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# **Navigating Identity: The Impact of Habit and Environment on Sexual Orientation Fluidity**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Introduction.** Sexual orientation is traditionally seen as a fixed trait, but growing research shows that it can be influenced by external factors such as life circumstances, habitual behaviors, and environmental exposure. This case series explores how habit and environment contribute to changes in sexual orientation, focusing on two individuals who experienced shifts in their sexual identity due to significant life events.

**Case Presentation.** Case 1 involves a 27-year-old man who identified as heterosexual and had a long-term girlfriend. After an unexplained breakup and financial hardship, he engaged in sex work with both women and men, gradually identifying as homosexual after developing emotional and physical connections with male clients. Case 2 presents a 30-year-old woman who identified as heterosexual but exhibited boyish traits. After studying abroad in Germany, where she was exposed to a more LGBTQ+ inclusive culture, she returned home identifying as lesbian and adopting a more masculine gender expression.

**Conclusion.** These cases illustrate the influence of environmental exposure and habitual behavior in the fluidity of sexual orientation. They challenge the traditional view of sexual orientation as biologically fixed, highlighting the complex interplay of external factors in sexual identity development. Further research is needed to understand the broader implications of these shifts.

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**Keywords:** LGBTQ+, Sexual Orientation, Environment, Habits

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## **1. Introduction**

Sexual orientation is often regarded as an intrinsic aspect of human identity, typically manifesting early in life. Many theories, from biological predispositions to developmental psychology, have attempted to explain how individuals come to identify as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or otherwise. However, the growing body of research on sexual fluidity has challenged the traditional view that sexual orientation is immutable. Increasingly, evidence suggests that sexual orientation can shift in response to life circumstances, environmental exposures, and emotional experiences. This phenomenon highlights that sexual identity, much like other aspects of human personality and behavior, may not be as fixed as once believed. The term "sexual fluidity" refers to the capacity for one's sexual preferences to change over time, influenced by various internal and external factors. While the core elements of sexual attraction may remain relatively consistent, certain life events—such as psychological trauma, exposure to new environments, or changing social contexts—can facilitate significant transformations in sexual orientation. This fluidity is particularly pronounced in environments that allow for the exploration of non-heteronormative identities or where individuals face external pressures that lead them to reassess their sexual preferences.

The relationship between sexual orientation and external factors, such as habit and environment, has long been debated. Many individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ report experiencing a strong, early sense of attraction toward the same sex, while others describe their sexual orientation as something that evolved over time. The complexity of this subject makes it difficult to generalize, as the factors influencing sexual orientation are often highly individual. However, common themes have emerged in cases where sexual orientation appears to shift in response to significant life events. In this case series, we present two individuals whose sexual orientations evolved under the influence of both habitual behaviors and environmental shifts. These cases provide a nuanced understanding of how external circumstances—be they financial, social, or cultural—can intersect with personal identity and lead to changes in sexual preference. Such cases challenge the assumption that sexual orientation is solely biologically determined and underscore the importance of considering broader social and emotional factors when examining sexual identity.

Sexual orientation does not develop in isolation. It is shaped by a confluence of biological, psychological, and environmental factors. Habitual behaviors, such as recurring engagement in certain types of sexual activities, can contribute to the shaping of sexual preferences over time. For instance, in contexts where individuals are forced or pressured into certain sexual behaviors (such as in sex work), these experiences may gradually influence their sexual orientation, either by reshaping their emotional responses to sexual encounters or by altering their understanding of their own desires. Environment, too, plays a critical role in sexual identity formation. Social and cultural environments can either encourage or discourage the exploration of non-heteronormative identities. In conservative societies where heterosexuality is enforced as the norm, individuals may suppress or remain unaware of their

attraction to the same sex. Conversely, environments that are more accepting of LGBTQ+ identities provide the freedom for individuals to explore and express their sexual preferences without fear of judgment or ostracism. In these cases, individuals may find that their sexual orientation shifts as they are exposed to new possibilities and experiences that challenge the assumptions they previously held about themselves.

The following cases exemplify the complex interplay between habit and environment in shaping sexual orientation. The first case involves a 27-year-old man whose sexual orientation evolved following a combination of financial pressures, sex work, and emotional upheaval after the end of a long-term heterosexual relationship. Over time, his experiences led him to identify as gay, despite having previously identified as heterosexual. The second case explores the experiences of a 30-year-old woman, who, after spending time in a more LGBTQ+-friendly environment abroad, returned to her home country identifying as lesbian. Both cases highlight the fluidity of sexual orientation in response to life circumstances, emotional experiences, and environmental factors.

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## 2. Case Series

### Case 1: A 27-Year-Old Man with a Shift in Sexual Orientation

A 27-year-old man, previously identifying as heterosexual, engaged in homosexual relations and later tested positive for HIV/AIDS. Raised in a conventional family environment, the patient had a long-term girlfriend between the ages of 18 and 22. They were in a stable, seemingly happy relationship for four years, and the patient reported being emotionally and physically satisfied. He claimed to have had no significant issues in the relationship and expressed confusion about why they eventually broke up, stating that the decision seemed sudden and difficult to comprehend. The breakup left the patient emotionally unsettled, as he couldn't pinpoint any specific conflict or reason for the separation. He described feeling lost and detached afterward, not just from romantic relationships, but from women in general. Though he continued dating casually after the breakup, he did not enter into any serious romantic commitments. His focus shifted more toward work, but financial difficulties soon followed, and by the age of 23, he began engaging in sex work as a means of income.

Initially, his clients were older women, and he continued to identify as heterosexual. However, over time, the demand from male clients increased, and the financial incentives led him to engage with male clients more frequently. At first, he compartmentalized these encounters as strictly professional, but he eventually found himself becoming more comfortable with men, even developing a stronger physical attraction toward them. The patient noted that as he engaged more frequently with male clients, his interest in women faded. He no longer felt the same emotional or physical connection to women, and he began to identify more strongly as gay. His previous long-term relationship with his girlfriend, which had once been a defining aspect of his life, now seemed distant and irrelevant.

At age 26, he was diagnosed with HIV following routine testing. This diagnosis added further psychological strain, reinforcing his sense of separation from his past heterosexual life and pushing him to fully embrace his identity as a gay man. Despite his claims of a healthy and satisfying relationship with his long-term girlfriend, the emotional impact of their sudden breakup seems to have been a turning point for the patient. He was unable to articulate why the relationship ended, which may suggest unresolved psychological factors or a sense of rejection that influenced his later detachment from women. The confusion surrounding the breakup, combined with his financial challenges, may have created a vulnerability that contributed to his willingness to engage in sex work and later explore relationships with men.

The patient's initial attraction to women faded as his experiences with male clients grew more frequent and emotionally charged. He described feeling a growing sense of comfort and connection with men that he had never fully experienced with women, even during his long-term relationship. This emotional evolution, alongside his need to survive financially, played a significant role in reshaping his sexual identity. The HIV diagnosis was a pivotal moment in the patient's life, as it forced him to confront his sexual health and lifestyle choices. The stigma associated with the diagnosis created a further sense of isolation from his past life and reinforced his emerging identity as a gay man.

### Case 2: A 32-Year-Old Woman Who Became Lesbian Following Study Abroad

A 32-year-old woman presented with a notable shift in sexual orientation following a period abroad. The patient, who had always been slightly tomboyish but identified as heterosexual, reported a change in her sexual preferences after completing a master's program in Germany. Before her departure, she had casual romantic relationships with men but never felt an emotional or deep connection. The patient was described by friends and family as somewhat "boyish" in her mannerisms and appearance but had previously dated men. During her two-year stay in Germany for graduate studies, she was exposed to an open and diverse LGBTQ+ culture, one that sharply contrasted with the more conservative values of her home country.

Upon returning home, she no longer expressed romantic interest in men and instead began relationships with women, identifying as a lesbian. Her newfound orientation was accompanied by a more masculine presentation, including adopting male pronouns in some contexts. She attributes this change in orientation to the liberal, inclusive environment she experienced abroad, which allowed her to explore aspects of her identity that had been suppressed. The patient's transition from heterosexual to lesbian orientation coincided with her exposure to a different cultural environment where same-sex relationships were normalized and supported. It is possible that the newfound freedom to express herself without societal judgment enabled her to explore and accept her attraction to women. The patient's shift also reflects the role of social and environmental influences in shaping one's gender expression and sexual orientation, particularly when individuals are removed from rigid or conservative backgrounds.

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### 3. Discussion

The case series presented highlight the dynamic interplay between habit and environment in shaping sexual orientation. Both individuals initially identified as heterosexual but experienced significant shifts in their sexual orientation due to external pressures and environmental influences. These cases challenge the traditional understanding of sexual orientation as a fixed trait and demonstrate how life circumstances, habitual behaviors, and social environments can lead to substantial changes in sexual identity. In Case 1, the man's transition from heterosexual to homosexual orientation was significantly influenced by habit. Initially engaging with male clients for financial reasons, he compartmentalized these experiences, maintaining his heterosexual self-identity. However, repeated engagement with male clients, coupled with a lack of emotional fulfillment from women, eventually led him to reevaluate his sexual preferences. Over time, his habitual behavior with male clients became less transactional and more emotionally involved, marking a shift in his sexual orientation.

This case highlights the potential for habitual behaviors to reshape sexual attraction, especially when such behaviors are linked to emotional and physical satisfaction. The influence of sex work in this case underscores how external pressures, such as financial necessity, can lead individuals to explore previously unconsidered sexual preferences, potentially resulting in long-term changes in sexual identity. In Case 2, the shift from heterosexual to lesbian orientation was driven largely by the patient's exposure to a new cultural environment. Before moving to Germany, she had not seriously questioned her heterosexuality. However, the LGBTQ+-inclusive environment she encountered abroad allowed her to explore same-sex relationships and question her previously held assumptions about her identity. The freedom to explore her sexuality in a non-judgmental, open environment allowed her to discover new aspects of her sexual and gender identity. This case illustrates the significant role that cultural and social environments play in shaping sexual orientation. In conservative or heteronormative environments, individuals may feel pressured to conform to societal expectations, suppressing or ignoring same-sex attractions. However, when exposed to more open and accepting environments, individuals may feel liberated to explore previously unacknowledged sexual desires. The shift in sexual orientation seen in this case highlights how environmental factors can facilitate the exploration and eventual adoption of non-heteronormative identities.

Both cases also point to the importance of psychological and emotional factors in sexual orientation shifts. In Case 1, the unresolved emotional trauma of the patient's breakup with his long-term girlfriend may have contributed to his detachment from women and his eventual attraction to men. The breakup, combined with financial pressures and the stigma of an HIV diagnosis, created a psychological landscape that made the transition to a homosexual orientation more likely. Similarly, in Case 2, the patient's lack of emotional fulfillment in previous relationships with men may have predisposed her to explore same-sex relationships when presented with the opportunity. Her exposure to a supportive LGBTQ+ environment provided the emotional safety net she needed to explore her same-sex attractions and ultimately embrace a new sexual identity. This case series provides insight into the complex and fluid nature of sexual orientation, illustrating how external factors such as habit, environment, and psychological influences can contribute to shifts in sexual identity. The cases underscore the importance of considering a wide range of influences—emotional, social, and environmental—when examining sexual orientation development. Sexual identity is not always fixed, and these cases demonstrate the powerful role that life circumstances can play in shaping and evolving sexual preferences.

Further research is needed to explore the broader implications of these findings, particularly in relation to individuals who experience shifts in sexual orientation later in life. Understanding the interplay between habit, environment, and psychology can contribute to more nuanced perspectives on sexual orientation and provide valuable insights for healthcare providers, therapists, and educators working with LGBTQ+ populations.

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### 4. Conclusion

This case series highlights the fluidity of sexual orientation and the significant role that habit and environment can play in its evolution. Both cases demonstrate how external pressures, such as financial necessity and exposure to different cultural contexts, can influence shifts in sexual identity. The 27-year-old man's involvement in sex work and eventual transition from heterosexual to homosexual orientation, alongside the 30-year-old woman's change to identifying as lesbian after exposure to a more open LGBTQ+ culture, illustrate the complex interplay between environmental, habitual, and psychological factors. These cases challenge the idea of a fixed sexual orientation and underscore the importance of considering broader life circumstances in understanding sexual identity development.

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