

# Identity Ambivalence and Dissociative Identity Defensiveness in Sexual Minority Members

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## **Abstract**

Since the 1960's different ethnic, gender and sexual groups have organized into minority liberation movements, striving to reduce their discrimination by and exclusion from society's hegemonic power structure and to improve their symbolic status. These social movements rallied minority members, and installed a positive sense of minority identity in them while opposing their socially proscribed inferiority. This has been the advent of "the Age of Identity". For sexual minorities, defined by their sexual difference from the normative majority, this age has come to fruition online, where countless sexual groups create communal settings uniquely suited to their needs.

According to Social Identity Theory, minority groups strive to create a positive social identity for themselves. This positive identity is only attainable through the reassignment of meaning for their minority status, which is made possible by minority communities. This process of community-based empowerment notwithstanding, several theories concur that minority members are continually influenced by the majority's pejorative view of their ingroup. Members of sexual minorities may be especially vulnerable to social negation because of their up-bringing as members of the majority group, their stigma's occurrence in a relatively late developmental stage and its concealability. These unique minority characteristics result in sexual minority members having to actively disown their default identity as members of the majority. They also construct their minority identity in a context of deep internalization of hegemonic norms, which relegate their group to an inferior position.

The current project explored two processes that arise from this dialectic relationship between sexual minority identity construction and hegemonic norm internalization: identity ambivalence and dissociative identity defenses. In general, ambivalence has been linked by various research traditions with over-reactive responses oscillating between extremes. Identity ambivalence is hypothesized to occur when a positive minority identity is constructed over the backdrop of majority-defined negativity, without replacing it.

A similar kind of ambivalence has been the focus of recent research within the realm of the self. It has been demonstrated that disparities between explicitly constructed positive self-esteem, and implicit (i.e., automatic, uncontrollable and generally non-conscious) negativity results in self over-sensitivity and over-reactivity, manifested in narcissistic oscillations between grandeur and inferiority. Comparable findings (i.e., the coexistence of highly positive explicit regard, and implicit negativity) have been repeatedly documented in recent years with the context of minority groups. Ambivalence towards minority ingroups may also be a consequence of conflicting needs to justify the group (by constructing a positive minority identity) and justifying the system (which, in this context behooves support for the hegemonic stratification system that defines the ingroup as inferior). This scholarly tradition has demonstrated such ambivalence using negative and positive valence explicit measures (e.g., indicating that the ingroup is characterized simultaneously as very intelligent and very unintelligent). This, however, has not led to systematic research into the consequences of minority ambivalence.

Another possible outcome of the unique characteristics of sexual minorities may be dissociative identity defenses. Dissociation is defined as

"the process whereby the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment are disrupted" (APA, 1994, p 477). Dissociation can be conceptualized as a state in which constellations of self-concerns have tight internal links, coupled with weak links with other self constellations. In the current context, the sexual characteristic which initially appears outside of the self constellations, defined by the individual's default normative identity, may remain secluded and hamper self integration. By means of this isolation, the self is protected from the stigma attached to the sexual characteristic. If sexual stigma is rejected through the construction of a positive minority identity, this defense is no longer required.

The current project focused on sexual minority identity construction (through affiliation with online minority communities), the aforementioned defensive and ambivalent identity processes, as well as an array of hypothesized identity outcomes (Defensive Superiority, Sexual Identity Primacy, Differential Ingroup Treatment, Selective Exclusion from the Ingroup, Sexual Compulsivity, Online Sexual Problem and Sexual Risk Taking). The project utilized three online samples: the first included 339 same-sex attracted men (from a previous reanalyzed study); the second included 256 paraphilic individuals (paraphilia is the clinical diagnosis corresponding with sexual proclivities that deviate from accepted norms, other than attraction to same sex individuals); The third sample included 521 additional same-sex attracted individuals.

The project's findings first supported the utilization of a demographically heterogeneous sample. Differences between the sexes and sexual forms were tested using an exploratory multiple analyses of co-variance

(MANCOVA). Because these analyses demonstrated sex differences, and because of the study's inability to garner sufficiently large women subsamples, the following analyses focused exclusively on men. Employing a series of Hierarchical Regressions, the relationships between basic social identity variables (on both explicit and implicit levels), the defensive / ambivalent identity variables and the identity outcome variables were explored.

These analyses demonstrated that the links between basic social identity variables and the defensive / ambivalent variables differ greatly between the same-sex attracted samples and the paraphilic sample. While a gay positive minority identity was linked with decreased levels of dissociative identity defenses and ambivalence, the opposite was true for paraphilic identities. Conversely, the examined identity outcomes were largely unaffected by sexual form, with the majority of outcomes (6 out of the 7) demonstrating significant links with dissociative identity defenses.

These findings were discussed in the context of the difference between the social climate in which same-sex attracted and paraphilic minority identities are constructed. It appears that while well integrated and unambivalent GLB identities are attainable, paraphilic identities may only be partially established. Because paraphilic identity cannot be incorporated into the normative self, it remains in its isolation. In addition, the findings point to the importance of dissociative identity defenses as an identity process with significant outcomes, some of which have both applied and public ramifications. Finally, possible integrations of current findings with social identity and self structure theories are proposed.