

RACCOLTA DI ARTICOLI SCIENTIFICI CON GLI ATTI DELLA

VII CONFERENZA SCIENTIFICA E PRATICA INTERNAZIONALE

**«Ricerche scientifiche e metodi della loro realizzazione:
esperienza mondiale e realtà domestiche»**



Bologna
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LOVE AS A MIRROR OF THE HOLISTIC "SELF": THE ROLE OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS IN SHAPING THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL IDENTITY OF LGBTIQ+ INDIVIDUALS

Verhun Polina Dmytrivna¹, Venger Hanna Serhiivna²

1. 2nd-level Higher Education Seeker

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities

South Ukrainian National Pedagogical University named after K. D. Ushynsky, UKRAINE

2. Cand. Sc. (Psychology), Senior Lecturer

Department of Clinical Psychology and Mental Health, Odesa, UKRAINE

Abstract. *This article explores the role of romantic relationships in the process of forming a multidimensional identity in LGBTIQ+ individuals. It analyzes how loving connections can serve as a psychoemotional resource that facilitates the integration of a holistic self amidst discrimination, internalized stigma, and social pressure. Special attention is paid to the concept of love as a "mirror" in which an individual reflects their own identity and receives its validation. The paper provides an overview of contemporary psychological approaches and empirical studies demonstrating the impact of close relationships on the self-perception, self-esteem, and psychological resilience of LGBTIQ+ individuals. The article is based on an interdisciplinary approach, combining social psychology, identity theories, and research on intimacy within the LGBTIQ+ context.*

Research Object: Psychological factors in the formation of LGBTIQ+ individuals' identity.

Research Subject: The influence of romantic relationships on the development and integration of LGBTIQ+ individuals' multidimensional identity.

Relevance of the Topic: In contemporary society, LGBTIQ+ individuals face numerous challenges related to accepting their identity, discrimination, internalized stigma, and social rejection. Simultaneously, recent research indicates that romantic relationships can serve as a powerful resource in the process of integrating personal wholeness, reducing psychoemotional stress, and forming



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positive self-esteem and identity. However, this topic remains insufficiently explored within the Ukrainian academic field, which necessitates a deeper analysis of this interdependence.

Scientific Novelty: This work proposes an interdisciplinary approach to studying the role of romantic relationships in forming the holistic "self" of LGBTIQ+ individuals. It uncovers the functions of love as a psychological mirror that facilitates the integration of a multidimensional identity (sexual, gender, emotional, social). Particular attention is paid to analyzing the resource potential of loving relationships as a source of support amidst social pressure, discrimination, or life crises.

Introduction

The challenge of forming a holistic personal identity for LGBTIQ+ individuals is one of the key issues in contemporary psychology, sociology, and culturology. In conditions of social polarization, homophobic stereotypes, stigmatization, and human rights violations, LGBTIQ+ individuals are often forced to wage an internal struggle for self-acceptance, for the safe expression of their own identity, and for love that doesn't provoke condemnation.

Romantic relationships, being a source of intimacy, trust, and acceptance, become one of the crucial pillars in the formation and support of a multidimensional identity. Through relationships with another subject, an LGBTIQ+ person has the opportunity not only to see their "self" in the mirror of mutual love but also to transform their self-perception—from fragmented or suppressed—into a stable, accepted, and holistic one.

Despite growing attention to LGBTIQ+ topics in the international scientific community, there remains a lack of interdisciplinary research in the Ukrainian context that combines psychological analysis of loving relationships with the study of identification processes. This is precisely why this work aims to identify the psychological mechanisms through which loving connections support the identity integration of LGBTIQ+ individuals.

Theoretical Framework

Multidimensional Identity of LGBTIQ+ Individuals

The identity of LGBTIQ+ individuals is a multidimensional construct that includes sexual orientation, gender identity, race, class, age, religion, and other social characteristics. The concept of intersectionality, proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, emphasizes that these aspects of identity do not exist in isolation but interact, creating unique experiences of discrimination and privilege [1].

Research indicates that LGBTIQ+ individuals belonging to multiple marginalized groups may face increased stigmatization and psychological stress. For instance, queer women from ethnic minorities may experience additional difficulties due to the intersection of sexual orientation and ethnic background [2].



The Role of Romantic Relationships in Personal Development

Romantic relationships can serve as a vital resource for LGBTIQ+ individuals in the process of identity formation and maintenance. Studies show that support from a partner can contribute to reducing internalized homophobia and boosting self-esteem [3].

Furthermore, romantic relationships can act as a source of social support, which is critically important for LGBTIQ+ individuals who face discrimination and stigmatization. Social support from a partner can help mitigate the negative impact of minority stress on mental health [4].

Mechanisms of Influence of Romantic Relationships on Identity

Reflection Through a Partner

Romantic relationships can serve as a mirror in which LGBTIQ+ individuals reflect on and make sense of their own identity. Research indicates that support from a partner helps reduce internalized homophobia and boosts self-esteem [5]. Additionally, romantic relationships can act as a source of social support, which is critically important for LGBTIQ+ individuals facing discrimination and stigmatization [6].

Identity Validation

Partner support can contribute to the validation of LGBTIQ+ individuals' identity. Studies show that social support from a partner is associated with increased self-esteem and reduced symptoms of depression [7]. Furthermore, romantic relationships can help lessen the impact of stigmatization on the mental health of LGBTIQ+ individuals [8].

Psychoemotional Support in Stressful Contexts

Romantic relationships can be a source of psychoemotional support for LGBTIQ+ individuals in stressful situations. Research indicates that support from a partner can help mitigate the impact of minority stress on mental health [9]. Moreover, romantic relationships can contribute to lower levels of anxiety and depression among LGBTIQ+ individuals [10].

Romantic Relationships and the Integration of Traumatic Experiences

For many LGBTIQ+ individuals, romantic relationships can serve as a platform for re-evaluating and integrating personal traumas related to rejection, discrimination, or homophobia. A partner who fully accepts a person, including their past experiences, becomes not only a source of love but also a new experience of safety [11]. Researchers emphasize that precisely these relationships can activate processes of "rewriting" identity – from vulnerable to resilient [12].

Romantic support also reduces the intensity of PTSD symptoms among LGBTIQ+ individuals, especially in cases involving experienced stigmatization or internalized homophobia [13].

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Partnership as a Resource for Visibility and Social Acceptance

In cultures where LGBTQ+ identity is marginalized, a public partnership can serve as an act of social visibility. Appearing with a partner in public spaces, shared recognition, or even daily rituals (such as introducing a partner to friends or family) contributes to strengthening a sense of "normality" and belonging to the broader social fabric [14]. This, in turn, influences the cognitive components of self-identification – an individual begins to associate themselves not only with a marginalized group but also with a wider community of human connections [15].

Intersectionality: How Romantic Relationships Support Various Dimensions of Identity

The multidimensional identity of LGBTQ+ individuals often includes not only sexual orientation or gender identity but also race, class, culture, religion, and other social markers. Research highlights that a partner who acknowledges and supports all these aspects contributes to the integration of different parts of the "self" and creates a space for safe self-expression [16]. This is especially important for non-white, transgender, or non-binary individuals, for whom each identity axis can become a separate source of discrimination [17].

Empirical Research Results

1. Sample and General Characteristics of Participants

The study included 80 LGBTQ+ individuals aged 19 to 38, with an average age of 27.6.

Gender Identity:

- 35 cisgender women
- 28 cisgender men
- 17 non-binary, transgender, or gender non-conforming individuals

Sexual Orientation (self-identification):

- 27 lesbian individuals
- 21 gay individuals
- 14 bisexual individuals
- 9 pansexual individuals
- 6 queer/non-binary individuals without a clear sexual identity
- 3 individuals identified as asexual or demisexual

Countries of Origin:

- **Eastern Europe:** Ukraine (15), Poland (13), Lithuania (13)
- **Western Europe and North America:** Germany (14), Canada (13), Norway

(12)

Romantic Relationship Status at the Time of the Study:

- 52 individuals were in stable committed relationships (over 6 months).

- 16 were in open or unstable relationships.
- 12 were not in a relationship but had previous experience with long-term romantic connections.

It's worth noting that lesbians and gay men made up the largest portion of the sample (48 individuals, or 60%), allowing for a more detailed analysis specifically within same-sex romantic relationships.

2. Qualitative Analysis of Romantic Relationships as a Resource

2.1 Lesbians' Experiences in Romantic Relationships

All 27 lesbians in the study had experience with long-term romantic relationships with female partners; 18 were in relationships at the time of the study. Interviews revealed several key themes about how romantic intimacy affects identity, self-perception, and overcoming life challenges.

1. **Safety as a Condition for Self-Disclosure:** Most participants reported that it was within their partner relationships that they first felt safe enough to be their "true" selves, without fear of judgment for their sexuality or emotionality. As one 26-year-old respondent from Lithuania shared, "When I'm with her, for the first time, I'm not afraid to talk about myself. She knows me without masks, and that heals more than therapy."

2. **Validation of Worth Through Love:** Romantic intimacy provided internal validation for many participants, especially when facing family or social rejection. A 30-year-old respondent from Ukraine stated, "If she chose me, it means I am worthy. I am not confused."

3. **Mutual Support During Crisis (coming out, depression, discrimination):** Partners often played a crucial role in helping individuals navigate existential and social crises. A 24-year-old respondent from Poland recounted, "She was there when I came out to my mom. Without her, I wouldn't have made it."

4. **Collective Identity Formation:** For many lesbians, partnerships not only supported their identity but also helped expand it through shared participation in LGBTQ+ initiatives, activism, or creative endeavors. A 33-year-old respondent from Germany noted, "Together, we became a voice. Separately, I wouldn't have dared to be public."

2.2 Gay Men's Experiences in Romantic Relationships

Of the 21 gay men who participated, 14 were in long-term romantic relationships at the time of the survey. Their accounts revealed distinct aspects of how partnership influences identity.

1. **Relationships as an Act of Resistance to Norms:** For many gay men, simply being in a relationship was a way to assert themselves in a world that often denies the right to same-sex love. A 29-year-old respondent from Canada expressed, "Our relationship is my personal protest. We exist, and that's already a victory."

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2. Ambivalence of Couple Coming Out: Being in a romantic relationship often forced gay men to confront the decision of making or delaying a public coming out, leading to both internal and external conflicts. A 31-year-old respondent from Norway shared, "We were together, but 'in public' we were just friends. It's exhausting."

3. Partner as a Mirror of Homosocial Experience: For many respondents, romantic intimacy with another man allowed them to re-evaluate their perceptions of masculinity, strength, vulnerability, and reciprocity. A 25-year-old respondent from Lithuania stated, "I learned tenderness from him. Before that, I thought tenderness was weakness."

4. Support in Conditions of Social Invisibility: Partner support became particularly valuable in countries where homosexuality is stigmatized or silenced. A 28-year-old respondent from Ukraine explained, "In the city, we're not accepted, but at home, we are who we are. And that keeps me going."

In summary, love in the lives of LGBTIQ+ individuals is not only an interpersonal emotional category but also a psychosocial resource that shapes, supports, and sometimes saves an individual in the context of their multidimensional identity.

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