CHAPTER 3

The Construction of Sexual Identity

Abstract This chapter focuses on the construction of gay identity. First, sexual identity is defined and the emergence of gay identity is discussed. Two significant theories of identity—social identity theory and identity process theory—from social psychology are outlined in relation to gay identity. The Cass identity model, which describes the processes underlying sexual identity development among gay men, is discussed from a social psychological perspective. Significant empirical research into the construction gay identity is summarised and it is argued that both social and psychological levels of analysis are key to understanding the construction of gay identity.

Keywords Coming out · Sexual identity · Gay identity · Identity process theory

What Is Sexual Identity?

Sexual identity can be defined in terms of the individual's subjective perception, appraisal and categorisation of his sexual orientation and consists of the cognitions, emotions and behaviours associated with his sexuality. More specifically, the individual derives a sexual identity from the recognition, evaluation and labelling of his sexual orientation, and this identity is populated by sexual thoughts, associated emotional

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experiences, and sexual behaviours and practices. Sexual identity is essentially a 'compartment' within the broader identity structure. It is comprised of sexuality-relevant aspects, and is separate from other compartments (e.g. ethnicity, religion), but interacts with other compartments when determined by the social context.

Crucially, sexual identity refers not only to the recognition that one is gay, bisexual or something else, but also to broader consciousness and acceptance of how one thinks, feels and behaves as a sexual being. The two cases described in Chapter 1 highlight the complexity of sexual identity—while James engages in chemsex, this does not appear to be a part of his sexual identity; Sandeep's sexual identity is characterised by fear and shame in relation to his same-sex sexual practices. A key observation is that sexual identity is fluid and that it changes over the life course.

It is important to reiterate that sexual orientation and sexual identity are not interchangeable, despite the fact that some writers have used the terms synonymously. For instance, it is quite possible for a man with a homosexual orientation and to have sex with other men, but not to self-identify as gay, as has been observed in Middle Eastern societies, for instance (Maatouk & Jaspal, 2020). The individual may continue to perceive himself to be heterosexual, or perhaps bisexual, although, to the outside observer, this identity appears to be inconsistent with his behaviour.

Although the existing evidence suggests that sexual orientation is determined early on in life, sexual identity can form, crystallise and be manifested at any stage of the life course. Some gay men report 'always knowing' that they were gay, while others reportedly 'discover' they are gay in the middle age—sometimes after years of (heterosexual) marriage and having fathered children. Some people acknowledge their same-sex attraction but do not believe that the current binary labels that exist (e.g. gay, bisexual) adequately capture their sexual identity (Cohler & Hammack, 2007). The rejection of sexual identity labels may be attributed to the social representations of being 'gay', 'bisexual' and so on, that is, the images, ideas and emotions that these labels evoke. These labels may be inconsistent with the individual's 'desired self' or with the identity that they wish to project to others. In short, this is why *subjective* perception, appraisal and categorisation are key precursors to sexual identity.

The Emergence of Gay Identity

This book focuses on the social psychology of gay men, of which an important aspect is the construction of gay identity. In Chapter 1, historical aspects of gay identity development in Britain were discussed. It is similarly important to consider the social and economic context in which the label 'gay' has become available as an identity category. In his historical analysis of gay identity, D'Emilio (1983) has argued that, although same-sex sexual attraction and behaviour have long existed, the notion of a *gay identity* is the product of history, inextricably entwined with the emergence of capitalism and the free labour system in Western, industrialised societies. The free labour system shifted the status of the family as an independent and interdependent unit of production to that of an affective unit, producing 'not goods but emotional satisfaction and happiness' (p. 7). Same-sex attraction existed but the notion of developing an identity on the basis of this attraction was economically and, thus, socially impossible.

The advent of capitalism meant that the central objective of the family was no longer procreation (for economic survival) but rather the derivation of intimacy and happiness, which in turn enabled individuals to begin to organise their personal lives around same-sex intimacy and happiness. According to D'Emilio (1983), major historical events like World War II served to facilitate mobility, independence, and sexual exploration among same-sex attracted individuals, thereby laying the foundations for the emergence of a gay identity. Crucially, this identity was to be construed as a group membership—something shared with other people like oneself—rather than as an individual trait. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, same-sex sexual behaviour has occurred for centuries but it was actually in the late nineteenth century that same-sex attracted individuals began to construct a sexual *identity* around their attraction. In short, free labour led to a degree of economic and, thus, social independence.

The emergence of gay contexts, venues and meeting places facilitated a sense of community among same-sex attracted men who, by the 1960s, were beginning to refer to themselves as 'gay' and to advocate politically for their common identity, rights and interests (Cook, 2007). The category 'gay' reflected not only individual sexual orientation but also a broader culture in which particular norms, values and practices became discernible. Being gay became a social representation, a group

membership, and a cultural code for those who identified with it. It provided a sense of community, shared thinking and common practice. It led to the perception of 'us' versus 'them' and, as outlined in Chapter 5, to a distinction between gay and heterosexual norms, and a rejection of the latter among those adherent to 'gay culture'. For instance, some gay men reject monogamy and marriage as 'heteronormativity' and may favour other relationship styles perceived to be more consistent with their gay identity.

This historical overview of the emergence of gay identity enables us to understand why the notion of being gay remains difficult, or even impossible, in collectivist societies in which the social and economic future of the individual is contingent on that of the family. Although globalisation has increasingly facilitated a 'global' gay identity with many shared, cross-cultural aspects, same-sex attracted men in the Middle East do not unanimously identify as gay, many enter into heterosexual marriages, and live their lives as heterosexual men because gay culture and, thus, gay identity are simply unavailable to them (Maatouk & Jaspal, 2020).

Sexual identity is important to study. Far from being an 'objective' trait, it is the product of both culture and the individual's own subjective perception, appraisal and categorisation of his sexuality. Sexual identity will guide cognition, relationships and behaviour. Yet, the 'identity' projected to others may not always be that which resides within the individual's psychology. It is important to understand the social psychological aspects of sexual identity construction—as group and individual identities, and as public versus private identities.

The Social Psychology of Identity

Social psychological debates on identity tend to focus on the distinction between 'social identity' and 'individual identity' and, similarly, on the cognitive and social levels of analysis (Jaspal, 2014b). In this section, two significant social psychological theories of identity—social identity theory and identity process theory—are outlined in relation to the construction of gay identity. At a basic level, social identity theory is concerned with group membership as identity, while identity process theory focuses on individuality and attempts to analyse the total identity of the individual. Both are eminently relevant to the social psychology of gay men.

Social Identity Theory

As a key social psychological theory of identity, social identity theory has been elaborately discussed elsewhere (Pehrson & Reicher, 2014). Although widely considered a theory of identity, the originator of social identity theory Henri Tajfel never really intended it to be a theory of identity. According to his original formulation, social identity refers to 'an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Thus, social identity theory seeks only to explain one dimension of identity, namely the individual's relationship with social groups and contexts in which the social group becomes a key focal point of the identity structure. In outlining the relevance of social identity theory to the construction of gay identity, it is useful to point to two key processes: *social categorisation* and *social comparison*.

Social categorisation is a cognitive process that enables the individual to simplify the social world by slotting stimuli (including oneself and others) into categories. The individual is, thus, able to order the social environment and anticipate patterns of thought and behaviour in relation to these stimuli. As indicated in the previous section, in Western societies at least, the category 'gay' came into existence as a social representation as a result of social and economic processes and was characterised by particular images, values, and norms. An individual may position himself and others in that category, thereby paving the way for a distinction between 'us' (gay men) and 'them' (everyone else).

This can be attributed to the fact that people attenuate differences between stimuli within the same category and that they accentuate differences between stimuli in different categories. Thus, the man who categorises himself as gay will perceive greater affinity and fewer differences between himself and other gay men, and less affinity and greater differences between himself and those who are not gay. Crucially, social categorisation can occur only if a category like 'gay' actually exists in one's cultural context, which, as demonstrated above, has not always been the case and is still not the case in some cultures.

There are several factors that determine how we come to categorise social stimuli and indeed other people. Political rhetoric, individual motivation, and social representations are just some of the determinants of this social psychological process. For instance, in the Islamic Republic

of Iran, homosexuality is a capital crime and, even if globalisation has made a gay identity partially available in Iranian society, few identify with the category due to the political rhetoric surrounding this 'crime' (Jaspal, 2014a). Furthermore, Sandeep, whose story was recounted in Chapter 1, has been socialised in a cultural context in which being gay is a source of stigma and shame, which prevents him from categorising himself as gay. Conversely, James (Case Study 1) feels affiliated to a gay community and is consequently immersed in gay affirmative social representations, which enables him to categorise himself in these terms. This highlights the important role of social representations, consisting of norms, values, and ideologies, in determining whether or not the label 'gay' becomes a social identity and, if it does, the nature and value of this social identity.

Social comparison enables the individual to evaluate social categories by considering convergences and divergences between the ingroup and outgroups. Crucially, the knowledge that people derive concerning these categories is socially determined—it is contingent upon social representations. People are exposed to the images, values and norms (social representations) that are prevalent within their cultural context. For instance, in their study of British Muslim gay men, Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) found that, although their participants identified as gay, some of them evaluated this group membership negatively, perceived themselves to be inferior to heterosexual men, and believed that they would face divine retribution as a result of their gay identity. This is not dissimilar from the social representations held by Sandeep (Case Study 2). As we begin to categorise ourselves primarily as group members, our own sense of self becomes entwined with, and dependent upon, the fate of our group as a whole. Put simply, when our ingroup excels, we feel good about ourselves. When it does badly, this has a negative effect on us personally. This is why stigmatising remarks about gay men (as a group) can be distressing to individuals who identify with this category.

As a group member, the individual is motivated to evaluate his ingroup more positively than outgroups as this provides feelings of self-esteem. The downward comparison principle, which is derived from social identity theory, suggests that individuals compare their ingroup with outgroups on dimensions on which they will perform favourably (Wills, 1981). In gay culture, a distinction between 'good gays' and 'bad gays' has been made—those gay men who conform to heteronormative norms, such as monogamy and marriage, may be perceived, and perceive

themselves, to be superior to those who favour non-monogamy and casual sex with multiple partners (see Chapter 4). Furthermore, it could be hypothesised that HIV-negative gay men manifest stigma towards those gay men who are living with HIV in order to derive self-esteem from the social comparison process. Men with a strong gay social identity are motivated to attenuate stigmatised aspects of their group identity (e.g. sex with multiple partners due to what has been called 'slut-shaming') and, conversely, to accentuate those aspects of their identity that promote feelings of pride and self-esteem. Yet, what it is 'good' and 'bad' depends on social representations.

The two processes interact to facilitate social identification and the social identity that arises from this process is said to dominate the identity structure and become salient in particular social contexts. This in turn leads to intergroup behaviour, which is discussed more extensively in Chapter 5. At a psychological level, social identity leads the individual to define himself *principally as a group member*. As a theory of intergroup behaviour, social identity theory does not capture the total identity of the individual, which, conversely, is the focus of identity process theory.

Identity Process Theory

In Chapter 1, it was shown that gay men are at high risk of particular social stressors, such as homophobia, coercive social norms on the gay scene. These events and stressors contribute to the social context in which gay men derive a sense of identity. As depicted in Fig. 3.1, identity process theory (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014) provides an integrative model of how people construct their identities, what can plausibly 'threaten' their identities, and how they subsequently cope with these threats. The theory posits that individuals construct their identity by engaging in two social psychological processes: *assimilation-accommodation* and *evaluation*.

- *Assimilation-accommodation* refers to the absorption of new information (such as new identity characteristics or social representations) into identity and the creation of space for it within the identity structure. For instance, despite their same-sex attraction, many gay men do not initially identify as gay. However, they may eventually 'come out' by absorbing into the identity structure this new information about themselves, that is, their sexual orientation

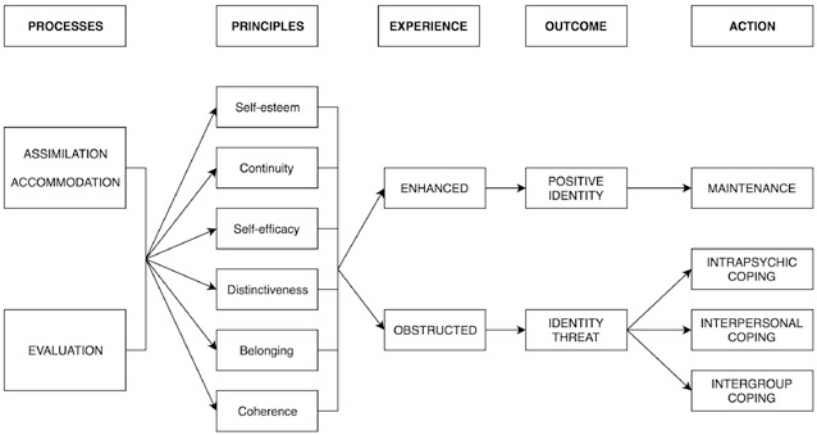

Fig. 3.1 Identity process theory (from Jaspal, 2018)

(assimilation). The assimilation of this novel information may lead some gay men to question the significance of their religious identity if it is inconsistent with their new sexual identity. This can lead to changes in the identity structure in order to make room for their gay identity (accommodation).

- *Evaluation* refers to the process of attributing meaning and value to the components of identity. For example, in homophobic societies, gay men may come to internalise the stigma appended to their gay identity and actually view this as a source of shame. They may elect to conceal their gay identity. Conversely, in societies in which LGB rights have advanced significantly, one's gay identity may constitute a source of pride and, thus, be more readily disclosed to others.

Clearly, social representations will in part determine which identity elements are assimilated and accommodated and how they are evaluated. The two identity processes do not function randomly, but rather they are guided by various motivational principles. These principles essentially specify the desirable end-states for identity:

- *Self-esteem* refers to personal and social worth.
- *Self-efficacy* can be defined as the belief in one's competence and control.

- *Distinctiveness* refers to feelings of uniqueness and differentiation from others.
- *Continuity* is essentially the psychological thread between past, present and future.
- *Coherence* refers to the perception that relevant aspects of identity are coherent and compatible.

When these principles are compromised, for instance by changes in one's social context, identity is said to be threatened. Identity threat is generally aversive for psychological wellbeing. However, the degree to which one's wellbeing is compromised is determined by the nature of the threat, the number of principles curtailed by the threat, and one's ability to cope effectively. Gay men who are socialised in contexts in which their gay identity is accepted and validated are unlikely to experience the threats to self-esteem, self-efficacy, and continuity faced by those raised in non-gay affirmative contexts. Indeed, social representations of gay men will be negative in non-gay affirmative contexts, increasing the risk of threats to the aforementioned principles. Furthermore, personality traits, such as optimism and resilience, and access to social support are likely to reduce the impact of an adverse event (e.g. homophobia, relationship breakdown) on the identity structure, leading to a decreased risk of identity threat (Jaspal, 2018).

Identity process theory posits that people attempt to cope in response to identity threat and describes coping strategies at three distinct levels of human interdependence: *intrapsychic, interpersonal* and *intergroup*.

- *Intrapsychic strategies* function at a psychological level. Some can be regarded as deflection strategies in that they enable the individual to deny or reconceptualise the threat or the reasons for occupying the threatening position. For instance, a gay man may initially deny that he is gay and perceive his same-sex attraction as a 'phase' which will eventually wane. As highlighted in Chapter 2, some individuals may attribute the reasons for their sexual orientation to traumatic events in childhood, as a means of *externalising* the causes. Conversely, there are acceptance strategies that facilitate some form of cognitive restructuring in anticipation of the threat. For instance, before coming out to other people, an individual may anticipate negative reactions from some people and pre-emptively distance himself from them to minimise the negative impact of the loss of these relationships.

- *Interpersonal strategies* aim to change the nature of relationships with others. Many are maladaptive. For instance, the threatened individual may isolate himself from others or feign membership of a group or network of which they are not really a member, in order to avoid exposure to stigma. Indeed, some gay men initially present themselves as heterosexual and may even express homophobia in public settings in order to deflect potential accusations of homosexuality. An example of an adaptive interpersonal strategy is that of self-disclosure, given that this can facilitate the acquisition of support from others, which both of the men in the case studies presented in Chapter 1 appear to lack.
- *Intergroup strategies* aim to change the nature of our relationships with groups. Most are adaptive. Individuals may join groups of like-minded others who share their predicament in order to derive social support. They may create a new social group to derive support or a pressure group to influence social representations. For instance, some gay men diagnosed with HIV report significant benefits of joining a support group in order to manage the psychosocial challenges of their diagnosis.

Jaspal (2018) has provided an extensive overview of the coping strategies that may be used by gay men who face identity threat. In that overview, it is argued that both personality traits and the availability of coping strategies in a given social context will determine the threatened individual's choice of coping strategy. Social representations also play a crucial role because they determine the availability and the individual's evaluation of particular coping strategies. Identity threat is by no means unusual but, given the minority status and stigma associated with gay men, threat may be more chronic and aversive for psychological wellbeing in this population. All of the available evidence shows that effective coping is central to psychological wellbeing.

Identity: Individual or Social?

Social identity theory describes how a category can become a group membership and, subsequently, the primary mode of self-definition. Identity process theory outlines how the total identity of the individual is constructed and regulated in the face of stressors, events and change (defined as 'threats'). Social identity theory and identity process theory

focus on identity at group and individual levels, respectively. It seems appropriate to describe both theories in relation to gay identity because being gay can be construed as a group membership, on the one hand, and as an individual trait, on the other.

Some gay men eschew a sense of solidarity with other gay men to resist the stigma associated with homosexuality. Some believe that they are alone in having same-sex attraction. The status of gay identity may change over time—with some gay men initially seeing their same-sex attraction as an individual aspect but later perceiving a sense of affinity with other gay men. Even when construed as a group membership, the category 'gay' comes to form part of the individual's unique tapestry of identity elements. Yet, for many people, being gay is a powerful *social* identity and there are social contexts in which this identity becomes salient vis-à-vis other identity aspects that also comprise the identity structure. Thus, the distinction between individual and social identity is a matter of perspective and social context. The distinction is an important one in the social psychology of gay men. It is most evident in models of sexual identity development.

The Cass Identity Model

In 1979, Vivienne Cass proposed the first major theory of 'homosexual identity development'. Though widely perceived as a model of coming out, its principal focus is the first stage of the coming out process, that is, the individual's own psychological appraisal and construction of his sexual identity. Cass' model was developed on the basis of several years of clinical psychotherapeutic work with gay men. It posits that gay men progress through the following six stages before successfully constructing a positive gay identity: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis.

Identity confusion (stage 1) arises from the gay person's inevitable socialisation in a heteronormative context, which assumes him to be heterosexual and leads to the person's own uncritical acceptance of this ascribed heterosexual identity. The context is characterised by social representations that construct heterosexuality as socially and morally desirable, on the one hand, and homosexuality as problematic, on the other hand. However, at this stage, the individual begins to construe his own preferences, feelings and behaviours as potentially homosexual, which challenge his ascribed heterosexual identity. This is analogous to the

process of social categorisation, which is described in social identity theory, given that the individual begins to categorise himself as potentially gay. The resulting conflict can in turn produce feelings of stress, anxiety and confusion.

Identity comparison (stage 2) refers to the subsequent process of comparing one's emerging gay identity with the sexual identity of heterosexual men. In his social context, the gay individual will be exposed to social representations of heterosexuality specifying 'appropriate' patterns of talk, thought and action. Yet, the gay person begins to realise that the norms, values, and practices associated with his emerging identity are inconsistent with those associated with heterosexuality. This is consistent with the process of social comparison in social identity theory, since the gay person compares his sexual identity with that of others. At this stage, the individual may face threats to his sense of belonging within the heterosexual majority and risks isolation because of the normativity of heterosexuality and stigma of homosexuality.

In response to the threats to identity that inevitably occur at the first two stages, the individual engages in identity tolerance (stage 3), which can be considered a coping phase of the individual developmental journey towards a gay identity. Having recognised his difference, faced isolation, and experienced identity threat, the individual now seeks other people who share his sexual identity. This stage has a more social and interpersonal focus than the preceding stages in that the individual seeks emotionally fulfilling forms of interpersonal contact with other gay men, which may take different forms. For some, this may constitute casual sexual encounters which, temporarily at least, provide emotional fulfilment, while, for others, a close friendship with another gay man could provide emotional respite from the stigma and isolation associated with the identity confusion and comparison stages of identity development (Kocet, 2014). Cass' model was of course developed before the advent of the Internet, but it is easy to see how online interactions on websites and geospatial social networking applications might also facilitate identity tolerance (Jaspal, 2017b). In the identity tolerance stage, the gay person has the opportunity to gain access to gay social networks, to meet romantic partners and to rethink the value and significance of his emerging gay identity. This is a developmental stage characterised by exploration and excitement, on the one hand, but also by risk to sexual health and psychological wellbeing, on the other hand.

Engagement in the exploration process can lead to identity acceptance (stage 4), that is, the individual's acceptance, rather than tolerance, of his gay identity. At this stage, he will express a preference for associating with other gay men, for frequenting gay-oriented contexts and venues, and for engaging in gay-related practices. This stage is remarkably more social than the preceding stages given that the individual now derives a sense of belonging in a gay community. He begins to derive acceptance and inclusion from other people in this social context, although, as outlined in the case studies in Chapter 1, there are various obstacles (e.g. prejudice, racism) to deriving a sense of belonging and social support in LGB contexts (see also Jaspal, 2017a). Despite the individual's own acceptance of his gay identity at this stage, he acknowledges the social constraints on public manifestation of this identity.

Identity pride (stage 5) results from the individual's positive appraisal of his gay identity given his immersion in gay culture. He not only accepts but also celebrates his gay identity, perceiving it to be superior to heterosexual identity. At this stage, the individual rejects the norms, values and social representations associated with heterosexuality, which may hitherto have been used to position his gay identity as being inferior. The gay person will begin to abandon the deflection strategies (e.g. denial, passing) previously employed to conceal his gay identity and manifest it proudly at a public level. He may proactively challenge the stigmatising social representations of being gay because he is proud of it. He may engage in group-based strategies, such as group mobilisation in relation to his sexuality. Identity pride in turn generates greater alignment between the private and public manifestations of gay identity, potentially enhancing identity authenticity.

Identity synthesis (stage 6) is the final stage of sexual identity development, which occurs when the individual receives positive responses to his gay identity from others in his social environment. This enables him to understand that his gay identity, though stigmatised by some, is accepted by significant others in the same way that it is accepted by him. At this final stage, the gay person is able to reconcile his gay identity with other identity aspects, which may ordinarily have presented challenges. For some people, this may include family, occupational, and religious group memberships. At this stage, the individual no longer perceives his gay identity as an impediment to these other identity aspects and, similarly, the other identity aspects sit comfortably alongside his gay identity. This process is analogous to the assimilation-accommodation process outlined

in identity process theory, since the individual essentially reconfigures the identity structure in a way that creates space for his sexuality.

Stage models of sexual identity development like the Cass model have received significant criticism over the years, largely because there is actually little evidence that individuals progress through these stages in a linear manner and because it is difficult to predict movement between these stages. Furthermore, the Cass model, like many others, presents the construction of gay identity (and its synthesis with other identity aspects) as normative. It therefore overlooks the many other sexual identity categories that individuals may adopt and the diverse ways in which these identity categories may be assimilated, accommodated and manifested in everyday life.

Some Empirical Research into Gay Identity

Much research, including Cass' own studies, has generally revealed that the vast majority of participants are in stages 4 or 6 of the Cass model (Brady & Busse, 1994; Halpin, 2008), thereby undermining the hypothesis that these stages are all relevant or that they are experienced progressively. The lack of empirical support for sexual identity models could be the lack of longitudinal data in relation to gay identity development. Furthermore, sample bias might lead to greater participation in the studies by gay men with a more developed gay identity. More generally, the data used to develop the models have generally been collected from Western, industrialised societies like the US and the UK and fail to capture the experiences of gay men from other cultures and contexts.

Much empirical research demonstrates the critical role of social representations in determining the nature of sexual identity construction among gay men. In a longitudinal study of 156 LGB young people (Rosario et al., 2006), it was found that 57% self-identified consistently as LGB and that 18% transitioned from bisexual to gay or lesbian. The authors noted that psychosocial stressors (such as homophobia from significant others, exposure to negative social representations) may delay the formation of a consistent sexual identity or lead to transient self-identification as bisexual. Moreover, it appears that family support is an especially important determinant of gay identity. Elizur and Ziv (2001) found that family support had an effect on gay identity formation and that this relationship was mediated by family acceptance.

Using identity process theory, Coyle (1991) conducted a study of 204 gay men in London and found that exposure to negative social representations of homosexuality was associated with challenges in constructing, and manifesting to others, a gay identity. Conversely, exposure to a gay subculture (that is, to gay affirmative social representations) facilitated identity construction and provided participants with the resources to challenge negative social representations known to impede the construction of gay identity. In their study of 86 behaviourally homosexual men, Rowen and Malcolm (2002) found that internalised homophobia (itself often the result of negative social representations in one's context) was associated with less developed gay identity and with higher levels of sexual guilt. Furthermore, internalised homophobia was negatively correlated with self-esteem, satisfaction with physical appearance, and emotional stability. However, in their attempt to understand the factors that might facilitate gay identity construction, Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) found a positive association between positive LGB media models and self-realisation, coming out and sexual identity among LGB people. This suggests that positive social representations of being gay provide more favourable conditions for the construction of a positive gay identity.

It is important to acknowledge in empirical research the diversity that characterises the gay community. In their study of British South Asian gay men, Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) have found that the principles of self-esteem, continuity and coherence guide the assimilation-accommodation and evaluation of gay identity. Exposure to gay affirmative social representations of being gay will enable gay identity to provide self-esteem, continuity and coherence. Conversely, negative social representations put these principles at risk. These studies suggest that identity elements that do not provide satisfactory levels of the identity principles will not be readily assimilated and accommodated and are more likely to be negatively evaluated (see also Vignoles, 2014). Thus, individuals will express greater 'identity confusion' and lower levels of 'outness' to other people. They themselves may deny that they are gay.

Besides the adverse impact that this can have for psychological well-being, a problematic sexual identity may also be associated with greater sexual risk-taking, as one negative health outcome. For instance, in a study of Grindr users, Chan (2017) found that the relationship between sex-seeking and number of sexual partners was stronger among gay men who were more confused about their sexual identity and less out to other

people. These studies demonstrate the importance of a positive sexual identity and the challenges that can arise when this identity is somehow compromised.

Overview

Sexual identity development among gay men is a complex process, not least due to the negative social representations that have historically surrounded homosexuality and the stigma that these representations have created. Yet, in recent years, social representations have improved significantly and have facilitated the *possibility* of a gay identity. Both social and economic factors have clearly played a significant role in generating this possibility.

Models of sexual identity development are fraught with problems, which limit their utility in social psychological studies of gay men. The models evoke many important, unanswered questions. How can we predict the stage at which an individual will begin his sexual identity development? How can we predict progression through the stages? How do we capture individual and social construals of gay identity? Why do some gay men not reach the 'final' stages outlined by the models despite living their lives as gay men?

Essentially, the Cass model seeks to explain and predict how being gay is assimilated and accommodated in the identity structure and how it comes to be evaluated positively. The empirical evidence reviewed in this chapter reiterates the importance of social representations in determining how gay men construct their sexual identity and the extent to which they manifest this identity to others. The sexual identity development models suggest that at different stages gay identity may be manifested as an individual or social identity. They indicate that being gay may be a private, concealed identity prior to becoming a publicly manifested identity. These are important observations for which much empirical evidence has been accrued.

Social psychological theories of identity can greatly enhance the descriptive and predictive value of the models of sexual identity development. Social identity theory outlines the processes that lead to the formation of a social (group) identity on the basis of sexuality. Identity process theory provides a holistic overview of the social and psychological processes that underlie the construction and protection of gay identity, as an individual construct. Its focus is on the total identity of the

individual, of which sexuality is one component. Identity process theory predicts that individuals attempt to derive satisfactory levels of the identity principles—they are *motivational* principles in that we are motivated to think and behave in ways that enhance the principles.

It can plausibly be hypothesised that the more the individual perceives a particular stage to be beneficial for identity, the more likely it is that he will progress to that stage. In other words, the more that identity tolerance is deemed to enhance self-esteem, self-efficacy and so on, the more likely it is that this stage will be entertained as an option. Conversely, those stages that are deemed to be threatening for identity (because they undermine self-esteem, continuity and so on) are likely to be resisted. Yet, significant theoretical challenges remain: how does one predict the starting-point of sexual identity development and the order in which the individual progresses through the various stages? These questions can be understood only by viewing gay men in context, the focus of the next section of this volume.

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