

# Lesbian Identity Construction: An Adhesive Identity Process

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**Abstract.** As part of the sexual minority, lesbians receive less attention than gay men. Compared with gay men, lesbians bear more pressure from traditional culture and social discipline, and their identification process is more complicated. In other words, lesbians form a more open "mixed self" in the process of accepting multi-culture and multiple identities. To explore the identity status and mode of lesbians, the qualitative interview was used to conduct in-depth interviews with 5 lesbians. The results show that the main interaction dimensions of lesbians are as follows: In the process of interaction with self, parents, heterosexual community, and homosexual community in the above four dimensions, different situations or different situations in the same situation will change the way individuals manage their identities. Conflicts, coordination, concealment, or integration among different identities will affect the psychological state of individuals: Steadiness or anxiety, or sometimes steadiness and sometimes anxiety, will also lead to the different behavior of the individual. It can be seen that the identity of lesbians, namely the acceptance of their own multi-role identities, is a process of integration with multiple identities and roles. By introducing the concept of adhesive identity, this study enriched the interpretation of the psychological and behavioral manifestations of the lesbian identity process.

**Keywords:** Lesbian; adhesive identities; multi-role.

## 1. Introduction

In life, people will fall into a variety of difficulties, resulting in varying degrees of physical and psychological maladaptation. According to the minority pressure model [1], homosexuals not only face the same problems as heterosexuals but also face setbacks in more aspects due to their sexual orientation. The homosexual community has suffered persecution or discrimination from society since it was considered abnormal. Studies have shown that gay people suffer more mental health problems than heterosexuals, including substance use disorders, mood disorders, and suicide. [2]

Since homosexuality was considered a mental illness in its early days, research on gay people has focused on medicine. The aim is to explore the causes of homosexuality by studying its physiological characteristics such as hormone level and brain development. From the perspective of public health, homosexual sexual misconduct increases the probability of HIV transmission. As a result, homosexuality is labeled as "abnormal," "stigmatized," and "threatened."

In the 1970s, social identity theory first raised the issue of individual identity. Tajfel and Turner et al. revealed the basic psychological process of comparison, categorization, and identification of social identity by using the minimalist group paradigm. According to social identity theory, individual identity is the identification and attribution of various social identities, which is a cognitive structure rather than a generative process. Cass' six-stage model is the earliest and classic model of homosexual identity based on Essentialism. It is believed that homosexual self-identity is to identify with the nature of their sexual orientation, this process is linear, and each stage is carried out in order. The identity model of homosexuals is diverse, tortuous, and spiral. This study holds that most people in the society are in a multicultural environment, they also have multiple identities, and different identities will be activated and integrated into different environments. Homosexuals' self-identification is by no means linear and single, nor can it be explained by fixed models. Its identification process is to accept their multiple identities in a multicultural environment and realize "the mixed self" in the adhesive identification process.

Due to the particularity of the sample, it is difficult to select directly randomly from the population. First, using the principle of convenience, the researchers contacted three familiar lesbians who had

known each other for 3 years or more, had a history of same-sex relationships, and identified themselves as persistently attracted to or not attracted to the opposite sex. Subsequently, in the insider introduction, contact with another 2 lesbians. Among the 5 research subjects, 3 have already worked and 2 are students in school. Based on the principle of confidentiality, the researcher numbers the 5 interviewees, and the sequence of numbers is the interview sequence.

Firstly, this study collected relevant information through in-depth interviews with 5 lesbians to explore the process and way of their self-identification. Then the concept of adhesive identity is introduced and the identification process of lesbians is proved to be consistent with the way of overlapping identity according to the interview data. Finally, the paper analyzes their management methods for various identities in the identification process and finds the coping modes that can be summarized to provide a reference.

This study combined essentialism and constructivism perspectives of the homosexual identity development model to supplement and modify the Cass model for the identity development process of Lesbians in China. The identity pattern of lesbians is not linear and single as shown in the Cass model, but a process of adjusting their management mode of multiple identities according to different cognitive states, to achieve the harmonious and mixed-status of multiple identities. Adhesive identity can give lesbian identity from the point of view of the key factors and how to get along with other important identities, through different ways of management, make all kinds of identity harmony intermixing in individuals, a more open inclusive of self reduces identity anxiety.

## 2. Literature Review

As a sexual minority group, homosexuals have long suffered from discrimination and prejudice due to their conflict with mainstream culture, social values, and norms, and suffered difficulties in all aspects of life. These dilemmas are not caused by the nature of gay identity but are related to external events or conditions. Merton's stress theory emphasizes that society is a stressor that stimulates conflicting values with the structures it acts on. The pressure of prejudice, discrimination, and stigma from society on homosexuality is heavy and sometimes exceeds the individual's ability to bear, leading to mental or physical illness, such as substance use disorder, emotional disorder, and suicide.[3] One example of this conflict between mainstream and minority groups is the lack of a policy mechanism that supports family life and intimacy, similar to that of heterosexual marriage. In addition, negative attention from others can also lead to negative self-attention, which affects an individual's happiness. Affected by their sexual orientation, homosexuals are alienated, excluded, and ignored in the interaction process, which greatly affects their dignity and sense of value. Influenced by the traditional Chinese concept of marriage, women should get married when they reach their age. A woman's life is incomplete if she does not bear children. People are used to seeing marriage as a task rather than a choice for women, and if a woman does not love and marry a man, it is considered abnormal. In the face of all kinds of pressures, lesbians faced even more difficulties, received less attention than gay men, and were once "invisible" in society.[4]

Since homosexuality was considered a mental illness in its early days, research on gay people has focused on medicine. The aim is to explore the causes of homosexuality by studying its physiological characteristics such as hormone level and brain development. From the perspective of public health, homosexual sexual misconduct increases the probability of HIV transmission. As a result, homosexuality is labeled as "abnormal," "stigmatized," and "threatened". Such stereotypes and prejudices against the gay community have been internalized for a long time to become an important cause of homophobia. China deleted homosexuality from CCMD-3 in 2001, and the research on homosexuality has gradually shifted from the medical perspective to psychology. After experiencing a lot of hostility, fear, and negative views from heterosexuals, homosexuals will internalize them into their consciousness and develop negative perceptions of themselves. The minority stress model introduces a "distal to proximal" influence path, focusing on the influence of external social conditions and structures on individuals. For example, when the external negative cognition of

homosexuals is perceived by homosexuals, they will have negative cognition of themselves and choose to hide their sexual orientation.[5] However, group isolation also contributes to increased acceptance within the group and the life satisfaction of members within the group, which is why homosexuals tend to expose themselves to homosexual groups. Stereotypes, stigma, prejudice, and discrimination from society are undoubtedly the biggest source of pressure for minority groups, which interfere with their identity and cause pain and anxiety.

The earliest and classic identity model of homosexuality is Cass's six-stage model, which is based on three dimensions: self-perception, behavioral awareness, and awareness of others' reactions. The Cass model, based on the essentialism perspective, holds that self-identification of homosexuality means identification with the nature of one's sexual orientation, and it will not change after confirming one's homosexual identity, and this process is linear, with each stage proceeding in sequence. The essentialism model emphasizes the linear and single cognitive process. The identity model of homosexuals is diversified, tortuous, and spiral. Constructivism makes up for the defects of essentialism to a certain extent and is more suitable for explaining the identification process of lesbians. However, it cannot explain the specific way in which the identification of lesbians occurs, and whether the variables proposed are related to the identification of lesbians remains to be proved. Most people in the society are living in a multicultural environment, with multiple identities, and different identities are activated in different environments and integrated.[11] What individuals need to do is to make innovations in the multi-cultural form and form a more open "mixed self", so that they can freely face the multi-cultural life. The self-identity of lesbians is achieved through the acceptance of various group identities in the process of social interaction. So, the self-identity of the lesbian community is constantly constructing cognition in the process of interaction with society.

Adhesive identity, a concept originally derived from the study of Chinese Christians in North America by Fenggang Yang, refers to the co-existence of several modes of identity in the construction of multiple identities, that is, none is dominant and need not be mutually exclusive. Fei Xiaotong's concept of "pluralistic unity" can be used to explain the dynamic process of individual growth. "Pluralism" refers to a variety of group qualifications possessed by individuals. These qualifications are represented by the body of actors and their extension and become a complete "unity". In the course of each individual's life, facing various sculptural endowments of social forces, diversified group membership constructs deconstruct, or reconstructs diversified dynamic social identity, to construct diversified and rich complete life.[6]

### 3. Research Method

Due to the particularity of the sample, it is difficult to select randomly from the population directly, so this study adopts a qualitative research method. Since the purpose of the interview is to understand the identity development status and process of the diverse roles of lesbians, there is no fixed question, so the semi-structured interview is adopted, and questions and supplements are made according to the answers in the process of narration, to constantly improve the interview questions. According to the research theme and content, this study prepared the interview outline in advance. The researcher briefly introduced the research content and purpose to them and ensured that they were informed. Then, 3 lesbians volunteered to participate in this study. Subsequently, in the insider introduction, contact with another 2 lesbians. Five participants were numbered for confidentiality reasons. Here are their details: A is a 22-year-old college student, B is a 26-year-old civil servant, C is a 24-year-old Internet employee, D is an 18-year-old high school student, and E is a 28-year-old literary and art worker. After the interview, the researcher played back the recording and transferred the text, and contacted the interviewees again to verify the ambiguity and restore the real situation. In this study, the vocabulary of "communication", "role", "identity management mode", "mentality" and other words was coded to build an analysis framework.

## 4. Main identity and management mode

The process of self-identification of lesbians is a process of integration with their multiple identities. How multiple identities blend harmoniously in life situations depends on how one manages important roles. Different management methods will make individuals show different cognition, emotion, and behavior.[7] Therefore, there will be state differences among lesbians. Some seem to live a stable life, some are always in anxiety and depression, and some are sometimes stable and sometimes anxious. Lesbians are the unity of multiple identities or qualifications of multiple groups. Their sexual orientation brings them the identity of a sexual minority group, and they will have other identities in different life scenes or different roles in the same life scenes. In the face of multiple roles, there is no fixed management mode, which needs to be adjusted according to different situations and roles. When conflicts arise between important roles, if individuals do not adjust the specific management mode, it will cause internal and external troubles, affecting individual mood and health state. Taking the interview data of 5 interviewees in this study as an example, the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral differences caused by different role management styles of lesbians can be analyzed.

### 4.1 As an individual: active adaptation

As a subculture, not everyone can be exposed to the gay culture at birth, and because it goes against the mainstream culture, society hardly promotes gay culture. Individuals often have a period of confusion and anxiety when they recognize their sexual orientation, that is, they perceive that they are not sexually attracted to the opposite sex, but they do not understand the reason, and they will think that they are strange, or think that they are not interested in love." *I was so confused about this before, but I didn't have that certain feeling all the time*" (respondent D). "*As soon as I saw the man take off his clothes, I felt so sick that I felt numb from my back to my scalp*" (Respondent D). With the increase in individual knowledge and experience, gay culture is no longer alien. Individuals who are aware of their homosexual tendencies actively seek relevant knowledge, film and television works, or try to fall in love with the same sex, to explore and confirm their sexual tendencies. "*When I was A sophomore, I confessed my love to A girl I had liked for A long time. At that time, I was already sure that I liked girls, so I was much calmer when I confessed my love than before*" (Interviewee A). Accepting one's homosexuality is just a breakthrough in exploring the nature of one's sexuality. In life, individuals face different challenges due to their homosexuality in different situations. Most homosexuals choose to interact with different groups in different ways on the premise of sticking to their homosexual identity. Even if they encounter difficulties, they will not try to deny the fact that they like the same sex, but take the initiative to find ways to adapt to different difficulties.

### 4.2 As a child: Passive hiding

Through sorting out 5 interview materials, and repeated reading and coding, we can know the interaction status of 5 lesbians and their parents. As a child, and as a homosexual at the same time, there is a conflict between the two roles: to fulfill the traditional responsibility of marriage and procreation of children and to insist on their sexual orientation and unmarried infertility. Influenced by the social mainstream value norms, people internalize heterosexuality as a normal marriage and love model from childhood. With the growth of same-sex sexual attraction and other special experiences, or with the opposite sex of trial and error, individuals gradually perceive their homosexual tendencies and explore, try, and finally confirm their homosexual identity. It is also a challenge between two different cultures for each person's ancestral role, children. Given the culture that parents have been exposed to and the lag in recognition, gay culture is almost alien and incomprehensible to them. Concealing identity as a way to coordinate the roles of children and homosexuals is a helpless and passive action of children. The purpose of concealment is to maintain a good parent-child relationship, and anticipate the parents cannot accept gay culture in the case of the protection both sides. However, most gay people are still eager to expose their sexual orientation to their parents and get understanding and acceptance from their parents.

### 4.3 Being a member of society: show and keep

Homosexuals divide society into homosexual in-group and heterosexual out-group based on their sexual orientation. Generally speaking, group boundaries are fuzzy, and there will be no discrimination in daily communication. In the inner group and peer group, the pressure brought by the identity of sexual minorities is small, and the impact on individual life, work, and communication are not obvious. Therefore, the majority of homosexuals will not deliberately hide their sexual orientation. *"It's okay to come out with your friends., even when I came out, they thought it was normal. Maybe I acted free and easy in front of them, and they thought it was normal for me to be anything"* (interviewee C). Compared with homosexual in-group and peer groups, homosexual people tend to be reserved about their sexual orientation when communicating with non-peer heterosexual groups, that is, to reveal or conceal their homosexual identity according to the individual situation of the other party. *"With the boss or someone much older than you, I think you might have to weigh it because after all, he might not only look at your ability, but I'm afraid he might be biased"* (interviewee C).

## 5. The construction mechanism of lesbian identity

Through the analysis of the research results, the self-identification of lesbians is not the exploration of their nature in the sense of psychoanalysis, but rather a process of accepting their social identity.[8] According to the classic Cass model of homosexual identity development, the homosexual identity process includes six stages: identity detection, identity exploration, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity integration, and the process is linear.[9] The next stage can be entered after the successful completion of one stage, and the whole process is irreversible. This model is not suitable for analyzing the self-identity process of Chinese lesbians. By introducing the concept of overlapping identity and the perspective of developmental psychology in the development theory of homosexual identity, that is, combining essentialism and constructivism [10], the author holds that homosexual identity is constantly constructed and improved in the process of interaction with society, and the process is multiple, complex and reversible.

The identity of lesbians in China, that is, the acceptance of their own multi-role identity, is a process of integration with multi-identity and role. Lesbians have important roles as homosexuals, children, and members of society, and their main interaction objects are self, parents, heterosexuals, and homosexuals. When interacting with themselves, individuals tend to accept and adapt and take the initiative to explore solutions to difficulties due to their sexual tendencies. Once an individual confirms his homosexual identity, it will not be denied or changed by external forces. When interacting with their parents, homosexuals passively conceal their sexual orientation to protect their parents' physical and mental state or reduce their unnecessary troubles, but at the same time, they are actively seeking opportunities and eager to be accepted by their parents. When interacting with gay people, individuals tend to show their sexual orientation, seek emotional, material, and resource support from the inner group and get a sense of belonging and dependence. There is a distinction between the peer and non-peer groups when interacting with the heterosexual community. In the heterosexual community of peers, individuals are freer to show their homosexual identity without trying to hide it or fear too much adverse impact. When interacting with non-peer heterosexual groups, individuals tend to retain their homosexual identity, choosing whether and to what extent to expose their homosexual identity based on their knowledge of the other party. The management of different roles affects the state of lesbians at each stage and in different life situations. The ultimate goal of good role mixing is "pluralistic integration", that is, among various roles and identities, no one is dominant or mutually exclusive. Individuals can accept their own pluralistic identities at the same time, and carry out coordinated identity management to achieve internal and external harmony.

## 6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the research, the self-identification of lesbians is not the exploration of their nature in the sense of psychoanalysis, but rather a process of accepting their social identity. By introducing the concept of overlapping identity and the perspective of developmental psychology in the development theory of homosexual identity, that is, combining essentialism and constructivism, the author holds that homosexual identity is constantly constructed and improved in the process of interaction with society, and the process is multiple, complex and reversible. The identity of lesbians in China, that is, the acceptance of their own multi-role identity, is a process of integration with multi-identity and role. Lesbians have important roles as homosexuals, children, and members of society, and their main interaction objects are self, parents, heterosexuals, and homosexuals. When interacting with themselves, individuals tend to accept and adapt and take the initiative to explore solutions to difficulties due to their sexual tendencies. Once an individual confirms his homosexual identity, it will not be denied or changed by external forces. When interacting with their parents, homosexuals passively conceal their sexual orientation to protect their parents' physical and mental state or reduce their unnecessary troubles, but at the same time, they are actively seeking opportunities and eager to be accepted by their parents. When interacting with gay people, individuals tend to show their sexual orientation, seek emotional, material, and resource support from the inner group and get a sense of belonging and dependence. There is a distinction between the peer and non-peer groups when interacting with the heterosexual community. In the heterosexual community of peers, individuals are freer to show their homosexual identity without trying to hide it or fear too much adverse impact. When interacting with non-peer heterosexual groups, individuals tend to retain their homosexual identity, choosing whether and to what extent to expose their homosexual identity based on their knowledge of the other party. The management of different roles affects the state of lesbians at each stage and in different life situations. The ultimate goal of good role mixing is "pluralistic integration", that is, among various roles and identities, no one is dominant or mutually exclusive. Individuals can accept their own pluralistic identities at the same time, and carry out coordinated identity management to achieve internal and external harmony.

In qualitative research methods, the researcher himself as a research tool will inevitably produce errors and deficiencies. Most of the interviews are one-off and completed in a short time, which cannot accurately summarize the more real and comprehensive life experience of the interviewees. In the interview process, researchers found some real problems beyond the purpose of this study, which could not be supplemented due to the subject and length of the study. Researchers hope to make up for the defect of the small sample size in future studies or try to use quantitative methods to carry out more accurate and visual studies from other perspectives. Or use a long time to carry out a field investigation, collect more comprehensive and reliable information, and put yourself in the living conditions of the research object. In the follow-up research, besides focusing on the identification process of lesbians themselves, we should also pay attention to the factors causing their poor identification and provide corresponding solutions to make up for the deficiencies of this study and provide more comprehensive and clear results.

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