



# Effects of the Family of Origin on Sexual Identity Development

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## Abstract

Sexual identity is a substructure of sexual functioning that, according to Althof (2000, p. 247), includes “gender identity, object choice, and intention.” Further, a person’s gender identity is his or her sense of being either male or female (Yarhouse, 2001). The literature on various models of sexual identity can be organized into categories that address (a) general sexual identity development (defined to include gay and lesbian experiences), (b) gay identity development, and (c) lesbian identity development (Yarhouse, 2001). Whether an individual is developing an identity in any of these categories, the families of these individuals have an influence and a response to each member’s sexual identity in the family system. Baptist and Allen (2008) highlight in their in-depth interviews the complexities of negotiating family rules, journey with the family as they struggled with their new identity, and reveal how the impulsive process contributed to the family’s co-creation of new stories.

## Why look at the family of origin on how an individual’s sexual identity develops?

- Many social changes of an individual happen during adolescence while he or she is increasing autonomy from parents (Harden, 2014).
- Knowledge of sex and gender is in its formative years during the time an individual is and influenced by his or her family of origin (Yarhouse, Brooke, Pisano & Tan, 2005).
- There are many milestones an individual refers back to discover during his or her childhood to develop his or her own sexual identity (Yarhouse, Tan & Pawlowski, 2005).
- The age range of first experiences of same-sex attraction or sexual identity confusion is between 5-15 years old, when they are still living at home (Yarhouse et al., 2005).
- Understanding the origins of sexual identity can help narrow developmental explanations for behaviour sex differences in general (Burri, Cherkas, Spector & Rehman 2011).
- Masculine and feminine ideologies are formed during childhood years and have an impact on sexual identity development (Striepe & Tolman, 2003)

## Literature Review

Sexual identity is a rather broad construct. The literature on various models of sexual identity formation is summarized below. Identity development and the coming-out process are often treated as synonymous in the literature. But for the present, Yarhouse (2001) claims that some of the earliest models of identity development made assumptions about gay men and lesbian women having identical or nearly identical developmental experiences. This is not always the case, and given that there are many dimensions of sexual identity, it should not be a surprise that there are many theories as to how one comes to develop a sense of sexual identity (Althof, 2000, Yarhouse, 2001).

For psychologists, the divergent courses of adolescent sexual development pose a number of intriguing research problems: What individual differences in decision making, personality, and early environmental experience shape the emergence of sexual behaviors, and how does the course of sexual development shape later differences in psychological well-being? Beyond psychology, understanding individual differences in adolescent sexual development—its causes, correlates, and consequences (Harden, 2014). Sexual identity can also entail one’s biological sex (as male or female), gender identity (one’s psychological sense of being male or female), sex role (degree to which one adheres to social expectations for one’s sex), sexual orientation (the direction and persistence of one’s experiences of sexual attraction), and intention or valuable framework (Althof, 2000; Shively & DeCecco, 1977; Yarhouse, 2001).

### Theories of General Sexual Development

	Cass (1979)	Troiden (1989)	Coleman (1982)
Stage 1	Identity Confusion	Sensitization	Pre-coming out
Stage 2	Identity Comparison	Identity Confusion	Coming out
Stage 3	Identity Tolerance	Identity Assumption	Exploration
Stage 4	Identity Acceptance	Commitment	First Relationship
Stage 5	Identity Pride		Integration
Stage 6	Identity Synthesis		

### Results Found in the Literature

- Not being able to discuss sexuality in a context outside of heterosexuality was a cause of confusion or a prolonging in the coming out process.
- Individual’s who are dis-identified cited misperceptions of oneself due to family disruptions or difficult relationships within one’s family that has caused questioning one’s sexual identity. This is due to not connecting with a strong role model, feeling different and unable to connect with someone else, therefore thinking he or she is different.
- Families negative reactions to the coming-out process of a family member provided reinforcement in a core aspect of being same-sex attracted. For one’s parents to react negatively to a son or daughter’s sexuality reinforces any unhelpful perceptions of oneself.
- The lack of bonding with a parent has show some results in rejecting any form difference or differentiation of a family member, therefore reinforcing sexual identity confusion in the future.
- Perceptions of positive parental attitudes toward homosexuality are associated with a greater sense of a consolidated sexual identity for individuals in those types of families.
- In a study done by Burri, Cherkas, Spector, and Rahman (2011), that there are genetic influences on an individual’s sexual attraction combined with a common non-shared environmental component. Although there were measurement errors, the findings highlighted common developmental factors affecting differences in sexual orientation.

## CONCLUSION

When assessing the emotional environment of the family, it is important to consider the overall history of family relationships. The coming-out process may be seen as a crisis if the family has not had the education to conceptualize, understand, or define the issues involved in identifying as or being non-heterosexual. Families may enter counseling because a child has come out and they do not have the abilities to cope or handle the disclosure. Seeing the identified person separately from the family may be necessary to build the therapeutic alliance, as well as thoroughly assess the extent of the presenting concerns from the parent’s point of view. Before researching and writing this literary review, there was hope that there would be more research done on how an individuals family of origin could potentially influence a family member’s sexual identity or orientation. There is a call for more research on sexual identity formation being influenced by one’s family of origin and home environment.

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