Homosexual Identity:  
A Concept in Need of Definition

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ABSTRACT. Despite the fact that the concept homosexual identity has been used extensively in the literature on homosexuality since the late 1960s, investigators have shown little concern for defining or discussing the manner in which it is used. As a result, the study of homosexual identity has been characterized by confusion, disarray, and ambiguity. A multiplicity of terminologies makes comparisons between studies difficult. There has been little attempt to place theoretical proposals or data within the framework of existing psychological literature on identity.

A number of assumptions critical to an understanding of homosexual identity are commonly made, and several of these are discussed: The synonymity of homosexual identity and self-concept; homosexual identity as childhood identity; homosexual identity as sexual identity; and homosexuality as distinct essence. This review also considers the following issues: The distinction between identity and behavior; the utility of an identity construct as applied to the study of homosexuals; the definition of identity in developmental theories of homosexual identity; and homosexual group identity.

Use of the concept homosexual identity to refer to an aspect of homosexual functioning spans little more than a decade. The proliferation of articles on homosexual identity since the early 1970s stands as testimony to the importance the concept has been given by both popular and scientific writers. Indeed, a perusal of the pages and indices of early bibliographies (e.g., Parker, 1971; Weinberg & Bell, 1972) clearly shows the lack of reference to, and interest in, the construct prior to that time.

One could postulate a number of factors that might account for the development of widespread interest: (1) the change in perspective, ap-
parent since the 19th century, from *homosexual-as-object* to *homosexual-as-person*; (2) the gradual abandonment, during the 1960s of the notion of collectivity and its replacement with the ideology of the individual, which emphasized the rights of individuals, free expression, self-fulfillment, and social tolerance; (3) the increasing emphasis in social psychology and sociology on the humanistic approach to the individual. In sum, the climate of the 1970s was ripe for the homosexual to be defined into ‘‘personhood’’ against a backdrop of an oppressed minority group. Consequently, the concept of homosexual identity was adopted as an integral part of the language of the gay subculture, as well as that of the psychological and sociological professions.

With the literature of the 1980s already showing signs of a new emphasis on consolidation and scientific rigor, it is appropriate to review and assess the recent literature on homosexual identity. It is my contention that this literature can best be described as an overgrown garden, badly in need of pruning if its contents are to be given any life. While the existing literature on homosexual identity should be viewed as a pioneering rather than a definitive effort, nevertheless, it seems time for the study of homosexual identity to move into a more scientific mode. Otherwise it is in danger of lapsing into a static notion, adopted in a popular sense by the gay subculture and shunned by the scientific community.

The purpose of this paper is to examine critically the use of the construct *homosexual identity* in the psychological and sociological literature, to point out areas that require clarification, and to suggest guidelines for future research programs.

**USES OF THE TERM IDENTITY IN RESEARCH ON HOMOSEXUALITY**

There is considerable variation in the way the term *identity* is used in the homosexual context. Some authors refer to the phrase *homosexual identity* (e.g., Bell, 1973; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977; Cronin, 1974; Dank, 1971, 1972, 1974; Goode, 1978; Goode & Haber, 1977; Hayes, 1981; Humphreys, 1979; Johnston, 1980; Latham & White, 1978; Lyman & Scott, 1970; Murphy, 1974; Plummer, 1973; Roesler & Deisher, 1972; Sagarin, 1976; Weeks, 1977, 1980/81; Whitam, 1981; Dank, Note 1. Others prefer *gay identity* (e.g., Adam, 1978; De Cecco, 1981; Hanckel & Cunningham, 1979; Hayes, 1976; Ponse, 1977, 1980; Warren, 1980; De Cecco, Note 2; DuBay, Note 3; Robertson, Note 4). At times ‘‘gay identity’’ and ‘‘homosexual identity’’ are used interchangeably (e.g., Goode & Troiden, 1979; Ponse, 1978; Troiden, 1979); at other times the meanings of the two phrases are distinguished from each other (e.g., Harry & DeVall, 1978; Morin & Schultz, 1978; Taylor,
1977; Troiden, 1979; Warren, 1974; Morin & Miller, Note 5; Somers, Note 6). Lesbian identity is a phrase that is adopted either exclusively (e.g., Ferguson, 1981; McLellan, Note 7) or in conjunction with the previously mentioned terminology (e.g., Cronin, 1974; Ponse, 1978, 1980). Dank (Note 1), Crites (1976), Goode and Troiden (1974), Miller (1978), Richardson and Hart (1981), and Weinberg (1978) mention homosexual self-identity, while a number of authors refer to identity in a homosexual context without further elaborations (e.g., Babuscio, 1979; Clinard, 1968; Cory, 1975; Freedman, 1975; Hencken & O'Dowd, 1977; Humphreys & Miller, 1980; Kimmel, 1978; Moses, 1978; Patterson, 1974; Simon & Gagnon, 1967a). Some authors make reference to a gay self (e.g., Cronin, 1974; Ponse, 1978, 1980), or lesbian self (e.g., Jay, 1975). Sexual identity is another commonly used term that plays a significant part in the literature (e.g., Hoffman, 1968; Horowitz, 1964; Miller, 1978; Robertson, Note 4). Finally, deviant identity (e.g., Goode, 1978; Williams & Weinberg, 1971) was a once popular expression that is currently losing favor.

Authors show little concern for justifying the particular terminology used, or recognizing that others may adopt quite different meanings for the same terms. The assumption appears to be that all terms mean roughly the same thing. One answer to the problem of multiple terms, would be to develop a more uniform set of words or phrases, which implies, of course, that researchers could agree on what is and is not acceptable. Another solution is for authors to include clear definitions of the particular terms adopted so that others can know the precise meanings referred to. Ideally, we need a terminology that is generally agreed upon, or at least understood, by most researchers with some allowances made for idiosyncratic augmentations.

DEFINING HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY

The most noticeable feature of the literature on homosexual identity is an almost universal lack of definition of the term "identity" as it relates to the homosexual. There are literally hundreds of scientific articles that refer to homosexual identity without explaining what is meant by the concept (e.g., Bell, 1973; Cory, 1975; De Cecco, 1981; Freedman, 1975; Goode & Haber, 1977; Goode & Troiden, 1979; Hammersmith & Weinberg, 1973; Harry & DeVall, 1978; Hayes, 1976; Hencken & O'Dowd, 1977; Humphreys, 1979; Johnston, 1980; Kimmel, 1978; Lehman, 1978; Lyman & Scott, 1970; Morin & Schultz, 1978; Murphy, 1974; Plummer, 1973; Ponse, 1977, 1978, 1980; Sagarin, 1976; Simon & Gagnon, 1967b; Steffensmeier & Steffensmeier, 1974; Troiden, 1979; Weinberg & Williams, 1973; DuBay, Note 3; Robertson, Note 4; Morin & Miller,
Note 5). In these articles it is possible to infer diverse meanings such as (1) defining oneself as gay, (2) a sense of self as gay, (3) image of self as homosexual, (4) the way a homosexual person is, and (5) consistent behavior in relation to homosexual-related activity. Sometimes it can be inferred that identity is intrapersonal; at other times, that it is outside the individual; and still at others, that it is both within and outside the person. In addition, "sexual identity" and "self-identity" are sometimes used as explanations of homosexual identity, even though these terms also remain undefined. In several instances, the notion of self (e.g., "self-definition," "self-concepts," or "self-image") is intricately bound to the idea of identity (e.g., Cronin, 1974; Dank, 1971, 1972; Horowitz, 1964; Latham & White, 1978; Loewenstein, 1980; Simon & Gagnon, 1967b; Weeks, 1980/81; Dank, Note 1). The reader, however, will only be frustrated in any attempt to determine whether these concepts are interrelated, synonymous, or distinct.

Some authors (e.g., Goode & Troiden, 1974; Jandt & Darsey, 1981) do attempt to explain their perception of homosexual identity in terms of self, but then fail to define self [e.g., Jandt & Darsey's "considering self homosexual" (p. 19)]. Defining one broad and nebulous concept in terms of another is hardly calculated to illuminate the reader.

Other simplistic definitions of homosexual identity include Levine's (1979) "the knowledge that one is homosexual" (p. 4), Goode and Troiden's (1974) notion of homosexual self-identity as "how a person defines her gender preference" (p. 231), and Stoller's (1980) a "statement about a person's totality, his identity" (p. 20). Adam (1978) adds a further dimension with his reference to homosexual identity as equivalent to ethnic identity or minority identity, although once again the meanings of such terms are not explicated. In general, most authors subscribe to the idea that identity is "the answer to the questions Who am I? and Where do I belong?" (Warren, 1974, p. 145).

**GENERAL CONCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY**

A significant and unfortunate feature of the literature on homosexual identity is its isolation from established theory and data on the general concept of identity. Only a handful of researchers (e.g., Humphreys, 1979; Moses, 1978; Grzelkowski, Note 8) have made serious attempts to draw from this literature. Although the parent literature itself lacks coherence and clarity, it should not be ignored since it provides the broad framework and foundation which research on homosexual identity badly needs. Collating the existent identity literature may be difficult and time-consuming, but I firmly believe that the study of homosexual identity is impoverished by this neglect of general theory and research on identity.
When homosexual identity is considered from this perspective of human identity, interesting questions emerge: can homosexual identity be presented as a construct similar to that described in the general literature as a person's overall identity? Is homosexual identity essentially similar to or different than ethnic, occupational, or status identities? Can we assume homosexual identity and heterosexual identity are structurally alike? To what degree is homosexual identity time and space specific? What effects do particular sociological, psychological, political, or economic conditions have upon the nature of homosexual identity?

Berger and Luckman (1966) have emphasized that "theories about identity are always embedded in the more comprehensive theories about reality" (p. 160). In the homosexual literature, theorists have given little attention to the assumptions that form the underlying base for their views on homosexual identity. As researchers it is imperative that we recognize the degree to which our work is based upon personal beliefs about self (Riebel, 1982; Wegner & Vallacher, 1977). Our understanding of reality reflects our past experiences, present social and psychological functioning, and future aspirations, all of which can be easily and subtly incorporated into our research. I suggest that those studying homosexual identity should first scrupulously examine and identify the assumptions upon which they rest their notions of identity. They should then compare their personal framework with theoretical perspectives that have been presented in the identity literature. If, for example, a particular researcher firmly believes "once a gay, always a gay," then it is imperative that this attitude be made known to the reader and its validity defended within the context of the general and homosexual literature on identity. The homosexual literature is unfortunately characterized by the unquestioning adoption of a number of assumptions. Some of these will be discussed in this paper.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDENTITY AND SELF-CONCEPT IN THE HOMOSEXUAL CONTEXT

The homosexual literature is notably vague in its description of the relationship between identity and self. In most cases it implicitly suggests that these concepts are synonymous. Examination of the general literature, however, indicates that some theoreticians advocate a clear distinction between the two terms (e.g., Ball, 1972; Davis, 1970; Stone, 1962); others believe the terms can be used interchangeably (e.g., Laing, Phillipson, & Lee, 1966; Miller, 1963; Shibutani, 1961; Zavalloni, 1973); while a third group uses "identity" to refer to a component of self (e.g., Abend, 1974; Schwartz & Stryker, 1970).

Maslow (1968) noted, with reference to "identity," (and his comments
are applicable to "self"), "partly identity is whatever we say it is . . . It means something different for various therapists, for sociologists, for self-psychologists, for child psychologists, etc., even though for all these people there is also some similarity or overlap of meaning" (p. 103). Schafer (1973) believes that the only way of dealing with the diffuse, multi-purpose uses of the terms "self" and "identity" is to "decide on the basis of the situational and the verbal context in which the word self . . . (or identity) is being used at any moment, which aspect of a person is being pointed at" (p. 53). These approaches are far from satisfactory for research purposes. If the study of homosexual identity is to achieve empirical precision, then a clear conceptual basis must be provided.

Despite different perspectives, theorists of identity commonly refer to (1) a personal aspect of individual functioning conceived of as self-representations and self-perceptions. The personal aspect is variously called personal identity, self, self-concept, personal self, self-identity, and so forth. Theorists also refer to (2) a social aspect of identity that is the representation of the personal aspect to others in a relatively consistent way. The social aspect has been termed social identity, social self, meta-identity, public identity, and identity. Both aspects are construed as essentially cognitive elements of functioning that emerge out of the interplay between the individual's own perceptions and perceived perceptions of self by others.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CONCEPTUALIZING HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY

The theoretical framework I have used in the study of homosexual identity has evolved from a number of different approaches. Self-concept is, to quote Rosenberg (1979), "the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (p. 7). It is all those self-perceptions or self-attitudes that a person holds, and the affective component attached to each of these self-representations. Self-concept also includes self-perceptions of how the individual wishes to be.

Identity refers to organized sets of self-perceptions and attached feelings that an individual holds about self with regard to some social category. It represents the synthesis of own self-perceptions with views of the self perceived to be held by others. Where self-perceptions and imagined other's view of self are in accord, then identity may be said to have developed.

Homosexual identity, then, evolves out of a clustering of self-images which are linked together by the individual's idiosyncratic understanding of what characterizes someone as "a homosexual." This understanding develops out of an integration of the individual's unique interpretation of
socially prescribed notions and self-developed formulations. Early stages of homosexual identity development usually involve cognitive processing of self-information against a symbolically held image of the "generalized other." Development of a fully integrated identity, however, requires more direct communication with others. Ultimately this includes the presentation of a homosexual self-image to both homosexual and heterosexual others. Where presentation is to one but not the other of these groups, homosexual identity cannot completely evolve. Commonly, the homosexual self-image is withheld from non-homosexual people and a heterosexual role adopted. A fully developed sense of self as "a homosexual" requires accord between self-perception and imagined views of self held by all others constituting the individual's social environment. This sense of identity becomes translated into relatively predictable behavioral patterns. Stability is created through the constancy experienced in interaction with others. The individual strives to maintain cognitive and behavioral consistency which, in turn, serves to reinforce the way others are believed to see the self.

Both self-concept and identity are considered significant to an adequate understanding of homosexual identity. For example, the statements "I am a guilt-ridden homosexual" and "I am a proud homosexual" both reflect some degree of identity development ("I am a homosexual"). The two self-attitudes, "guilt-ridden" and "proud," illustrate a qualitative difference and clearly show the importance of taking self-conceptions into account. In addition, the multidimensional nature of homosexual identity is emphasized. There is no such thing as a single homosexual identity. Rather, its nature may vary from person to person, from situation to situation, and from period to period.

It is also possible to differentiate between the self-image, "I am a person who relates sexually to others of the same sex," (self-conception) and "I am a homosexual" (identity), a distinction commonly reported in the popular literature. I do not believe there is anything to be gained by devising something called homosexual self-concept (Plummer, 1975; Richardson & Hart, 1981; Weinberg & Williams, 1974). In the present theoretical formulation the components of self-concept (self-images) are the units upon which identity is built. The two constructs differ significantly in that identity necessitates reference to a specific social category while self-concept does not.

In order to avoid the conceptual difficulties present in the general literature, the terms presented identity and perceived identity are adopted. Strictly speaking, identity, as discussed previously, might more accurately be called self-identity, to distinguish it from presented identity and perceived identity. Unless otherwise indicated, "identity" will be used in the sense of self-identity. Presented identity is that picture of self presented to others with regard to a specific socially defined category, that is,
the identity that a person wants others to believe one holds about self. Present identity is closely linked with ideal components of self-identity. Perceived identity refers to that image held by another about self with regard to a specific social category. Such an image will develop out of a synthesis of the meaning others put on our behavior (presented identity) together with perceptions already held about us.

Human beings can choose to present an image of themselves that is quite distinct from the way they actually perceive themselves. Further, others may hold an image of a person that is at odds with that person’s own perception of self. In the homosexual literature these distinctions have been consistently noted (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1974; Goode, 1978; Levine, 1979; Miller, 1978; Reiss, 1961; Weeks, 1977). Frequently, however, these concepts have been referred to as simply “identity.” This makes cross-study comparisons particularly difficult.

In the literature on homosexual identity, both the personal and social elements of identity are alluded to. However, the social has received considerably more attention, while the personal has been sorely neglected. Consideration of the social aspects of identity has led to a number of studies that have produced descriptions of various aspects of the gay subculture and mainstream society, and the way these influence gay identity (e.g., Cronin, 1974; Humphreys & Miller, 1980; Moses, 1978; Ponse, 1978; Warren, 1974; Weinberg & Williams, 1974; Williams & Weinberg, 1971; Robertson, Note 4). Particular emphasis has been given in many cases to the ways persons experience their homosexual identity in the world within which they live. Focus has also been given to the study of characteristics commonly perceived as making up presented identity.

Unfortunately little attention has been given to the personal, cognitive aspects of identity, and this is, indeed, a grave error. Identity is a cognitive construct, “classes of self-representations” to use Schafer’s (1973) terminology. If one is going to study the social aspects of identity, then describing elements of social structure is valid, provided the analysis is then extended to the cognitive restructuring that might or does take place for the individual within such settings. After all, it is the individual’s own perceptions of the world, rather than the world itself which are critical to the identity issue.

HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY AS CHILDHOOD OUTCOME

The medical and psychiatric fields have sponsored the commonly held idea that homosexual identity arises out of early childhood developmental processes. Proponents of this theory work within either an ego identity framework (e.g., Gundlach & Riess, 1968; Pattison, 1974; Weis & Dain,
1979; McLellan, Note 7) or sexual identity framework (e.g., Green, 1974; Hoffman, 1968; Whitam, 1977, 1981).

Ego identity theorists either imply or state explicitly that homosexual identity is equivalent to, or closely aligned with, the concept of ego identity. Such a perspective is, however, confused in several respects. First, ego psychology, from which the notion of ego identity arises, is itself a derivative of psychoanalytic theory. Erik Erikson, one of the best known ego psychologists, proposed the notion of ego identity to refer specifically to the psychosocial integration of the individual. This integration normally occurs during adolescence but may continue into early adulthood (Erikson, 1959, 1968). Basing his work on psychoanalytic theory, Erickson emphasized the important function of the ego as organizing and synthesizing the processes of development, transforming them into a unique sense of self, which he called ego identity. Erikson makes clear, however, that ego identity is quite distinct from what he calls self-identity, which he defined as the identity that emerges from the integration of the individual's self-images (self-representations) with role images (perceptions of the social positions held).

Unfortunately, this distinction has been absent in the homosexual identity literature, where the term ego identity is often used in the context of self-identity. Some theorists have adopted the term "ego identity" while, at the same time, rejecting the construct "ego" and its theoretical implications as untenable. This practice makes for theoretical nonsense. What we need to ask is whether homosexual identity is equivalent to ego identity? Is the ego identity construct the most suitable theoretical structure and framework within which to present homosexual identity? Does the presentation of homosexual identity as an adolescent outcome exhaust all there is to know and understand about gay identity?

Proponents of the sexual identity model perceive homosexual identity as equivalent to sexual identity, believed to be developed in early childhood. Green's (1974) model of gender identity forms the basis for most of these theorists. This has led to confusion over what is meant by "identity." Early childhood identity theories are invariably proposals about how sexual preference or sexual orientation is formed. "Identity" in this sense refers primarily to consistent behavior patterns as they relate to a particular sexual role, not to cognitive aspects. Not surprisingly, this has led to confusion between the behavioral and cognitive aspects of homosexuality. Although intricately bound up with each other, behavior and identity are separate entities. Concern for the consequences of such confusion has prompted a number of theorists (e.g., Altman, 1979; Goode, 1981a; Kirkham, 1971; McDonald, 1981; Omark, 1978; Richardson, 1981a; Stoller, 1980; Weeks, 1981; Weinberg, 1978) to argue most strongly for a clear distinction between behavioral terms and concepts (e.g., sexual preference, sexual orientation) and identity terms.
Is the Green model the most acceptable framework within which to place homosexual identity? Is the concept of homosexual identity necessary to a theoretical account of how sexual preference develops? In a fresh approach, Storms (1979, 1980, 1981) has largely steered clear of the Green model and proposed a theory of erotic orientation development. His research was intended to study the process of "self-attribution" or perceiving oneself as a homosexual, by examining the information from which such attributions derived. Erotic fantasies and sexual behavior were considered the primary sources of this information.

The assumption that homosexual identity is the logical outcome of early childhood and adolescent developmental processes is clearly in need of examination. Can the concept of adult identity development be ignored? Can we conceive of a homosexual identity that arises in adulthood, in much the same way as other adult identities are formulated (such as the identity of "Jew" or "Catholic" following religious conversion as an adult; or the identity of "disabled" following trauma occurring during adult years)? Is homosexual identity developed in childhood to be perceived as the same phenomenon as that developed in adulthood? Given what we know about childhood cognitive and self-development, what difficulties might we have in formulating a theory of early homosexual identity development?

Proponents of adult identity acquisition mostly refer to the development of a homosexual self-image which is consonant with perceived environmental expectations. This may occur at any point in an individual's life-time. Because symbolic interactionism is commonly used as a theoretical base by these theorists, the influence of social factors in determining identity is given greater emphasis.

Argument has long waged between proponents of childhood versus adult homosexual identity. Plummer (1981) has proposed a synthesis of both approaches. He notes that there is evidence for the importance of both childhood and adult experiences. While the basic idea of seeing human development as a continuum rather than two separate categories is to be commended, Plummer comes close to falling into the old trap of mixing behavioral and cognitive concepts. As noted previously, the term "sexual identity" does not necessarily, and most times does not, refer to a cognitive construct but rather a behavioral one.

I am not claiming that cognitive and behavioral elements cannot be incorporated into a single theoretical formulation, but rather that care must be taken (1) not to confuse the two strands of development and (2) to use the word "identity" only in a cognitive sense.

I believe we need to direct our attention to the cognitive development of homosexual identity in a way that allows for a synthesis of childhood and adulthood processes. We know that one of the primary tasks of the developing child is to develop a picture of self as distinct from others. As
the child grows older these self-perceptions gradually regularize and consolidate allowing a relatively consistent picture of self to be presented to the world. Adolescence is a time when such consolidation is likely to occur. At this time, according to the developmental theorist, children are cognitively, morally, emotionally, and socially equipped to place themselves in the world as unique individuals. We also know, however, that some identities are formulated prior to adolescence (e.g., ethnic, racial, gender identities).

The question for theorists is how homosexual identity should be conceived in relation to these developmental processes? As a part of a society that includes the social category “homosexual,” a child will learn the descriptors of such a category. Conceivably this cognitive template (Gergan, 1977) may be applied to self, initiating the process of cognitive restructuring that leads to identity development.

Equally possible, an individual may make no such cognitive comparison until adulthood. Which factors (social, personal, developmental, etc.) are associated with childhood as compared with adult development of a homosexual identity is a relatively unexplored research question. The debate of childhood versus adult gay identity acquisition is a futile one, ignoring the fact that human development is a complexly varied and continuous process. Self-conceptions and identities are constantly evolving aspects of individual functioning. New self-perceptions are built upon existing ones, so that eventually a new gestalt is formed. This in turn is experienced as new psychological activity. Out of this, changes in old identities and formation of new ones may occur. Identities are not static pictures of how the individual conceives of self. How might the content and structure of gay identity change over time as the individual moves from childhood to adulthood, or from one period of adult life to another? There is little information available to researchers as to which self-images are grouped together during either initial or later formulations of homosexual identity.

**HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY AS SEXUAL IDENTITY**

A great number of writers make explicit or implicit reference to the synonymy of homosexual identity with sexual identity (e.g., Coleman, 1981/82; Dank, 1971, 1974; Hoffman, 1968; Horowitz, 1964; Miller, 1978; Miller & Fowlkes, 1980; Ponse, 1978; Richardson & Hart, 1981; Roesler & Deisher, 1972; Weinberg, 1978; Robertson, Note 4; Troides, Note 9). The belief that homosexual identity is the same as sexual identity is so ingrained that the tenability of this deduction is never questioned. It is, indeed, another assumption that requires examination.

It is possible to trace historically how sexual identity and homosexual
identity might have become linked. The nineteenth-century medical model saw homosexuals classified as sexual perverts (Boswell, 1980; Bullough, 1974; Foucault, 1978). Arising out of this model, psychoanalytical theory presented a theoretical conception of human development that linked identity development (the satisfactory integration of id, ego, and superego) with sexual identity. According to this formulation, the consistent presentation of homosexuality in puberty and adult years is considered a sign of fixation at the Oedipal stage of sexual identity development. Therefore, equating homosexuality and sexual identity was clearly established by this line of thinking. The fact that it is sexual activity that most often prompts the eventual creation of homosexual identity no doubt reinforced this link.

The central question is whether homosexual identity is simply a synonym for sexual identity. Are the components of a gay identity those of sexual identity? Is a person’s homosexual identity entirely bound up in sexual elements? The equation, sexual activity equals sexual identity equals homosexual (Ponse, 1978), is a theoretical proposal that is no longer relevant to the experiences of modern day homosexuals. The notion of “homosexual identity” is expanding to include new elements (such as the political, collective). The psychosocial framework within which the homosexual of the 1980s is constructed is no longer solely a sexual one. Identity, by definition, is time-bound, and theories of homosexual identity must allow for this.

I contend that it is necessary to separate the concepts “sexual identity” and “homosexual identity” since the structure and contents of each may refer to different phenomena. Sexual identity thus becomes the individual’s overall conception of self as a sexual being. It might, for example, include the perception “I am a sensuous person,” which illustrates a general view of personal responsiveness and sensitivity, without specifically describing the person to whom it is directed. The contents of a person’s homosexual identity, while they may include sexual self-images, may also refer to non-sexual areas. For example, “I am a member of a minority group” and “I am a person who socializes with gay people” are percepts that may be unrelated to sexual responsivity. It is expected that in the early stages of identity development, sexual components will be more prominent than at later stages. This reflects the significance sexual cues have been given in Western characterizations of homosexual identity.

The multidimensional continuum approach suggests that homosexual identity may vary on any number of dimensions. There are a myriad of meanings that individuals can include in their perceptions of themselves as “a homosexual.” A sound theory of gay identity must be able to incorporate within its proposals the multi-faceted nature of identity. What is the content of the different aspects of homosexual identity? What is the
relative importance of each component in different life situations and for different individuals? Which personal and social factors are influential in changing identity components during identity acquisition?

**HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITIES: GAY VS HOMOSEXUAL DICHOTOMY**

A number of researchers have warned of the need to examine nonsexual aspects of identity (e.g., Bell, 1973; Loewenstein, 1980). A recent theoretical development is that of distinguishing between “homosexual identity” and “gay identity” (e.g., Chesebro, 1981; Harry & DeVall, 1978; Humphreys & Miller, 1980; Kimmel, 1979; Morin, 1977; Morin & Schultz, 1978; Taylor, 1977; Warren, 1974; Weinberg, Note 10). A homosexual identity “describes one’s sexual orientation” (Warren, 1974, p. 149) and “places its focus on an explicit sexual act and then on its coincidental behavior” (Chesebro, 1981, p. 186). A gay identity “implies affiliation with the gay community in a cultural and sociable sense” (Warren, 1974, p. 149) and “identifies those who have adopted a particular world view or perspective of reality which is self-imposed and a self-defined determinant of the attitudes, beliefs, actions, and even the vocabulary affecting human interactions” (Chesebro, 1981, p. 186).

The change in conception of homosexual identity away from a totally sexual meaning is being expressed quite firmly in the homosexual/gay identity distinction. It suggests that, at times, identity is bound up with sexual concepts and, at other times, it is not. The difficulty with presenting such a dichotomy, however, is that it proposes a rigid division that is unlikely to exist in reality, and that cannot be easily operationalized for research purposes. What, for example, are the qualifying factors for defining someone “gay” as opposed to “homosexual?” It appears (Cass, in press) that individuals have a range of self-perceptions that relate to a homosexual identity and do not employ a simple two-way categorization.

The dichotomy model appears, therefore, to reflect a political stance rather than the subjective reality of the individual. Proponents of the homosexual/gay dichotomy suggest that a gay identity is a more “advanced” identity since it reflects the individual’s development of strategies for effectively dealing with a stigmatized status. However, the notion of “homosexual identity” as proposed by these theorists runs counter to the definition of identity presented in this paper. I am not questioning the developmental emphasis. This has been almost uniformly advanced by a number of writers (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1981/82; Hencken & O’Dowd, 1977; Lee, 1977; Miller, 1978; Plummer, 1975; McLellan, Note 7; Troiden, Note 9; Weinberg, Note 10). I question whether a homosexual identity, as defined by the dichotomy theorists, can be fully
developed at the stages they suggest. My own model (Cass, 1979) contains the idea that identity is not fully developed until the final (Identity Synthesis) stage. It is not until this time that the individual’s sense of self as “homosexual” represents an integration of self-images with the view of self believed to be held by others in all areas of the individual’s life.

**HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY AND ITS DEVELOPMENT**

Although space does not permit a full discussion of theories of homosexual identity formation, it is obvious that the theoretical form “identity” takes will be paramount in understanding the developmental paths proposed. However, many theorists have presented “identity” as a given, offering little more than simplistic reifications such as “self-definition,” “self-perception,” or “self-labeling” as definitions of the core constructs in their work. As a result, there is often confusion between self-concept and identity, between identity as perceived by others and as perceived by the self, as well as between cognitive and behavioral aspects. Reference to the cognitive components of homosexual identity is virtually nonexistent. Using the term “identity,” some theorists refer to childhood developmental processes, others to adult processes, and yet others to a combination of the two. Some call the process “coming out,” while others use this phrase to include both behavioral and identity processes.

A theory purporting to outline identity formation should (1) offer a clear definition of what “identity” means and of its relationship to self-concept, (2) outline the structural components of identity, (3) trace the changes that occur as identity develops, and (4) describe both internal and external factors influencing such changes. Conceptually, it is necessary to keep distinct the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional changes, and to trace each area through all stages of development.

**HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY AS GROUP IDENTITY**

In the past decade, direct and indirect references has been increasingly made to the notion of minority identity in relation to homosexuals (e.g., Abbott & Love, 1973; Adam, 1978; Fein & Nuehring, 1981; Ferguson, 1981; Gagnon, 1977; Kameny, 1969; Seidenberg, 1973). Unfortunately, little consideration has been given to actually defining or describing the nature of homosexual identity in the group or subcultural context. A reading of the literature on ethnic identity suggests, however, that the concept of group identity provides an important perspective to the understanding of identity.
I choose to define group identity as the perception a person has about self as sharing certain attributes with a particular community of others. A positive affective component is attached to such a perception. A particular sense of "Me" emerges out of seeing oneself as a "We." Group identity most commonly emerges where the attributes in question are perceived negatively by a dominant group.

In the homosexual literature, attention has been given to "gay pride" from a sociological perspective. When translated into the context of positive group identity, it is possible to consider it from a psychological viewpoint. What is the content of homosexual group identity? What affective and cognitive changes take place as an individual moves from a heterosexual to a homosexual group identity? Cass (1979) has suggested and found support (Cass, in press) for the notion that development of positive gay group identity marks an important stage in the development of a fully integrated homosexual self-identity.

**HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY: FACT, FANTASY OR CONSTRUCT?**

This paper would not be complete without mentioning those authors who decry the use of the concept "homosexual identity" (e.g., Cappon, 1965; Pattison, 1974; Sagarin, 1976, 1979; Weltge, 1969; DuBay, Note 3). They argue that there is really no such thing as "a homosexual." It is a figment of the theorist's imagination and, therefore, should not be studied as if it were an objective reality. The concept of homosexual identity is believed to be destructive because (1) it places the individual in a stigmatized category that is dehumanizing, and (2) it attributes permanence and rigidity to the individual. Locked into a set category, there is little avenue for change. This view is strengthened from two other sources: (1) growing opposition to the assumption of essentiality in the idea of the homosexual identity and (2) the focus of the 1970s on "self" as process.

The notion of identity as essence (Katz, 1975) portrays homosexual identity as a pervasive and unchangeable fact that is acknowledged by the person about the self or by others about that person (Plummer, 1981; Ponse, 1978; Richardson, 1981b; Warren, 1974; Weeks, 1980/81). For some authors, this "fact" is believed to have been established in early childhood (or at conception) as an essential and integral part of the child's functioning. According to this latency perspective, the task becomes one of gradually acknowledging and exhibiting this identity. Other theorists do not hold this view but, nevertheless, believe that once identity is established, it becomes an inherent quality of the person. Thus we have the notion of homosexual identity as being equivalent to one's "true" or "real" self (e.g., Berzon, 1979; Guth, 1978), a view commonly held by members of the gay subculture as well as by theorists. Given the restric-
tiveness of this view, it is understandable that some authors have resisted adopting the concept of "homosexual identity."

While a case can be made for the idea that a static quality is seen to characterize the homosexual individual, it does not necessarily follow that the identity construct should be abandoned: (1) Homosexuals do perceive themselves as having an identity that is a relatively stable part of themselves. Do we, therefore, attack what is in effect a reality for the individual (subjective and socially influenced though it may be) or might we not do better to examine our theoretical conceptions of that identity. (2) Identities can change, and instances of this are readily available in everyday life. What we need to realize is that it is the theories of identity governing our thinking, as Berger and Luckman (1966) point out, that dictate the rigid and permanent quality of homosexual identity:

Identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society. Identity types, on the other hand, are social products and *tout court*, relatively stable elements of objective social reality (the degree of stability being, of course, socially determined in its turn). (p. 160)

What we do need to examine is why a fixed essence perspective has been, and still is, promoted so strongly within and outside the gay subculture. Zita (1981) and Harry and DeVall (1978), for example, suggest that defining oneself as a lesbian or homosexual brings about certain social and political consequences that are necessary to the survival of a gay woman or man. De Cecco (1981) proposes that the importance of an essence concept lies in its promotion of the status of homosexuals as a minority group. Plummer (1981) notes that categorization brings "comfort, security and assuredness" (p. 29).

Those theorists diametrically opposed to the concept of homosexual identity tend to adhere to the need to focus on the individual as existential, self-as-experiencing. The self may be viewed as both object and process. The study of identity as a construct pertains to the former, since it considers the way an individual perceives the self. The self-as-process perspective involves consideration of the way a person actually experiences the self as "a homosexual." It is experiencing rather than perceiving that experience. An individual is seen to be in a state of continuous becoming (Maslow, 1968; Stein, 1977). Therefore identity can never be "what is," only "what is becoming."

The concept of identity based on self-as-object is considered restrictive because it ignores the "experiencing aspect" and, therefore, the very nature of "who I am." It is true that consideration of the structure of homosexual identity has often precluded a view of identity as process. Nevertheless, this is not sufficient grounds for ignoring the fact that, for homosexuals at this specific point in history, the concept of an identity is
built into their cultural milieu. While some may wish it were not, yet it is a part of the "psychologies" of our time.

So, is homosexual identity fact, construct, or simply fanciful illusion? The answer, it would seem, is all three! To the homosexual, perception of self as "a homosexual" is seen to be as valid an experience as that of "being homosexual." Yet homosexual identity can only arise in those societies where the homosexual categorization is acknowledged. In this sense, homosexual identity is hypothetical, constructed out of a need to control and restrict (Plummer, 1981) rather than a reflection of any actual concrete form. For the researcher wishing to understand the individual's experiential sense of "being a homosexual," the "homosexual identity" becomes a suitable research tool, an explanatory construct with hypothetical properties. An adequate understanding of homosexual identity requires serious consideration be given to all three perspectives.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this paper it has been my contention that there are three areas for concern: (1) the lack of definition of what is meant by "homosexual identity," (2) researchers' persistence in isolating their work from the theoretical literature on identity and self-concept, and (3) the inadvertent inclusion of theoretical assumptions that play a critical role in the conceptualization of homosexual identity. It is suggested that researchers should return to the most basic of questions, namely, "What exactly do we mean by the term 'identity' as it pertains to homosexuals?"

I suggest that a multidisciplinary approach to the issue is necessary if all facets of homosexual identity are to be adequately examined. To date, the psychological profession has been notably absent from both the theoretical and empirical areas. Because identity is a cognitive construct, this absence has produced an understandably limited and one-sided approach. It is precisely because the study of identity points us to "the dialectic between individual and society" (Berger & Luckman, 1966) that it offers an exciting opportunity for a combined-discipline approach.

On another level, an understanding of homosexual identity must have implications that go beyond homosexuals. What, for example, might we learn about heterosexual identity? How might our knowledge of the homosexual situation aid our understanding of other minority identities? Ultimately, the study of homosexual identity should allow us to consider the whole question of human identity.

NOTES

1. Grzelkowski (Note 8) refers to degrees of identity. Perhaps a phrase such as "partially developed homosexual identity" may be appropriate here.

2. A role is a behavioral concept referring to the patterns of behavior expected from a social position and may be distinguished from identity, which is a cognitive construct. For a discussion of
homosexual role, and an example of the confusion between the concepts of "identity," "role," and "behavior," see the debate presented by Goode (1981a; 1981b), Omark (1978; 1981), and Whitam (1977; 1978; 1981).

3. Dank (1971) suggested this direction over a decade ago, yet little attention has been given to cognitive processes in identity formation or maintenance.

REFERENCE NOTES


REFERENCES


Freedman, M. Homosexuals may be healthier than straights. Psychology Today, March 1975, 28–32.


