Who am I? A Transformative Process of Same-Sex Sexual and Gender Identities Development in Indian Context

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Abstract

Although, sexuality in recent years expanded rapidly across a wide range of social sciences, very few Indian researches attempt to question how homosexually oriented men come to adopt sexual identities and distinct gender identity.The present study captures and explains the transformative process of same-sex sexual and gender identities development. Using constructivist grounded theory methodology, 16 men with diverse sexual identities and 2 hijra and transgender each were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. With constructivist grounded theory principles, the data elaborates Indian model of same-sex sexual and gender identities and a transformative process of the same in an Indian context.

Keywords: same-sex, sexual and gender identities, transformative process, Indian context.

Introduction

Studies on sexuality in recent years expanded rapidly across a wide range of social sciences. Researchers, since last two decades, have attempted to understand and explain the underlying process of becoming aware, acknowledge, and accept same-sex sexual identity by various sexual identity development models. Existing models broadly describes stages – progression from one stage to final stage of sexual identity development – (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Dube, 2000; Minton and McDonald, 1984; Troiden, 1989; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Minton & McDonald, 1984) and process of sexual identity development – pathways of sexual identity formation, going forth and back from one phase to another – in Western cultural context (Alderson, 2003; Downing & Roush, 1985; Eliason, 1996; Cox & Gallois, 1996). These models stress on the content, and the process, of identity development. However, these models fail to adequately recognise interplay of indigenous cross-cultural structures as an agency and internal psychological processes individuals go through, particularly within predominantly heterosexual (and extremely homophobic) sociocultural contexts. Furthermore, these models fail to distinguish between personal and group identity development, which has been found to be central in conceptualisation of same-sex sexual identity development.

Most existing literature in India focusing on sexuality is in realm of sexual health issues primarily on HIV prevention. Studies on sexual identity development process in Indian cultural context are largely ignored by Indian academicians and professionals. This warrants the need of research on same-sex identity development from Indian perspectives. Present study is a part of a larger study to understand development of same-sex sexual identity in Indian cultural context conducted in Gujarat. The study discussed the process model of same-sex sexual identity development and

explained five developmental markers (Pandya, et al. 2013). However, it did not capture the transformative processes that lead to development of sexual as well as gender identity among men who have sex with men, Hijra and Transgender population. The present study specifically looks at psycho-social process of sexual and gender identity development. It also discusses the complex socio-cultural structures that act as an agency that regulate transformative processes of sexual and gender identities development.

Method

This study was conducted in the city of Vadodara (formally known as Baroda), in western Indian state of Gujarat. We considered 'Grounded Theory' approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz, 2006) as the best-fit approach for the present research to address our aim and to help us construct a theory of transformative process of sexual and gender identity development in Indian context. Using constructivist grounded theory methodology, 20 men with diverse sexual and gender identities were selected through Lakshya Trust – a community based organization working with men who have sex with men, hijra and transgender population in three cities of Gujarat namely, Vadodara, Surat and Rajkot. In order to represent the MSM, hijra and transgender population, men with different sexual and gender identities from Vadodara city were recruited in the study. It is important to note that these culturally adapted sexual and gender identities are fluid and dynamic. Some of them are labels which were internalized and persons started identifying themselves with these labels. The Table 1 is an attempt to organize cultural beliefs around sexual & gender identities, psychological & behavioural characteristic and sexual characteristics of men who have sex with men, hijra and transgender (MHT) population, which may vary with time.

Study Participants

All participants were self-identified with same-sex orientation and those who were willing to participate in the study were recruited using following inclusion criteria:

1. Self-identified men as same-sexual orientation who are above 18 years of age
2. Married (heterosexually)
3. Married or Unmarried with steady relationship
4. Married or Unmarried and exploring relationship

The study used theoretical sampling as presented in the Table 2. Interviews of each participant were carried out until the saturation of data achieved.

Data Collection

All interviews were conducted face-to-face, at their convenient time, either at counselling centre, drop-in-centre (DIC) of the community based organization, Lakshya Trust, or participants' home by the first author. Participants were interviewed at least 3 times. The duration of first interview was approximately 90 to 120 minutes while rest were follow-up interviews for 15-20 minutes to clarify or seek missing information. Entire data collection and primary analysis process was spread over 9 months.

Participants were aged between 18 and 51 years. Of the 20 participants, 10 had some secondary education (10th standard), 6 had higher secondary education (12th standard), and 4 were graduates. 8 worked as daily wage labourers, 4 worked with government or non-government organisations, 5 had small businesses, and 1 was a photographer and 2 were begging in the train. Most of them (12) identified as being from low-income

families, while the others belonged to the Indian middle class. Most participants (12) lived in joint-family (where multiple generations of family members live under one roof).

A semi-structured interview schedule, based on previous literature, was developed. The interview schedule chronologically covered: childhood experiences, experiences of being different from others, awareness about and proclivity towards the same-sex, factors that push and pull to accept or reject same sex-sexual identity, culturally defined gender-inappropriate behaviours including factors that push and pull to adopt opposite gender role, personal responses to such behaviours, and factors that make them comfortable with sexual being. Interviews were transcribed and translated into English, and these transcripts were then organised into categories (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Data from each interview were analysed, where we examined general patterns and themes, before conducting the next interview. This iterative process allowed us to incorporate additional avenues of investigation to our interview schedule.

The data were coded using four levels of coding: initial coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, through the process of constant comparison of categories, core categories were developed that revealed the experiences of participants as a group.

Several strategies to assure trustworthiness of findings were employed. These included: (i) member checking by providing participants an opportunity to read transcripts and respond to initial analysis, (ii) independently reviewing the codes and analysis by all the authors to ensure reliability of coding.

Results

Same-sex sexual and gender identity development consists of different layers of identities such as personal, community and public sexual identities. Each layer integrates different identity developmental markers. The Figure 1 explains three broad identities and developmental markers.
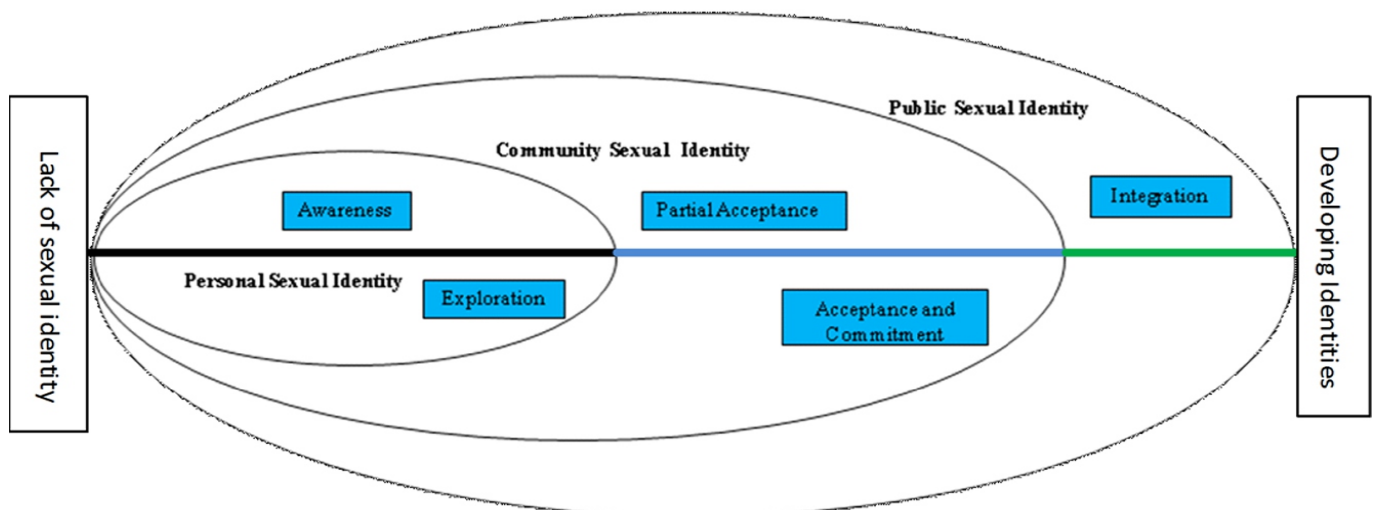

Figure 1. Indian Model of same-sex sexual and identity development

Table 1 Sexual and gender identities, psychological, behavioural, and sexual characteristics

Sexual identity	Gender identity	Psychological and Behavioural Characteristics	Sexual characteristics
Homosexual (Important to note that homosexual is not a term used by participants. Usually others (outside of their community) referred their sexual identity as "homosexual" which is later internalized.	Koti (effeminate man)	Psychologically feel and behave the way women do. Feel romantic and sexual attraction towards other men. Strong inclination to wear female attire and makeup.	Engage in anal or oral sex with men. Usually take receptive (passive) role and popularly known as "bottom" within the culture.
Bisexual	Man	Feel romantic and sexual attraction towards both men and women. Some men display effeminate while others display masculine mannerism.	Engage in vaginal sex and receptive as well as penetrative anal/oral sex with men
Double Decker	Koti (However, some men identify them as man with homosexual orientation)	Feel romantic and sexual attraction towards other men. Strong inclination to wear female attire and do makeup. Occasionally, they wear female attire and make-up.	Engage in receptive as well as penetrative anal/oral sex with other men.
Gay	Man	Feel romantic and sexual attraction towards other men.	Engage in receptive and penetrative anal/oral sex with other men
Ghadiya	Man	Feel romantic and sexual attraction towards other men. Masculine men whom Koti or Double Decker label as "Ghadiya." Ghadiya usually are active partners or lovers. Some masculine men with same-sex orientation started identifying them as "Ghadiya" and have romantic relationship with Koti.	Engage in penetrative anal sex with other men (known as "top")
Same-sex sexual identity	Hijra	Feel romantic and sexual attraction towards other man. Wear female attire and part of the Hijra gharana – a cultural group with strict behavioural norm.	Occasionally engage in sexual activities with other men
Same-sex sexual identity	Transgender	Feel romantic and sexual attraction towards other man. Wear female attire and socially	Engage in sexual activities with other men.

Table 2 Characteristics of study participants

Number of participants	Participant's sexual and gender identity	Characteristics
6	Koti	Effeminate men, sometimes wearing female attire and makeup, usually passive/ 'bottom' in anal/oral sex with men. Two participants were heterosexually married, and one was in steady same sex-sexual relationship; other two were single who were exploring relationship; and rest two were in steady same-sex relationship.
4	Bisexual	Sexually active with both men and women and also identified themselves as bisexual. Two participants were married.
2	Double Decker	Effeminate unmarried men involved in receptive as well as penetrative anal/oral sex with other men. Both were seeking steady same-sex relationship.
2	Gay	Men self-identified as gay who were engaged in receptive and penetrative anal/oral sex with other men. Both were unmarried and sexually active with men only. One was in steady same-sex relationship while other was exploring potential same-sex relationship.
2	Ghadiya	Unmarried masculine men and active partners/'tops' who engage in penetrative anal sex with other men and penetrative vaginal sex with women. One Ghadiya was cohabiting with other male partner after "same-sex marriage" within the closed community.
2	Hijra	One was Guru and another was Chela from Behcharaji Gharan in Vadodara. Both were identified them as "Hijra," with occasional same-sex sexual relationship. Guru had castrated penis while chela's castration ceremony yet to be organized. Begging was their primary income generating activity,
2	Transgender women	Men who identified as transgender woman who adopted woman's role. One was undergoing sexual re-assignment surgery (SRS) to change the sex while other was adopted opposite gender role after castration of penis. Both were living as women at the time of interview.

Personal sexual identity comprises two phases: awareness and exploration. Awareness is the first phase which encompasses of being aware of differences than peers and person starts questioning the previously held assumptions of being heterosexual. The Figure 2 presents the process of development of personal identity.

Once the awareness of differences is acknowledged, men actively explores the differences, interests towards same sex individuals, and same sex feelings. Men develop a sense of being different than other and challenge the previously held assumptions of being heterosexual. They start recognizing their feelings as different from the peers. They find their behaviour being 'gender inappropriate'. The recognition of being different from others and 'gender inappropriate behaviour' such as feeling of being attracted towards same gender individual, hugging and holding hands in public spheres create confusion within as well as curiosity to explore more about their feelings and behaviour results in active exploration of such differences. Being aware of differences, men actively engage in exploring questions related to same sex desires, feelings and experiences and engage in repetaing sexual experiences. They define these sexual exploration and experiences as 'masti' or time pass and seek out pleasure from these experiences. Hoewever, at the same time, they undergo an internal conflict. With such experiences they gained more knowledge about same-sex sexuality and seek for other man. The Figure 3 presents the process of development of community sexual identity.
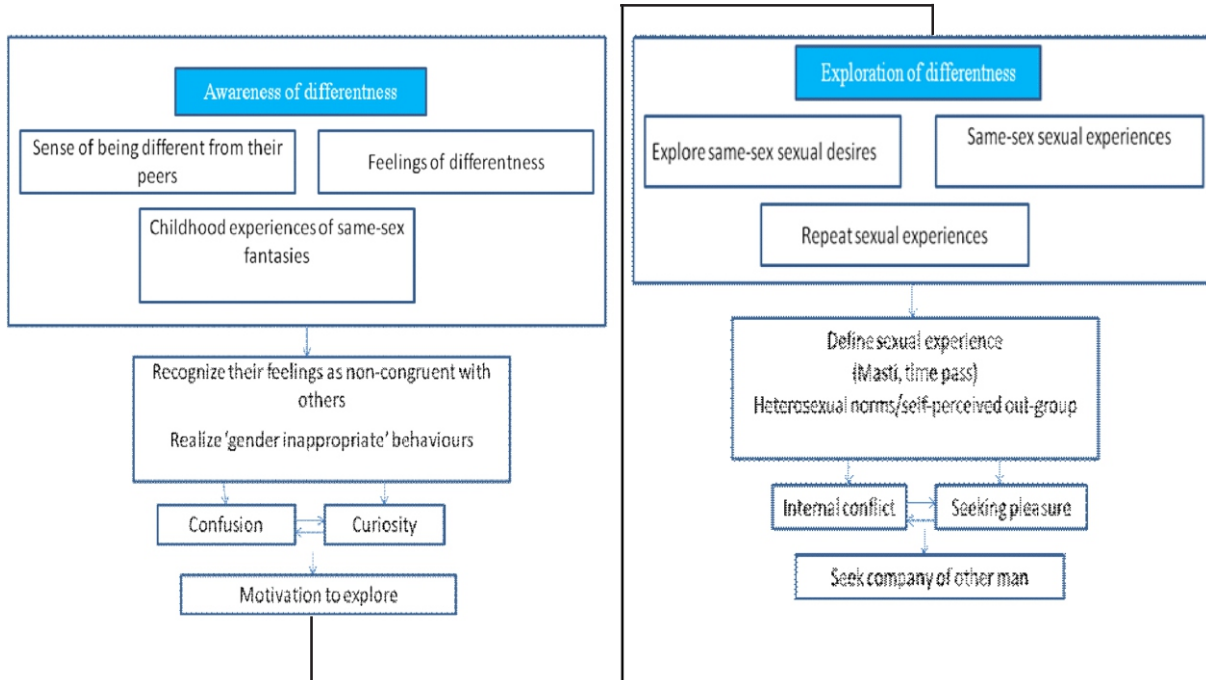

Figure 2. Process of development of personal identity

When men become aware of differences and exploring those differences through same-sex sexual experiences within the closeted group of same-sex men, community sexual identity was demonstrated through partial acceptance of one's same-sex sexual feelings and desires. The dominant heteronormative values, created a personal construct of homosexuality as undesirable, and created mixed feelings such as fear, shame and guilt, coupled with love and excitement (Pandya, 2011). Therefore, same-sex sexuality was accepted only within closeted group – a private space where same-sex sexual activities are acted out without recourse to validate one's same-sex feelings, desires, and demonstrate sexual and gender identity in public as heterosexual men. The closeted group includes, peers with same-sex and gender identities, family of choice where they nurture family relationships (like mother, sister, daughter-in-law) with peers and support group of the organization working on sexual minority. This phase represents romantic relationships, relate themselves with sexual and gender
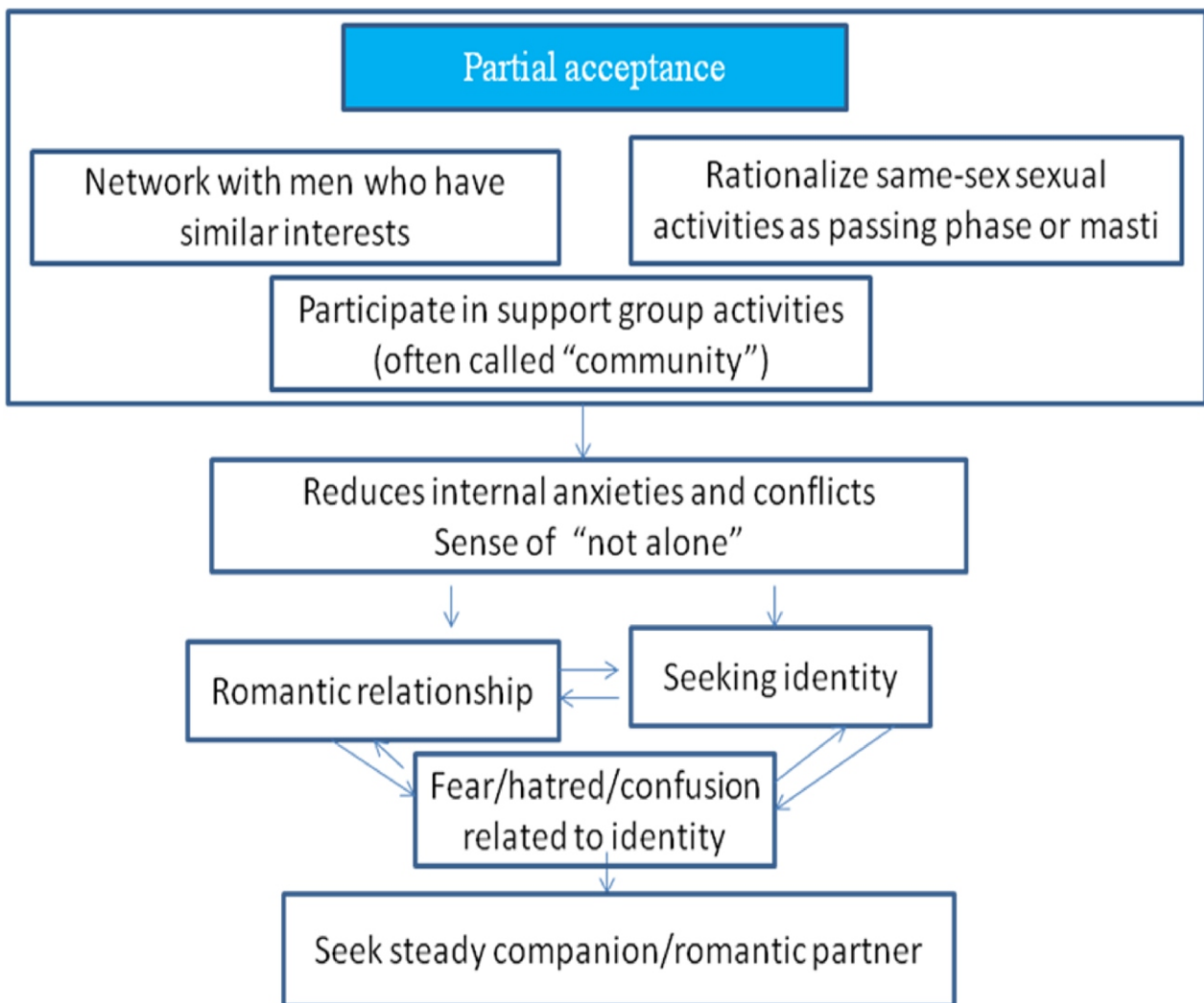

Figure 3. Process of development of community identity

identities at the same time, fear, hatred towards self due to their engagement with peers, support group and same-sex sexual relationships.

After partial acceptance and coming out with same sex identity in community, the person move forward and accept the same sex identity and commitment to one's identity. At this stage, person get into emotional and ideological transformation which leads to satisfaction from the relationship that further leads to accepting homosexuality as reality. At this stage there is calculative disclosure within the community and person is engaged into community and nurture 'family of choice' relationship, which leads to fulfilling homosexual relationship. The Figure 4 presents the process of development of public sexual identity.

Public sexual identity was reflected with acceptance, commitment to sexual being and integration of sexual identities. It involved clarification and validation of same sex feelings. Men began to intensely identify with their same-sex sexual community and their activities, and began to challenge homophobia and accept the same-sex sexuality as a reality. In this period, internal conflicts related to sexual feelings, desires, practices and sexual identities are clarified and resolved. At this phase, a full acceptance and commitment to same-sex attraction and desire as part of an overall identity is attainted. Acceptance of sexuality by family members emerged as catalyst for validating and synthesizing their sexual being. Integration same-sex attraction and desire forms public sexual identity among
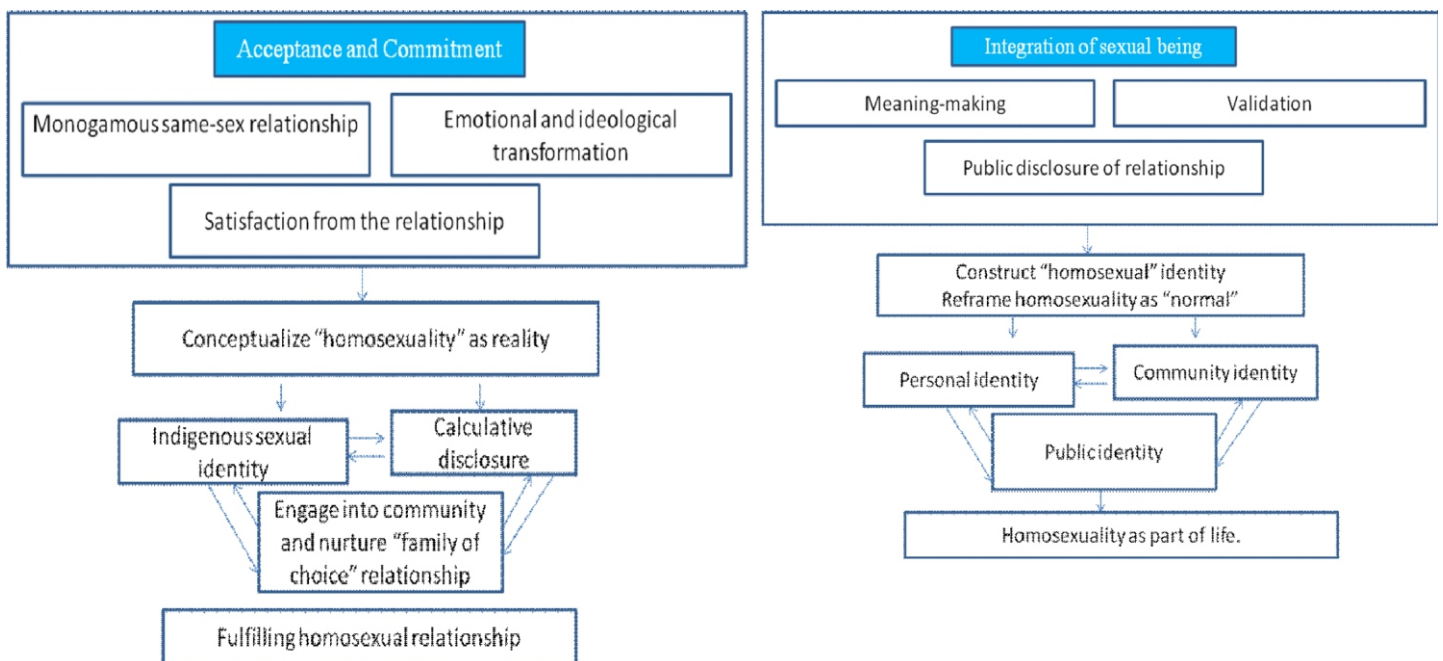

Figure 4. Process of development of public identity

homosexually oriented men while Hijra strongly relate them as 'Hijra' as an identity and transgender identifies as 'Women'. Here, it is important to note there are many overlaps in Hijra and Transgender identity. This research validates that identity of Hijra and Transgender as exclusive identities. There may be Hijra and Transgender persons who identify them as 'Women', with the fact that there is sizable 'Hijra' who consider themselves as 'Hijra' who are different from women and transgender.

Integrity of sexual being is the last developmetnal marker of same sex sexual and gender identity development. They make meaning of their identity and validate their ideas against and diclosure their relationship with same sex partner in public in case of homosexually identified men. These experiences reframe their notions of homesexuality as normal. That leads to personal and community identity which integrate public identity and accepting homosexuality as part of life. In case of Hijra and Transgender, it is easy for them to build identity as Hijra or Transgender due to their appearance and clothing as women. Hijras have distict identity as 'Hijra' who are considered as sacred / spiritual identity. Hijra represents strick tradition. Hijras are believed to be married to the Lord Shiva, worship goddess Behchraji. Ideologically, they are not allowed to keep romantic or sexual relationship with any men ; however, in some Gharana, Hijras keep secret realtionship with men or even married with men. Transgender person have distinct identity as 'transgender' and do not bound by the laws of 'Hijra'. They can publicly keep relationship with other men, which reduces their conflicts related to their sexual and gender identity.

Different identities, personal, community and public identities overlaps sexual and gender identity demonstrated by men at one point of time. Sexual and gender identity development processes may go back and forth within, and may go beyond, the five processes we have identified here.

Discussion

The present study attempted to describe process of transformation of same-sex sexual and gender identities among Indian MSMs, Hijra and Transgender. Same-sex sexual and gender identity develop as a result of five interconnected transformative processes, emergent identities, identity conflicts, validation of identities, multiple identities formation and conceptualization of sexual and gender identities. The Figure 5 explains the transformative process of sexual and gender identities.

Limitations of the study

The findings of this study need to be read in light of certain limitations. Participants for the research were recruited through a community-based organisation and were part of a support group. Each participant was ritually participated in 'family of choice' practice. The data we have are retrospective accounts of a group of men, Hijras and Transgender persons who were already oriented to sexuality issues and had strong bonds and relationships with the same-sex sexuality community of Vadodara city. Our participants also represent only specific geographical, historical (in case of Hijra) and classed strata of Indian society. Therefore, the tentative theory generated from the present research remains context-bound and limited in terms of its generalisability.
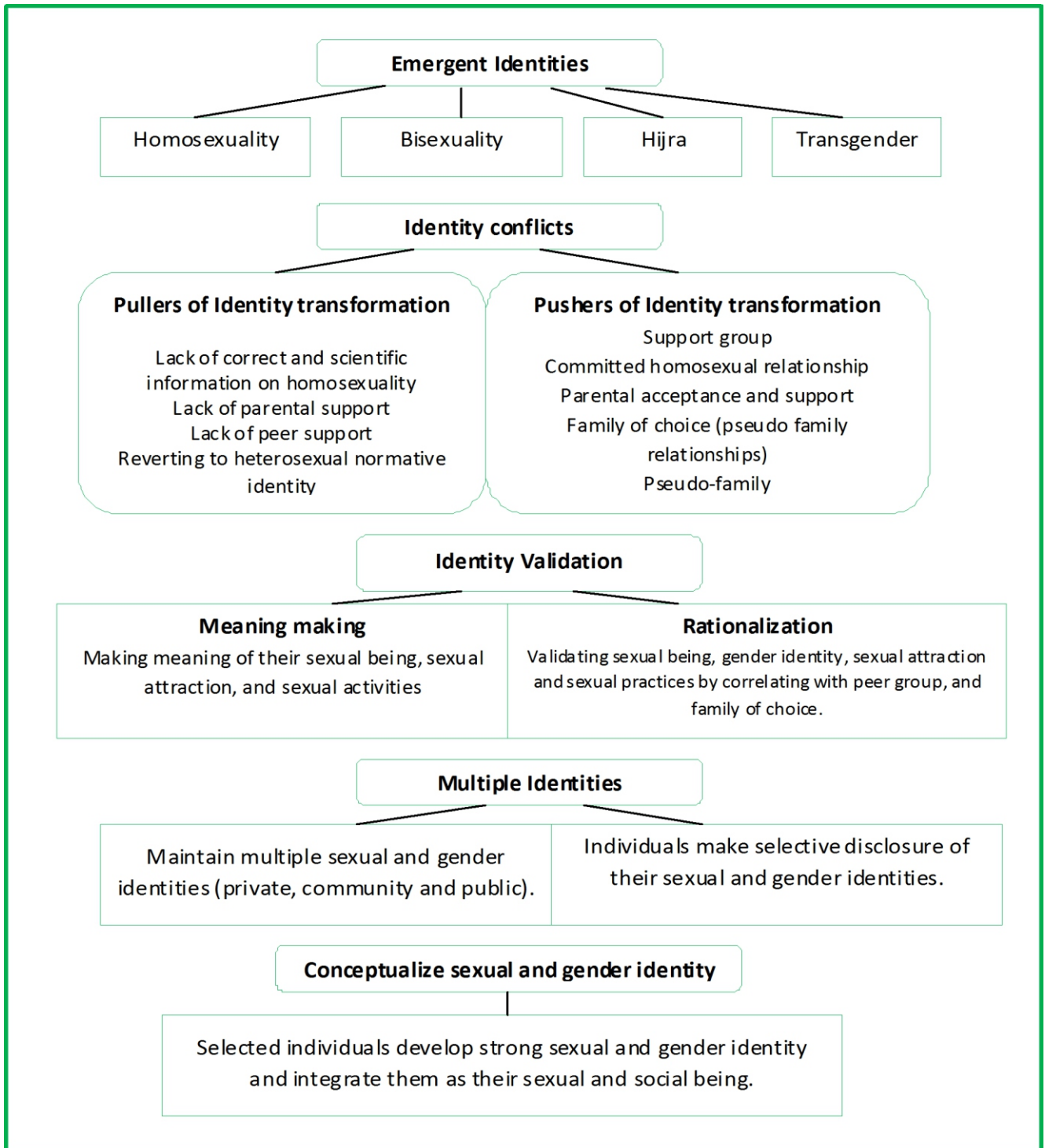
Emergent Identities

| Homosexuality | Bisexuality | Hijra | Transgender |

Identity conflicts

Pullers of Identity transformation

Lack of correct and scientific information on homosexuality
Lack of parental support
Lack of peer support
Reverting to heterosexual normative identity

Pushers of Identity transformation
Support group
Committed homosexual relationship
Parental acceptance and support
Family of choice (pseudo family relationships)
Pseudo-family

Identity Validation

Meaning making
Making meaning of their sexual being, sexual attraction, and sexual activities

Rationalization
Validating sexual being, gender identity, sexual attraction and sexual practices by correlating with peer group, and family of choice.

Multiple Identities

Maintain multiple sexual and gender identities (private, community and public).

Individuals make selective disclosure of their sexual and gender identities.

Conceptualize sexual and gender identity

Selected individuals develop strong sexual and gender identity and integrate them as their sexual and social being.

Figure 5. Transformative process of same-sex sexual and gender identities development

Conclusion

We have conceptualised Indian model of same-sex sexual and gender identity as well as transformative process of developing sexual and gender identities. The research identified developmental processes marked with processes that transform and shape non-normative sexual and gender identities. There exist multiple identities particularly for men identified as gay, bisexual, and indigenous identities. Men who become Hijra or Transgender have multiple identities; however, develop distinct sexual and gender identity over a period of time and live with single identity and integrate new gender identity into their being. The process of identity formation is continual and does not have endpoint while transformative processes are micro processes that facilitated formation of same-sex sexual and gender identities.

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