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Reconfiguring spirituality and sexual/gender identity: "It's a feeling of connection to something bigger, it's part of a wholeness."

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Abstract
In the context of religious and spiritual communities that may marginalize those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ), we explore how 11 women reconfigured potentially conflicting spiritual and sexual/gender identities. Interviews with women in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on Canada's East coast, indicated some used faith traditions to try to change themselves, but most found ways to disengage from or alter their spiritual relationships. Many losses were entailed as women rejected or were discarded by faith communities. In reconfiguring their spiritual lives, women drew from former traditions, explored new paths, and forged individual relationships to the spiritual.

Keywords: sexual orientation; gender identity; LGBTQ; religion; spirituality; identity strategies

Introduction

I have actually tried very consciously to create one world for me to live in, because this is who I am, this is the way I am.

This quote from a 29 year old participant in Ganzevoort, van der Laan, and Olsman's (2011, p. 217) study of young gay Christians highlights the struggle many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people face when their sexuality or gender conflicts with their religious or spiritual identity. Integrating identities can be a challenge.

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, wholeness (Blazer, 2009; Hill & Pargament, 2008). While a small number of research studies have shown negative correlations between religious or spiritual beliefs and mental health, the vast majority have found they are associated with improved stress coping and reduced depression, anxiety, suicide and substance abuse (Koenig, 2009). Religion and spirituality have been particularly important coping tools for some socially marginalized or oppressed groups. What happens, then, when religious or spiritual teachings are part of the oppression and marginalization of a group? In this paper we explore how Canadian women who identified as LGBTQ[1] addressed potentially conflicting aspects of self, reconfiguring their spiritual and/or sexual/gender identities.

Literature review

[1] The G in LGBTQ refers to gay, which is typically used to speak of gay men, as compared to lesbian women. Some women, however, prefer the term 'gay' to identify themselves, which was true of one or more of our participants. Thus we refer to LGBTQ women.

A growing body of literature links religion and spirituality with psychological well being, enhanced self-esteem, lower rates of depression, improved ability to cope with adversity, and reduced rates of mental health problems (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Koenig & Larson, 2001; Maselko, Gilman and Buka, 2009; Mattis, 2002). Ellison's (1994) work suggested that religious involvement provides a sense of meaning and purpose, reducing stress, as well as a network of individuals who provide social support and enhance feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. More pointedly, a number of studies have shown spirituality to be an effective means of managing stress (Kim & Seidlitz, 2002; Tuck, Alleyne and Thinganjana, 2006).

This can be particularly evident among members of socially marginalized groups (Iwasaki, Bartlett, MacKay, Mactavish and Ristock, 2005), where religion and spirituality have been correlated with improved coping, reduced depression and anxiety, and higher life satisfaction (Chen, Cheal, Herr, Zubritsky and Levkoff, 2007; Mela et al., 2008; Meltzer, Dogra, Vostanis and Ford, 2011). For example, spirituality and religion have been shown to have significant mediating effects on racism-related stress for African Americans. With socio-political roots in liberation and survival (Bannerjee & Pyles, 2004; Heath, 2006), spirituality, the church, and the Bible have historically served as transgressive and transformative spaces (Mattis, 2002). For African Americans, involvement with spirituality tends to correlate with better mental health (Utsey et al., 2007), higher degrees of emotional resilience (Alawiyah, 2011; Brodsky, 2000; Lawson & Thomas, 2007), and reduction in the stress effects of racism (Beagan, Etowa and Bernard, 2012; Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002).

Religion and spirituality may be less helpful in alleviating stress related to marginalization when religious teachings are in fact part of that marginalization (Bozard & Sanders, 2011). Instead of being a source of solace and support, religious communities are often

oppressive environments for those who identify as LGBTQ (Henrickson, 2007). Some religions condemn homosexual behaviours as sinful, unnatural and impure (Yip, 2005), though the extent to which that perspective becomes a broader cultural ideology varies (Adamcyk & Pitt, 2009).

Canadian context: changing views on religion and homosexuality

LGBTQ human rights are very advanced in Canada (see Canadian Heritage, 2012). Since 1985, discrimination has been prohibited under Section 15 of the federal Charter of Rights and Freedoms; a 1995 federal court ruling (Egan *vs* Canada) added sexual orientation to the prohibited grounds for discrimination. Most provinces and territories also include sexual orientation in their human rights acts. A federal bill (Bill C-389) to add gender identity to the prohibited grounds for discrimination under Section 15, thus protecting the rights of transgender persons, has been under debate since 2005 (see CPATH, 2011). It was approved in the lower house of the government in 2011, and was awaiting approval in the Senate when an election was called; a new bill has now been introduced. Due to Section 15 protections, marriage restrictions were ruled discriminatory and same-sex marriage was legalized in 2005 (see Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2010). None of these human rights changes occurred without opposition, often rooted in or expressed through religious beliefs.

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms grants all Canadians the right to practice their religion of choice. Influenced by French and British colonial heritage, however, Canada remains decidedly Christian in character (Reidel, 2009), with self-identified Roman Catholics constituting 44% and Protestants 29% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2001). While religion is an important predictor of attitudes regarding homosexuality (Olson, Cadge and Harrison, 2006; Rowatt et al., 2006), that relationship depends on cultural context (Adamczyk & Pitt,

2009). In Canada, a 40-year history of official multiculturalism has had a mediating effect on the relationship between religion and attitudes toward homosexuality. Reidel (2009) argues that opposition to same-sex marriage based on religious grounds was unsuccessful because to accede to it would have "amounted to violating the deeper commitment to individual rights and human rights as interpreted by the Charter" (p. 261).

At the same time, in recent decades LGBTQ communities have gained social and political power, facilitated by broader social shifts toward sexual liberalism, progressive legislation, and the increased "sophistication and effectiveness of secular and religious/spiritual lesbian and gay politics" (Yip, 2010, p. 36). A number of religious communities in Canada have responded by declaring commitment to LGBTQ rights and members, most notably 'affirming' congregations within the United Church of Canada. Significantly, however, the Roman Catholic Church continues to condemn homosexuality and the Anglican Church – the third largest Protestant church in Canada – does not permit the blessing of same-sex marriages. Needless to say, current religious stances regarding homosexuality, homosexual religious leadership, and same-sex marriage did not come about without extensive debate and controversy. Thus the current context for LGBTQ Canadians is one of increased acceptance in many religious domains, tinged with the memory of recent airing of often-entrenched and vociferous arguments on either side of passionate debates. The rights, moral status, and value of LGBTQ persons and relationships have been heatedly discussed in public forums.

LGBT, religion and spirituality: bricolage?

Conflict between religious/spiritual identities and sexual identities experienced by many LGBTQ persons have been associated with depression, internalized homophobia, anxiety and suicidal

ideation (Lease, Horne and Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Many who identify as LGBTQ respond to homophobic religious environments by leaving in order to assert their sexual identities (Henriskson, 2007; Lease et al., 2005). As Wilcox (2002, p. 498) asks, "How do those whose religious identity is denied or challenged by leaders and communities re-integrate the sundered aspects of the self-image?"

A recent study out of the Netherlands suggests that when religious/spiritual and sexual/gender identities collide some LGBTQ individuals experience alienation from their bodies, their sexuality, and significant others, while others experience alienation from their spiritual selves and spiritual well-being, potentially struggling with guilt and shame (Ganzevoort et al., 2011). Ganzevoort and colleagues (2011) closely examined the identity struggles of ten young homosexual Christians. To resolve the tensions between religious and sexual identities, some emphasized religious affiliation and downplayed or rejected their sexuality. They saw homosexual actions as lapses into sin, something to be overcome, or something secretive and unconnected to their identity. Some did the opposite – rejecting their religions, denying spiritual or religious selves, and highlighting their sexual identities. Any lingering sense of a spiritual self was played out in secret. Others stayed active in both LGBTQ community and religious community but kept these very separate. A few integrated the two, insisting on both identities, though this might mean changing churches.

Interestingly, those who were most able to reframe conflicts between their religious and sexual identities were those who adhered to a religious discourse of personal choice and responsibility, rather than one of obedience to the Bible and homosexuality as sin (Ganzevoort et al., 2011). Similarly, in their study of gay and lesbian churchgoers, Maynard and Gorsuch (2001) found intrinsic motivation, personal religion and private devotions were significant. Wilcox

suggests that a broad "societal shift toward religious individualism may facilitate LGBT Christians' efforts to create coherence between their religious and sexual or gender identities" (2002, p. 500). Rather than rule-books, she argues, religions have become resources to be drawn upon – or not – as needed and desired. In her study of 72 LGBT Christians and former-Christians, participants 'sifted' through religious messages to find interpretations and practices that they could reconcile with their sexual or gender identities. Wilcox suggests spiritual individualism is a necessity for LGBTQ persons.

While some argue that a societal shift away from institutionalized religion marks increasing secularization, others argue that this is not necessarily a secularizing trend, but rather the development of a privatized, individualized spirituality (Buxant, Saroglou and Tesser, 2010). Increasingly, individualized beliefs and practices are incorporated in the spirituality of both religious attendees and those who do not adhere to a faith tradition (Wilcox, 2002), in a form of "free-lance spirituality" (Buxant et al., 2010) or spiritual *bricolage* (Savastano, 2007). In Canada, while public religious participation has been declining steadily, with only a third of Canadians regularly attending religious services, over half of all adults report engaging in religious activities on their own (Clark & Schellenberg, 2006). For LGBTQ individuals, as they draw upon those beliefs and practices they find helpful, inspiring, and meaningful (Savastano, 2007), they may find possibilities for reconfiguring spiritual or sexual/gender identities that lead to greater wholeness (Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Wilcox, 2002). In this paper we explore the ways 11 LGBTQ women reconfigured their spiritual lives and/or their sexual/gender identities in a small city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, on Canada's East coast.

Methodology

In a larger project, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to explore aspects of health and well-being with 19 women who self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ). From that sample, nine women discussed spiritual health in some detail. That sub-sample of nine interviews was selected for this analysis.

The study drew on interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997), in particular queer phenomenology (Ahmed, 2006), which retains the detailed explication of concrete experiences, but incorporates specific attention to that which is relegated to background, those aspects of the social world that are unconscious because they are deemed irrelevant, impossible, or have never been noticed. The interview guide was developed by the larger research team, which consisted of five variously-identified LGBTQ women, based on our own knowledge and expertise as well as existing literature. It was tested within the team, and – in keeping with qualitative approaches – continued to develop throughout the project in response to previous interviews and emerging analyses. The interview guide focused on health and well-being broadly, but included discussions of 'coming out,' and the relationship of LGBTQ identity to physical, mental, spiritual, emotional and social health and well-being. As is usual in qualitative interviewing, when participants showed interest in a topic, the researchers followed their lead, exploring it more fully. Thus for nine of the 19 women, spirituality became a more significant focus. In keeping with the self-reflexivity demanded in qualitative research, the two authors also interviewed each other, following the same interview guide; our own stories were incorporated as data, subject to the same analytic processes as the other nine interviews.

Recruitment was conducted through advertisements, posters, word of mouth and snowball sampling. Participants had to self-identify as LGBTQ. Following informed consent discussions, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were coded

thematically, using an iterative process that moved back and forth among transcripts, comparing and contrasting, as well as looking closely at outlying cases (Boyatzis, 1998). Qualitative data analysis software Atlas/ti was used to facilitate team analysis. The initial broad code of 'spiritual health' was divided into codes such as religious teachings, responses to messages, experiences of community, and so on. Those are the basis for this analysis.

To enhance rigor and trustworthiness, initial coding of all data was begun only after the whole team thoroughly discussed several interview transcripts. A code list was developed by consensus, and was open to revision throughout the study. At several points, the whole team coded the same transcripts to check that we were still interpreting the codes and the data consistently. Differences were thoroughly discussed. As spiritual health emerged as a theme of interest, after the full set of transcripts had been coded the first author engaged in further, more detailed coding of related transcript passages, which was checked by the second author. Further refinements of the analysis were made by both authors in consultation during the writing stages. All participants were sent summary results of early analyses.

Including our own interview data in the analyses required particular attention to reflexivity. Each of us coded the other author's transcript. In many ways, having been interviewed ourselves meant our biases and preconceptions were more readily evident than usual, in that they were recorded in writing. Our personal experiences differed substantially from each others', providing a kind of check-and-balance during data interpretation, as well as enriching analyses with diverse perspectives. We also explored our emerging interpretations with the rest of the larger team, to ensure we were not imposing analysis on the data. We carefully attended to counter-messages in the data, things that contradicted our perceptions, or surprised us, to ensure we were not silencing particular views.

Participants ranged in age from 23 to 62 years, with three in their twenties and thirties, four in their forties, and four in their fifties and sixties. All were given pseudonyms. One woman self-identified as African-heritage, one as Jewish, and the rest as white of European heritage. One participant identified as a transwoman not really interested in sexuality, one self-identified as bisexual or lesbian depending on context, two identified as queer, and seven as lesbian. One woman had been raised Roman Catholic, one Jewish Reform, two Anglican, four United Church, one African Baptist, one Calvinist, and one Salvation Army. As adults, one woman raised in the United Church and another raised Salvation Army had converted to Pentecostal churches, though both later left or were asked to leave. At the time of the interviews, a few participants were exploring Buddhism and one attended a Baptist church though she was also a member of the Metropolitan Community Church, founded to serve the spiritual needs of LGBTQ people.

Results

Impact of Homonegative Religious Teachings/Practices

Of the three women under 40 who spoke about their spirituality, only Rachel (23 years) directly addressed the issue of religious teachings. With roots in the Jewish Reform tradition, her experience was that queer identity and Jewish identity were completely compatible:

> When I was growing up the rabbi was queer. He wasn't out about it, but he was queer, everyone knew he was queer, it was just like not really talked about. ... It just wasn't a big deal. …So, I never really had that experience of negotiating [conflicting identities], like coming from a reformed Jewish background that was never an issue, negotiating the two.

Rachel's experience stands in stark contrast to the narratives of most of the women over 40, for whom the impact of homonegative religious teachings was much more salient.

For some women, such teachings were overt, as was the case for Catherine (46 years,

raised Roman Catholic): “I grew up knowing that sex outside of marriage is evil and sinful, and you’ll go to hell for eternity, let alone homosexual sex.” Arlene (27 years), raised in the United Church, was most troubled by her partner’s experiences growing up in a Roman Catholic tradition and the fact that family members still believed the church’s teachings. Raised in the Anglican Church, Jennifer (53 years) described less explicit homonegative teachings: “We wouldn’t have had overt kind of, ‘This is wrong’ things, it wouldn’t have been labeled, but you would have heard this is what’s right and basically anything else wouldn’t be right.” She also said, however, “It would have been a moral failing to be gay or lesbian.” In the Baptist church, Ella (45 years) described the “barriers” to being an out lesbian as, “Folks who somehow suggest that the Bible is limiting them from treating gays and lesbians as human beings.” Kim (44 years, raised United Church) spoke more broadly of not feeling “welcome at the church.”

Beth (52 years) had been raised in the United Church but converted to a Pentecostal faith when she was 21 years old. There, she received overt messages that being gay or lesbian was sinful. At one point her late thirties she was told explicitly that affection between women was not acceptable. She and another woman in her church had developed an intense, non-sexual friendship:

> The associate minister noticed the affection one day in church and called me into the office and…said that she saw in the other woman a viper who was trying to consume me and that this was of the devil and that we needed to cease and desist, forthwith…We were told to not have associations with one another, and we had to sit on opposite sides of the church and not have any fellowship together.

Some of the women had been very involved in church activities at different points in their lives. Ella’s father was “a Baptist minister and so we grew up very, very, very much involved in the church.” She was involved in the top levels of the Baptist youth leadership. Catherine and her sisters had formed the church choir in her rural parish the whole time she was growing up. For

Kim, teaching at a United Church summer camp had been highly significant until "a difficult experience at the church camp where I was outed part-way through the last summer."

Bible schools figured prominently in the lives of three women, Beth, Ella and Corrie. Feeling called to the ministry, Beth enrolled at a Bible college. Her experience there served to highlight an emerging sexual attraction to women.

> I went to Bible school and there was a girl, a young woman and I remember having a crush on her, thinking "Oh man, this is not good!" …I left Bible school thinking, "I've got some problems, I have a problem here."

Ella had a similar experience. Deeply involved in the Baptist church and planning to enter the ministry, Ella had "dealt with conflicted feelings for quite some time." While attending Bible School she had her first relationship. She struggled a great deal, "feeling like 'Wow, if they knew what the real story was,' so there was all that angst and stuff going on." Once the truth emerged, and after a fraught process, "ultimately, I was actually asked to leave the church, so really that's a book's worth of stories." Corrie's story differs from Ella's and Beth's in that her faith foundered while at a Christian college for three years. She started a sexual relationship with a woman, but neither she nor her partner identified as lesbian. Nonetheless, her identity as a Christian suffered: "My faith broke down while I was there."

Responding to homonegative teachings

Women's responses to the teachings of their religious institutions varied, but the dominant pattern, true for just over half of the participants, was a strong sense of alienation from institutionalized religion. Only one participant still had an active engagement with a religious community. Some women had tried to change their gender or sexual identity, some had abandoned a spiritual identity altogether.

Two of the women had at various points tried to change themselves to fit with their

religious or spiritual beliefs. Mya (62 years) was born male-bodied, but knew from the age of four that she was a girl inside. Raised in the Salvation Army, she recalled at the age of seven being furious with God:

> I was asking God to sort out my gender issue, and of course it wasn't happening… I was going home one day and…I stopped on the pavement, you know, and I'm like this [shaking fist] at the sky… "You've got all the answers for everybody except me!"… God and everything just faded out of my life at that point.

Like Mya, Beth's initial response to her attraction to women was to ask God to change her. After leaving Bible School, a growing attraction to a woman at work left her devastated.

> One day after work I came home and I was in the bathroom…and I looked at myself in the mirror and said, "You know, you're a lesbian and that is not a good thing." It was just a really horrible realization. Bad, dirty, perverted, ugly.

Beth began a long journey of trying to become "holy enough for it to go, or for me to gain control of it, ... to never be attracted to women." At one point she told a church leader about her sexual attractions, and engaged in a process "called deliverance which Catholics call exorcism." It was very intense and frightening: "She laid hands on my head and cast it out and she said she saw it leave. And I thought 'That's good, that's dealt with!" Eventually, however, she "recognized that it hadn't gone."

Beth's quest to become "holy enough" meant praying a lot, reading the Bible, attending every church function: "just immerse yourself and essentially live like a nun." She went through years of psychotherapy and, ultimately, a week-long "get straight" camp sponsored by a Christian ministry in the 'ex-gay' movement. When that did not 'fix' her, at age 38 Beth "began to feel depressed and despair, and it turned into a crisis of faith. If God is so wonderful, why is he not healing this? ... I was afraid of going to hell."

While both Mya and Beth initially focused on trying to get their religions to change them,

the other participants focused on various ways to disengage from faith traditions. Zoe (35 years), raised in the United Church, simply walked away, rejected her Christian upbringing: "I kind of spent my life saying 'I don't need spirituality' and equating spirituality with religion." Arlene (27 years), who also grew up in the United Church, simply did not "really identify all that much with God," though she still got angry at the messages she heard from some churches. Una (51 years, raised Anglican) simply said she had stopped attending church: "We don't go to church…I live across from the church, I haven't gone to church in a long time."

Two participants, Catherine and Jennifer, described distinctly rational processes of disengaging from their faith traditions. Jennifer began questioning the teachings she heard from the pulpit of her Anglican church as a young adolescent "maybe age 12 or 14":

> I'm sitting in church arguing in my own head with what this man is saying. And I'm thinking, "That's very narrow-minded, that's an awfully terrible way to look at people or human nature or think that God would only love you if you're this," or, I thought, "That doesn't seem very credible." 'Cause the evidence seemed to be sparse.

As an adult negotiating her sexual identity within the context of religion, "logic" eventually won out. She came to realize that "churches are cultural institutions, they're political and they're about power" and therefore subject to human interpretations and misinterpretations:

> You have a perception, as do I, of how to live, what is a good life, how to live a good life. But the religions that would make statements that you can't possibly be a good person because you are lesbian, to me sound absolutely ridiculous, just as a notion…logically that can't be so. I think all these rules around who you're allowed to love and all of that, those are human constructions, that's not some kind of universal truth, and most people who are deeper thinkers in any religious tradition understand ambiguity and complexity.

Once she saw religions as human constructions she decided to ignore them, because they "don't speak for the person upstairs." Seeing "most religions" as "tyrannical,... unforgiving,... unaccommodating, ... unfair," Jennifer let go of teachings about the moral failings of gays and

lesbians: “Logic tells me that I shouldn’t let that have much space, so I’ve largely let it go. So I don’t participate in organized religion.”

Similarly, Catherine, raised in an “extremely Catholic” family, and exposed to “major Catholic stuff, anti-feminist, anti-homosexual” teachings, had doubts early on: “I was pretty sure the ‘I’m an evil sinner’…stuff that was being force fed to us was not true. I don’t know where I got that and I’m really glad I had it.” She described herself as being “a critical thinker and a logical thinker.” As an adult, she too came to see religions as human, cultural institutions. In her early 20s, around the same time she was beginning to realize she was lesbian, she walked away from Catholicism.

> I’ve never understood why anyone would want to be part of the Church, once they’ve come out…I can kind of, in my head, understand that if you believe in a God, you have to find some way to reconcile that He still loves you or something. But…a faith that so thoroughly disowns me, why on earth would I want to be part of that?

While some women tried to mobilize their religions to change their gender or sexual identities, others used their sexual and gender identities to change their relationships to religion. These women left their faith traditions when LGBTQ identities became stronger or clearer. They experienced a loss of faith. For example, Corrie, who had been sexually involved with a woman in college without considering herself lesbian, experienced what she called a breakdown of faith. A few years later, experiencing a “huge crush” on another woman, she realized she was lesbian. Initially shocked, she quickly came to own the identity: “It was like a little explosion in my heart.” Her lesbian identity intensified her loss of faith, and she found religious teachings “upset” her too much; she stopped attending church.

Mya, who had asked God to help in her gender struggles, then drifted away from religion, returned to it as a young adult when she got married in the Catholic Church. She told her wife

soon after that she was a woman in a man's body, and they agreed she would not act on this until their children were grown. She hid her transgender identity for over thirty years, during which she was constantly "searching for the Lord." Mya and her family went from church to church, searching for community, eventually settling in an evangelical church. Though she answered an altar call, she said, "I always kept my distance because I always felt like some day it's going to come to pass, and I'm going to change gender and…these people aren't going to agree with it." Once her children were grown, she began to come out as transgender, and lost that church community: "I quit church and then about a year later my spouse quit church, ah, because I changed gender and that killed– Anyway." She was very clear that although she left her church, it was not voluntarily: "If I hadn't left, the church would have kicked me out, there's no two ways about that... They don't see me as a person, in terms of the gender that they think should be there."

Finally, two women were asked outright to leave their churches. As was discussed above, the Baptist church asked Ella to leave after it became clear she was lesbian. Beth was also eventually asked to leave her church. Having returned from "get-straight camp" still feeling attracted to women, she tried to stay in the church, despite a crisis in faith. At age 39 she had her first lesbian relationship. When she told her minister, she was ordered to end the relationship: "I was going to go into heavy pastoral counseling and be watched closely. And of course I didn't break it off, I tried but you know there's no breaking it off." Eventually a church member discovered her relationship and the minister accused her in a confrontation that left her "terrified and traumatized." She had to be publicly rebuked, confessing her sins at a congregational meeting, then she resigned from the church.

Residual Injuries and Losses

Having struggled with homonegative messages from their faith traditions meant some of the women faced considerable hurts and losses. None of these women had rejected their LGBTQ identities (c.f. Ganzevoort et al., 2011), or they would not have been part of our study – recruitment required LGBTQ self-identification. Most had lost any connection with a particular faith tradition, and some talked about loss of meaning, prayer, and community. Some also spoke of disconnection from family.

The loss of a religious tradition, for many women meant loss of a spiritual life. Corrie had left the Christian Reform Church, but felt dissatisfied, unfinished:

> [It's] one of those things that's just kind of left hanging in my life, one of those things I think oh one day I'll get back to it. I don't feel great about the way I left the church when I was younger. I feel like it was a decision I made with my heart and that it's, it's ah, I wonder if it wasn't the most intelligent thing for me to do. That somehow there's a part of my mind that feels dissatisfied with that decision.

Catherine talked about going through an anti-Christian phase – "Not just non-Christian, but actively anti-Christian" – then realizing she missed some things she had cut herself off from, like Christmas carols. Beth found not feeling able to pray a huge loss:

> I miss not being able to pray for people when I'm feeling they need support and I can't give it personally but I still feel like I want to support them. That's something I struggle with, is how do I do that now? It is missing. [During a very hard time] I didn't even think of praying, and it was like a dead end and it was very– It was very silent. And I was sad about that.

For these women, loss of beliefs, loss of comfort, and loss of rituals were significant. As Beth said, "There's no God and that's that and it was sad, like a divorce, or death."

Mya experienced tremendous sense of loss concerning the meaninglessness of any kind of rituals concerning death. The sense of not fitting, not belonging, not being welcome as she was, she anticipated continuing until after her death:

> Because of my change in gender and everything else, I say when I die, get them to pick my body up, take it away, burn it, stick it in a general hole, you know they

> can argue among themselves what the ashes represent. ... Do we put Mya up there or do we put the previous name up there, you know? Maybe we put both of them on there? Would they allow it even? Whereabouts would you get buried? And, I said the hell with it... I don't want you to have a church service or anything like that. It doesn't mean I don't believe in God, don't mistake the two.

To whatever extent the thought of a Christian burial would have offered comfort or solace to Mya – and her family – she felt she had to reject that to be true to her gender identity.

Loss of community was very significant for some of the women. Some walked away from faith communities as they were entering other new communities, such as a university or a new city, so the loss of community was less difficult for them. But Kim, for example, who had worked at a church camp for years, never went back after she was 'outed': "Which was a huge loss for me 'cause there was a real sense of community in that job, you're there for the whole summer with the same people, right? So that was a huge sense of loss." In leaving her church, which had been central to her and her spouse's life, Mya lost her social community as well. After she began transitioning, only one member of the church ever came to visit them. Beth, whose paid work and social life were also wrapped up in her Pentecostal church, lost not only that community, but her willingness to connect with communities at all:

> I do miss the community piece, now it's disparate pieces in groups. I don't feel like I'm a part of a community. However, when I left the church, I said I will never invest myself heavily in one group again. I will make sure I have many friends, or a few friends and many acquaintances over a broad spectrum of organizations and whatever.

Several years later Beth still resisted joining any groups: "I shy away from it. I almost feel an aversion to group anything."

Loss of family connections was also quite common when women disengaged from the faith traditions of their past. For some these were smaller losses, for others greater. Arlene, for example, spoke about the sadness and anger her partner felt knowing her Catholic family

members – "people that she loves and spends time with, or she grew up with" – believed their church's teachings about lesbians. Una did not attend church, though she had an uncle who was a minister in the church across the street from her home. She described a family rupture after she came out: "I had one aunt that didn't speak to me for six months 'cause I hurt [my former husband] and he ran to them 'cause her husband is a minister."

Catherine also described a period of silence with family. Tiring of "the letters preaching fire and brimstone and eternity in hell," she asked her parents not to write if that was all they had to say. They stopped writing, and she was not in touch with them for a few years. Though she was fairly close with family at the time of the interview, she said it was mainly because she stopped needing anything from them. When he died, her father had never met her partner of ten years. A decade later Catherine's mother still struggled to acknowledge her relationship, and when Catherine married her lesbian partner, their marriage was rejected as a farce by both her mother and a sister who was becoming a Catholic nun.

Corrie most clearly linked the religion of her upbringing to connection with family. She saw her rejection of their faith tradition as rejection of her parents:

> There is I guess some legacy from my parents that I've just rejected and I wouldn't and don't want them to feel that. You know whether they're – they're in their 80s now – whether they're alive any more or not, but it's like it's something that will always have an influence on me, what they taught me and what they believe.

Impact on Mental Health

The women who self-selected for our study on experiences of health and health care did not describe significant effects on mental health from their struggles with LGBTQ and spiritual identities. Ella referred to "the whole crazy-making scene of being closeted, regardless of whether one has Christianity in their life or not." Corrie still struggled with a sense of

incompleteness, lack of resolution concerning her spirituality and faith. She had been working with therapists for about 20 years, though it was not entirely clear why:

> A lot of it is trying to, I guess it's connected to the issues that I talked about in terms of sexuality and being a woman ... and not feeling like I'm really doing– Wondering am I really fulfilled in what I'm doing or could I be doing something that– Could I be a better person I suppose, the thing I always ask myself.

When asked what being a better person meant to her, Corrie returned to the religion of her upbringing:

> I have a sense that I could be a better person than I am, and I imagine, when you repeat it back to me, that has everything to do with my religious upbringing because this idea of being good, was a really important one to me as a kid.

Catherine spoke about aspects of repression; growing up lesbian in a very Catholic family, she did not feel a lot of guilt, or concern about sin and hell, but she did know that much of what she thought and felt were not safe to express. She thought that she had learned not to feel emotions.

> I knew that it was not safe to be out and not to even think in those terms, so I just didn't feel attraction to anything. Emotional health, what that meant, is that I learned really well, how to– not even repress emotions as far as I'm aware, but I don't even *have* them. So it's not like I'm experiencing huge anger and I stuff it away. I don't even experience it, so that's detrimental to emotional health, as a result of spiritual stuff.

She also described herself within her Catholic family as largely silent: "Knowing I disagreed with what they said and knowing it was not safe to talk about that. ... So I was the silent kid. Growing up I didn't talk."

Beth's struggles with the Pentecostal church had profound effects on her psyche, and she pursued psychotherapy for many years. The way church leaders chastised her for non-sexual affection with another woman left her ashamed and wary lest her lesbian attractions be noticed: "That added to just an intense restraint around myself that I grew to exercise. Intense, hyper

vigilant about my own– It felt like lesbian was leaking out of my pores." Years later she still experienced a nagging sense that her body could betray her: "There's always a little worry about is my body in the right place at the right time? Is my body transgressing in any way it shouldn't? Will anybody assume something?" She found the vigilance exhausting.

> I get tired of policing myself. 'Cause I still am doing it. I still have internalized homophobia to the nth degree and I know it. I run into it all the time ... I'm constantly hyper vigilant about where my body is at all times and who it is or isn't coming in contact with.

She went on to say "the pathological piece – lesbianism as pathology – has a long history in my head." While she never really considered suicide, she did think the conflicts between her lesbian/queer identity and her faith tradition were part of why she had never had a sexual relationship after the one that resulted in her expulsion from the church. She was closest with gay men, who were safe for her: "To be able to relax physically, emotionally, and spiritually, and physically just to relax, okay, I don't have to worry about these guys, I don't have to worry about anything."

Reconfiguring Spiritual Identities

Ella was the only participant who remained connected to a faith tradition she had grown up with, forging what Ganzevoort and colleagues (2011) refer to as an integrated identity. When Ella left the Baptist church, she eventually joined the Metropolitan Community Church in the city where she was living, and then in Halifax where she eventually relocated. However, she did not feel a strong spiritual tie there, and had recently returned to her religious roots, attending a local Baptist church. Ella's family was a major part of her ability to integrate her religious and lesbian identities. She noted that her family included more than one Baptist minister, and many conservative Christians, even fundamentalists. Yet they all learned to accept her and welcome her lesbian partner:

> My 82 year old aunt who just died last year, ... she fell in love with my partner ... And let's be clear, 82 year old Baptist minister's wife. And when we told her we were getting married, without a word of a lie, not even missing a beat she's like "Well praise the Lord, that is so wonderful!"

In reconfiguring their spiritual identities, participants employed several approaches, sometimes changing over time. While most rejected organized religion, they all spoke of maintaining some form of spiritual life. Over half of the participants spoke about what Ganzevoort and colleagues (2011, p. 216) might call a subjectivity-discourse, in which "personal authentic living with God is put to the foreground, which at times may imply divergence from the traditional teachings of the community." In this approach, the focus is on personal experiences of God or the spirit. This individualized approach allowed for a form of "spiritual bricolage" (Savastano, 2007), retaining some spiritual beliefs and practices, discarding others, and adopting new ones.

Some women had reconfigured the religious teachings of their upbringings to what they saw as core principles. For example, Corrie said, "It distilled down to this idea of goodness, that's what God was and that's what religion was, it was the aspiration to goodness." Kim, too, talked about a sense of goodness, saying she believed in "some sort of creator":

> I don't really understand what that is, but I do believe that there's something and I believe that there's ah, I don't know, a collective sense of greater good, maybe... And I do have the sense of comfort around that. ... I don't think that you need to be a churchgoer to have that.

Jennifer, too, had distilled religious teachings into what she considered a core: "I took it down to some core precepts like, what's a good person? And ah, I am able to say I am a good person [eyes filling]. And if I'm not always, I certainly try to be." Beth spent years experiencing losses as she let aspects of her faith drop away – which she called deprogramming – then found a core belief she could hold onto: "I woke up one morning and said okay, I think God loves me as I am

...that was a huge relief."

Both Kim and Catherine talked about reconfiguring spirituality in relation to death, suggesting they had rejected notions of heaven but retained ideas of something after death. When her grandmother was dying, Kim was comforted to believe she was going somewhere else: "It was clear to me then that there's nothing to be afraid of, she's going someplace, I don't know where, but anyway." Catherine had recently been with a close friend, another former Catholic, while she was dying, and had while she rejected the idea of a soul and heaven, she believed in an ongoing energy; "I believe energy stays with us, and moves to other places, and so [my friend] is still here. My Dad is still here too, in terms of energy. Whether they're somewhere else [too], I don't know."

Some women had rejected the religions of their upbringings, but retained some version of practices, without a specific faith tradition or organized religion. Una, who had stopped attending church, went on to say, "It doesn't mean I don't believe, and it doesn't mean I don't pray." Ella also distinguished between "going to church and having an active spiritual practice," a distinction she said grew from her experiences as a lesbian in the Baptist church. At the time of the interview Mya still considered herself religious, but said, "We just have to be what we are to ourselves that's all." Rachel also saw herself as spiritually active, retaining Jewish traditions, though not attending synagogue.

> I feel like I have a really strong spiritual health ... identifying with my Jewish identity in a really strong way and having that spiritual practice. ... I don't feel like I necessarily need to attend an institution because I don't think that's necessary for religious practice or spiritual faith. I've been able to negotiate and find other ways to maintain my Jewish community and my Jewish identity outside of religious institutions. So like there's a group of us who are Jews, ... we had a Seder last week.

Beth, too, continued to pray, but differently: "Very rarely I'll say a prayer but it's not to God, it's

more putting something out there into the universe."

Some participants reconfigured their spiritual lives by exploring other faith traditions or spiritual paths. Interestingly, five women mentioned at least passing interest in Buddhism. This could simply reflect the fact that there is a strong and active Shambala Buddhist community in Halifax or may indicate perceived openness to LGBTQ lives in that tradition. Zoe said,

> Lately, I've started reading books on Buddhism and I really want to learn how to meditate ... I feel like something's kind of missing for me, like some kind of focus or some kind of, I don't know, some kind of believing in something else, sort of bigger than what's right in front of my face.

Arlene echoed this, saying that while she didn't believe in God, she did "believe that there's somebody out there" and Buddhism appealed to her. Though she resisted what she described as overly-simplistic "new age lesbian spirituality," Corrie had gravitated to Eastern religions and practiced yoga regularly: "I'm aware that it is a spiritual practice when I'm doing it ... it's another kind of religion that I'm practicing in a sense."

Finally, some participants described having grounded their ideas of the spiritual in other, more every day, aspects of life. They spoke about solace, purpose, meaning, comfort, mortality, transcendence, presence and goodness, but did not link these to a specific faith tradition or even to God. Catherine believed she was a spiritual being, and connected with spirituality by being "with plants and trees and animals and wood stoves. Fire. Music. But I don't really have any need for an organization. In fact, I have a need for there *not* to be an organized aspect."

Jennifer most explicitly described a subjective spiritual bricolage, a self-defined relationship with spirit. She stated simply, "I know the big guy or girl up there is quite fine with me." Not only had she distilled Christian teachings to a sense of goodness, but she also found the spiritual in nature: "I think the beach is a spiritual place…I think the natural world is, it's alive, it's imbued, it has a spirit. I believe that kind of thing." She drew on former practices in that she

still prayed: “Oh yeah, all the time. But not in an institution.” In moments of fear, she would pray: “Let’s just talk to that person up there…. there’s comfort in that.” Finally, Jennifer defined spirituality entirely in terms of personal connection to wholeness:

> I think for me, well it’s about connection right? It’s about connections with something that’s bigger than yourself, with other people I guess, in some kind of larger sense of goodness ... I’ve always had that notion that it’s this relationship, it’s the one, it’s the personal. ...It’s extremely important to me to have that …because I guess it’s a feeling of connection to something bigger, it’s part of a wholeness, I’d say.

Discussion

The LGBTQ women in our study had experienced a range of religious teachings, though most had faced messages that to some degree condemned who they were. They thus had to negotiate conflicting LGBTQ identities and religious/spiritual identities or beliefs in order to establish some sense of wholeness. In response, some women tried to use faith to change who they were, fighting their gender or sexual identity. Most at some point chose to disengage from religion. Some did this through rational processes of critique, some simply drifted away, some faced a crisis in faith, and others were asked to leave their churches.

The losses or injuries experienced were numerous, particularly for those who had been very intensely involved with their faith traditions and religious communities. Leaving a religion rendered women at least temporarily lacking a way to connect with the spiritual. Many faced loss of rituals and beliefs that had provided solace and comfort. Some experienced significant loss of community, often including loss of connections with family and loved ones. No one in this self-selected sample described significant impacts on mental health, though ongoing struggles to be a better person, and against generalized repression and internalized homophobia were identified as repercussions of religious condemnation.

Nonetheless, all of the women had in some way reconfigured their spirituality to conflict less with their LGBTQ identities, employing a range of processes to do so. Family acceptance allowed one woman to return to the Baptist church of her upbringing, probably partly because some of those family members were clergy. More often women separated spirituality from religion, then constructed or fostered a personal relationship with the spiritual. Some women explored other faith traditions, in particular Eastern ones. Some continued to draw on parts of the religious practices of their upbringing, for example praying, but not to a God. Some drew on earlier teachings, but reinterpreted them, or distilled them to core principles such as the value of goodness. Lastly, many women found ways to see the sacred in the everyday, finding spiritual comfort and solace, connection and wholeness, in their relations to nature, music, the elements, other animals.

Reconfiguring spiritual and LGBTQ selves: The role of bricolage

In his writing about gay men's spirituality, Savastano (2007, p. 23) suggests they must "start from scratch" in creating spiritual traditions and practices. Few spiritual or religious traditions offer models for integrating spiritual and LGBTQ selves in the interest of wholeness. He also suggests they may be more likely than most to bring critical awareness to bear as they scrutinize faith traditions and spiritual practices, a "heightened critical awareness that accompanies stigmatization and liminality" (Savastano, 2007, p. 15). This certainly parallels our findings, where some women used critical thinking to disengage from religions. Interestingly, in Savastano's ethnographic fieldwork, many gay men were drawn to Buddhism, which we found as well. Savastano suggests this was because gay men interpreted Buddhism as insisting that any form of dogma be questioned, a stance that resonated for those who questioned not only the religious teachings but also social dictates concerning sexuality and gender.

Savastano (2007) particularly explores the importance of spiritual bricolage for gay men. Those drawn to Buddhism did not generally see themselves as Buddhist, rather they drew on aspects of it. He argues that this was a necessary strategy for gay men:

> Few gay men that I have met can fully embrace their religious tradition without having to draw from other sources, intellectual, devotional or ritualistic, in order to locate themselves within their chosen tradition and still remain fully attentive to who they are as psycho-spiritual-sexual beings. (Savastano, 2007, p. 12)

Similarly, Wilcox argues that while spiritual bricolage or religious individualism is often understood as a kind of religious dilettantism, it may in fact be "an essential strategy for those who value both their LGBT identity and their religiosity" (Wilcox, 2002, p. 510).

Implications

Our small study suggests implications for both LGBTQ and spiritual communities, as well as social workers. Faith communities need to continue developing awareness about LGBTQ lives, and about the potential harms done when people's very selves are marginalized or excluded. Ganzevoort and colleagues (2011) refer to the discursive battles around LGBTQ issues – especially in faith communities – as "culture wars" and note that the casualties of war may be LGBTQ individuals who do not manage to navigate identity conflicts in the face of impassioned debates about their right to exist (2011, p. 221). Unlike their study with young Christians, none of our participants (who were older) persisted with the strategy of denying their sexual or gender identity in order to maintain a sense of their spiritual or religious selves, though some struggled with that for many years. Our recruitment meant all had come to terms with an LGBTQ identity. Nonetheless, for some, many years of characterizing their gender/sexuality as pathological was certainly a mental health risk factor, and contributed to ongoing residual injuries.

Almost all of participants abandoned spiritual or religious lives to maintain their sexual/gender identities. Ganzevoort and colleagues (2011, p. 220) warn that those providing

support or counselling services to LGBTQ young people should be aware that there may be a spiritual price to be paid for coming to terms with LGBTQ identity. In our study that price included loss or denial of a spiritual self, as well as loss of spiritual community, and for some loss of family. We would argue that this awareness of a spiritual price also is relevant to LGBTQ communities. It has often been difficult for LGBTQ individuals to discuss or embrace anything pertaining to the spiritual, especially anything related to Christianity, because faith traditions have been so thoroughly implicated in the oppression of LGBTQ people. Nonetheless, people should not have to trade one identity or community for another. LGBTQ communities still have work to do to help their members find spaces to acknowledge the spiritual. Obviously some of this work has already begun with groups like the Metropolitan Community Church (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000), and affirming congregations of mainstream religions, as well as the rise of non-Western faith traditions and spiritual practices.

For social workers a key implication is that LGBTQ individuals pursue multiple complex strategies in reconfiguring their spiritual and sexual/gender identities. The fact that religions have ostracized many people should not be taken to mean LGBTQ individuals have no interest in finding expression for their spiritual selves. Clearly some women in our study, even some of those most harmed by organized religions, were seeking a kind of spiritual wholeness. Unlike many studies done with LGBTQ young people (e.g. Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Gold & Stewart, 2011), our study explored spirituality with women 23 to 62 years old. Most had experienced complex trajectories over time. Some of their stories would have sounded very different even a decade earlier. This suggests social workers should be aware that people may follow winding paths as they reconfigure spiritual and LGBTQ selves, and should seek approaches to support the positions people take up along the way.

Limitations

The major limitation to this study is that the sample was recruited for a broader study of health and wellness. Spiritual health was but one portion of the interviews, and interviewers followed the lead of the participant regarding the extent to which she wanted to talk about that aspect of self. The advantage is that this recruited a more general sample rather than one focused on spiritual issues. The disadvantage was that women varied in the depth with which they addressed spirituality.

Though our small sample did include a range of women, including a range of sexual orientations, it only included one transwoman. Given that transgender people face unique and often extreme forms of marginalization, and given that religious communities have been much less vocal about transgender issues, specific research is needed into the spiritual and religious experiences of trans persons. The fears raised by one participant in our study about the treatment of her body after death suggests there may be profound spiritual concerns in this community.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how a small group of women who identified as LGBTQ addressed potentially conflicting aspects of self, reconfiguring their religious/spiritual and sexual/gender identities in the context of both social liberalism and religious debates about LGBTQ status in Canada. We have shown that when women experience religious traditions as unwelcoming, they may nonetheless seek alternative ways to ground a sense of themselves as spiritual beings. While debates about declining religiosity and rising spiritual individualism may signal broader societal trends, in this group there is the possibility that a form of spiritual bricolage, choosing meaningful elements from a range or faith traditions and other aspects of life, may allow LGBTQ women to find venues for spiritual identity and expression. This may be

significant knowledge for social workers who encounter LGBTQ clients. Future research in this area should include a range of ages and other demographic characteristics, examining whether there are patterns to LGBTQ trajectories in spirituality and religion.

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