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Abstract

This chapter summarizes advances in current theoretical and empirical literature on sexual identity development. It proposes a model of sexual identity that offers a more global (i.e., non-sexual identity group specific) perspective in comparison to existing sexual identity group-specific sexual identity models. Attention to commonalities in sexual identity development across sexual identity subgroups can offer a more global perspective that captures shared experiences of sexual identity development as well as differences between subgroups. The proposed unifying model of sexual identity development incorporates what has been learned from years of theory and research concerning sexuality, LGB and heterosexual identity development, attitudes toward sexual minority individuals, and the meaning of ordinate and subordinate group membership. The model describes the intersection of various contextual factors that influence the individual and social processes underlying sexual identity development. The unifying model is innovative in its applicability across sexual orientation identities, as well as its inclusion of a wide range of dimensions of sexual identity and possible developmental trajectories. The chapter concludes with a discussion of preliminary research findings that inform the unifying model and that have implications for future research. We hope this model allows researchers, educators, and practitioners to develop interventions and conduct investigations on broader questions about human sexuality without being constrained to gay–straight dichotomies of sexual orientation and the related methodological limitations that have characterized sexual identity theory and research in the past.

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Identity consists of a stable sense of one's goals, beliefs, values, and life roles (Erikson, 1950; Marcia, 1987). It includes, but is not limited to, gender, race, ethnicity, social class, spirituality, and sexuality. *Identity development* is a dynamic process of assessing and exploring one's identity,

and making commitments to an integrated set of identity elements (Marcia, 1987). Identity formation was originally conceived as a focal task of adolescence (Erikson, 1950), but the concept has more recently been applied throughout the lifespan (see Kroger & Marcia, Chapter 2, this volume).

In this chapter, we focus on sexual identity development. During the past two decades, there have been numerous theoretical and empirical advances in understanding sexual identity development as applied to individuals identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual (e.g., Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Eliason, 1995; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000; Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002; see Savin-Williams, Chapter 28, this volume). Within these advances, conceptual models and measurements of sexual identity development were designed for specific sexual identity subgroups (e.g., lesbians, gay men, heterosexuals). It is important to note, however, that only limited progress has been achieved in the construction of models and measures for bisexual or heterosexual individuals (see Diamond, Pardo, & Butterworth, Chapter 26, this volume; Savin-Williams, Chapter 28, this volume).

Sexual identity subgroup models and measures serve an important role in elucidating identity experiences and processes that are unique to each subgroup. Attention to commonalities in sexual identity development across sexual identity subgroups can offer a global perspective that captures shared experiences of sexual identity development as well as differences between subgroups. Thus, group-specific and universal models of sexual identity development can be viewed as having complementary strengths and limitations in that aspects of sexual identity development that are uniquely salient to specific groups are the focus of group-specific models, and aspects that are shared across groups are the focus of universal models. The need for both group-specific and universal foci also parallels greater societal acceptance of diversity in sexual identity groups (e.g., Yang, 2000).

The purpose of this chapter is to describe current theoretical and empirical literature on sexual identity development, and to arrive at a proposed model of sexual identity that offers a global (i.e., non-group specific) perspective. This proposed model can offer a complementary perspective to existing group-specific (i.e., gay and lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual) sexual identity models and is not intended to replace such models. In the subsequent sections, we (a) review and evaluate prominent literature and concepts concerning sexual identity development within specific sexual identity subgroups, (b) introduce a unifying model of sexual identity development that can be applied across sexual identity subgroups, and (c) discuss preliminary findings from recent research that can inform the unifying model and that may have implications for future research.

Sexual Orientation, Sexual Orientation Identity, and Sexual Identity

A number of scholars have argued that sexual *identity* would be more reliably assessed, and validly represented, if it were disentangled from sexual *orientation* (e.g., Chung & Katayama, 1996; Drescher, 1998a, 1998b; Drescher, Stein, & Byne, 2005; Rust, 2003; Stein, 1999; Worthington et al., 2002). Our conceptualization of *sexual orientation* refers to an individual's patterns of sexual, romantic, and affectional arousal and desire for other persons based on those persons' gender and sex characteristics [American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, 2009]. Sexual orientation is linked with individual physiological drives that are beyond conscious choice and that involve strong emotional feelings (e.g., falling in love). *Sexual orientation identity* is what we term the individual's conscious acknowledgment and internalization of sexual orientation. Sexual orientation identity is thought to be linked with relational and other interpersonal factors that can

shape an individual's community, social supports, role models, friendships, and partner(s) (e.g., APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, 2009; APA, 2003). We conceptualize sexual orientation identity as subsuming sexual orientation, with the former construct reflecting a conscious acknowledgment of the latter construct. Thus, to simplify our discussion, we use the term *sexual orientation identity* throughout the chapter to refer to these overlapping concepts in a single phrase. It is worth noting that Savin-Williams (Chapter 28, this volume) uses the phrase *sexual identity label* to represent what we term sexual orientation identity. Savin-Williams prefers *label* over *identity* because the former is terminologically distinct from sexual identity and because *label* captures his intent to use the term as a group descriptor. We use the term *sexual orientation identity* to be explicit about this concept as a conscious acknowledgment of identity and to locate it within the broader construct of sexual identity.

We conceptualize sexual orientation identity as one of many dimensions of *sexual identity*. We consider other dimensions of sexual identity that are commonly attributed to sexual orientation identity (sexual behavior with men and/or women; social affiliations with lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) individuals, and/or heterosexual individuals and communities; emotional attachment preferences for men and/or women; gender role and identity; Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985) as correlates of sexual orientation identity, but not sole characteristics of sexual orientation identity. These elements are part of sexual identity as a larger construct. We view sexual identity as also including other dimensions of human sexuality (e.g., sexual needs, sexual values, modes of sexual expression, preferred characteristics of sexual partners, preferred sexual activities and behaviors) as well as group membership identity (e.g., a sexual orientation identity, or considering oneself as a member of sexuality-related social groups) and attitudes toward sexual minority individuals. These concepts and their roles in sexual identity development are elaborated upon in the chapter.

Measuring Sexual Identity

Content analyses of research on sexual diversity in psychology have indicated that the most common method of assessing what we term the *sexual orientation identity* (others term sexual orientation or sexual orientation label) of participants is to request self-identification as gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, or some variation on these types of categories (Buhrke, Ben-Ezra, Hurley, & Ruprecht, 1992; Clark & Serovich, 1997; Huang et al., 2009; Phillips, Ingram, Smith, & Mindes, 2003). This method provides categorical self-identification. These categories are typically used as a global proxy for the cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and physiological bases underlying sexual identity. However, a substantial body of research has suggested a variety of ways in which self-identified heterosexual, gay, and lesbian individuals might exhibit bisexual behavior or attractions without categorically identifying as bisexual (e.g., Diamond, 2000, 2003a, 2008; Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Worthington & Reynolds, 2009). This is further complicated by the substantial number of individuals who report predominantly other-sex sexual feelings and behaviors, who also have experiences of same-sex attraction or behavior, but who do not identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Diamond, 2008; McConaghy, Buhrich, & Silove, 1994; Worthington & Reynolds, 2009; see Savin-Williams, Chapter 28, this volume). A universal model of sexual identity may advance the current state of research and measurement by addressing limitations and constraints inherent in categorization of sexual orientation, feelings, and behaviors.

Both categorical and more continuous conceptualizations of sexual orientation identity have evolved over the last 60 years since Kinsey and his colleagues (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953) first published their classic works on sexual *behavior* of males and females. Kinsey et al. used a seven-category taxonomic system in which "0" corresponded to "*exclusively heterosexual*" and "6" corresponded to "*exclusively homosexual*." It

is noteworthy that, although the scale is intended to index sexual behavior, it is often used as a measure of sexual orientation identity. A number of scholars have criticized the Kinsey Scale (e.g., Masters & Johnson, 1979; Sell, Wells, & Wypij, 1995; Shively & DeCecco, 1977) because it presents same- and other-sex sexual behavior as opposites along a single continuum. Specifically, in Kinsey's binary model, increasing desire for one sex represents reduced desire for the other sex, which in reality may not always be the case. In contrast, other theorists have suggested that same-sex and other-sex attractions and desires may coexist relatively independently and may not be mutually exclusive (Diamond, 2003b, 2008; Sell et al., 1995; Shively & DeCecco, 1977; Storms, 1980; Worthington & Reynolds, 2009). In multi-dimensional models of sexual orientation identity, the intensity of an individual's desire for or arousal toward other-sex individuals can be rated separately from the intensity of that individual's desire for or arousal toward same-sex individuals, and this allows for a more nuanced understanding of sexual diversity (Worthington & Reynolds, 2009).

In understanding measurement issues related to sexual identity, readers are cautioned to recognize that inconsistent terms, methods, and concepts have plagued the sexual orientation and sexual identity literatures. As noted earlier, scholars often inappropriately presume interchangeability of terms (e.g., sexual orientation, sexual identity). The field also operationalizes key sexual identity variables in inconsistent ways (e.g., categorical self-identification, use of a continuous self-identification scale such as a Kinsey-type scale, and physiological measures). The sexual orientation and identity literature also does not typically account for historical shifts across time in both popular and scholarly conceptualizations of variables tied to human sexuality, especially self-ascriptions related to sexual orientation identity (e.g., *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, *queer*, *heterosexual*, *metrosexual*, *bicurious*, *heteroflexible*, *pansexual*, *polyamorous*, *trans-amorous*, *uncertain*, *disidentified*, *ex-gay*, *ex-ex-gay*). Therefore, much of this literature is difficult to interpret—especially when comparing findings across time,

samples, and investigators (Meyer & Wilson, 2009; Moradi, Mohr, Worthington, & Fassinger, 2009). In one attempt to reconcile incompatible definitions and conceptualizations of variables related to sexual orientation, Tolman and Diamond (2001) have suggested that sexual orientation can be conceptualized as having inherent biological determinants (essentialism) as well as being strongly influenced by and given meaning through socio-cultural forces (constructionism). That is, rather than understanding sexual orientation from either a social constructionist or an essentialist paradigm, the integration of aspects from both perspectives may better reflect the multi-dimensionality and dynamics of human sexual orientation.

Tolman and Diamond's clarification of the nature of sexual orientation as having *both* essentialist *and* constructionist components is consistent with the distinctions among sexual orientation, sexual orientation identity, and sexual identity as proposed in this chapter and in Worthington et al. (2002). Modern scholarship examining the stability of sexual orientation also seems to support our conceptualizations of sexual orientation, sexual orientation identity, and sexual identity (e.g., Diamond, 2003a; Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006, see Savin-Williams, Chapter 28, this volume). Specifically, some dimensions of sexual identity, such as relationships, emotions, behaviors, values, group affiliation, and norms, appear to be relatively fluid; by contrast, sexual orientation [i.e., an individual's patterns of sexual, romantic, and affectional arousal and desire for other persons based on those persons' gender and sex characteristics (APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, 2009)] has been suggested to be stable for a majority of people across the lifespan (Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981; Ellis & Ames, 1987; Haldeman, 1991; Money, 1987). Our distinctions among sexual orientation, sexual orientation identity, and sexual identity attempt to capture and acknowledge both fluid and stable aspects of sexual identity. These distinctions are also consistent with the aforementioned constructionist and essentialist distinction.

As the reader may have noticed, the stability of sexual orientation is supported by some earlier empirical studies (e.g., Haldeman, 1991, 1994) but is questioned by more recent empirical studies (Kinnish, Strassberg, & Turner, 2005; Savin-Williams, Chapter 28, this volume). New empirical data concerning sexual fluidity could reflect a greater acceptance of sexual minority individuals in society in comparison to 20 years ago (Savin-Williams, 2005, Chapter 28, this volume). That is, more people may be acknowledging sexual minority orientations (i.e., “coming out”) because of a more accepting societal climate. Yet, it is not clear from existing research whether sexual orientation is more variable across time for some individuals and not for others, or whether individuals may be relatively more or less open to *experiencing* and *acknowledging* variations in sexual arousal and desire at different points in their personal development. That is, *experiencing* arousal may be different than *acknowledging* arousal, which may vary across contexts and relationships. For instance, Diamond’s (2003a, 2003b, 2008) research on women and same-sex attractions indicates that many women’s acknowledged identities vary as contexts, relationships, and behaviors change, but that their overall levels of sexual desire and attraction generally do not change.

Sexual Orientation Identity Development

Models of sexual identity *development* may provide an additional perspective regarding the nature and variety of sexual orientation identities over time. In her groundbreaking work, Cass (1979) set the foundation for much of the theory building and exploratory research on the sexual identity of gay men and lesbians (e.g., Troiden, 1988, 1993). In this work, Cass described a multi-stage process from confusion to identity synthesis where the individual addresses the impact of stigma while passing through milestones of identity awareness and formation. This work has been more recently considered descriptive of the

coming out process for sexual minority individuals rather than as a model of identity development (e.g., McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). That is, the model may only consider one aspect of sexual identity development—acceptance and disclosure of one’s sexual orientation identity as gay or lesbian.

Although they are too numerous to fully review here, there has been a proliferation of models intended to describe lesbian and gay identity development. Readers are referred to Reynolds and Hanjorgiris (2000) and Savin-Williams (2005, Chapter 28, this volume) for a thorough review and critique of existing models. These critiques note that past gay and lesbian identity development models have often neglected individual differences in race, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic class (Savin-Williams, 2005, this volume). Savin-Williams (Chapter 28, this volume) also discusses the previously noted problems of the *gay–straight binary* inherent in many of these models (see also Moradi, Mohr, et al., 2009, for more on this discussion). Specifically, these models meet their intended aim to delineate identity development for specific groups but are limited in their generalizability to other identities (e.g., bisexuality, heterosexuality) and to description of sexual identity development *across* groups.

Building on existing sexual minority identity formation models, Fassinger and colleagues (Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996) produced arguably the most sophisticated models of lesbian and gay identity development. Their models include four phases of sexual identity development (awareness, exploration, deepening/commitment, and internalization/synthesis). The Fassinger et al. models are distinct in its conceptualization of phases of both individual and group membership identity. Within the awareness phase, at the individual level, one recognizes being different, and at the group level, one acknowledges that there are different possible sexual orientations. This recognition and acknowledgement leads to the next phase, exploration, wherein exploration of same-sex attractions occurs at the individual level and exploration of one’s position

in the lesbian and gay community begins at the group level. Through this exploration, the deepening/commitment phase occurs—the crystallization of a gay or lesbian sexual identity at the individual level and personal involvement in the lesbian and gay community at the group level. The final phase is internalization/synthesis. Within this final stage, a gay or lesbian identity is integrated into one's general self-concept at the individual level and across contexts (e.g., home, work, neighborhood) at the group level. Importantly, the individual and group phases do not necessarily occur in parallel fashion, and an individual could experience concordant or non-concordant phases of individual and group identity. For instance, a person could commit to a lesbian or gay identity at the individual level (e.g., have a same sex partner), but still be at an earlier stage at the group level (i.e., not have identified self to others as lesbian or gay, not engaged in lesbian and gay community). Two quantitative measures of lesbian and gay identity development have been developed to assess each status of the models: the Gay Identity Scale (Fassinger, 1997) and the Lesbian Identity Scale (Fassinger & McCarn, 1997).

Although the Fassinger and Miller (1996) and McCarn and Fassinger (1996) models are a clear advance over earlier lesbian and gay identity models, there are some limitations in the Fassinger models that require attention. In particular, one must identify as gay or lesbian to complete the instruments associated with the models. As a result, research using these instruments is likely to sample only from participants who identify as gay or lesbian and who are in the deepening/commitment or internalization/synthesis statuses of sexual identity development (see Savin-Williams, Chapter 28, this volume).

We contend that some of the limitations of past sexual identity development models can be addressed through a unifying, generalizable sexual identity development theory and accompanying instrumentation. For instance, a sexual identity development measure that does not categorize participants into sexual orientation identity categories (or ask participants to do so) at recruitment has the advantage of capturing participation

from gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other participants who, on the basis of sexual orientation identity or commitment to sexual identity, might not otherwise volunteer for research exclusively related to lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identities (see Worthington, Navarro, Savoy, & Hampton, 2008). A universal model of sexual identity is also applicable to heterosexual individuals, who may not go through the stages identified by Fassinger and colleagues. Thus, a more global conceptualization of sexual identity broadens the scope of measurement and can improve empirical investigations of sexual identity.

Bisexual identity. Although there may be some overlap in the experiences of the coming out process and identity development for lesbians, gay men, and bisexual men and women, bisexuality has been identified as a unique and often misunderstood phenomenon (Klein, 1993). Kinsey et al. (1948) long ago advanced the notion that bisexuality was much more common than previously expected. In their seminal research on bisexuality, Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994) suggested that “becoming bisexual involves the rejection of not one but two recognized categories of sexual identity” (p. 26). They described a stagewise model of bisexual identity development that includes initial confusion, finding and applying the label, settling into the identity, and continued uncertainty. They emphasize that a substantial amount of bisexual identity development involves confusion, exploration, and uncertainty. Nevertheless, although larger proportions of their bisexual research participants expressed ongoing and past uncertainty about self-identification compared to heterosexuals, lesbians, and gay men, the vast majority of bisexuals expressed comfort and certainty with their bisexual identity.

Similar to Weinrich and Klein (2003) and to the differential developmental trajectories framework posited by Savin-Williams (Chapter 28, this volume), empirical studies by Weinberg et al. (1994) have highlighted within-group differences among bisexuals by identifying several different “types” of bisexuality, including the pure, mid, heterosexual leaning, homosexual leaning, and varied types. This research demonstrates several

important aspects of bisexuality that counteract stereotypes: (a) bisexuality is a unique and legitimate identity; (b) substantial external pressures to conform to the gay–straight dichotomy may result in considerable confusion, exploration, and uncertainty; and (c) there are important within-group differences among bisexual individuals that have critical influences on sexual identity development (see also Worthington & Reynolds, 2009).

Heterosexual identity. Heterosexual identity development is a relatively new and understudied area of sexual identity theory and research (Ellis & Mitchell, 2000). One of the first studies of heterosexual identity applied Marcia's identity development theory (see Kroger & Marcia, Chapter 2, this volume) within an exploratory qualitative investigation of how undergraduate students' heterosexual sexual identities formed (Eliason, 1995; see Savin-Williams, Chapter 28, this volume). Although the study was conducted with a small number of participants ($n = 26$), Eliason determined that the largest proportion of her participants exhibited identity *foreclosure*. Another large percentage of students were categorized in identity *diffusion*, primarily because they expressed confusion about the definition of sexual identity. Eliason found gender differences among the small number of participants who were categorized as identity *achieved*. Whereas the men appeared to commit to heterosexuality based primarily on a rejection of gay identity, the women appeared to be more open to other alternatives at a later point. Similarly, all participants categorized as identity *moratorium* were women, with no men categorized into this status.

Sullivan (1998) applied concepts commonly associated with racial identity development (i.e., Hardiman & Jackson, 1992) to the identity development process of both LGB and heterosexual college students. She described the development of heterosexual identities within five stepwise stages (*naïveté*, *acceptance*, *resistance*, *redefinition*, and *internalization*) shaped by an atmosphere of homophobia and heterosexism. No research, to our knowledge, has examined the validity of the Sullivan model. Potential questions for future empirical research concerning

the Sullivan model include the following: what developmental events lead a heterosexual person to examine her or his sexual identity with an appreciation of sexual minorities in society (the *resistance* stage)? And how might heterosexual persons be distributed across these categories?

Mohr (2002) introduced a model of adult heterosexual identity in an effort to conceptualize heterosexual therapists' barriers to and facilitators of effective practice with LGB clients. Like the Sullivan model, no empirical studies to our knowledge have examined the Mohr model. Nevertheless, it potentially contributes to our limited theoretical base concerning heterosexual identity. Mohr argues that therapists' ineffective practice with LGB clients can be understood as a manifestation of efforts by therapists to develop, maintain, and express heterosexual identities in ways that contribute to a positive and coherent sense of self, although these efforts are detrimental to the therapy process. Mohr's model describes heterosexual identity as a result of the interaction between individuals' sexual orientation schemas or *working models* and their core motivations to fulfill basic needs for social acceptance and psychological consistency. This entirely theoretical model also describes the importance of social context (e.g., work, home, community) and multiple identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender) in processes related to heterosexual identity.

Another model of heterosexual identity development was advanced by Worthington et al. (2002), who built on the earlier work of McCarn and Fassinger (1996). A unique feature of this model relative to the previously described models is that it includes sexual orientation as one component of heterosexual individuals' broader sexual identity. This heterosexual identity development model is the foundation for the unifying model proposed later in the present chapter. In the Worthington et al. (2002) heterosexual identity model, sexual orientation identity was conceptualized as one of six dimensions of the larger construct of individual sexual identity: (a) *perceived sexual needs*, (b) *preferred sexual activities*, (c) *preferred characteristics of sexual partners*, (d) *sexual values*, (e) *recognition and identification*

of sexual orientation, and (f) preferred modes of sexual expression. Multiple interrelated biopsychosocial factors (e.g., biological, microsocio-cultural, gender, cultural, religious, and systemic) were posited as influencing an individual's progression through five heterosexual identity development statuses. Although a complete presentation of the heterosexual identity model is beyond the scope of this chapter, we briefly review the original tenets below because they also represent theorized determinants of sexual identity development in the unifying sexual identity model proposed later in the chapter.

Biological determinants of sexual identity were considered in the heterosexual model because many biological influences (e.g., amino acids, hormonal variations, genetic familiarity, molecular genetics, prenatal sex hormones, prenatal maternal stress, functional cerebral asymmetry, neuroanatomical sex differences, sibling sex ratio and birth order, temperament, and physical attractiveness) have been proposed to influence sexual identity. Although these biological factors are posited to operate, empirical evidence supporting their role is limited (Zucker & Bradley, 1995). In addition to biological factors, microsocio-cultural influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) stemming from one's immediate relationships with family, peers, coworkers, neighbors, and others also were included in the initial model because gender roles, sexual knowledge, sexual attitudes/values, and some sexual behaviors are often learned within microsocio-cultural contexts (e.g., peer group, classmates, family). In addition, heterosexual identity was conceptualized as dependent and concomitant to gender identity development processes because a person's biological sex triggers a range of social norms for gender characteristics and behaviors, including sexual identity. For instance, as soon as a newborn baby enters the world, her or his biological sex is emphasized (e.g., through the colors of her/his bedroom and her/his clothes and toys). In turn, gender characteristics based on societal and cultural norms (often stereotypically masculine and feminine) are attributed to the individual (Gilbert & Scher, 1999). The individual then internalizes societal constructions of gender

and acts according to these internalized norms in her or his interpersonal interactions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). An important way in which one internalizes societal constructions of gender and acts according to these internalized norms is through enacting a heterosexual identity. That is, gender role prescriptions for women include being sexually oriented toward men and gender role prescriptions for men include being sexually oriented toward women. Related to this notion is evidence that heterosexual self-presentation is an important societal norm for masculinity (Mahalik et al., 2003; Parent & Moradi, 2009), and aspects of sexual identity such as sexual fidelity and relational orientation are important societal norms for femininity (Mahalik et al., 2005; Parent & Moradi, 2010). Furthermore, gender role traditionality is fairly consistently correlated with prejudicial attitudes toward non-heterosexual groups (e.g., Goodman & Moradi, 2008).

Cultural context was also theorized as a critical influence on heterosexual identity development. Contexts such as family (see Scabini & Manzi, Chapter 23, this volume), community, cultural norms, and oppression may facilitate or inhibit an individual's affectional preferences and sexual behaviors, thereby affecting her or his sexual identity development. Furthermore, because many religions regulate sexual behavior among their members and instruct specific values and moral convictions regarding sexuality, religious orientation is theorized to shape sexual identity development, particularly the statuses of sexual identity exploration and commitment. Related research demonstrates that sexual values are associated with religious orientation (Davidson, Darling, & Norton, 1995; Robinson & Calhoun, 1982; Tozer & Hayes, 2004) and that homonegativity correlates with religiosity (e.g., Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Johnson, Brems, & Alford-Keating, 1997; Worthington, Dillon, & Becker-Schutte, 2005). Finally, because systemic homonegativity, sexual prejudice, and privilege are so pervasive at both macro- and micro-levels of society (Levitt et al., 2009; Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, & Miller, 2009), these forces are hypothesized to influence sexual identity development.

We describe these influences more specifically in the next sections of the chapter.

Although the McCarn and Fassinger (1996) model aims to describe the sexual identity development process of sexual minority individuals, and whereas the Worthington et al. (2002) model intends to describe this process for heterosexual individuals, these two conceptual models contain quite similar features. They propose similar processes of identity development (e.g., both models reflect the processes of *exploration*, *commitment*, and *synthesis/integration*), consider individual as well as group identity, and account for multiple dimensions of—and influences on—sexual identity development. Bieschke (2002) suggested that the Worthington et al. model may serve as a unifying model of sexual identity development. Accordingly, the next section of this chapter presents a new unifying model of sexual identity development. This newer model represents an updated version of the Worthington et al. (2002) model and attempts to integrate research on correlates of sexual identity and theories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual identity development into one inclusive working model.

A Unifying Model of Sexual Identity Development

We define *sexual identity development* as the individual and social processes by which persons acknowledge and define their sexual needs, values, sexual orientation, preferences for sexual activities, modes of sexual expression, and characteristics of sexual partners. We add to this definition the assumption that sexual identity development entails an understanding (implicit or explicit) of one's membership in either a privileged dominant group (heterosexual) or a marginalized, minority group (gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity), with a corresponding set of attitudes, beliefs, and values with respect to members of other sexual identity groups.

Similar to the Worthington et al. (2002) heterosexual identity model and McCarn and Fassinger (1996) lesbian and gay identity development model, the unifying model proposed here describes two parallel, reciprocal developmental determinants: (a) an individual sexual identity development process and (b) a social identity process (see Fig. 27.1). These two processes are

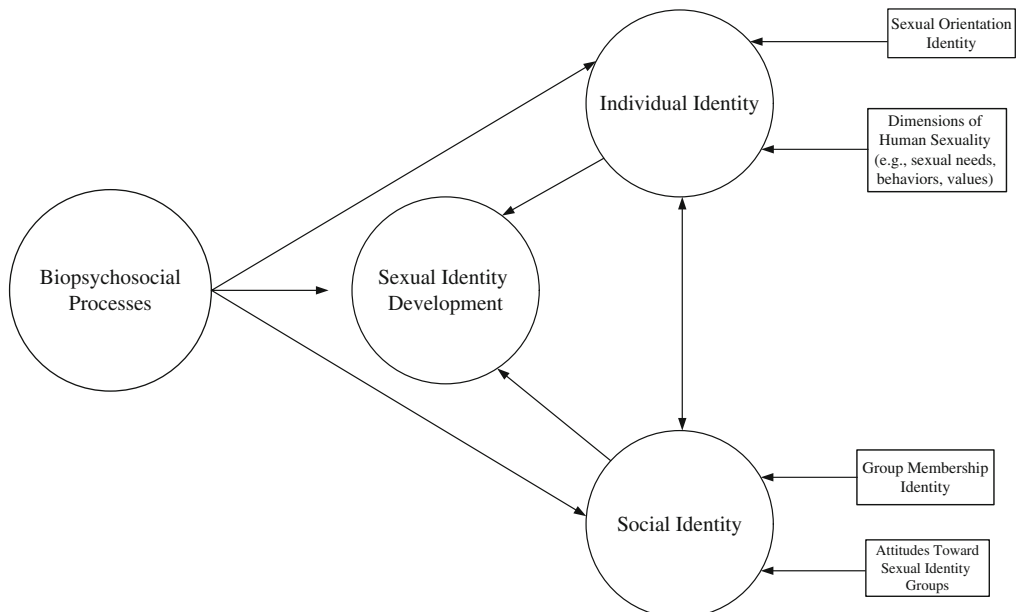


Fig. 27.1 Determinants of sexual identity development

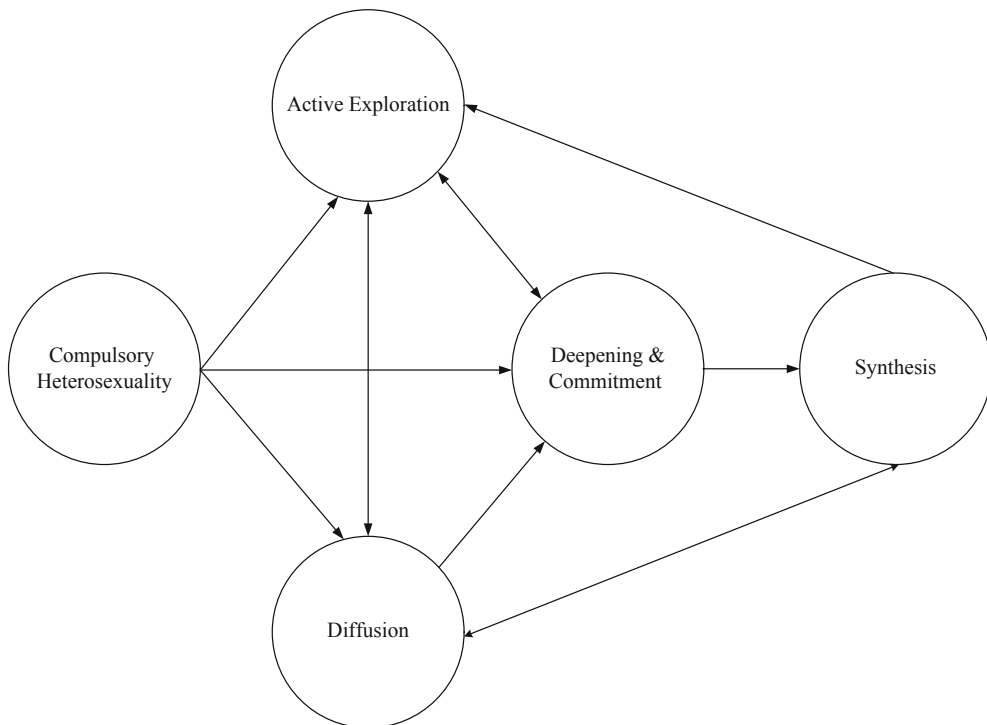


Fig. 27.2 Processes of sexual identity development

posited to occur within five discernible sexual identity development statuses—described in the next section of the chapter (see Fig. 27.2): (a) compulsory heterosexuality [a term first proposed by Rich (1980) and more recently adopted by Mohr (2002)], (b) active exploration, (c) diffusion, (d) deepening and commitment, and (e) synthesis. Although the unifying model represents an attempt to describe developmental phenomena, we emphasize that there are opportunities for circularity and revisiting of statuses throughout the lifespan for a given individual. Thus, points in the model should be thought of as non-linear, flexible, and fluid descriptions of statuses through which people may pass as they develop their sexual identity over the lifespan. As can be seen in Fig. 27.2, which illustrates the hypothesized processes underlying sexual identity development, there are many different trajectories and outcomes of sexual identity development.

As described earlier in the chapter, individual sexual identity includes, but is not limited to,

sexual orientation identity. As in the heterosexual identity model, sexual identity in the universal model is understood as a multi-dimensional construct that includes sexual orientation identity and numerous other domains of human sexuality (e.g., sexual needs, sexual values, preferred sexual activities, preferred characteristics of sexual partners, preferred modes of sexual expression) (see Fig. 27.1). The social identity process involves group membership identity, or the recognition of oneself as a member of a group of individuals with similar sexual identities, and attitudes toward other sexual identity groups (see Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004, for more on group membership identity theory). It is important to note that the recognition of oneself as a member of a group of persons with similar *sexual identities* differs from the recognition of one's *sexual orientation identity*. The former is a broader group membership identification which includes both sexual orientation identity and other salient

aspects of human sexuality. For instance, a person could identify as heterosexual (a sexual orientation identity), while also considering oneself as a member of other sexuality-related social groups [e.g., celibates (Abbott, 1999), swingers (de Visser & McDonald, 2007), nudists (Story, 1987), voyeurs (Rye & Meaney, 2007), exhibitionists (Långström & Seto, 2006), practitioners of sadomasochism (Moser & Klienzplatz, 2006)]. We expect that dimensions of the larger construct of individual sexual identity evolve and interact with the processes of group membership identity and attitudes toward sexual identity groups (See Fig. 27.1). For example, an individual who has (a) negative attitudes toward sexual minority individuals and (b) a group membership identity grounded in societal heterosexism may not want to engage in sexual activities that involve homoerotic taboos.

Regardless of whether a person is sexually active or celibate, sexual identity development may occur on both conscious and unconscious levels throughout all stages of the model. For instance, exploration can involve cognitive or behavioral activities (or both) and is not limited to behavioral experimentation. Furthermore, as suggested by identity status literature (e.g., Pastorino, Dunham, Kidwell, Bacho, & Lamborn, 1997), we expect that persons experience different sexual identity statuses (and related dimensions) at different times due to individual differences in developmental context. Thus, the model allows for many different individual trajectories and outcomes of identity development.

Statues of Sexual Identity Development in the Unified Model

Compulsory heterosexuality. The title of this status is based on the term coined by Rich (1980) and applied by Mohr (2002) to describe the presumption across societal systems that (a) heterosexuality is normal and universal and (b) women and men are innately attracted to each other emotionally and sexually. Compulsory heterosexuality refers to individuals of any sexual

orientation who accept and adopt the compulsory heterosexuality as a sexual orientation identity that is institutionalized and required by socialization in many cultures. Compulsory heterosexuality also reflects microsocial (e.g., familial) and macrosocial (e.g., societal) mandates for “appropriate” gender roles and sexual behavior and/or avoidance of sexual self-exploration, which may preempt sexual exploration. Because of societal assumptions about normative development, most people are likely to experience very little conscious thought about their adoption of compulsory heterosexuality. People exhibiting the compulsory heterosexuality identity status can be of any age. For example, prepubescent boys and girls may not have had much opportunity to consider their sexuality at a conscious level. Similarly, many adults may never have considered any alternatives to heterosexuality.

Because heterosexuality is so strongly circumscribed in most cultures, compulsory heterosexuality is likely to be the starting point for most individuals, regardless of whether they later self-identify as heterosexual or as a sexual minority. As a result, this status represents an externally imposed identity rather than a self-ascribed identity, even when an individual identifies outwardly as heterosexual. This status closely resembles the foreclosed identity status in Marcia’s model of identity development (see Kroger & Marcia, Chapter 2, this volume). Movement out of compulsory heterosexuality is likely to be permanent because entry into one of the other statuses ultimately precludes the type of naive commitment to sexual identity characteristic of this status (see the *Deepening and commitment* status sub-section of the chapter for our descriptions of two related sub-statuses of *Deepening and commitment*—*committed heterosexuality* and *committed compulsory heterosexuality*).

In terms of group membership identity, individuals of any sexual orientation in compulsory heterosexuality tend to operate within culturally prescribed norms for heterosexist assumptions about normative behavior on the part of others. Concrete, all-or-nothing thinking tends to characterize conceptions of different sexual identity groups. For instance,

attitudes toward heterosexuals are “group appreciating” (cf. Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1995). The presumption that heterosexuality is normal and good is accepted without question. Awareness that heterosexuals are a privileged, dominant majority group is either denied or repressed from awareness or accepted without question as normal, understandable, and justifiable. Attitudes toward sexual minority individuals are “group depreciating” among individuals in the compulsory heterosexuality status (cf. Atkinson et al., 1995). People in this status are likely to assume that everyone in their microsocial contexts (e.g., familial, work, and other immediate social circles) is heterosexual. As such, sexual minority individuals are understood only in abstract, stereotypic terms. For individuals who have same-sex or other-sex sexual orientations, the nature of this status suggests that attitudes toward sexual minority individuals are likely to be at the condemnation end of Herek’s (1984) *condemnation—tolerance* continuum, reflecting prejudice toward same-sex sexual orientation and sexual minority individuals (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009).

Active exploration. Purposeful exploration, evaluation, or experimentation of one’s sexual needs, values, orientation and/or preferences for activities, partner characteristics, or modes of sexual expression are typical of the active exploration status. Active exploration of individual sexual identity is distinguished from naive behavioral experimentation in three important ways that have implications for other statuses in the model. First, exploration can be cognitive or behavioral. Although there may be a bias toward behavioral sexual exploration in modern society, cognitive forms of exploration (e.g., fantasy) are possible as well and may be the preferred form of exploration among individuals; particularly those who engage in abstinence-oriented lifestyles. Second, active exploration is purposeful and usually tends to be goal directed, such as purposefully experimenting (in thought or action) with different modes of sexual expression, different characteristics of sexual partners, and/or sexual acts. Third, the socially mandated aspects of heterosexuality—those that

characterize compulsory heterosexuality—are thought to be questioned or abandoned by individuals of any sexual orientation when active exploration occurs. However, contextual influences can constrain or promote sexual identity exploration within socially acceptable boundaries. For example, this occurs when a person is raised in a family, culture, or religion that instructs that acceptable sexual partners are only persons of the same race, different gender, similar age, same socioeconomic status, and same religion. Although these constraints vary from person to person depending on a number of dimensions of social context (e.g., gender, culture, age, religious orientation), active exploration occurs when the individual engages in cognitive or behavioral exploration of individual sexual identities beyond that which is socially mandated within one’s social context. For instance, even if one is raised in the above-described context, active exploration regarding preferred characteristics of a sexual partner for some might entail the development of sexual or romantic relationships with people having different types of physical, social, economic, or spiritual characteristics. For others, active exploration might entail such things as experimenting with different types of sexual activities, transcending gender roles through adoption of gender atypical modes of sexual expression, engaging in sex with more than one partner (e.g., group sex), reading books about sex, and so on. As a result, active exploration could be characterized very differently depending on contextual factors. Furthermore, there is a wide range of levels of exploration (e.g., type, depth, and duration of exploration). Thus, our notion of active exploration is inclusive and flexible enough to account for between and within-group differences exhibited by same-sex- and other-sex-oriented individuals, as suggested by Savin-Williams’ (Chapter 28, this volume) differential developmental trajectories perspective on sexual identity development.

Active exploration will most typically coincide with biological maturation (e.g., physical capacity), but could occur at nearly any point during the course of the lifespan. This status closely resembles Marcia’s (Kroger & Marcia,

Chapter 2, this volume) moratorium status, which is characterized by a suspension of commitment in favor of active exploration. Due to the powerful impact of systemic homonegativity and sexual prejudice, many heterosexually identified individuals who enter this status are likely to primarily explore needs, values, and preferences for activities, partner characteristics (with the exception of gender), and modes of sexual expression—but they will likely not explore sexual orientation identity alternatives.

Sexual minority individuals are more likely to explore options in all areas of their sexual identities. Entry into the active exploration status for sexual minority individuals may be prompted by awareness of homoerotic feelings, behaviors, and exploration (Fassinger & Miller, 1996). These experiences may lead to re-labeling of sexual orientation identity (e.g., from heterosexual to lesbian, gay, or bisexual) during active exploration. Although some heterosexuals in this status may also consciously experiment with symbolic (fantasy) or real sexual activities with same-sex partners, most are expected to identify as “straight” to preserve the privileged status associated with it. Others may reflect on the possibility that their compulsory heterosexual orientation identity does not fit them and may consider or adopt another sexual orientation identity (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer). We conceptualized only two pathways out of active commitment: (a) into deepening and commitment following active exploration or (b) into diffusion. This process is described in subsequent sections of the chapter.

The group membership identity process is hypothesized to be more salient for individuals in the active exploration status in comparison to the compulsory heterosexuality status. Recognition of same-sex attractions might result in (a) questioning the privileged status of heterosexuality in society, (b) maintaining negative attitudes toward oneself and toward sexual minority individuals (Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008), or (c) exploring one’s own attitudes toward sexual minorities as a group, as well as the possibility of membership in that group (Fassinger & Miller, 1996). When a person recognizes her or his

membership in a dominant heterosexual group, such recognition might result in (a) questioning the justice of the privileged heterosexual majority position or (b) further asserting the privileges of the heterosexual majority. In active exploration, the interaction of individual and social processes of identity development is thought to become considerably intertwined. For example, a willingness to violate cultural sanctions against sexual self-exploration may result in recognition and understanding of ordinate–subordinate group dynamics and majority group privilege by individuals of any sexual orientation identity. As such, individuals of any sexual orientation identity may be aware of and associate with persons from different sexual minority groups more often than persons in the compulsory heterosexuality status.

Identifying as heterosexual (a privileged group membership status) in active exploration can sometimes be reserved as a visible orientation (i.e., passing as straight) by individuals of any sexual orientation. Homoerotic thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can be dismissed as transient, concealed, and denigrated; or may be accepted as congruent with one’s of sexual, romantic, and affectional arousal and desire. Many individuals in active exploration can overtly or secretly experiment with behaviors that involve more than one partner and/or one or more same-sex partners without ever identifying with a sexual orientation identity minority group (Diamond, 2008; McConaghy et al., 1994; Worthington & Reynolds, 2009). Thus, sexual behaviors and sexual orientation identity can be conveniently separated by some. For instance, this discrepancy could occur when persons identify as heterosexual to serve an “ego preservation” function, protecting individuals with heterosexist and self-stigmatizing beliefs from threatening thoughts and feelings (Moradi, van den Berg, & Epting, 2006). Earlier related research (Herek, 1984) also suggests that expressing negative attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals may serve as an expression of positive self-concept for the individual (e.g., negative attitudes that are part of one’s religious identity; Mohr, 2002). Not surprisingly, separation of gayness from one’s

self-concept has been identified as a component of internalized homophobia as reported by self-identified lesbian and gay adults (Moradi, van den Berg, & Epting, 2009). Alternatively, as noted above, some individuals in active exploration may more openly associate with (and come to identify with) LGB individuals and groups through friendship patterns, sexual exploration, and other types of affiliation. This process is thought to be more likely for persons who either (a) are less restricted by heterosexist contextual influences (e.g., growing up in an environment in which sexual diversity is normative, acceptable, and even desirable; Savin-Williams, 2005, this volume), or (b) who demonstrate resilience against such constraints (Sanders & Kroll, 2000).

Attitudes toward other sexual orientation identity groups are likely to vary considerably both within and between individuals in the active exploration status. However, we posit that an orientation toward active self-exploration is likely to correspond with more positive attitudes toward sexual minority individuals and with less self-stigma compared to compulsory heterosexuality. This hypothesis is partially supported by our earlier work, which found that exploration was positively associated with LGB-affirmative attitudes and negatively related to homonegativity among one sample of heterosexual adults (Worthington et al., 2005) and another sample of individuals from heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual sexual orientation identity groups (Worthington & Reynolds, 2009). In another study, we found that exploration was related to psychotherapists' self-efficacy to affirmatively work with sexual minority clients (Dillon, Worthington, Soth-McNett, & Schwartz, 2008).

Diffusion. Diffusion has been defined as the absence of commitment and of systematic exploration (Marcia, 1987). It is one of the more complex identity statuses. Identity literature describes two types of diffusion—*diffused diffusion* and *carefree diffusion* (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005; Luyckx et al., 2008; Marcia, 1976, 1989). The carefree diffusion status reflects someone who is unconcerned and content with not having strong commitments or having actively explored. In fact, carefree

diffusion does not always include the maladjustment commonly thought to accompany it (Luyckx et al., 2005, 2008). Thus, in terms of sexual identity development, people exhibiting carefree diffusion are similarly expected to indicate low levels of commitment or exploration, and apathy regarding commitment and exploration (e.g., “I don’t care”). Any sexual identity-related exploration by carefree diffusers is expected to appear to be a random willingness to try or be almost anything related to sexual identity without distress. The diffused diffusion status has been suggested to reflect an underlying uncertainty or insecurity and is more likely to be distressed by lack of commitments (Archer & Waterman, 1990; Luyckx et al., 2005, 2008).

Whether due to insecure apathy or a carefree lack of commitment, individuals in diffusion may be more likely to ignore or reject social and cultural prescriptions for sexual values, behavior, and identity. In some cases, diffusion may be difficult to distinguish from active exploration, because the infrequent and random experimentation (in thought or action) characteristic of this status might resemble active exploration. However, diffusion typically lacks goal-directed intentionality—one of the criteria necessary for active exploration to occur (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, Chapter 17, this volume). Although carefree diffusion may be characterized by a lack of distress, it is important to note that diffusion typically coincides with a number of forms of psychological distress (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Rodriguez, 2009). Thus, we posit that people experiencing diffusion are likely to have identity confusion in other aspects of their lives. They may also express a lack of self-awareness about their underlying motives or intentions that might characterize people in other statuses (see Soenens & Vansteenkiste, Chapter 17, this volume, Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, Beyers, & Missotten, Chapter 4, this volume).

Because emerging research suggests that individuals in diffusion can transition into either foreclosure or moratorium (Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010), pathways out of diffusion could include returning to

compulsory heterosexuality or progressing into active exploration, which in some cases may be facilitated through professional psychological services or other interventions to address potential psychological distress (Schwartz et al., 2009). We expect that individuals are vulnerable to enter this status from any of the other identity statuses—but most likely compulsory heterosexuality or active exploration—while experiencing high levels of distress (e.g., distress resulting from stigma and/or harassment associated with sexual exploration or taboo behaviors). Research is needed to examine this assumption and to identify types of distress that could potentially influence entry into diffusion. Furthermore, given that individuals in more integrated levels of identity are less likely to regress into diffusion (Meeus et al., 2010), we assume a similar dynamic in sexual identity.

Deepening and commitment. Individuals of any sexual orientation identity in the deepening and commitment status exhibit a movement toward greater commitment to their identified sexual needs, values, sexual orientation and/or preferences for activities, partner characteristics, and modes of sexual expression. This status most closely resembles Marcia's achieved identity status (Marcia, 1987; see Kroger & Marcia, Chapter 2, this volume).

A critical distinction between deepening and commitment and Marcia's achieved identity status is that deepening and commitment in our model is hypothesized to be possible (or even likely) without the individual's engaging in active exploration. We posit that moving to deepening/commitment of lesbian, gay, bisexual persons almost always involve active exploration, whereas movement to deepening/commitment of heterosexual identity may or may not involve active exploration. Some individuals may move directly from compulsory heterosexuality into deepening and commitment as a function of maturational changes in life experiences, cognitions, and behaviors that do not meet the criteria for active exploration. For instance, heterosexual individuals entering deepening and commitment may be more likely to transition into

this status from compulsory heterosexuality than from active exploration. For such individuals, the deepening and commitment that occurs during this status is contained within their compulsory heterosexuality. As such, their compulsory heterosexuality becomes a *committed compulsory heterosexuality* that is characterized by a more profound commitment to compulsory heterosexuality.

It is also possible that heterosexuals could move from compulsory heterosexuality to deepening and commitment via active exploration. We expect such individuals to differ from individuals in committed compulsory heterosexuality in several ways. Individuals moving into this status from active exploration may be more likely to question the presumption that heterosexuality is the only normal and appropriate sexual orientation identity, and to question the need for the institutionalization of heterosexuality as the only sexual orientation identity through, for example, legislation banning same-sex marriages. In terms of group membership identity, individuals in deepening and commitment who commit to a heterosexual identity orientation after active exploration are expected to question heterosexist assumptions about normative behavior on the part of others. Heterosexist assumptions and attitudes (e.g., heterosexuality is normal and universal; women and men should only be attracted to each other emotionally and sexually) are expected to be maintained or strengthened among heterosexuals entering deepening and commitment from compulsory heterosexuality without active exploration (i.e., committed compulsory heterosexuality).

Deepening and commitment following active exploration is thought to be the most common identity development process for LGB individuals. The active inquiry into different sexual needs, values, orientation, and partner characteristics in active exploration is thought to yield a great amount of self-understanding and knowledge (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky, & Strong, 2008). This heightened sense of self-understanding is hypothesized to lead to greater levels of clarity and choices about one's sexuality. This process is also thought

to be linked to a greater level of acceptance than earlier described statuses, and more willingness to further examine one's overall sexual identity.

Attitudes toward heterosexuals may still be "group appreciating" (cf. Atkinson et al., 1995) on the part of individuals of any sexual orientation identity. Persons who have entered the deepening and commitment status are thought to deny that heterosexuals are a privileged, dominant majority group if they have engaged in active exploration. This is because the socially mandated aspects of heterosexuality—those that characterize compulsory heterosexuality—are thought to be questioned or abandoned by individuals when active exploration occurs. Both LGB persons in deepening and commitment and heterosexuals in deepening and commitment following active exploration are hypothesized to express less "group depreciating" attitudes toward sexual minority individuals compared to heterosexuals characterized by committed compulsory heterosexuality.

For sexual minority individuals and committed heterosexuals in this status, group membership identity processes and attitudes toward sexual orientation identity groups also begin to deepen and crystallize into conscious, coherent perspectives on dominant/non-dominant group relations, privilege or loss of privilege, and oppression or marginalization. This process of crystallization may take virtually any form along the continuum of attitudes toward sexual minority individuals as well as toward heterosexuals (the dominant group), from condemnation to tolerance to affirmation (Herek, 1984; Worthington et al., 2005). Based on general identity literature, we expect that individuals may move out of deepening and commitment via three pathways: (a) into synthesis (described below), (b) into active exploration, or (c) into diffusion (Stephen, Fraser, & Marcia, 1992; Meeus et al., 2010).

Synthesis. Potentially the most mature and adaptive status of sexual identity is characterized by a state of congruence between the individual and social identity processes of sexual identity development that were described earlier in the chapter (see also Fassinger & Miller, 1996). In the synthesis status, people come to an understanding of sexual identity that fulfills their self-definitions

and carries over to their attitudes and behaviors toward both LGB-identified and heterosexually identified individuals. Individual sexual identity, group membership identity, and attitudes toward dominant and marginalized sexual orientation identity groups merge into an overall sexual self-concept, which is conscious, congruent, and volitional (see Soenens & Vansteenkiste, Chapter 17, this volume). Other aspects of identity are likely to blend into the synthesis status—in the sense that intersecting identities (e.g., along lines of gender, race/ethnicity, religious orientation) will have a high degree of coherence and consistency in relation to sexual identity. Thus, we expect that a coherent sexual identity will correlate with coherence and consolidation within other types of identity.

We posit only one pathway into synthesis, through deepening and commitment. However, we hypothesize that synthesis may also require active exploration. Individuals who experience deepening and commitment directly from compulsory heterosexuality are not likely to demonstrate all of the qualities of synthesis. For instance, we hypothesize that more active exploration is associated with more affirmative and flexible thinking with respect to sexual diversity for sexual minority and heterosexual individuals (Worthington & Reynolds, 2009; Worthington et al., 2005). Thus, individuals in synthesis are likely to experience little or no self-stigma or internalized heterosexism/homophobia, to understand human sexuality as a continuous and nuanced—rather than all-or-nothing—phenomenon, and to be more affirmative toward LGB individuals. However, the difficulty of transitioning into synthesis does not preclude an individual from moving out of synthesis for one reason or another, which we hypothesize to occur via either active exploration or diffusion.

Preliminary Research Supporting a Unifying Model of Sexual Identity Development

Several empirical studies have informed the development of the unifying model. One study involved the development of a measure that

quantitatively assesses the statuses associated with sexual identity development (Worthington et al., 2008). The measure, called the *measure of sexual identity exploration and commitment* (MoSIEC), was designed to assess sexual identity statuses among individuals, regardless of sexual orientation or identity. Initial psychometric investigations yielded promising evidence of reliability and validity in national adult samples (Worthington & Reynolds, 2009; Worthington et al., 2008).

Similar to other literature that supports the measurement of identity status (Luyckx et al., 2005, 2008; Meeus et al., 2010), the MoSIEC yields four empirically derived dimensions: (a) *commitment*, (b) *exploration*, (c) *sexual orientation identity uncertainty*, and (d) *synthesis/integration*. The MoSIEC factor structure reflects constructs from Marcia's theory that describe two dimensions of exploration (i.e., exploration factor and sexual orientation identity uncertainty factor) and two commitment-related dimensions (i.e., commitment factor and synthesis/integration factor). The four factors also represent constructs from the unifying sexual identity development model: (a) active exploration indicated by the exploration factor, (b) compulsory heterosexuality and deepening and commitment represented by the commitment factor, and (c) synthesis characterized by the synthesis/integration factor.

The sexual orientation identity uncertainty factor reflects what Marcia referred to as *moratorium* (delay of commitment during exploration) or what recently has been termed *reconsideration of commitment* (the comparison of present commitments with possible alternatives because the current commitments are no longer satisfactory; Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008). Construct validity for this factor has been demonstrated through its positive correlation with exploration and its negative correlations with commitment and synthesis. An analysis of patterns of between-groups differences on sexual orientation identity uncertainty indicated that participants who were bisexual, lesbian, or gay tended to endorse these items more strongly compared to those individuals who identified as

heterosexual (Worthington & Reynolds, 2009; Worthington et al., 2008).

Recent studies employing the MoSIEC have also supported the unified model. For instance, significant between-group differences in sexual identity development statuses have been found among self-identified sexual minority individuals (e.g., Worthington & Reynolds, 2009). For instance, "mostly straight" women differed from "exclusively straight" women, showing higher levels of identity exploration and uncertainty (and marginally lower levels of synthesis) than their exclusively straight counterparts. In addition, in support of the unified model, differences in sexual behaviors among participants in Thompson and Morgan (2008) did not necessarily constitute differences in sexual identity development status (mostly straight women shared similar levels of exploration, uncertainty, and synthesis with both bisexual and lesbian women although they reported different sexual behaviors). This finding specifically supports the notion advanced by the universal model that sexual behavior is only part of sexual identity.

As previously mentioned, the unifying model of sexual identity development hypothesizes that individuals who have engaged in active exploration are more likely to hold positive attitudes toward LGB individuals and less internalized heterosexism or self-stigma. As noted earlier, this hypothesis was partially supported by prior research using an earlier version of the MoSIEC (Worthington & Reynolds, 2009; Worthington et al., 2005). More specifically, these authors found that exploration and sexual orientation identity uncertainty were positively associated with LGB-affirmative attitudes (i.e., LGB civil rights, knowledge, and internalized affirmativeness) and that exploration was negatively related to homonegativity (i.e., religious conflict and hate) among self-identified heterosexuals. Future research is needed to explore whether (and how) internalized heterosexism and self-stigma (Herek et al., 2009; Moradi, van den Berg, et al., 2009; Szymanski et al., 2008) differ across self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons who range in endorsement of commitment, exploration, sexual orientation identity uncertainty, and

synthesis/integration dimensions. Worthington and Reynolds (2009) recently began this line of research in a study indicating within-group differences among bisexual men and women, gay men, and heterosexual women in terms of sexual identity development dimensions and LGB-related knowledge and attitudes.

The MoSIEC studies also report links of sexual identity dimensions with age, religiosity, sexual conservatism, and multiple aspects of sexual self-awareness (Worthington & Reynolds, 2009; Worthington et al., 2008). Age was positively linked with commitment and synthesis/integration. Individuals who were lower on religiosity and less sexually conservative appeared more likely to engage in exploration and exhibit uncertainty, whereas sexual assertiveness and sexual self-consciousness were associated with commitment, exploration, and synthesis/integration.

Future Research

The unifying sexual identity development model and the MoSIEC can be applied to a host of additional research questions and social issues. The various dimensions of sexual identity development are theorized to relate to a range of sexual behaviors and outcomes, including unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, safer sex practices, sexual agency, and sexual risk behaviors. Research is needed to examine these hypothesized links with the goal of understanding and impacting these behaviors. Furthermore, the unifying model and measure could be useful in examining the relations between sexual identity statuses and sexual health awareness and help seeking. Future research might also investigate whether educational and psychological interventions targeting various social issues (e.g., risky sexual practices, antigay attitudes and behavior, and heterosexism and homonegativity) can be tailored according to aspects of sexual identity present in the target groups to increase the effectiveness of these strategies. An integrated sexual identity model can also facilitate research

integrating sexual identity with other types of identity, including racial/ethnic, gender, and religious/spiritual (among others). Ultimately, this model can be a starting point from which an extensive program of research on sexual identities can be produced.

Conclusion

The proposed unifying model of sexual identity development incorporates what has been learned from years of theory and research concerning sexuality, LGB and heterosexual identity development, attitudes toward sexual minority individuals, and the meaning of ordinate and subordinate group membership. We have attempted to describe the intersection of various contextual factors that influence the individual and social processes underlying sexual identity development. The unifying model is innovative in its applicability across sexual orientation identities, as well as its inclusion of a wide range of dimensions of sexual identity and possible developmental trajectories. We hope this innovation allows researchers, educators, and practitioners to develop interventions and conduct investigations on broader questions about human sexuality without being constrained to gay-straight dichotomies of sexual orientation and the related methodological limitations that have characterized sexual identity theory and research in the past.

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