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## Review

# Social psychological aspects of gay identity development

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**Abstract**

This article focuses upon the social psychological aspects of identity development among gay men. Key stage-based models of, and contemporary empirical research into, gay identity development are outlined. Three levels of sexual identity development are examined: the psychological, the interpersonal and the collective. It is argued that, in order to develop an effective theory of gay identity development, empirical research should focus upon these levels of analysis, acknowledging that there is a dynamic interplay between them; the multiplicity of identity itself (consisting of sometimes competing elements); and the motives that underpin the construction, management and protection of identity (principally self-esteem, self-efficacy, continuity, positive distinctiveness and belongingness). Identity process theory is proposed as a useful theoretical framework for doing so.

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Corresponding author: Jaspal, Rusi ([R.Jaspal@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:R.Jaspal@brighton.ac.uk))**Current Opinion in Psychology** 2022, **48**:101469This review comes from a themed issue on **Sexual & Gender Diversity in the 21st Century (2023)**Edited by **Phillip Hammack** and **Liam Wignall**For complete overview about the section, refer [Sexual & Gender Diversity in the 21st Century \(2023\)](#)

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101469>2352-250X/© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).**Keywords**

Gay identity, Identity development, Coming out, Stage-based models, Identity process theory.

**Introduction**

This article focuses upon the social psychological aspects of identity development among gay men. Identity is defined as the constellation of elements (e.g., group memberships, personality traits) that make each individual unique and distinctive [1]. As one of those elements, sexual identity refers to the individual's perception, construal and enactment of their sexuality [2]. "Coming out" occurs at psychological, interpersonal

and intergroup levels – one comes out to oneself, to other individuals and to groups. Identity processes have been linked to mental health [3,4] and to sexual health [5]. Gay men have been found to experience inequalities in relation to both [6]. The article summarizes contemporary thinking in relation to gay identity development. Key stage-based and developmental models, as well as relevant empirical research regarding the social psychological aspects of identity are outlined.

**Stage-based models of sexual identity development**

Stage-based models focus upon a series of steps that the individual goes through in order to construct a "healthy" sexual identity. Early models focused on homosexual identity development from childhood to adulthood [7,8]. Subsequent models have examined coming out in specific lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) groups [9,10]. In general, the models describe the individual's (1) awareness and acknowledgement, (2) internalization and assimilation, (3) disclosure, and (4) integration of their sexual identity – most notably across both private and public spheres. The early stage-based models generally assumed a linear trajectory from stages 1–4, with more recent iterations acknowledging the possibility that the individual will skip some stages and return to others. As Weinberg [11] noted, the stage-based approaches assume a straight-line progression, which qualitative research in particular has shown to be unrepresentative of many gay men's lived experiences of their sexual identity development [12]. The models all assume stage 4 to be psychologically healthy and thus a desirable end-state. Yet, there is limited explanation of the individual's motivations for progressing through each stage and limited acknowledgement of the multiplicity of their identity (including elements other than their sexuality).

**Three levels of sexual identity development**

In the remainder of this article, three levels of gay identity development are examined: the psychological, the interpersonal and the collective. This is predicated upon identity process theory [13,14] which postulates that identity construction and protection occur at these levels and are motivated by the need for self-esteem, self-efficacy, continuity and positive distinctiveness.

### Identity awareness, acknowledgement and acceptance

All of the stage-based models posit that a key initial step to sexual identity development is that the individual becomes aware of, acknowledges and eventually accepts their sexuality. This is a complex process. For instance, the individual may be aware of their same-sex desire but chose not to acknowledge it. They may disclose it to others but appear not to have assimilated it to the identity structure. Although there is evidence that identity integration enhances psychological wellbeing [15,16], some gay men never arrive at “integration” since they compartmentalize (i.e., keep separate) their sexual identity in some contexts but not in others. Indeed, in some contexts, integration of public and private identities [8] may simply not be possible. Yet, the individual may still be said to have, and lay claim to, a gay identity and to experience psychological wellbeing [17].

Approaches to identity construction that acknowledge the socio-cognitive elements, (i.e., awareness, acknowledgement, internalization and assimilation) but also the significant role of social context offer more nuanced accounts of sexual identity development. The individual may not acknowledge their sexuality because in their culture there may be no accessible labels or categories that can operate as suitable descriptors for it [e.g. 18]. Moreover, internalization and assimilation will, in part, depend upon the meanings and values that are appended to any labels and categories that (come to) exist as sexual identity descriptors. For instance, Jaspal and Siraj [19] found that their British Muslim gay male participants resisted self-identification as gay because of the primarily sexualizing, stigmatizing and thus threatening nature of the labels and categories available to them in their culture. In Latino culture, the cultural construct of machismo can have similar effects for identity [20].

Social identity theory [21] and identity process theory [13] discuss the human motivation for self-esteem and positive distinctiveness (among other identity principles). These principles motivate people to identify with some social categories over others. In order to internalize and assimilate one’s gay identity in the identity structure, one must feel that this identity provides them with feelings of self-esteem and positive distinctiveness [2]. Yet, the discernible stigma still appended to homosexuality (even in societies which have made significant advances in relation to LGBT acceptance and inclusion) can make this impossible. Some gay men may themselves internalize the stigma to which they are exposed in their social milieu, leading, in some cases, to feelings of disgust, rejection and self-hatred [22]. While a stigmatizing social context does generally impede awareness, acknowledgement and acceptance of one’s sexual identity, it does not necessarily preclude self-disclosure or the formation of interpersonal

relationships on the basis of this identity. Incidentally, those with higher internalized homonegativity may have more to gain from self-disclosure and the derivation of social support [23].

### Self-disclosure and interpersonal relationships

Disclosure of one’s sexual identity and the formation of interpersonal relationships contribute to the individual’s sexual identity development. This can be challenging in a heteronormative social context in which gay men may be exposed to minority stressors ranging from micro-aggressions to overt prejudice [24,3]. Therefore, gay men come out to varying degrees [25]. Self-disclosure can facilitate social support from like-minded and sympathetic others. The derivation of social support has been found to be protective against minority stressors and to facilitate a positive sense of self [26]. It may also expose the individual to more positive images of their sexuality that subsequently compete with negative and stigmatizing images that the individual may have previously internalized. In general, sexual identity disclosure provides many social and psychological benefits in the longer term, even though the process and act of coming out to others can itself be stress-inducing [27,28]. Gay men “manage” their stigmatized gay identities strategically (i.e., the extent to which they come out) in contexts, such as the workplace [29] or in consumer settings [30], indicating that coming out is not a binary process.

However, empirical research into subgroups of gay men, such as those of ethnic minority background, shows that self-disclosure may expose the individual to psychological adversity, especially when responses from others are unfavorable [3]. Some gay men develop what appears to be a healthy and secure gay identity without disclosing it to others in valued ingroups [31]. It has been found that degree of outness (that is, the extent to which gay men have disclosed, and openly discuss with others, their sexual identity) can operate as a strategy for enhancing their overall sense of self, especially in the face of minority stressors [32]. Thinking about their level of outness can enable some gay men to withstand the threats to identity brought about by these stressors. However, social context is key – it has conversely been found in a US sample that increased outness was associated with increased depressive symptomatology due to elevated risk of exposure to minority stressors [33].

In many respects, self-disclosure is a precursor to the formation of interpersonal relationships on the basis of one’s sexuality. After all, one must disclose this identity to others to develop relationships. Like all relationship types, friendships and romantic relationships can make significant contributions to the formation of gay identity [34,35]. In social media settings, gay men may share particular elements of their identity and regulate the nature and extent of their self-disclosure [36–38].

Both self-disclosure and interpersonal relationships can be seen as outcomes or, as Vignoles [2] reminds us, as enactments of the identity that one has constructed. This is also consistent with the stage-based models. Self-disclosure can also enhance other aspects of the process of constructing a gay identity, such as facilitating its acknowledgement, internalization and integration within the self-concept. In short, self-disclosure is risky – on the one hand, it promises psychological benefits and, on the other hand, it may expose the individual to minority stressors.

### The construction of a group identity

Sexual identity is defined as the perception, construal and enactment of one's sexuality. For some, being gay is construed primarily in terms of a group membership [39]. It comes to constitute a social category which provides self-esteem, positive distinctiveness and, crucially, a sense of connection and belongingness with others who share this identity element. People feel identified with others who share their sexuality and believe that there is something that binds them together [40,41]. Particular generational cohorts will have a shared understanding of identity-relevant elements [42,43]. Many adopt the perceived norms associated with their social identities derived from their sexuality, even in relation to drinking habits for instance [44]. Given its focus on intergroup relations, social identity theory has often been used to understand this form of identity development [e.g. 45].

Yet, not all gay men perceive their sexuality in terms of a group membership and some report relatively low levels of group identification (with other gay men) [46]. Explaining why some gay men develop a gay identity that is primarily collective in nature while others do not is important. Gay identity is likely to be construed and sustained as a group membership when the social category (and sense of connection with other gay men) provides access to social support in the face of psychological adversity (e.g., brought about by minority stressors) and when it satisfies the identity motives for self-esteem, positive distinctiveness and belongingness.

The construal of one's sexuality as a group membership may enable some gay men to enhance the other two broad components of their sexual identity development, that is, to accept their sexuality and to form interpersonal relationships with other gay men. By engaging in group action (e.g., providing and deriving support, engaging in gay activism), individuals may also derive a sense of purpose and believe that they are enhancing not only their own social psychological conditions but also those of fellow ingroup members. The construction and enactment of "proto-homonormative" identities in the public coming out narratives of YouTube celebrity vloggers is a case in point [47]. It is thus valuable to

examine the "status" of one's gay identity, that is, whether it is construed as an individual identity element, a group membership or indeed a combination of both. This can reveal how one's gay identity is actually enacted.

### Conclusions

This article provides a critical evaluation of stage-based sexual identity development models, acknowledging some of the known criticisms of these models, and advocates an identity motivational approach to gay identity development. This is important as a stronger gay identity is associated with greater psychological wellbeing [13,48,49]. Individuals are creative and resourceful in their attempts to construct and protect identity [50,43]. Identity process theory [13,14] is especially valuable as it (1) has an explicit focus on multiple levels of analysis (i.e., the intrapsychic, the interpersonal and the intergroup), (2) attends to the multiplicity of identity (consisting of sometimes competing elements), and (3) has a strong focus on the motives that underpin the construction, management and protection of identity. This approach is consistent with the notion that greater psychological "flexibility" is related to the construction of a healthy gay identity [51].

Gay identity development consists of at least three main dimensions: (1) awareness, acknowledgement and acceptance of one's gay identity, (2) self-disclosure and interpersonal relations on the basis of this identity, and (3) the construction of a group identity on the basis of one's sexuality. No assumptions are made about the direction or chronology of these components or even that all three dimensions will be enacted by the individual. The identities of gay men in distinct social and psychological contexts will develop differently in accordance with social, cultural, institutional, psychological and many other factors. The three dimensions operate in tandem, with one potentially reinforcing or undermining another. In contrast to the stage-based and developmental models, an identity motivational approach – one focusing on the identity motives – can enable us not only to describe but also predict gay identity development. This will be key to supporting gay men to construct an identity that is satisfactory to them and thus conducive to psychological wellbeing.

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### Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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\* of special interest

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