

TRANSGENDER PEOPLES' EXPERIENCES OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

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Elijah Marcelle-Ezekiel Westerfield

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Transgender peoples' experiences of religion and spirituality

By

Elijah Marcelle-Ezekiel Westerfield

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SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Kristen Benson

Chair

Tom Carlson

Christina Weber

Jim Deal

Approved:

4/11/2012

Date

Jim Deal

Department Chair

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the religious and spiritual experiences of transgender people. The study used an existing data set consisting of interviews from five self-identified Christian transgender participants, of which 1 was female-to-male, and 4 were male-to-female. Feminist phenomenology guided all aspects of this project. The results of the study suggest that participants felt a connection with a higher power, and specifically viewed themselves as made as transgender by God. However, the results of this study also indicated that transgender people feel conflicted about how others perceive them based on their (others') religious beliefs, with participants experiencing both supportive and discriminatory responses toward them.

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INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) spirituality has been an issue of discussion for many years (Halkitis et al., 2009; Heermann, Wiggins, & Rutter, 2007; Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, & Quick, 2010; Tan, 2005). There has been little academic research, however, on transgender peoples' religious and spiritual beliefs. Understanding how transgender people experience religion is necessary given that religion and spirituality play a major role in most people's lives by creating supports, reducing stressors, and fostering inner peace (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; French & Joseph, 1999; Koenig, 1997). Unfortunately, many communities of faith do not feel like a spiritual home for transgender people due to stances against the population (Bockting & Cesaretti, 2001) that are rooted in transphobia. Discrimination and negative responses toward transgender identity from members of the religious community contribute to weakened ties to formal religious institutions (Bockting, Knudson, and Goldberg, 2006). Negative responses from faith communities can leave people without a welcoming place of worship and can contribute to the rejection of religion altogether (Lease, Home, and Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005). Despite barriers, the need for a spiritually fulfilling life has prompted some within the transgender community to form spiritually supportive communities.

While the transgender community has become more visible in the past decade, research has only begun to explore transgender identity outside of a pathological and medical context (Bockting & Cesaretti, 2001; Kolakowski, 1997). To date there has not been a formal census to determine the number of transgender people in the United States. Several studies estimate the prevalence of transgender identity, but these studies focus on documented cases of male-to-female transsexuals in countries other than the United States who have undergone sex

reassignment surgery (SRS) (De Cuypere, et al., 2007; Van Kesteren, et al., 1996; Veale, 2008; Weitze & Osburg, 1996). The Human Rights Campaign (2009) has estimated that .25 to 1 percent of the U.S. population is transsexual. However, the HRC did not specify what criteria, such as sex reassignment surgery or self-identification, was used to determine this percentage. Sex reassignment surgery has been used as the primary indication of transsexualism, which makes it difficult to determine the actual number of people who identify as transgender but do not undergo surgery to alter their body (Horton, 2008). Surgical technologies and research have focused on male-to-females (MTFs) (Krege et al., 2001; Trombetta et al., 2004; Udeze et al., 2008) and consequently medical knowledge is not nearly as advanced and accessible for female-to-males (FTMs). Because of the cost, many transgender people whose gender identity does not correspond with their biological sex do not pursue SRS or hormonal therapy (Rothblum & Factor, 2008). Others, such as cross dressers, do not have a desire to undergo irreversible procedures. Based on these two factors, the number of persons who are transgender is probably significantly higher than calculated.

As more and more people live openly, society is beginning to recognize transgender individuals as healthy, functioning members of society. Now that researchers are moving away from a pathological view of transgender identity, there is an increase in the need for research that focuses on understanding quality of life issues. An important, yet often overlooked, aspect of quality of life is spirituality and religion. Religious beliefs help many people make sense of the world. The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) summary report estimated that in 2008, 80% of the 54,461 United States citizens in the sample identify with a religion (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009). The majority are Christian (76%), including Catholic, while 3.9% are other

religions. The ARIS survey did not recognize gender categories other than male and female. Another reason there has also been a limited amount of academic literature on the transgender population and religion is because traditional religions have not recognized identities other than biological male and female (Bockting & Cesaretti, 2001; Kidd & Witten, 2008; Kolakowski, 1997; Smith & Horne, 2007). Without accurate data regarding the prevalence of transgender people, it is difficult to determine how many consider themselves religious, or participate in faith communities.

What is known is that transgender people encounter ignorance and discrimination in many aspects of their lives (Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2002). Even when LGBT people are not accepted in certain faith communities, those belief systems remain important (Wilcox, 2002). People find creative ways to fulfill their spiritual needs, though not all faith communities reject transgender people. Several denominations within the United States such as the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), United Church of Christ (UCC), Unitarian Universalist Church (UU), and certain congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) welcome transgender people. Of the churches that are affirming, the UU was originally founded on beliefs of social justice and equality for all people (Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, 2010). Others, namely the MCC, were founded in response to the exclusion of LGBT people from established churches (Metropolitan Community Churches, 2010). Some established denominations, such as the UCC and ELCA, have added inclusive language to church welcome statements and by-laws (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2009; United Church of Christ, 1999). The twenty-second General Synod of the UCC decreed in 1999 that congregations of the church should include an explicit welcome to transgender people,

as well as encourage all members to advocate for transgender civil rights (United Church of Christ, 1999). This proclamation also encouraged members of the clergy to become more educated about gender identity. The ELCA also recognizes the importance of affirmative religious stances on issues like gender identity and sexual identity (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2009). Church leaders have declared that the ELCA should support civil rights legislation that prohibits discrimination in public services, housing, and employment (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2009).

While some congregations and denominations in the United States have evolved or have been established in response to the spiritual needs of LGBT people, several have taken explicit stances against the community. For example, in a 2008 papal address to the Roman Curia, Pope Benedict XVI of the Catholic Church declared that gender differences between men and women are an “order of creation [to] be respected...to disregard this would be the self-destruction of man himself, and hence the destruction of God’s own work.” (Pope Benedict XVI, 2008). While it is unclear as to whether the Pope was referring to same-sex marriage or transgender identity, the statement positions the Catholic Church as disapproving of identities that forego traditional gender roles and challenge heteronormativity. Most congregations in the United States have been silent on the issue of transgender identity and membership in the church. For instance, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) currently does not address transgender identity, but the denomination is strongly opposed to LGB identity. Since 1976, the SBC has passed fifteen resolutions addressing LGB issues; these resolutions reinforce that congregations should actively oppose LGB civil rights and supporters of LGB rights (Southern Baptist Convention, 2008).

For some faith traditions there is little conflict between gender identity and religious beliefs. Historically, Native American two-spirit individuals were revered as having special spiritual connections (Jacobs, Thomas, & Lang, 1997). Due to the cultural and spiritual beliefs of these tribes, gender non-conforming behavior was not only tolerated, it was celebrated. Hijras, a group of biologically male eunuchs in India, are also regarded as spiritual beings that can bring luck or fertility to others (Lal, 1999). However, the majority of transgender people must attempt to make sense of how their identity fits with their religious beliefs, and how they will negotiate church stances on transgender identity. While there is a significant body of self-help literature that focuses on transgender people's personal experiences (Brooks, 2004; Moore, 2004; Scott, 2004), there is limited empirical research. This thesis will explore the religious experiences of a group of transgender people.

Rationale

Despite the increasing familiarity about transgender issues, there is little research on transgender people in general, and almost no literature on how transgender people experience religion and spiritual beliefs. Until recently, transgender people (predominantly MTFs) were researched from a medical or pathological context (Drescher, 2010). There is a need for research that humanizes the transgender community, presenting them as ordinary people, and not medical oddities, deviants, or mentally ill. This research will fill gaps that exist in the fields of religious studies, gender and sexuality studies, family studies, and mental health.

Currently, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-IV-TR (2000), widely used by mental health professionals, classifies transgender people as meeting the criteria for Gender Identity Disorder (GID). While GID is a necessary diagnosis to receive medical

treatment, it still labels a person as having a disorder (Lev, 2004). The revised DSM-V is scheduled to be released in 2013, with changes in diagnostic criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2012). GID will be removed and will be replaced with the diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria, which will take the focus away from pathologizing transgender identity in general and focus on the relationship between the body and clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2012).

As long as transgender identity is classified as a mental disorder, as something that can or should be fixed, or as an undesirable way of being, transgender people will suffer discrimination and victimization. Ignorance about the transgender community contributes to harassment in schools, discrimination in housing and employment, lack of access to vital health services, and the possibility of violence or death (Grossman & D'augelli, 2006; McGuire et al., 2010). Widely held beliefs and cultural norms also influence a transgender person's feelings about themselves and their self-worth (Gagne, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997). Ignorance and discrimination can lead to isolation, low self-esteem, and suicide (Grossman & D'augelli, 2006; Heermann, Wiggins, & Rutter, 2007; Landsittel, 2010). The stress that transgender people face can also leave people vulnerable to mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression (Bockting, 2009; Murad et al., 2010), and chemical abuse and dependence (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). Given the recent media attention on LGBT youth suicide (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and Movement Advancement Project, 2011; Riley, 2010; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011), it is crucial to have research that documents transgender people as healthy, happy, functioning, and productive members of society. Given

that research has demonstrated the positive effects religion and spirituality has on health and well-being (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; George et al., 2000; Ross, 1990), it is important to understand how religion is experienced by transgender people. I examined one of the largest influencing forces in peoples' lives—religion—and how it is experienced by a group that is just now being acknowledged and addressed by religious communities.

This research will also be beneficial to clinicians who are working with individuals pursuing hormonal therapy and sex reassignment surgery. Mental health professionals working with transgender clients are often put in the position of gate keeper, determining who will and will not move forward with physical transition (O'Reilly, 2011). Clinicians' decisions about treatment and referral to medical specialists are influenced by the Standards of Care (SOC) for Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender Nonconforming People as outlined by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH, 2011). The SOC were recently updated, having not been updated since 2001. In the previous version, the recommendation was to diagnose the client as having Gender Identity Disorder. If the client was determined to be appropriate for medical intervention, letters confirming the client's transgender identity were written and used to obtain hormones or surgery (Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, 2001). In the 2011, 7th edition of the SOC, clinicians are encouraged to consider the client's "unique anatomic, social, or psychological" (p. 2) situation and modify clinical guidelines if needed (WPATH, 2011). The new SOC recognize that there are many ways to express gender, and transgender identity alone does not require psychological treatment. Unfortunately, the majority of clinicians have not received training on the transgender population (Lev, 2004). Those who have training are mainly familiar with the diagnosis of

Gender Identity Disorder, which pathologizes transgender people and does not provide a liberatory framework.

Clinicians need more training and affirmative literature that does not portray all transgender people as struggling with their identity (Drescher, 2010, Lev, 2004). My hope is that this study will encourage clinicians to seek out more information and develop an informed understanding of the issues the transgender population faces. Clinicians also need more training when addressing the topics of religion and gender identity, since both topics are central to client's lives. My hope is that this study will encourage mental health professionals to consider how discussions of religion and spirituality can be incorporated into sessions with transgender clients using a transgender affirmative lens.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter is divided into two sections: (1) Literature Review and Theoretical Framework and (2) the Research Questions and Operational Definitions. The literature review is divided into the following two main areas: integration of religious beliefs and gender identity, and participation in faith communities.

Integrating Spiritual Beliefs and Gender Identity

The majority of studies about the LGBT populations' experiences with religion have focused on gay and lesbian identity integration and religious beliefs, while excluding information about bisexual and transgender people (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Buchanan, Dzleme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Heermann, Wiggins, & Rutter, 2007; Lease, et al., 2005; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2002). Connections can be made between the lesbian, gay, and transgender communities, as all challenge heteronormativity by disrupting socially constructed expectations about gender roles. While the LGBT communities face different issues, all are subject to discrimination that is rooted in homophobia and transphobia. Additionally, the LGBT communities have been marginalized and viewed as disordered by scientific, medical, and religious institutions. For these reasons, studies that focus on religion and sexual orientation may be helpful in guiding research that explores gender identity and religious experiences.

Transgender people are in a unique and challenging position when it comes to incorporating religious beliefs into their lives. Transgender identity has rarely been addressed in religious texts outside of a few passages in the Holy Bible referring to eunuchs (The Acts of the Apostles 8:26-40; Isaiah 56:3-5), and it has only recently been discussed by religious leaders (Pope Benedict XVI, 2008; Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, 2003;

Wangsness, 2011). This leaves both the religious and transgender communities searching to find how transgender identity fits with religious beliefs and teachings.

Currently, many religious leaders and communities seem to view transgender identity as a variation of gay or lesbian identity, and not separate from sexual orientation (Pope Benedict XVI, 2008); however, there are significant differences. Gender identity is a person's internal understanding of their own gender (Landsittel, 2010) while sexual orientation is based on a person's emotional and sexual attraction to one or more genders of other people (Grossman & D'augelli, 2006). Transgender people can be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual. Many congregations view gender and sexuality as "tied to faith via the mechanism of sexual morality" (Sullivan-Blum, 2004) which is interpreted by different congregations in different ways. In more conservative denominations, the distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation may determine whether or not the transgender individual is welcome in the church community.

It is understandable that many transgender people have difficulty making sense of and incorporating spiritual beliefs into their lives because religion has been portrayed as incompatible with transgender identity (Buchanan, et al., 2001). Similar to gay men and lesbians, transgender people who are involved in traditional religions are sent messages that they are not welcome because their identities are sinful (Barret & Barzan, 1996). This leaves transgender people to accept the church's teachings about gender identity and sexuality, reject religious doctrine, or develop a new or modified belief system that is compatible with transgender identity (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Kidd & Witten, 2008; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994). It is important to gain insight into how transgender people make sense of religious messages received about their identity. This will help to better understand how those messages affect their identity.

Some transgender people make sense of how gender identity and religious identity can coexist by interpreting scripture passages as affirming transgender identity (Kolakowski, 1997). For example, several passages in the Holy Bible and Torah describe eunuchs as spiritual beings and as church officials. The Acts of the Apostles (8:26-40) in the Bible tells a story about an Ethiopian eunuch, an official in charge of the treasury under the queen, who was blessed and baptized by Philip the Apostle. In Isaiah (56:3-5) in the Bible and the Torah, eunuchs are described as being welcomed into the church and accepted by God. The passage reads,

Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.” And let no eunuch complain, “I am only a dry tree.” For this is what the Lord says: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.”

While it is important to note that holy scriptures are open to interpretation, these passages are among several that serve as affirmations for those who believe they were created as spiritual beings and as transgender by God (Phillips & Stewart, 2008). Wilcox (2002, p.506) found that some LGBT people view their identity as “a sacred gift from God...something not just to be endured, but to be celebrated.” Others have determined that transgender identity brings them closer to God because both display a “duality of spirit” (Sullivan-Blum, 2004). In a personal essay, Moore (2004) suggested that transgender people are inherently, intensely spiritual beings because they transcend their physical form. This study will explore the religious messages about transgender identity that have influenced the experiences of participants.

Participation in Faith Communities

Participation in a faith community is an important aspect of many peoples' lives, transgender people included. Transgender people's positive or negative religious experiences influence how connected they are to faith communities. Rodriguez & Ouellette (2002), in a study that focused on how lesbians and gay men integrate religious identity into overall identity, found that the more involved people are within the church – such as being a formal member, attending services, taking leadership roles, and participating in activities – the more likely they were to report spiritual beliefs as integrated into personal identity. Many studies have shown that positive religious experiences and participation in faith communities also increase quality of life by reducing stressors, establishing supports, fostering a sense of belonging and community, and increasing feelings of inner peace (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; French & Joseph, 1999; Koenig, 1997). Given that participation in faith communities is beneficial to wellbeing, more research exploring how transgender people view their place in those communities is needed.

Theoretical Framework

This study will be guided by feminist and queer theories, which will inform my interpretation of the data. Feminist theory scrutinizes power structures. It focuses on power differentials, and the resulting inequalities which are rooted in gender differences. Feminist theory, however, often overlooks transgender identity; instead it primarily focuses on women's inequality in relation to men (Sanger, 2008). While feminist theory explores systems of power, such as sexism, it often neglects to explore the important roles that sexual orientation and gender identity play in the construction of power hierarchies (Sanger, 2008). Queer theory deconstructs the meanings society has given to gender identity (Hebert, 2007; Laird, 2000). Queer theory

focuses on the social and political implications of sexual identity and gender expression. Both queer and feminist theories challenge rigid and binary gender categories, and the cultural expectations that determine what are and are not acceptable ways of expressing gender (Hines, 2006). Applying these lenses to my study will allow me to question the purpose and meaning of gender in religion. Societal norms, gender roles, and social policies that affect the transgender community could be significantly different if religious communities had a different, less rigid view of gender.

Feminist Analysis

Feminist analysis takes a critical stance toward conventional binary categories of gender. Through a feminist lens I deconstructed the social norms that maintain sex and gender categories which consequently marginalize transgender people. Lorber (1996, p. 16) stated that, “deconstructing sex, sexuality, and gender reveals many possible [gender] categories embedded in social experiences and social practices. Multiple categories disturb the neat polarity of familiar opposites that assume one dominant and one subordinate group, one normal and one deviant identity.” Through reading and analyzing the transcripts I examined the social constructions of gender and the meanings that participants gave to gender within a religious context.

According to Butler (1990, p. 25), “gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be.” Butler (1990, p. 25) goes on to say that, “gender...is a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame.” Butler is suggesting that gender is not something inherent. It is constantly acted out in daily life and expression is constrained by the strict gender norms that are in place. People act out what they perceive to be the expected ways of acting for their gender. Butler suggests that gender is something that is

learned, performed, and replicated. Lorber (1996, p.20) expands upon the idea that gender is a performance that is based on and reinforced by societal norms that allow little room for transgression, stating, “gendered behavior is constantly normalized by processes that minimize or counteract contradictions to the expected.” These gender roles are learned starting at a young age. As children develop, they look to the environment to determine the proper way to act out their gender, and they continue doing so throughout their lives; Gender defines a person’s perception of the world (Martin and Halverson, 1981). Through feminist analysis I explored how participants challenged binary gender categories and the cultural expectations that determine how gender is performed and reinforced according to religious beliefs.

Feminist research requires that the researcher be aware of personal biases and make their positionality transparent. It is impossible to remain completely objective in my research. Instead, I actively sought to gain awareness of how my biases influenced my views of the data. Feminist researchers view interpretations of data as subjective, understood from the researcher’s perspective, and influenced by preconceptions (Harding, 1998; Hill Collins, 1991; Stanley & Wise, 1993). It is the researcher’s responsibility to examine personal biases that influence the interaction between participant and researcher, and influence the interpretation of data. Feminist researchers also believe that participants are the experts on their own lives and can best tell their own stories (Foss and Foss, 1994; Ngunjiri, 2007). I accomplished this by letting participant words speak for themselves through using direct quotes from interviews. I also respected participant’s views on gender and their own gender expression, using language that the participant identifies with. For example, while I may prefer to write “they” or other genderless pronouns, participants may want it to be clear that “he” or “she” is the preferred pronoun.

Research Questions

This thesis will expand the current academic literature pertaining to transgender identity and religion. The purpose of this study will be to explore transgender peoples' experiences with religion and spirituality. This purpose will be investigated with the following research questions: (1) how do transgender people experience their religion or spirituality? (2) How do transgender people think others might perceive them based on their (others') religious beliefs?

Operational Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the following operational definitions will be used.

Cisgender: an individual's gender identity matches the behavior or role considered appropriate for their sex (Crethar & Vargas, 2007).

Coming out: a process that occurs throughout an individual's life in which he or she discovers, explores, accepts, and reveals an identity as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender (Riley, 2010).

Faith community: a formal (i.e., church) or informal (i.e., religious studies group) gathering of people to celebrate religious or spiritual beliefs.

Female-to-male (FTM): a person who is born female or assigned a female sex at birth, and identifies as a man or a masculine gender.

Gender: socially constructed categories of "woman" and "man" based on gender roles, behaviors, and presentation (Bornstein, 1994; Dozier, 2005).

Gender identity: a person's internal understanding of their own sex and gender (Landsittel, 2010).

Male-to-female (MTF): a person who is born male or assigned a male sex at birth, and identifies as a woman or a feminine gender.

Religion: an institutional and structured expression of spiritual beliefs (Hill and Pargament, 2003; Stander, Piercy, MacKinnon, & Helmeke, et 1994).

Sex: a classification of people as male or female in accordance with anatomy, chromosomes, and hormones (Landsittel, 2010).

Sexual orientation: is a categorization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or heterosexual based on a person's emotional and sexual attraction to one or more genders. It is a combination of sexual attraction, sexual identity, and sexual behavior (Grossman & D'augelli, 2006).

Sexual reassignment: to change the appearance of one's body through hormones and/or surgical procedures.

Spirituality: a search for personal purpose, wholeness, connection with others, and self-awareness (Heermann et al., 2007; Love, et al., 2005; Stander et al., 1994).

Transgender: An umbrella term used to describe people who transgress the conventional binary gender system where biological sex determines gender (Bockting, 1999). This term encompasses male-to-females, female-to-males, crossdressers, transsexuals, genderqueers, and drag queens and kings. It is separate from sexual orientation; a transgender person can have any sexual orientation (Witten, 2003).

Transphobia: feelings of disgust or prejudice toward people who transgress traditional gender expressions (Hill & Willoughby, 2005).

Transition: when a transgender person begins to live as their desired gender through sexual reassignment surgery, legal or social name change, hormone therapy, or other social and physiological processes (Schleifer, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

The following is the plan of research for this study. I explain how I analyzed the data, and how I ensured trustworthiness.

Phenomenological Framework

Phenomenological analysis is an approach that explores, through personal perspectives, how participants understand and ascribe meaning to their world (Dahl & Boss, 2005; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The researcher assembles information through inductive methods, in this case interviews, and presents it from the participant's viewpoint (Creswell, 1998). Phenomenological analysis focuses on particular occurrences that are experienced by participants, which in this study are transgender identity and religion. The phenomenological approach in this study was informed by a feminist framework, which fits with this study due to the inequalities transgender people face in many areas of life, including in religious communities. Feminist theory focuses on generating social change through exploring and critiquing power differentials that result in inequalities (Allen, 2000; Hill Collins, 1991; hooks, 2000). Because this is a topic that has not been extensively researched, it is important to first gain understanding about how transgender people experience inequality in their lives before steps can be taken toward social change in the religious realm. One aspect of inequality is invisibility. Feminist theory seeks to give voice to groups who have been disregarded by the dominant culture (Cotterill, 1992; Reinharz, 1992). Visibility is important because it can "prepare the ground for civil rights protection, [and] can be empowering for those who have lived most of their lives with no validation at all from the dominant culture (Hennessy, 1995, p.140)." Many people have not even considered that genders other than man and woman exist. Even in the LGBT community, the "T" is often overlooked. As

a transgender researcher, I am very invested in research that empowers my community and increases awareness of the issues our population faces in order to create lasting social change.

Statement of Reflectivity

My motivation for doing this research is because I am transgender and queer; I realized there is limited affirmative research on and for the transgender community. Many transgender people have not been given an opportunity to have a voice and my research allows transgender people to speak about a topic of great importance to them. I wanted to present an empowering research project that would be positive for the transgender population.

I thought transgender people's experiences of religion and spirituality was an interesting topic, and as I researched the topic more, I found that there were many personal accounts of what religion and spirituality meant to transgender people, but very little empirical research. This research will add to body of literature that addresses spirituality and transgender identity, which are both important parts of a person's identity.

Another reason for wanting to do this research is because I believe that it is important to present research conducted by a transgender person to provide an insider perspective. While I appreciate and support trans allies who are affirmative, there is still a sense of "outsider-looking-in" due to the historical pathologization of transgender people by cisgender researchers. I believe that because of the trauma of constantly being medicalized, pathologized, and scrutinized in general, most transgender people are distrustful of "experts" who do not and cannot understand what it is like to live life as a transgender person. I wanted to conduct this research with the care and respect that transgender people deserve. My personal experiences as a transgender person gives me first-hand experience with many of the issues the participants in this study face, so it

makes the research very interesting, personal, and relevant to me. My perspective and analytical positionality with the data is different than a cisgender researcher's because it reflects my own lived experience, as I have faced similar issues as the participants in the study. I share a common culture and discrimination with other transgender people, which allows me to further explore marginalization and discrimination. Throughout my project, I explored biases influenced by my own experiences and feelings about prejudice and discrimination, gender roles, and transgender identity. I was aware of how I responded to difficult situations or injustices that have been experienced by the participants. I addressed my biases and any strong feelings about the data with my advisor, so we could explore how that may be influencing my interpretation of the data.

Procedure

This study used a secondary data set to analyze transgender people's experiences with religion. The data for this study belongs to a larger study conducted by Dr. Kristen Benson about transgender people and their partners' relational experiences. In the larger study, once the interviews were completed, the interviews were transcribed and reviewed. The transcripts were then mailed to participants to check for accuracy and to allow participants to clarify answers. Additionally, I served as Dr. Benson's graduate assistant and helped to transcribe data, which created increased familiarity with the data.

Purposive sampling was utilized in the larger study. In purposive sampling participants are selected because of a certain characteristic (Patton, 1990). In the study, participants were selected because of their transgender identity. Participants for the data set were recruited through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling relies on recommendations from initial participants to identify potential additional participants who have information-rich stories (Salganik &

Heckathorn, 2004). In-depth, face-to-face interviews were then conducted and recorded. Interview guides included open-ended questions. Examples of questions include: do your spiritual or religious beliefs relate to your gender identity? How does this relate to how you see yourself and how others see you?

Participants

The criteria to participate in the study were to a) self-identified as transgender; b) be over the age of 18; and c) be able to meet for a face-to-face interview. Five participants who self-identified as transgender were recruited for this study. The ages of participants ranged from 24-57. One participant identified as female-to-male (FTM), and four were male-to-female (MTF). The sample was predominantly white, non-Hispanic (n=4), and one participant identified as Latina. Four of the members were living with a partner, including three who were legally married in a heterosexual relationship; one participant was divorced and lived alone. Five of the participants identified as Christian, with three specifying denominations of Roman Catholic (1), Episcopalian (1), and Protestant (1). While all of the participants identified strongly with a religion, religiosity was not a requirement for participation in the larger study, and wasn't part of the call for participation for this study.

Introduction to the participants.

Each participant was assigned a pseudo name to protect their privacy.

Travis identifies as female-to-male and is 24 years old. He is Roman Catholic. He is engaged and lives with his partner in a large city; they do not have children. Travis has a bachelor's degree and is currently a full-time graduate student. He reports income between \$5,000 - \$14,999.

Suzanne identifies as male-to-female and is 56 years old. She is a Protestant. She lives with her partner in large city and has been legally married for 34 years, with one biological child. Suzanne has a graduate or professional degree, is employed full time, and reports income between \$100,000-\$200,000.

Donna identifies as male-to-female and is 46 years old. She identifies as Christian. She is divorced and single, with two children. She is the primary caretaker for her aging mother, and lives with her biological children and mother in a large city. Donna has a graduate or professional degree, is employed full time, and reports income between \$40,000-\$49,999.

Sally identifies as male-to-female and is 45 years old. She is a Christian. She has been legally married for 24 years and has two biological children. She lives with her partner and child in a large city. She has a graduate or professional degree, is employed full time, and reports income between \$50,000-\$74,999.

Amy identifies as male-to-female and is 57 years old. She identifies as Episcopalian. She has been legally married for 30 years, and has two biological children. She lives with her partner and adult child in a large city. She has a graduate or professional degree, is full-time employed, and reports income of \$50,000-\$74,999.

Data Analysis

My research questions were analyzed through the use of inductive qualitative thematic analysis. Thematic analysis focuses on identifiable patterns of living, thinking, and behavior (Aronson, 1994). Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six phases of thematic analysis, which I used as a guideline for my research: (1) I became familiar with the data by reading and re-reading transcripts in their entirety, and noting ideas; (2) I broke down and clustered all similar data from

the entire transcript into initial codes by organizing into meaningful groups; (3) I searched for themes by collating codes into different categories; (4) I reviewed and refined themes by reading the collated extracts for each theme to determine if they formed a coherent pattern; (5) I defined and named the themes by refining the overall story, and generated clear definitions and names for each theme; (6) I produced the final report by selecting examples that provided a vivid account of the story the data tells, within and across themes.

Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 10) defined a theme as, “something important about the data in relation to the research question, and [something that] represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set.” I examined narratives to reveal themes that articulated participant perspectives (Riessman, 1993). I used an inductive approach to form categories that reflected frequently reported ideas and experiences in the data. Themes reflected the meanings participants created about their religious experiences.

I determined themes by organizing the data into groups of similar ideas and experiences. I broke down the data into themes by taking note of word repetitions. I kept track of prominent ideas by circling words, using different colored highlighters, and underlining the texts. As I read the transcripts, I noted words and synonyms that were frequently repeated by participants. Words that occur often in the course of an interview are often significant to the respondent, and could give clues to patterns in the data (Patton, 1990). People often use metaphors to convey their emotions, beliefs, and experiences (Braun & Clark, 2006). Therefore, I also searched for any analogies and metaphors used by participants. I repeated the process of searching for word repetitions, analogies, and metaphors several times, each time looking for commonalities within and across interviews. I eventually produced a list of codes that helped me identify overall

patterns and issues in the data. The codes were given meaningful names that indicated the ideas that support the themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After I determined major themes in my research, I took a look at subthemes, or themes within a theme (Creswell, 1998). I used similar techniques to identify subthemes as I did with dominant themes. I identified texts that were related to a major theme, but shared commonalities with other texts within a theme. I then sorted based on similarities to other ideas within that theme. Each theme and subtheme is defined in the final report.

Trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness indicates validity and reliability in the data (Guba, 1981; Patton, 2001). Guba (1981) devised unique criterion for measuring trustworthiness, and proposed four criteria to ensure rigor in qualitative research, a) credibility (internal validity); b) transferability (external validity); c) dependability (reliability); and d) confirmability (objectivity).

Credibility.

Credibility ensures that the researcher has measured what was intended to be measured. Qualitative researchers can promote confidence in their data by adopting well-established methods of interviewing and data analysis. Shenton (2004) also suggested that the researcher become familiar with the culture of participants in order to promote understanding and trust. I have been involved in the transgender community by attending support groups and events, as well as educating the community about transgender issues. Additionally, Patton (2002) proposes that combining multiple theories, data sources, and methods can minimize intrinsic biases that exist in studies with singular approaches to data collection and analysis.

A stipulation of credibility is frequently debriefing with supervisors and colleagues (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990). I peer debriefed with my advisor, Dr. Benson, which involved me discussing and evaluating my research methodologies and interpretations of the data. I read through the data, highlighted and made notes about ideas that stood out. My advisor did the same, and we compared and discussed to ensure that similar themes were found. Peer debriefing allowed others to identify alternative or more comprehensive approaches to data analysis that I may not have considered. Peer debriefing also offered me the opportunity to discuss my interpretations of data with those who could notice biases or flaws in research design or analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The larger study utilized member checks to make certain the data was correctly represented. As Patton (2002) recommended, participants from the larger study were given the opportunity to review their transcribed interview in order to correct mistakes, clarify the intention of their words, expand on ideas, and offer feedback to the researcher.

A final indicator of credibility is for the researcher to evaluate the project through reflective commentary (Shenton, 2004). Shenton (2004) described reflective commentary as the process of evaluating the development of the project to monitor the researcher's interpretation of the data and the effectiveness of methods used in the study. Guba and Lincoln (1985) recommend that during the process of reflective commentary researchers record any patterns in the data and review the effectiveness of techniques used, in order to assess the overall development of the project. As I was reading the collected interviews I recorded my initial impressions of the data, and noted any patterns. I also reviewed my methodology and data analysis with my advisor to evaluate the effectiveness of techniques utilized. As the study

progressed, I revised my literature review based on my findings to further understand how my study fit with other studies on this topic.

Transferability.

Transferability is the extent that research findings can be applied in others studies (Merriam, 1998). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend that the researcher develop thick descriptions that provide readers with a full picture of the data, including its limitations and context, which can be compared to other studies. I included direct quotations of significant statements throughout my analysis to be used in other research.

Dependability.

Dependability assures that similar results would be obtained if the study were repeated with the same methods and participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Methods that overlap provide data continuity. The methods in this study, which I have already described, included member checks, thick descriptions, and using participants' direct words.

Confirmability.

Confirmability is the degree to which the results can be verified by others. It includes exploring decisions made that may have influenced the research process and findings (Patton, 1990; Shenton 2004). I peer debriefed with my advisor to talk about biases in my interpretation of the data. I determined if my findings were based on the participant's experiences and ideas, instead of influenced by personal bias. Confirmability also involved keeping records of the process of the research project (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). I documented the methods for checking and rechecking the data. Through reflective commentary, I evaluated how effective the

methodological techniques I used were in capturing the experiences of participants. I also used reflective commentary to keep record of emergent patterns in the data.

RESULTS

In this study I explored transgender peoples' experiences with religion and spirituality. More specifically, this study examines how transgender people consolidate their gender identity with their spiritual and religious beliefs. Transgender participants identified a number of factors that contributed to how they experienced religion. The findings embody the major themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. The five major themes that emerged were: (1) "God doesn't make mistakes", (2) "I am part of God's plan", (3) "Church is a place of love and acceptance", (4) "The box they keep their God in is too small", and (5) "Can you be a transgender Christian?"

Themes are organized by research question. The research questions were: (1) how do transgender people experience their religion or spirituality? And, (2) how do transgender people think others might perceive them based on their (others') religious beliefs? This section is organized by research question and the themes that fall under that question. Themes (1) and (2) are part of research question one. Themes (3), (4), and (5) are part of research question two. Themes are illustrated by quotes from participants.

Experiencing Religion and Spirituality

The first research question was: how do transgender people experience their religion or spirituality? Two themes were identified: (1) "God doesn't make mistakes", and (2) "I am part of God's plan".

God doesn't make mistakes.

The first theme highlighted how participants perceive God's view of transgender people. Four of the five participants identified a belief that they were made by God as transgender, and

therefore are not mistakes. As participants described their views of God's perception of transgender identity, several phrases emerged from the data. One phrase used by participants was that they are "God's child" or that God was their father. For example, Suzanne described that God has love for all things he created, including transgender people. She stated:

There's just a gentle acceptance and love and so forth for all mankind because you realize that everyone is God's child. So...judge not, that ye be not judged.

Like many Christians, Donna described God as being her divine father, and like a father, God loves her unconditionally.

I still feel like God loves me and accepts me just like a father or a mother...I know there are fathers and mothers who disown their children and reject their children, but most loving and accepting fathers and mothers would obviously never disown their children or throw them out. Most who do accept their children love them despite whatever their children might get into. So, I feel God considers me the same way because he is my loving father.

Other terms that frequently were used by participants to describe how God views transgender people included with "love" and "acceptance." Many participants expressed God's love. Amy described that:

I knew I was a loved child—am—a loved child of God. There's nothing wrong with me...God doesn't make mistakes. Genetics can get pretty screwed up, but I love the way I am. I'm loved the way I am. We are all loved the way we are, no matter how we're born.

Travis, a devout Catholic, described that God's love and acceptance was not only comforting, but affirming. He showed that he gained strength through prayer with his ability to converse with God about his gender identity. Travis was able to draw on his faith in God for support, and felt a sense of affirmation from God. Travis stated that:

I was praying and I was like I'm very interested in what God has to think about this, so I was like, God just...let me know, what am I supposed to be? Does it really matter? Lead me to discussions and help me figure out who I am under you...and I felt peaceful about like, you know, just go with what you feel.

Some participants believed gender does not matter to God, so God does not view being transgender as a key aspect to one's identity. Participants felt that gender categories are too narrow for God. They stated that God is more interested in what kind of person someone was, and if their actions and beliefs were in line with what Jesus and God taught. Travis explained:

Gender is a human construction. When God looks at us he's not like, alright penis or vagina? You know like, wow you're a person, I created you. What have you done to spread my glory throughout the earth? What have you done to serve me? He's not going to sit there, who did you sleep with? What gender are they? What gender are you? He's not going to sit there and ask all these questions because he's God and he's already past that.

One participant drew from Bible scriptures to support her view that gender is irrelevant to God. She cites the Bible as a source of support that helped her reconcile her transgender identity with her spiritual beliefs. Amy describes that in Heaven, there is no gender or other human constructs.

When Jesus was being asked about Mary, and I believe the practice of brothers marrying deceased brother's wives, that in the kingdom of heaven, in the kingdom of God, there is not male or female. There's no marrying. In whatever kind of body that is, I'm fine. This physical body is not all of who I am. Not by a long shot! I've already been blessed with personal evidence of that, so if I'm not just this body, then why does it limit me? Why does my mind limit me? It doesn't. I'm much more than this, and I'm a child of God. And I know this. It's been brought home to me again and again and again. Enough times that I can believe it.

Travis described that God does not only accept transgender identity, but that Jesus would want, "the least of his brother in the front row," And goes on to say, "if you were a real Catholic, you'd be inviting prostitutes, transsexuals, and all these people to sit at the head of your table." This reasoning is well-founded in the Bible, as the scripture contains many stories where Jesus showed compassion to those considered outcasts in society. Travis' statement echoed the belief shared by most participants that Jesus and God are benevolent entities that view them with love and understanding. Furthermore, Travis and other participants described God as being more concerned with their spiritual characteristics, than with their physical bodies.

I am part of God's plan.

The second theme for how transgender people experience religion and spirituality is personal religious beliefs. The majority of participants identified a belief that they were made by God as transgender, and therefore were part of God's plan. Four of the five participants referred to being transgender as the way they were created. Donna stated, "I have come to accept my

being transgender as part of God's plan for my life." This statement showed that Donna had a belief that God had a specific reason for creating her as transgender, and she has faith in God's plan for her.

Sally when describing this drew directly from the Bible, stating,

Psalm 1:39 says, I am wonderfully made. In fact, it says I am fearfully and wonderfully made. And...if I...call myself junk then I am going against what God created.

Amy shared this sentiment, saying,

When you start out with a real rock hard belief that you are a loved child of God, am I going to believe that all this time I didn't remember that I was transgendered? That God didn't know? Uh, I'm sorry, this is the way I was made. And, I've always been this way.

Amy's statement supports Sally's in that they both have found strength from knowing that being transgender was what God intended for their lives. Sally and Amy both caution that believing they were made to be anything other than transgender, or trying to be anything other than their authentic selves, is going directly against what God wants for their lives.

Most participants also described the process they went through when reconciling their identity with religious beliefs. Sally described that through the process of coming to understand God's plan for her life, she became a more devoted Christian, and goes on to explain why.

I understand more about what it meant to be an outcast in society. And in my own theology that, that is who Jesus spent time with. He didn't go to the religious people. He went to the people that nobody else cared about, no one else would have. They weren't

good enough for the established religion. That, that was who Jesus chose to spend his time with...And that's very, very comforting to me.

Another participant, Travis, explains his process of reconciliation as realizing what his church said and what God thought of him were two separate things,

The more I realized that I don't worship my church and the people and the members of my church and what they think, I worship God...the better I consolidate those ideas about gender and religion.

Donna talked about the struggle she encountered when coming to terms with the plan God had for her life as a transgender person. The participant stated:

I had an issue with how God perceives me, as far as the, let's shall we say, the conflict, that, that existed in me with myself looking outwardly to be male yet inwardly being female. Uh, and so I had to reconcile that with, with my religious beliefs too... I did both a lot of prayer, meditation, and Bible reading to search the scriptures because of the...my big preoccupation was how can I accept myself, how can my kids accept me, and how can God accept me? If I couldn't accept me, if God couldn't accept me, and my kids couldn't accept me, then I guess I'm pretty unacceptable.

Travis spoke about living authentically as who he is and the way he was made by God.

He describes his process:

I was like am I just doing this because I feel guilty about being in a lesbian relationship? I was like, I need to figure this out for myself. Because that's no reason to transition. You know, that's horrible! That's guilt and just not who you are.

Throughout this theme there were several commonalities among participants. Some of the participants described finding strength from and being comforted by scriptures in the Bible that portrayed Jesus as being an ally to those who were outcasts in society, or scriptures that described God's creations as flawless. Another common response in the theme was to focus on God's message, instead of what other people thought of their identity. Both Donna and Travis described having to override the messages they have received from others, such as church and family, and focus on what they feel is God's plan for them.

Others' Perceptions of Transgender People Based on Others' Religious Beliefs

The second research question was: how do others perceive transgender people based on their (others') religious beliefs. Three themes were identified: (3) "Church is a place of love and acceptance", (4) "The box they keep their God in is too small", and (5) "Can you be a transgender Christian?" Theme (3) had one subtheme, which was, "They try really hard to make us welcome". Theme (5) had two subthemes: (1) "Are you gay?", and (2) "People are surprised I'm Christian".

Church is a place of love and acceptance.

The third theme explores how participants view their faith community as being a place that is accepting of their transgender identity. Several participants described church as being a place of love and acceptance, where others would not judge or reject them. Travis described his feelings about how others at church should receive him, stating, "I've always felt like my church was a place where...people wouldn't judge me...If they were really, truly Christians...it would just be a place of love and acceptance."

Several participants explored the process of finding a church they felt would be accepting of their identity. Finding a welcoming church community seemed to be very important to participants, and attending different churches was not uncommon. One factor that was important to participants when finding a supportive church was the ability to be themselves. Suzanne stated, “Last year I went to the first service I ever went to as Suzanne. And it was wonderful to be able to worship with all of me.” Suzanne also talked about being encouraged by a pastor to come dressed as female to church. She described the pastor’s insistence:

Her suggestion to me, it was to just get dressed as your female self and come down here and come to church...come on down to the Metropolitan Community Church, put your dress on and come on down.

This statement is in line with the position of affirmative churches, such as the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), which was founded because of the exclusion of LGBT people from other church communities. Suzanne also stated that although the MCC church was welcoming, she was not an active church-goer because she was trying to find other supportive church communities. Another participant, Travis, explained that he was also actively searching for church communities that were welcoming. Travis said, “The unique thing about us is we don’t go to the same church every single Sunday because we haven’t found the church that we feel quite at home yet for various reasons.”

They try really hard to let us know we are welcome.

Travis addressed the subtheme: ways that others in the faith community have shown support. This participant had experiences where other people at church explicitly welcomed him, and made him aware that he was wanted in the church community. Travis describes a priest who

had been a strong supporter and advocate for him, and was planning on marrying him and his fiancé. Travis explains coming out to the priest and the response he received:

He sent me a letter and it's like, wow what a strong and brave letter from a strong and brave person. Your gender doesn't bother me, you know, when I think of you as a person I just think of you as a good person and I know this is going to be difficult, so I wish you blessings.

Others at church showed their support to Travis by talking with him during and after church services. He points this out as unusual because Catholics usually do not talk before, after, or during mass. He describes the atmosphere of church, stating:

You get some people that are like, oh my God I'm so glad they're here, you know, and they're so nice and like trying to make us feel welcome even if it's just a handshake before church starts.

And goes on to recount that others have told him, You have a lovely singing voice... So a lot... some... some people will do, try really hard to let us know we are welcome which is nice.

Although Travis identified specific ways in which people have tried to make him feel welcome in church, it may be significant that no other participant addressed about this topic.

This may mean that most participants feel they are not welcome in church communities.

The box they keep their God in is too small.

The fourth theme explores how some participants view their faith community as being a place that has rejected their transgender identity. All but one participant talked about their experiences with church communities being unreceptive toward them. Suzanne described leaving

her denomination entirely, stating, “I no longer consider myself to be a Southern Baptist because they...I can’t support a group of people who won’t support me.” Feeling unsupported was a common sentiment among participants. Travis describes wanting to be a priest at one point in his life. When he tells his priest this, the priest responded, “You know [participant female name] you might have to move to another church to do that.” While the priest himself may have been welcoming, it positions the Catholic Church as being unwelcoming of transgender identity. The same participant conveys his confusion about whether or not others in his faith community view him negatively. He says, “That’s the hard thing. That’s what I’m...it’s just like...I don’t think so, but maybe they just stopped talking to me and I didn’t realize that was the reason.”

Several participants perceived extreme reactions toward them if they were to reveal they are transgender. Travis described feeling that some would be outright hostile toward him and explained that his experience has been, “a lot of the Protestants...would actually say, you know, you can’t come here.” Suzanne tells about being demonized by some in her faith community, saying:

I’m uh the devil incarnate because of um, you know, wear women’s clothes. So, I got to be doing something that is not right. They’re not sure exactly what that might be but I must somehow be uh subversing, yeah subversive for family values.” This reinforces the perception that faith is tied to sexual morality. Many congregations view gender and sexuality as tied to faith. Since gender identity and sexual orientation are often perceived to be the same, people in church may not understand the difference between being transgender and being lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Depending on the church, that could make the difference between whether or not a transgender person is accepted. Stepping outside of gender norms in churches that are not

welcoming toward LGBT individuals seemed to cause backlash from other members, and resulted in transgender members feeling unwelcome.

Travis prefaced another statement with, “Nobody’s like hurt us or said anything mean,” implying that these are realistic reactions they might receive from others. He continued his statement saying, “We’ve gotten stares, but we get stares everywhere, not just in church.” Sally agreed that her identity is misunderstood by most people, stating, “I know that transgender people are not generally accepted in society...there are people who would not accept me.”

Several participants cited sections of the Bible that are used to justify exclusion of transgender people. Amy talked about rejection stemming from how people interpret the Bible. She says, “Unfortunately, many people are stuck with that view of scripture. And it’s sad because it limits them. It limits their view of the world. It limits their view of God. The box they keep their God in is too small.” The same participant went on to describe how she considers being transgender a spiritual gift and surmised that, “The American church doesn’t want to talk a whole lot about spiritual gifts which is unfortunate, because they’re there.”

Can you be a transgender Christian?

The fifth theme explores how participants perceived others view them and their spiritual beliefs. This theme had two subthemes, (1) “Are you gay?”, and (2) “People are surprised I’m Christian”. One term that was used in both of the subthemes was “curious,” indicating that people are unsure about how transgender identity and spiritual can co-exist, but are also open to learning more about it.

Are you gay?

The first subtheme explored perceptions of sexual orientation and how transgender people are labeled as gay due to not “passing” completely as their preferred gender. Many people do not realize that gender identity and sexual orientation are separate concepts, and most people do not even think that someone may be transitioning to another gender. For example, a female-to-male transgender person may still appear to be female, therefore he may receive the label of being a lesbian as opposed to a transgender man. Homophobia and transphobia also contribute to conflict within faith communities, as was apparent in theme four. All of these factors can lead to increased tensions in church settings, if the church is not affirmative of LGBT identity. These factors combined together form multiple layers of religious tension.

Travis, a Catholic, describes his experiences with bringing his partner to church with him. He says:

We just get taken as a lesbian couple. More recently the more I look like a guy and [my partner] a girl I don't know if they still perceive me, us, as a lesbian couple... They'll probably still see us as a lesbian couple until I get some hair on my face. And then they'll start being like...hmm...what's going on?

He guesses that people are surprised at his church and imagines them thinking, “Gay people and they're coming to church? Like... gay people?” He goes on to talk about how Catholicism may be more strict about gender roles and expression than other denominations, so this may be why he and his partner stand out. He explains that, “Catholicism has very big ideals about men and women and what the role of a man is in marriage and the role of a woman is, and also the role of males being priests and only males.”

But for the most part he feels that people have been open to him. He states:

Everybody's been, you know, cool. The only thing that I noticed is during Our Father people normally hold hands, but recently they changed that you don't have to you, you can just kind of go like this...so there's like that optional awkwardness of if you're going to hold hands with people. Unless people hold hands with us, I've noticed. I don't know if that's like, we're gay and contagious...or we just want to do this.

Travis also talks about people in his church questioning if his transition was so he his identity wouldn't be at odds with his Catholic faith. He questions this himself and says:

People are just really curious. They want to know, am I transitioning because I want to be in a male/female relationship with [partner name] because that will make my church happy. A lot of people have that thought and I actually went through that thought.

On the other hand, some have experienced being labeled as gay because they do "pass".

Amy was taken for a lesbian because she looked like a woman, and when she was with her partner, they appeared to be a lesbian couple. Amy described her experience with being asked to not come to church dressed as a female and then as a male. She says:

I've been to church as Amy. Our priest has asked me please not to come to church as Amy, and then as [male name], and then as Amy, and then as [male name]. Because it would cause a lot of concern that really doesn't belong there...Amy hasn't been to our church, no. I have not been to our church as Amy. I've been to many other churches as Amy.

In both Travis and Amy's case, participants felt like their churches treated perceived gay members differently, as indicated by the narratives of their experiences. Travis also discussed

that church members assumed his transition was to be more in line with heterosexist ideals that are reinforced by his church. In Amy's case, she is being asked to fit into a heterosexist church culture by presenting only as male, and therefore as in a male/female relationship with her partner. Additionally, the commonality between Travis and Amy is that both feel conflicted about the roles they are asked to assume in church, and both feel confused and unsure about how they are perceived by others in their church.

People are surprised I'm Christian.

The second subtheme describes how people outside of church have reacted to transgender people and their spiritual beliefs. Only one participant addressed this subtheme. Travis describes being worried that his Christianity will be questioned because of his gender identity. He explains revealing his identity to a Catholic friend:

I was nervous that she would be like...oh my gosh, you're not really Catholic, bye. No, but she was, she was great. She's like, oh wow, I didn't know! I didn't know about that, wow. Well, we'll definitely have to keep talking about these things and...it's been, it's been good.

Travis seemed to anticipate that others would reject the two identities that are most important to him—his identity as transgender and his identity as a Catholic. He admits that, “a lot of people are very surprised when I tell them I'm Christian...much less when I tell them I'm Catholic.” He goes on to say that most people are curious about how he reconciles the two identities. He describes that,

It (revealing transgender identity) usually just increases their curiosity like, how do you reconcile the two? Like on Livejournal I had like this eighty comment thread going on

because somebody asked a question like, What religion is everybody here? And I wrote that and all these people are like what, what, oh my gosh...so I was just like, well, some of my values are still ok with being trans.

Like subtheme (1), subtheme (2) also focuses on being unsure about how others perceive transgender identity. Also, like subtheme (1), people's surprise may come from not understanding that someone could transition from one gender to another. Others' surprise may also be from not understanding how transgender identity and Christianity could coexist.

DISCUSSION

This chapter is divided into six sections: (1) Discussion of the main findings of the study, (2) Strengths of the study, (3) Limitations of the study, (4) Implications for future research, (5) Clinical implications, and (6) Conclusion.

Main Findings of the Study

The main findings for this study are organized by research question.

Research question (1): How do transgender people experience their religion or spirituality?

It appears that transgender people, like the general population, feel it is important to have a spiritual aspect to their lives. The participants in this study felt a connection with a higher power. Considering that 80% of individuals in the United States (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009) identify with a religion, the fact that transgender people also identify with a religion is no surprise. Like the larger population, the participants in this study are predominantly Christian, with all five identifying as such.

Religious beliefs help people make sense of the world. It was expected that participants would also use religious beliefs to understand their world, including understanding their identity as transgender. The findings indicated that some participants in this study used prayer, reading the Bible, and attending church as ways of coping with and understanding their identity. Understanding how transgender people experience religion is important given that spirituality and participation in church plays a major role in most people's lives by creating supports, reducing stressors, fostering a sense of belonging, and increasing inner peace (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; French & Joseph, 1999; Koenig, 1997). It appears that the people in this study drew on

God for support and reassurance. The literature indicates that some transgender people make sense of how their gender identity and religious identity can coexist by interpreting Bible scriptures as affirming their transgender identity (Kolakowski, 1997), which is supported by what I found in my study. Amy and Sally both cited Bible scriptures as significant in helping them come to terms with their identities. Transgender participants seemed to have the view that God had a specific plan for their lives.

Gender roles and expectations are cultural, and so is religion. Both have a mutual influence on each other, perpetuating rigid gender norms. As stated in an earlier section, these cultural norms marginalize transgender people by determining what are and are not acceptable ways of expressing gender. Religious beliefs influence how people view gender. The transgender people in this study received many messages that they were going against God's plan, subversive to family values, and that their identity is sinful or something to be ashamed of. This reflects the beliefs the larger culture has about transgender identity and gender in general. People who step outside of expected gender roles are questioned and made to feel as if they are doing something wrong or immoral. For example, Christianity privileges those with cisgender identities as good and holy, while excluding or demonizing identities of marginalized groups. Thus, transgender identity is associated with the sacrilegious. Given the influence that religious organizations have on people, stances against the transgender population are actively harmful. Transphobia is legitimized and reinforced by the rigid gender roles perpetuated by social media, religious teachings and societal expectations of gender role performance, which makes it acceptable to view transgender people as less than cisgender people. This leads to exclusion of transgender people in the church, and to the justification of discriminatory practices that attempt to strip

transgender people of the spiritual and religious aspects of themselves. Transgender people have to continuously and actively challenge dominant discourses about gender in religion, since they do not fit the prescribed notion of what a Christian should be.

Some religions, like Catholicism, are very strict about the roles of men and women. For example, Travis discussed that Catholicism is very clear that only men are allowed to be priests. The Catholic Church's position is that women, while being spiritually equal to men, have an inferior physical form that is incapable of receiving sacrament (Ross, 2005). Furthermore, Ross (p. 5) goes on to state that "sexuality (gender) has ontological significance—that is sexuality is at the core of one's being. Christ's maleness has an ontological character, which priests must share." Travis challenged and questioned this stance when he expressed desire to become a priest. The response from his priest was that he would need to switch churches if he wanted to pursue that, indicating that it wouldn't be a possibility for a transgender or a female-bodied person. A feminist view of Travis's experience would posit that a transgender person, by simply being an "other" who did not subscribe to the same gender roles as others, challenged religious norms and rigid binary gender categories. The priest, like most people, was not aware of the differences between gender and sex and how someone could have a masculine gender identity, but a female body. All of the participants challenged the position that gender is the core of a person's being. They experienced that their physical form and spiritual form were separate identities and that God only cared about the spiritual characteristics of a person.

Transgender people's experiences with religion and spirituality is complex; participants in this study explored their belief systems in depth, and considered how their identity fit with their religious beliefs. A common belief that most participants subscribed to was that gender isn't

relevant to a higher power. However, they questioned that belief in response to cultural messages that characterize gender as clear cut, innate, and unchangeable. The dominant discourse regarding gender reinforces rigid gender norms and binary gender categories, reinforced by religious messages about gender, while discouraging and minimizing identities that do not fit that discourse. Because gender norms are acted out and reinforced constantly, religions often prescribe the correct way to perform gender which are reinforced by cisgender people who participate in these faiths. The transgender people in this study began to internalize these messages and subscribe to the cultural beliefs that because they are stepping outside of expected gender roles, they must be doing something wrong or something God wouldn't approve of. This led some of them to question if there was a place for them in the realm of religion. For someone who views religion as a very important part of their life, these feelings of exclusion and shame can be detrimental. Furthermore, a feminist and queer theoretical stance would support the assertion that the larger cultural discourse about gender is invasive and inescapable. Everyone experiences religion in their own way, but cultural messages influence how a person experiences religion and spirituality. Transgender people have to constantly evaluate and question how they fit with their religious beliefs because of the messages they are sent by church members, clergy, religious leaders, and society. Cisgender people do not have to consider how their gender identity can be integrated with their religious beliefs because they are not sent messages that many religious institutions and God views them as at odds with Christianity. Cisgender people have the privilege of not having to question how they might fit in with a church community, and they do not face rejection from religious communities.

Research question (2): How do transgender people think others might perceive them based on their (others') religious beliefs?

The second research question sought to find how transgender people think other people view them. The findings suggest that the people in this study have struggled to make sense of how their gender identity and spiritual beliefs are compatible. Sometimes, however, it appears that this struggle came from other people. While transgender people themselves mostly felt at peace that God had a plan to create them as transgender, the conflict they felt came from outsiders questioning their spiritual identity and how it could be compatible with their transgender identity.

The findings indicated that participants felt welcome in some church communities, while feeling unsupported in other church communities. The participants felt supported when congregation members made an effort to make them feel welcome through the ways they acted toward participants or what they said to participants. Participants felt unsupported in churches when congregation members or clergy had negative interactions with them that made them feel uncomfortable or unsafe in that church.

This supports what the literature says, that depending on the denomination and the church, transgender identity is either accepted or rejected. This is because transgender people who are involved in traditional religions are often sent messages that they are not welcome because their identities are morally wrong (Barret & Barzan, 1996). Like the transgender people in the literature, participants were left to accept their current church's teachings about gender identity, reject the teachings, or develop a new or modified set of beliefs (Kidd & Witten, 2008; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994). Like many people, the participants felt

the need to be a part of a faith community or church. It seems that transgender people's positive or negative experiences influenced how connected they were to faith communities. Transphobia seemed to influence whether or not someone was accepted into the church. A feminist lens would suggest that clergy and parishioners were either inclusive or exclusive based on how conforming the transgender participants were to gender norms, and not based on whether they shared similar morals or beliefs as others in their faith community. Several participants stated that they were actively searching for faith communities because their current faith community was not as supportive of their identity as they had hoped. These participants rejected the teachings of their churches, and sought to find churches that fit their belief systems.

We now have a better understanding of how transgender people perceive how others view them based on their (others') religious beliefs. It seems that most participants worried about and anticipated being rejected by church members. It also appears that most participants struggled in their faith community with being labeled as "gay" as opposed to transgender. The findings supported the literature that states that many religious leaders and church community members seem to view transgender identity as a variation of gay or lesbian identity (e.g. Southern Baptist Convention, 2008; Pope Benedict XVI, 2008). Several of the participants discussed their experiences at church where members assumed they were gay. The fact that they were transgender, as opposed to gay, was often misunderstood by others. It seemed that the people in this study struggled with even being acknowledged as transgender. While what transgender identity means is becoming more widely known, the vast majority of people do not even consider that someone may be changing genders. Queer theory posits that most people's reality does not include thinking about gender identity and sexual orientation as separate

concepts; however, a transgender person may identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. Heterosexual cisgender people are in a privileged position where they do not have to think about either their gender identity or sexual orientation. Rarely are these concepts considered, and mostly it is in response to when someone has stepped outside of expected gender roles or assumed heterosexuality. This creates problems for groups that are in the minority, such as transgender people and LGB people, because their needs are not considered by the larger population.

The participants discussed that members of their church often conveyed surprise and confusion when they revealed their transgender identity. At some churches, this surprise and confusion was mixed with unwelcoming or even hostile reactions from others. For example, some participants describe a church climate where they were required to be in line with expected gender roles, or they were not welcome in the church. If they did not conform, they were viewed as deviant or immoral. This has broader implications because it encourages justification of heterosexism and transphobia, which leads transgender people to feel uncomfortable about attending and worshiping in those churches. For transgender people who believe spirituality is an important part of their lives, not being able to find an accepting place of worship could affect their quality of life. Not having a place of worship could affect the many positive benefits that church attendance has been shown to have. Not all the participants had negative experiences at church. The participants also described their experiences at churches that had an affirming stance. At these churches, they felt love and acceptance from church members. This is important because positive experiences promote participation in church, which in turn increases quality of

life by reducing stress, establishing emotional support systems, creating community, and increasing feelings of peace (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; French & Joseph, 1999; Koenig, 1997).

The participants in this study seemed to accomplish something unique in that they were able to come to terms with their religious and spiritual identities, instead of rejecting that part of themselves. All participants maintained strong beliefs even when faced with opposition and marginalization. Participants appeared to tailor their belief systems to fit their specific needs and values, instead of automatically accepting religious dogma. This helped them be able to maintain a strong connection to a higher power, even if their church had not been supportive. This ability to navigate religious doctrine and politics shows that transgender people are able to adapt to challenging situations when they arise in the religious realm, just as they are able to adapt to challenging situations in other aspects of life.

Strengths of the Study

This study contributes to a growing body of literature that has just recently been acknowledged and written about by scholars. Knowledge of transgender identity is becoming more common through exposure through media and through the LGBT movement. As more people are aware of what transgender means, and as transgender people begin to gain rights, more and more professionals are finding a need to be informed about this population. There is a need for information that presents transgender people in a positive light (Lev, 2004) and a need for information to aid advancement in the medical, mental health, and social sciences fields. Yet, very few professionals are trained to adequately work with transgender people (Lev, 2004). In the past few years I have been asked to speak several times about my experiences as a transgender person, including experiences I've had with the mental health field. My own

experiences speaking and my research into this topic has led me to believe that this is an issue that is relevant to the present day. This study will hopefully aid professionals in better understanding the transgender population.

A second strength is this study addresses the importance of presenting transgender people in a healthy way. More and more literature is beginning to take this stance (Bockting & Cesaretti, 2001; Kolakowski, 1997), but there is still literature that presents transgender people as pathological, including in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-IV-TR* (2000). This study contributes to the growing body of literature that presents transgender people as healthy, functioning members of society that are much more complex than some research presents them as.

Another strength of this study is that it focuses on an important quality of life issue, which is spirituality and spiritual growth. Since religion and spirituality has a positive effect on health and well-being, it is important to understand how this phenomenon is experienced by transgender people. As previously mentioned, there have been very few studies that focus on transgender people and their spiritual and religious identities. This study contributes to the few studies there are about how spirituality is experienced by a group that has rarely been addressed by religious communities and scholarship. More research in this area is needed, as I found out as I was initially researching my topic. Very few studies address both transgender identity and spirituality.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to explore the limitations of this study. One limitation was that all participants identified as Christian, and were from the United States, which indicates that their

Christianity is Westernized. This gives us a limited view of the experiences transgender people have with religion, since no other religions were discussed. As I mentioned in my literature review, in some cultures and religions, transgender people are revered as spiritual beings (Jacobs, Thomas, & Lang, 1997). That experience of religion is far different than, for example, someone who has been told by their church that their identity is sinful. Future studies could incorporate a wider range of religions and spiritual beliefs, which could add to the findings of this study.

Another limitation of this study is the sample is predominantly white, non-Hispanic, with one participant identifying as Latina. Also, the sample was mostly male-to-female identified (n=4), with only one participant identifying as female-to-male. A different composition of participants, encompassing a variety of races, ethnicities, ages, socioeconomic statuses, and gender identities could result in different findings.

Implications for Future Research

There are several suggestions for future research based on the findings of my study, which could further expand my research questions. One suggestion is that the research could focus on a more diverse sample, featuring many genders, socioeconomic statuses, ages, races/ethnicities, and faiths. Another suggestion for future research is to explore how transgender participants were able to develop a sense of self-acceptance while coming to terms with and integrating religious beliefs. Understanding how transgender people go through that process could be helpful to other people struggling with similar issues.

Future research should further explore participants' direct experiences with church and faith communities, and how that influences their experience of religion. Some participants described leaving their church or visiting multiple churches to try to find a place where they

would be a welcome member. It would be interesting to learn more about the process of selecting and exploring a new church, denomination, or possibly a new religion, in order to feel comfortable at church. It would also be interesting to learn about the process people would go through to reconcile their current beliefs with the beliefs of their new church. Additionally, I suggest that future research expands beyond the examination of church attendance, and explores other religious practices and how they influence how someone experiences religion. For example, research could focus on the role of prayer and readings of Holy Scriptures in how someone reconciles their faith with their gender identity.

Another suggestion for future research is to explore relationally how clergy and church members have been inclusive to transgender church members. My current research question inquires about how transgender people think other might perceive them based on their (others') religious beliefs. Research that interviews church members and clergy could shed light on the process churches go through when taking an affirmative stance and welcoming a transgender member. Research exploring how transgender people are actually perceived by others at church might be helpful in understanding how transgender people are received at church. This could include research about how the church congregation has adapted to meet the needs of the transgender member. It could also include research about how clergy presents information about being transgender to their congregation and if that influences how church members view transgender members.

A final suggestion for future research is to explore therapists' competence and comfort in discussing religion and spirituality with transgender clients. Research shows that while most therapists believe religion and spirituality is important to therapy, they are not trained in how to

approach spiritual topics with clients, and feel uncomfortable with or unsure about talking with clients about spirituality and religion (Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, & Killmer, 2002). This coupled with therapist's lack of training on transgender issues (Lev, 2004) may prevent therapists from having conversations with clients about important topics that are central to their lives. There is a need for more research that explores how to better train mental health professionals to integrate the topics of spirituality and gender identity into sessions with transgender clients.

Clinical Implications

This study will be beneficial to mental health professionals, especially couple and family therapists, since faith and transgender identity are key aspects of personal identity. There is a growing body of mental health literature that does not pathologize transgender identity (Drescher, 2010). This study will add to the literature that is moving away from pathology, and focusing on the quality of life issues for which transgender people seek therapy. Religion is another aspect that is significant in the lives of most people, but there is little research about how faith is experienced by clients and how to incorporate clients' spirituality into therapy sessions (Knox, Catlin, Casper, & Schlosser, 2005).

This research will be beneficial for therapists working with a couple or family that has a transgender member, and families that feel discontent due to religious beliefs. Families often struggle when a member reveals that they are transgender due to lack of information or misinformation about transgender people (Ryan, Huebner, & Diaz, 2009). Families may be coping with the loss of the member's pre-transition identity, while simultaneously adjusting to the physical and social transition of the family member (Lesser, 1999). The family may be

struggling not only with the social ramifications of transitioning to another gender, but also with religious beliefs about gender. The family may even view any form of transitional surgery or hormone therapy as a rejection of what God created. Organizations that are anti-LGBT, such as Focus on the Family, reinforce the idea that transgender people are deviating from God's divine plan, citing Bible verses such as Genesis 1:27 and Mark 10:6 which states that, "God created them male and female" (Focus on the Family, 2008). These messages from religious-based organizations influence how families view transgender identity. For therapists to help families with these complex issues, they first need to have an understanding of both transgender identity and religion. This research will hopefully encourage clinicians to consider how they would handle such issues in an affirming and knowledgeable manner.

Conclusion

Very few studies have explored how transgender people experience religion. This study is distinctive because it explores not only how transgender people experience religion internally, but also how they think others view them based on their (others') spiritual beliefs. The findings both supported and challenged current literature. The literature indicated that negative responses and discrimination against transgender people contributes to becoming cut off from their religious institutions (Bockting, Knudson, and Goldberg, 2006; Lease, Home, and Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005). However, it seems that negative responses only prompted participants in this study to seek out church communities that would accept them. Participants indicated through their responses that religion was very important to them, and others would not influence them to give up their beliefs or change the way they worshipped. The findings were congruent with the existing literature in that beliefs systems remained important, even when participants were

rejected from certain faith communities. All participants discussed how important their beliefs remained in helping them find peace and support when they struggled with their transgender identity.

From this research, it is clear that the issue of spirituality is very complex and important for transgender people. The exploration of how transgender people experience religion and spirituality provides insight into the social perceptions they face, and how that affects their participation in churches. This research also provides insight into the social climate toward transgender people in organized religions. The contradictions in participants' answers reveal that positive or negative experiences with religion depends on the church climate itself—its stances on the issue of transgender identity and the makeup of its members.

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