society regarding the LGBTQIA community. Also, it'll provide a platform for upcoming researchers to plan and modify new healthcare interventions for such populations. It also tries to throw light on the variable themes of construction for participants involved in different lengths of relationships. Hence, this study may have further applications for the patients who suffer from loneliness and depression by focusing on identified themes and how it affects their mental health.

The present study will study the concept of intimacy and isolation from a social constructivism viewpoint. The concept of "Social Constructivism" originated from the domain of sociology. According to this philosophical approach, there is no single reality but there exists multiple realities. The individual learns by engaging oneself in a collaborative process with others which is active in nature. It gives significant attention to an individual's cultural and social setting in which he/she exists. Hence, this approach supports the idea of "Inter-subjectivity" where individuals have shared understanding of the concepts through their interaction. Hence, an individual's knowledge is derived from the common understanding of concepts rooted in his/her interaction with others.

Research Questions

1. How homosexuals and heterosexuals discern the idea of intimacy for themselves?
2. How homosexuals and heterosexuals describe the idea of isolation for themselves?
3. How are the constructions of intimacy and isolation different among homosexuals and heterosexual participants?
4. How males and females differ in their conceptualization of intimacy and isolation?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Erikson's theory of ego development has been described as epigenetic and unfolds itself in eight stages spanning throughout the life course of an individual (Erikson, 1963). However, these eight stages have been studied in great detail by the researchers after the conception of the psychosocial development theory. It is beneficial to use the theory in a longitudinal

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design as well as a self-report measure as it was found to have high internal consistency and stability over time (Sneed, Whitbourne & Culang, 2008; Boyd & Koskela, 1970). Such findings increase the credibility of the self-report measures but also subject the study to scrutiny of socially desirable responding and biased responses from the participants (Boyd & Koskela, 1970). Hence, it might be more appropriate to test the components of the psychosocial theory in a qualitative or a mixed methods setup to yield a better study of the individual differences manifested in the psychosocial development. Most of the studies have studied the psychosocial stages within a certain contextual framework.

In a typical study diving into the emotional accounts of the lives of old homeless men, Smith and Nicolson (2011) found some interesting themes that these men associated their lives with. Their narratives showed that these men were experiencing a sense of despair in their lives but at the same time, they managed to reflect upon their past as a source of learning. It is explicitly reported in the study that one's present self is a product of reconstruction of the past memories. The older men view their current lives as interplay of personal and social factors. However, these men's rich narratives touch their professional lives as well to understand their process of achieving a sense of ego-integrity.

There are studies which have tried to study these psychosocial stages as a function of some observable behavioural traits. A few studies explained the opposing forces for a stage mentioned by Erikson with more clarity and also discussed the implications for enhancing an individual's therapeutic intervention by assessing his/her developmental problems associated with previous psychosocial stages. They have also emphasised that there is no correct polarity for any given psychosocial stage but the healthy development of an individual depends on the balance that he/she maintains between certain behaviours that aids his/her positive ego development (Hamachek, 1988, 1990). A limitation of such a study is that it lacks empirical evidence and does not take into account the triangulation of information from other concerned individuals as well. Most of the literature point towards the preference of a pole from the other for a given psychosocial stage as a part of healthy psychosocial development. However, Erikson and colleagues (1986) described a healthy balance of the two poles to achieve healthy ego development. For example, Mackinnon et al. (2015) focused only on the positive aspects of the intimacy component in young adults and the positive outcomes posited by it. However, the so called positive side of intimacy is seen as dystonic in nature which can bring unhappiness and may result in poor functioning of the individual (Newell, 2015).

Some researchers have tried to understand the psychosocial development beyond the eighth stage as mentioned by Erikson (Erikson, 1963). Brown and Lowis (2003) tried to develop a ninth stage of psychosocial development marked by a sense of gero-transcendence (Tornstam, 1989) and looking towards the future but at the same time, confronting the past crisis again. Erikson's theory has been described as a continuing process with individual differences facilitating the psychosocial growth towards achieving a particular virtue of a stage. In a modelling analysis of a thirty- years old longitudinal study data, it was found that the core stage of basic trust vs. mistrust develops for most of the individuals only by 20 years of age in a form of a linear progression (Sneed, Whitbourne & Culang, 2008). Although this research emphasised on the individual differences and unique trajectories of each stage, there is a lack of studies focusing on studying individual differences in the pattern seen in psychosocial development. Since Erikson's theory was a flexible theory of development, a few researchers have reformulated it in different life spans but keeping the chronological order the same (Capps, 2004)

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Recently, researchers have postulated that two or more stages may have partial manifestation in a during the defined age period for a particular stage. These are of clinical importance where a unique interplay of different psychosocial stages at any given time period may serve as a basis for an individual's therapeutic intervention (Marcia & Josselson, 2014). Hence, the Eriksonian theory has been actively modified to better fit into the current clinical, educational and counselling setups (Hamachek, 1988, 1990). These psychosocial stages are not independent but are interconnected to each other. Mackinnon, Pasquale & Pratt (2015) found that friendship intimacy in young adults was a significant contributor of generativity in later stage. Hence, friendship may be considered as a significant social theme revolving around intimacy and Isolation. However, in the same research, they found that sex has an effect on this relationship. Females are found to be more generative as compared to men. This is consistent with the results obtained from other studies as well as concerning the effect of previous stages on later adult behaviour (Weinberger, Hofstein & Witbourne, 2008)

The theory of psychosocial development is theorised to be universal in nature. However, its application to certain indigenous cultures is questionable. In such cultures, their own concepts for ego development might resemble some of the psychosocial stages of Erikson's theory but their outcomes and the context in which they are seen to operate are entirely different from what is mentioned in the ego development of an individual in the existing psychosocial theory (Salamone & Salamone, 1993).

Erikson's theory has been described in much detail horizontally but it clearly lacks a vertical viewpoint, i.e., the understanding of the relationship between the stages (Meacham & Santilli, 1982). However, it has been found that this relationship exists with the previous stage influencing a later one (Orlofsky, Marcia & Lesser, 1973). In the present study, the understanding of intimacy and isolation holds a central position. Hence, it is more likely that the stage of identity formation have an impact on this stage of intimacy and isolation. However, for homosexuals, the process of identity formation may not take a linear path as seen in the case of heterosexuals. In their case, the process of "coming out" may hold more value and may affect their subsequent stages of psychosocial development. Previous studies have tried to come up with a sequence of stages for such population (Coleman, 1982; McDonald, 1982; Monteflores & Schultz, 1978; Troiden & Goode, 1980), with the stage of 'realisation of homosexuality' as being the first one. Other researches of our interest includes the conceptualisation of homosexuality from a social constructionist viewpoint where it is assumed that it is affected by social institutions (Dank, 1971) or the constraints inflicted due to the socially constructed views of sexuality. In other words, there exists an influence of the social interaction on the identity formation of homosexuals. Now, if we consider the psychosocial development as unidirectional along with the formulation that the subsequent stages' achievement adds on the achievement on previous stages, it can be posited that the issue of homosexual identity formation stage may also affect their later stage of intimacy and isolation. Bisexuality has been seen from a different lens than homosexuality and hence, their identity formation process have been found to be delayed than the exclusively gay sample (Rust, 1993; Calzo & Antonucci, 2011).

A gender difference in the expression of behaviour pertinent to psychosocial development is missing from most of these studies. However, females are seen as expressing higher level of intimacy during their young adulthood as compared to men (Heller & Wood, 1998; Montgomery, 2005; Hook, Gerstein, Detterich & Gridley, 2003). This may have implications for predicting behaviours at a later stage such as issues with partners and subsequent failure

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of a relationship (Weinberger, Hofstein & Witbourne, 2008). However, more research is required in studies that take on approach other than self-report measures.

In India, the concept of marriage holds cultural and social implications where most of the marriages are still arranged by the family of the individuals. In such cases, the idea of intimacy for the couple becomes restricted and confined. Thus, the concept of marriage for such couples can be best understood from their interaction with others, thus making it a by-product of social constructivism. In turn, it greatly affects the shared understanding of the marital bond between the husband and the wife (Sonpar, 2005).

Most of the studies show a consistent lack of attention to the special population of LGBTQIA and their psychosocial development. The individuals from 21-35 years of age are less focused upon in the country and do not have significant mental health help and interventions. This study seeks to suggest a few modifications in the current health practice scenarios of such age group population (heterosexuals as well as homosexuals) by studying their issues of intimacy and isolation.

The study takes a social constructivist understanding of the issues on intimacy and isolation. Social constructivism as a method of inquiry has been constantly compared with terms within psychology and sociology such as personal construct theory, cognitive constructivism and radical constructivism. It has been defined as an important contributor for the creation of social reality (Sexton, 1997). It places the importance on the cultural and contextual factors which have received less attention in the field of psychology (Raskin, 2002). Extensive studies have been done on constructivism in relation to its therapeutic application for family therapy. But its appropriateness within these disciplines have been put to question lately (Speed, 1991). One way in which it is different is the way in which it places the ideas and the experiences of the individual in a social setup, affected by various interactions and institutions (Gergen, 1985). Hence, it was considered appropriate for the study.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

The research study has the following objectives:

1. To explore and understand the prevalent themes around which Indians attach meaning to intimacy.
2. To explore and understand the prevalent themes around which Indians attach meaning to isolation.
3. To compare the understanding of homosexuals and heterosexuals on intimacy and isolation.
4. To explore gender differences in the construction of themes around intimacy and isolation.

Research Design

The study is aimed at understanding the social constructivism of intimacy and isolation. Hence, the focus here is on the “shared meaning” for participants of their lived experiences of these concepts rather than focusing on a single individual. Therefore, the study is qualitative in nature, aimed at understanding the “lived experiences” of the participants and taking a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2007, p. 57-59).

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Concepts and Dimensions

The stage of intimacy and isolation has been defined in terms of certain observable characteristics.

Intimacy. Intimacy is characterized by “possessing healthy intimate relationships, committing to another person, expressing feelings towards another person.” (Hamachek, 1990)

Isolation. On the other hand, isolation is defined as just the opposite of intimacy as characterized by “hesitant to form close emotional bonds with others, difficulties in commitment and in expressing their feelings” (Hamachek, 1990).

However, it should be noted that no one pole out of the two is solely beneficial to an individual and should not be viewed as a syntonik side.

The homosexual population (in this study, only gays and lesbians) may have a different formulation of the same concepts. Thus, it might lead to a new dimension of construction exclusively for homosexual population.

Operational Definitions

Intimacy. Existence of the concept in terms of its constituent elements in the form of a construction which is a result of social interactions of participants.

Isolation. Viewing the concept in terms of the various contributing factors which leads to the construction of its idea.

Sample

The study was divided into two stages. First stage was a preliminary stage while the second stage consisted of in-depth interviews with the participants.

Sample characteristics. All the participants belonged to an urban background. They had decent educational background. Some were working professionals while others were students.

Sample size. First stage consisted of a focused group discussion in which a total of six participants took part. Participants in the second stage consisted of two groups of participants, in which four were present in the heterosexual group whereas five participants formed a part of the homosexual group.

Sampling techniques. The participants in first stage were selected through a purposive sampling technique. The sampling technique used for the second stage study was also purposive in nature, with age as a general criterion for all the participants (21-35 years). Along with purposive sampling, snow-balling was also used.

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For both the groups, inclusive criteria and the no. of participant were as follows:

Table 1 Sample Matrix

Heterosexual participants	No. of participants	Homosexual participants	No. of participants
Marriage/Long-term intimate relationship (>5 years)	1	Long-term intimate relationship (>5 years)	1
Involved in a Relationship (<5 Years)	2	Involved in a Relationship (<5 years)	4
No Relationships	1	No Relationships	0
Total = 4 participants		Total = 5 participants	

Group 1 consisted of heterosexual individuals whereas group 2 had exclusively homosexual individuals (gays and lesbians).

Procedure

Before the main study, a pilot study with a focused group discussion took place in which several underlying themes and adjoining concepts were identified which later form the base for the interview will schedule. The participants of the study were sent a document containing the informed consent and basic debriefing letter via email. Then, they were called for a one-on-one interview process in a public or any other comfortable location which was mutually agreed upon. The interview responses were tape recorded only after taking the consent of the participants. After the interview, the participants were thanked for their contribution and they are informed that they shall get know the results of the study by contacting the researcher.

The Interview process will consist of a single session of semi-structured interviews which will be recorded with the consent of the individual. The interview will consist of a pre-decided set of questions which will be expert validated and will be carefully constructed to encompass the objectives of the proposed study. The interview will be accompanied by obtaining of demographic information of the participants such as age, sex, marital status, etc. The data will be analyzed through thematic model. The focus of the design will be to obtain rich information on the understanding of intimacy and isolation constructs from the viewpoint of social construction of the concepts among Indian heterosexual and homosexual participants.

Data Analysis

For the first stage of the study, the analysis of the focus group discussion followed a five-step process where the responses of the participants were grouped and labeled and then findings and theories were developed based on the similar labels.

For the second stage of the study, the information was analyzed using the thematic analysis because the focus was on finding and reporting the pattern and themes emerging from the data. Upon selection and multiple readings of relevant segments of the narratives, themes were developed using coding and were sorted into categories in order to draw conclusions. Identifying the latent and manifest content and their integration, emphasising the context were the main focus of analysis here (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). Under the phenomenological approach, the focus of interest lies in developing the essence of the

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experiences provided (Creswell, 2007, p. 157). Hence, the thematic analysis model in align with the phenomenological approach was used for the study.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent. The participants are given a document containing the nature of the study and the type of questions that will be asked from the participants. After well-informing the participants, their willingness to participate in the study is taken.

Debriefing. The participants receive a briefing session at the start and at the end of their interview process about the context of the questions and that their responses will be recorded.

Confidentiality. Since the information shared by the participants will be very private in nature, hence the participants will be assured about the confidentiality of the information given by them.

Sensitive formulation of questions. The questions in the semi-structured interview are formulated keeping in mind the sensitive nature of the issues covered in the study.

Trustworthiness/Credibility

To establish the trustworthiness/credibility of the proposed study, two specific techniques were used:

Member check was done in which the transcribed information was shared with the participants to ensure that the essence that they wanted to convey remained the same in the transcription.

During data analysis, inter-rater coding was used in which multiple raters went through the information simultaneously and common theoretical codes were developed and used.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The interview conversations were first transcribed verbatim. The data was analyzed using a six-phase thematic model of analysis. The first step involved getting familiarized with the data. This happened through reading and re-reading the transcripts and formulating initial ideas. The next phase was the development of initial codes which seemed interesting and relevant to the research question through understanding the data excerpts contained in the nine transcripts. Subsequent phases included developing codes into themes by collating codes and looking for a similar pattern, reviewing the themes by looking for similar themes, ones with weak evidence supporting them, etc. Then, essence of each of the themes was understood and explained in detail using the verbatim or the participants. Finally, it was the rigorous phase of reporting the findings with verbatim and quotations (for structural support) in a constructive manner where various sub-themes and overarching themes were identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The participants were asked questions pertaining to the various dimensions of intimacy and isolation. The descriptions provided by the participants were categorized into domains which are the broad areas covered in the interview process. Each domain had further sub-domains to better highlight its constituting elements. Sub-domains were further classified into themes and sub-themes respectively. Domains and sub-domains were preconceived with the help of

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a focused group discussion. This categorization gave rise to a structured process which led to the process of social construction of intimacy and isolation.

The major focus of analysis was to understand the construction of these concepts by the participants through their vivid descriptions of the same. The results will be discussed hereupon objective wise.

Table 2 Construction of Intimacy by the Participants

Domain	Sub-domain	Theme
Intimacy	Meaning	Comfortable Trust
	People involved	Family members Friends Partners
	Nature of relationship	Sharing
	Emotions felt/involved	Positive Negative Mixed
	Needs fulfilled	Support Satisfaction

Construction of Intimacy

Meaning. As far as the description of the concept goes, the important sub-themes among the participants were “being comfortable” and the element of “trust” on the significant other. The sub-theme of “being comfortable” is defined as achieving a desired level of comfort with the significant other.

“Comes out being comfortable with another person” (YK/29/M),

“comes with a lot of comfort” (J/34/M),

“how comfortable you feel” (J/22/F)

The “trust” sub-theme may be defined in terms of a required ability important for intimacy in a relationship.

“getting someone I trust the most” (AP/21/M)

“being able to trust someone” (DV/21/F)

“being able to trust that someone is not going to take advantage of you or manipulate you” (DV/21/F)

“how much you can trust a person” (J/34/M)

Hence, for the participants, the meaning of intimacy is defined by concepts of comfort ability and trust.

People involved. The people involved in the circle of intimacy of the participants majorly lie into categories of family members, friends and romantic partners. This is much in contrast with the previous studies done in various cultures where it’s mostly friends or romantic partners which form an essential core of an individual’s intimate circle (Pan, Cheung & Hu, 2018; Shrier & Blood, 2016; Lesch & Adams, 2016). But in a collectivistic culture like that of India, where parents have a significant role in an individual’s life nearly throughout his/her teenage and young adult periods, it seems likely that parents also are a part of his/her intimate circle as reported by the participants. It is interesting that people who talked about having parents being in their circle of intimacy described more about their mothers than their fathers. At the same time, the participants talked less about their romantic partners while describing

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their circle of intimacy, pointing out to a possible fact that Indians may have a broader scope of including a wide variety of people involved in their intimacy circle which is clearly not limited to their romantic partners only.

Nature of relationship. The nature of relationship of intimacy as reported by the participants is mostly “sharing”-centric where participants talked about how they share everything with their closed ones and how it has affected their relationship.

“sharing any minute detail with parents...sharing everything with close friend” (YK/29/M)

“sharing changed the dynamics of our relationship” (DV/21/F)

This nature of sharing differed from various set of people where it was specific for different people involved in the circle of intimacy.

“With parents...sharing your opinions more freely and with a partner... sharing your fears, your history, dreams” (J/22/F)

Hence, for the participants, “sharing” is an important part of their relationships of intimacy with various people in their lives. Therefore, sharing facilitates a certain level of intimacy among the participants.

Emotions felt/involved. The descriptions of emotions felt or involved in a person’s relationship of intimacy ranged from positive emotions to negative ones.

“you feel calm and peaceful” (J/34/M)

But most interesting were the views of participants that it is always a mix of emotions that are experienced in a relationship of intimacy.

“security, which comes with a fear” (DV/21/F)

In an eastern culture like that of India, it is clear that they tend to think about situations from both sides of the same coin simultaneously. For them, if they experience positive emotions, there are possible chances that negative emotions are present around the corner as well (Snyder, Lopez & Pedrotti, 2011). Here, among the statements given by the participants, most involved a mix of emotions.

“sadness, happiness, joyfulness” (GS/33/M)

“happiness or sad, everything is combined” (AP/21/M)

It can mean that the participants tend to view their relationships of intimacy from both the perspectives and not from one side of intimacy being syntonetic in nature (Newell, 2015). They experience positive emotions with negative ones and report them as an accepted fact rather than something which exists.

Needs fulfilled. To understand if the concept of intimacy fulfilled certain needs in the lives of participants was also of importance to the study. Here, the purpose was just not to identify the basic needs fulfilled but also, to understand, in what terms do the participants view these needs which are fulfilled for them. For some of the participants, it is the “support” need that is fulfilled in their relationships. More specifically, “emotional support” is received by the participants. Next important sub-theme was that of “satisfaction”, where the participants received certain levels of positive results, help or reassurance.

“providing support and making me feel good” (YK/29/M)

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“gives me solutions...emotional satisfaction” (AP/21/M),

“relieved out of that stress after sharing” (GS/33/M)

“knowing that someone is constantly there for you, was a very reassuring thing for me” (DV/21/F)

Hence, for the participants, intimacy is understood as consisting of “being comfortable” and “trust” where their “family, friends and partners” are involved in the circle of intimacy with whom, their nature of relationship revolves around the “sharing” aspect between them. They report of experiencing emotions which are either positive or negative but mostly mixed in nature and their needs of “support” and “satisfaction” are fulfilled from such relationships.

Construction of Isolation

Isolation is understood in a different light than intimacy by the participants. Rather than being a mere absence of intimacy, participants reported that isolation is basically faced under situations. For them, the meaning of isolation was not related to certain traits such as “being comfortable” like in the case of intimacy, but instead it was related to a state defined by absence of people, negative feelings, being ignored etc. Major themes found in this domain were “meaning/faced under situations”, “coping with isolation”, “support systems” and “reasons for isolation”.

Table3 Construction of Isolation by the Participants

Conditions involved. This refers to the situations under which the participants have faced

Domain	Sub-domain	Theme	Sub-theme
Isolation	Conditions involved	Personal factors	Introvert personality Not having anyone Feelings of negligence Self-induced
		External factors	Situations Friends Both situations and friends
	Coping	Techniques	Listening to music Talking to someone
		Support system	Family members Friends
		Made no efforts	

isolation and have reported significant negative feelings that they felt at that point of time. For some of them, it is like a gradual process which does not happen in a day, where not having commonalities affects the relationship between two people which further leads to distance between them and ultimately, becomes isolation.

“just because we do not have things in common, or we do not like something, we personally tend to not mingle with them. we, as people do not generally isolate

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willingly. Somehow, we just stop being intimate with them or close to them. that distances people and then it becomes isolation.” (YK/29/M)

Participants described certain situations and particular conditions under which individuals tend to feel isolated or away from the crowd. These include the following sub-themes:

Personal factors. This theme encompasses multiple personal aspects perceived by the participants and hence, were reported as the conditions under which an individual suffers because of his/her individual traits.

Introvert personality. Few of the participants mentioned that they think the other individuals with introvert personality traits are more likely to be isolated because they do not have anyone to talk to and they distance themselves from people.

“you do not have anyone to share to .. see this introvert sort of people. They do not interact more with people.” (AP/21/M)

For others, the introvert personality is seen as a state where individuals may have a tendency to harm themselves. Hence, this idea of the participants that people having such personalities suffer more than the rest is quite intriguing because it is commonly seen in a collectivistic culture like that of India that the individuals who are not outgoing and sociable does not want to form meaningful connections with others and hence, is somewhat responsible for the consequences where he/she would be left alone or isolated. It is also described as a “choice” that such personalities have to make.

“people are introvert... its fine until they are not harming themselves and other so yaaaa .. it can be a choice” (DG/24/M)

For the same participant, his introverted personality contributed to his adjustment problems and mingling with people. Such postulations may serve as a scapegoat for individuals who have a wrong perception about being introverted to be affected by difficult situations. This may also influence the amount of efforts they make in a particular situation to tackle their problems.

“a new place for me...hard to adjust and talk to people as I was an introvert” (DG/24/M)

Not having anyone. For most of the participants, isolation is defined as a situation where they didn't have anyone to share, to talk to, for help, etc. In such cases, it wasn't any person or set of people who contributed towards it, but instead, there were perceptions of these situations which was understood as a contributor to their isolation statuses.

“standing out of the crowd like when you do not want to talk to...you do not have anyone to share to...” (AP/21/M)

“when you do not have anybody to share anything” (GS/33/M)

“I did not have anyone to share it” (YP/21/M)

It is these situations of not having anyone that may have been influenced the participants' idea of isolation. This can also be understood in the present light of definitions available on isolation (Hamachek, 1988) where isolation is defined in terms of absence of healthy interpersonal relationships, lack of trust between people and feelings of insecurity, etc. Here, in our case, it is the perception of negative experience of certain situations in which individuals didn't have certain people to share their feelings with. This can also be compared

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to the intimacy status (see table 1), where individuals reported “sharing” as an important element of their relationships. Hence, it is not surprising that individuals tend to relate absence of closed ones to not being able to share which further leads to a perception of such situations as those of isolation.

Feelings of negligence. A few of the participants described the perception of feelings of negligence from other individuals. This sub-theme is related to the conditions where people felt ignored and not understood and hence experienced isolation. This sub-theme is different from others in a way that in other themes, it was the absence of individuals or the qualities of individuals that gave them a sense of isolation, but here the case is complete opposite. It focuses on the perception of participants as isolated even though they were surrounded by other people due to being ignored and not understood. Under this sub-theme, two further concepts were identified. “Not-being understood” refers to a feeling of being misunderstood or absence of that understanding by the closed ones or people around oneself. Here, the isolation is in regard to the perception of the situation as being non-accepting and negative where other people didn’t care and not listened to the individuals and thus, they did not have anyone to rely upon or share things with which created a sense of isolation among them. This is also accompanied by feelings of being abandoned by a few participants.

“like isolation would be being abandoned and uhhh.... For like being ignored” (YP/21/M)

“at certain particular opinions and you know when people do not care that time i feel isolated mostly. it feels like no one understands you” (J/34/M)

“I guess isolation for me would be at a point where you feel like nobody understands you.. or understands your emotions,..I mean even if they are people who are around you and they they can’t understand you.” (J/22/F)

“Being ignored” refers to the feeling of being shunned and non-acknowledgement. Participants reported that being ignored was one of the conditions under which they felt isolated where they were not acknowledged and hence, not understood. One of them also mentioned that she experienced this isolation in a relationship where she was shut down by her partner.

“I have experienced isolation in a relationship. You know the other person has complete right to share their feelings and they still shut down some walls. They shut you out.” (S/23/F)

Self-induced. Another theme found talks about mentioning the certain situations/conditions under which an individual holds oneself responsible for experiencing a level of isolation. One of the participants reported that a way in which one can feel isolated is when he/she does not want to talk to anyone due to negative experience or maybe because of some other reason. It is a situation made by the person itself. Another participant mentioned that when you build a wall around you and not allow people to come near you, it can also be considered a form of such an isolation. For another, the precautionary step of isolating oneself to prevent from getting hurt due to other people was one of the ways. Here, the important thing to understand is the tendency of the participants to introspect and understand how they have been isolated in the past and thus acknowledging that they also had a role to play in the same as much as other people/situations do.

“When you do not want to talk to” (AP/21/M)

“also not allowing people to come that close to you” (DV/21/F)

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“people isolate themselves in various ways” , “isolating oneself from not letting people hurt you” (S/23/F)

At the same time, one of the participants had a viewpoint that people generally do not isolate themselves. Hence, pointing out to other people or situations responsible for isolation in his case.

“people do not generally isolate willingly” (YK/29/M)

External factors. This theme explores the various types of external reasons behind a person feeling isolated. Major sub-themes identified were “situations”, “people” and “because of both people and situations”.

Situations. For one of the participants, the situation where other people didn’t care about him actually created a sense of isolation within him. As discussed previously, the phase of isolation is considered to be synonymous with the situations leading to it. Another important situation was that of a social exclusion where the participant talked about the norms of the society where one does not seem to fit in and hence, experiences isolation.

“there were set notions of what everyone should be, especially gender norms...everyone who didn’t fit in would be isolated” (J/22/F)

“wanted to make friends but didn’t feel like having opportunities” (DG/24/M)

People. Another sub-theme present in the descriptions of the participants was that of people being the reason for their isolation. Their descriptions talked about how people who isolate themselves are not able to see a way out of it and how it’s the people who create situations of isolation. One of the participant mentioned that people giving a lot of importance to other stuff also makes a difference. This sub-theme gives us a view of participants that some of them attribute the feelings of isolation to other people and hence, they have less control over the situations than people who attribute the reason for isolation to various types of situations. Another participant said that the level of intimacy with a person also determines the level of isolation perceived, hence, again pointing out to the formulation that intimacy and isolation co-exist together.

“I would say people...people give importance to a lot of other things which actually make a lot of difference” (AP/21/M)

“I guess people more because they create the situations” (J/22/F)

“how much you are closer to that person, that will decide your level of isolation” (GS/33/M)

Both situations and people.

This sub-theme identified includes the participants mentioning that they can’t really separate the two from each other and hence these both affect their feelings of isolation mutually.

“I can’t really distinguish both from one another” (J/22/F)

“a combination of both (people and situations)” (J/34/M)

Now, this leads us to an understanding that isolation is usually attributed to be felt under certain situations, due to certain qualities or behaviours exhibited by others and the support system of during that time are majorly family members and friends.

Coping. As most of the participants described the experienced where they have gone through a phase of isolation, hence it was also important to understand the coping strategies that they used to manage a good well-being during that time. By looking at the way these individuals

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have described the coping strategies, one can infer the way in which they perceive the isolation stage and how they try to come up with a solution to the problem which further determines the effectiveness of the same in coping. Important sub-themes identified were “listening to music”, “talking to someone” and “not doing anything”.

Techniques. This was one of the themes identified which consisted of the descriptions of the methods used by the participants in order to help them cope well.

Listening to music. Few of the participants talked about how music helped them in going through the phase of isolation. For one of the participant, it was the specific genre of sad music that particularly helped him in coping. This strategy may work when the person does not have the availability of a closed one to talk to or the person does not feel like talking to someone. At that particular moment, this strategy might work but it must be noticed that this type of coping is not a problem-focused coping strategy.

“tend to listen to music like sad music” (YP/21/M)

“At that time, it's only music and times with friends that you have.” (YK/29/M)

Talking to someone. Another important technique identified was that people may talk to someone to cope well with their phase of isolation. It can be in the form of clearing things out with the person with whom one fought with or talking to someone else about one's feelings. It acts as a catharsis strategy where individuals are able to vent out their feelings. It can be considered as a problem focused strategy where individuals either confront the problems or they tell someone else to seek solutions.

“would talk to someone else...who is not involved in the situation” (J/34/M)

“went and spoke to them (friends) personally” (AP/21/M)

Not doing anything. This theme talks about the fact that a few of the participants reported that they didn't do much to help themselves or to cope up in such situations of isolation. One of them mentioned how he went with the flow and everything was okay while the other out rightly said he didn't do anything to cope up with the situation.

“went with the flow and everything was like... okay” (YP/21/M)

“did not do anything to cope up” (YK/29/M)

Such instances highlight the role of awareness of mental health among people. The descriptions provided by the participants didn't have much variety in it which reflects that they tend to have only a limited number of strategies to adopt in such phases of isolation. It can also be inferred that participants didn't think much about the solutions as much as the problem when they were going through the phase of isolation.

Support system. Another interesting theme which was identified was the support system the participants had while they were going through a phase of isolation. This theme provides us with significant insights into who were particularly helpful in such situations and how did the participants receive the help. By doing so, it'll be easier to understand the ways in which individuals consider certain set of people as helpful or not. This can help us to understand a certain pattern that individuals follow in these situations.

Family members. This sub-theme includes how participants went to their family members first to share their problems as they considered the “family” to be constant in their lives and hence, they were a more reliable source to seek help. At the same time, individuals expressed

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their views that they knew that it was only the family members who would entertain their anger and frustration.

“used to talk to my family members and close friends” (DG/24/M)

“coming home and taking it out on people who I know would take it” (J/22/F)

Under family members, one of the participants reported that his mother is his biggest support system. This is also in congruence with the people involved in the circle of intimacy (see table 1) where mothers were one of the important person involved. Hence, the person with whom an individual shares intimacy with, he/she may consider the same person as a support system during times when he/she is isolated. In simple words, this means that intimacy and isolation can be seen as two circles existing together for an individual where one of them significantly influences the other.

“biggest support system is my mom” (YK/29/M)

Friends. Another major source of support for the participants was from friends. As most of the participants in the study are young adults, hence, it is more likely that they spend more time with their friends who may understand their problems better due to being in the same age group.

“friends were my biggest support system” (S/23/F)

“some of my friends.” (AP/21/M)

Differences in Constructions between Homosexuals and Heterosexuals

To understand the difference between the constructions made by the heterosexual sample and homosexual sample, different sub-themes under the same theme were explored to highlight the differences better. If we understand these differences, it will be easier to understand the underlying ideas supporting them.

Table 4 Thematic Comparison between Heterosexuals and Homosexuals

Domain	Themes	Sub-themes	
		Heterosexual sample	Homosexual sample
Intimacy	Meaning	Directed at others	Focused on self
	People involved	Limited to family and friends	Extends to romantic partners
	Nature of relationship	Sharing as a practice Relationship-focused descriptions	Sharing as a purpose Person-centric descriptions
	Needs fulfilled	Support with a result/effect	Assurance of having someone
Isolation	Conditions involved	Absence of someone	Being ignored Not understood
	Support system	Family and friends	Friends
	Reasons for isolation	Because of people	Because of people and situations

Differences in Intimacy. The difference between the constructions of homosexual and heterosexual participants on intimacy was understood by taking the same themes as the basis

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Meaning. The meaning of intimacy for the participants in the heterosexual group was “directed at others” whereas for the homosexual participants, it was “focused on self”.

Directed at others. This sub-theme identified talks about how heterosexual participants define intimacy in relation to someone else. In other words, their idea of intimacy is more directed at others where they include more of other people and less of themselves. This also involves the times when they were able to trust someone else or were comfortable with the other person. The descriptions provided by the participants in the heterosexual group clearly reflect that their formulation of intimacy was in accordance with the traits mentioned by Erikson (1963), i.e., as he mentioned that individuals understand this stage of intimacy and isolation in relation to others and other interpersonal aspects.

“comes out being comfortable with another person” (YK/29/M)

“maybe the level of understand that individuals have. How much you compromise or how much the other person compromise or how much you both get convinced to a particular issue, all that is intimacy.” (GS/33/M)

“being able to trust that someone is not going to take advantage of you or manipulate you” (DV/21/F)

Focused on self. Sub-theme found for the participants in the homosexual group majorly defined intimacy in terms of themselves. This is in regard to how they mentioned that for them, intimacy is basically how they feel, how they react, etc. hence, for them, the idea of intimacy is constructed in a way where they see themselves at the centre and other individuals revolving around their feelings, their level of trust and comfort, their expression of individuality.

“It’s something which I get into or like I could get to with anyone” (YP/21/M)

“I feel intimacy is how close you feel how comfortable you feel basically, you know it’s about how comfortable you feel, how much you can trust a person...” (J/34/M)

“how you react, how you behave, how you see spending quality time with someone” (DG/24/M)

“Just being yourselves” (J/22/F)

“When you willingly, with consent, give people your time” (S/23/F)

Researchers have found that the path of psychosocial development as described by Erikson (1963) is almost unidirectional for the individuals who identify themselves as heterosexual but the same can’t be said about the individuals who identify themselves as homosexual (Coleman, 1982; McDonald, 1982; Monteflores & Schultz, 1978; Troiden & Goode, 1980; Rust, 1993; Calzo & Antonucci, 2011). Hence, for the heterosexual individuals, the stage of intimacy and isolation most always follow the previous stage of identity and role confusion. Hence, it is more likely that the identity formation for the heterosexual participants is established and therefore, they get to move on and are able to define their intimacy with others in relation to them. But homosexual individuals might not have followed that unidirectional path of psychosocial development due to which it cannot be said with confidence that they have successfully resolved the previous stage of identity formation. Hence, there are greater chances that they still work on their identity formation which extends to the subsequent stage of intimacy and isolation where the homosexual participants have defined their ideas of intimacy in relation to themselves.

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People involved. Both the groups differed in the way they described the people involved in their circle of intimacy. Important theme identifies for the heterosexual group was “Limited to family and friends” and for the homosexual group was “Extends to romantic partners”.

Limited to family and friends. The participants in the heterosexual group majorly stated that their parents and friends are the people involved in their circle of intimacy. However, one of them also talked about his fiancée (a romantic partner) but the mention was at the end of the list. Hence, one can understand that such participants build the idea of intimacy less around their romantic partners and more around their family and friends.

“close family and friends” (DV/21/F)

“between parents and children, between brothers and sisters, husband and wife...between friends” (YK/29/M)

Extends to romantic partners. In the case of homosexual participants, the conceptualization of the people involved also extended to their romantic partners in addition to their family and friends. It should be noted that most of the participants in the homosexual group were openly gay or lesbian. Now, it is interesting to look at their ideas of the people involved where it's not just the family members and friends but also their romantic partners which form a part of their circle of intimacy.

“a few men I have met” (YP/21/M)

“definitely my lovers” (S/23/F)

Nature of relationship. The difference in the descriptions of the two groups could be seen as ranging over two sub-themes for each of them; “sharing as a practice”, “relationship-focused descriptions” for the heterosexual participants and “sharing having a purpose”, “person-centric descriptions” for the homosexual participants.

Sharing as a practice vs. Sharing as a purpose. The heterosexual participants viewed sharing as sort of a practice which usually takes place in their relationship. They described it in terms of it being the most basic element of a relationship which may or may not have benefits. Hence, it's more of a practice for them in a relationship.

“Sharing any minute detail with parents, ...Sharing everything with close friends” (YK/29/M)

The homosexual participants reported that the kind of sharing that they practice usually is purposive in nature. In other words, for them, it is not merely a practice but it extends to serve some purpose where the participants wanted to share certain things with the people involved in their circle of intimacy. Here, the idea of sharing is viewed from a perspective that it'll bring something to the individual.

“With a partner: sum total of all that. Sharing your fears, your history, dreams” (J/22/F)

“you become a lot of them and they become a lot of what you are” (J/22/F)

Relationship-focused vs. Person-centric descriptions. The descriptions provided by the heterosexual participants were more focused on the relationships with the people involved in their circle of intimacy. One of them talked about how sharing in the relationship actually changed the dynamics of her relationship. Another participant mentioned that there's nothing to hide from a trusting partner. These descriptions throw some light on the focus area of heterosexual participants while talking about their nature of relationships.

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“the moment you trust somebody, there is nothing to hide...other person is aware about the situation” (GS/33/M)

“sharing changed the dynamics of our relationship” (DV/21/F)

On the other hand, for the homosexual participants, the descriptions provided by them were more person-centric in nature, i.e., their descriptions were very specific to the different sets of people involved in their lives. One of the participant mentioned that how with her parents, she shares a different bond and from her romantic partner, she sort of expects everything.

“with parents: sharing your opinions more freely; With a partner: sum total of all that. Sharing your fears, your history, dreams; with your parents: there is a constant dialogue” (DV/21/F).

“friends are understanding more than anyone else even my sisters” (YP/21/M)

Such descriptions does not lead one to conclude that heterosexual participants do not experience different nature of relationship with different sets of people. But what can be understood from the descriptions given by such participants is that maybe they didn't want to bring attention to just one set of people when it came to defining their nature of relationship.

Needs fulfilled. Sub-theme of “Assurance of having someone” emerged from the descriptions given by homosexual participants and the sub-theme of “Support with a result/effect”. These sub-themes are formed on the basis of the nature of the needs fulfilled for the participants and their perception of it.

Assurance of having someone. From the descriptions given by the homosexual participants, it became quite clear that they expressed assurance just to have someone in their lives they can go back and talk to or ask for help. Hence, for them, it is this assurance which is fulfilled from their intimacy statuses in their lives.

“I mean it is reassuring to someone you know to know that someone is gonna be there like you know to talk to you and feel like” (J/34/M)

“having that one person you can always go back to” (J/22/F)

Support with a result/effect. For the heterosexual participants, the theme reflected by their descriptions was that of an effect or a result that they get from support given by their closed ones.

“providing support and making me feel good” (YK/29/M)

“whenever I have a problem and I approach them, they definitely give me solutions. I get an emotional satisfaction...Support from cousins gave confidence” (AP/21/M)

Differences in Isolation. Here, the same process of comparison was repeated by identifying different sub-themes under common themes.

Conditions involved. For heterosexual participants, the sub-theme of “not having anyone” emerged while the sub-themes of “being ignored” and “not understood” were found in the descriptions given by the homosexual participants.

Not having anyone. Among the heterosexual participants, the sub-theme of not having anyone was prevalent where they reported that they felt isolated when they did not have anyone to talk to or share their feelings with. This idea of having nobody leading to isolation was also

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described as being caused by oneself in situations such as when one of the participants didn't want to talk to people and hence, he shunned them but felt alone later on.

“you do not have anyone to share” (AP/21/M)

“also not allowing people to come that close to you...had no one to talk to...had to face the situation alone” (DV/21/F)

“Being ignored” and “not understood”. These themes emerged from the descriptions of homosexual participants who reported that they felt isolated because they were not accepted and hence ignored or were not understood by people around them. This is also reflective of a general prevailing stigma in a conservative country like India where the members of LGBTQIA community are looked down and not very well accepted socially in most parts of the country. Hence, for the homosexual participants, it was not the absence of people but was the absence of love and acceptance from their closed ones.

“is like not being understood...felt isolated when I'm not understood...you know, when people do not care, that time I feel isolated...it feels like no one understands you” (J/34/M)

“a point where you feel like nobody understands you...if there are people around you and they do not understand you...not being understood by people” (J/22/F)

Support system. The heterosexual participants found their “family and friends” being their biggest support system whereas homosexual participants described their “friends” majorly to be their system of support. It points out to the fact that the homosexual participants do not view their family members as being supportive during times of isolation. It might be because they are not easily accepted and hence ignored by their close ones.

Reasons for isolation. For the heterosexual participants, the reasons for their isolation mostly had to do with “people”. One of the participants reported that people are the ones creating situations of isolation as they give importance to a lot of other things. Whereas, for another participant, being closer to one person affects the level of isolation that person would suffer later.

“I would say people...people give importance to a lot of other things which actually make a lot of difference” (AP/21/M)

“how much you are closer to that person, that will decide your level of isolation” (GS/33/M)

For homosexual participants, most of them couldn't separate the situational factors from people and reported that they both interact with each other to contribute to their isolation. The important theme identified here was “because of people and situations”.

“I can't really distinguish both from one another” (J/22/F)

“both (situations and people) of them do play a role” (S/23/F)

These ideas reflect a viewpoint that isolation for the homosexual participants is perceived to come from an interplay of situations and people, hence making its intensity more than that experienced by the heterosexual participants where for them, it is just the people who are a possible source of their isolation.

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Differences in Constructions between Males and Females

Males and females did not have differing opinions or viewpoints on most of the domains but they differed in the way they described the meaning of intimacy and the impact of intimacy and isolation on them.

Table 5 Thematic differences between Males and Females

Domain	Themes	Sub-themes	
		Males	Females
Intimacy	Meaning	Feeling and view of self	Ability of self
Impact of Intimacy and Isolation	Impact on Individual	Positive changes	Limiting people

Among the meaning of intimacy, major sub-themes identified were “feeling and view of self” for males and “ability of self” for females.

Feeling and view of self. This sub-theme describes how male participants mentioned the meaning of intimacy as being a feeling of self that is expressed towards someone else such as feeling connected, feeling close. At the same time, how an individual views it such as viewing it as a compromising situation, how one reacts and behaves.

“how you react, how you behave, how you see spending quality time with someone” (DG/24/M)

“a level of understanding that individuals have...how much you compromise...how much you both get convinced to a particular issue” (GS/33/M)

“getting someone I trust the most” (AP/21/M)

Ability of self. The meaning of intimacy for females was described in terms of their ability to trust someone, giving people their time or being open to someone in a different way. For them, it’s in their hands how they feel and react and hence, show intimacy to someone.

“being able to trust someone...being able to trust that someone is not going to take advantage of you or manipulate you” (DV/21/F)

“When you willingly, with consent, give people your time...being open to someone in a different way” (S/23/F)

These ideas of meaning of intimacy gives us an insight that few of the male participants described intimacy in terms of the emotional aspects such as feelings whereas few of the female participants described it in terms of the behavioral aspects such as their ability to act or feel.

When it came to the description of impact of intimacy and isolation on the individual, sub-themes of “positive changes” and “limiting people” emerged for male participants and female participants respectively.

Positive changes. Male participants reported positive effects of intimacy and isolation in their lives where they became stronger than before and their confidence also increased. To one of the participant, intimacy gives him vigour and zest for life.

“made me a better person” (DG/24/M)

“idea of isolation because I’ve had experiences not being spoken to . so...it’s been that I always empathise with people.” (YK/29/M)

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“Gives me confidence to move further...you need somebody at the end of the day to combat isolation...it has always impacted me positively” (GS/33/M)

Limiting people. For female participants, the major sub-theme of limiting the number of people emerged which is one of the impacts on them because of intimacy and isolation. One of the participants was so affected even from a minor thing that it was very difficult for her to go back. For another participant, intimacy taught her to make it clear to people about their roles.

“it’s also drawing a line between how much its okay for someone I care about to take advantage.” (DV/21/F)

“letting very few people into my life...even a small thing...if it falters it takes me a lot of time...like to back to be in...how it was before...trusting is one problem” (J/22/F)

These constructions tell us that male participants tended to view the impact from an optimistic viewpoint where they focused on their “positive changes” while the female participants viewed it from a practical viewpoint where they learnt the “give and take aspect” as well as “limiting people” in their lives.

The construction of the stage of intimacy and isolation by the participants occurred through their constituent themes. These two should not be viewed as opposite poles but they exist in a harmony with each other just like the Chinese philosophy concept of “yin-yang”. The participants considered both these concepts to be equally involved in their lives. The absence of one leads to the presence of other. They both provide individuals with opportunities to learn and grow as a person. The ideas can be seen to arise or develop from an interactional process of the participants such as their experiences with significant others and their perception of it.

CONCLUSION

The present study followed a phenomenological approach to understand the ideas of young adults (21-35 yrs.) on intimacy and isolation from a social constructivist perspective. Individuals who identify themselves as either heterosexual or homosexual were invited to participate in the study. The study took place in two phases, where a focused group discussion was conducted in the first phase in which certain important themes were identified and a semi-structured questionnaire was developed. The second phase of the study consisted of interviewing 9 participants on domains relating to intimacy and isolation. The interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the participants. The transcripts were analyzed using the thematic model where codes were developed and underlying themes were identified.

The study explored various themes and ideas to understand how participants constructed their concepts of intimacy and isolation. Under intimacy, five broad sub-domains were found which led to its construction whereas isolation was described in terms of three sub-domains. It also compared the descriptions provided by the heterosexual and homosexual participants to highlight the differences in understanding. A gender comparison was done and important themes were discussed.

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Acknowledgements

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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How to cite this article: H Gupta (2020). Understanding social constructivism of intimacy and isolation among heterosexuals and homosexuals. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 8(1), 167-194. DIP:18.01.021/20200801, DOI:10.25215/0801.021