CHAPTER 4

EXPLORING THE SYMBOLIC MEANING/S OF ‘COMING OUT’ IN THE PROCESS OF IDENTITY WORK

Various stage models of gay, lesbian identity development that have been described in an earlier chapter lay emphasis on ‘coming out’ as a significant stage in development of a gay or lesbian identity. This process of coming out has been defined as disclosure to others that one is gay, lesbian, or bisexual (APA, 2004) and inherent to this disclosure is the notion of self-acknowledgement or self-acceptance of being LGB. Coming out is not a one-time occasion. Comfort with one’s sexuality changes and is likely to grow with time and so are the chances of disclosure to more and more people. Coming out is thus often described as a life-long process that involves a widening circle of friends, family and acquaintances. Viewed from the perspective of the stage models of LGB identity development, coming out to self and others is a cornerstone in the process of self acceptance as gay or lesbian (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1979).

Most of the stage models describe LG identity development across four to six stages. These start with becoming aware of and confused by same-sex attractions; this is followed by greater self-awareness, looking for information and meanings of homosexuality, having homosexual experiences, working through questions of natural/normal v/s unnatural/abnormal, guilt, fear and so on. As individuals become more comfortable with the possibility of being gay and begin to accept themselves, they are said to enter the third stage of ‘coming out’ or what has been defined by the various stage model theorists as ‘coming out, identity tolerance, identity acceptance’ (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988; Coleman, 1981). D’Augelli (1994) has proposed a lifespan approach to sexual identity development with emphasis on six developmental tasks - exiting heterosexual identity, developing a personal gay identity status, developing a gay social identity, becoming a gay offspring, developing a gay intimacy status and entering a gay community. Here too the second, third and fourth task of developing personal and social gay identity and becoming a gay offspring refer to coming out to self and others, including one’s parents. One of the critiques of the stage models of LG identity development is that it tends to define sexual identity development in terms of a linear progression that starts for the LG individual with a negative, socially ascribed heterosexual identity to becoming an ‘out’ and happy LG person. Thus not only is development viewed as a linear process but there is value attribution associated with moving up on the development ladder. Also these models understate the importance of social context within which the LG identity development occurs. Finally, they minimize the tremendous variation in experience of LG individuals that
is mediated by ‘contexts’ of social class, ethnicity, age, gender and other background factors (Kaufman and Johnson, 2004).

**Symbolic Interactionism - Framework to understand identity development and disclosure among gay and lesbian individuals**

To emphasize the unique developmental situation of each person and inter-individual differences in response to their environment, D’Augelli (1994) uses the concept of ‘developmental plasticity’. Kaufman and Johnson (2004) suggest that in order to center the role of social context and interaction between ‘self and context’ within the narrative of development and maintenance of a LG identity, symbolic interactionist literature on self and identity to theorize gay and lesbian identity development would be useful. They use Goffman’s work (1963) ‘Stigma – Notes on management of a spoiled identity’ to describe the process of individuals becoming aware of their sexual identity, becoming aware of social perceptions of the same and using various stigma management strategies and negotiations situated within their contexts.

Kaufman and Johnson (2004) argue that key concepts and theory from symbolic interactionism provide a more coherent theoretical framework to examine identity development and the situated complexity of identity negotiation and disclosure among gays and lesbians. The concept of reflected appraisals i.e. individuals' perceptions of how others perceive them, is central in symbolic interactionist research on how social interaction impacts the self (Gecas and Burke 1995). In case of gay and lesbian persons as they begin to become aware of their same-sex attractions, they also become aware of society’s negative evaluations of same-sex sexuality. Thus as the identity standard (view of oneself) of a LG person is developing, so is their awareness of negative reflected appraisals from society. In fact presence of hostile and negative reflected appraisal hinders the development of a strong identity standard. As discussed in the previous chapter, the initial identity standard of a LG person is likely to be negative as mediated by the negative reflected appraisals from others. However research on reflected appraisal also points to the role of the active individual, who interprets, acts on and may even refute reflected appraisals (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983; Ichiyama 1993; Milkie 1999). Burke (1991) points out that individuals actively construct identity. Burke theorizes that individuals strive for consistency between their view of themselves (identity standard) and their perceptions of how others see them (reflected appraisals). When inconsistencies arise, individuals act in ways to bring the reflected appraisals more in line with the identity standard. In doing so, individuals may reject reflected appraisals that are not important to them or come from others they do not value, or they may look for objective information in the environment that may counter the reflected
appraisals (Ichiyama 1993; Milkie 1999). They may engage in social movements to actively change the perceptions of their social group (Goffman, 1963), may selectively associate with supportive others and try to sustain an identity that is congruent with their self concept (Snow & Anderson, 1987).

Respondents in this study have discussed their process of becoming aware of their same-sex attractions and increasingly developing ‘comfort’ with who they are (identity standard). Alongside this all of them describe being aware of the negative reflected appraisals and working actively to seek out positive reflected appraisals through looking for positive/affirmative information and depictions of LG individuals, looking for role-models, engaging with the queer community, making alliances with sympathetic others and so on.

In the context of invisibility of same-sexuality in public discourse during the 1980s and 90s when most of the respondents were growing up in different cities of India, most respondents talked about the importance of finding affirmative information about homosexuality, meeting other people who were ‘gay and ok with it’. Respondents talked about finding the word ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’ for the first time in a newspaper article, in the dictionary, on the internet, gay chat rooms and so on.

Around the 9th Std., I knew it, but I would keep it to myself and I would read whatever information I would get and I think those days Ashok Rowkavi (one of the first gay men who came out on national television in the early 1990s) was quite famous. I wouldn't say he was my hero but then I used to read those articles by him or about him, cut them and keep them with me… it was during that time that I came out and said to myself, 'look this is the way I am, now I have a word for how I feel so that's it!'

[Abhijit, 28 year old gay man]

I was exploring (on the internet) and then I came to a site called ‘naughty chat’ and I typed the word 'Gay' and entered a gay chat room and talked to the people there. So that time I was introduced to the concept of gay. It is through one of these sites that I spoke to the first Indian gay man who was there. He was 29 then and I was 19 and we used to talk a lot…

[Amit, 33 year old gay man]

Others described the importance of meeting gay and lesbian persons, support groups, organizations working with LGBT persons.

at the age of 16 or 17, you don’t know much and I think its necessary to meet someone else, who has figured this out... its like until someone uses the word, ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, that flash bulb doesn't really
go off in your head...

[Mehak, 28 year old lesbian woman]

One of the respondents stated that she had her first girlfriend in second year of her post-graduation studies and once in a relationship they both acknowledged for the first time that they could be lesbian. They then wanted to meet other people like themselves and know more about gay life in Bombay. She says,

So she (her girlfriend) decided to do a study on psycho-social aspects of coming out. And, she got in touch with the queer community in Bombay, through Humjinsi, Olava in Pune. And then I started getting the language, the confidence, the pride, you know the acceptance, when I met all these people, the queer community, the feminist women, then it worked for me

[Pradnya, 33 year old lesbian woman]

Another gay man, who first contacted Gay Bombay (GB), a support group for gay men in Bombay talked about his experience of volunteering for a gay rights conference in Bombay in 1998.

I happened to become part of one of the preparatory meetings for the conference, then I became part of the conference and as I told you, those three days were wonderful, lots of discussions happening, sharing stories and sharing experiences, meeting people from around the world with such different experiences… that I think really changed it for me, that helped me make the decision of coming out and deciding not to get married for sure and then to be involved in activism.

[Vineet, 40 year old gay man]

Thus shifting of reflected appraisals and seeking more positive reflected appraisals is an important step in strengthening one’s identity standard. Respondents played an active role in shifting the reflected appraisals to accurately match their identity standard. Goffman (1963) states that when the identity standard is not too strong then individuals may not seek to alter the negative reflected appraisals and instead engage in the stigma management strategy of ‘passing’ as part of or member of the non-stigmatized group. However when the identity standard is positive and strong, then the urge to come out and not hide anymore as well as to work to alter perception about one’s group is strong too.

Reading Ek Madhavbag (a play in Marathi depicting the coming out story of a gay son to his mother) was a milestone for me and by that time I realized that it is futile to hide anything and whatever I am, I am… call it illness, call it anything but this is what I am and I also realized that if there is a debate between vikruti (perversion) and prakruti (nature), then for me, all this was so natural

[Mansoor, 33 year old gay man]
Respondent descriptions of joining support, activist groups, seeking safe, queer friendly spaces and literature is a reflection of individual agency in rejecting mainstream negative reflected appraisals and looking for positive ones. However it is also a reflection of the structural and situational reality that such affirmative spaces have been created and continue to exist and support young queer persons in the face of a heterosexist public and institutional discourse in India from the early 1990s.

While one underlines the importance of access to affirmative spaces in the process of development of an affirmative LG identity, the subjective and the psychological experience of living with a stigmatized identity and its impact on identity development as well as disclosure cannot be ignored. In other words, while empowering and affirming social processes may enable stigmatized individuals to reject and alter negative reflected appraisals, the psyche needs to heal from the effects of stigma in order to engage with and participate in the empowering processes. This is illustrated in the following quote,

My low self-esteem has got a lot to do with it. Me being compared to a girl… my girlishness, all this being socially unacceptable… The acceptance feature was there all the time and the experience of being ridiculed. These two factors were always in the picture. That is why I did not want to come out to people

[Ajay, 32 year old gay man]

To tell or not – situated complexities of disclosure/non-disclosure in lives of LG individuals

Stage models of LG identity development assume that once individuals become aware of their same-sex attractions and pass through the initial phase of denial, fear, bargaining and learn to tolerate their lesbian or gay identity, then the path is paved for self-acceptance and coming out to self and others. These models thus assume that every LG individual who has developed comfort with their identity and accepted themselves would come out to most people such as family, colleagues and friends. In fact non-disclosure is interpreted as failure to attain the later and final stages of LG identity such as gay pride and integration (Cass, 1979). In making this assumption what the stage models overlook is the role of situational complexity of individual lives and overemphasize the impact of identity on behavioral choices of disclosure (Rust, 1993, Parks, 1999). Situational complexity may include several individual factors such as being stuck in a homophobic job environment or lack of availability of social and familial support. However it is necessary to recognize that individual ‘self’ is not merely a psychological reality. It is a collection of self concepts and multiple identities that are essentially based on social position (Stryker, 1968) of class, caste, gender, age and so on. Thus choices of disclosure of sexual identity cannot be seen
as merely being determined by levels of internalized homophobia or self-acceptance, several structural and contextual variables would play a significant part in these decisions.

Respondents in this study discussed multiple factors that motivated them to come out and also cited several processes and reasons to choose non-disclosure. In fact the decision of disclosure, partial disclosure or non-disclosure resembles the idea of a ‘revolving door’, of being in or out of the closet depending on the costs associated with disclosure (Schneider & Conrad, 1980).

Being dependent on parents, living in the parental home, while continuing studies or not having a stable job with a regular income was an important situational/contextual factor that motivated some of the respondents to not disclose their sexuality to their parents. Fearing the worst kinds of responses from the family based on experiences of other LG individuals within the community added to the apprehension of telling family. Research studies and other literature from human rights groups and NGOs in India sites family as one of the main sources of violence and abuse in a LG person’s life (Fernandez & Gomathy, 2003; PUCL-K, 2001). Non-disclosure to family however did not imply that the LG individual led a depressed, ‘in the closet’, lonely existence. Respondents in this study talked about being part of the gay community, going for community events and parties, having sex, having relationships and so on, while they maintained a single status within their family homes.

One of the respondents stated,

No not yet because I am still dependent on them, even if I work… at least as of now I don't want to tell them. I go for parties and all and meet many people. At home, it is more like I went out with friends and got late coming back. They don’t know I went for a gay party. Finally what is the end? Marriage! Marriage is the end. Till then if they don't come to know, its ok. When they start talking about that (marriage), then I will tell them… by then I will also be financially stable

[Karan, 24 year old gay man]

Tan (2011) in his article titled, “Go Home Gay Boy! Or why do Singaporean Gay Men prefer to ‘Go Home’ and ‘Not Come Out’” argues that the Anglo-American ontologies, which posit that gay men should come out to match their outer selves with their inner ones maybe limiting in explaining the reality of gay persons in eastern parts of the world, where kinship and family ties play a central role in individual identities. Familial concerns and filial duties are placed in high regard. Tan argues that gay men in Singapore couch their homosexuality in kinship terms and ‘go home’ with their boyfriends and resist acts of coming out that are seen as causing hurt and bringing shame to one’s family. Tan thus urges us to not uncritically accept the coming out ritual as the only way to lead an authentic life. Another dimension to this construction of self through family and kinship ties is proposed by the dialogical self theory
(Hermans, 2002), which is conceptually very close to the social constructionists but different in that it does not lead us to dissolve the person in the social realm. It emphasises that the subjective ‘I’ is created within the inter-subjective experiences of ‘being-with’ (or being-against) others. Thus the personal realm is bounded with the social realm, not as independent entities but as mutually defined (Hermans, 2002). This implies that the ‘going home’ instead of coming out as described by Tan is as much about the interpersonal realm and the unique situations in every interpersonal dyad (e.g. parent-child) or triads (e.g. parent/grandparents-child-sibling) that influence/define one’s self concept, expectations from self, ideas of ‘appropriate/inappropriate’ conduct; as it is about one’s gender, birth order, status within family, family’s status/honour within community and so on. Boyce (2006) based on his work with MSM in Kolkata, India argues that in the Indian context too, among the large population of men who have sex with men, only a minority would ‘identify’ with same sex sexuality and take on an identity based on sexuality such as gay, bisexual. The default presentation of ‘self’ to family and society is a heterosexual one and identity is constituted in social and community terms rather than individual ones. Privileging of family values, arranged marriage and obligation to marry means that same-sex sexual relationships are not radically disassociated from heterosexuality (Vanita, 2002a). In fact the centrality of heterosexual marriage is such that any sexual relations outside of it may often not be acknowledged. Thus male to male sexual relationships can become problematic only when linked to claims for socially recognised sexual identities.

Tan’s argument that it is normative for grown up/adult men to live with their parents until the time they marry and buy their own house as well as the real estate rates in Singapore making it difficult for young people to have their own place, applies directly to situation of young people in India. In the Indian patriarchal and heteronormative society, mothers worry about their sons being able to cook and clean and take care of themselves and are ever willing to continue taking care of their adult unmarried sons. Thus these sons can continue to live within the family home and alongside access all the freedoms and mobility that are available to men and sons in patriarchal societies, which in turn would allow for sexual exploration and living out one’s sexuality to some extent. The analogy of ‘going home’ instead of coming out is seen to be often working within the Indian context as well, at least so for gay men. It is important however to note that in such a society, the pressure of confirming to rigid standards of masculinity, heterosexual marriage, reproduction and filial duties is very high too. This implies that effeminate men, kothis, who may not share the same cultural and social capital as ‘masculine’, (read in society as ‘heterosexual’) men, may not find it as easy to ‘go home’.

Karan states in the previous quote that ‘marriage is the end’ implying that marriage is seen as compulsory
in India and he expects that at some point the pressure to marry will begin to build up, when he will have to think about coming out to his parents. One of the other respondents talked about avoiding disclosure to his family, friends or colleagues. He said that, as an elder brother, he is responsible for his sister’s marriage and cannot think of coming out as it would affect her marriage prospects.

I don't want it to affect my younger sister as she has to get married and I don't know how society and others would react to her. So I don't want it to affect anyone in my family

[Sunil, 32 year old gay man]

The above argument of ‘going home’ may not apply to lesbian women in the same way. By the fact of being women, there are several restrictions placed upon their mobility, access to resources and choices within the natal home. Control over their sexuality, pressures of compulsory heterosexual marriage and reproduction are even stronger in their lives. Moreover they do not have an equal access to social and cultural capital of community and family as their male counterparts. It is on this backdrop that, lesbian women may choose strategies to avoid violence and manage stigma in their lives. Leaving family home and withdrawing from family, once they are independent, concealing their sexual identity and choosing whom, when, why to disclose are some of the stigma management strategies that lesbian respondents in this study reported. In fact from among the fifteen lesbian women interviewed in this study, only three were living with their natal families.

One of the respondents said that she is facing a lot of pressure from her parents for marriage and has been wondering about consequences of disclosure to parents. She said,

... but I can’t tell my mom what I am. Because I am the only daughter and if I tell them, they will get a heart attack (laughs)... I know my mom very well, she will stop everything. She will throw my computer, she will throw my mobile because I am always online... She will think that this internet and my whole circle of online friends have spoilt me, so she will stop everything of mine

[Salma, 30 year old lesbian woman]

Another respondent spoke about leaving her parental home and migrating to another city; first for her education and now for a job. She says that her parents are already dealing with her choice of being away from home and making a career for herself instead of choosing marriage. She says about coming out to her parents,

I don't want to come out to them, not now for sure. They are still dealing with me not being there at home and working in another city. Then they think that I am living with a ‘friend’. They know that I go out with her on little little holidays. I really don't know what they make of it... I wouldn’t want to deal with repercussions of coming out right now

[Priti, 31 year old lesbian woman]
Goffman (1963) describes use of information management strategies by those who are discreditable i.e. those individuals, whose stigma may not be visible and who can ‘pass’ as belonging to the group of non-stigmatized. However they are discreditable as they can be discredited with visibility. In the above quote, the respondent seems to be managing the information that she provides to her parents about her living arrangement in the city. While she tells them that she is living with a friend, who is a woman (more acceptable proposition) and that they take holidays together (seen as more acceptable for an unmarried young woman than taking holidays with men), she chooses not to disclose the nature of her relationship with this friend (which would be a highly unacceptable proposition). In this sense the respondent is able to manage her identity as a ‘good daughter’, one who will not bring shame to the family, while being able to negotiate an independent life in another city, away from her parents and extended family.

Discussing consequences of coming out, one of the lesbian respondents, who came out of a heterosexual marriage and has two daughters, said that she would like to be able to talk to her daughters some time about her sexuality and her woman partner. However she believes that her children have already undergone the trauma of parental divorce and that has caused a lot of insecurities, she does not want to further burden them by talking about her sexuality. Divorce has itself stigmatized and in Goffman’s words, ‘discredited’ this respondent and her children, disclosure of her same-sex sexuality would mean dealing with an additional layer of stigma both for her and her children.

I am still not out to her and I would like her to finish her 10th standard before I tell her. She is a little soft, she has taken a beating with a bad marriage, she has had to go through a lot of stress. She has so much to deal with, I don't want to add to her tension by telling her that her mom's a lesbian...

[Claire, 41 year old lesbian woman]

One of the respondents recalled his college days and said that while he was completely comfortable with who he was, the peer and college environment he was in was replete with ideas of heterosexual dating, romance, courting and there was total invisibility to same-sex desires. As a result he says, he never really got a chance to come out. He says,

I was reasonably good looking so there would be jokes and link ups depending on who they saw me speaking to... if I spoke to a girl who was absolutely ugly, they would say 'chee (yuck) what a contrast' and if I spoke to a good looking girl, they would say 'achi jodi hai' (you make a nice pair)... By this time I was very clear that I was a gay man who was in the closet and was taking things sportingly. In my entire batch or whoever I knew in college, I didn't see anybody who seemed gay or could be approached, so I just chose to keep it to myself

[Atul, 33 year old gay man]
Some of the respondents who chose to not come out to parents cited interpersonal reasons like lack of emotional closeness with parents as reasons for the same. Since they did not discuss most aspects of their lives with their parents, disclosure about their sexual orientation seemed irrelevant. One respondent said,

My Aunt stays just down the road, I haven't met her for the last 8 months, my aunt and uncle call me and ask me to visit, I am like ‘dekhengey’ (we’ll see), I am quite apathetic to my father and my real mom. My step mom and I weirdly enough can talk now, but we are more like acquaintances...

[Avinash, 28 year old gay man]

One of the respondents talked about her strained relationship with her father,

They don't even know about stupid things like I smoke! They don't want to confront anything, even something so stupid... Its pointless. And my father being my father, he couldn't accept me with short hair. I mean I cut my hair in the 3rd and he didn't talk to me till my 5th! I grew my hair long and I cut my hair again in the 11th Std. I cut it really short. My dad slapped me… and from that day till now he hasn't spoken to me

[Priya, 30 year old lesbian woman]

In addition to lack of closeness with family, other respondents stated that they knew their parents were conservative and hence were not likely to engage in a conversation about their sexuality or try to understand. Some said that, they have just accepted that their parents belong to a different generation and would have a hard time understanding this, so they have chosen not to disclose.

For respondents who chose to come out to their friends or family, most said that they wanted to share an important part of their lives with their loved ones, wanted more authenticity in their relationships and did not want to hide anymore. Some respondents stated that they knew that their parents had worries about them as they were not getting married and coming out and discussing their relationships would be one way of addressing these concerns. Pressure of marriage was a common motivator and context to disclose to parents according to some respondents.

...because they don't know me, a large part of me, that is the primary reason. I want to be able to share my life with them. Then there are some very practical things like they would be happy to know that I have a partner because currently they think that I am a single 33 year old man who has not gotten married till now and will probably not get married, will lead a solitary life...

[Atul, 33 year old gay man]

So that morning when the topic of my marriage came up, I said that I have to tell you something, I have decided not to get married…. Its a personal decision and I am very sure about it and there's
nothing to discuss… even as I was saying it, I knew that this was the beginning of a coming out conversation…

[Shashank, 38 year old gay man]

Some of the respondents stated that now that they are independent and a few of them have steady partners, they were no longer fearful of the consequences of coming out and hence decided to disclose. Citing ease of his life circumstances, one of the respondents stated that after the death of his father and marriage of his sister, he felt more confident in coming out to his mother,

The positive thing for me to come out was the fact that my father was no more because I don't think I could have ever told my father about me… then my sister got married. I had decided that I will tell my mother and then there was this play that I was reading, which was about a son coming out to his mother, I gave the script to my mom… that’s how I came out to her.

[Mansoor, 33 year old gay man]

Thus disclosure or non-disclosure of one’s same-sex sexuality is not just a matter of achieving a psychological comfort with oneself and coming to a point of self-acceptance after working through all the negative evaluations associated with same-sex sexuality in one’s family, among friends, in school and colleges, at workplace, in social contexts, media and so on. It is on the other hand often a decision based on complex psychological, interpersonal and social realities. Having access to gay affirmative language, literature, role models, support from queer community as well as straight allies, independence from one’s parents/family, access to discrimination-free education, jobs, peers, protection from gay-related violence and so on, all come together in providing a facilitative or debilitating environment that determines choices related to coming out.

Responses to disclosure and its impact on LG identity development and maintenance:

Coming out or disclosure of one’s same-sex sexual identity shifts an individual from the discreditable stigmatized to the discredited stigmatized and yet the process of coming out can play a significant role in the identity development, consolidation and maintenance of the LG identity. Here the ‘response’ to the coming out becomes crucial. As described earlier, most LG individuals even as they become aware of their identity and develop an identity standard, also become aware of the negative reflected appraisals associated with homosexuality. An important part of identity work then is to look for positive reflected
appraisals and develop a positive self-view as a LG individual. These positive reflected appraisals may be available in one’s natural environment or one may have to look for the same in the form of support groups, activist collectives for LGBT. Examples of already existing positive appraisals would include growing up in a liberal family, within a liberal neighborhood or going to a school that is affirmative of human diversity. Another example of a positive reflected appraisal is an accepting, affirming or positive response to coming out or disclosure of one’s sexuality. Such a positive reflected appraisal from persons, who are significant in an LG individual’s life, plays a crucial role in enhancing self-esteem and development of an affirmative LG identity.

She took everything positively and supported me. I felt that since my mother has come to know about me and has accepted me the way I am, I need not fear anymore or hide my identity and in fact whom should I fear? My mother is with me and I need not think about the rest of the world. I really don't care.

[Mansoor 33 year old gay man]

Several respondents described their coming out experiences with their family members and friends. Gestures of support, unconditional love, assurance that the quality of relationship would remain intact post-disclosure from mothers, siblings, and friends were reported by respondents.

I am very fortunate with my people at home. They are quite accepting of most things… after I came out to my brother, he would tease me for a week and say, ‘oh! you are so gay, so full of happiness!’

[Abhijit, 28 year old gay man]

I remember the night, when she (mother) asked me, if I have anything to tell her. I knew that it was time to just come out and say it and I was so scared. I started and then broke down and then in the middle of all that, did not want to tell at all. She was so worried that, she just said, whatever it is just tell me. So I just said it and her first reaction was, ‘thank god! I thought you were going to say something horrible like you are into drugs or in some trouble, this gay is fine, it is ok’…

[Sahil, 25 year old gay man]

Some respondents had come out at their work places as well and some were selectively out only in LGBT/safe spaces. Goffman (1963) describes various stigma management strategies used by stigmatized individuals to cope with negative reflected appraisals and maintain a positive identity. Information management or selective disclosure of identity depending on individual’s assessment of levels of hostility
or safety that one may expect in differing spaces, contexts and relationships is one such crucial stigma management strategy.

As seen earlier the decision to come out is mediated by several contextual and situational factors and not merely based on psychological preparedness or consolidation of one’s identity. Similarly, responses to coming out too are mediated by several factors such as extent of awareness, exposure, contact with LGBT persons, personal beliefs about sexuality, circumstances of coming out, relationship with the LG person, own life choices of non-stigmatised/ non-LGBT family member, friend (Ranade et. al. 2014). Among respondents in this study too several of these situational factors played an important role. For instance, one of the respondents had gone to UK as part of an exchange program while doing his post-graduate studies. Here he met and became friends with several people who were gay friendly. One of his friends, invited him to a wedding party of a gay couple. He recalls this event,

I was shocked and surprised and of course happy. I was meeting a gay couple for the first time and that too, ekdam direct lagnach (directly at a gay wedding). I took lot of pictures and I still have them. I showed these wedding pictures to my mom when I came out to her…

[Mansoor, 33 year old gay man]

Another respondent had come out to her mother and her mother had only cried in response and refused to talk to her about her sexuality after that. This respondent said that a negative and stressful life event had actually helped her mother to acknowledge her sexuality and begin to engage with her about the same. The respondent had had a difficult period in her relationship with her partner, where her partner attempted suicide and was admitted to the hospital. It was after this incident that the respondent’s mother came forward to support her daughter.

After all the hospital stay and all, I went home to Pune, because I was so troubled, she (girlfriend) went to Bhopal, her hometown. We stayed apart, dealt with it and later got back together… but all this helped with my mom and the barriers were broken. Then she started talking about my life, she started asking about her (girlfriend). So from July (time of first coming out) to April she didn't meet her at all and then she came to the hospital and saw her lying on the bed, really unwell and so she went and held her…

[Pradnya, 33 year old lesbian woman]

Coming out or making one’s same-sex sexual orientation known can also have the effect of spoilage of one’s social identity. In Goffman’s words, “it has the effect of cutting them off from society and from themselves so that they stand a discredited person facing an unaccepting world” (Goffman, 1963, pp. 19). Some of the respondents in this study described homophobic, hostile and violent responses from their
environment, responses which made their own journey of self-acceptance immensely challenging.

An illustrative example is of Sandip, who first came out to his best friend who he was attracted to. The friend called his desire galicha (disgusting), while also offering to help by taking him to doctors, who could cure him. Sandip recounts that all through his childhood he was very effeminate and timid. He would find it difficult to make friends with the boys and had faced severe corrective behaviors (described in the previous chapter) at home and school. This friend was his only support and hence he believed that the friend’s effort at taking him to the doctor were well intentioned. At the doctors clinic, Sandip was asked to test his testosterone (male) hormone levels and then recommended testosterone injections (presumably to correct his effeminacy). Since the treatment was going to be expensive, Sandip’s friend decided to tell his sister. When the sister was informed, she cried for a few days and stopped talking to Sandip. After a week she gave him a newspaper article about homosexuality being curable with psychiatric help. At the psychiatrist’s clinic, Sandip was offered counseling and anti-depressant medication. He was advised to watch straight pornography at the clinic to enhance heterosexual desire. The doctors asked him to bring his parents to the clinic where they received counseling and they were informed that while the treatment may last for a long time (approximately 2 years), if Sandip had strong motivation, they could help him. Parents first response to this pathological presentation of their son’s homosexuality was further pathologizing,

My mother asked the doctor if tyachi ji zaga ahey ti vyavastit ahey ki nahi? (Whether his place down there /genitals were normal?), that was their first question. Then they asked if I had sex anywhere or if I had been raped because of which I had become like this…

[Sandip, 24 year old gay man]

In addition to the clinically prescribed cures for homosexuality, Sandip was asked to try meditation, nama-smaran (chanting of god/godman’s name) by different family members. Following these humiliating responses to his coming out, Sandip attempted suicide, believing that he was a pervert. At the hospital where he was admitted, he met a social worker, who gave him the phone number of a local LGBT support and rights group in Pune. Here Sandip met people with diverse sexualities and gender expressions and this helped immensely to reduce his isolation and his belief that ‘he is the only one with such abnormal desires’.

Perry et. al. (1956) describe fatal deficiency of the self-system that results from social isolation as, “the fear that others can disrespect a person because of something he shows means that he is always insecure
in his contact with other people; and this insecurity arises, not from mysterious or somewhat disguised sources, but from something he knows he cannot fix” (Perry et. al., 1956, pp. 145)

However as stated earlier, research on reflected appraisals points to the role of the active individual, who engages with, processes and even rejects reflected appraisal from her environment. One of the respondents describes how she processed her mother’s response to her coming out. She says that, while she did feel sorry for all the pain and grief her mother was going through and the fact that she had let her down, this did not translate into her feeling sorry for being a homosexual or directing the mother’s anguish and pain towards herself in the form of self imposed sanction.

She read the letter, and she started crying. She went out of the room and she howled and I think that was the worst sound I had heard in my entire life… I was so traumatized that I was giving her that kind of grief… Later at some point in the night, we all went to bed, but I couldn’t sleep. I was alert and worried… was she still crying? because every time I would hear her cry, my heart would be like, shit man I have let her down so bad and at that point I was not upset that she had not understood or accepted me, I was just upset that she was so sad…

[Pradnya, 33 year old lesbian woman]

Finally, having same-sex sexual experiences, relationships and intimacies does not always translate into commitment to a same-sex sexual identity. Identifying or committing to a same-sex sexual identity does not automatically imply a public declaration or an ‘out’ status as a queer person. As seen in this chapter, identification, self-categorization, disclosure, non-disclosure, partial disclosure is mediated through a range of psychological, interpersonal, socio-cultural, environmental factors and should not be seen merely as a function of levels of self-acceptance. In fact the idea of continuity or coherence of the self in western literature on coming out is challenged here. The very idea of the western self as the individuated, bounded self is questioned in favor of extending the understanding of the self to include the interpersonal, socially and culturally embedded self.