

## Identity formation in homosexuals: challenges, acceptance, and legalisation of homosexuality

Rajni Bala<sup>1\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The construction of identity plays a vital role in an individual's life. As a psychosocial construct; identity provides a sense of self and personality and works as a resolution of a viable pathway towards the next stage i.e. adulthood. A sense of identity arrives as a totality of one's past and current experience. The process of identity formation is not a task that can be performed in a blink of an eye. It is a period that is marked with several crises, but what identity itself becomes a crisis for an adolescent; what if it doesn't provide a sense of formation but deformation and abnormality; and put a question that he/she is not going through the same change and formation as others but something new, different and not acceptable. The present study aimed to investigate the formation of identity in homosexuals along with the attitudes and challenges they confront. Identity represents the psychological relationship of an individual to the social system. It is a major developmental task for an adolescent that enables him to justify his/her emotions, thoughts, patterns of behavior, and attitudes regarding his/her orientations, choices, and lifestyle(s). Identity is a powerful term that provides a sense of individuation and uniqueness to a person. Who I am? What I am doing here? What is the meaning and purpose of my living? How I am different from others along with the same emotions? All these questions create an urge in an individual to know about his existence. The notion of identity provides a basis for the 'how', 'what', and 'why' of a person.

**Keywords:** *Identity Formation, Homosexual Identity, Legalization of Homosexuality*

Identity demonstrates an organized set of characteristics which provides a base that helps people to interpret and understand themselves. The identity of an individual is tied to a specific set of social norms and settings. The formation of identity takes place during the transformation of a person from childhood to adulthood. This phase of rapid change comes with various revolutionary changes such as physical, social, moral, psychological, and mental. This transition develops the new dimensions to one's personality and these personality traits provide him/her a sense of individuation. Among these revolutionary transitions, the most challenging task for a person is to be fully aware of his sexual identity along with its aspects like gender identity and gender role preferences and to maintain equilibrium among both phenomena.

<sup>1</sup>Teacher, Department of Psychology, Panjab International Public School, Sri Chamkaur Sahib, Punjab, India.

\*Responding Author

Received: September 08, 2020; Revision Received: November 27, 2020; Accepted: December 07, 2020

© 2020, Bala R.; licensee IJIP. This is an Open Access Research distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License ([www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0](http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0)), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any Medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

## **Identity formation in homosexuals: challenges, acceptance, and legalisation of homosexuality**

Here one must understand the difference between sexual identity and gender identity; gender identification that the person is male or female but how they feel and believe about being male and female determines sexual identity which is a question of utmost importance. Gender identity is linked with body image. It develops when a child learns how a male and female body appears naked or through the dressing. An individualistic perspective about own self works as a guiding force for the development of identity and establishes a spontaneous sense of what one feels and how one appears, which further reflects the mental well-being of an individual.

Along with the heterosexual community, there is another social body called the homosexual community, the people who are living a complex and hard life, first due to the imbalance and lack of knowledge to understand the uniqueness of their body and emotions. Besides this, the other challenge for them is the attitudes of others towards them.

Johnston (1973) defined identity as “what you can say you are according to what they say you can be” Thus, her definition of identity has two components: a self-evaluation and a socially determined range of choices or categories. Until a word gains wide usage in the culture, the category or type of person does not exist.

Cass (1984b) proposed that identity is a cognitive construct, an organized set of self-perceptions and accompanying feelings that an individual has about her/ himself concerning some social category (race, gender, occupation, sexuality, etc.). Cass believed that for any aspect of identity to become integrated into the self, there must be direct communication with others about the identity, and the person must perceive that there is some degree of consistency between the identity and his/her actual behavior.

Paula Rust (1993) describes identity as "a reflection of a socio-political organization rather than a reflection of the essential organization, and coming out is the process of describing oneself in terms of social constructs rather than a process of discovering one's essence"

Samuolis et al. (2001) found that secure attachments appeared to facilitate identity development and prevent identity diffusion in females. Secure attachments are proposed to promote the development of identity by encouraging the exploration of identity alternatives. Research indicates that the maximum increase in identity takes place in adolescent years yet some studies suggest that identity formation is a lifelong process. Erikson (1959) suggests that though individuals start thinking about their identity in high school and college years, the formation of ego identity occurs throughout life. Marcia (1980, 1993) also reports that identity development is a process which neither begins nor ends in adolescence.

Newman and Newman (1976), expanding on Erikson's notions, suggest that the central crisis of early to middle adolescence is "group identity versus isolation". They suggest that being accepted by a peer group is essential in the formation of identity; however, this occurs only if the peer group meets the social needs of the adolescent and provides an environment of belonging.

### ***Homosexual Identity***

Since the term “homosexual” first entered the language in the late nineteenth century (predating the term “heterosexual” according to Katz, 1983), the burning question has been: Why? What causes homosexuality: nature or nurture, biology, or environment? The debate continues, one hundred years later, albeit indifferent, perhaps more sophisticated terms. The

## **Identity formation in homosexuals: challenges, acceptance, and legalisation of homosexuality**

controversy is now termed the essentialist-social constructionist debate, or the minoritizing-universalizing debate (Sedgwick, 1990). In the social sciences, the question was often reframed as “Why do some people identify themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual in the presence of negative societal attitudes?” This question allows the possibility of human agency and choice and broadens the scope of the research on sexual identity formation.

Societal attitudes play a vital role in the development of homosexual identity. It has been seen that societal attitudes impede the progress towards the achievement of identity. The first interaction of a person with him/herself as a homosexual is known as the 'coming-out' process; the process that demonstrates the resolution of internal conflict within a person in terms of identification as homosexual. The conflict resolves itself when an individual recognizes and accepts his/her sexual orientation that he/she has same-gender feelings, and exploring and reaching out to the LGBTQ community. The number of coming-out models represents the recognition, acceptance, and identification of one's self as homosexual. It is not humanly possible to discuss each model in this paper but to understand the homosexual identity, the challenges, and its development, it is essential to go through at least one coming-out model.

The coming-out model presented by Richard Troiden (1988) demonstrates the gay and lesbian development. Troiden, a gay man, represented the idea that it is not the innate tendency to perceive one's self as homosexuals, ambisexual, or heterosexual. The coming-out process is all about the re-socialization of adulthood or adopting an identity that indicates the complete departure from the previous socialization of the person. To perceive or consider one's self homosexuals defined the romantic or sexual inclination towards the same sex. As Troiden explained homosexual identity can exist on three levels: at the self-concept level (how a person refers to his identity); at the perceived level (what is the opinion of other people about his/her identity); at the presented level (how person displays and represents his/her identity in the social setting). The recognition, realization, and re-socialization demand the similarity among these three levels. The roles, behavioral patterns, and status of a homosexual identity depend on the personal experiences as well as the outsiders' views.

### **THEORETICAL MODEL**

Troiden claims to represent the gay and lesbian development through four stages and put forward the point that the realization of one's sexuality is not a linear process but a spiral, as it confronts the individual with the ups and downs, back and forth through the stages. Sensitization, confusion, identity assumption, and commitment are the stages given by Troiden to have a better understanding of homosexual identity. The inset of the first stage, sensitization is before puberty, when an individual generally considers him/herself as heterosexual but has some experiences that are not similar to their consideration. Usually, these experiences are social and gender related. It has been seen that people who don't behave according to the typical gender role settings and assumptions are more likely to recognize and establish their homosexual identity at an earlier age than those with more gender-typical behaviors and roles. The next stage, confusion, determines that a 'probable' homosexual identity was formed in gay men at an average age of 17 and lesbian at age of 18. However, lack of information, knowledge, confrontation to the feelings of prejudice, hatred from others, social stigma prevents adolescents from discussing his feelings and sexual orientation and experiences with anyone, which leads him/her towards the confusion. This confusion compels the adolescents to avoid the related topic, push him/her into denial, assumption of anti-homosexual opinions and position among others, and most dangerous

## **Identity formation in homosexuals: challenges, acceptance, and legalisation of homosexuality**

and unwanted is to adopt a temporary heterosexual identity that will be publicly acceptable. The third last stage is identity assumption. In many cases, late adolescents or early years of adulthood signal the shift into an actual 'coming-out' process. This stage indicates the difference that lesbians are more likely to assume their homosexual identity in emotional contexts and relationships, whereas gay men prefer to achieve identity in a social setting or sexual situations. The assumptions of being gay or lesbian are affected by social stigma, prejudices, and lack of information because of which some people managed to avoid homosexual experiences. The last stage is commitment, which involves an obligation to live as a homosexual. It may include the committed relationship, a sense of comfort while adopting accepting homosexual identity and roles. At the last Troiden concluded that identity is always 'emergent' and is never fully settled or determined in any fixed or absolute manner that represents that coming-out is a lifetime process.

Altman (1971) describes homosexuality as socially constructed: "The very concept of homosexuality is a social one, and one cannot understand the homosexual experience without recognizing the extent to which we have developed a certain identity and behavior derived from social norms"

Troiden (1988) defines a homosexual identity as a perception of the self as homosexual to social settings defined as romantic or sexual. This homosexual identity can exist on three levels: (1) at the self-concept level, also referred to as self-identity; (2) at the perceived level, or what a person thinks other people think about her/his identity; and (3) at the presented level, or how the person announces or displays her/his identity in social settings. According to him, a "probable" homosexual identity was formed in gay men at an average age of 17 and lesbians at age 18. Depending on access to information, social stigma, and personal experiences, this identity may or may not be experienced as "sexual."

In the cohort, characterized by high levels of commitment to homosexual identity, self-esteem, and life-satisfaction; participants were asked about the meaning of homosexual identity in their lives. Many participants described the personal significance of being homosexual as depending on context and circumstances. Thus, several men said that although it had obvious relevance to their social lives, homosexuals had little bearing on their work lives or political viewpoints. Other men cited the greater importance of nonsexual identity such a being black, overweight, or single or stated that homosexual identity was important only if others made it.

Levinson (1978) stated that social identity as homosexual may become less important in midlife because of an increasing tendency for middle-aged men to become critical of the particular groups and institutions that have had the greatest significance for them, with less dependence upon group rewards and the assumption of a more universalistic perspective on life.

## **CHALLENGES AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS HOMOSEXUALS: LEGALIZATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY**

Considering sexuality as a matter of privacy is very well-known in India. Views and behaviors regarding sexuality are undergone many changes and influenced by several factors such as culture, religion, society, the notion of acceptance and rejection, and belief-system(s), etc. As in India, it is quite difficult for people to discuss sexuality. It is a matter of irony that even the well-educated people are not fully aware and comfortable to discuss the same with their children, parents, life-partners. Not being able to come forward to discuss

## Identity formation in homosexuals: challenges, acceptance, and legalisation of homosexuality

the natural phenomenon creates a void in the understanding and acceptance of the same. As it has been written in *Rigveda*, one of the sacred and historical books of Hinduism, regarding sexuality that *Vikriti Evam Prakriti* means “what seems natural is also unnatural”. This notion can be seen in people, in everyday life, which makes it critical to understand the sexual variation within themselves or other people. Homosexuality is not a new or rare or bizarre phenomenon, but it may be considered controversial in some cultures that bound the nature of acceptance of something natural.

People do not generally discuss, accept sexual variation in others that prevents homosexuals to disclose their identity, and creates insecurity and fear of not being a part of the society and living a life according to their choice. The stigmatization of homosexuality produces homophobia in heterosexuals, which results in discrimination, prejudice, marginalization, and social exclusion of homosexuals which often leads them towards stress, anxiety, depression, and suicide. Besides these factors, it may lead a homosexual to undergo some medical treatment for being homosexual as it may be seen as a disorder or abnormality.

In order to change the attitudes and perspectives towards, to show acceptance and to provide equal legal rights to homosexuals, APA removed homosexuality from DSM in 1973, i.e. it must not be considered as 'abnormality' or 'disorder'. Besides this, if we are showing the feelings of hatred, prejudice, and discrimination towards homosexuals, we are opposing the Article 15 (no discrimination based on sex, race, caste, religion, or place of birth) and Article 21 (right to life and personal dignity) of Indian Constitution; the pride and base of Indian Law and order, that demonstrates that it is illegal to show such attitude and behavioral pattern. No doubt, Section 377 criminalized homosexuality, but due to the commendable efforts of the Naz Foundation, it has been condemned by the Supreme Court. Naz Foundation come forward and took an initiative when they come to know that NHRC (National Human Rights Commission) rejected the plea of a gay man that he was subjected to the aversion therapy, counseling, and drug administration without disclosing it and giving the loose medicines. This treatment was meant to convert him into a heterosexual, but it makes his life even more miserable and makes him suffer serious psychological and emotional changes that were devastated. At this point Naz Foundation challenged sec. 377 in Delhi court because of sec. 377 of IPC violates Constitutional protection embodied in articles 14, 19, and 21. On 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2009 Delhi court delivered its judgment legalizing gay sex among consenting adults and held that the law which criminalizes the same is the violence of fundamental rights.

Likewise, we can see that there are a variety of views and attitudes toward homosexuals. Negative societal attitudes, social stigmatization are heinous and can lead homosexuals towards anxiety, depression, self-doubt, and extreme decisions like suicide. Here, one thing we need to keep in mind that we cannot label others with harmful and hurtful opinions, this is not normal, this is not acceptable and there must not be any justification for the same. Humanity is and must be on the top. However, during recent years, the homosexual community has raised their voice against discrimination, and activism put a remarkable increase as they have battled for their rights and against social stigmatization.

## CONCLUSION

As responsible citizens and being human we must provide social support to the homosexual community and welcome them with open hearts and minds. In order to make this society a better place to live we need to understand that human sexuality, no matter homosexual or heterosexual, is complex and full of diversity. It is not bound with the judgments we pass or

## Identity formation in homosexuals: challenges, acceptance, and legalisation of homosexuality

force others to follow rules regarding the same. It is a matter of privacy, and privacy is not only maintained by the ones who are being a victim rather we must not interfere so that the notion of privacy could be maintained. Second, we need to be more concerned about humanity and emotions rather than how people want to live and how they are sexually oriented, and whom they want to live their life. Another most important part must not be overlooked that we need to go through the textual content, we need to read more and more to have in-depth understanding and knowledge while keeping the idea in mind that the sexual orientations are not superior or inferior until the unless it is not the harming and hurting others. The other way to trace the change is that humanity demands us to be more tolerant of diversity. Democracy is not giving us the right to consider minority groups as waste and do not allow us to make the diversity a taboo. On the other hand, the doctors must express a neutral attitude towards homosexuality rather than misleading others in the way that it is a disease or it can be cured.

Sexuality, gender roles, marriage, commitments, relationships, and lifestyle choices are defined by religious and cultural diversity in India. There is no harm to follow our religion and culture but we must keep in mind that these modes of living life must provide humans with freedom rather than to bound him/her into unnatural criteria. Even sexual diversity has been seen in animals too like chimpanzees and dolphins. We need to dwindle away the older and narrow-minded views and need to adopt newer and modernized ideas. A modern, flexible, and respectful outlook over sexual variations and orientations need to be adopted. The doors must be widely open to attend, to understand, and to accept sexual diversity so that we can have a society with a great attitude that reflects humanity.

## REFERENCES

- Altman, D. (1971). *The homosexual: Oppression and liberation*. New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey.
- Cass, V. (1984b). Homosexual identity: A concept in need of definition. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 9(2/3), 105-125.
- Eliason, M. J. (1996). Identity Formation for Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Persons: *Journal of Homosexuality*, 30(3), 31–58. [https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v30n03\\_03](https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v30n03_03).
- Erikson, E. H. (1959). Late adolescence. In D. H. Funkerstein (Ed.), *The student and mental health*. Cambridge: River side Press.
- Homosexuality in India: Social acceptance and human rights issue. (2017). *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development*, 4(3), 153–157. [https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as\\_sdt=0%2C5&q=homosexuality+in+India%3A+social+acceptance+and+human+rights+issue+nimisha+mishra&btnG=](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=homosexuality+in+India%3A+social+acceptance+and+human+rights+issue+nimisha+mishra&btnG=)
- Johnston, J. (1973). *Lesbian nation*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Katz, J. N. (1983). *Gay/lesbian almanac*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Kertzner, R. M. (2001). The Adult life Course and Homosexual Identity in Middle Gay Men. *Annual Review of Sex Research*, 75–92. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12666737/>
- Levinson, D. J. (1978). *The season of a man's*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- Marcia, J. E. (1980). Identity in adolescence. In Adelson, J. (Ed.), *Handbook of Adolscnt Psychology*, Wiley, New York.
- Marcia, J. E. (1993). The ego identity status approach to ego identity. In J. E. Marcia, A. S. Waterman, D. R. Matteson, S. L. Archer, and J. L. Orlofsky (Eds.), *Ego Identity: A Handbook for Psychosocial Research*. (pp. 1-21). New York: Springer-Verlag.

## Identity formation in homosexuals: challenges, acceptance, and legalisation of homosexuality

- Mishra, N. (2017). Homosexuality in India: social acceptance and human rights issue. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development*, 4(3), 153–157. <http://www.allsubjectjournal.com/download/2922/4-2-94-275.pdf>
- Newman, P. R., and Newman, B. M. (1976). Early adolescence and its conflict: Group identity vs. alienation. *Adolescence*, 11, 261-274.
- NHRC. The Law and the Police, Law and other things, Friday. 2009. (<https://lawandotherthings.blogspot.in/2009/07/naz-foundation-and-nhrc.html>)
- Nirnimesh Kumar, Delhi High Court strikes down section 377 of IPC, The Hindu. 2009. (<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/delhi-high-court-strikes-down-section-377-of-ipc/article219269.ece>)
- Reddy, S., Reddy, P., Quadri, M., Ohri, N., Desai, S., & Vankar, G. (2016). Attitude of Psychiatrists towards homosexuality in India: A survey based cross-sectional study. *Archives of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy*, 18(3), 32–39. <https://doi.org/10.12740/app/64040>.
- Rust, P. C. (1993). “Coming out” in the age of social constructionism. *Gender and Society*, 7, 50-77.
- Samuolis, J., Layburn, K., and Schiaffino, K. M. (2001). Identity development and attachment to parents in college students. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 30(3), 373-385.
- Sedgwick, E. (1990). *The epistemology of the closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Troiden, R. (1988). *Gay and lesbian identity*. New York: General Hall.

### **Acknowledgement**

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 interest.

**How to cite this article:** Bala R. (2020). Identity formation in homosexuals: challenges, acceptance, and legalisation of homosexuality. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 8(4), 686-692. DIP:18.01.085/20200804, DOI:10.25215/0804.085