Abstract

The study is focused on exploring experiences of growing up through childhood, adolescence and young adulthood of lesbian and gay (LG) individuals within their homes, schools, neighborhoods, among friends and their journeys of finding themselves and their communities while living in a heteronormative society. A qualitative exploratory design was used in the study. Life course perspective that includes study of human beings across the life span within their social, structural and historical contexts has been applied in this study. Data was collected over a period of almost two years in cities of Bombay and Pune and snowball method was used to meet the research participants. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and coded to carry out thematic analysis.

Several theoretical frameworks across disciplines within the social sciences are used in the study to understand processes of growing up and identity development and maintenance among LG individuals. These include critical developmental psychology (Burman, 2007) that questions the Universalist assumptions within life span studies and views growing up within a socio-cultural context. This lens accommodates diversity of experience and goes beyond heterosexist assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality. Going beyond traditional socialization theories – functionalist (Parsons, 1956), social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977) and constructivist models of socialization (Vygotsky, 1978), sociology of childhood provides fresh insights into children’s abilities to negotiate, share and create cultures; wherein socialization is not seen as mere imitation or adaptation. These perspectives on growing up have been used to reflect on growing up experiences of young gay and lesbian persons. Perspectives on sexuality that provide insights on questions such as what constitutes ‘normal’, ‘natural’ sexualities have been used. Role of science and medicine in the production of the natural, normal, blessed, pure sexuality and the creation of the abnormal, pervert, sinful homosexual, bisexual, asexual, poly sexual within the clinic is discussed (Achuthan et. al. 2007). Marriage and family as institutions that exert social control on sexuality and the role of the State in regulation of sexuality (Marcuse, 2013) are discussed here too. Theories of self and identity theories ranging from the personal/internalization identity theories such as Burke’s Identity Control theory (1991) and Stryker’s Identity theory (1980) to theories of the relational self (Gergen, 1994) as well as collective and social identities (Brewer et. al. 1996; Ashmore et. al. 2004) have been used to discuss various aspects of sexual identity development among gay and lesbian persons.

The thesis includes six chapters. First chapter explicates some of the theoretical frameworks mentioned above and also gives a description of the lived realities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer (LGBTQ) persons in India. Second chapter explains the methodology and the methods used in this study. It
describes the life course approach as well as the objectives, process of data collection and analysis. The third chapter describes growing up experiences of LG individuals and highlights some unique developmental concerns and challenges for LG individuals. Gender transgressions and not conforming to the rigid gender binary of man/woman is discussed. Specific areas of gender non-conformity such as dress and clothing, mannerisms, play and choice of play mates are discussed with illustrative quotations. Correction of transgressions – often gender transgressions in childhood and sexual transgressions in the form of same-sex desire in teenage years is discussed. Sources of these corrections such as family/parents, schools, peers, medical professionals/counselors and experiences with these correction efforts are explained. Finally the process of sexual exploration, which often leads to the naming of one’s sexual desire, is described in the end of this chapter. Chapter four examines the phenomenon of coming out. Coming out is seen in most Euro-American literature as a significant or rather essential milestone in development of a gay identity. In this chapter I use the framework of symbolic interactionism to argue that decisions of disclosure or non-disclosure of a person’s sexual identity maybe embedded in situational complexities of their individual lives as well as social structure and may often not be a measure of their degree of self-acceptance. Similarly conception of self as interdependent/relational and seeing oneself as not separate from or rather as part of family, kinship relations and community may affect self-definition of sexual identities and disclosure of the same. The individual and structural complexities in decisions of disclosure / non-disclosure are discussed in detail in this chapter. Participants reasons for coming out as well as reasons to not come out and responses to these are discussed. Chapter five goes beyond the individual narrative of growing up experiences into the interpersonal and collective dimension and discusses role of intimate relationships and discovering LGBTQ community/s in individual journeys of consolidation and maintenance of LG identity. The various ways in which people discover other queer persons like themselves in an environment of invisibility to queer desires are discussed. Also the experience of identification on meeting community as well as difference from community due to other aspects of one’s identity is explained with illustrative examples. Chapter six is the final chapter on conclusion and implications of the study. This chapter highlights that while there has been a lot of writing on LGBTQ lives in the last decade, most of it is focused on adult lives of LGBTQ. This study provides a glimpse into the experiences of LG individuals as they are growing up in a context of institutionalized homophobia and the ways in which they negotiate their non-conformity within their homes, in schools/colleges, with peers, in intimate relationships, on the streets and so on. The study has implications for ways in which childhood/s, family/s and life-span development is currently conceptualized and studied in India.