

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# A Phenomenological Study of Identification Process in Male patients of a Referral Center with Abnormal Sexual Orientations (Homosexual) and Their Challenges

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**Abstract:** **Background:** The purpose of this research was to explain the identification process in young homosexual men. **Material & Methods:** The method of this study was phenomenological. The data was categorized and processed based on Strauss and Glaser's interpretive analysis approach. In this research, participants were selected with a purposeful sampling method. Finally, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 15 referred homosexual men with a mean age of 23.9. **Results:** results were classified into two aspects of the identification process, and challenges/risks. The process of identity formation in young homosexual men included three steps: a. childhood exploration, b. adolescent confusion and identity crisis, and c. youth encounter and acceptance. Also based on the challenges and risks, the experience of negative emotions, such as feeling frustrated, anxiety, guilt, and depression were achieved in the emotional dimension. **Conclusion:** Iranian homosexual men pass difficult periods to seek identity. And finally, they may not achieve a complete identity, their challenges include: 1) a. becoming sensitive and feeling differently from others, b. realizing his orientation, c. suffering a great deal of religious conscience and selflessness, d. starting to change orientation without success, e. accepting identity desperately. 2) a. realizing they cannot reveal gay identity in family and society, b. having to put on a mask and play a role, c. facing individual and social challenges and due to these tensions, d. facing emotional and behavioural challenges, e. referring to counsellors for getting help and finding his real and correct identity.

**Keywords:** Identity; homosexuality; phenomenology; Iranian gay; young men

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## 1. Introduction

Homosexuality is a word to describe people who tend to the people of the same sex and the meaning of sexual orientation is the level of sexual, emotional attraction, and romantic love to another person (1, 2).

About homosexuality, the truth is that, worldwide, this orientation is generally not accepted and is even referred to as an act of sin, deviation, or sickness. Most parents face a deep feeling of guilt about their children and they believe that they had to provide a better condition for the growth of their children that could have prevented them from growing up to become gay or lesbian (3). This is because most cultural teachings in most societies emphasize the preservation and continuity of family, consider this group of people beyond the norms and especially by the religious principles, including that of Islam and Christianity, which has completely forbid-

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den homosexual behavior as deviant (4-7).

Since 1980, homosexuality has been removed from the list of Disorders' Symptoms of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM) and it is mentioned that sexual orientation is not a disorder by itself (8). Currently, according to most studies in different societies, 2 to 13 percent of people are gay and lesbian (9, 10) and, another report has announced 9 million people of America's population are gay and lesbian (11). In recent years, the number of studies about sexual orientation and its relation to mental health has increased. In most societies, they are marginalized and face a lot of problems. Some of them commit suicide because of feelings of guilt and self-hatred (12). Many gay men marry a person from the opposite sex and even have kids, but they encounter many family issues (13). Due to the conflicts between their sexual orientation and the cultural and moral norms of society, many are in danger of suicide (14), drug or alcohol abuse (15, 16), depression, disappointment, and other mental health problems (17-27) more than other people. Gays usually get confused in adolescence and youth and they would prefer to deny their orientation (28). These people reject their sexual orientation and they do not share all their emotions with their families and they hardly accept their feelings, because they are afraid that their family or friends may reject them (29, 30).

While most researchers point to the identity confusion in young gays, they have provided various patterns of identification about these individuals, but all of them explain the identification process among gays to be similar to any other youth, with two general stages of "exploration" and "commitment". Troiden (1989), mentions four stages from exploration to commitment (31). Sophie (1986), explains this process in five stages awareness, experimentation, exploration, acceptance, and integration (32). Similarly, McCarn and Fassinger (1996), describe four stages of awareness, discovery, commitment, and internalization (33). Cass (1984), explains this process in six stages identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. However, it seems that another interesting point in this case is cultural factors and social norms that act as a benchmark for assessing the tendencies and behaviors arising from it (34). As Alderson (2003), emphasizes the gay's social life in the democratic and traditional societies, the identification process has three steps: a. before coming out to self, b. coming out to self, and c. beyond coming out. He also believes that these norms of society provide opportunities to accept or to incline or prevent tendencies (35). Similarly, Hammack and his colleagues (2018) emphasized the importance of the role time and place for the identity development of the gay individual (36).

Meanwhile, the lives of gays in Iran's religious community have unique challenges. They neither can form a life with

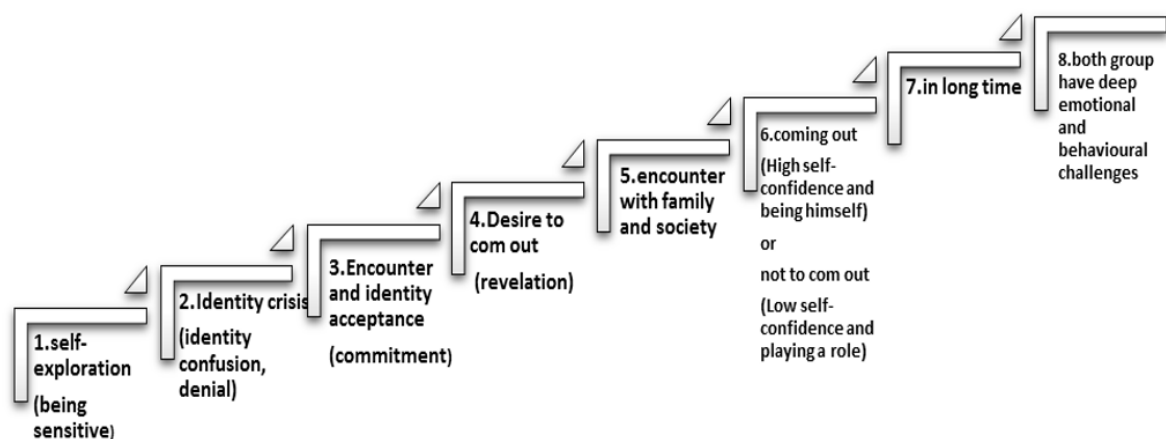
their same sex nor are they willing to live with the opposite sex, (sometimes they even have to marry their opposite sex). Therefore, they may face many emotional challenges and these challenges will lead them to counseling centers for assistance and counseling services. However, some family counselors do not have a complete understanding of the status of their sexual minority clients and may not be able to provide proper counseling services to their clients further confusing them, which is no exception for Iranian counselors (37).

In Iranian society, family counselors face challenges, on the one hand, they face American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines that say homosexuality is not a disorder, and on the other hand, they face Iranian culture and laws that say homosexuality is a crime, and homosexuals should be punished. For this reason, family counselors in Iran often get confused about how they should treat clients, according to the APA or their country's culture and law.

But what is clear is that the first step in providing accurate consulting services is an in-depth knowledge of his clients and issues. Due to the above-mentioned reasons, the present research studies the identity of homosexual men in the cultural context of Iranian society by using the quantitative (data-oriented) approach. It tries to enter the inner layers of the emotions and feelings of these people and explain how they are exposed to homosexuality, how they face different kinds of challenges during their identification process, how they encounter the paradoxical conflicts that they experience between themselves and the outside community and how they identify and introduce themselves, to open the way for better understanding of these people and their issues, and for Iranian family counselors to be able to provide better and more accurate services to their homosexual clients.

## 2. Methods

In this research, a qualitative approach was used to recognize and explain the identity dimensions of young gays in Iran. The current study was a phenomenological type and based on this approach, the goal was to get a deeper understanding of this phenomenon (the gay identity). In this method, before any valuation or judgment, the life experiences of gays regarding the phenomenon of how its realization and manifestation of its effect were searched (38). In this research, the description, explanation, and classification of the findings were conducted in a conversation with gays. Participants of this study were selected based on the purposeful selection method. In this way, the researcher searches for a phenomenon that can be studied in depth (39). Therefore, the participants in this research included young gay men in Tehran. They were selected based on three criteria age, sexual orientation, and residence. The participants were 19 to

**Table 1:** Main questions in the interview**Facing the orientation****Q1:** When and how did you realize your sexual orientation?**Q2:** What was your reaction when you realized your sexual orientation?**Q3:** Did you try to change this tendency?**Q4:** How did life pass as a gay man?**Q5:** What have you done especially when you faced your tendency, whether now or when you were a teenager?**Q6:** What was others' reaction to you as a homosexual?**Self-perception****Q7:** What is your description of yourself especially based on your sexual orientation?**Challenges and risks****Q8:** What issues have you encountered about your sexual orientation?**Q9:** What feelings did you have about your sexual orientation?**Figure 1:** The identification process of Iranian homosexuals

29 years old, they were identified to be gay and resided in Tehran, Iran. Their mean age was 23.9, and those selected for the study were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Most of them were students at university or had a bachelor's degree. The interviews continued until saturation was reached, which included 15 interviewees. All of the participants were recruited from the counseling clinics, and the main criterion for their choice was to consider themselves gay. In this research, the information collection tool was a semi-structured interview with open questions. The questions were not necessarily limited to any hypotheses, they were not based on any predetermined variables allowing the interviewees to share their feelings, perceptions, and exposition from what they experienced in real life just as they are. However, this type of interview minimizes the possibility of discrimination between respondents and because of the inclusion of specific sequences and clear outlines for questions compared with phenomenology methodology, it can provide more stability (39). In this research, the questions are based on the life experiences of gays which include three dimensions of facing the tendency, self-perception, and challenges

and risks which provide a regular sequence of inner questions of themselves to make the same circumstance for all of the participants. The interviews were conducted by a psychotherapist in the field of homosexuality to find out honesty about participant's sexual orientation through the pre-interview and to separate homosexuals from pedophiles. The main interviews were conducted in 50-60 minutes' time slots with the 15 young gay men and the main questions are indicated in Table 1.

### 2.1. Data Analyzing Method

Data analysis in qualitative research begins immediately after data collection is started and is based on the concepts that are obtained during the coding process: The coding in this qualitative method involves two steps:

At the first step which is named "open coding", data was analyzed and categorized. This process included analyzing, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data.

In the second step known as the "axial coding paradigm", the relationship between categories and sub-categories was found. Axial coding was performed using a coding paradigm

which included thinking about causative conditions, text and background, mediator conditions, mutual action-action strategies to react to the phenomenon in its text, and the possible consequences. Afterward, a central category was chosen and a descriptive story was made about it.

Interpretive analysis was performed to analyze the answers of the respondents by the grounded theory of Straus and Glaser (40). In this process, the initial codes were found based on the important concepts extracted from the responses. Then, according to the variety of the responses and by putting the initial codes together, the axial categories were obtained. In the next step, other answers were checked and the data of each category were classified or in case of finding a new subject, a new category and definition were defined for it. At the end, all categories were compared in reassessment and the comprehensiveness of the classes and the appropriateness of the subject and categories were assessed. Qualitative studies emphasize the uniqueness of human experiences which is probably hard to validate them. Therefore, the following methods were used to validate the data:

- In the case of using the parentheses; the researcher tried to write his idea to follow the data like an external evaluator.
- Continuous Comparison; Analyze the data and the feedback at the same time based on the studies.
- Allocate enough time; by continuously communicating with the participants at the desired location, they have been working to bring an intimate and reliable atmosphere for the enhancement and enrichment of data between the researcher and participants.

## 2.2. Ethical Considerations

Interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the participants transcribed for subsequent analysis, and translated into English. Digital files were retained for data-checking purposes at the University, of Iran, and were identified only by code numbers to safeguard confidentiality. After transcription and data verification, audio files were destroyed. All maps created during the interview were saved in digital format.

- Participants in this study will not incur financial costs.
- Entry into and exit from the study is free and is not forcible to the participants.
- The names of the participants are protected and any confidential information from the research is prevented.
- Permission is required to record their audio and all recorded audio will be deleted after analysis
- Also avoid cultural/social labels during the interview

## 2.3. Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were by the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with



Figure 2: Iranian gay men challenges/risks

the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants in the original study on which this article is based.

## 3. Results

Participants' statements were analyzed and classified based on Straus and Glaser's grounded theory, through open coding and axial coding. The findings were obtained in two parts: A) Identification Process, and B) Challenges and Risks.

### 3.1. Identification Process

#### 1. Childhood; Self-exploration

It can be deduced the attention and self-awareness item from the answers of the participants which is related to the question about their first encounter with their tendency, what most respondents have referred to as their first perception before elementary school and they discovered themselves so they became sensitive about their sexual orientation.

- Mani, 19, student: "Since I was 6, I became attracted to a man's body, not a woman and I knew I was different."
- Shahram, 21, Student: "Since childhood, I liked to be with boys and I am attracted to them. I was sensitized by my feelings."
- Shahrooz, 29, works at the company: "I had no feelings or interest in the girls. It was different."
- Homayon, 29, working: "From the beginning, I was interested in the manhood and power, and I fell in love with the men of my family and because of this I became sensitive."
- Pasha, 22, student: "When I was 5 or 6 years old, I realized that I'm different from other boys because I was attracted to boys instead of girls".
- Jamal, 21, student: "In elementary school, I was interested in the male traits and it had made me sensitive."

According to the responses of participants, we can say that the first step during the identification process is being sen-

sitive about the different tendencies which according to the answers, this awareness was made in their childhood. Actually, with the formation of gender identity, most of these people understand their differences and they realize that same-sex people are attractive to them.

## 2. Adolescence; Identity Crisis:

Although, the sensitivity to their specific features occurred during the years of gender identification for most people, according to the answers of participants, it should be said that the confusion feeling is more in adolescence and it faced them with their identity questions. Most of them referred to a crisis in this period:

- Hamid, 20, unemployed: "I was very confused at high school until I found the word "gay" on the internet".
- Soroush, 20, student: "I was worried about myself at high school until I searched about gays and how much my personality is like them".
- Mani, 19, student: "I was very upset during the years of high school and I searched on the internet about my feelings and I found the word homosexuality".
- Pasha, 22, student: "When I was in elementary school, I had many issues but I never searched to find why I am like this until adolescence that I confused."
- Shahrooz, 29, works at the company: "I found the reason for this weird sense when I was 16."

**Confusion:** Participants referred to their confusion as the answer to the question about the type of their reaction against this different feeling and they somehow failed to accept their inclination at the beginning:

- Shahram, 21, Student: "I was confused and I didn't know what should I do or where should I go."
- Homayon, 29, working: "I had thousands of questions in my mind which I had no answers for them."
- Naser, 26, student: "I had a weird feeling, I was sweating and I couldn't deal with this feeling."
- Vahid, 19, unemployed: "I didn't know why I had this feeling and I was really confused."
- Jamal, 21, student: "I didn't know what this feeling is and why I am like this".

Based on these statements, it can be understood that the adolescence period of gays leads to mental pressure and guilt due to their maturation and sexual orientation with self-awareness rather than the differences in their tendencies, and in fact, this condition is like confusion which is the result of different orientation and not being aware about the encounter way.

**Denial and Losing himself:** According to participants' statements, at first they could not accept their orientation and it made them deny: • Mehrdad, 26, student: "I didn't care about it and I just let it go".

- Samand, 29, student: "I quit everything and knit like a cocoon."

- Shaahin, 19, student: "I tried to not care about it and I decided to get married".

**Feeling Guilty:** According to the statements of participants, it's not easy to have self-awareness about the differences in sexual orientation experience, it had confusion and some negative feelings and mental pressure:

- Kamran, 25, student: "I had mental and conscience pressure."
- Hamed, 29, working: "I was feeling guilty about why I had to attract to men."
- Mehrdad, 26, student: "I had a lot of conscience pressure."
- Pasha, 22, student: "I was always waiting for God's doom".

**Humiliation Feeling:** According to participants' statements, they had experienced humility:

- Mani, 19, student: "I thought it would finish but I felt humiliated because of my orientation."
- Shahrooz, 29, works at the company: "When I felt that maybe I'm gay, I hated myself."

## 3. Youth; Encounter and acceptance:

Indirect encounter: what is evident, is the individuals' real encounter during adolescence first with denial and not caring about it, even focusing on other behaviors like focusing on school's courses or loneliness are the most important ways that they choose to deny their orientation.

- Hamid, 20, unemployed: "I took refuge in the courses of school and writing poems and I started writing because I had a lot of mental pressure."
- Soroush, 20, student: "I prayed, vowed, and cried but it made no difference."
- Hamed, 29, working: "I started praying that God may help me."
- Samand, 29, student: "I prayed and vowed very much but it had no advantages."
- Homayon, 29, working: "I decided to be religious to not think about my orientation."

According to these answers, in this step, most of the respondents faced much conscience and mental pressure in addition to denying their tendency and they decided to be religious to make themselves calm. Because of the religious culture and society of Iran, especially the religious orders about sexual orientation, the first and initial way many gays seem to choose, is to adopt a religious stance, as Most of the participants pointed out.

**Direct encounter:** Based on the answers of participants, after trying to achieve calmness by being religious, their next step is trying to encounter the crisis and solve the issue.

- Jamal, 21, student: "I fought it".
- Shahram, 21, Student: "I decided to treat it but I didn't succeed".
- Naser, 26, student: "I decided to cut my penis".
- Mehrdad, 26, student: "I went to a clinic that the doctor may change me, I didn't want to be like that."



- Homayon, 29, working: "I decided to have a relationship with the opposite sex but it made no difference."
- Mani, 19, student: "I got married but it failed because of my orientation".
- Vahid, 19, unemployed: "I went to the psychologist and started to treat myself."
- Hamid, 20, Unemployed: "I put myself in a girl's atmosphere to change my feelings."
- Kamran, 25, student: "I went to doctors and ayatollahs (religious clergymen)."

According to the responses of the participants, after trying to confront this challenge, all of them talked about the acceptance step:

- Shaahin, 19, student: "I couldn't take it anymore, I should accept my identity otherwise I was going to be depressed."
- Hamed, 29, working: "How much I prayed and tried, my orientation didn't change, so I had to accept it."
- Naser, 26, student: "Based on my research, I realized that I can't change this orientation".
- Mani, 19, student: "I had no choice, so I had to accept myself, otherwise I went to die."
- Jamal, 21, student: "The psychologist told me that I should accept myself before the society."
- Pasha, 22, student: "After going to the doctor for many years, I realized that I had no choice, so I have to accept myself."
- Homayon, 29, working: "The religious conscience pressures was killing me and I had to accept myself."

**Self-Acceptance:** By thinking profoundly about these answers, it can be realized that the participants have no choice and they should accept themselves after passing this hard process of confusion, denial, loneliness, and trying to encounter directly and indirectly. So according to this, it can be named a self-acceptance step.

- Samand, 29, student: "I can live as same as all other people with my orientation, and this is my right."
- Shahrooz, 29, works at the company: "I was born gay and this orientation is not selective."

According to these answers, young gays after experiencing different ways of facing issues, have no choice except to accept this feature, so they accept themselves. There are two interesting and different aspects of this phenomenon. At the beginning of adolescence, they talk about coercion in their acceptance, but some of them talk about their honorific acceptance especially those who are older.

- Mani, 19, student "I'm proud of my identity".
- Hamid, 20, unemployed: "I'm proud of being gay."
- Soroush, 20, student: "Being gay is a natural orientation as same as heterosexuality."

Based on these answers, it can be deduced that the next step after identity acceptance, is identity commitment, in which gays accept their identity proudly in this step, not by coercion.

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Failure to come out, and putting on a mask instead: Anyway, they should accept their orientation as a shameful issue, because all of them despite accepting their feature, talk about their failure in showing the real themselves:

- Shahram, 21, Student: "Although I accepted my identity completely I still should play a role and put a mask in society".
- Vahid, 19, unemployed: "I couldn't be myself anywhere".
- Mani, 19, student: "I can't tell anybody about my orientation."
- Hamed, 29, working: "I have to put on a mask or even get married to the opposite sex that nobody doubts".
- Kamran, 25, student: "I have to be far away from society so that no one can realize my orientation."

Anyway, some of the respondents who had a chance to show their real personalities, they feel satisfied because they were not forced to live secretly and put on a mask:

- Shaahin, 19, student: "There is no pressure from my family to get married to the opposite sex anymore."
- Naser, 26, student: "I felt comfortable when I told my orientation to my family and friends".
- Samand, 29, student: "I told everything to my family and I don't feel guilty anymore."
- Homayon, 29, working: "I am myself now and I don't have to deceive others".

A brief identification process in Iranian gay men is shown in Figure 1 below as can be seen, it consists of different stages.

### 3.2. Challenges and risks

#### 3.2.1. Living with fear:

- Pasha, 22, student: "I always scared that maybe somebody realized my real identity".
- Mani, 19, student: "I'm scared to be fired if somebody knows my orientation in my workplace."
- Soroush, 20, student: "I can't talk about my feelings with my friends because I'm afraid to lose them."
- Kamran, 25, student: "I'm always afraid of God and his punishments".
- Shaahin, 19, student: "I'm always afraid of law and being executed."
- Shahram, 21, Student: "I wish I could tell my family about my issue but I'm afraid that they may reject me."

#### 3.2.2. Feeling Loneliness:

- Vahid, 19, unemployed: "I have to be alone always because it's not possible to find somebody to live with."
- Hamid, 20, unemployed: "Our future is full of loneliness".
- Shahrooz, 29, works at the company: "When my friends realize my orientation, they leave me alone."
- Mani, 19, student: "Because I'm religious, I can't be with boys, and because I'm gay, I can't be with girls."
- Jamal, 21, student: "I always feel inner loneliness."

Most of the participants suffer from their loneliness. Also "feeling guilty", "fear", "conscience pressure", "frustration", "loneliness", and "anxiety" are the most subjects that they pointed to.

### 3.2.3. Sadness:

Most of the participants experienced sadness periods and some of them used antidepressant drugs under the supervision of a doctor and they said they were addicted to them.

- Mani, 19, student: "In puberty age, I was very depressed and when I went to the military service, my depression increased very much."
- Homayon, 29, working: "I was very depressed because of my differences".
- Mehrdad, 26, student: "My depression started at the age of puberty."
- Shaahin, 19, student: "I had lots of mental pressure and I was depressed".
- Kamran, 25, student: "I was depressed because I couldn't make love with the person who I love and I was scared to lose him."
- Pasha, 22, student: "The doctor prescribed antidepressant drugs for me."
- Jamal, 21, student: "I use neuropsychiatric drugs and I'm addicted to them."

### 3.2.4. Conscience Torment:

Many participants experienced mental pressure and feeling guilty due to a contradiction between their sexual and religious orientation and it made some of them to suicide and some of them left their religious orientation. Of course, suicide has a variety of causes, but this could be one of the causes here

- Naser, 26, student: "I cried a lot and I had conscience torment".
- Pasha, 22, student: "Because of the differences between my sexual and religious orientation, I experienced an extreme feeling of guilt."
- Bijan, 25, student: "I'm religious and I feel guilty about my sexual orientation."
- Shahram, 21, Student: "I burned my penis because I'm religious and I felt guilty."
- Mehrdad, 26, student: "I left my religion to feel comfortable because I felt guilty."
- Mani, 19, student: "I can't leave my religion or my sexual orientation and I always feel guilty".

### 3.2.5. Constant Anxiety:

Most of participants experienced the anxiety, they say they can't get rid of this feeling because it is with them all the time

- Shaahin, 19, student: "I'm always anxious".
- Shahram, 21, Student: "I'm always anxious about that maybe God doesn't accept my prayers and punish me because of my orientation".
- Homayon, 29, working: "I'm worried and anxious."

- Jamal, 21, student: "I'm waiting for God's punishment every single second."

- Kamran, 25, student: "I have lots of mental pressure and I always feel sorry for it".

### 3.2.6. Frustration:

Many of the respondents spoke about their frustration, and when they fell in love with a person of the same sex, they could not tell their feelings or when they told their feelings, they were rejected by them. Even those who had a relationship with another person who was gay were separated because of many reasons after a while.

- Mani, 19, student: "My emotional orientation was increased at high school and I always became in love with same-sex people, but I couldn't tell them, so I became frustrated."
- Samand, 29, student: "I had to stop my orientation and it was a kind of frustration for me."
- Hamed, 29, working: "I had too many problems in a dormitory, and living there for many years was provoking me but I couldn't tell anybody about my orientation because the failure and frustration were the results of that."

Brief Challenges and risks Iranian gay men face are shown in figure 2 below.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

According to the findings of this research, it can be deduced that the identification process of young gays could be classified into 3 steps 1- Childhood; Exploration 2- Adolescence; Confusion and Identity Crisis 3- Youth; Encounter and Acceptance. These findings nearly are in the same line with other research (31, 33, 34) and (35), which show a long process that has many challenges and risks.

Also, gays face a hard and complicated process in making their identity. They will be sensitive about their special orientation during their life experience, from childhood to adolescence. Based on this, childhood could be the first step of their self-exploration during their life. In fact, as with the heterosexual population, childhood is the time for the formation of the perception of gender identity (being boy or girl) for gays, too (41). Based on the gender patterns and imitation process, they will act like the behavioral and gender patterns that they discovered. They follow the traditional patterns of men and women in this process and because their parents are the most important persons in their socialization, preschool children show their gender behaviors based on the modeling learning process.

Gays, despite the discovery of their special features in childhood, are not different from normal people in terms of behavioral acts and they show their gender behaviors as same as other people in this age. According to this, it should be said that these people are not successful in achieving a conscious



understanding of their differences with other people, so they act like other children with their gender pattern. This subject could be related to the limited cognitive experience at the beginning of childhood and especially the most important feature of this period namely self-centering. Children in the pre-operational phase have less ability to understand others because of their focus on themselves, so they prefer to understand others based on their own experiences instead of others' experiences (41).

In adolescence, due to the maturation and increasing sexuality, they face more challenges and this condition makes them confused.

Facing sexual orientation and cultural and social limitations can make teenagers confused. To combat this confusion, society, and cultural norms provide them with some means to face this issue through gender role models and rewards or punishments that are influenced by cultural norms. Having said this, because lack of role models for gay teenagers in Iranian culture, has made the situation even harder for gay teenagers because they do not have confirmed social that would be based on cultural norms. From the point of view of many of these individuals, their orientation is viewed as being a "false tendency" that is confronted. In this case, many of them will be forced to deny their orientation in adolescence. This finding which is consistent with the results of another research (28) is a conformation about the usage of early denial strategies against different sexual orientations from the social norms. It's because of their talks about feeling guilty and a hard experience of conscience torment, hard experiences in adolescence, identity crisis, and the confusion influenced by it that guide them to face challenges.

In this case, the first strategy is the indirect encounter such as studying and reading books or poems, but what is important about young Iranian gays is their religious orientation for achieving a calmness because of the mental pressure and seeking forgiveness from God which is very common in Iran's society. After experiencing different problems and becoming frustrated in solving them, finally they accept their identity in the middle of adolescence. Enter the self-acceptance period will performed little by little because most of them spoke about a mandatory acceptance and they accept their orientation as a hidden disorder, but they'll accept their identity step by step after that they will know different people.

On the other hand, in the second phase which is analyzing challenges and risks in gays' lives, the frustrations and loneliness are their common points. In addition to the loneliness and frustration which most of them had pointed to, the negative emotional experiences such as fear and constant anxiety, feeling guilty and self-hatred, exclusion, heartbreak, stress conscience torment, and depression are the other results of this research which could be the emotional consequences of their life's experiences in Iran. Hereof, especially the social

and cultural conditions that didn't let them show their real themselves and made them put on a mask, are caused those to be the most important reason of these consequences.

According to these results, it should be explained as same as another research (42), that the identification process of gays is harder and more complicated because when heterosexuals reach the identity acquisition step and they become committed to it, they will have no more problem with their identity and society, because of their normal sexual orientation. But gays, in addition to the hardships that they experience during the identification process, have more limitations in terms of their identity revelation in society which makes them alone or put on a mask. As participants referred to their life experiences, it can be deduced that they faced challenges and risks especially fear of the revelation of their identity. They are afraid of showing their real personality, so they try to prevent the revelation of their real orientation and they choose to put on a mask. It's because of that; the loneliness, feelings of rejection, shame, fear, and self-hatred are the most general emotional challenges of gays. These findings are consistent with other research (15, 43-45), and it should be explained it gays don't like to reveal their identity in societies that don't accept their identity, and when they don't reveal themselves and the person identity would be different with the expected identity of family and religion and society, they will face lots of mental, emotional and behavioral problems, and they'll have some feeling like depression, fear, loneliness, exclusion, and self-hatred. According to the findings of this research and being in line with other researchers (13, 46, 47), it was found that in addition to not revealing their real identity, they're under the pressure of their family to get married, so some of them are forced to get married despite their inner desire and orientation. They experience another failure in addition to the previous failures of their life. On the other hand, it was found that, when they don't reveal themselves, they are forced to play a role among their family and friends and they can't be themselves and they said this is the most suffering mode in their life as Jung (1959), believed that if a person put a mask a lot, he or she will lose their real emotion and themselves and they can't achieve the self-realization so they'll be addicted to the expectations of the society and they can't make a balance between the expectation of the society and their real ones, so in this case, it could not be expected a safe and healthy mental personality (48).

Based on the findings of this research, as same as other research (35), it should be pointed the effects of cultural norms and in addition to the necessity of family counselors' awareness about the gays' identification process, paying attention to the cultural and social factors is essential. Counselors of these clients must be aware of their challenges in revelation and its consequences in Iran's society, they should know their clients' needs and explain to them the consequences of



their identity revelation or not revelation, which in this case, researches, believe that the family therapies which are performing with this kind of people, most have a special difference with the family therapies which are performing with heterosexuals(15, 37, 49).

## 5. Appendix

### 5.1. Acknowledgment

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### 5.2. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

### 5.3. Funding support

None.

### 5.4. Author's contributions

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