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Sexual Identity

Sexual identity refers to how individuals view and understand themselves as sexual beings. Sexual identity is often incorrectly seen as synonymous with sexual orientation identity, but the two are very different concepts. Individuals' sexual orientation identity refers to individuals' understanding of their sexual orientation, or to whom they are emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted, whereas sexual identity is a much broader concept. Sexual identity encompasses all personal and social aspects of individuals' lives related to their sexual orientation identity, sexual and/or romantic thoughts and desires, sexual and/or romantic beliefs, and sexual and/or romantic activities (Brandon-Friedman, 2018b).

The first well-known exploration of individuals' sexual development was written by Sigmund Freud in the early 1900s. Freud (1915/2001) suggested that individuals are sexual from birth and go through a series of stages during which they come to understand, manipulate, and exercise their sexual impulses in socially appropriate ways. In the mid-twentieth century, Erik Erikson (1950/1985) expanded on Freud's work by developing a theory of ego-identity development that detailed the process through which individuals come to understand themselves and establish how they interact with others throughout their lives.

Building upon Erikson's work, researchers and theorists began to explore how individuals incorporate aspects of their identities such as their race/ethnicity, culture, and sexuality into their global identity, or their sense of themselves as a whole person. The term sexual identity began being used in social science literature extensively in the late 1970s. Two of the first researchers to focus on individuals' understandings of themselves as sexual individuals were Vivienne Cass and Richard Troiden, both of whom did research with gay men. Their models came to be known as models of sexual identity development even though they were

actually models that sought to explain how individuals came to understand themselves as a sexual minority, accept themselves as a sexual minority, reveal their sexual minority identity to others, and then integrate their sexual minority identity into their global identity. Cass' (1984) and Troiden's (1988) models were later expanded upon by other researchers and theorists, but the work generally continued to focus on sexual minorities.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a shift toward recognizing that all people have sexual identities, not just those who identify as sexual minorities. This required a re-evaluation of how the term "sexual identity" was being used, as it needed to be expanded to include aspects of sexuality in the lives of those who identify as heterosexual as well. With the academic literature, Eliason (1995) was among the first to explore sexual identity development among individuals who identified as heterosexual. Rather than exploring sexual identity as a temporal process, his work sought to classify individuals' level of exploration or commitment to their sexual identity. Eliason's findings indicated that most individuals who identify as heterosexual had not given much thought to their sexual identity and had committed themselves to identifying as heterosexual without much thought to what being heterosexual meant or exploration of any other possibilities.

Around this time, the term sexual orientation identity began to be used to differentiate between individuals' sexual orientation and their overall sexual identities, even though academic, professional, and popular literature often continues to use sexual identity to refer to sexual orientation identity. Worthington and his colleagues (Worthington, Navarro, Savoy, & Hampton, 2008) developed a theory of how individuals who identify as heterosexual develop their sexual identity. This work sought to identify where individuals were on four aspects of sexual identity development: Commitment, which indicates an individual has committed to a sexual identity

without exploring the various components of sexual identity; Exploration, which represents the degree to which individuals are actively exploring aspects of their sexual identity; Synthesis/Integration, which indicates an individual has gone through the process of exploring their sexual identity, has come to a more advanced understanding of it, and has integrated it into their global identity; and Sexual Orientation Identity Uncertainty, which represents the degree of uncertainty individuals feel about their sexual orientation identity.

Worthington and his colleagues found individuals who identify as sexual minorities generally spend more time considering their overall sexual identity as they are already required to examine their sexual orientation identity and this introspection spreads to other areas of sexual identity exploration. More advanced sexual identity development has been linked with positive sexual health outcomes, indicating it is an important process in individuals' lives (Worthington et al, 2008; Brandon-Friedman, 2018a). Worthington's model is generally considered to represent the most comprehensive way of understanding sexual identity among all individuals as it considers not just individuals' sexual orientation identities, but all aspects of their lives that make up their sexual identity.

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See Also: Sexual Orientation Identity; Gender Identity; Coming Out, Sexual Development

Further Reading:

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