Rethinking Sexual Identity Development

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"Who am I?"

A daunting question. One that we begin answering right off our preschool essay, listing our name, age, gender, possessions, abilities and other obvious descriptive traits. One that we build upon as we start developing a concrete sense of self during adolescence. One that we carry into adulthood and spend a lifetime articulating to fit our individual best.

Conceptually, identity is said to comprise a stable sense of one's goals, beliefs, values, and life roles (Erikson, 1950; Marcia, 1987). The development of an identity is a dynamic process that includes assessment and exploration of one's identity, and making commitments to an integrated set of identity elements (Marcia, 1987). The initial theories of identity formation approached it as a central task of one's adolescence (Erikson, 1950), but more recently, this concept has been theorised to apply throughout one's lifespan (Kroger & Marcia, 2011).

Identity is a word that encompasses multiple facets of our being, namely, gender, ethnicity, race and so forth. One of these important facets is our sexuality. Our sexuality, very much like human development overall, is multifaceted, complicated, and variable. It is one of the fundamental drives behind our feelings, thoughts, behaviours; and is hence pivotal to our psychological and sociological representations of self (Lucas, D. & Fox, J., 2021). This aspect of our identity is generally referred to as our sexual identity. Very simply put, "sexual identity is how one thinks of oneself in terms of to whom one is romantically or sexually attracted" (Reiter L., 1989). More often than not, this directly translates to what sexual identity label (like lesbian, gay, bisexual, heterosexual, etc.) one identifies with.

In the past few decades, a number of theoretical and empirical advances have been made in an attempt to understand and map the process of sexual identity development for queer and

heterosexual identity groups alike. For our purpose, we intend to conceptualise this developmental process in a manner that is all-inclusive and non-linear. To achieve that, we first build up on the idea of the identity statuses defined by James Marcia, in the context of sexual identity formation and development.

Psychologist Erik Erikson developed an important theory for identity development known as 'Psychosocial Development theory'. In this, he refers to *identity versus confusion* as life's fifth psychosocial task wherein an individual is expected to search for a sense of personal identity after undergoing an intense internal exploration. Marcia expanded upon Erikson's initial theory and worked with *commitment* as the balance between *identity* and *confusion*. He defined four identity statuses as a cross-interaction of the two central components, exploration and commitment:

1. Identity Diffusion (low exploration, low commitment):

This status refers to the case in which an individual is neither exploring nor is committed to any identity. It is described to be the period where one has very little awareness or experience in regard to identity exploration. Therefore, it is said to be the least mature status, typical of children and adolescents. Theory suggests that adolescents move past this status on exposure to different identity possibilities. Marcia was of the opinion that those who linger in this status drift aimlessly and have low self-esteem.

In the context of sexual identity, *Nikitha (19 years old, Indian, India)*, finds herself in a situation quite similar. This is what she had to say on being asked about it:

> *"I don't really explicitly identify with any label such as lesbian, bisexual or pansexual, I don't think I care about the semantics of it that much really."*

When implored to expand, she added:

> *"I know people who do and I respect them, to each their own, but I don't feel the need to put myself in a box. So no, I am not looking to find myself a label that 'fits'. I will fall in love when I do, with whomsoever that I do and that will be it; I see no point stressing about it as of now."*

On being asked if the lack of a defined sexual identity caused her any sort of distress or apprehension; if it affected her self-esteem negatively, she answered:

"Actually, on the contrary, my self-esteem has skyrocketed after making peace with the fact that I need not stick to an identity; not having to conform in particular has been liberating. The very existence of the queer community opposes the patriarchal structure, which is something I had to work very hard to understand. There was a period I spent a large amount of time mulling over feminism and the plight of gender dichotomy. I found that I no longer enjoyed most mainstream movies or books, just media in general because the depiction of women nauseated me. And that was horrifying because I love films, shows, books; I love stories in all forms. Discovering more things about the LGBT community, finding stories that were just 'human' and devoid of the usual gender roles was just an amazing experience for me. It's like, a lot of my inner conflicts were around my inherent worth as a person, as a woman. And discovering that I may be was part of the queer community and then rediscovering and rebuilding my values in this community has been a very important experience for me. And so currently, I am very content with where I am."

Nikitha's lack of commitment and exploration despite her obvious previous exposure to different identities and the possibilities, paired with her diverging outlook on her own sexual identity puts forward a bigger picture of this identity status. To presume that one would have a low self-esteem level and must feel isolated and secluded to find themselves in a state of identity diffusion would be a limited perspective.

So to redefine it in the context of sexual identity, diffusion may occur when a person doesn't have a clear idea of the meaning and possibilities of sexual identity. This confusion may cause individual distress and a lack of belongingness; this would track with the original aforementioned theory. Additionally, diffusion may also occur when a person expresses apathy regarding commitment and exploration (e.g., "I don't care") for their sexual identity. In this case, diffusion does not strictly have to include the maladjustment that's usually expected to accompany. Contentment, carefreeness and random willingness to try or be almost anything in respect with sexual identity without distress can be expected in this case. Another thing that should be noted is that this identity status is not limited to early adolescence and can be experienced at any point in life.

2. Identity Foreclosure (low exploration, high commitment):

An individual is said to have achieved the status of identity foreclosure when one has committed to a particular identity without having explored the options. Marcia suggests that this status or 'the commitment' is often out of anxiety about uncertainty or rigid expectations by family, society or

culture in general. However, it is stated in this study that adolescents and young adults move away from the status of diffusion or foreclosure during high school and college years.

When we explore this theme in the context of sexual identity, a very prevalent and common experience recorded of this status is that of compulsory heterosexuality, where an individual identifies as heterosexual by default. *Inés (26 years old, Latina, Spain)* talked about her own encounter with this phenomenon:

> *"It's funny to remember, how being gay was not even an option I consciously considered. It wasn't like I had serious internal homophobia, just heteronormativity I guess. Though I could have very easily been there, internally homophobic I mean, as I come from a very conservative Christian family and my first exposure to queer existence was literally a homophobic slur at the age of seven, haha, but no, I was saved by my European high school experience where I met my first gay friend, Marcos who was a really cool guy by the way. So I knew that being gay wasn't 'bad', but it still wasn't something I even questioned for myself. It took me being on Twitter, seeing so many gay people interact with each other and just, exist normally for me to consider it as something that even I could be. They talked of their experiences and I was like, 'hey that happens with me too!'. Fast forward to two years later, I got myself a girlfriend. Voila!"*

Despite newly emerging and developing open-mindedness towards queer identities, heterosexuality still remains vehemently circumscribed in most societies. And compulsory heterosexuality is hence often the initiating point for most individuals regardless of whether they go on to identify as still heterosexual or swap it for some queer identity label. It can be said that this status represents an identity that is more a product of external imposition than a self-exploration.

However, foreclosure need not be limited to the experience of compulsory heterosexuality. While Inés now associates herself with the label of a bisexual, her identity status still overlaps more with foreclosure than achievement:

> *"I was recently thinking of how I have never dated a man, how I don't really feel the want to. How while I do find men attractive, it's in a manner acutely different from how I perceive women. For a terrifying moment, I considered that I could be a lesbian. I haven't revisited that thought since. Bisexuality is not ideal in a homophobic society but it's not as*

> *'inconvenient' as homosexuality. That's blunt, but that's the truth. Perhaps I am a female-leaning bisexual. Perhaps all I feel for men is an aesthetic superficial attraction. But I'll never know because it's not something I'll ever actively think about. Or maybe I will, years later when I'm in the US, away from my family, but for now, I am a bisexual for all I care. I have got to be."*

Even after having lived two decades and a half, with a responsive and caring virtual safe space, Inés cannot allow herself a future with a woman she loves or would come to love and has to rely on the safety blanket that her assumed attraction to men provides. Here, identity foreclosure is an intentionally induced status, but it's still a product of external imposition and restrained exploration.

3. Identity Moratorium (high exploration, low commitment):

This status is wherein an individual forgoes committing to any identity in lieu of active and rigorous exploration. Marcia describes the moratorium phase as the precursor to the status of identity achievement. This period is believed to be emotionally taxing for the adolescents as they experiment and explore a range of various roles and beliefs. They are expected to act rebellious and uncooperative, show low self-esteem and avoidance for problems, behave in an anxious and insecure manner and adopt similar traits temporarily.

For sexual identity, it roughly translates to intentional exploration, evaluation, and/or experimentation of one's sexual behaviours, preferences and needs. It is usually followed after compulsory heterosexuality when one becomes open to other possibilities for self and is usually followed by identity achievement, where one claims a label. But that need not be the case always. *Selin (32 years old, Turkish, Australia)* who closely identifies with this status talked about her journey:

> *"I don't how to say this without sounding obnoxious, but I had a very active sex life in my 20s. Men, women, trans men and trans women, I had experimented with every permutation and combination of sex and gender really. Though having sex and enjoying sex are two very different things and back then, at some point, I realised I could like, find pleasure, only with women. And for like a solid 6 years, I firmly believed myself to be a lesbian, and that's what I identified as. But just last year, I found myself in a fling with a co-worker. A 'male' co-worker. It was a two-three time thing, we fizzled out eventually, but the point*

was, I did not, not like it. Probably liked it positively. Cue identity crisis! Haha. At this point, I still won't be able to tell you for sure, I drift in and out of different labels, bisexual is what I am leaning towards perhaps, but yeah. I'm basically exploring yet again. In my 30s! Hah! Who would have thought."

When asked if this was a matter that caused her any sort of stress or anxiety, she replied with ease:

"Oh! Not at all! I was confused for a little moment, yes that I'll admit, because, believing in something so surely for a while and then having it dismantled can do that to you. But it's also just a silly label at the end of the day. I can still fall in love or have sex with whoever I feel like in that moment, what I call myself is of little consequence. I am in no hurry to commit to any label."

Selin's experience with identity statuses was not the smooth cascade of foreclosure, moratorium and achievement that would normally be expected which tells us that identity development is not always the linear adolescence-centric process that it's mainly theorised as. Moratorium also doesn't have to always be a phase of emotional dissatisfaction; different people have different reasons for contentment and distress.

4. Identity Achievement (low exploration, high commitment):

This status is assigned when an individual, after intensive and self-satisfactory exploration, commits to a particular identity. Marica highlights that individuals who reach identity achievement, experience a sense of self-acceptance, have a stable definition of self and stay committed to their identity.

Its translation in the context of sexual identity remains pretty much the same and hence self-explanatory. But right in the analysis of the previous status, we explored the statement of Selin who moved to moratorium status after an identity achievement status which causes a dissonance in the expected permanence of this status. The circular and recurring nature of these statuses can be highlighted here.

To add to the conceptualisation, here's what *Rebeca (20 years old, Latina, Paraguay)*, who falls closely under this status had to say:

"I don't think the realization hit straight away, it was a culmination of a number of things, a gradual process. Basically, I used to not be as interested in men as I was 'expected to

be'. And for the longest time, I blamed it on my experiences with them being boring. But it wasn't that. They were regular relationships, regular dates, regular intimacy. I just didn't find pleasure in them. At the same time, my interest in women heightened, growing more the more I thought about it. There was also a multitude of other factors in action that I told you of, like the internet, television, my friends, my therapist...And then it wasn't till some three years ago that I finally realized that I really didn't want any kind of romantic relationship with a man. I still always say that I'm open to changing my mind if that's what I feel like at some point, but I honestly really don't think that will happen. For now, lesbian is what I am the most comfortable with."

It's important to note that the criteria for exploration and what one deems sufficient to ascertain and commit to an identity could vary from person to person. The development of sexual identity remains a deeply personal process that is a result of coming together of a number of social, personal, mental and environmental factors and it's a topic of marvel for a number of academics.

Apart from James Marcia, a number of experts attempted to build upon or oppose the model of identity development by Erik Erikson and a number of them focused exclusively on the development of sexual identity. Amongst these presented models, some were linear and some were non-linear. One of the prominent models was by psychologist [Ruth Fassinger](). Fassinger's model of gay and lesbian identity development also took into account cultural and contextual influences. He also suggested stages similar to Marcia's: awareness, exploration, commitment and internalization (Fassinger, R. E., 1998). Another pertinent model was suggested by sexuality expert [Vivienne Cass]() and is known as one of the fundamental theories of LGBT identity development. Her model was one of the first to treat LGBT people as normal in a heterosexist society, instead of viewing homosexuality and bisexuality as an issue. Cass suggested a process of six stages of LGBT identity development: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride and identity synthesis (Cass, V., 1979). However, a common pattern of stages and statuses is seen in all the models that more or less compartmentalize the process. They also focus on the aspect of 'coming out' and presume an end goal of an explicit identity through a 'concrete label'. As seen in the various quoted snippets, in context to sexual identity, it's possible one's situation may either overlap with more than one identity statuses or stages, or, one may not classify into any at all.

As mentioned earlier, external factors also have a notable influence over this process. It is true that cultural differences exist and have a major impact on the process. But, with the increasing influence of media and content consumption, more liberal state laws and open peer culture, the process of identity development, especially sexual identity development has been found to be more unified. This does not mean that every individual will have a similar experience of identity development. But, it is implied that most individuals will be exposed to similar kinds of sources that influence their development, for better or worse. When we asked a few participants to imagine their life and their journey of sexual identity development without the presence of media and internet, especially the 'Twitter community', it led them thinking:

> *"I would have never understood my internal discomfort around boys, in an intimate setting I mean, if it weren't for 'Sex Education' on Netflix."*

> *"...I'd have probably been like, super homophobic or something, haha. I'd have done my best to push that idea away."*

> *"Culture is open, family is fine, but not all of them understand. Twitter gives a breathing space and a sense of likeness in the community. Without it, it really would not have been easy."*

> *"Oof! Probably until I actually fell in love with a girl and then realised it a few decades later. Maybe when I'm 50 or something..."*

This thought exercise gave an overview of how pivotal a role media and online communities play for identity development; particularly for sexual identity development because it is perceived to be a sensitive topic and is not often discussed openly in many societies and families. Queer individuals, especially, gain active support through communities and find a reliable safespace on these social media platforms. Considering various external factors and the societal perceptions, sexual identity development is observed to be easier for heterosexual individuals than the others. Hence, representation in media and virtual platforms are a saving grace to those looking to explore other sexual identities.

Building upon the idea of unification, it has become explicit that fixing individuals to a particular status or perceiving the process of sexual identity development to proceed stagewise would not be rational. Although the existing models attempt to describe the process exhaustively, there remains a possibility of overfitting or underfitting when categorised. Moreover, there is always a scope for

revisiting the stages or statuses. One might even reside in more than one stage or status at the same time; one might even circle in and out of them. Thus, it would be more suitable to understand this developmental phenomenon as a process throughout the lifespan; in a non-linear, flexible and fluid fashion. By and large, expecting a concrete 'label' as the end goal, can spoil the game as there are many different trajectories and possible outcomes of sexual identity development.

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