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LGBTQ Experiences with Religion and Spirituality: Occupational Transition and Adaptation

Brenda L. Beagan &
Brenda Hattie

This paper explores how individuals experienced transition regarding spiritual or religious occupations after acknowledging identities as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ). Based on qualitative interviews with 35 self-identified LGBTQ people, it explores experiences of identity conflict and processes of transition, as well as meanings of spiritual or religious occupations. For some, transition occurred very young, for others not until adulthood. Some participants remained in the faith traditions of their upbringings, others adopted new faith traditions, many created personal relationships to spirituality, and a few abandoned anything spiritual. Those who left religions often lost faith, rituals, community, family connections, and specific religious occupational roles. Occupational adaptation took three forms: reducing participation and engagement; altering the meaning of engagement; or changing the occupation itself. The occupations participants identified as spiritual were both private and collective. While borrowing from diverse spiritual paths was common, so too was creating individualized spiritual practices. Spiritual occupations held a range of meanings for participants: enacting openness, truth, honesty, and authenticity; providing meaning; connecting with self and others; transcending the mundane; and ultimately, survival. Occupational transition is shown to entail exploration, competence and achievement, but also loss, abandonment, altered meanings, and revised or novel occupations.

Keywords: Sexual orientation, Gender identity, Religion, Spirituality, Occupational transition, Occupational adaptation

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Both spirituality and sexuality are under-explored topics in occupational science. This paper brings them together in an exploration of the experiences lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ)¹ individuals have with religion and spirituality. Many people experience conflict between an LGBTQ identity and any religion with which they identify, since many faith traditions

denounce homosexuality. When such conflicts arise, often through the process of 'coming out,' or acknowledging one's sexual orientation or gender identity to self and others, a fundamental transition may be occasioned as reconciliation is sought between conflicting identities. It is useful to examine this as an occupational transition, a process seen as central to the development of

coherent identity. This paper explores how individuals raised in various relationships to religions experienced transition regarding spiritual or religious occupations after coming out as LGBTQ. It adds empirical depth to theory about occupational adaptation processes.

LGBTQ, Occupation and Religion/ Spirituality

Religion is generally understood to involve an established collective tradition with common beliefs and practices, as well as teachings to guide the lives of adherents (Koenig, 2009). Spirituality is considered more self-defined, concerning individual relationships to self, the sacred, transcendence and wholeness (Blazer, 2009; Hill & Pargament, 2008). It may be expressed through a formal religion, but may also be expressed and experienced in completely personal ways. While religion is often a spiritual practice, spirituality does not always involve religion.

A growing body of literature suggests that sexual orientation influences occupational choice, engagement, meanings and contexts (Bailey & Jackson, 2005; Birkholtz & Blair, 1999; Devine & Nolan, 2007; Jackson, 1995, 2000). This has been demonstrated in occupations ranging from household financial management to choice of employment, and from engagement in social activism or leisure occupations to navigating family relationships (Bailey & Jackson, 2005; Bergan-Gander & von Kurthey, 2006; Birkholtz & Blair, 1999; Doan, 2010; Hines, 2010; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Williamson, 2000). Devine and Nolan (2007) argued that sexual orientation particularly influences “the symbolic aspects of occupation and the meanings individuals place on occupation” (2007, p. 159). A recent study with transgender participants suggests that individuals may be pushed toward or restricted from some occupations due to gender, but may also use gender-typed occupations to hide gender identity or to present convincing gender displays (Beagan et al., 2012).

There has been almost no exploration in occupational science of the relationship between LGBTQ identity and spiritual or religious occupations. In their study with transgender participants, Beagan et al. (2012) noted that one transwoman left her church during gender transition, experiencing the congregation as unwelcoming. Outside of occupational science there is considerable evidence that spirituality, and especially mainstream religions, are fraught with tension for many LGBTQ people (Barton, 2010; Dahl & Galliher, 2009, 2012; García, Gray-Stanley, & Ramirez-Valles, 2008; Murr, 2013; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Rodriguez, 2009; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Super & Jacobson, 2011). Most religions condemn homosexuality, and are ambiguous at best regarding gender transition (Kidd & Witten, 2008; Levy & Lo, 2013; Westerfield, 2012; Yip, 2005). Judaism, Aboriginal traditions, Buddhism and Hinduism tend to be experienced as most welcoming for LGBTQ individuals (Abes, 2011; Barrow & Kuvalanka, 2011; Porter, Ronneberg, & Witten, 2013; Schnoor, 2006; Westerfield, 2012), while Islam and Christianity are least (Barton, 2010; Jaspal, 2012; Rodriguez, 2009; Siraj, 2011, 2012; Super & Jacobson, 2011).

Despite the increasing openness of some faith traditions, conflict between sexual or gender identity and religious teachings has caused considerable pain and suffering, and lasting psychological and emotional harm, to many LGBTQ people (e.g., Bowers, Minichiello, & Plummer, 2010; Ganzevoort, van der Laan, & Olsman, 2011; García et al., 2008; Hattie & Beagan, 2013; Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005; Rodriguez, 2009; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Schnoor, 2006; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Barton reported that simply living in a ‘Bible belt’ region of the U.S. was described by gays and lesbians as a “spirit-crushing experience of isolation, abuse, and self-loathing” (2010, p. 477). Common concerns are low self-esteem, guilt, shame, depression, anxiety, fear of damnation, feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy, and suicidal ideation (Barton, 2010; Dahl & Galliher, 2009, 2012; García et al., 2008; Jaspal, 2012; Rodriguez, 2009; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Siraj, 2012;

Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Super & Jacobson, 2011; Westerfield, 2012).

Spirituality and Spiritually-Related Occupations

In occupational science, spirituality has been linked with meaning, purpose, motivation, interconnectedness, hope and essence of the self (Beagan & Kumas-Tan, 2005; Egan & DeLaat, 1994; Nesbit, 2004; Townsend & Polatajko, 2013; Unruh, Versnel, & Kerr, 2003; Wilding, May, & Muir-Cochrane, 2005). There is debate about the relationship to the sacred or divine (McColl, 2000, 2003). One study with African Canadians showed how the meaning and experiences of spiritually-related occupations are shaped by social context; in the context of racism and oppression, they were a source of community, connection, moral support and guidance, coping, healing and positive reinterpretation (Beagan & Etowa, 2011). For participants in that study, spirituality was almost uniformly equated with religion.

The experiences and meanings of spirituality and religion may be vastly different when they are thoroughly implicated in the oppression experienced by a social group, as is the situation for LGBTQ people. Evidence from other fields suggests that important processes of transition are required to resolve conflicts (Ganzevoort et al., 2011; García et al., 2008; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Schnoor, 2006). Some LGBTQ people recognize their minority sexual orientation or gender identity very young, others repress it as long as they can, and others do not recognize themselves as LGBTQ until well into adulthood. Whenever they 'come out' to themselves, for individuals involved in religious traditions, especially ones that openly condemn homosexuality or gender variance, a process of resolving conflict is required.

LGBTQ-Spiritual Identity Conflicts

Several studies have found similar patterns in how LGBQ Christians attempt to resolve such

conflict: rejecting a gay identity, rejecting a religious identity, compartmentalizing gay and religious selves, or identity integration (Ganzevoort et al., 2011; García et al., 2008; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Schnoor (2006) found similar pathways in his study with Jewish gay men. Processes are less clear for transgender people, but there is evidence that they change faith traditions at greater than average rates, leave religions altogether, or try out new faith traditions and spiritual paths (Kidd & Witten, 2008; Levy & Lo, 2013; Porter et al., 2013). When people attempt to reconcile conflicting identities, the transition can involve changing religions, reducing participation, or changing denominations or congregations within a religion, but it can also mean altering beliefs or relationship to beliefs (Barrow & Kuvalanka, 2011; Barton, 2010; Brennan-Ing, Seidel, Larson, & Karpik, 2013; Dahl & Galliher, 2009, 2012; García et al., 2008; Levy & Lo, 2013; Murr, 2013; Schnoor, 2006; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Siraj, 2012; Westerfield, 2012).

Occupational Transition, Adaptation and Identity

Occupational science has particular expertise in transitions, positing that transitions due to life change, accident or health crisis encompass change in roles, competences, occupations, meanings, environments, routines and relationships; they require adaptation and elicit identity shifts (Hon, Sun, Suto, & Forwell, 2011; Klinger, 2005; Luck & Beagan, 2014; Stone, 2005; Suleman & Whiteford, 2013; Vrkljan & Miller Polgar, 2001, 2007; Wiseman & Whiteford, 2009). Once change is occasioned – developmentally or through disruption – transition typically entails exploration and occupational experimentation, developing competences for new roles and realities, and finally achievement – acquisition of the skills and habits needed for full occupational participation (Kielhofner, 2008). Kielhofner (2008) suggested occupational adaptation is the process of establishing a positive identity through achieving occupational competence. The challenge of occupational adaptation is “to identify

and enact a self and a way of living that is experienced as good... and allows one to realize one's unique potentials, limitations and desires" (2008, p. 129). Disconnection from culturally dominant life course narratives poses challenges for identity development; Kielhofner used the example of "being homosexual" as one such source of disconnection, requiring adaptation and transition (p. 129).

Occupational transitions are not only a matter of exploration and achieving competence; they are also accompanied by potential loss, particularly when socially valued identities are disrupted, such as during retirement or driving cessation (Vrkljan & Miller Polgar, 2007; Wiseman & Whiteford, 2009). Even when occupations are not health-promoting, nor socially-sanctioned, their loss can shake identity (Kiepek & Magalhães, 2011). Resolution of identity conflicts is effected in part through adapting longstanding occupations (Luck & Beagan, 2014), and may entail abandonment of occupations experienced as less than central to identity (Unruh, 2004).

The transitions that are almost inevitably occasioned by coming out as LGBTQ within a faith tradition have never been studied as occupational transitions. This study does precisely that, asking how individuals raised in various religions, and various relationships to religion, experienced transition regarding spiritual or religious occupations after coming out as LGBTQ.

Methods

Approved by the Dalhousie University Research Ethics Board, this study used qualitative methods, which are ideal for exploring highly personal and variable experiences. Interpretive description is designed to explore direct experiences analyzed through an interpretive lens informed by theory (Thorne, 2008), in this case the theoretical concepts of occupational adaptation and transition (Kielhofner, 2008). Interpretive description emphasizes theoretical usefulness, seeking to produce a coherent description identifying thematic patterns and commonalities that

characterize the phenomenon being explored. Though it is philosophically aligned with constructivism and phenomenology, and borrows design elements from grounded theory and ethnography, its objective is less the production of abstract truth claims or theory than the illumination of conceptual realities for practical application.

Semi-structured interviews were used to discuss with participants both their experiences of religion and spirituality and the meanings those held for them. Participants were recruited through notices posted on LGBTQ websites and Facebook pages, in bars and community sites, as well as distributing advertisements through email networks. Recruitment was conducted within a mid-sized city on Canada's east coast. The response was overwhelming, and recruitment had to be halted at 35 people, when theoretical saturation was perceived to have been attained on most themes. Maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990) was used to ensure diversity in sexual orientation, gender identity, age, ethnicity, relationship to religion when growing up and current spiritual affiliation. Too much research in this area has been conducted with narrowly defined groups – just practicing Christians, or just bisexuals, or just gay men. We wanted to explore the ways people experience spirituality and religion within the full diversity of LGBTQ communities. Recruitment was intensified as needed to fill gaps in diversity. For example, when few Buddhists were volunteering, advertisements were sent to LGBTQ Buddhist contacts to forward.

Informed consent was discussed, and after participants provided their signed consent they participated in audio-recorded interviews lasting 1 to 3 hours. Interviews asked about LGBTQ identity and processes of disclosure; religion and spirituality while growing up; changes over time in LGBTQ identity and in religious/spiritual beliefs and practices; and integration of LGBTQ self and spiritual self, personally and in the broader LGBTQ community. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and coded using AtlasTi. Codes were

developed through regular team discussions to interpret transcripts. Individual transcripts were read and re-read, developing new codes as needed to capture what was going on in the data (Thorne, 2008). Initial coding remained broad, facilitating deeper analyses within themes. Further levels of analysis drew on coded data, but also returned to raw transcripts repeatedly, reading and re-reading, comparing across individuals, exploring patterns and divergent cases, eventually synthesizing and relating data with theory.

Interpretive description seeks rigor in many of the same ways as other qualitative methods. It does, however, grant primacy to the usefulness of the analysis produced. Claims produced are expected not only to be plausible to those with experience or expertise, as well as confirming experiential knowing, but also to illuminate new ways of understanding. Rigor was enhanced by having more than one researcher, with coder and analyst meeting regularly to discuss emerging interpretations. It was enhanced by using a systematic approach to coding and analysis that also attended to outliers, and moved beyond initial interpretations (Thorne, 2008). As a form of member-checking, a descriptive summary report was sent to all participants for individual feedback. Responses indicated that preliminary analyses resonated. Study results were also presented at two LGBTQ community workshops to assess the extent to which they resonated with the broader communities; again feedback was positive.

The team was comprised of two researchers, both identifying as LGBTQ. Both of us were raised in Christian traditions; one left her faith tradition as a young adult, one became far more involved, joining a Pentecostal church in her 20s. She was asked to leave the church in her 30s. One of us identifies as highly spiritual, the other less so. Our differing personal experiences and academic backgrounds (sociology, education and women's studies) provided checks and balances during data interpretation, enriching analyses with divergent perspectives. One author did most of the

interviews, both did initial coding and one author led further analyses and writing.

Participants

Pseudonyms were given to all participants, to protect confidentiality. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 68, distributed quite evenly across age groups (see Table 1). About 2/3 were Caucasian, somewhat less than the population of the region. Participants included 19 women, 11 men and 5 trans- or other-gender; 21 identified as gay or lesbian, 4 as bisexual and 10 as other. One transwoman identified as heterosexual. Five were raised in Jewish traditions and one with no faith tradition, the rest grew up in Christian traditions with varying degrees of intensity (see Table 2). Four had studied theology; participants included clergy as well as deacons and church elders.

Elsewhere we have reported on participant experiences with religions, their perceptions of

Table 1: Participant Demographics

| Participant Demographics | Number |
|--------------------------|--------|
| Age (years) | |
| 20–30 | 11 |
| 31–40 | 6 |
| 41–50 | 7 |
| 51–60 | 7 |
| 61+ | 4 |
| Ethnicity | |
| Caucasian | 23 |
| Jewish | 4 |
| Other | 8 |
| Gender Identity | |
| Man | 11 |
| Woman | 19 |
| Trans/queer | 4 |
| Other | 1 |
| Sexual Orientation | |
| Gay | 10 |
| Lesbian | 11 |
| Bisexual | 4 |
| Heterosexual | 1 |
| Queer | 7 |
| Other | 2 |

Table 2: Faith Tradition Growing Up and Current Beliefs

| Faith/Beliefs | Number* |
|---------------------|---------|
| Tradition Raised In | |
| Intensely Christian | 18 |
| Somewhat Christian | 12 |
| Non-Christian | 6 |
| Current Beliefs | |
| None | 8 |
| Spiritual | 8 |
| Christian | 7 |
| Other | 4 |
| Jewish | 3 |
| Buddhist | 3 |
| Pagan | 2 |

Note: *Adds to more than 35; one person was raised by one Jewish parent, one Christian parent

benefits and harms, their spiritual seeking and their perceptions of spirituality in LGBTQ communities (Beagan & Hattie, [under review](#)). Here we examine the process of transition regarding sexual/gender identity and religion/spirituality, and the effects on religious/spiritual occupations and identities.

Results

Identity conflicts and transitions

About half of the 35 participants experienced intense identity conflicts between sexual/gender identities and faith traditions. Five who were raised Jewish and one raised Atheist did not experience conflict, nor did those who were raised more nominally Christian. Some struggled with residual guilt or shame regarding messages they had encountered growing up that condemned homosexuality or gender variance, but internal tensions were not extensive.

For 18 of the 29 participants raised Christian, however, internal conflicts had been intense. They were typically raised in extremely Christian environments, heavily involved in church, youth groups, choir and Bible study. They led church camps, were altar boys, went to Bible College, became church elders or deacons and worked for their churches. Religion was talked about at

home, and often was central to family, schooling and community. Most were raised in Presbyterian, Baptist, Catholic and fundamentalist or evangelical faith traditions; two were heavily involved in the United Church.

Will, for example, attended both Presbyterian and Pentecostal churches, immersed in charismatic fellowship, day-long services, laying on of hands, speaking in tongues and altar calls (gay man, 30). Quincy attended an Adventist university, was an ordained elder in his local church, ran a Sunday school and adult Bible program and frequently preached (gay man, 38). Daniel and Peter (gay men, 48 & 59) were both raised in evangelical Christian sects requiring conservative dress, frequent church attendance and Bible study, abstinence from dancing and alcohol and little interaction with books, media or peers outside of church and extended family.

Transition occurred in different ways. Some accepted very young that they were LGBTQ, some struggled against it well into their 40s or 50s, and some did not recognize their sexual orientation until they were adults. While nine people stayed in the faith traditions of their upbringing, or something very close, even they experienced transition as they came to terms with intersections of LGBTQ identity and religious/spiritual identity. The other 26 left or changed faith traditions or spiritual paths. About half of those gradually drifted away, the others were forced out or left abruptly.

Transition and losses: Community, friends, family

The losses that ensued during transitions were often profound. Even some who left their faith traditions gradually lost friends and community, and sometimes family. Some mourned the loss of their faith, convinced God could not love them. Cathy left the Catholic church at 20, abruptly and in anger, then was left with a haunting sadness: "It was a big void. I always thought something was watching out for me. I always had someone to pray to; someone could see me all the time, according to my old belief. And suddenly, I didn't have that" (queer woman, 33).

Several people mourned the loss of church community. When Kyle was asked to leave his church at 16 because he was perceived to be gay, he felt totally abandoned: *"I'd never felt so alone in my life, and I'd never felt so unsupported in my life. ... I lost a lot, when I needed them the most... It really felt like my heart broke"* (gay man, 29). Participants described the connections in religious communities as passionately intense and difficult to replace. Those who were asked to leave a church because they were LGBTQ typically lost their entire social network. As Daniel said, *"The depth and the profound despair that there was for me, of being alone... how lonely it was"* (gay man, 48).

One participant particularly missed the rituals of church, and was uncertain how to raise her children with moral values in the absence of a formal religion. Others lost numerous organizational roles when they came out (or were outed) – clergy, secretary, outreach worker, youth group leader, choir, deacon, elder. Quincy lost his occupational roles as lay pastor, deacon and elder.

My spiritual life is about service, and there's nothing as powerful and enlivening, and as confirming of the presence of God and the power of God in our lives. Today, there's nothing like that for me, like standing in the pulpit and being the conduit of the Holy Spirit, declaring the gospel to His people. There's nothing more powerful than that. And that had been the foundation of my own spiritual life and study. And I have been deprived of that for 6 or so years. So it's, ah... (gay man, 38)

Loss of family connections was common. Some simply grew steadily more distant from family whose religious beliefs condemned homosexuality or gender variance: *"Even if I don't think I'm going to burn in hell, my parents still do"* (lesbian woman, 52). Others had more abrupt ruptures with family, with years or decades of estrangement. Clare noted how much her parents had missed during 15 years of no contact: *"I fell in*

love. I bought my first home. I got married. I had two kids... The absence is very profound. ... Then it becomes normal. And you get used to it" (lesbian woman, 51).

To be clear, many experienced leaving faith traditions as positive, though often mixed with more challenging emotions. Peter, for example, was shamed in front of his evangelical church and elders and asked to leave. He lost multiple church roles, his community and his family.

I got in my vehicle and drove away and it just felt like my whole life, everything I knew, went down the tubes. But within minutes, there was such a freedom, because it was so much struggle in trying to maintain something. ... [Now] I have exactly the same beliefs I had all my life.... But there's no mediator. There's no church there telling me how I connect with Him. It's so liberating. (gay man, 59)

Occupational adaptation

Occupational adaptation regarding religious or spiritual occupations took three forms: reducing participation and engagement; altering the meaning of occupational engagement; or changing the occupation itself.

Reducing participation and engagement

About a third of the participants gradually eased out of faith traditions. They moved away to study, work or live, and just gradually stopped attending. Some had already been struggling with the politics of their religions, such as Zionism in Jewish traditions, or positions on birth control in Catholicism. Some reduced their involvement because it increasingly felt obligatory or dishonest. Natasha (bisexual woman, 20) stopped attending while still in high school, because of homophobia: *"I could be a part of the church and go through the motions and just make people happy. But I just couldn't feel right being part of the church when they tell us that gay people are wrong."* Quincy (gay man, 38) reduced his leadership positions in his evangelical church, eventually withdrawing his membership, so the church

would not have to deal with the situation should he be 'outed' publicly.

Altering meanings of occupational engagement

Several participants altered the meaning of their spiritual engagements, by focusing less on scripture, doctrine and religious teachings, and more on the core values and beliefs of their faith traditions. As Deborah said, "*So much about Judaism for me is really rooted in the notion of tikkum olam, of healing the world and healing ourselves and those being intimately interconnected, and personal and political liberation*" (queer woman, 26). Some participants had studied multiple other faiths and belief systems, concluding that all major world religions share common core values such as love, respect, forgiveness, acceptance, joy and compassion: "*In any of the religions, it was love that kind of came through... really loving thy neighbour, honouring thy parents*" (Kyle, gay man, 29).

Some focused on their religion as providing a moral compass, guidance and direction: "*I'm a part of this group of people that are on this path, that we try to live an ethical, moral life*" (Isaac, gay man, 68). Others emphasized the history of religious institutions doing good works in communities. A few emphasized their personal relationships with a deity. Daniel, for example, eventually dismissed church teachings that condemned him to hell, focusing on God's love:

I had to decide 'What is it that God really thinks about me? Who am I, in God's eyes?' And I just started to accept the truth of what was the inner core of my being... Okay, this [being gay] is pre-destined. This was ordained... God didn't create a mess or crap, God didn't create bad things... and I am a creation of God. (gay man, 48)

Two distinctions were central to altering the meaning of religious occupations. First, people drew an important distinction between spirituality and organized religion: "*I do believe there's something bigger than me, than society, that unites us all. And that, I think is spiritual.... And I don't*

feel like I need to go to that building to find that" (Marie, lesbian woman, 47). Secondly, participants who remained involved with religions distinguished religious teachings from church doctrines: "*This is not God who has a problem with me, this is the Church*" (Jennifer, lesbian woman, 35). Those who knew theology well appeared to experience less conflict concerning LGBTQ identities. Participants who had completed advanced degrees in theological studies had no concerns about the state of their souls. They knew enough about theological ambiguities concerning homosexuality that they were untroubled by the spiritual implications of coming out.

Changing or adapting the occupation itself

While some participants reduced their participation in spiritual occupations, and others redefined the meanings, some changed the occupational engagement itself. They remained in a faith tradition but changed how it was done, changed faith traditions, or abandoned organized religion and crafted an individualized spirituality.

'Queering' the traditions: Nine of the 35 participants remained in the faith traditions with which they were raised, but changed how they engaged. Isaac (gay man, 68) stayed involved with Conservative Judaism, joining synagogue committees concerned with inclusiveness in rituals and prayer, as well as same-sex marriage. Deborah ceased to attend the Reform synagogue but maintained weekly prayer and ritual, respecting Jewish holidays: "*I don't work on Shabbos. And I do Shabbos davening every week and havdalah every week. And I honour all of the holidays in Judaism.*" She focused on 'queering' Jewish traditions: "*I sit with what I know to be the tradition and really sort through what makes sense for me. So I do a lot of like, queering everything, every ritual that I partake in.*" She held Seders with friends, collectively writing their own Haggadah, the guiding text:

We wrote our own, which was beautiful and really exciting, that really inserted ourselves

and was for ourselves. So like, queer the prayers and rethinking the language that we use. Queer the rituals themselves in terms of how we do them. (queer woman, 26)

Rather than leaving her faith tradition, she found ways to make it fit for her.

A few of the Christians continued to seek churches that welcomed them as LGBTQ people. Those who had been raised in more conservative traditions found welcoming churches less rigorous theologically than they wanted. This left them in a bind, torn between being satisfied theologically or welcomed as an LGBTQ congregant. Lee-Anne, for example, continued to see herself as Catholic, but rarely attended Mass (bisexual woman, 33). She attended a Baptist church that she considered comparable, which welcomed LGBTQ members. The first time she attended was overwhelming: *"I basically spent the entire Mass crying. Because like, all of a sudden, I was in the included... It was very, very powerful."*

Changing spiritual paths: Six of the 35 participants changed faith traditions, adopting ones they experienced as more welcoming to LGBTQ people. Three women had become Buddhists, having been raised Catholic or evangelical Christian. They spoke of Buddhist principles of living truthfully, accepting oneself unconditionally and each person being perfect the way they are. Beth maintained a daily practice of Qigong, meditating, chanting and praying to Buddhist deities and ancestors: *"I have a lot of different prayers and practices and chants and mantras"* (lesbian woman, 47).

Cathy also spoke of *"being dedicated to truth in my life"* (queer woman, 33), which she connected to paganism. She celebrated pagan holidays such as solstice and equinox and drew on tools learned from Buddhism and yoga in a daily meditation practice. Sam (gay man, 48) had also adopted paganism after rejecting the Catholic church. He and his long-term partner crafted personal rituals to mark seasons and cycles, and mark the passing

of loved ones. He and a small group of gay men occasionally did pagan rituals together.

An Aboriginal man, Bernie developed a strong connection with Aboriginal spiritual practices, after leaving the Catholic church as a teen. He identified as Two Spirit: *"It's like a gender identity. It's not what you present outside. You balance your male and female, perfectly, the two spirits within me, male and female"* (Two Spirit, 51). Following the "Red Road" (an Aboriginal spiritual and life path) and guided by elders, he did daily smudging rituals and regular sweats: *"It cleanses you, spiritually, physically, mentally."*

Crafting an individualized spirituality: More than half of the participants had crafted some form of individual relationship to spirituality. As Dale said, *"Spirituality is about being good and pure, and honest to yourself, and respect"* (gay man, 35). Some had drawn together elements from various spiritual paths. Paulina commented, *"I take part of everything I read and have kind of made up my own thing"* (queer woman, 22).

The most common source of spiritual connection was nature. As Peter said, *"I think I'm as close to God as anywhere on earth just sitting on a rock and hearing the water"* (gay man, 59). Sylvie described the way nature evoked transcendence for her:

Spirituality to me is... a part of what builds your foundation... It is something inside of you that you conjure up yourself. Some sort of power, strength, calmness, confidence, security, sense of 'Nothing is going to happen to me. I'm going to be all right.' ...For me, it's nature. I go to the beach and I love being around the water. I love looking at beautiful scenery. I love smelling the grass. I love smelling the air. It gives me a sense of ... there's just so much more, you know, there has to be, because the beauty and the power of nature is just so intense. (lesbian woman, 48)

Others also found time spent in nature helped them to transcend mundane daily preoccupations:

"I think it keeps me on track, like, whenever I get too caught up in mundane life" (Paulina, queer woman, 22). Saul went to the woods, a lake or the ocean when he needed to connect with his spirit: "The plants and animals don't judge me, gender me. I can go there and connect and not have to worry about negative transphobic, you know, infiltrations" (queer transman, 24).

The occupations of spirituality: The doing and the meaning

Whether they abandoned religion, reduced their involvement, revised the personal meaning of religious or spiritual occupations, transformed former practices or adopted/created new practices, occupational adaptations led to and were sustained through changes in the occupations participants considered spiritual. Some attended religious services, others connected with spirituality only in private. While ritual was key for some, for others spirituality infused mundane everyday occupations.

Most participants engaged in practices they considered spiritual, such as church attendance, meditation, yoga, chanting, smudging and sweats. Some needed quiet reflection, some took themselves to natural environments. Jardine found connection with spirituality through working in her garden, though she found the connection hard to articulate; she saw germination and plant growth as part of *"the magic of the world,"* saying *"I guess I respond to the energy of things"* (queer woman, 26). After years of community activism, especially around HIV/AIDS, Sam developed a personal ritual of talking to the stars at night, part meditation, part prayer.

That became my spiritual practice, was this night time conversation with the stars... We lost friends [to AIDS] ... And this idea that the stars are the embodiment of the souls of the departed came to me as, not necessarily literally, but as a symbolic representation. And so when I would talk to the sky, that's what I'm doing. I'm talking to the souls of those who have touched my life (voice breaks) and now have left... that was

spiritual practice. It brought me peace. It gave me a sense of being connected to something greater than myself. (gay man, 48)

A few of the younger participants engaged in New Age spiritual practices, such as tarot cards, palmistry and reading tea leaves. Aron, for example, began reading tarot cards while awaiting hormone therapy to begin gender transition. It became a daily ritual that helped him cope with depression and get through each day while waiting to see the endocrinologist: *"The waiting—Every day just felt heavier and longer and unbearable... feeling totally powerless"* (queer transgender, 23). Dayna deliberately courted mystic visions and messages, primarily through the use of sound:

I do my own rituals and I try to open myself up. I've looked at solfeggio harmonic sound. I'm really in tune with sound and so I do sound meditations ... There are frequencies, the lower ones, which I attune to, and they can bring me into other worlds. (woman-loving, gender-fluid, 48)

Sarah's ongoing spiritual practice was listening to or participating in sacred music, especially choral music, which she described as an expression of spirituality akin to prayer (lesbian woman, 53). Rick found numerous practices spiritual, as long as they involved groups.

I am just as happy sitting on a cushion with the Buddhists as I am singing a 400 year old hymn with the Catholics. ... It has to do with being with other people. ... Doing, focusing together. And it has something to do with— Do you know the concept of flow? It has something to do with flow and being with a bunch of people. (gay man, 48)

Clare, in contrast, required quiet solitary time for morning reflection focused on gratitude.

Lastly, in Cameron's self-constructed spiritual path, almost every occupation became spiritual,

as long as it was infused with intention and presence (bisexual woman, 38). She marked Christian holidays with her husband and son. She found spirituality in nature, as well as in yoga, music, meditation, self-reflection, journaling and burning incense. She saw ritual in sharing an evening prayer with her son, but also in washing dishes in what was formerly her mother-in-law's kitchen, feeling intense connection. She saw ritual in shaving her legs in the shower, *"That's a part of ritual preparation of myself for the day"* (laugh). She experienced sex as the most spiritually intense occupation, connecting with all of the senses to the Divine in a partner. Sam echoed this, saying that he cast off Catholic guilt and came to experience sex with his partner *"as a way of touching the Divine"* (gay man, 48).

The meanings of spiritual occupations

While the doing of spiritual/religious occupations sustained and facilitated occupational transition, the meanings people attributed to those occupations and their spiritual beliefs connected directly to the achievement (Kielhofner, 2008) of a reconciled identity. For a few participants who stayed involved with religions, spiritual occupations provided a sense of contribution. Isaac said of his role in the synagogue, *"this gives me a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment"* (gay man, 68). For several people, spiritual occupations helped them stay calm, grounded, emotionally stable, centered, clear, lucid and less caught in the mundane. Cameron's spirituality not only helped her deal with difficulties, but also deepened her joy, happiness and excitement: *"It helps me to open to life, open to change, open to diversity"* (bisexual woman, 38). Dayna commented that, *"Ritual is wonderful because that is what opens us. It unlocks us."* Sarah and Cathy described music as enabling emotional and spiritual opening:

Some sort of connection, some sort of like, opening, like, my chest is open. Because the tear usually starts in here, and I can feel like, my chest cave a little bit. And then it comes up and out. So, some sort of like, my heart is engaged. And I feel alive, maybe?

Yeah. It's unclear. It's hard to put language to it. (Cathy, queer woman, 33)

A few participants described spirituality as providing meaning and purpose to life. For Beth there had to be something beyond the mundane:

Life is pretty empty and meaningless without spirituality. In my belief system, all this is an illusion. It's all a dream. And if I don't find deeper meaning beyond going to the grocery store and watching a movie and, you know, making a buck and getting a pay cheque—I mean, it's like, it doesn't mean anything. I just don't feel like life has any meaning without spirituality. (lesbian woman, 47)

Beth's perspective was echoed by Aron, more than 20 years her junior. Raised atheist, Aron found that empty: *"That sort of perspective feels like a, within myself, feels like an absence. I would feel a lacking of something, or an emptiness"* (queer transgender, 23).

For a few participants, spirituality had been important for survival. Aron described being depressed, suicidal, drug-addicted and trapped in a dysfunctional relationship, and the significance of reaching *"the bottom and having to tap into something deeper, that's like, 'No, you can do this. Keep going.'"* For Will, religion was key to survival, despite having been shamed and denounced to his whole congregation.

There was times when nothing was there for me, when I felt alone, I felt abandoned by—I didn't feel like I belonged in my family. I didn't feel like I belonged in my church. But there was something there that was saying 'You know what? I love you. And it doesn't matter what you're going through. It doesn't matter what these people are telling you. I love you.' And that love got me through. And it saved my life. Because without it, I'd be dead. I don't even doubt that. (gay man, 30)

He credited his faith with keeping him alive, clean and sober and off the streets.

Finally, several people spoke of coming to terms with their LGBTQ identities as being spiritual, being about honesty and truthfulness, authenticity. Doris described acknowledging her lesbianism as a spiritual awakening:

When there's something that resonates, and resonates deeply,... it's like an instant text message from the Divine that there's something here that is of the Holy. There's a deep knowing within me, that I trust, which I didn't trust before. I'm sure it has something to do with this experience around the consciousness of my lesbianism. And the moving, and acting on that reality. It's when the Divine within is stirred, in a way that touches the heart, and then manifests in our living. The part of my being that was dormant, or repressed, for 40 years, that part of my being was stirred. And is it entwined with what I understand as my soul? I think it is. (lesbian woman, 64)

For Doris, living spiritually meant becoming all of who we are intended to be: *"As creatures we are to become, in the best sense of possibilities, who we were created to become. To be and to continue becoming who we are created to be,... to be fully who we are."*

Discussion

This study was enhanced by the reality that both researchers identify as LGBTQ, improving recruitment and rapport. The fact that we both have intense experiences with religion, are not currently aligned with any religion, yet strongly respect the value of religion and spirituality for many members of our communities meant we were able to elicit and hear complex and often painful narratives. On the other hand, we undoubtedly asked questions that arose from our own worldviews, although participants certainly did not always follow our lead.

The study is limited in that we recruited only participants who self-identified as LGBTQ. People who rejected that identity in favour of a

spiritual or religious one are missing, thus that transition narrative is absent. Participants also had something they wanted to say about religion or spirituality. Those who grew up in rather secular contexts, who remain unconnected to religion or spirituality, likely did not participate. The study took place in Canada, a country with relatively liberal legislation and with legislation protecting LGBTQ human rights. The results might be very different elsewhere. As a qualitative study with a self-selected convenience sample, the results cannot be thought to be generalizable or representative. Finally, there is an inherent limitation when *doing* is studied through self-report. While this is a beneficial way to explore meanings, and even trajectories during transitions, self-report is not ideal for studying actual doing. Yet, observing the spiritual occupations of strangers, especially individualized practices, would be rather invasive since they are usually inward-focused, deeply personal and often seek to transcend the mundane.

Nonetheless, there is a dearth of research from an occupational perspective on spirituality, sexuality and gender identity. More study is needed, particularly concerning the internal processes through which some people manage to stay in faith traditions despite doctrinal condemnation of homosexuality and gender variance. Different trajectories of transition also warrant further exploration; some participants 'came out' young, others well into adulthood, with differing impacts on their spiritual lives. Some gradually drifted away from religions, others fought hard to remain. Some adopted individualized spiritual practices and beliefs, others abandoned anything spiritual. The reasons for these differences in the transition process are not yet clear. Finally, the relationship between LGBTQ identity and spiritual occupations needs explication. If occupational transition and adaptation are part of enacting personal values and achieving coherent identity (Kielhofner, 2008), what happens for those who reject anything spiritual? Does their adaptation involve different forms of value expression?

Occupational loss and adaptation

All participants experienced some form of transition, changing their sexual, gender, religious and/or spiritual identities. Almost all faced significant losses. The results show some of the processes possible during this kind of transition. Occupational adaptation took three main forms: reducing or ending engagement, changing the occupational meanings, or changing occupations. The latter was sustained through doing: attending services of a former or new religion, rewriting rituals and prayers or forging new spiritual practices. Bringing the doing in line with their being helped participants to become more fully the identities they preferred. Spiritual/religious doing and adapting meanings were central to identity reconciliation. As Kielhofner (2008) said, adults engage in self-reflection and reassessment in a “process of knowing themselves, exploring the worth and meaning of their lives, and seeking to control the circumstances and direction of their lives” (p. 135). This resonates with not only the ways adapting religious/spiritual occupations and meanings contributed to survival for some participants, and living authentically for others, but also Isaac’s simple statement that his synagogue involvement “*gives me a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.*”

To be clear, not all participants experienced intense conflicts between spiritual and LGBTQ identities. It was largely dependent upon faith tradition and intensity of involvement (Super & Jacobson, 2011). Many left their faith traditions gradually, or abruptly. Some were asked to leave. As noted elsewhere, the loss of valued occupations may leave individuals feeling they are no longer valued members of society (Vrkljan & Miller Polgar, 2007). But in this instance, the occupations themselves, at least those connected to Christian faith traditions, were implicated in negating worth and value. Though people treasured their faith traditions, leaving was often experienced as liberating. Yet it was also accompanied by complex losses: loss of faith, moral guidance, community connections, family connections, ritual and service roles.

Some participants remained in the faith traditions of their upbringings, but altered the meanings or traditions, or reduced or modified their engagement. As has been found in previous studies, it seems helpful to identify where religious institutions may deviate from spiritual teachings, and/or distill a religion to core concepts or principles, such as love and compassion (Barrow & Kuvalanka, 2011; Barton, 2010; Brennan-Ing et al., 2013; Levy & Lo, 2013; Murr, 2013; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Siraj, 2012). Some of our participants abandoned any spiritual beliefs (see Ganzevoort et al., 2011), but most left specific religions in favour of other traditions (most notably Buddhism and paganism), or forged individual relationships to spirituality (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). In their worldwide survey of transgender seniors, Porter and colleagues (2013) found respondents significantly more likely than average to have left Catholic and evangelical churches, and significantly more likely to identify with a non-specific spirituality. In her study with Christian women, Murr (2013) found participants experienced a stronger sense of spirituality after leaving organized religions; some of our participants reported the same thing.

Occupational loss and adaptation were inevitably connected to identity (Phelan & Kinsella, 2009). On one hand recognition or acceptance of an LGBTQ identity led people to abandon or adapt their spiritual occupations; on the other hand, growing distance from a faith tradition sometimes allowed people to recognize or accept their LGBTQ identities. And for some participants, reconstructing what they understood to be spiritual was part of reinventing identities as moral people with worth and value (Kielhofner, 2008).

Spiritual occupations and meanings

The occupations people identified as spiritual ranged from attendance at church or synagogue, or formal roles such as preaching, to talking with the stars or simply being in nature. Not surprisingly in a culture moving away from organized religions, New Age activities were common, as were those drawn from Eastern spiritual paths such as meditation and yoga. Participants used

both solitary and group occupations in pursuit of spiritual connection. Noteworthy is the extent of 'spiritual seeking' evident in our sample. Only three people identified as not at all spiritual, one of whom described her relationship to music as sacred.

Previous studies have shown that spiritual occupations may help individuals cope with injury, illness and disability (McColl, 2000; Nesbit, 2004; Schulz, 2004; Unruh et al., 2003), as well as pain and addiction (Unruh, 2007). In their phenomenological study, Wilding, May and Muir-Cochrane (2005) found spirituality helped people with mental illness find meaning in life, providing a reason to live. Spirituality may provide guidance, connection to others, purpose and satisfaction in daily occupations and ways of overcoming alienation and despair (Schulz, 2004; Wilding et al., 2005). In a study of spiritual occupations among African Canadian women, Beagan and Etowa (2011) found spirituality was a central mechanism for coping with racism, providing hope, meaning and transcendence, as well as connection with spiritual others across time: "In the context of racism and oppression, communion with spiritual communities and ancestors allowed connection to a time-honoured tradition of using spiritual occupations to survive adversity, and make meaning from suffering... It helped them cope with the injuries of racism" (2011, pp. 286-287).

In the current study religion was a significant contributor to the suffering of LGBTQ people. Yet spiritual occupations were strongly connected to meaning, connection to others and connection to the deepest – and most authentic – parts of self. Living honestly and authentically as a deeply spiritual act is a novel finding of this study. This included acceptance of self through the process of coming out: "*There's a deep knowing within me, that I trust.*" For a few participants, spirituality kept them from suicide, or from losing themselves to drugs and street life, even when their own faith traditions were part of what drove them to despair.

Conclusion

The meanings and forms of spiritual occupations are highly affected by the collective histories of particular communities, and the role of religion and spirituality in those histories (Beagan & Etowa, 2011). In LGBTQ communities, mainstream religions have been (and continue to be) significant contributors to oppression and suffering. Thus many individuals leave faith traditions, or alter engagement. This inevitably becomes an occupational transition as they use occupational adaptation or change to cope with ensuing losses, or to alter the meanings of spiritual teachings such that they can incorporate LGBTQ identity while retaining previous faith affiliations. While abandoning spiritual occupations is always an option, for some the cost to identity is too great. In those instances, occupational adaptation appears helpful, reducing participation and engagement, altering meanings of engagement, adapting rituals and traditions, changing faith traditions or developing personalized spiritual practices.

Occupational transition is understood as involving change leading to exploration of new roles and occupations, development of new occupational competencies and eventual achievement of successful occupational engagement (Kielhofner, 2008). Empirical research such as this study suggests that the occupational adaptation entailed in such transitions may be accompanied by profound losses, and may result in abandonment of valued occupations, but may also be accomplished through altering meanings of occupational engagement and/or through significant change in the occupations themselves. Regardless, occupational transition and adaptation appear central to identity reconciliation. This result has implications for understanding occupational adaptation processes beyond LGBTQ communities, particularly for other marginalized groups.

End Note

1. We define these terms consistent with the definitions provided in a paper previously published in this journal (Beagan et al., 2012).

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