ISSN- 2581-575X
INDIAN JOURNAL OF HEALTH, SEXUALITY AND CULTURE

REVIEW ARTICLE

Re-examining Stage-based Models of Queer Identity Formation: A Critical Review

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Abstract

This literature review critically examines stage-based models of queer identity formation, analyzing their theoretical foundations and limitations within contemporary LGBTQ+ scholarship. While early models such as Cass and Troiden's models provided structured frameworks for understanding sexual and gender identity development, they have increasingly been critiqued for their reliance on linear progression, binary thinking, and Western individualistic assumptions. By analysing 114 articles on queer identity formation, this review chronologically addresses the major stage-based models of queer identity. The paper also synthesizes critiques by prominent researchers in the field, who challenge the applicability of stage-based approaches in capturing the fluidity and cultural uniqueness of queer identity formation in our contemporary world. This paper highlights the need for newer gender affirming and culturally sensitive theoretical models of queer identity formation that will help add substantial literary development to our ongoing understanding of queer identities.

ARTICLE INFO

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Dates:
Received: 15-09-2025
Accepted: 12-11-2025
Published: 31-12-2025

Keywords:
Queer, Identity models, Critical review, Gay, Lesbian, Gender identity

How to Cite:
Royan SJ, Deb S. Re-examining Stage-based Models of Queer Identity Formation: A Critical Review. Indian Journal of Health, Sexuality and Culture. 2025;11(2): 45-55.
***DOI:** 10.21590/ijhsc.11.02.07*

Introduction

The study of identity has always been an area of ever-evolving interest in the field of psychology. Identity, an individual's self-conception and self-definition, encompasses personal values, beliefs, roles, and affiliations that give a sense of continuity and coherence to the self over time. Identity involves both internal processes of self-reflection and external influences such as social roles, cultural norms, and interpersonal relationships.[1,2] While studying identity is far from simple, major theorists like Erik Erikson, Sigmund Freud and Marcia have made major contributions to our current understanding of identity as a psychological construct.

While identity is a multifaceted concept, James Marcia[3] propounded that personal identity comprises of 3 main components- vocational identity, sexual identity and the set of beliefs and values a person holds. Thus, highlighting the vital role that sexual identity has on the holistic identity framework. For the longest time, 'sex' and 'gender' were seen as synonymous, where the biological dichotomy of male and female automatically meant congruence with

masculinity and feminity respectively. Anything lying outside these realms of 'society norms' was seen as abnormal or unknown.

Stage-based models of identity formation have played a significant role in shaping psychological and developmental understandings of how individuals come to recognize and articulate aspects of the self. Originating in mid-20th-century psychological thought, these models typically propose a linear progression through discrete phases, culminating in a coherent and socially integrated identity. Much of the foundational literature on identity formation such as Erikson's psychosocial stages- was developed with cisnormative or heteronormative populations in mind, often assuming a universal and sequential path that may have failed to explain nuances of queer identity formation.

Hallmark research undertaken by Devor,[4] Cass[5], McCarn and Fassinger,[6] Coleman,[7] Bockting & Coleman[8] and Simons[9] has played major roles in understanding queer identity formation, through stage-based models. Thereby, attempting to combat earlier negative notions of gender non-conforming individuals as being 'evil possessions,' 'abnormalities,' and 'sinful and dirty.' These stage-based models of queer identity challenged binary conceptions of gender, which marginalized non-binary and gender-diverse narratives that fall outside traditional transition trajectories,[10] and got the ball rolling by creating a space for ongoing research on queer identity.

The Indian Hijra community is one of India's oldest communities, drawing its inheritance from strong historical as well as Indian mythological roots. During the Mughal period, many yielded power as Khawjasaras protecting the royal harems and being confidantes of the ruler.[12] The centuries-old term 'hijra' is extensively used in the Indian sub-continent to identify transvestites, intersex, eunuchs, and transsexual men, or as Chakrapani[13] describes the hijra as 'female mind in a masculine body.' Yet, the term hijra does not equate transgender female or simply any man who identifies as a woman. But to identify as hijra, the trans female must be initiated through a ritual adoption by a hijra guru into the hijra community.[2] Thus, making it both a sexual as well as a cultural identity. The existing models of queer identity, being rooted in Euro American perspectives,[14] fail to account for such culturally diverse perspectives. Thus, this article critically analyzes the literature on stage-based models of queer identity formation, with the aim of assessing their theoretical assumptions and limitations, and relevance to contemporary understandings of cultural gender diversity. Through an examination of key models and empirical studies, the review explores how these frameworks have contributed to the conceptualization of transgender identity development thus far and seeks to highlight the gnawing research gap for the need of a revised contemporary model that exclusively caters to non-Western cultures, like India.

Methodology

This literature review employed a systematic and thematic approach to identify, select, and critically analyze scholarly works on models of queer identity formation. The objective was to explore how theoretical and empirical literature has conceptualized the development of queer identity models throughout the years.

Literature Search

A comprehensive search was conducted across several academic databases, including PsycINFO, PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search terms used in various combinations included: *"queer identity formation," "LGBTQ+ identity development," "sexual identity models," "non-binary identity development,"* and *"queer identity."* Searches were limited to original articles published by authors of the identity models, peer-reviewed journal articles, and books published in English between 1979 and 2025 to capture both foundational and recent developments in the field.

Articles that met the following criteria, were included in the review: (1) the work focused explicitly on identity formation within queer populations (including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender individuals); (2) the source offered a theoretical stage based model or framework of identity development; and (3) the work was situated within the disciplines of psychology, sociology, gender studies, or fields of social sciences. Studies were excluded if they

(1) were based on cisheteronormative frameworks without relevance to queer populations, or (2) were not stage-based theories of queer identity formation; or (3) were not available in full text.

Data Analysis

A total of 1600 articles that met the keyword searches were identified through various database searches. After initial screening by the author, approximately 1400 articles were eliminated as they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Over 114 articles were deemed eligible for the final review.

This article chronologically addresses the selected literature of major stage-based models of queer identity, followed by a critical analysis of each by prominent researchers in the field. A narrative synthesis was used to compare models across theoretical perspectives and disciplines. The review lays special emphasis on assessing the effectiveness of these models to account for cultural diversity within queer identities, outside the Western world.

Critical Review of Stage based models of Queer Identity

Understanding queer identity development is a complex and dynamic process influenced by biological, psychological, and social factors.[15] This paper aims to explore the social and psychological dimensions involved in the formation of queer identity by focusing on assessing stage-based identity development models.

Most stage-based models are built upon each other, as they attempt to address the limitations in their predecessor;[14] the researcher finds it vital to chronologically analyse these major models, in order to better enumerate the evolution in the understanding of queer identity in research, thus giving a fitting timeline progression of stage-based queer identity models.

Cass's Six-Stage Identity Model (Cass, 1979)

Cass's six-stage model is recognized as the pioneer framework in the study of queer identity development, and notably the first to conceptualize homosexuality through a stage-based process.[5] Developed by clinical psychologist and sex therapist Vivienne Cass, this model outlines six distinct phases in the formation of queer identity.

The first stage, called identity confusion, arises when individuals begin to notice feelings that conflict with the assumption of heterosexuality. This stage is often marked by confusion and emotional turmoil. Followed by the identity comparison stage, which involves exploring the possibility of being queer, during which individuals compare themselves with both heterosexual and queer peers, often leading to a sense of disconnection from societal norms and a search for 'true' belonging.[5]

In the third stage, identity tolerance, individuals begin to accept their queer identity and seek support in the queer community, which can reduce the impact of societal stigma. This is followed by identity pride, in which a sense of self-worth emerges, accompanied by resistance to heteronormative rules. Lastly, in identity synthesis, queer identity becomes integrated into the individual's overall self-concept, existing alongside other aspects of identity rather than dominating it.[5]

Cass later revised her framework by merging stages one and two, as well as stages five and six, and adding a pre-stage, thereby creating a more streamlined four-stage model.[5]

Cass's framework assumes individuals progress through the stages in a fixed sequence- one stage at a time. This approach has been critiqued for oversimplifying the fluid and ongoing nature of queer identity development.[5,15] Additionally, it also implies a definitive end to identity formation; this assumption contradicts contemporary narrative understandings that view identity as dynamic and evolving throughout life.

Kenneady and Oswalt[15] pointed out that, within the Cass model, coming out is seen as an inevitable action upon reaching the final stage. This may not hold true for all queer individuals as it fails to consider the very real risks involved in coming out, particularly in contexts where societal acceptance is lacking, especially in patriarchal and traditional communities.[12]

Denton[16] further critiques Cass's model for reinforcing heterosexuality as the 'default identity'. This perspective neglects the role of sociocultural

forces—such as patriarchy, societal hegemony, and social conditioning that shape perceptions of normalcy from early childhood.[4]

Degges-White, Rice, and Myers[17] argue that empirical validation of Cass's model remains limited as it lacks clear distinctions between stages (particularly between stages one and two, and stages five and six). Moreover, Cass's assertion that lesbian identity typically begins at puberty is contradicted by contemporary research that suggests that same-sex attraction and behaviors can emerge in early childhood, not just in adolescence.[18]

A notable cross-cultural review comes from a study by Ferdoush,[19] which examined the applicability of Cass's model among Bangladeshi *Kotis*. The study found that Cass's model failed to account for the lived experiences of queer individuals in South Asia, where queer stigmatization is rampant. Participants reported that, despite understanding and accepting their sexuality, they were unable to feel pride in their identity because of persistent societal rejection. Many expressed a desire to live different lives, with some even disclosing suicidal thoughts or attempts.[19] The study also revealed that due to stigma and fear, many *Kotis* either concealed their identity by 'passing' as heterosexual or never progressed to the later stages of pride or identity integration.

Coleman's Model of Homosexuality Identity Development (1982)

This model outlines five distinct phases of homosexual identity development. Beginning with the pre-coming-out stage, which occurs during childhood when individuals are typically unaware of their same-sex attractions but may experience a general sense of being different from their peers. As awareness of these feelings begins to take prominence, many individuals respond with defence mechanisms of repression or denial, due to societal stigma messages surrounding homosexuality.[8]

As the individual progresses to the coming-out stage, there is a shift from internal resistance and confusion to self-acknowledgement and acceptance. Coleman[8] emphasized that this self-acceptance is a key milestone in this phase as it brings about internal reconciliation, thus allowing individuals to disclose their sexual orientation to others.

The exploration stage involves initial sexual experiences and greater engagement with the larger queer community. In this stage, individuals work toward forming meaningful and stable relationships, while learning to function as a partner within a same-sex relationship (adjustment, navigating roles and expectations in the relationship). The final stage is integration, where one's sexual orientation becomes a natural part of their overall self-concept. They are often better equipped for long-term, successful partnerships, having resolved earlier identity conflicts and role uncertainties.[8]

Much like the criticism against Cass's model, scholars like Galbraith[14] argue that this model too imposes a 'set and strict' normative and hierarchical structure on queer identity development, which may not reflect the diverse and non-linear experiences of many LGBTQ+ individuals. Being a linear model, it assumes a fixed progression from one stage to the next, without accounting for individual differences, fluidity, or simultaneous experiences across stages. This rigidity fails to account for the complexities of queer identity, which is often dynamic, non-conforming, and shaped by ongoing personal and societal interactions.[18]

Troiden's Model of Homosexuality Identity Development (1989)

Often referred to as an "ideal-typical" model of homosexual identity development, Troiden's model, like the early phases in Cass and Coleman's models, begins with the Sensitization stage. In this phase, young individuals sense that they are different from their peers, which leads to feelings of confusion, social withdrawal, and low self-image.[20]

In the second stage, identity confusion involves the emergence of same-sex attraction, which forces individuals to question their sexual identity more strongly. As they progress to identity assumption, individuals start to accept a sexual minority identity. This stage frequently includes the process of coming out and forming lasting connections with other members of the queer community, which provides a sense of belonging and validation.[21]

In the commitment stage, homosexuality is embraced as a core aspect of the self. Having

accepted themselves, individuals often experience romantic love, emotional fulfillment, and develop strategies to navigate a society where heterosexuality still reigns as the norm.[20,21]

Troiden's model has been critiqued for being vague and broad in its stage definitions. While Troiden[20] argues that this broadness allows for a more inclusive representation of varied queer experiences, critics point out that such generality can undermine the model's applicability. Galbraith[14] notes that Troiden's model similarly reinforces the presumption of heterosexuality as the default identity from which queer individuals must diverge. Though this view may have reflected the societal attitudes of its time, it is increasingly seen as outdated and limiting in modern contexts. Rogers[22] argues that continued acceptance of cisheteronormative ideals, especially those centered around male-dominated views of sexuality, actively suppresses queer experiences. She asserts that framing heterosexuality as the baseline contributes to the marginalization of non-heterosexual voices and must be consciously challenged and dismantled.

D'Augelli's Model of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identity Development (1994)

This identity development model offers a more flexible, non-linear perspective on how individuals form homosexual and bisexual identities. Made with the intention to have practical utility in educational and clinical settings, this model outlines a series of developmental phases. In the first phase titled exiting heterosexuality, individuals begin to acknowledge same-sex attractions. Next, developing a personal sexual minority identity, individuals work toward emotional stability, challenging societal stereotypes, and establishing a sense of self within the queer community.[23]

The third phase emphasizes building connections and receiving support from others with shared identities. Followed by individuals disclosing their sexual orientation to their parents, in the fourth phase. The fifth stage, developing sexual minority intimacy, involves forming close, intimate relationships. The sixth and final phase entails connecting with the broader queer community by becoming involved in political advocacy for queer rights.

D'Augelli's model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development differs significantly from earlier linear approaches as it challenged the 'essentialist' ideas by framing identity as socially constructed rather than fixed and limited by emphasizing the contextual, relational nature of identity formation.[14]

However, the model is not without its limitations; like Cass's model, it also implies that 'coming out' is mandatory for full identity development, suggesting that individuals must disclose their orientation to others in order to progress through the model's stages.[16] This assumption has been challenged by Galbraith,[14] who argues that coming out is not a single, definitive act but an ongoing and deeply personal process. Framing coming out as necessary can create a hierarchy within the queer community, placing those who are out as more complete in their identity than those who are not. Furthermore, cultural, religious, and societal factors significantly shape how individuals approach coming out, especially in countries that continue to discriminate against queer individuals.[24,25]

The model's emphasis on engaging in political activism also invites critique. While community involvement can be empowering for some, not all individuals have access to advocacy or feel the need for political engagement. Treating this step as necessary in identity formation risks excluding or undervaluing those who do not pursue activism or who are unable to participate in queer communities due to safety, culture, the nation's legal framework or other constraints.[24]

DeVor's 14-stage Model of Transgender/Transsexual Identity Formation (2004)

Devor's 14-stage model of trans identity development presents perhaps the most comprehensive and structured model for understanding identity development in trans men. The model begins with a stage called Abiding anxiety, characterized by a persistent, subconscious discomfort with one's assigned gender. This is followed by the Identity confusion stage, where individuals begin questioning the mismatch between their internal identity and designated gender role.[4]

In the Identity comparison phase, individuals start to notice how their thoughts, feelings, and experiences differ from the societal expectations tied to their assigned gender. This leads to the discovery of the transgenderism stage in which the individual becomes aware of the existence of transgender identities. This realization is an integral' ah-ha moment' that can help make sense of their experiences.

Followed by the Identity confusion about transgender identity phase marked by uncertainty and fear as the person evaluates whether the transgender label fits their personal experience, which they have been experiencing all their life. This is followed by the stage of Identity comparison about transgender identity, during which individuals assess the lives of transgender people for points of similarity with their own. In this phase, the comfort of conformity that one's experiences are shared by others acts as a major validating factor. In the Tolerance phase, they begin to cautiously accept the possibility that they may be transgender, though mixed emotions may continue to exist.

Once the individual reaches the Acceptance *stage*, there is a stronger internal affirmation of their transgender identity. This leads to a period of *d*elay before coming out, marked by emotional preparation to commit to the trans identity and concern over others' reactions. The coming-out stage marks a proactive endeavour to disclose one's identity to others.

The next phase, exploration of identity and transition issues, includes experimenting with new gender expressions (dressing, wearing makeup, etc.), names, pronouns, or considering medical interventions. As comfort and confidence grow, the individual enters the integration and pride stage, in which the transgender identity is embraced as a source of pride.

In the post-transition stage, in which individuals adjust to life after transitioning, including new interpersonal dynamics and social roles. Finally, the model culminates in the identity synthesis phase, where being transgender becomes a fully integrated aspect of the self.[4]

Sinclair-Palm[26] argues that both Devor's and Cass's models share similar problematic elements in that they present identity as a rigid, linear sequence and fail to capture the rich variability, complexity, and fluidity of gender experiences. Furthermore, these models largely omit considerations of race, class, and cultural background, which significantly shape identity development.

Devor[4] himself acknowledges limitations in his work, noting that the model is based exclusively on narratives from trans men and may not accurately reflect the experiences of trans women. He also explains that his findings are rooted in Western cultural contexts and may not apply in non-Western societies with different gender norms.

Research by Ferdoush[19] and Goel[25] highlights these cultural differences, particularly in South Asian countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In these countries, many trans women (especially those within the Hijra community) often lack access to formal education and literacy. This makes Devor's suggestion in stage 4 (that individuals discover transgender identities through reading) less applicable to such societies. Instead, cultural knowledge about gender variance is often passed through oral tradition or community experience, reflecting a fundamentally different pathway to identity formation.

Bilodeau's Model of Transgender Identity Development (2005)

This framework challenges traditional binary understandings of gender and recognizes identity formation as a process deeply shaped by social, political, and contextual influences. Created through in-depth qualitative research involving two transgender students at a Midwestern university, Bilodeau's model[26] offers a reimagined approach to identity development.

Departing from earlier stage-based models that often present identity development as linear and universally applicable, Bilodeau[26] emphasizes that transgender identity formation is fluid and shaped by both internal experiences and external societal pressures. The model addresses essential aspects such as recognizing one's gender identity, experimenting with gender expression, and negotiating identity in the face of social norms. It also underscores how factors like campus environment, peer support, and institutional policies can either support

or hinder the identity development of transgender students.

Bilodeau argues that understanding transgender identity development requires acknowledging and resisting systems of oppression, including transphobia and heteronormativity. The model outlines six stages: (1) moving away from a traditionally gendered identity, (2) establishing a personal transgender identity, (3) forming a transgender social identity, (4) embracing a transgender identity, (5) exploring transgender intimacy, and (6) finding community within transgender spaces.

However, the model has been critiqued for its assumptions about normative experiences. For example, it places significant emphasis on coming out, community engagement, and romantic or sexual relationships as milestones. This can marginalize those who choose not to disclose their identity or who do not align with these expectations.

Another critique is that the model implies that being transgender requires ongoing advocacy and self-representation. Similar concerns were raised by McCarn and Fassinger,[6] who raised questions about individuals who simply wish to live without engaging in activism.

The model may exclude transgender individuals whose experiences fall outside mainstream narratives such as those who remain closeted, avoid visibility, or lack access to affirming communities. Studies like Ferdoush[19] highlight how many trans people, especially in more conservative or marginalized contexts, choose to hide their identities to avoid stigma or violence.

As Patton[27] argues, models like Bilodeau's tend to overlook the profound influence of unique social contexts, especially outside Western cultures. Scholars, including Rust,[29] Parks,[30] Kaminski,[31] Brady and Busse,[32] Cain,[33] Appleby,[34] have emphasized how factors like race, ethnicity, gender, culture, and class play critical roles in identity formation yet these dimensions are often ignored in predominantly Western models.

According to Diamond,[35] supporting the mental and emotional well-being of sexual-minority individuals requires empirical research that reflects how identity development is actually experienced, rather than relying on generalized and often Western-centric assumptions. Both Devor[4] and Simons[10] advocate for the creation of culturally specific frameworks that more accurately reflect transgender experiences within particular geographic and sociocultural contexts.

Bockting & Coleman Model of Transgender Identity Formation (2007)

Bockting and Coleman[9] proposed a five-stage model to describe the development of transgender identity, consisting of the phases: pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, intimacy, and identity integration. In the pre-coming out phase, individuals often experience gender deviant thoughts, and behaviors may not yet be fully understood or expressed. The coming out stage involves acknowledging one's gender identity both personally and publicly. This period can be especially difficult for those struggling with mental health issues or lacking strong social support networks.[9]

In the exploration phase, individuals may begin experimenting with gender expression and negotiating societal expectations of gender (often confronting rigid binary norms and stereotypes). In the intimacy stage, the formation of deeper emotional and romantic relationships emerges. The final phase of identity integration is marked by a strong sense of self-acceptance and the ability to view one's transgender identity as just one aspect of a multifaceted self.

This model affirms transgender identity development as a dynamic, non-linear process shaped by both internal self-perception and external social factors. A notable strength of the framework is its incorporation of minority stress theory,[11] which recognizes the unique psychological pressures such as discrimination, stigma, and marginalization. The model also highlights the role of resilience, self-affirmation, and the importance of community support.[9]

Critics argue that it tends to generalize transgender experiences and leans toward binary and medically focused transition pathways.[36] It centers narratives that involve medical professionals potentially overlooking the identities and experiences of nonbinary, genderfluid, or gender non-conforming individuals who do not follow conventional transition routes or prefer not to undergo surgical transition methods or hormone therapy.

Another major critique involves the model's limited incorporation of intersectionality. While it offers valuable insights into the gender identity process, it does not sufficiently account for how intersecting factors such as race, class, and culture determine individual trans experiences.[37] This absence can lead to a limiting Western-centric perspective.

Simons Model of Transgender People of Colour Identity Development Model (2020)

The transgender people of color (TPOC) identity development model outlines eight interconnected and fluid components that reflect the diverse experiences of transgender individuals of color. Unlike traditional linear frameworks, this model recognizes that identity development occurs in non-sequential and overlapping ways.

The journey often begins with the self-identification stage, in which a person becomes aware of and accepts their transgender identity. In the validation stage, individuals engage with resources such as literature, personal reflection, or shared experiences within their communities. The display phase refers to the realization of how one's gender expression diverges from societal expectations. For instance, one participant in the study described how cutting their hair short altered how others perceived them, highlighting the importance of visible gender cues in social interpretation.[10]

The proaction stage involves taking assertive steps aligned with one's identity, such as correcting misgendering or advocating for recognition and rights. The Transition stage may include medical steps such as hormone therapy or surgeries, but the model clearly states that medical transition is not a requirement for affirming one's transgender identity. The intersection phase explains how individuals cope with marginalization, particularly those tied to both racial and gender identity.

In the Passing stage, individuals make careful decisions about when and how to disclose their identity, often for safety or self-preservation in potentially hostile environments. Finally, exploration involves trying out various gender expressions, such as presenting more traditionally masculine, feminine, or androgynous, depending on personal choice.

This model represents a significant evolution in the understanding of transgender identity development, particularly among people of color. One of its major strengths lies in its recognition of the importance of intersectionality how gender identity, race, cultural background, and systemic oppression intersect to influence personal experiences. It also addresses key survival strategies, including selective disclosure and seeking validation through the community, providing a more realistic depiction of how TPOC individuals navigate their identities.

However, the model is not without its limitations. It is based largely on qualitative data from a limited sample, which may limit its applicability across broader cultural or economic settings.[38] Additionally, elements such as transition and passing could promote ideals suggesting that medical transition or conforming to binary gender expectations are central to transgender identity. This could marginalize individuals whose gender journeys fall outside these norms.[27]

Result and Discussion

This review of stage-based models of queer identity formation reveals both the historical significance and evolution of the cumulative research in the field. The paper also highlights the limitations of these models in capturing the diversity of queer experiences, as propounded by various researchers. Stage-based models, such as Cass's[5] homosexual identity formation model and Troiden's (1989) four-stage model, although outdated, assert their significance as they provided some of the earliest structured attempts to conceptualize how individuals come to recognize, accept, and integrate a non-heterosexual identity.[14] These models have been instrumental in legitimizing queer identity development within academic discourse, especially during times when queer identities were demonized. They offered a coherent narrative that could be used in therapeutic, educational, and research settings to affirm the legitimacy and relevance of queer identities.

One of the most common critiques against stage-based models is their assumption of a linear and universal developmental trajectory, which takes away from variation in individual experiences.

Whilst newer research has shown that queer identity development is frequently non-linear, recursive, and context-dependent, challenging the applicability of such rigid frameworks.[27] Furthermore, all these models are rooted in Western, individualistic cultural paradigms that overlook non-Western and collectivist cultures' queer experiences. Another concern is that early stage-based models often pathologize queer identities by framing identity formation through narratives of confusion, crisis, or internal conflict, thereby aligning with outdated medicalized discourses.[6]

Many of these models are grounded in binary frameworks of gender and sexuality, failing to adequately account for the experiences of individuals who identify as bisexual, pansexual, nonbinary, or otherwise outside of traditional identity categories.[35] An interesting critique from Abes, Jones and McEwen[41] enumerates that these models often treat sexual and gender identity as isolated from other dimensions, such as race, class, religion, and disability; this makes the models less relevant for those individuals whose identities are shaped by multiple, intersecting systems of oppression. Other critics argue that stage-based frameworks neglect the broader structural and political contexts in which queer identities are formed.[42]

The paper shows that while stage-based models have vitally contributed to early understandings of queer identity, they are unable to encapsulate the contemporary culture's divergent queer experience. Therefore, as Devor,[4] Galbright,[14] and Langdridge[43] have suggested, more inclusive, gender affirming, flexible and culture-sensitive theoretical stage-based models are necessary to further develop our understanding of queer identity in our modern world.

As highlighted in much detail, these models fail to encapsulate the Indian LGBT+ experience, which is extremely culturally specific.[25] For instance, the Hijra community, which encompasses a large portion of the Indian transgender community even today, is not just a sexual identity, but one that is rich in cultural aspects as well. The Hijra community is unique and complex in its setup. Firstly, Hijras are not homogeneous as there lie several sub-categories of Hijras, namely Akwa Hijras, Kalyani Hijras and Nirvana Hijras; each of these categories have their own social status and roles in the Hijra Gharana. Secondly, the Gharana itself is very structured, with the Nayak acting as the superior, under whom are gurus who act as mother figures to their Chelas. Each of these groups has allocated power, economic benefits and roles in the gharana. Needless to say, the effect of this microsystem, as Bronfrenbrenner[44] would explain, has an immense impact on the individual and their identity. Furthermore, applying the social constructivist approach of learning the Guru's scaffolding (training in trade, sex work, dressing, guidance, etc.) is also noteworthy in identity formation.

The socio- political landscape of India is also diverse, with its unique challenges like patriarchy, socio-religious taboos, financial and literacy issues that inevitably influence its citizens. Nevertheless the Indian LGBT+ community is heavily stigmatized and faces psychological, political, economic exclusion[45] Sartaj[46] found that the rates of lifetime mental illness in Delhi's Hijra community was 40% alcohol abuse disorder (26%), anxiety or depressive disorders (8% each), somatoform disorders and bulimia nervosa (6%), making it an urgent need of the hour to shed light on the community and recognize the need for an exclusive model that explores the Indian transgender experience.

Conclusion

The influence of queer identity theories has challenged the foundational assumptions of developmental psychology by rejecting normative endpoints and embracing ambiguity and contradiction as valid features of identity.[44] This has opened the door to a more inclusive understanding of queerness. By acknowledging the limitations in the existing models, future research should prioritize models that are intersectional, culturally sensitive, and attuned to real lived experiences.[47] Such a direction will shine the limelight on queer experiences in non-westernized cultures, which remains under researched, and contribute to clinical practice, education, feminist theories and policy making by validating diverse pathways to identity beyond traditional developmental scripts.

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