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TRANSGENDER AND GENDER NON-CONFORMING INDIVIDUALS' EXPERIENCES IN A NON-AFFIRMING RELIGION

BY

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experience of navigating a transgender or gender non-conforming (TGNC) gender identity and non-affirming religious affiliation. To understand TGNC individuals' experiences, I employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and integrated participatory methods to ensure that the research design, analysis, and dissemination were congruent with the TGNC community's feedback and direction. Through semi-structured interviews, four TGNC adults who were actively participating in a non-affirming religion described their experience of participating in a non-affirming religion. Individuals shared similar challenges, strengths, internal processes, and community supports. They identified the intricate thought processes and self-reflection required for their continued participation in their non-affirming congregations. Participants found strength to maintain a connection to their religion through a fundamental relationship with God. Through these four accounts, counsellors and practitioners have a glimpse at this complex phenomenon and can draw on this shared knowledge to inform their practice.

Keywords: transgender, gender non-conforming, counselling, interpretative phenomenological analysis, participatory methods, religion, non-affirming religion, minority stress

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1. Introduction

Until 1973, homosexuality was pathologized and included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM; American Psychological Association [APA] Task Force, 2009a). Thus, it is not surprising that many lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals are reluctant when considering accessing mental health supports (Lefevor et al., 2017). Additionally, religious individuals may be hesitant to seek out counselling because of doubting secular counsellors' abilities to address religious concerns (Jacobsen & Wright, 2014; Lefevor et al., 2017). Because the understanding that same-sex sexual attractions are normal and positive is recent, and the research basis for counselling LGB individuals is limited (but growing), many counsellors lack appropriate training and knowledge to effectively assist individuals who are part of the LGB community (APA Task Force, 2009a; Lefevor et al., 2017). The American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation released guidelines for appropriate therapeutic intervention with the LGB community in 2009, and subsequently many articles have been published that examine effective counselling approaches specific to the religious LGB population (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008; Galek et al., 2015; Jacobsen & Wright, 2014; Kelley, 2015; Lefevor et al., 2017). Recommendations for counselling individuals who identify as a sexual minority (LGB) and part of a non-affirming religion, include working within the client's values, providing acceptance and support, recognizing potential worldview differences between client and counsellor, focusing on integration of religious values and virtues, acknowledging intersectionality, and utilizing an affirmative multicultural approach to counselling (APA Task Force, 2009a; Bartoli & Gillem, 2008; Galek et al., 2015; Jacobsen & Wright, 2014; Lefevor et al., 2017).

Internalization of negative messages as a result of sexual stigma has a significant

negative impact on the psychological health of those LGBTQ2S+ individuals receiving said messages, with transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) individuals experiencing higher rates of psychological distress (Borgogna et al., 2019; Meyer, 2003; Rood et al., 2017; Timmins et al., 2017; Vosvick & Stem, 2019). A 2015 United States national survey of individuals who identify as transgender discovered that, of the survey sample, 39% were experiencing serious psychological distress; this rate is almost eight times higher than that of the overall United States population (James et al., 2016). The Trans PULSE Project, a survey 433 trans people in Canada (Bauer et al.,2015) found that more than half of trans people living in Ontario have levels of depression that are consistent with clinical depression, and 43% had attempted suicide. The Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey (Veale et al., 2017) found that of 923 participants, over one-third of trans youth aged 14-18 had attempted suicide in the previous year, with 45% reporting extreme stress and despair in the 30 days prior to the survey. Veale and colleagues also discovered that youth who experience high levels of discrimination combined with low protective factors had a 72% probability of reporting that they have seriously considered suicide. These are a few examples of the extreme mental health struggles that transgender individuals face in Canada and the United States.

In addition to the extreme mental health struggles that TGNC individuals face in Canada and the United States, there are additional and intersectional effects of identifying outside of the gender norm. Individuals experience increased risk to exposure of violence, discrimination, sexual harassment, familial separation, poverty and hunger, and barriers to employment (Bauer et al., 2015). All these additional effects from identifying as TGNC contribute to isolation or exclusion from social spaces, unemployment, avoidance of needed services such as health care, and economic marginalization (Bauer et al., 2015). TGNC individuals who are also people of

colour experience compounding effects of multiple intersecting marginalized identities (Scheim et al., 2013). For example, Scheim and colleagues (2013) found that Indigenous Canadians who are gender diverse experience poverty at a rate of 47%, homelessness or under housing at a rate of 34%, and relocation due to trans identification at 67%. In addition, 61% of Indigenous participants identify at least one unmet health care need in the past year (Scheim et al., 2013). Finally, 73% of the Indigenous survey participants experienced violence due to being trans (Scheim et al., 2013). Simply stated, identifying as TGNC is not the only barrier that these individuals experience, and the combination of marginalized identities can have devastating effects.

The above compounding factors may be exacerbated when combined with participation in a religion that does not accept the individual's identity. Though there is an increasing number of articles discussing the relationship between sexual orientation and religious affiliation, research examining the relationship between gender identity and religious affiliation is lacking (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008; Galek et al., 2015; Jacobsen & Wright, 2014; Kelley, 2015; Lefevor et al., 2017). Identifying as transgender or gender non-conforming is hard enough, imagine navigating the compounded difficulty when your religious community does not accept your identity.

Statement of Problem

If TGNC individuals are provided with culturally sensitive and informed mental health services, their navigation of the relationship between gender identity and religious affiliation could be eased. The experiences of TGNC individuals need to be understood by mental health practitioners, psychologists, and counsellors through a process that allows these individuals to be the experts of their own experiences.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to elicit a thick description and convey the experience of navigating gender identity and religious affiliation while also calling the discipline to action. Additionally, this study will contribute to the growing body of literature on TGNC individuals while providing counsellors and psychologists with an in-depth understanding of the navigation process TGNC individuals go through in relation to non-affirming religious affiliation.

Research Question

How do TGNC individuals navigate the complex relationship between their gender identity and non-affirming religion?

Definition of Terms

The following terms relate to the conceptualization of this study:

Sex is a biological construct that is comprised of anatomy, physiology, genetics, and hormones (Johnson et al., 2007, 2009). It is typically assigned at birth, or even prior during ultrasounds, based on the presentation of external genitalia (American Psychological Association, 2015a, 2015b). Sex refers to the traits that distinguish between biological males, females, and intersex individuals that determine sex, such as the physiological and psychological processes that relate to procreation and sexual pleasure (American Psychological Association, 2015a).

Gender is a social construct that is based on sociocultural and historical contexts (Johnson et al., 2007, 2009). Because of gender's basis in sociocultural and historical contexts, it is a construct that constantly changes throughout time as well as across cultures (Johnson et al., 2007, 2009; Stryker, 2008). It refers to the attitudes, feelings, and behaviours that a culture or society ascribes to peoples' biological sex characteristics (American Psychological Association,

2012; Stryker, 2008).

Sexual orientation, according to the American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation (2009a), "refers to an individual's patterns of sexual, romantic, and affectional arousal and desire for other persons based on those persons' gender and sex characteristics" (p. 30). The concept of sexual orientation is more complex than whether a person is attracted to men, women, or both; it encompasses sexual and emotional attraction, behaviour and social affiliation, and attraction to people of all gender identities (APA Task Force, 2009a; American Psychological Association, 2015b). Sexual orientation includes three variables - identity, behaviour, and attraction - that converge in many ways (APA Task Force, 2009a). Sexual orientation encompasses sexual interest, attraction, and fantasies, while *sexual identity* is defined as an individual's self-prescribed labels and can include preferences for gender/sex, number of partners, and other preferences such as kink-identified (American Psychological Association, 2009a; Salomaa & Matsick, 2019).

Gender identity describes how individuals see themselves as female, male, neither, both, as a third gender or two-spirited (American Psychological Association, 2015a, 2015b; Ho & Mussap, 2019; Johnson et al., 2007, 2009). It is an essential facet of an individual's identity and does not necessarily correspond to assigned sex at birth (Ho & Mussap, 2019; Johnson et al., 2007, 2009). Gender identity is a complex construct that is malleable and adapted over time; it is linked to and influenced by social interactions; individual behaviours, traits, characteristics, and body image; and cultural contexts and expectations (American Psychological Association, 2015a; Johnson et al, 2007, 2009).

Transgender is an umbrella term that refers to individuals whose gender identity differs from that which is assigned at birth (Scandurra et al., 2019). Transgender is a term that refers to

individuals who move away from their gender assigned at birth; it references deviation from gender norms and expectations (Stryker, 2008). Like gender, the meaning of the word transgender is dependent on social, cultural, and political contexts (Scandurra et al., 2019; Stryker, 2008). Thus, the meaning of the word transgender evolves over time and is reliant on the dominant cultural discourse about what constitutes normative gender and marginalized or diverse gender (Stryker, 2008). Though transgender does, in this definition, mean a movement away from gender assigned at birth, not all individuals who move away from their assigned gender identify as transgender. Transgender is a term that is useful for political identification, community mobilization and organization, shared community, and social justice, but is not immune to erasure that arises through categorical terminology (Singer, 2014).

Gender non-conforming refers to individuals whose behaviour or appearance does not conform to dominant cultural and societal norms and expectations regarding what is acceptable or appropriate for their assigned gender (American Psychological Association, 2015a, 2015b; Scandurra et al., 2019). Individuals whose behaviour or appearance do not conform to the dominant ideals and norms regarding gender often do not identity as transgender. Transgender is sometimes used as a catch-all phrase for all gender identities that are not cisgender, but this can result in categorizing individuals under a heading they do not want to be categorized as. For example, individuals who identify as non-binary, genderqueer, pangender, agender, gender-fluid, and so on, prefer to use these terms as opposed to being placed under the transgender umbrella. The term gender non-conforming will be used in this proposal to capture those individuals who divert from dominant cultural and societal norms about gender, but do not fit under the transgender umbrella. Transgender is a term that originated predominately from a restrictive Western discourse that relied heavily on a restrictive understanding of gender identity (Irving,

2013). The primacy of gender identity is not a universally understand concept, and thus the term transgender is narrow and not reflective of genders outside of Western discourse (Irving, 2013). In addition, seeking to place non-Western gender identities, such as two-spirit, third gender, hijra, etc., into a Westernized definition of gender results in individuals' identities being placed within a hegemonic structure that they do not adhere to (Schmidt, 2017). As a final note, these definitions of gender non-conforming and transgender are constantly in flux, and this is the resolution that I have come to in order to attempt to accurately represent all of those affected by cisgenderism.

Cisgender describes individuals who experience alignment between their assigned sex at birth and the expected or typical social category of gender (Aultman, 2014). This is a term that emerged from transgender communities to challenge the assertion that cisgender individuals are normal, tradition, or biological (Aultman, 2014; Stryker, 2008). This term states the unstated assumption contained in using the words man or woman and can be seen as a way of categorically equalizing transgender in how individuals identify their gender (Stryker, 2008).

For the purpose of this study a *non-affirming religion* is defined as a religion or religious denomination that places restrictions on individuals based on their gender identity and/or sexual orientation through doctrine, rules, religious norms, or community expectations. Non-affirming religions maintain that heteronormative roles and relationships are morally acceptable, and subsequently same-sex and gender non-conforming expressions are viewed as sinful or unacceptable (Wolff, 2016). Religious institutions and communities hold a wide range of beliefs and practices about gender identity and sexual orientation and the degree to which they affirm members of the LGBTQ2S+ community (Paul, 2017; Wolff, 2016). The beliefs held by religious institutions do not only vary between religious denominations, but also vary within (Paul, 2017;

Wolff, 2016). Thus, individuals in this study will determine to what extent their religious experience is non-affirming.

Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberly Crenshaw (1989), a black feminist scholar, and was introduced to address the marginalization of black women within antidiscrimination law and feminist and antiracist theory and politics. Since its introduction, intersectionality has broadened to encompass a range of issues, social identities, power dynamics, systems, and structures (Carbado et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1989). Though intersectionality began with race and gender, it is not a theory or concept that is fixed to any specific social position; it can and does move (Carbado et al., 2013). Intersectionality is a framework for understanding how different aspects of individuals' identity, such as race, class, sexuality, gender, and disability, interact and converge with each other to create a compounding effect of disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1991).

Chapter 2: Conceptual and Theoretical Foundation

In this study, I provide a rationale that draws on current literature to support the need for additional research about the relationship between religion and gender identity, to better prepare counsellors to work productively with TGNC individuals who have been impacted by non-affirming religions. I will provide a history of the mental health treatment of gender and sexual minorities, examine the similarities and differences between gender and sexual orientation, explore the heteronormative context that the LGBTQ2S+ community exists within, describe minority stress and the internalization of negative messages, and discuss non-affirming conservative religions and their effects on sexual minorities and recent trends in TGNC research.

There is an increasing need for attention to the TGNC community and the challenges that they face. A 2014 survey conducted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Center for Transgender Equality found that, of the 6456 TGNC adults surveyed, 41% of transgender individuals reported attempting suicide (Haas et al., 2014). This exceeds the proportion of the general United States population by over 30% and the proportion of lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults who have attempted suicide by 10-20%. In addition to these findings, Haas et al. (2014) found that factors, such as HIV, race, age, education, discrimination at work or school, and alienation from family have increase the risk of negative effects on mental health. Not included in this survey was the influence of religious affiliation on mental health status. Based on these data, it is essential that the relationship between gender identity and non-affirming religious affiliation be examined. This survey found a range of responses based on various subgroups ranging from a low of 30% attempting suicide to a high of 60% attempting suicide. It is disturbing that the low range for suicide attempts among various subgroups is 30%, considering the general population of the United States has a suicide attempt rate of 4.6%. Haas,

Rodgers, and Herman recommended increasing research efforts about the TGNC community, specifically regarding the relationship between rejection, discrimination, and victimization.

Although transgender and gender non-conforming individuals are generally conflated with lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals, counsellors cannot assume that their challenges are identical. While there is extensive research about internalized homophobia, which is the process of directing negative messages and stereotypes about LGB individuals inwards (Gibbs & Golbach, 2015), and the relationship LGB individuals have with religion (Anderton et al., 2011; Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Bourn et al., 2018; Brewster et al., 2016; Gibbs & Golbach, 2015), there is a lack of research about how TGNC individuals navigate this complex relationship. Rood et al. (2017) conducted a review of the literature and found only 11 published studies where researchers empirically investigated internalized transphobia, only 3 of which were qualitative. Internalized homophobia, as a result of participating in a non-affirming religion, can result in anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, intimacy problems, and self-esteem issues (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Bourn et al., 2018; Gibbs & Golbach, 2015). The lack of information regarding the relationship between identifying as TGNC and participating in a non-affirming religion, leaves counsellors ill-prepared to counsel these individuals in a productive and culturally sensitive way.

Mental Health Treatment of Gender Minorities

Gender Identity Pathologized

Gender dysphoria seems to be following a similar trajectory to the pathologizing of homosexuality (Ross, 2015). Gender identity was first included in the *DSM-II* as a sexual deviation disorder entitled *transvestitism* (American Psychiatric Association, 1968; Drescher, 2015b). *Gender identity disorder* was classified as a mental disorder in the *DSM-III* and the

DSM-IV, under the psychosexual disorders section; also included in this section were *pedophilia* and *premature ejaculation* (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, 1994; Ross, 2015). The *DSM-III* included two diagnoses: *gender identity disorder of childhood* and *transsexualism* (American Psychiatric Association, 1980; Drescher, 2015b). The *DSM-III-R* included a third diagnosis: *gender identity disorder of adolescence and adulthood, nontranssexual type* (American Psychiatric Association; 1987; Drescher, 2015b). In the following *DSM-IV*, the above diagnoses were discarded and covered under one overarching diagnosis: *gender identity disorder* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Drescher, 2015b). In the final *DSM-5*, gender identity disorder has been renamed to *gender dysphoria* and has been moved into its own section that is separate from sexual dysfunctions and paraphilias (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Drescher, 2015b). Gender dysphoria refers to the distress that accompanies the incongruence between an individual's experienced gender and assigned gender (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The *DSM-5* also states that not all individuals will experience distress because of incongruence but may experience distress due to the desired physical interventions being available (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The current definition of gender dysphoria has shifted to focus on the psychological consequences of gender dysphoria as opposed to the previous *DSM* definitions that focused on gender dysphoria being a symptom of mental illness (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Johnson, 2015). The existing status quo of DSM diagnosis before receiving medical services perpetuates TGNC oppression; additionally, some transgender individuals think that gender dysphoria should be medicalized and diagnosable (Drescher, 2015a; Johnson, 2015). In some cases, the requirement for individuals to receive a diagnosis creates additional barriers to receiving services that are necessary; in addition, this perpetuates the existence of stigma and

prejudices towards the TGNC community (Drescher, 2015b). Johnson (2015) argues that the medical model of transgender identity adds to the accountability structure that influences transgender individuals' lives and their participation in different institutions such as healthcare, community participation, and the legal system. The relationship between transgender identity and the medical model is complicated, and quite frequently transgender individuals are left to rely on gatekeepers such as medical practitioners and lawyers (Johnson, 2015).

Evolution of Practice Guidelines on Working with Sexual and Gender Minorities

After homosexuality was removed from the DSM in 1973, in 1975, the American Psychological Association adopted a resolution stating that homosexuality does not imply impairment in any regard and urged all mental health professionals to end the stigma of mental illness that had been historically associated with homosexuality (American Psychological Association, 2012). It was not until 16 years later that the APA released the first practice guidelines (Division 44/Committee on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns Joint Task Force on Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients, 2000).

The guidelines were a step in the right direction. They urged psychologists to recognize and address their biases, understand the stigmatization that LGB individuals face, and acknowledged the challenges that LGB individuals and their families. The guidelines strongly emphasized that an LGB orientation is not a mental illness. While the guidelines provided principles and their rationale, there were few instructions for practical application and therapeutic intervention. Awareness and acknowledgment are not enough to be competent. Skill, judgement, and diligence are also required (Rodolfa et al., 2005).

These guidelines expired in 2010. Given the many changes in the LGB field of psychology since their implementation, the American Psychological Association released

expanded guidelines in 2012 (American Psychological Association, 2012). Definitions of terms such as *sex*, *gender*, *gender identity*, *gender expression*, *sexual orientation*, and *coming out* that were missing from the original set of guidelines are included in the update. Shifts in attention towards stigma, intersectionality, personal professional attitudes and knowledge, individual client experience, unique challenges, religion, age, workplace issues, and continuing education are evident in the 2012 APA guidelines (American Psychological Association, 2012). In addition to a broader focus, there are application guidelines present in the 2012 guidelines that were not included in the 2000 guidelines. Psychologists are provided with case examples illustrating providing appropriate referrals to local support groups, addressing the effects of internalized stigma based on client readiness, and creating the goal to integrate sexual orientation and religious identification. The expansion of the guidelines is likely due to more literature and empirical evidence being available. In addition to the above, the 2012 guidelines also pay significantly more attention to the concept of gender being non-binary; the word transgender is used upwards of 80 times throughout the guidelines as opposed to zero in the guidelines put out in 2000. Finally, the 2012 guidelines include rationales that reference sexual orientation change efforts and the assertion that these efforts are ineffective and harmful (American Psychological Association, 2012).

The *Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender-Nonconforming People* by the World Professional Association of Transgender Health (WPATH) was a step forward in access to health services for TGNC individuals (Coleman et al., 2012). WPATH is an "international, multidisciplinary, professional association" with a mission to promote evidence-based care, research, public policy, education, and general respect in transgender health (Coleman et al., 2012). The Standards of Care (SOC), released in 2012,

provides clinical guidance for professionals to provide appropriate and effective mental health services among other forms of healthcare. The SOC clarified best practices with TGNC clients such as declaring gender identity change efforts unethical and harmful. The SOC are intended to be flexible to meet the broad and diverse needs of the TGNC population while encouraging optimal healthcare and guiding treatment. The SOC emphasized the role of making informed decisions and utilizing a harm-reduction approach and curating individualized treatment plans. This requires practitioners to be aware of different cultural contexts and realities of each individual client. Included in these SOC are core principles emphasizing respect for clients, providing gender-affirming care, becoming knowledgeable about the needs of TGNC individuals, matching treatment approach to specific needs of individuals, facilitating access to care, seeking informed consent, offering continuing care, and advocating for clients.

The American Psychological Association (2015b) implemented *Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People* to complement treatment guidelines already implemented, such as the WPATH SOC. This document specifies 16 guidelines to guide psychologist training and aid psychologists in culturally competent, appropriate, and affirmative practice with TGNC individuals, intended to be an "introductory resource for psychologists who will encounter TGNC people in their practice" (American Psychological Association, 2015b, p. 833). They include definitions for practitioners who are unfamiliar with language around gender identity; addresses strengths and challenges the population faces; and discusses research, education, training, and healthcare. Again, it is important to note that these guidelines were developed to be used in conjunction with other already established guidelines and standards of care (American Psychological Association,

2015b).

The Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) has followed a similar trajectory to the American Psychological Association. In 1982 they endorsed statements against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the recruitment and hiring of employees (CPA 1982). In 1996 the CPA released a policy statement for the inclusion and equality of sexual orientation as a protected class (CPA, 1996). In 2006 the CPA released a position statement supporting same-sex marriage (CPA, 2006). Finally in 2015 the CPA released a statement for the official opposition of conversion therapy (CPA, 2015). In 2010 the CPA released a policy stating that they affirm that all adolescent and adult persons have a right to "define their own gender identity regardless of sex, genitalia, assigned birth sex, or initial gender role" (CPA, 2010, see 2010 section on gender identity). Although the CPA does not have practice guidelines of its own, outside of the Code of Ethics, the CPA states on its website that psychologists should seek out Clinical Practice Guidelines (CPA, n.d.; CPA, 2017). They provide a reviewed list of Clinical Practice Guidelines for psychology as well as instruction on how to determine whether the guidelines should be trusted (CPA, n.d.). Among the list of practice guidelines is the American Psychological Association practice guidelines discussed above as well as referencing WPATH (Coleman et al., 2012) in their fact sheet on gender dysphoria in adolescents and adults (CPA, 2021).

Conversion Therapy

Conversion therapy, or sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE), is an ongoing subject of conversation in the psychological community as well as in legislation. Conversion therapy is an empirically unsupported treatment with the goal of converting non-heterosexual individuals into heterosexual individuals, based on the assumption that sexual orientation is a choice that can be changed through therapeutic interventions (Gamboni et al., 2018). Almost all early

discussions of LGB people assumed that these sexual orientations were inevitably associated with psychopathology (Bieschke et al., 2000). These discussions and assumptions were theoretical, with no attention to the fact that early empirical studies on LGBTQ2S+ individuals were based on clinical populations in hospitals, prisons, or outpatient care (Bieschke et al., 2000). Some common aversion techniques designed for men included seeing sex workers, marriage, alcohol and drugs, isolation with a woman, inhalation of substances, electroshock, injection or ingestion of chemicals to instigate convulsions, and less commonly castrations and lobotomies (Bieschke et al., 2000; Hipp et al., 2019). These aversion type therapies have been used for over a century, and the use and development of modern forms of sexual orientation change efforts began to accelerate when the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the DSM in 1973 (Salway, 2019).

After 1973, SOCE began to be marginalized within the medical and psychological professions, but this marginalization drove SOCE underground and away from healthcare providers to other organizations, most notably, religious organizations (Salway, 2019). SOCE are now delivered under many non-transparent names and organizations such as Journey Canada and New Directions Ministries (Salway, 2019). Salway et al. (2020) surveyed 8,388 sexual minority men surveyed, 3.5% of whom had been exposed to SOCE. Extrapolated to all sexual minority men in Canada, that means approximately 20,000 Canadian sexual minority men have been exposed to SOCE (Salway et al., 2020). Cognitive-behavioural and covert sensitization techniques have also been used in an attempt to suppress same sex attraction (Bieschke et al., 2000).

As of 2015 the CPA released a policy statement affirming that any therapy that has the goal of either repairing or converting individuals' sexual orientation is unacceptable and not

supported by scientific research (CPA, 2015), following the American Psychological Association in 2009. The American Psychological Association acknowledged the differing methodological and philosophical viewpoints but determined that psychology must rely on empirical evidence (Anton, 2010). The American Psychological Association's Task Force of Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation reviewed the available research on SOCE in order to provide recommendations to the association (Anton, 2010).

Although conversion therapy or SOCE has been considered unacceptable by the CPA since 2015, legislation is a few steps behind. In Canada, conversion therapy has not been banned federally, but the current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has directed the Justice Minister to work with the Minister of Diversity, Minister of Inclusion, and Minister of Youth to propose amendments to the Criminal Code to ban conversion therapy (Aiello, 2019). Because conversion therapy and SOCE have not been banned by federal law, they continue to exist in Canada. Cities such as St. Albert and Vancouver have voted municipally to ban conversion therapy, but the local legislation cannot entirely ban the practice itself (Wells, 2019). A proposed Criminal Code amendment would supersede municipal, provincial, and territorial jurisdictions (Wells, 2019).

Municipalities and provinces have approached the issue in different ways such as levying fines, amending business licenses, and changing land use bylaws. Municipalities are able to amend bylaws to reflect the values of their community, provincial governments can change health regulations to ensure licensed practitioners are prohibited from providing conversion therapy, and finally the federal government can amend the Criminal Code of Canada to ensure that those who practice conversion therapy or employ SOCE will be committing a criminal offence (Wells, 2019). Conversion therapy is unethical and immoral, implying that LGBTQ2S+ individuals' lives are of lesser value than heterosexual and cisgender people (Wells, 2019).

Despite the denouncements from regulatory and governing bodies, there has not been an end to SOCE; the banning of SOCE may have driven the practice into environments and settings outside of regulated health care settings (Salway et al., 2020).

Entrenched in conversion therapy are practices used to change or suppress individuals' gender identity and gender expression or presentation (Hipp et al., 2019). Wright et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review of the literature to find literature documenting the use of conversion therapies for TGNC individuals, how these procedures have been applied, and their mental health impacts. Wright et al. (2018) found only seven articles that specifically discussed these issues. This begs the question as to what extent were conversion therapy efforts used with TGNC individuals and to what extent were these efforts documented (Hipp et al., 2019). This scarcity of information is likely because "transgender" did not become popular until the late 1980s and the experience of being transgender not being understood as separate from identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Hipp et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2018).

Minority Stress and the LGBTQ2S+ Community

Sexual orientation and gender identity are complex, fluid, and unique to each individual. Both constructs that are not fixed; thus, people may experience a range of sexual and gender identities over their lifetime (Bosse, 2019). Because of the fluidity of identity development, one specific identity development theory should not be applied to these constructs, but for the purposes of this inquiry I will utilize the development progress outlined by the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2015b).

Gender Identity Development

Although sexual orientation and gender identity are different constructs, their development progresses through similar stages: awareness, exploration, expression, and identity

integration (American Psychological Association, 2015b). Individual perceptions of what it means to be part of a sexual or gender minority, exposure to others with similar identities, societal norms, cultural beliefs, stigma, and acceptance from friends and family may influence the development process (Bosse, 2019). An important step, and possibly a milestone, in both sexual orientation and gender identity development is disclosing identity to others, often called *coming out* (Bosse, 2019). Disclosure of identity is often associated with better mental and physical health (Bosse, 2019). Both sexual and gender minorities face the task of determining when it is and when it is not safe to disclose their identity; this can range from sharing with family and friends to sharing with healthcare providers, employers, and acquaintances (Bosse, 2019). In addition to disclosure of identity, gender and sexual minorities constantly face heteronormative attitudes that are prevalent throughout society (Bosse, 2019). The TGNC community encounters an additional stage in identity development that Devor (2004) describes as *witnessing* and *mirroring.* Mirroring refers to being seen and validated by others that the TGNC individual sees as similar to oneself and *witnessing* refers to having their own identity reflected to them (Devor, 2004). This stage influences an individual's sense of transgender identity affirmation; the ability to express gender identity through appearance while adopting desired gender social roles (Kuper et al., 2018).

The development of gender identity can be confusing, especially for those individuals who are unaware of the concept of *fluid gender* (American Psychological Association, 2015b). Accordingly, some TGNC individuals may attribute the friction between their assigned sex and societal expectations to their sexual orientation, assuming that they may be lesbian, gay, or bisexual (American Psychological Association, 2015b; Bosse, 2019). Further complicating the relationship between gender identity and sexual orientation is that both gender and attraction are

used to define and identify an individual's sexual orientation (American Psychological Association, 2015b). In addition, when assigned sex and gender identity do not align, the expression and formulation of sexual orientation becomes increasingly complex (American Psychological Association, 2015b).

Gender identity development is also shaped by societal norms, stereotypes and stigma, exposure to certain language, exposure to people of similar identities, cultural beliefs, and experiences with discrimination (Bosse, 2019). Robbins and McGowan (2016) discuss the complexity and intersectional nature of gender identity development and assert that gender identity cannot be constructed in isolation from other societal identities, the development of gender identity is inseparable or inextricable from heterosexism and cisgenderism. Thus, it is imperative that psychologists not only understand the differences between gender identity and sexual orientation, but also the symbiotic relationship they share and how each is socially constructed. Furthermore, when consuming research that discusses the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and two-spirited (LGBTQ2S+) community, and be able to discern how such research is politically and culturally situated (American Psychological Association, 2015b; Robbins & McGowan, 2016).

Receiving Negative Messages About Gender Identity

The LGBTQ2S+ community exists within a heteronormative context that ascribes to the idea of a gender binary as opposed to a gender spectrum (Puckett & Levitt, 2015). LGBTQ2S+ individuals often receive negative social messages about their sexual orientation and gender identity, which may result in minority stress and internalized homophobia and/or internalized transphobia (Bourn et al., 2018; Gibbs & Golbach, 2015; Rood et al., 2017). Minority stress is "the excess stress to which individuals from stigmatized social categories are exposed as a result

of their social, often a minority, position" (Meyer, 2003, p. 675). Minority stress can be conceptualized as distal (external stressors such as discrimination, rejection, or violence) or proximal (internal stressors such as fear of victimization or discrimination, internalized negative beliefs, and identity concealment stress). Similar to internalized homophobia, internalized transphobia is the process of directing negative messages and stereotypes that devalue the TGNC identity inwards (Rood et al., 2017). A variety of research supports this claim, more specifically focused on the concept of internalized homophobia as opposed to internalized transphobia (Bourn et al., 2018; Gibbs & Golbach, 2015; Herek et al., 2015; Rood et al., 2017).

Bourn et al. (2018) examined the relationship between internalized heterosexism (also called internalized homophobia) and religious coping, utilizing surveys from 617 individuals who identified as LGB and religious. They found a significant correlation between internalized heterosexism and the mental health status of participants. Bourn et al. (2018) also found that LGB individuals who grew up in heterosexist or non-affirming faith environments experienced greater internalized homophobia, which contributes to a negative self-schema (Bourn et al., 2018).

Gibbs and Goldbach (2015) surveyed 2949 individuals who identified their sexual orientation as lesbian, gay, bisexual, heterosexual, questioning, or other to explore how religious identity conflict impacts suicidal behaviour among LGBT young adults. Fewer than 2% of individuals in the study identified as transgender. While survey items queried religious conflict, internalized homophobia, and suicidality, there were no questions about internalized transphobia or the experience TGNC persons (Gibbs & Golbach, 2015). Nonetheless, Gibbs and Goldbach found that over 30% of participants had experienced suicidal thoughts in the previous month, with half reporting that these thoughts were chronic.

Herek et al. (2015) presented a conceptual framework based on preciously collected data from 2259 lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults who completed the Revised Internalized Homophobia Scale (IHP-R; Herek et al., 1998); none of whom identified as transgender. Herek and colleagues assert that sexual stigma affects all members of society, whether heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The extent to which self-stigma (or internalized homophobia), defined by Herek et al. as a negative attitude one has towards themselves, is manifested by individuals depends on the extent to which individuals associate their identity to having more costs and fewer benefits (Herek et al., 2015). Internalized homophobia, or self-stigma, is influenced by beliefs, affect, behaviours, cultural contexts, and institutionalized beliefs (Herek et al., 2015). For example, individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual who belong to or were raised in conservative and heteronormative institutions experience more self-stigma (Herek et al., 2015). Herek and colleagues found that internalized homophobia contributes significantly to psychological distress and well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals.

Finally, Rood et al. (2017) investigated internalized transphobia through qualitative interviews with 30 TGNC individuals. Utilizing the consensual qualitative research approach and based on the experience of the participants, six distinct categories emerged: society negatively regards TGNC identities; social messages originate from media and religious ideology; TGNC individual report emotional distress in response to social messages; TGNC individuals report negative self-perceptions in response to social media; TGNC individuals report resilience processes in response to negative messages; and social messages are perceived to differentially impact TGNC people of colour (Rood et al., 2017).

Participants consistently reported phrases that they heard from society such as “disgusting”, “tranny”, “ugly”, “deceptive”, and “demonic” (Rood et al., 2017). It was reported

by multiple participants that these negative social messages came not only from the general public, but from the cisgender LGB community. In response to these social messages, participants reported two primary responses: anger and sadness (Rood et al., 2017). Participants reported experiencing anger, sadness, fear, and anxiety which led individuals to experience negative beliefs about their identity (Rood et al., 2017). Thus, TGNC individuals experience negative social messages which may lead to psychological distress (Rood et al., 2017). It is evident in examining these few studies that there is a need for further examination of the specific effects of internalize transphobia within the TGNC community. The current literature examines in depth the effects and process of internalized homophobia but tends to ignore or not dive into the topic of transphobia.

The LGBTQ2S+ community faces sexual stigma, defined as "the negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords anyone associated with non-heterosexual behaviors, identity, relationships, or communities" (Herek et al., 2015, p. 19). Sexual stigma is perpetuated and upheld by societal institutions and ideologies that assert that LGBTQ2S+ individuals' lives are less valuable than that of the cisgender heterosexual majority (Herek et al., 2015; Meyer, 2003). Sexual stigma manifests itself in three ways: behaviourally (shunning, violence, etc.), felt sexual stigma, and internalized sexual stigma (acceptance of stigma as part of individual's identity) (Herek et al., 2015). The degree to which experiences of stigma manifest themselves can be related to the individual's beliefs and assumptions about their identity, and messages they receive from groups they associate with (Herek et al., 2015). Sexual stigma contributes to disparities in physical and mental health (Herek, 2007; Logie et al., 2020; Veale et al., 2017). As reported by Veale et al. (2017) through their study on the effects of stigma on transgender youth in Canada, the higher the level of

stigma experienced by individuals, the higher likelihood of mental health problems. In opposition, the higher social support and resilience factors that individuals possess, the lower likelihood or severity of mental health problems (Veale et al., 2017). The unique stressors that the LGBTQ2S+ community faces, as a result of sexual stigma, helps to explain the higher rates of mental health issues in this community, and examining the effects of minority stress is necessary to understand the effects of stress on LGBTQ2S+ individuals (Meyer, 2003; Puckett & Levitt, 2015).

Impact of Internalizing Negative Messages

Internalization of negative messages, as a result of sexual stigma, has a significant negative impact on the psychological health of those LGBTQ2S+ individuals receiving said messages, with TGNC individuals experiencing higher rates of psychological distress (Borgogna et al., 2019; Meyer, 2003; Rood et al., 2017; Timmins et al., 2017; Vosvick & Stem, 2019). There are multiple factors present in LGBTQ2S+ individuals' lives that can have a negative impact on their psychological health (Vosvick & Stem, 2019). Some of these factors, as stated by Meyer (2003) include additional social stressors because of minority status, environmental contexts, and individual or internal identities. Meyer suggests that external social conditions gain importance or significance through cognitive appraisal. This means that the more an individual is exposed to certain external or environmental stressors, the more ingrained the social stressors becomes in that individual's identity (Meyer, 2003). Meyer concludes that, yes, the LGB population has a higher prevalence of mental health disorders. Meyer's minority stress model, though it has been influential and has become a model frequently used by researchers examining the LGBTQ2S+ community, examines the effects that minority stress can have on LGB individuals, while ignoring the effects or compounded effects minority stress can have on

individuals who identify as queer, transgender, gender non-conforming, questioning, pansexual, asexual, demisexual, etc. Because the TGNC community experiences all the above, it is essential to examine what additional stressors the group faces, such as in-group discrimination, identity conflict, cissexism/transphobia, (Rood et al., 2017; Timmins et al., 2017).

Within the LGBTQ2S+ community, individuals experience varying degrees of negative psychological impacts, depending on the intersections of individuals' identities, whether they are cisgender or TGNC, heterosexual or a sexual minority, or a combination of both sexual and gender minorities (Borgogna et al., 2019). Borgogna et al. (2019) examined the negative psychological impacts due to intersecting gender and sexual orientation identities through a multivariate analysis of data from the Healthy Minds Study (https://healthymindsnetwork.org/research/hms/). This study included responses to both the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (Spitzer et al., 1999) and The Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (Spitzer et al., 2006) from 43,632 college students who identified as a gender or sexual minority or both. Consistent with this finding, Borgogna et al. found that those who identified as gay/lesbian, bisexual, questioning, pansexual, demisexual, asexual, and queer, presented with higher rates of depression and anxiety when compared to the heterosexual population. Additionally, TGNC individuals presented with significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety when compared to cisgender individuals, with gender non-conforming having the highest levels of depression and trans-men having the highest levels of anxiety. Borgogna and colleagues further examined the levels of psychological distress by comparing the effects of identifying as TGNC and as a sexual minority, with results demonstrating that those with this dual identity experience significantly higher scores on depression and anxiety measures when compared to cisgender heterosexuals and cisgender sexual minority individuals. Thus, the findings support the

notion of an interactive and additive/compounding effect between gender identity and sexual orientation (Borgogna et al., 2019). The findings of this study further support the minority stress theory as discussed by Meyer (2003).

TGNC individuals receive strong negative messages from society, including but not limited to being called freaks and undesirable, hearing that they are not valued, or being viewed as sexual deviants, which are all indicative of discrimination, microaggressions, and victimization (Austin & Goodman, 2017; Rood et al., 2017). All these factors influence the high rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts within the LGB and TGNC community (McNeil et al., 2017). McNeil et al. (2017) found, through a review of 30 quantitative studies about factors relating to suicide attempts and/or ideation within the TGNC community, that suicidal ideation rates for the TGNC community ranged from 37% to 83% and suicide attempt rates ranges from 9.8% to 44%. The TGNC has reportedly consistently higher rates of suicide attempts and ideation than the sexual minority community (Hottes et al., 2016). Hottes et al. (2016) found, through a systematic review of 30 cross-sectional studies including 21,201 sexual minority adults, that LGB rates of suicide attempts range from 11% to 20%. The TGNC community faces different and additional stressors than the cisgender LGB community, such as access to gender neutral spaces, appropriate medical care, legal recognition of gender, and non-affirmation of identity (McNeil et al., 2017). The significant levels of psychological distress and suicide attempts appears to be more complex in transgender individuals (McNeil et al., 2017). For example, McNeil, Ellis, and Eccles found that the relationship between social support and suicidal ideation/attempt is complicated. These compounding factors lead to the understanding that, although LGB individuals face issues of minority stress, psychological health, and

internalized homophobia, TGNC individuals' experiences are compounded, especially if they are TGNC and identify as a sexual minority (Borgogna et al., 2019; Testa et al., 2015).

Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure

Testa et al. (2015) developed the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience (GMSR) measure to address the lack of reliable and valid measures available to assess minority stress and resilience factors of TGNC individuals. Meyer's (2003) minority stress model was not specifically developed for the TGNC community, but studies support the assertion that the TGNC community experiences high rates of minority stressors (Austin & Goodman, 2017; Borgogna et al., 2019; McNeil et al., 2017). While there are certain aspects of Meyer's minority stress model that are paralleled for the TGNC community, such as violence, rejection, discrimination, and internalized transphobia (internalized homophobia for sexual minorities) the model neglects to examine discrimination such as accessing essential services because of discrepancies in records regarding their name or sex, discrimination when accessing medical care, being able to access safe restrooms, and non-affirmation of identity (Testa et al., 2015). The model developed included four distal stress factors (gender-related discrimination, gender-related rejection, gender-related victimization, and non-affirmation of gender identity), three proximal stress factors (internalized transphobia, negative expectations for future events, and identity concealment), and two resilience factors (community connectedness and pride) (Testa et al., 2015). Non-affirmation of gender identity was added to address how one's internal sense of gender identity is not affirmed by other people. By adjusting and expanding on Meyer's (2003) minority stress model, the *Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure* reflects and addresses the complex and unique stressors that the TGNC community faces (Testa et al., 2015).

Non-affirming Religions and LGBTQ2S+ Mental Health

There are few religions that affirm the identities of LGBTQ2S+ individuals (Bourn et al., 2018). According to Tranby and Zulkowski (2012), religion privileges specific constructs of gender and sexuality. Many contemporary religions maintain a heteronormative stance towards gender and sexuality (Tranby & Zulkowski, 2012). This means that many religions assert that men and women have distinct roles that should be filled in monogamous and heterosexual relationships, as well as assuming that heterosexuality is the moral sexual orientation and believing that there are only two genders. Many Christian religious denominations have a hierarchy that is based on these heteronormative ideals, thus placing anything outside of heteronormativity as deviant (Tranby & Zulkowski, 2012).

According to Lefevor et al. (2021), sexual and gender minority individuals experience non-affirmation and trauma in conservative religious environments on at least three levels: structural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Common structural contributors to non-affirmation include formal discriminatory policies (prohibiting officiation of same-sex marriages), hetero- and cisnormative doctrine (sermons propagating hetero- and cisnormative standards), and support of sexual orientation change efforts. Interpersonal trauma and non-affirmation results from rejection from the religious community, stigma (expectation of rejection, condemnation, and discrimination), closeting or identity concealment, invisibility, and violence (verbal and non-verbal). Frequent exposure to the interpersonal discrimination can contribute to internalized negative beliefs, which Lefevor et al. describe as intrapersonal trauma. Intrapersonal trauma can present as crisis of sexuality and/or gender, crisis of faith, internalized homophobia/transphobia, and internalized negative beliefs (also called internalized spirituonegativity) about religion or perceived rejection from the LGBTQ2S+ community for identifying as religious. Depending on

the severity and exposure to each level of non-affirmation, LGBTQ2S+ individuals can experience negative mental health effects to varying levels of severity (Lefevor et al., 2021).

Several researchers investigated the effects of participating in non-affirming religions on individuals who identify as LGB and found that there are significant negative outcomes including increased risk of suicide, depression, internalized homophobia/heterosexism, and minority stress (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Bourn et al., 2018; Gibbs & Golbach, 2015). On the other hand, in general, religious commitment, including belief, dedication, and activity, is positively related to psychological well-being and acts as a protective factor against negative psychological outcomes such as depression, suicidality, substance use, and anxiety (Dangel & Webb, 2017; Galek et al., 2015; Gibbs & Golbach, 2015). As stated by Brewster et al. (2016), "religion provides a system of meaning that helps [individuals] cope with hardships and life circumstances out of their power" (p. 120). Separately, religion and sexual identity can result in positive psychological well-being, but it is possible that the intersections of those two identities may negate the individual benefits of each identity (Jacobsen & Wright, 2014). Because many religions hold heteronormative beliefs and see the LGB community as immoral or sinful, the relationship between identifying as part of the LGB community as well as part of a religious community is complicated and can result in a threat to identity (Bourn et al., 2018; Jacobsen & Wright, 2014).

In these religious contexts, sexual minority individuals are taught that their identities are unaccepted and essentially incompatible with their religious identities (Brewster et al., 2016). These teachings can result in an identity conflict that leads to internalized heterosexism and, in turn, increased psychological distress and identity conflict resulting in increased instances of depression, suicidal ideation, isolation, substance use, guilt, low self-esteem, and alienation from

supports (Bourn et al., 2018; Brewster et al., 2016, Galek et al., 2015; Gibbs & Golbach, 2015; Jacobsen & Wright, 2014). In many instances, LGB individuals may feel internal and external pressure to separate their sexual identity from their religious identity or choose between their orientation and their religion (Galek et al., 2015; Jacobsen & Wright, 2014). Religious based antagonism, discrimination, and non-affirmation comes in many forms, and often results in experiences of cognitive dissonance (Scheitle & Wolf, 2017). More conservative traditions, such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) or evangelical Protestantism result in more prominent identity conflicts (Scheitle & Wolf, 2017).

The LDS church is a Christian based religious denomination with more than 16 million members worldwide (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.-b). The LDS church places believe in the Holy Bible and through interpretations of this text, has condemned same-sex sexuality as sinful (Scheitle & Wolf, 2017). In addition to condemning same-sex attraction, the LDS church encourages the LGBTQ2S+ community to attempt sexual orientation change through prayer, faith in Jesus Christ, therapy, and group retreats (Scheitle & Wolf, 2017). The church has issued official statements that affirm heterosexual marriage between husband and wife as part of an eternal plan (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2008). Not only does the LDS leadership condemn same-sex attraction, but it also has the power to restrict church membership or revoke membership all together; this is commonly known as excommunication (Jacobsen, 2017). In addition to excommunication, the church also denies children from same-sex relationships to become members of the LDS church until they are 18 and disavow their parents' relationship (Jacobsen, 2017). In addition to the negative view of sexual minorities, the LDS church also has a patriarchal organization, leading to individuals who do not identify as men to feel alienated with little power to make change (Jacobsen, 2017).

Evangelical Protestantism is a major segment of Christianity that crosses denominations (Stackhouse, 1998; Stokes & Schewe, 2016). There are many Christian denominations that are entirely evangelical such as the Evangelical Free Church and the Alliance Church, however there are some denominations in which evangelicalism exists on a spectrum (Stackhouse, 1998). The United Church, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Methodists, and Lutherans have an evangelical wing and a progressive wing; Evangelicalism is not restricted to one denomination and is not monolithic (Stackhouse, 1998). Christian denominations that ascribe to evangelicalism are distinguished by their belief in the substitutionary death of Christ as saviour, commitment to Jesus as Lord, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the inerrancy of the bible (Stackhouse, 1998). Evangelical Protestants value traditional conservative morals with an emphasis on traditional family values and gender roles (Stokes & Schewe, 2016). Evangelical religious leaders and organizations are the primary opponents of LGBT rights (Stokes & Schewe, 2016). Through a review of 141 Evangelical sermons, Stokes and Schewe (2016) found four key ideas present throughout: the size of the LGBT community does not warrant the attention that is given to them, LGBT couples are immoral, homosexuality is a choice and a sin; and homosexual relationships lead to promiscuity and health hazards. In addition to framing the LGBT community as sinners, the Evangelical church asserts that those who believe that LGBT individuals are sinners are fighters against Satan (Stokes & Schewe, 2016).

These conservative religions perpetuate the cognitive dissonance that LGBTQ2S+ individuals will face throughout their membership in non-affirming denominations, leading to negative psychological outcomes and loss of community (Jacobsen, 2017; Stokes & Schewe, 2016). Evangelical protestants are one of the most common Christian denominations making up 10% of the Canadian population and accounting for about one-third of the 30,000 congregations

in Canada (Reimer & Wilkinson, 2015). The LDS church on the other hand makes up less than 1% of the Canadian population, with around 200,000 members and 497 congregations (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.-a). These are just two examples of the many conservative non-affirming religious environments that exist today.

Gibbs and Golbach (2015) completed a secondary data analysis using data from an internet study collected by OutProud: The National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender youth. This analysis explored the relationship between religiosity and identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans (LGBT), and the effect that the relationship has on suicidal thoughts and attempts (Gibbs and Golbach, 2015). Though Gibbs and Golbach included the "T" from LGBT in their study, only 2% of their participants identified as transgender. While one might infer that leaving one's non-affirming religion would relieve LGBT/religious identity conflict, Gibbs and Golbach found that leaving one's religion because of conflict was not associated with improved psychological well-being, but in fact contributed to an increase of suicidal ideation and attempts (Gibbs & Golbach, 2015). Another surprising result of the study was that the level of internalized homophobia an individual experienced was a minor factor mediating the relationship between religious conflict and suicide (Gibbs & Golbach, 2015). Thus, even if an individual had low levels of internalized homophobia, other factors such as loss of social support, could be at play, (Gibbs & Golbach, 2015). These findings suggest that it is important for counsellors to understand the implications of religious affiliation when working with LGB individuals. Though LGB individuals may be experiencing an identity conflict because of their participation in a non-affirming religion, leaving the religion may exacerbate identity conflict (Bourn et al., 2018; Gibbs & Golbach, 2015). What may be helpful for non-religious LGB individuals could be harmful to those who participate in a non-affirming religion.

Counsellors should be aware of the additional stressors, such as loss of community, social supports, belief structures, religious coping, culture, and identity that leaving one's religion can affect LGB individuals (Bourn et al., 2018; Gibbs & Golbach, 2015).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, as defined by Kimberly Crenshaw (1991), is a framework for understanding how different aspects of individuals' identity interact and converge with each other to create a compounding effect of disadvantage. Lefevor et al. (2017) further describe intersectionality as "a theoretical or analytic approach that simultaneously considers multiple categories of identity, difference, and disadvantage" (p. 388). An example of this could be that the experiences of an Indigenous Catholic lesbian woman cannot be explained by examining her ethnicity, orientation, gender, and religion separately. Her experience with sexual identity may be entirely different than a Caucasian, atheist, lesbian woman, and her experience of gender may be different than that of an Indigenous heterosexual Catholic woman. Approaching counselling with an intersectional multicultural framework entails examining the singular unique experiences of each identity, while also examining the way those identities interact with and influence one another (Lefevor et al., 2017).

When working with TGNC clients, the goal of counselling should be to seek synthesis between religion, gender identity, and sexual orientation as opposed to sequestration (APA Task Force, 2009a; Jacobsen & Wright, 2014). This includes an assessment of a client's beliefs, religious identity, and spiritual functioning, and how they interact (APA Task Force, 2009a). This assessment of each clients' unique experience could include understanding clients' specific religious beliefs, goals, and motivations; ways of coping with religion; and understanding the religious community's impact on clients' experiences of their sexual orientation (APA Task

Force, 2009a; Lefevor et al., 2017). As with all counselling relationships, counsellors should seek to create a strong therapeutic alliance by being genuine, non-judgmental, empathetic, and creating a safe and mutual learning environment (APA Task Force, 2009a). When counsellors assist clients, who want to navigate the complex relationship of sexual orientation and religiosity, it is necessary for them to utilize an affirmative therapeutic approach which includes the following central elements: acceptance and support, comprehensive assessment, active coping, social support, and identity exploration and development (APA Task Force, 2009a). Though the findings presented identify some important considerations for counsellors and the religious LGB community, they fail to examine the unique relationship that TGNC individuals have with religion, leaving a gap in practice which needs to be filled with more specific and extensive research.

Lack of Mental Health Professionals Knowledge and the TGNC Community

Over the past decade, with the help of media such as books, television shows, and movies, TGNC individuals have become more visible within our society (APA Task Force, 2009b; Hendricks & Testa, 2012). This increase in visibility seems to have increased TGNC individuals, their families, friends, and communities, seeking mental health support (APA Task Force, 2009b; Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Although recent trends in research indicate a growing knowledge base about the TGNC community, the APA Task Force on Gender Identity and Gender Variance survey (2009b) of 294 APA or American Psychological Association of Graduate Students members, showed that less than 30% of psychologists and graduate students were familiar with the trans and gender non-conforming experience. This demonstrates the need for further counsellor education and training for working with the TGNC population. Many, if not most, psychologists should expect to encounter TGNC individuals in their professional and

personal lives (APA Task Force, 2009b). Further supporting the need to further education and training on TGNC issues, James et al. (2016) discovered, through the 2015 United States Transgender Survey, that 18% of respondents that discussed their gender identity with a professional, such as a psychologist or counsellor, reported that one or more professionals, tried to stop them from being transgender. Dispenza and O'Hara (2016), surveying 113 psychologists, found that sexual minority psychologists were more comfortable counselling TGNC individuals than those cisgender heterosexual psychologists, and that the longer psychologists were exposed to the TGNC community, the better able they were to effectively counsel TGNC clients. TGNC individuals' negative experiences with counselling and mental health services often result from service providers' lack of knowledge surrounding gender identity and having to educate the provider on gender issues (McCullough et al., 2017). These findings are troublesome, especially considering the high rates of psychological distress that TGNC individuals experience. It is important that TGNC individuals feel that they can reach out for adequate mental health support from knowledgeable, well-trained, and competent professionals. Psychologists, counsellors, and mental health professions should strive to enact affirmative practice, which is simply a practice that reflects the desire for not only inclusion of sexual and gender minorities, but at its core is the belief that sexual and gender minorities are equal human experiences and expressions as cisgender heterosexual experiences (Austin & Craig, 2015). It is essential that mental health providers understand that not all TGNC experiences are the same with religion and assist TGNC individuals in navigating their identity conflicts and relationship with religion on a case-by-case basis (Lefevor et al., 2021).

Summary

Despite a growing research base and best practice guidelines, the gap in knowledge and research about the TGNC community and non-affirming religions needs to be addressed in order for counsellors to be adequately equipped when assisting TGNC individuals who experience a higher-than-average manifestation of mental health issues, navigate the complex relationship of gender identity and religiosity (Borgogna et al., 2019; McNeil et al., 2017; Timmins et al., 2017). Despite the American Psychological Association (2015a) guidelines for practice with TGNC individuals, more research that explores specific TGNC mental health needs is necessary, in particular, with respect to religion. The American Psychological Association's (2012) guidelines for psychological practice with LGB clients provides a model. The American Psychological Association (2012) addressed how counsellors can assist clients to navigate the complex relationship between sexual orientation and religion, encouraging psychologists to consider influences of religion and spirituality on LGB individuals' lives, and mentioning religion more than a dozen times. On the other hand, the American Psychological Association's (2015b) *Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People* mentions religion only once and does not identify specific strategies for psychologists supporting TGNC clients to navigate the intersection of gender identity and religion.

This review has found that the literature on the relationship between religion and identification as a sexual minority has emphasized the "LGB" in LGBTQ2S+, while underemphasizing the TGNC population (Barnes, & Meyer, 2012; Bourn et al., 2018; Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015; Lease et al., 2005). Accordingly, there is a need for further research surrounding the intersection of religion and gender identity, and implications for best practice. The current study will contribute to this literature by addressing this research question: How do

TGNC individuals navigate the complex relationship between their gender identity and non-affirming religion?

Chapter 3. Methodology and Methods

Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I describe the method and theoretical framework used to conduct this study. First, I discuss the social constructivist interpretative framework. Next, I discuss interpretative phenomenological analysis including describing phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. I then discuss participatory action research methods and how these methods fit within an interpretative phenomenological analysis research study. Finally, I describe the procedures of both phases of this research study: community engagement phase and the main study phase. This section looks at participant recruitment, how I collected, stored, and analyzed their accounts, ethical considerations, and benefits and risks associated with the study.

Social Constructivist Interpretive Framework

An interpretive framework is a paradigm or set of beliefs and/or theoretical orientations that researchers bring to the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In social constructivism, also known as interpretivism, individuals seek to understand the world around them by developing subjective meanings about the things, objects, and people around them (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mertens, 2015). These meanings vary from person to person, which in turn requires researchers to look for complexity of views, as opposed to seeking narrow meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, the goal of research based in social constructivism is to rely on participants' views, which are developed socially and historically through interactions with other people, history, and cultural norms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) and Mertens (2015) discussed the axiological, ontological, epistemological, and methodological stances of social constructivist researchers. Axiologically, both researchers' and participants' socially constructed values are honoured resulting in a balanced representation of ideas and views. These

values will influence both the researcher and participants in their interpretations of meaning. Ontologically, social constructivists view reality as not singular; we construct multiple realities through lived experience and social interactions. Epistemologically, reality is created through interactions by individuals as they experience it. Thus, the reality of knowledge gained through research inquiry is co-constructed between researcher and the participants. In social constructivism, an inductive methodology is applied with the assumption that reality is socially constructed, research can only be conducted through means of interaction between the researcher and participants.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is just one method that applies this interpretive and epistemological position. Researchers who utilize IPA emphasize individuals' subjective experiences and seek to understand their experience of a particular experience or phenomenon (Mertens, 2015). In addition, IPA researchers strive to understand how individuals make sense of their personal and social world through exploring, describing, interpreting, and situating the information collected (Smith et al., 2009). Through a social constructivist lens, IPA researchers make meaning of participants through paying attention to context and recognizing that the experiences and interpretations exist only within that context.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis, influenced by key ideas from Edmund Husserl, who is often credited as the originator of phenomenology, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is a school of qualitative research grounded in psychology, shaped by phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Chernavin, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith, 2007). The difference between IPA and the original phenomenological approach to research, is the intentional incorporation of interpretation by both the researcher and the participants

(Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Thus, researchers who utilize an IPA approach are committed to the examination of how people make sense of life experiences through focusing on the details of each individual's experience (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Interpretative phenomenological analysis is rooted in three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical framework that provides a theoretical guideline for researchers to understand and study human experiences and phenomena particularly at an individual level and at a subjective level of reality (Qutoshi, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Finding a singular definition for phenomenology is difficult, but most definitions encompass the general idea of "thinking about what the experience of being human is *like*" (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 17), particularly regarding things that matter to us. For the purposes of examining the phenomenological roots of IPA, I will examine Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre's contributions (Qutoshi, 2018; Smith et al., 2009).

Edmund Husserl. Edmund Husserl provided the basis for IPA's attention to the human experience (Smith et al., 2009). His classic phenomenological method focused on descriptive research that seeks to understand realities instead of pursuing truth (Qutoshi, 2018). He was interested in discovering how individuals understand their own experience of a phenomenon, particularly the essence of or the essential qualities of such experience (Smith et al., 2009). He reasoned that if the essential qualities were able to be drawn out of such experience, they would illuminate the experience for others; we all have different perceptual experiences of phenomena, and these experiences also have things in common (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl's philosophy has

helped IPA researchers focus on reflection, attentiveness, and systematic examinations of lived experience (Smith et al., 2009).

Martin Heidegger. Martin Heidegger was a student of Husserl (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger's approach to phenomenology marks a move towards hermeneutic and existential emphases in phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger was more concerned with the question of existence itself as opposed to Husserl's emphasis on individual processes (Smith et al., 2009). He viewed individuals as always a "person-in-context" (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 23) and emphasized the concept of intersubjectivity. To Heidegger our relatedness to the world is fundamental to our nature; we can only be understood as functioning within the world, with the world being a fundamental part of our being (Larkin et al., 2006). Interpretative phenomenological researchers adopted key ideas from Heidegger including the idea that humans exist within a realm of objects, relationships, and language; and existing in the world is always in relation to something, perspectival, and temporal (Smith et al., 2009). The most significant take away from Heidegger is the concept of approaching phenomenology through a hermeneutic lens (Smith et al., 2009).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty shares Husserl's and Heidegger's concepts of understanding individuals' relation to being in the world and agrees with Heidegger's desire for a more contextual approach to phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009). Merleau-Ponty emphasized an embodied nature of existence and how it has led to individual perspectives on the world (Smith et al., 2009). He introduced the concept of primacy which is the idea that any knowledge that we gain is from our own point of view and cannot be escaped or separated (Smith et al., 2009). We can empathize with other's experiences but are never able to understand or share entirely in their experience because we have different embodied experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This concept of

embodiment is essential for IPA researchers; "the lived experience of being a body-in-the-world can never be entirely captured or absorbed, but equally, must not be ignored or overlooked" (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 25).

Jean-Paul Sartre. Jean-Paul Sartre reiterated Heidegger's assertion that humans exist within a world that we are in constant relation to (Smith et al., 2009). In addition to this, he asserted that human beings are in a constant state of becoming themselves influenced by the presence of others (Smith et al., 2009). Sartre extended Heidegger's assertion of worldliness to include the concept of social and personal relationships, or lack thereof, also influence our understanding of our experiences in the world (Smith et al., 2009).

All four of the above philosophers were leaders in phenomenological philosophy and thus contributed to the basis of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl established the essential idea of perceptual experience (Smith et al., 2009). This idea of perceptual experience encourages me, the researcher, to examine each participants' experience separately while also examining was the "essence" of the common experiences are (Smith et al., 2009, p. 20). Subsequently, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre contributed to the rich interpretative focus of IPA and the aim to make meaning out of individuals' experiences (Smith et al., 2009). As a researcher, I not only seek to describe the participants' experience, but focus on understanding their unique experience in their relationship to the world. My attempt to understand participants relationship to the world is interpretative and relies on my ability to make meaning out of their experiences.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is a theory and method of interpretation based on the assumption that individuals interpret their experiences through the lens of their experience and interaction with the world (Mertens, 2015; Smith et al., 2009). Researchers engaging in hermeneutics attempt to

suspend all judgments and preconceived notions about what is real and give priority to the new objects/knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shinebourne, 2011). This requires what some would say is backward thinking; researchers look to the new knowledge and experiences to inform previous understandings (Smith et al., 2009). In IPA, a *double hermeneutic* exists because both participant and researcher are involved in the process (Shinebourne, 2011).

Double Hermeneutic. The double hermeneutic, as described by Smith and colleagues (2009), exists in IPA because the researcher is trying to understand the participant trying to understand their own experience, and is an essential component of understanding and making meaning of participants' experiences. Thus, there are two levels of interpretation occurring simultaneously: a) participant is trying to make sense of their own experience and context, and b) researcher is trying to make sense of and interpret the participants' interpretations (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Researchers engaging in this double hermeneutic process are playing a dual role; they are both "like and unlike the participant" (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 41).

In addition to this double hermeneutic, participant interpreting their own experience and researcher interpreting participants' experience, IPA researchers also operate the double hermeneutic in another way by combining both the *hermeneutics of suspicion* with the *hermeneutics of empathy* (Smith et al., 2009). Smith and colleagues used Ricoeur's work from *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. Ricoeur (as cited in Smith et al., 2009) describes the hermeneutics of empathy as attempting to reconstruct original experiences in its own terms, and the hermeneutics of suspicion as utilizing outside theoretical perspectives to interpret the phenomenon or experience. By combining the two hermeneutic approaches, IPA researchers are attempting to understand what the phenomena is like for the participant as well as

analyzing and making sense of it, leading to a more complete understanding of participants' lived experiences (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

Hermeneutic Circle. Interpretation and analysis in IPA research are not single-layered unidirectional approaches to understanding (Larkin et al., 2006; Shinebourne, 2011). A hermeneutic approach to understanding views the researcher and the participant as interrelated, thus a cyclical approach to understanding is created (Larkin et al., 2006; Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). IPA researchers can utilize a broad interpretative range and analytical strategies to understand participant experiences (Larkin et al., 2006). In addition to these approaches to analysis and interpretation, IPA researchers return to the data multiple times in order to understand it from different perspectives (Smith et al., 2009).

Idiography

Idiography, or the concern with the particular, operates on two levels in IPA research (Smith et al., 2009). First, there is commitment to the particular through depth of analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Second, researchers commit to making sense of how particular life experiences and phenomena are understood through the lens of specific people in a specific context (Smith et al., 2009). This in-depth analysis and commitment to understanding unique people and experience results in small and purposively selected samples (Smith et al., 2009). Idiography and the emphasis on the particular should not be confused with a focus on the individual; the phenomenological understanding of experience is complex and examines the individual in relation to an experience of phenomena, but not the individual themselves (Smith et al., 2009).

Participatory Action Methods

Participatory action research (PAR), influenced by Kurt Lewin, Paulo Freire, and Jürgen Habermas is a school of qualitative research that utilizes the research process as a mechanism for

change (Adelman, 1993; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mertens, 2015; Nicholls et al., 2016; Ponterroto, 2010). Kurt Lewin, commonly cited as the founding father of action research, demonstrated an alternative method to quantitative, positivist, and postpositivist inquiry through the application of psychological knowledge and ideas through action research (Adelman, 1993; Peters & Robinson, 1984). Likewise, Lewin demonstrated a way to not only understand a group of individuals sharing similar experiences, but also a way to solve social problems, raise the self-esteem of minority groups, and assist minority groups in overcoming forces such as discrimination and colonialism (Adelman, 1993; Lewin, 1946; Peters & Robinson, 1984). Because of the collaborative nature of PAR, no specific methods exist; participants and researchers work together to develop research questions and inquiry methods and engage in data analysis and interpretation (Mertens, 2015). Participatory action researchers seek not to simply study the world but seek to also change it; the purpose of meaning-making and knowledge construction is to improve society, including but not limited to marginalized groups such as indigenous people, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender persons, and queer persons (Balakrishnan & Claiborne, 2017; Chou et al., 2016; Lake & Wendland, 2018; Mertens, 2015; Ponterroto, 2010). Therefore, qualitative research should include an agenda for reform (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998).

Participatory action research challenges the notion that research participants are objects within a study, such that they are a means to an end, and the idea that science is an overarching truth or that there is one universal truth (Lake & Wendland, 2018). Thus, PAR has philosophical roots in postmodernism, social constructionism, and transformative frameworks. Participatory action researchers reject the notion of a single reality and recognizes that the social, political, cultural, economic, gender, and disability lenses play into the construction of reality (Creswell &

Poth, 2018). This requires researchers and participants to engage in an interactive process whereby they influence each other through sharing their subjective realities, resulting in the construction of multiple realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mertens, 2015; Segre, 2016).

Giving Voice to Marginalized Groups

Given the vulnerability of the population being studied, TGNC individuals, it is essential for researchers to approach the research process in a way that highlights marginalized voices and challenge popular discourses about the community (Creswell & Poth; Mertens, 2015). Because participatory methodologies are rooted in a transformative paradigm, researchers who engage in this type of inquiry actively engage in processes that minimize power differentials (Mertens, 2015). Participatory action research methods, such as community based participatory research (CBPR), involve community members in the project at various stages (Bush et al., 2019). Members of the community become cocreators of knowledge and are viewed as being the experts of their own experiences as well as their community (Bush et al., 2019; Israel et al., 2013). Ensuring that members of the marginalized community are involved in the research project allows for an increased holistic perspective on research outcomes, a feat that would not be achieved without community and participant engagement (Bush et al., 2019). Incorporating feedback and advice from members of the TGNC community prior to commencement of data collection, we can collaborate to recognize potential limitations and power imbalances that may arise. Participant and community engagement in this research projects formulation and process will allow for great insights as well as offer reassurance to the participants that their voices are important and necessary (Vincent, 2018). I strove to achieve this through collaborating with TGNC community leaders before commencing this research project to gain their perspective of the specific steps I took in this research project.

Participatory Action Methods and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

According to Bush et al. (2019), despite interpretative phenomenological analysis originating from a different paradigm than participatory action research methods, merging the two methods can provide insight into individual and community experience. In addition to Bush and colleagues' assertion, Smith and colleagues (2009) also stated that IPA is an integrative approach to research. Interpretative phenomenological analysis allows researchers to analyze and interpret participants' accounts of their experiences, while being clearly grounded in participants' own meaning making and conceptualizations (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009). As long as the IPA study is rooted in phenomenology, idiography, and hermeneutics, IPA researchers can draw upon a wide interpretative range while drawing on and making connection with other theoretical positions (Smith et al., 2009). Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a versatile methodological approach to research that allows for flexibility in order to incorporate a participatory action lens; "a natural synergy exists among CBPR and an interpretative phenomenological philosophical assumption" (Bush et al., 2019, pp. 4).

Social Constructivism

Both IPA and participatory action methods share roots in social constructivism (Bush et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018 Smith et al., 2009). Interpretative phenomenological researchers and participatory action research hold a basic set of beliefs that multiple realities exist and each of those realities is embedded in people's experiences of everyday life (Bush et al., 2019; Israel et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2009). To understand a phenomenon, one must gain the perspective of those who experienced it (Bush et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2009). The hermeneutic approach to understanding present in IPA and the assertion by participatory action researchers that we must hear from the community and community members to understand their experiences,

go hand in hand (Bush et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2009).

Reflexivity and Co-construction of Knowledge

Reflexivity takes center stage in both IPA and participatory action methods (Bush et al., 2019; Geraldi Gauci, 2019). Researchers engaging in either of these methods should maintain a constant awareness of decisions that are made throughout the research process in addition to paying attention to how their own identity, thoughts, and personality interact with the data and participants (Bush et al., 2019; Geraldi Gauci, 2019; Smith et al., 2009). I engaged in reflexivity through using a research journal that tracked important decisions made as well as musings about the data analysis process. In both IPA and participatory methods, research interacts closely and intimately with data collected (Bush et al., 2019; Geraldi Gaudi, 2019). In IPA a double hermeneutic is used giving attention to both the participants' interpretation of their own experience as well as the researchers' interpretation of the participants' experience, resulting in a co-construction of knowledge through reflexivity and interpretative methods (Geraldi Gauci, 2019; Smith et al., 2009). In participatory action methods, participants are viewed as experts of their own experience, thus allowing them to not only act as participants but as researchers of their own experiences, resulting again in the co-construction of knowledge (Bush et al., 2019). I strove to value participants as experts on their own experience through conducting credibility checks and inviting their feedback on my interpretation of their experience. Participants engaged in varying levels of involvement, through a simple e-mail or a two-hour video chat discussing the findings. They were able to participate in whatever capacity they felt they needed to.

Participatory action research methods are a social process, participatory, practical and collaborative, emancipatory, critical, and recursive (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). Participatory action research is a framework for research that addresses the complex interplay of power

throughout the research process and acknowledges the collaborative and co-constructive process of knowledge development (Balakrishnan & Claiborne, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mertens, 2015). Given the collaborative construction of participatory action methods and the interpretative and flexible nature of IPA, I was able to co-construct an understanding of the TGNC community's experience of navigating gender identity and participating in a non-affirming religion.

Research Design

This study consisted of two phases: community engagement and main study processes. The community engagement phase of this research project included gathering input and recommendations from TGNC community members and allies about the research design, research question, data collection methods, and interview questions. I utilized my current connections within the LGBTQ2S+ community in Edmonton, Alberta to reach out to community members that would be interested and willing to participate in the advisory portion of this project. I engaged with five transgender and gender non-conforming community leaders.

I interviewed each community advisor using a semi-structured interview to provide recommendation for conducting this research project in a way that is culturally sensitive (See Appendix A: Interview Guide – Community Advisors). We discussed the importance and relevance of this topic, appropriateness of the research questions, potential impacts on the TGNC participants and community, ethical considerations, development of a participant interview guide, and steps to ensure participants felt safe and respected during the entire research project.

I asked community advisors to provide input on how this project could best benefit the TGNC community in Edmonton. I gave them the space to discuss what dissemination modalities will be most beneficial to them as individuals, as part of an agency, and as part of the TGNC

community. Finally, I asked community advisors for input on how I, the researcher, could give back to them as advisors and the participants of this study for their contributions to this project.

The recommendations provided by community advisors included providing several options for interview formats such as phone, text, video, and e-mail. In addition, they recommended that participants be given the opportunity to bring support animals and anything else that may make them more comfortable. The community advisors placed emphasis on how I as the researcher should ensure that I create a safe and comfortable interview space for them, including giving participants the option to either engage with a question or decide to move on to the next. In addition to creating a safe space, community advisors agreed with my decision to provide the option for post-interview counselling for participants (further discussed in Benefits and Risks). Finally, advisors suggested that the dissemination of the final results of this study should be made public and shared with organizations that would benefit from the knowledge gained.

Management of Community Engagement Data

I conducted conversations with community members via Zoom, a web-based conferencing software. Zoom has the capability of recording both video and audio simultaneously. After each conversation, I removed the video file and only kept the audio recording. This audio recording was transferred to an encrypted external hard drive within 24 hours of our conversation. For those community advisors who wished to remain anonymous, I assigned their audio files a code as opposed to using their name.

Incorporating Feedback from Community Members

Once all feedback was retrieved, I compiled a list of recommendations. Once this list is compiled, I critically examined each recommendation and determined whether it was possible to incorporate them into the IPA research study.

Main Study Processes

Participant Recruitment and Sampling

Because of the idiographic approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis, small sample sizes are recommended and rarely amount to more than 10 participants (Geraldi Gauci, 2019; Smith et al., 2009). Smith and colleagues (2009) recommend a sample size between three and six for student projects is sufficient and should provide enough data for comparison while not overwhelming students with an overload of data. For the purpose of this inquiry, I recruited four adult individuals (over the age of 18) who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. In addition to identifying as part of the TGNC community, these individuals were in a position where they had decided to stay, or work to stay, part of their self-identified non-affirming religion. The recruitment of four participants allowed for the development of micro-analysis of similarities and differences between cases (Smith et al., 2009).

To recruit participants, I advertised using social media; I advertised on local LGBTQ2S+ social media pages, including Facebook and Instagram. I used two versions of a recruitment poster, one detailed (see Appendix G) and one simplified (See Appendix H). Individuals were invited to contact me via e-mail of phone. Participants who expressed interest were e-mailed an informed consent form (see Appendix C) which provided them with an overview of the study and requirements of participation.

Demographically, the participants ranged from 24 to 40 years of age. All four participants identified as Caucasian and were all born and raised in Canada. Participants gender identities were as follows: M2F non-binary, genderqueer, non-binary, and transgender male. Their sexual orientations were pansexual, polysexual, asexual, and queer. All participants participated in a Christian denomination of religion. They were Baptist, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Seventh Day Adventist, and Christian. Table 1 lists participants, their demographic characteristics, and their religious affiliation.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Age	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Religious Affiliation	Disability
Nicole	Caucasian	40	M2F Non-Binary	Pansexual	The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints	None
Ainsley	Caucasian	27	Genderqueer	Polysexual	Baptist/Christian	None
Kay	Caucasian	32	Non-Binary	Asexual	Seventh Day Adventist	Fibromyalgia, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome
Jaden	Caucasian	24	Transgender Male	Queer	Christian	None

Data Collection

Through feedback from community advisors, I decided to utilize a semi-structured interview format to elicit participants' stories (See Appendix D). Because of the limitations and restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted all interviews virtually through the Zoom conferencing platform. I Interviewed participants once, for between 90 minutes and 110 minutes. I utilized a semi-structured interview guide to prompt me throughout the interview to

ensure that I was capturing all the necessary information. The semi-structured interview template can be viewed as a *prompt sheet* that includes a few main themes for discussion; it is not intended to be prescriptive or limiting, instead it is flexible and allows participants to take the lead (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Geraldi Gauci, 2019). In many instances, participants' stories and my questions led to fruitful conversation outside of what was outlined on the interview guide. I used follow-up questions throughout the interview to elicit more thick and rich descriptions of the stories that participants were sharing.

Data Management

I conducted and recorded interviews using Zoom, an online conferencing application. Zoom has the capability of recording both video and audio simultaneously. After each interview, the I removed the video file and kept only the audio file. Within 24 hours, I transferred audio files to an encrypted external hard drive and deleted from my laptop. I protected the anonymity of participants by assigning participant audio files a code as opposed to using their name (Mertens, 2015). I made back-up copies of all computer files, including audio files, at each stage of analysis and stored them on an encrypted external hard drive. I completed all the interview data transcription. In addition to assigning a code to participants' data, I protected the anonymity of participants by removing their names and any identifying information from the transcripts. In addition to saving the transcripts and audio recording on an encrypted hard-drive, participants informed consent documents were stored there.

Data Analysis

Existing literature does not prescribe one single method for working with data in an IPA research study (Smith et al., 2009). Data analysis flows from a focus on narrow units of analysis to broader units, from the descriptive to the interpretative, while maintaining a commitment to

understanding the participants' points of view and a focus on personal meaning-making (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Interpretative phenomenological analysis can be described as an "iterative and inductive cycle" (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 85). Smith and colleagues (2009) emphasize that there is no clear-cut right or wrong way of conducting analysis in IPA research studies and encourage researchers to be innovative in how they approach the task. That being said, Smith and colleagues also outlined a step-by-step process to conducting IPA research but emphasized that these steps are flexible but will support first-time IPA researchers in navigating the data analysis process. Because this is my first IPA research study, I analyzed data utilizing Smith and colleagues' steps to analysis:

Step 1: Reading and re-reading. My first step in analyzing IPA data was immersing myself in the original data through reading transcriptions and listening to audio-recordings. My intent was to slow down and avoid quick reduction and synopsis. Recording strong reactions and recollections of powerful moments of the interview experiences accompanies this step. I utilized a reflexive journal as it allowed me to bracket information in order to remain focused on the data.

Step 2: Initial noting. This is the most detailed and time-consuming step of IPA. In this step, researchers examine semantic content and language utilization on an exploratory level. Following Smith et al. (2009), I examined each transcript in detail, making descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. Descriptive comments describe the content of what participants have said. Linguistic comments explore the use of language by participants. Conceptual comments focus on understanding what participants are discussing and is the first step of interpretation in the data analysis process. I examined each transcript three times, once for each type of comment. Each time, I highlighted texts that seemed important to the research question and indicated why. I also wrote down whatever came to mind as I read specific

sentences and words. This process of reflection took the form of questions, comments, and sometimes an emoji to indicate how I felt reading a specific passage.

Step 3: Developing emergent themes. At this stage of analysis, the researcher should have a detailed model of the interview as well as an additional level of notes. The management of data moves to reducing the volume of detail created in step two, while also maintaining complexity. This step shifts from looking at original transcripts to looking at the exploratory notes taken in step 2. As per Smith et al. (2009), I re-examined my exploratory notes and condensed them into concise statements of what is important. These statements captured and reflected my understanding of the participants experience.

Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes. Thus far, I established a set of emergent themes that were ordered chronologically. Based on Smith et al. (2009), I reexamined the emergent themes developed in step three and evaluated the importance of each theme. Initially, the list of emergent themes I created in step three was extensive and had to be condensed further to have a manageable amount of data while accurately representing participants' experiences. I examined and re-examined the themes of each transcript and merged near identical themes together, clustered related themes, and rid the data of themes that were not relevant to the research question. This step took me the greatest amount of time, with much of my effort being placed on ensuring that I was accurately representing the experiences of the participants and keeping the most important and relevant information related to their experience. This step in a chart of themes placed in categories which resulted in the themes and subthemes I present in the results.

Step 5: Moving to the next case. After I completed steps one to four for the first transcript, I moved onto the next participants case and repeated the same steps. I did this to

ensure that I was able to bracket any ideas I developed through the previous analysis (Smith et al., 2009), which allowed me to identify new themes within each participant transcript. Setting aside ideas allows the researcher to identify new themes.

Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases. During the final step of analysis, I re-examined all four cases and identified connections and patterns between them. This allowed me to connect ideas presented in each case while emphasizing each participant's unique between experience.

By following the above steps, I ensured that I gained an in-depth understanding of participant experiences and how they interpret their own experiences.

Ethical Considerations

I completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS 2): Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics on May 15, 2019 (see Appendix E for certificate). In addition to this, I received ethics approval from the Athabasca University Ethics Review Board.

Informed Consent

In order to receive informed consent, I provided participants with an informed consent form (Appendix C), which described the purpose and nature of participation, risks and benefits, voluntariness of participation, potential consequences of withdrawal, privacy and confidentiality protection, data protection and storage, who would have access to the data, the means of dissemination of the study, the potential risks of participation, and individuals to contact should they have with questions about the research project (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because IPA utilizes participant quotations in publication and dissemination, I specifically ensured that participants were aware that they were consenting to this. I also provided community advisors with informed consent (Appendix B)

Benefits and Risks

The Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists requires researchers to strive to do no harm to participants (CPA, 2017). However, interviews may bring up distressing memories or strong emotions; researcher should be prepared to allow participants to work through these. Also, researchers must provide participants with adequate resources and supports (Smith et al., 2009). Below are the identified risks and benefits for both community advisors and participants.

Community Advisors. Community advisors were in a position of contributing to the improvement of psychological services for TGNC individuals. In addition, I asked them to voice their expert opinions to guide the development of the study. Advisors were given the opportunity to be listed as co-author on presentations or publications. They were given the option to remain anonymous or be named in the final disseminated product of this research at their own discretion. Community advisors received $30.00 as compensation for participation. Finally, I suggested that community advisors could list their advisory activities on their curriculum vitae.

Main Study Participants. Participants were informed that their first-hand knowledge of the TGNC experience would contribute to the knowledge base of counselling psychology. They had an opportunity to voice their experiences in a safe place where their voice was considered expert. Because the participants were engaging in emotional and intellectual labour and discussing sensitive content, in the event of psychological harm or distress, they were be offered one free counselling session, up to $200.00, to debrief their experience. Additionally, I provided participants with a list of low cost and local resources for individuals experiencing psychological distress or for those who need to speak to a mental health professional (Appendix F), including a publicly funded sliding scale counselling service with drop-in and ongoing counselling services at multiple locations and an LGBTQ-affirmative counselling service. Finally, participants were

provided with two gift cards of their choice: one for $25.00 after the interview, and one for $30.00 after they engaged in credibility checking.

Quality Control

According to Geraldi Gauci (2019), evaluating IPA research involves bringing together review criteria specific to IPA and criteria applicable to all qualitative research in general. Yardley (2000) outlines four characteristics of high-quality qualitative research: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

Sensitivity to Context

Sensitivity to context encompasses many facets such as theory, relevant literature, sociocultural setting of the study, social context of the relationship between researcher and participant, and awareness of the power imbalance (Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000). In order to ensure these contextual characteristics are considered, I have conducted an extensive literature review, examined the philosophical roots of both IPA and participatory methods, and engaged in the community advisory stage of this project to ensure extensive understanding of the sociocultural setting and social contexts of my relationship with participants. Through examining both IPA and participatory methods and engaging in the community advisor stage, I confirmed that IPA and components of PAR were the best methodologies to approach my research question. Both methods allowed me to approach participants in a way that brought the voices of their experience to the forefront, making them experts of their own experience, while I positioned myself as a learner. This allowed me to develop an empathic relationship with them while limiting power dynamics. I encouraged participants to share only what they were comfortable with and ensured that they were aware that they could decline to answer any

question.

Commitment and Rigour

Commitment encompasses extended engagement with the research topic, development of competency with the method of inquiry, and immersion in relevant data (Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000). Rigour refers to the thoroughness of the research study and the completeness of data collection and analysis (Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000). A rigorous IPA study will have a carefully selected, homogenous sample (Smith et al., 2009). In addition to a carefully selected sample, quality in-depth interviews also demonstrate rigour and commitment (Smith et al., 2009). To achieve this, I developed specific inclusion criteria, including active participation in a non-affirming church, a TGNC identity, age over 18, and a willingness to reflect and recount their experiences of participating in a non-affirming religion. These criteria created a homogenous sample of individuals with a shared experience (Smith et al., 2009). I selected participants purposefully on the basis that they were able to communicate their specific perspective of their experience of their gender identity and non-affirming religious participation. In addition, IPA methods achieve rigour through complete interpretation of data at several levels of analysis, resulting in an interpretation beyond a simple description of data (Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000). In order to achieve a multi-level analysis of data, beyond description, I utilized the six steps of analysis identified by Smith et al. (2009).

Transparency and Coherence

Transparency and coherence relate to the clarity of the argument and the general construction of the qualitative story (Yardley, 2000). Interpretative phenomenological researchers can remain transparent through clearly describing each step of the research process, from participant selection to data analysis steps (Smith et al., 2009). I have demonstrated

transparency and coherence through clearly describing each step of the research process, beginning with community advisory interviews to final data analysis. Coherence is judged by the reader of the research study (Smith et al., 2009). Smith and colleagues (2009) outlines questions that researchers can ask themselves to ensure coherence: "Does it present a coherent argument? Do the themes hang together logically? Are ambiguities or contradictions dealt with clearly?" (p. 188). I created a coherent and logical thematic analysis presented in the results section of this document. In addition to answering these questions, researchers should ensure that the research questions and process aligns with the theoretical assumptions of the approach; in IPA, the phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic methods should be clearly written up (Smith et al., 2009). To ensure that my research question aligns with IPA, I examined the philosophical roots of IPA and ensured that my research question involved the examination and understanding of personal lived experiences and how they make sense of their experiences (Smith et al.., 2009).

Impact and Importance

Yardley (2000) describes impact and importance as arguably the most decisive criterion for how a piece of qualitative research should be judged. They state that developing a thorough and sensitive analysis are not enough if the research has no influence on the beliefs and/or actions of other people, is not interesting, and does not share important or useful information.

To ensure these four principles of a good qualitative study, I practiced continuous reflexivity throughout the research process by utilizing a reflexive journal. This provided a space for me to reflect on how I interacted with the participants and the data, and how my position may be affecting interpretations of the data. In addition, I conducted a credibility check with participants to ensure that my interpretation of their experience was what they had intended to convey.

Significance of the Study

It is essential for counsellors to be equipped with sufficient knowledge to effectively assist individuals who belong to the TGNC community. This study aims to build on the growing body of literature surrounding the TGNC community. Unfortunately, there is a lack of current literature that addresses the specific dilemma that TGNC individuals face when navigating their relationship with a non-affirming religion. Psychologists and counsellors should feel confident in relying on current guidelines for best practice and feel certain that those guidelines are based on current and rigorous research. Without research and extensive guidelines in place, counsellors are not serving this marginalized population to the best of their ability. This study revealed factors that contribute to TGNC individuals' successes and challenges in navigating the complex relationship between gender identity and religious affiliation. This knowledge gained will provide a steppingstone to create guidelines for best practice with TGNC individuals, give current and aspiring practitioner's insight into the experience of this phenomena, as well as increase the limited knowledge available on this population.

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter I describe the interpretations I have made based on each participants experience and through comparing their experiences. I will first introduce each of the participants to situate them within the context of gender identity and non-affirming religions and situate you within each of their unique stories. Following the participants' introduction, I will situate the results by providing a definition of non-affirming based on participants' interviews. It is necessary to understand how participants define non-affirming in order to accurately interpret the results. I will then describe the eight superordinate themes and their accompanying subordinate themes discovered through a detailed examination of each participants' experience.

Participant Biographies

Nicole

Nicole is a Caucasian individual and at the time of our interview, was 40 years old. She identifies as a "M2F non-binary" pansexual individual. "M2F" stands for male to female, meaning that she was assigned male at birth. Nicole uses both she/her and they/them pronouns. Pansexual "refers to a person who is sexually, emotionally, romantically, or spiritually attracted to others, regardless of biological sex, gender expression (of masculine or feminine characteristics), or sexual orientation" (Rice, 2015, p.1122). Nicole talks easily and confidently about herself, presenting as someone who is secure in the knowledge of who she is in the world. She lives in a small central Albertan city, with a population of fewer than 20,000 people. Nicole belongs to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS). She converted to the LDS faith in her early twenties. "Around 22-ish or so I started investigating the church and a whole bunch of crazy things happened that led me to believe that this is the thing to do". She has participated in the church ever since, and eventually became the primary school teacher for

three- to twelve-year olds. While in the church she "suppressed the shit" out of her gender identity and eventually married her wife in the temple. Temples are considered house of the Lord and only those who are deemed eligible can enter (Preparing to Enter, n.d.). The bishop of one's congregation and the stake presidency approve individuals based on their adherence to the Ten Commandments (Preparing to Enter, n.d.). Nicole's journey to accepting her gender has been tumultuous and fraught with pauses and pitfalls. She has frequently taken breaks from attending the church, but "promptings" and "thoughts in the back of my head" that she needed to go back, always led her back. The Church has become a source for her "sense of self". Nicole's interview was punctuated with stories of her confidence-building acts of courage such as how she would go to church in a dress, walk around town in fancy shirts and makeup, and attend public events in her best outfits. She said she does the best she can, she's "not trying to glam it up…just trying to cover the five o'clock shadow".

Ainsley

Ainsley was full of laughter and smiles throughout the whole interview, which they to their love of laughter and desire to live with joy. Ainsley radiated positive energy and said that "if we can laugh…it just makes everything feel better". Ainsley is a 27-year-old Caucasian individual from a major Albertan city. They identify as genderqueer and polysexual and were assigned female at birth. They have attended a Baptist church their whole life and identify Christianity as their religious affiliation. Ainsley described themself as a "very social person…an extrovert" who has always had "introverted jobs". Their presentation in the interview was confident and assured. They did not hesitate to answer questions and were very open about their experiences. Ainsley works primarily as a web designer, teaches voice lessons, are an improv performer, and a vocalist. They studied music, psychology, and metaphysics in post-secondary.

Ainsley surrounds themselves with friends in the performing community and the art scene. When asked about whether they have LGBTQ2S+ friends they said, “I think I seem to attract those kinds of people [laugh]”. They’ve brought their vocal abilities to the church in the form of leading worship vocally, or through song. When discussing their comfort with leading the church they said, “I don’t mean to brag, but I’m actually a really good vocalist… [laugh] I am actually I’m a very good vocalist and I am their best vocalist, and they will lose a lot”. They have led the church through worship and also engaged in youth group leadership.

Kay

Kay, a 37-year-old Caucasian individual from a large city in Ontario identifies as non-binary, asexual, and panromantic. They recently realized, or as Kay said, “admitted to myself” that they are non-binary two months before our interview. Participating in this project was important to them because if they had known of project like the current study when they were growing up, they would have “come out way sooner”. They have attended the Seventh Day Adventist Church since childhood and also participated in a Christian homeschooling program. They describe their upbringing as “sheltered”. Kay relocated to study behavioural science at a conservative Christian university. They have spent the last eight years “working with adults with developmental disabilities” and recently finished a course to be a medical office assistant and unit clerk. For most of Kay’s life, they’ve been surrounded primarily by individuals who are part of the Seventh Day Adventist church, or who are involved in Christianity in some capacity. Recently Kay has begun to diversify their social circle, and because of that has become more open and aware of different identities. It is in part through their friends that they have been able to identify where they fall within the LGBTQ2S+ community. Kay has spent much of their time methodically and critically examining the teachings of the Seventh Day Adventist church in light

of their gender awareness, and has become a more open, self-aware, and self-confident individual.

Jaden

Jaden uses his Christianity as motivation and a support to love other people. He has embraced being his "authentic self" and shares that with people who come across his path. One of his goals is to show other "queer people who have grown up in religion or who have been hurt by the church" that there are people who have "gotten through it and found a way to still have faith". He is, a 24-year-old, queer, transgender male, grew up in a large city in Alberta. They grew up in a "very conservative Christian home", attended a large Alliance church, and also attended a private Christian school from kindergarten to grade nine. Jaden does not identify himself with any particular church at the moment, as he is currently seeking a new place to worship. He currently identifies his religious affiliation as Christian. He presented as confident, assured, motivated to make change, and passionate about music, education, and gardening. He's experienced challenges such as drug addiction, mental health issues, and family conflict, but has overcome these obstacles with positive healthy relationships, relapse free, and using his music as a platform to share his story and create change within the Christian and LGBTQ2S+ community.

Definition of Non-Affirmation

I previously defined non-affirming religion as a religious expression that places restrictions on individuals, considers individuals lesser than, and deems them unworthy based on their gender identity and/or sexual orientation through rules, norms, and community expectations. Participants provided their own definition of what non-affirming is in their own experience. Their definitions moved beyond that of their place of worship, into what their church

does not do. All the following participant quotes are responses to the question "When you hear the term 'non-affirming religion' what does that mean to you?".

Nicole discussed non-affirmation as the religion not recognizing them. She said, "The religion doesn't really recognize me. There's no place for me in it because everything is so segregated by gender and that's such an important crux of the religion. There's no place for me there at all". Non-affirmation looks like the church not seeing Nicole for who she is. They do not recognize their transgender/non-binary identity.

Ainsley said that "Christianity as it is fed to me today, not by Jesus, but definitely by the tradition of the church is not affirming of anybody, actually." They describe the non-affirmation of the church as inherent in all Christian denominations. Their immediate response when asked what non-affirmation meant to them was, "Yes, I do agree. It is non-affirming. Hundred percent". They see "faith, grace, and Christ" as affirming, but the institution lacks the action and the connection that would make it an affirming organization. Ainsley believes that "unity amongst Christians would help a lot". Their motto is that "it is not us and them". Unity, collaboration, and "conversations with real people, real love, actually talking about real circumstances" would lead Christianity to be an affirming faith.

Kay describes non-affirmation as "not accepting of people who are different". Religions that say "you can't be different than you were born…we're put on earth to procreate…you must get married and have children" are non-affirming. They lead members who do not want any of those things to not "fit in". A non-affirming religion tells people who they can and cannot be. They see anything outside of the cisgender heteronormative standard as "not natural". Religious "definitions of nature" are also not affirming. Kay indicated that this non-affirmation does not always present itself as active "preach[ing] from the pulpit" against different identities, but it

looks like “the culture within the religion”. Kay noted, “Non-affirming doesn’t have to be, ‘You can’t come if you’re different’. It could still be ‘Well you’re here, but we’re just kind of like ignoring you’’. Non-affirmation can be passive.

Jaden, rightfully, said that “Non-affirming…looks very different to different people”. This is evident in the definitions that participants have provided. He said, “For the most part, most queer folks’ definition of affirming is beyond tolerance and into acceptance.” Non-affirmation can take the form of an absence of action towards affirmation, as opposed to outright denigration or condemnation. His experience of non-affirmation was witnessing and hearing stories about the mistreatment of other church members. He was taught that “gay is bad” and if someone comes out “you have to tell church leadership”. When churches identify themselves as affirming and accepting, Jaden expects that they are taking action to be affirming and not just labelling themselves as such while continuing to tolerate a culture of non-affirmation. Telling transgender and gender non-conforming individuals that they can come to the church on one hand while telling them, “You can’t transition, and you can’t have any homosexual relationships” is not an act of affirmation. It is at the very minimum, tolerance. Referring to churches that do this, Jaden said

> You’re not affirming…The part that drives me nuts about a lot of churches is that they will say, “Oh, we accept you”. But it doesn’t go beyond those words because acceptance looks like action. And it goes beyond just saying you’re welcome into our place of worship, because that’s very easy to do.

To be affirming, Jaden believes that churches need to “do their research and know that what [they’ve] been teaching all this time is wrong”. Affirmation equals action. Non-affirmation is performative tolerance.

Questioning the Actions, Teachings, Rules, and Beliefs of the Church

Participants each experienced non-affirmation in their churches in different ways, which led them to question their personal alignment and involvement with the church.

Lengthy and Active Church Involvement

Participants are involved with their current church in different ways. Three participants have been long-standing members since childhood, and one converted to their religion in adulthood. Nicole has been involved with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints for 15 years. She said,

> I've known these people for 15 years. I have seen their children, I have helped them build houses, I have mowed their lawn…I have done a lot of stuff in…the Mormon church in my small town…I've been an integral part of the community for many, many years.

Nicole has not only dedicated her time on Sundays to the church, but has spent time cultivating and participating in the church community around her, including serving as a Sunday school teacher.

Like Nicole, Ainsley was involved in their Baptist church since childhood, with significant service and relationships over many years in their local church and their denomination. They frequently noted themselves "being the same age as the [local] church" and their church "growing up with me" because the church opened around the same time they were born. In their teens, Ainsley progressed from being a member of the youth worship band, which played for the main Sunday service. This led to leading the worship band throughout junior high and high school. Eventually they were offered a paid role as worship leader for the main Sunday service. Ainsley also served at summer youth camps. They describe church members as the

"family that you chose". Despite their lifelong dedication to the Baptist church, Ainsley describes their religious affiliation more generally as Christian.

Kay and Jaden do not have leadership involvement like Ainsley and Nicole do, but they have both been participating in their religions since childhood. Kay grew up in the Seventh Day Adventist church and also participated in a Christian homeschooling group. Jaden grew up in an Alliance church in a conservative Christian home and attended a private Christian school. He describes his involvement with the church throughout childhood as "a way of life". Jaden, like Ainsley, describes their religious affiliation as Christian. He is not currently participating directly in the Alliance church, but is actively seeking out another Christian denomination to participate in.

All participants have long-standing relationships with their respective churches and are all seeking a belonging within their religion. They have a vested interest in keeping their faith and their religious participation alive without leaving their respective church homes.

Christianity as a Non-affirming Institution

Ainsley and Jaden recognize Christianity as a whole as non-affirming, not just their own denomination or specific members. When asked whether they would expect worshipping elsewhere to be more affirming, Ainsley said, "They seem more affirming. I think that…there's always still that backbone though…that thing about the oh those six verses [that purportedly prohibit homosexuality]. There's always that thing." Ainsley believes that non-affirmation is built into the foundation of Christianity, stating, "Christianity, as it is fed to me today, not by Jesus, but definitely by the, the tradition of the church, is not affirming of anybody." They find the teachings of humans, not of Jesus, to be non-affirming.

Jaden believes that few people actually critically explore their relationship with religion

or their personal relationship with God; instead, they focus on "following the lifestyle and the rules and the…tradition." This blind compliance contributes to a non-affirming environment. Jaden discusses how "sometimes I feel uncomfortable saying that I am a Christian," often feeling "more uncomfortable saying that I am a Christian than saying that I am transgender." While there is stigma associated with both identities, Christianity is viewed by many people within the sexual and gender minority communities as an institution that causes and has caused much harm.

Participants suggest that non-affirming churches shape their members to in turn be non-affirming. Although they identify Christianity as uniformly non-affirming, they all still seek to participate, holding out hope for more accepting, or at least, more accepting environments. Ainsley worships in young adult-centered activities outside of the main congregation, and Jaden has moved homes hoping to find a new church. The participants believe that God and Jesus are affirming and accepting of them, but the imperfect human beings who populate churches who have created a non-affirming culture of Christianity because of their interpretation of the gospel.

Church Doctrine, Rules, and Teachings Against LGBTQ2S+ Individuals

Churches require their members to follow their doctrine. While teaching against LGBTQ2S+ expression varied among participants' churches, each participant reported a lack of affirmation of TGNC individuals in general and against the participants in particular. Nicole experienced gender segregation: "They segregate the classes, right, boys to the left, girls to the right". Not only do they segregate by gender, but the church also has "certain rules for guys and gals and rooms at certain times and certain numbers." Accordingly, Nicole's gender identity requires she be accompanied by a man whenever she wants to attend women's classes.

To be in a leadership position, Ainsley was required to sign an agreement that they "would not do anything that would separate me from God," specifically that they would not

engage in what the church defined as homosexual behaviour. In Jaden's experience, if someone comes out as gay, "you have to tell church leadership, and they're gonna handle it". Naturally, this "doesn't create an environment where people want to come out", so it "doesn't happen". Both Jaden and Ainsley reported similar requirements to report gay members, as well as a requirement to sign a contract affirming they will not engage in what the church defines as homosexual behaviour before undertaking a service or leadership role. Jaden witnessed "people [being] removed from church because they were gay," while Kay was told by a friend they would lose their job if they attended a same-sex wedding or the wedding of a TGNC person.

In his own church and in other churches he has explored, Jaden was told that the church would love and welcome him as long as he did not engage in what they defined as homosexual activity or transition. This was also the case in Kay's church. These standards are presented as intended to affirm LGBTQ2S+ people, but have the effect of ensuring that they do not allow them to live their lives fully. As Jaden said, "Acceptance looks like action. And it goes beyond just saying you're welcome into our place of worship".

Church Culture, Negative Attitudes, and Actions Against LGBTQ2S+ Individuals

Outside of the rules set in place by churches, participants described an unwritten culture of non-affirmation. These include microaggressions (intentional and unintentional) and active devaluing of and acting out against LGBTQ2S+ individuals. These actions range from dirty looks, perpetuating the belief that the church does not accept LGBTQ2S+ people, supervising TGNC persons, actively rejecting the LGBTQ2S+ community, and overall lack of representation of anyone who is part of the LGBTQ2+ community.

Nicole experiences church members "giving me looks… They look at me as the crazy guy in the dress." Despite this culture of non-affirmation, Nicole still made every effort to view

church members as trying their best to be accepting: “They’re very supportive, as much as they can be.” Nicole knows that she is “breaking the rules” and that the church is “not really accepting of my gender.” Although her trans expression is contrary to the church’s rules, she describes church members’ lack of acceptance as “politely not actively denying it.”. Nicole’s description suggests she actively minimizes church members’ actions, and she has set a low bar her fellow congregants’ behaviour. For example, when attending the women’s class in church, the leadership “sent one of the priesthood guys back there…to babysit, just in case.” She thought “they were doing their best to accommodate me…. They were trying to be considerate.” Sending a man to observe a transgender individual “just in case” is not an act of affirmation, but an action borne out of fear and ignorance.

Nicole has made the effort to see the best in what the church is doing, but also finds it “very insulting”. Choosing to view the minimal and “insulting” efforts the church has made as positive, likely assists Nicole to experience belonging in the church. The church’s actions are performative, and do not help transgender and gender non-conforming church members like Nicole to feel they belong. As Nicole stated, “There’s no place for me in it. Because everything is so segregated by gender and that’s such an important crux of the religion. Like, there’s no place for me there at all.”

Like Nicole, Jaden experienced outward acts of non-affirmation. Jaden’s mother received phone calls from old church members who found out his gender identity, offering her support and prayer for what they perceived as her hardship. This outward act of non-affirmation, framed as concern, continued for years after Jaden and his family had lost contact with the callers. Another overtly non-affirming act occurred when Jaden was approached a former schoolmate from Christian school, whom he “hadn’t seen in like five or six years.” She approached him in

front of a group of people asking, “Do you still go by Emily?” Jaden, who was already years into his transition and had a moustache replied, “No, does it look like I would?”. These obvious acts of non-affirmation highlighted the inability of some church members to accept that someone could even be transgender.

Though Nicole and Jaden experienced the direct actions of church members, other participants witnessed the non-affirmation of other LGBTQ2S+ members of the church. Ainsley, who was part of the church leadership, participated in meetings in which sexual and gender minority members were discussed. Ainsley described the discussion focusing on what roles or duties were permissible for the member, noting, “It was pretty cringy sitting there and knowing who I am, it was challenging.” This confirmed to Ainsley that they would not be affirmed if they come out. Jaden was taught from childhood that “gay is bad” and witnessed people in youth groups “talking about like how they would handle… situations if people came out as gay”. Although what Ainsley witnessed is not a direct discussion about TGNC individuals, one can infer that if gay members would not be affirmed, nor would TGNC members. Both Jaden and Ainsley feared becoming the topic of another conversation of, “What do we do with this?” as opposed to, “How do we support them?” Accordingly, they learned to “keep their heads down.”

Witnessing conversations about how LGBTQ2S+ members would be treated in the church, Ainsley concluded that church culture was characterized by rigidity of beliefs. They found church members “so rigid” that instead of “flexing and going with the flow a little bit,” they were hurt when they learned about LGBTQ2S+ church members. Kay similarly stated that having “people be critical thinkers” is one of “religion’s biggest fear[s]”. The church “want[s] to spoon feed you things and indoctrinate you and then have you, like, repeat that to your children…and generations of people.” This rigid thinking and intentional indoctrination creates a

culture of non-acceptance and a closure to new ideas, which decreases the likelihood of a cultural shift within these churches.

In addition to overt actions, participants clearly perceive church members' negative attitudes towards LGBTQ2S+individuals. As Jaden described it, "It was sort of the same attitude, but it was very, like, we just don't talk about it. And kind of like pretending that it doesn't exist." Kay, who is not out to their congregation, has learned that being TGNC is not acceptable in their church. There is a set of implicit rules, of which church members may not be entirely conscious, that church members follow. As Kay said, "They don't have to actively necessarily preach from the pulpit that like it's wrong, but like the culture within the religion…within the church just says it's wrong".

Non-affirmation is not merely rules-based, but attitudinal as well: "They're just like not accepting…non-affirming doesn't have to be like, 'You can't come if you're different.' It could still be like, 'Well you're here, but we're just kind of like ignoring you'." Kay does not "feel represented or included" and their church doesn't "accept me for who I am". There are "undertones" and "cultural things that…come into play." It is as if

> as soon as like, you say, "I'm different…I don't want to be a girl or I'm going to be 'them'… I'm just gonna be me, but me is like not really a girl or a boy" they're [church members] like, "You can't do that, that's not natural."

Furthermore, the church that Kay attends does not outwardly endorse conversion therapies, but they have a "sneaky" way of encouraging cis-het normativity. Kay believes that church members' efforts to befriend them mask attempts to change their gender identity. Members of Kay's church believe that LGBTQ2S+ individuals need to be saved or changed in order to be accepted by the church. The church that Kay attends has glaring undertones of non-

affirmation and disapproval of the LGBTQ2S+ community. In some cases, this may look like active preaching and teachings against the community, but quite frequently it is hidden within the threads of culture within the church.

The overarching attitude of non-affirmation within these Christian churches, whether intentional or not, is still harmful. Each participant experienced non-affirmation in distinct ways, while the negative effects of the non-affirmation were similar for all. The overt actions and covert attitudes left participants feeling invalidated and unaccepted within their churches. The culture of non-affirmation creates a sense of fear and invites participants to question their own validity, whether they ever will be accepted for who they are, whether they will be expelled from the church, whether they can marry, and finally, why their fellow church members do not view them as human beings who deserve love and acceptance

Critical Reflection and Awareness of the Misalignment Between Personal and Religious Beliefs and Values

Participants have gradually come to realize that their beliefs, values, and identities do not mesh with the beliefs of the church in which they participate. They recognize the conflict between their identities (gender identity and religious identity) and have critically reflected on the practices and beliefs they will or will not comply. They experience conflict among how they see themselves, how they believe God sees them, and how the church sees them. Participants face the struggle of believing in their religion, while concurrently holding opposing values. As Kay stated,

> The more I grow in, like, my journey of like gender and sexual identity, the more I look at the church and say like, “wow, I really don’t agree with these practices”, or I really am feeling that, like, you know, you got it wrong. Like, maybe you have some of the biblical

> things right, but, like the way that you're treating people, or the way that you're involved in or not involved in social justice, or like the way that, you know…the church is…just not accepting people is like, not something I want to be a part of.

Kay has taken steps to notice the teachings and beliefs that align with their values and those that do not. They have begun to "really look at everything much more critically," resulting in deciding what to take from the church's teachings and what to leave:

> There are some things I would take from like what I've grown up with and be like, "Yes, this is right, and I still believe it", but there are a lot of things that I would take and say like, "No, like, I don't agree with that anymore"

This critical reflection is not easy because Kay still identifies as Christian and wants to remain part of the Seventh Day Adventist church. They "still believe in the Bible and…still like, would identify as a Christian, but don't know how much I identify with Adventism anymore." Kay is at a "crossroads…trying to figure out what I want to do". They still "hold a lot of the like biblical beliefs, but I definitely don't hold any of the cultural ones…. A lot of the things they teach culturally…is like bullshit. Like, I don't agree with any of that". Cultural beliefs in Kay's congregation look like cisnormative dress codes, rejection and lack of acknowledgement of LGBTQ2S+ identities, and members openly speaking out against LGBTQ2S+ individuals. Kay's critical reflection is helping them figure out where they fit within the religion and whether they can move forward in Adventism while holding onto the biblical teachings and rejecting cultural ones. Kay is taking a personal inventory.

Participants reported their critical reflection had emerged from a place of confusion and frustration. As Nicole said, "I know I'm not doing anything to hurt anybody, and my existence is valid, and I have as much right there as they do". She recognized that she "can't stop being trans

either," yet consistently reflects on "what could I have done differently". Nicole experiences a discrepancy between her identity and what the church teaches about her identity. She taught a lesson about being transgender to her primary class and "didn't like anything that came out of my mouth that day. I really didn't believe what I was saying". She was teaching a lesson about the invalidity of her own identity, while personally believing that she is "valid". She has a strong belief in the church and, as she stated, she will "never ever, ever, ever, ever say the church is not true," but experiences conflict because she knows that she is "not allowed to be there". For Nicole, the pain of existing within this actively exclusionary religion is currently less damaging to her than leaving, but she is acutely aware of the contradiction within which she has chosen to live.

These participants are faced with a conflict between how they feel about themselves and how the church feels about them. Sifting through the discrepant beliefs assists them to approach church and the teachings that they receive in a critical way. They have decided that they are going to take from the church the ideas that align with their own beliefs, which allows them to absorb the teachings in a way that is less harmful to their psyche and their identity. As Jaden said, the "dichotomy [is] really really hard to maintain". Participants reported constant work and reflection to exist within these denominations while maintaining adequate emotional safety and mitigating harm to themselves.

Questioning Church Attendance and Seeking Religious Acceptance Elsewhere

Participants' process of critical reflection, acknowledgement of the harm that their current churches are inflicting upon them, and their recognition of how their values and beliefs are misaligned with church's, led them to question their church attendance; some sought more affirming congregations. Each participant has acknowledged that they do not want to leave their

current faith, but their community does not turn around and accept them, they are more willing to take the plunge into a new faith community and hold out hope that those communities will support them and become just as strong of a community as they previously had.

Nicole questioned why she was still at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints: “I don’t even know why I’m here”. This questioning has led Nicole to exercise her faith elsewhere: “I’m okay now, I don’t need them [the church] anymore.” Nicole acknowledges she is not sure how she might fulfill spiritual needs going forward, noting she “might go with Reiki or something else. You can get those same emotional experiences from other places”.

Other participants expressed interest in finding other Christian places to worship. Ainsley feels content with worshipping elsewhere, but they are “hopeful” that their current affiliation, their Baptist church, will one day be ready to accept their gender identity and sexual orientation. Ainsley worships predominantly at their main Baptist church, but also worships elsewhere. Problematically, when they worship elsewhere, they “feel like a guest,” whereas at their current congregation, “it feels like a “family,” notwithstanding their disagreement with many of the church’s stances about gender and sexuality. In other congregations, they are “much more willing to bring up LGBTQ status”. Ainsley finds it much easier to be open and to “come out” to people who are not at their congregation. They would prefer to stay with their current church and community, but are “open to the idea of going to a different church” on a more regular basis. They have been part of the community at the Baptist church since childhood. Leaving the congregation would not be a simple matter.

Kay faces a different struggle. They have been looking for another congregation, such as the United Church as it is “really affirming and accepting of like, people who are queer”, but the church has different foundational beliefs. For example, the United Church “meet[s] on Sunday”,

whereas, as a Seventh Day Adventist, they "believe Sabbath is Saturday". Kay finds the affirmation and acceptance at the United Church "amazing", but finds that their foundational beliefs are not consistent with hers, and would therefore be unable to exit Adventism. They struggle with knowing that the "church that professes my beliefs also doesn't accept me for who I am". The Seventh Day Adventist church, as Kay said, "believes a number of things that like broader Christianity doesn't necessarily believe". This complicates their efforts to find an affirming church, frustrating Kay, and leading them to question attending a church. "Why would [I] go back?" Kay's journey of becoming aware of their gender identity and sexual orientation led them to distance themselves from the church, a direct result from the misalignment in values. Due to their church not meeting in person during COVID-19 allowed Kay to take a break from in-person services, noting, "chances of me still attending church are slim".

Jaden is still currently seeking a new church to attend; so far, he has not been successful. He has encountered churches that are performative in stating they are affirming, but the actions of church members seem to belie this. He has experienced that "a lot of churches…will say like 'oh we accept you', but it doesn't go beyond those words". Jaden's search for an affirming church has so far not been successful, but he remains hopeful that he will find a place to worship.

Though participants question their alignment with the church, most have chosen to stay at their current place of worship. They still experience familiarity and community in their historical churches and cannot find more affirming churches that hold the same fundamental beliefs. Their questioning and reflection do not occur overnight process. Most participants are expending substantial effort analyzing where they fit and whether worshipping elsewhere would be an overall improvement.

Fundamental Relationship with God

The word fundamental can be used to describe something that serves as a base support, essential structure, or function, and acts as a central element that other things depend on (Collins, n.d.). When one thing is fundamental to the other, the second cannot thrive without the first (Collins, n.d.). Participants described their relationship with God as fundamental. Each of them is able to, and actively works to, maintain a relationship with God, despite the non-affirming beliefs, assertions, and actions of the Christian institution and the congregations to which they belong. Because of their participation in a non-affirming religion, participants have had to do a deeper reflection of what they want from their religious participation, and God has played a central role in this self-discovery. The foundation of their religious and spiritual beliefs lies within their relationship with God; God is a steady presence in their life and acts as a safe haven from non-affirmation.

Benefits of a Relationship with God

Most participants described their relationship with God using words of endearment to highlight the benefits that the relationship provides. Having their God walk with them and provide them with approval and confidence, that may be lacking in their other relationships and communities, gives them strength to navigate life.

Ainsley maintained an upbeat and positive attitude throughout our entire interview, despite the heavy topics that we touched on. They gave credit to their relationship with God and discussed how

> trying to see the way God sees us is helpful because…God still, even still, delights in the fact that–that we try or that we, you know, God delights in us so much and it's just so fun to think of this kind of life

Knowing that God is out there delighting in the effort that they put into life, as opposed to judging them when they make mistakes, provides them with a sense of confidence, assuredness, and positivity. God acts not only as an impartial third party, but he also acts as a place of resolve for participants. Ainsley talks about how they have done a lot of "stupid stuff" and is still able to "come to God with my crap" and they are "filled when I am able to pour out". Kay maintains a "running dialogue with God in my head" whereby they maintain constant communication that helps them to be "calmer and to appreciate the little things".

Ainsley and Jaden described God as being a consistent presence in their lives. Ainsley attributed their resilience to knowing that "God and I are walking together" while Jaden attributed the fact that they are alive to "who God is" and how he is able to provide them with a feeling of "peace and awe and wonder and joy". Having this constant presence of someone who unconditionally supports you could be comforting, and as Jaden said, "Who wouldn't take comfort in that?…It's also given my life…a purpose and meaning". Jaden also goes on to talk about how having this fundamental relationship with God and how "knowing that I'm not at any moment alone…helps me to love other people better too". The benefits are not limited to personal ones; the relationship with God makes it possible for them to love the other people around them in a "better" way. It is as if God acts as Ainsley, Kay, and Jaden's personal confidant, best friend, and supporter who allows them to walk more easily through the world while contributing to a positive sense of self.

Relationship with God is More Important than Approval from the Church, Community, or the Institution

Participants consistently described their relationship with God as fundamental to their faith, while minimizing the importance of approval from the church, the community, or the

institution of Christianity. Ainsley recognizes that within the church community they are "going to walk into circles where I am not fully accepted. Like, just like Jesus did. I am going to have to be humble or to lay something down everywhere I go" in order to be accepted. The "something" they are laying down includes hiding or suppressing their gender identity and sexual orientation. The love of God or Jesus is "something I never have to lay down" to gain approval. The relationship Ainsley has with God is "not about anybody else...it's about me and God. God knows where I'm at". To Ainsley, God's love is more all-encompassing and enduring than the acceptance and love of church members and the church itself. Ainsley discusses how they are their true self with God. They are able to cope with "laying" parts of them down in the church because they seek and receive acceptance only from God. They "lay" no parts of themself down when communing with God.

> So, have I broken that? Probably, yeah, actually, yes, I have. I'm thinking I made out with a woman. I, you know, like I made out with a man, I made out with everybody. I made out with, my goodness. I've made out with so many people this whole time. And it's like, does that–is that separating me from, I keep coming back to that. Is that separating me from the love of God? Oh, no. Okay. Then that's the big deal. I know where I'm at with God. God knows where I'm at and we sort it out, you know.

When discussing whether they will continue to participate in their current church, Ainsley discussed how they "love these people [church members], love them, and I love worshipping with them", but if they disclose their gender identity and they have a negative and unsupportive reaction, they will "go and find God where God is" and that the most important thing is "that I can safely encounter God". They are comfortable leaving the church members to "wrestle" with their disapproval if it comes to that. They are still "hopeful" that the church and

church members' reactions will be positive, but place emphasis on the importance of finding sanctuary and safety with God. The church provides a vessel or a holding tank for ritual, companionship, communal worship, and is an important aspect of their faith, but it does not supersede their relationship with God.

While Ainsley discusses the importance of encountering God in a safe way and the permanence of God's presence, Nicole discusses how the church gave them the tools to understand how unbreakable their relationship is with God. Their relationship with God can never be taken away from them, despite the consequences the church may impose because of its disapproval of their gender identity. Nicole described how the church gave them the knowledge that they are "first and foremost…a child of God", and now that Nicole knows that, it is something that cannot be taken away from her. Nicole stated: "They can tell me anything, but I know I'm a child of God…they brought me in, and they taught me this stuff is *mine* [emphasis added]". Even if they "get excommunicated, so be it. Right. I will still love God. God will still love me. And Christ was my saviour before, he's my saviour now and they [the church] can't have that back". Nicole has been given the knowledge by the church to have this unbreakable relationship with God. In her own words,

> Now that I know that I'm a child of God. Sorry. That's mine. I own that. You can tell me I can't come to this building anymore. You can tell me that I'm out and you excommunicated me and whatever. You unsplashed[1] me. Okay. You can–you can do that. You can say that. You can't really get rid of me. Because I was always a child of God. Right.

[1] "Unsplashed me" is a reference to reversing a baptism.

Nicole's belief is that her relationship with God will persist with or without the approval from the church.

Jaden and Kay discussed how their idea and experience of God's unconditional love does not match the way their churches are not accepting of everyone. They emphasize the importance of establishing a relationship with God and how being part of a faith or being religious is not simply about following a set of rules. Kay states that,

> "maybe you [the church] have some of the biblical things right…the church is like, you know, just not accepting people is like, not something I wanted to be a part of. And so, the more that I grow in–in accepting who I am, the more I realize the church doesn't accept people for who they are, and that God does accept people for who they are".

Jaden and Kay go on to describe how their "picture of God being loving doesn't fit with him also being like 'you can't be how you are', even though the church is saying that". This idea of God being more accepting than the church or accepting despite the church's teachings has encouraged Kay to maintain a relationship with God, even when they have "gone through times where like, [they] haven't been like, following things the church teaches". They have always maintained that "running dialogue" with God, even when acting outside of the church's teachings.

Jaden has experienced wavering spirituality, but even during difficult times he emphasized what he believes to be the "most important aspect" of his spirituality – his relationship to God. He believes that being part of a faith or religion is not simply about "following the lifestyle and the rules and the kind of tradition", it is about being part of "something that [means] something". And part of creating that meaning is establishing a relationship with a "God that loves and loved unconditionally and loves really really well and

loves all people and accepts them". He cannot bring himself to believe that being part of the Christian tradition is about a "set of rules or following what a book says".

While their descriptions of the importance of their relationships with God varies, the commonality is that their faith rests with their relationship with God and not the institution. Their relationship or lack of relationship with their church does not affect their permanent relationship with God. When their faith wavers or when they are questioning the teachings of the church and the beliefs of the church members, their relationship with God keeps them grounded and remains unwavering. Although each of these participants are part of different Christian churches with different teachings, each has developed similar strategies and belief systems. These strategies and beliefs help participants resolve the discord between their religion's disapproval of their gender identities and their God's unconditional acceptance of their gender identities. They have all chosen to emphasize only the loving and forgiving aspects of their God. This selective perception allows them to experience solace and acceptance from God that they are unable to find within the church. Each disregards the punitive and judgemental nature of God that their churches have taught them. This approach minimizes the conflict between the religion they are taught and the faith that they practice.

Placing Faith and Trust in God

Multiple participants discussed how they are able to place faith and trust in God and believe that they are exactly where they are meant to be, learning the lessons that God wants them to. They are not walking through life alone; they have God walking beside them and guiding them along the way. As Ainsley states, "God is so in our lives working through it…If I make a mistake, God's ready to–to turn it around or go the mile with it". He knows "exactly who we are, exactly what we've done, exactly where we've been and where we need to go". Jaden

similarly stated that “you can have faith and confidence in knowing that you have somebody with you walking through it with you”. Both Ainsley and Jaden find comfort and solace knowing that not only do they have a relationship with God, but God is beside them through everything, good and bad. Ainsley believes that God chose this difficult path for them. They stated, “I love that this was chosen for me, I love that God was like ‘this is actually what I want you to go through. I want–I want you to feel this kind of pain’”. It is as if knowing God is with them and has a plan for them gives them the confidence to face their pain and suffering, while also giving them a reason or shape to the suffering that they are enduring. They are able to face these hardships due in part to the belief they have in a higher purpose or a higher power. They believe that God created them to be precisely who they are so that they can learn from their journey.

Not only does God provide a supportive and trusting relationship, but he also acts as a constant guide. Nicole has felt God’s presence throughout her life and has listened to God’s voice. She described frequent “promptings” and cited feeling the “Holy Spirit”. Sometimes she would not know why these promptings were happening but would follow them because she believed that it was God and the Holy Spirit guiding her. Nicole peppered the interview with statements like “the Spirit told me to”. Ainsley also listens to God and waits for God’s promptings to make decisions. When discussing when they plan to come out to their congregation, Ainsley said, “I don’t feel like it’s right now. I will wait and see, I’m kind of waiting on God for that”.

Placing faith and trust in God gives Ainsley and Nicole strength to negotiate difficult decisions while also maintaining membership in their non-affirming church. This faith in God that these participants discuss, encourages them not to resist obstacles that are being put in their way but understand that God has placed the obstacles there for their benefit.

God's Love is Unconditional

As Ainsley said, "No matter what I do, I'm loved". Nicole stated that "I'm his child. You don't have to like my gender. He does. He knows who I am". Kay shared that "God loves people where they're at and for who they are". Participants each described the relationship with God, and the love of God, as unconditional. His love does not consist of judgment, and he loves participants because of who they are, not in spite of who they are.

Each participant experiences God differently, but they all believe in and rely on the idea that God has unconditional love for them, for who they are, and for how they identify. Their belief in God's unconditional love contradicts some of the teachings they have heard at their church. Kay stated,

> I've always felt that like a loving God would not condemn people for something that fits them, or like that a loving God would not deny someone love because of how they are. That like a loving God wouldn't say "you have to be celibate your whole life." Like that's–a loving God wouldn't do that.

Kay sees God's love as non-punitive and supportive, which contradicts the teachings about punishment that they have heard through their church. In addition, Jaden discusses how even some progressive church members "love you in spite of you being gay" while God "loves you and loves your queerness". God's unconditional love provides participants' unconditional support, even when their chosen institutions are not supportive. This type of support and love allows participants to experience security in at least one relationship in their life. Jaden said that

> there's a lot to be said about knowing that there is this almighty power out there who created everything and who like knows you better than anyone ever will, on every aspect of who you are, and still, like loves you and wants good for you.

These participants walk through life with a feeling of support in the background, a safety net. It is through God's grace that they are accepted and that they can walk through life with a sense of confidence and self-acceptance. Their selective belief in seeing God as loving unconditionally enables them to interact with their faith in perceived safety and comfort.

Importance of Social Support and Connection

Lack of Social Support

All participants, at some point in their life, experienced a lack of support from their social circles, whether that be family, the LGBTQ2S+ community, or their fellow church members. Kay, Jaden, and Ainsley experienced a lack of support and understanding from their family about their gender identity. Jaden, as I previously discussed, came out to his mother and received a negative response. He experienced his mom as in a state of denial, argumentative and oppositional at every encounter. For two years after he came out, conversations and interactions with his mom were difficult. Jaden said:

> Until like, almost two years after every conversation my mom and I had about it was an argument or it was her telling me that I was like wrong, or like saying, like there's a lot of times where she would say like, it's probably just the drug use that's like damaged your brain and you are like basically in psychosis.

His mom was "in a lot of denial" and was looking for something to "grasp onto" in hopes that Jaden's identity "can't be true". Now, his mom fully supports Jaden, and their relationship is positive and supportive. His relationship with his dad, however, has not improved. Jaden said, "Coming out to my dad was very…we just won't talk about it, and to this day he'll like deadname me and use she/her pronouns". He uses the wrong pronouns and Jaden's deadname even though Jaden started to medically transition five years ago. This relationship with his dad is

one that has not improved overtime. They are “not super close”, which Jaden stated “doesn’t matter a lot” to him. His father was mentioned as more of a passing statement and was not woven throughout Jaden’s story.

Kay came out to their mother and experienced a similar response. Kay described their mother as a “super conservative Christian,” and her reaction to Kay changing their pronouns was, “You know, I don’t think I’ll ever get to that point for you”. They still communicate, but Kay's openness about their gender identity is very new, so there has not been time for their mother to progress past initial reactions. Kay made the decision not to come out to their dad, stating, “I don’t know if I could tell him”. Kay has witnessed their dad’s misunderstanding and negativity towards non-cisgender persons. Because their father lives on the other side of the country, they have been able delay coming to him, creating space to maintain a relationship without having to face the complexities of navigating Kay’s gender identity together.

Ainsley has had a similar experience of lack of acceptance of their gender identity with their family. Ainsley came out to their parents, “but they didn’t approve”. This made Ainsley feel as if they had to “stay this way [cis-presenting] forever. I’ve got to make it work for me”. Ainsley described their family’s reaction by saying “they feel like victims”. It is as if Ainsley’s gender identity affects them more than it affects Ainsley.

Nicole’s experience was somewhat different from Ainsley’s. Nicole discussed the acceptance that she has received from her wife. Initially, her wife “was not on board” and they stayed together because they “need each other financially”. Her wife has progressed from not being supportive and opposing Nicole’s gender identity, to helping with her makeup and the clothes that she wears. So, Nicole has had some familial support, but she has not experienced it as unconditional or constant. Nicole mostly discussed the difficulties that they faced finding

support outside of the church. They said, “My wife was not on board. The church is not on board. My job, at the time, was not on board…And the one support group I was not allowed to go back because I’m a ‘tranny chaser’”. The one group that Nicole thought would have been the most likely to provide support to Nicole rejected her. Nicole attended a meeting for transgender individuals and was immediately labelled as someone who is only in those meetings to find transgender individuals for sex. When Nicole arrived, the other participants said, “Well, you look like a dude and we’re pretty sure you’re a tranny chaser”. Nicole was then told “not to come back, ever”. She faced an unsupportive and discriminatory environment within the LGBTQ2S+ community, which led Nicole to suppress her identity for “the next ten years”. The rejection from within the LGBTQ2S+ community had a profound impact on Nicole and halted her progress toward accepting her gender identity. Rejection and discrimination from a group that is intended to be supportive for individuals within the TGNC community is extremely harmful; Nicole’s perseverance and determination helped her get past this initial rejection. Discrimination and rejection do not only come from outside of the LGBTQ2S+ community but can come from within when members hold expectations about what it means to be transgender, including appearance. Nicole did say that the community was not “as evolved back then”, and her experience could have been extremely different if she were to attend a more inclusive and supportive meeting today, as opposed to ten years ago. Nicole, in hindsight, has become forgiving of the rejection that she experienced, but does acknowledge the negative impacts of these interactions.

Desire for Connection, Acceptance, and Community

Like everyone, participants expressed a desire for connection, acceptance, and community, whether that be within the church or through like-minded people outside of the

church. Nicole expressed how “people like me aren’t really common” where she lives and has sought connection with the few people that do identify as part of the LGBTQ2S+ community. In their earlier days of their gender identity discovery, they would have preferred to make connections with other TGNC individuals, because they needed information about transgender and gender non-conforming identities and a support system. Nicole, through seeking out the transgender support meeting, was trying to find community, and instead found discrimination and toxicity.

Ainsley is hoping to remain at their current church, but is not sure if the church, “collectively as a whole will be ready” to accept their gender identity. Ainsley wants to “attack” this uncertainty “one [person] at a time”. They are hopeful that this strategy will work, as they want to maintain this connection and they “love worshipping with other people”. Their church is “family”, and they remain “hopeful” that acceptance will come. Ainsley has a deep desire to maintain connection with this church “family” that they grew up with and maintain that religious support system. They are willing to sacrifice their vocalist role in the church: “I’m understanding that I may not be able to sing at church”. Ainsley’s willingness to sacrifice one of the most important things to them, their voice, in order to maintain connection to their church family speaks of their profound desire for connection.

Kay has sought out connections through LGBTQ2S+ coffee meetups in a city that is close to where they live but has not had access to these gatherings over the last year because of COVID-19 restrictions. They enjoyed creating connections and being around like-minded people, “It’s really great to be around people that…totally accept you for who you are”. They not only seek that connection through the LGBTQ2S+ community, they are hoping to find that connection also through religion but have faced difficulties finding connection and community

because of conflicting beliefs about the sabbath. For example, “the United Church here in town has, like, a rainbow sidewalk, like, outside their church…it’s awesome…and they’re great. But like they meet on Sunday, which is like, it’s okay, but like…we believe Sabbath is Saturday”. Despite that missed connection, Kay was able to seek out connection and community through an ad hoc group at their church under the supervision of a young pastor This group provided a space for “people that are kind of on the fringes”. This group became “really tightknit”, and Kay says they discussed any topic, not necessarily about religious topics. They found a space within their church that “was really focused on being authentic”, and because of that group, they started going to church again. They found connections to other church members who held the same beliefs about social justice and concerns with some of the church teachings.

Jaden consistently expressed the desire for a religious community that “walks the walk” and that does not deny any aspects of who he is. As he said, if parts of his identity are being denied, “then what’s the point?”. He is currently trying to find a church community where he and his girlfriend feel comfortable and has members that are a similar age and share similar interests as them. He believes that it is “really important to walk with people in faith who have the same values and who also just...love and appreciate and accept you as you are”. At the time of our interview, Jaden had not found that community, but was actively searching for a church that walks the walk and embraces him for exactly who he is.

Each participant expressed a deep desire for connection and each has taken steps to form a community around them that benefits and supports them. Meaningful connection to other human beings is a basic human need. To fulfill this need, participants indicated that they have and continue to be willing to persevere through rejection, and the subsequent psychological anguish, to find that connection both within and outside of their faith community.

Church is an Important Community and Social Support

Despite the unsupportive and unaccepting environments that participants walk into on their days of worship, the church has become an established and important community and social support system for them. The persistence that participants have shown and the steps they have taken to remain connected to their current community, and the difficulty they face when seeking a new church community is no surprise given the importance of connecting. Nicole has been part of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in her home city for 15 years. She has been an "integral part of the community for many, many years". She gets a "great sense of community from the church" and has stated that they are "an extended family". Ainsley, similarly, sees her fellow church members as "church family" and stated that the church "feels like a larger extended family". They treated the church members "very much how I would treat my family". Church members for these participants are more than just acquaintances that they see at their church services - they are people who have been integrated into their lives in a similar fashion to their own family. They did not choose who would be church members at their place of worship, but those members became important to them, nonetheless.

Kay did not speak to the importance of the church community as a whole. Instead, they discussed the importance of the ad hoc doctoral study group that they were a part of and the friendships they have made with other LGBTQ2S+ individuals within the church who are going through the same process of questioning their religious participation. Having relationships with church members who are also facing similar struggles has provided Kay with the encouragement and confidence to continue to attend their church while at the same time critically examining their involvement. They feel safe with this small group of individuals but are "scared of

rejection" from the church if they share their gender and sexual identity.

These individuals have curated a community of connection and even a family within their congregations. This high level of involvement with, and importance of, the community makes their navigation of their gender and religious participation complex. Their beliefs may no longer align with the church, but the church is where their "family" is. Faith is important to each of the participants, but connection with others trumps church and doctrine teachings. The nuances of their faith recede in importance to that of the importance of social connection.

Acceptance and Support Outside of the Church Leads to Self-Acceptance

The church has not been the only source for social support and community for participants. Each participant has a community outside of the church, and in most cases, which they have curated to be a support system to actively affirm and accept of their gender identity and sexual orientation. The church may not be a safe and affirming place, but outside of the church they can curate their own safety. Participants have found spaces that not only accept them but contribute positively to their own self-acceptance journey.

Nicole, using her grit and confidence, attended bars in feminine clothing and a full face of makeup, and received a warm welcome and "nobody batted an eye at me". She was able to socialize with people outside of the church and had a community that was "really very welcoming". Nicole said, "I'll take it", referring to the support and even lack of interest towards her identity in this environment. This response gave Nicole the confidence to go out in public dressed how she wants. It was a surprise to Nicole to be treated like any other human. Nicole also found support through a friend whose response to their gender identity was "Oh that's cool". This low-key acceptance was instrumental in Nicole being able to accept who she is. She found "one person who was gonna let me express it [gender identity] to them and not hate me for it".

She said that having that support "helped a lot". Of course, it was not just the support from one friend that helped her on her gender identity journey, but receiving support from someone outside of the church led Nicole to believe that her transition and gender expression is possible and will be accepted more broadly.

Ainsley has a large social support system outside of the church: "I have enough support from my other communities who do respect my pronouns and other kinds of things". They have connections with many individuals who are both part of the arts community and part of the LGBTQ2S+ community. Ainsley has supports through "a lot of musician friends…performing friends, [and] improv friends". Ainsley's social support system has been mostly outside of the church. They said, "my friends were always–actually most of my friends [are] not in the church". Their curated group of friends are "ridiculously supportive".

Kay has a similar tactic to Ainsley's, although their friends are mostly part of the Seventh Day Adventist religion. When asked what was helpful in solidifying their understanding of their identity, they gave credit to their "really supportive friends". Having a solid group of individuals and "being able to talk to them about it has been really helpful". Discussing gender identity with individuals who have already gone through the same process of self-discovery and acceptance while participating in the Seventh Day Adventist church has been instrumental in Kay's journey. Kay is consistently working on "diversifying my friend group… It's really great to be around people that are like–totally accept you for who you are, you know, the more you're around those kinds of people the more you start to be able to accept yourself for who you are". They both learned to accept themselves by surrounding themselves with like minded and supportive individuals, and also learned more about the LGBTQ2S+ community and were then able to say, "I think that's me". They started "becoming more comfortable with who I was" and then

eventually they "came to this realization one day… 'you know…I think I fit in more on the non-binary than the binary'". Kay's connections ultimately helped them develop a clearer picture of who they are. Their connections can both provide that critical social support system and help them develop personal clarity and understanding.

Jaden emphasized, as discussed previously, the importance of maintaining healthy relationships with "people who love and accept me as I am". He has attributed being able to get through hard conversations and moments with his mother to the support of his friends. "Family was never like, my main support in coming out, but I had a community at that point that made it a lot easier". Having people around him who are affirming, healthy, and supportive aided Jaden through his coming out process, despite difficulty with his family. They provided him with a safe space to express his gender identity.

Although the church community is a huge part of these participants' lives, the communities they have created outside of the church have been more instrumental to their own self-acceptance. Without these communities and support systems, their discovery and comfort with their gender identity would have been impeded. These supports consistently provide a space where they do not need to mask their identity to receive approval and space.

Personal Connection Leads to Compassion, Understanding, Empathy, and Affirmation

Both Ainsley and Jaden emphasized the importance of personal connections with individuals. To create spaces where they feel safe and to spread awareness about the TGNC community, Jaden and Ainsley said that creating a personal connection with individuals can lead to a greater likelihood of understanding and accepting their gender identity. Ainsley said,

> One of the things I would say are, are huge in…guiding people to understanding and compassion and love is…face to face or as close as we can get conversations with real people, real love, actually talking about real circumstances and troubles that people face.

Establishing a personal connection and a meaningful relationship with people and having "real moments" allows Ainsley to have conversations about their gender identity as opposed to "forcing" their gender identity on people without any context.

Jaden believes that it is important for LGBTQ2S+ people to "show up in people's paths," that is, be present with those who might not otherwise be around queer and trans individuals. It provides an opportunity for "opening up" their minds. When interacting with new people, Jaden commented that if you develop meaningful relationships with people first and then they find out about your gender identity later, "it's like too late, you already love me and now we have to deal with this". When those who are not supportive of TGNC individuals encounter TGNC loved ones, they experience a challenge to their beliefs. In a relationship with a loved one, previously unsupportive individuals are more likely to "be curious and want to, like, explore that in a faith context" and ask questions like "What does this mean? Is this wrong? Do I have to rethink everything that I was taught?". It can "sometimes…take that like personal connection to really push somebody into that". Jaden uses the example of his mom, who was initially unsupportive, as someone who had to challenge their own beliefs because of this strong personal and loving connection that she had with her son.

Without relationships with TGNC loved ones, unsupportive individuals may never be provided an opportunity to overcome their biases. Ainsley and Jaden believe that personal connections will lead these individuals to reconsider their beliefs. Personal connection and social support, while vital for the participants, seems in some cases, certainly in Jaden's story, essential

to breaking down walls of prejudicial notions and preconceived ideas. Personal connection builds bridges and facilitates true understanding and insight.

Consequences of Combined Gender Identity and Religious Participation

Throughout the discussion of participants' experiences, I have touched on some of the consequences of their experiences. This section discusses specific consequences of their gender identity and religious identity–some positive, some negative. Although each participants' journey is different, they have faced similar challenges and highlights.

Dissonance Between Religious and Gender Identity

I have previously discussed participants questioning their participation in religion as well as their critical reflection on the misalignment of their personal beliefs with their religious ones. Unsurprisingly, this misalignment of beliefs and the direct actions from the church against the LGBTQ2S+ community contributes to an internal conflict. The teachings and actions of the church instilled a belief in these participants that their gender identity is wrong and led them to question who they knew themselves to be. Kay discussed experiencing anxiety because of their conflicting identities. They said, "There's like anxiety and stuff…from the dichotomy of being like, one way and feeling like another way". Kay experienced "a lot of like conflict within myself". They had been taught their whole life "that it's wrong to be anything but what you were born as". These competing identities cause Kay to "feel guilty for all the things you're supposed to be doing that you're not doing…and it's something that is really hard to let go of, like you feel guilty for…being one way when you're supposed to be another". The extreme pressure from the church and its teaching to conform to the cisgender and heterosexual standard caused Kay to experience guilt over simply being who they are. They have had to battle being comfortable with self-acceptance and the teachings of the church that do not support them. Self-acceptance and

self-love go against what their church has taught them for the entirety of their lives and challenging that ingrained internal monologue does not successfully happen overnight.

Similarly, Jaden and Ainsley discussed feeling like their identity is okay. Jaden said, "You really want to be anything other than what you are when it's causing that much trouble. So, you almost want to believe that it is just something you made up in your head". Their gender identity challenges the strongly held beliefs of some Christian faiths that any gender identity besides cisgender is invalid and wrong. Ainsley battles the thoughts of "Am I being selfish? Or am I, am I wrong in this". Religion and churches speaking out against TGNC identities causes TGNC folks to question whether their own identity is valid. Although Ainsley and Jaden both believe that their identities are valid, they still battle(d) the feelings of guilt and unlearning all the beliefs about gender identity that they have been taught by their religious institutions. Nicole made a powerful statement about their own gender identity and how religion has affected their ability to accept themself. They are at a point in their life now where they have accepted themself, but it was not a straightforward path. It had many trials, tribulations, challenges of faith, and challenges of personal identity. If they could choose, they would not have faced those challenges. Nicole said,

> Do you know how hard this is? Like, you don't. Nobody would ever choose this. The idea that anybody would ever frickin' choose this blows my mind. Like, this is not an option. If I could do this another way I probably would.

Fear of Rejection and Discrimination After Coming Out

Each participant faces the expectation and the fear that their gender identity will be rejected and that they will face discrimination. Nicole said, "I would expect a chilly reception. I would expect everybody to say, 'Stay the eff away from that thing over there'.". Ainsley said, "I

think I would feel, 'oh you know, okay, I'm not going to be accepted here'.". They added that about feeling uncomfortable in the church setting, "I don't know if discomfort is the right word, but discomfort or unwelcome or unsafe. All of the not good." Keep in mind, that Ainsley was not out at church at the time of their interview. So before coming out, they already have that sense of not being safe and not being welcome. Kay stated, "I never really told anyone like, church wise though, because people would just freak out…Church people? Yeah, they don't need to know." They added that they, "…haven't really told people because I don't want to, because I'm scared of what's gonna happen. I guess maybe that fear is a bit of a safety thing…I'm scared of rejection.". Jaden discussed that knowing how the church "handles" gay and transgender individuals "drove me to stay in the closet". Witnessing mistreatment and discrimination contributed, rightfully so, to a fear of experiencing that discrimination and mistreatment firsthand. For these individuals, it is more safe and more comfortable to not share their gender identity with their congregation. Their need to worship safely trumps the need to come out.

Internalized Transphobia

Transgender and gender non-conforming individuals are a highly stigmatized and discriminated population, so it is unsurprising that participants expressed internalized transphobia. Internalized transphobia is the process of directing negative messages and stereotypes that devalue the TGNC identity inwards (Rood et al., 2017). In these participants' cases, they received negative messages about themselves from society and its embedded normative gender expectations. On top of those messages, they received extreme messages that not only demand expectations of gender normativity, but actively denounce, devalue, and condemn TGNC identities. They are told that their identity goes against the will of God, and in some cases, they would be punished for their gender.

Ainsley stated, “It’s hard because there’s a lot of internalized transphobia that I deal with and homophobia that I deal with…I would say because of my faith background”. Transgender and gender non-conforming individuals deal with internalized transphobia, but when adding an increased number of negative messages about their identity from their religion, their level and frequency of internalized transphobia can be exacerbated. Nicole gave herself negative messages such as “Oh [God’s] got a frickin’ weird image of me” and “Am I going crazy? Am I nuts? Like, what’s the deal here?”. Nicole additionally questioned whether she passed on her transness and sexual orientation to other individuals in the church. She said, “I was wondering for a while, I didn’t pass that on, did I?”. Jaden also had negative internal messaging. He “grew up thinking that [he] was crazy, or [he] was living somebody else’s life”. Constantly receiving negative messages about who you are and the expectations from society and your religion can lead to extreme self-hatred. Jaden faced a not so uncommon experience where he would rather live a dangerous and risky lifestyle than come to terms with who he is. Jaden said, “I would rather live this lifestyle where my life is at risk then have to face who I actually am”.

Negative Impacts on Mental Health

Participants faced varying degrees of negative mental health, from shame to suicidal ideation. Nicole said that “the shame is like the worst part of the whole thing, right?”. She said that “if I can take away the shame”, their transition and their own acceptance of their gender identity would be much easier. Ainsley experienced dysphoria, dissociation, “a manic-depressive thing”, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation. They said, “At times I was a little suicidal, just a little, I don’t think I’d actually act on those things, but I liked…thinking about how I might not exist”. Ainsley “felt alone…hopeless, alone, abandoned, I felt all of that”. This experience of hiding their gender identity led to isolation. Navigating their religious identity and their gender

did not positively contribute to their mental health. Kay attributed their negative mental health experiences in part to navigating this complex relationship between religion and identity. They said, “I think I would say, even going further back…over my lifetime, that my mental health has probably been a lot worse because of not being able to accept who I was for so long”. Kay received a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder and “had a lot of anxiety”. They attributed this experience to “the tension and the…disconnect that was like inside [them]…feeling one way but acting another way…over [their] lifetime”. They have spent a lot of their life feeling “a lot of…guilt and a lot of feeling like [they are] not good enough”.

Jaden experiences loneliness, suicidal ideation, addiction, and anxiety. They described their experience with addiction as a “long prolonged suicide”. They had “stopped caring altogether”. It was not until they came out that they started to see improvements with their mental health. They said that the reason that they came out was because “regardless of what people say, or how my family might react, if I don't try to pursue this [gender identity], I'm gonna end up killing myself”. Jaden felt that “I couldn’t live my life the way that I was living it anymore”. Coming out and being honest with himself and with others about his gender identity contributed to his mental health improvement over time.

Positive Consequences of Discovering Gender Identity and Coming Out

Not all consequences of discovering their gender identity and navigating their relationships with religion were negative. Ainsley appreciated the exciting life that they have been given. They said, “It’s been very good…I wouldn’t have chosen it for me…But I’m thrilled that God was like, ‘Oh I want you to experience this because it’s different and it’s fun. It’s fun. Trust me. It’s fun’. [laugh]”. They delight in the challenges that they were given and are able to keep a positive attitude. They said, “I aim for joy and joy is a spiritual emotion…My quality of

life is very high. Sure, sometimes I feel very distraught, but that's what makes the colour of my quality of life so vibrant". Ainsley appreciates and finds joy in the challenges that they face and the challenges that God has given them.

Jaden similarly said,

> If I could be born cis and straight, I don't think I would because it's…given me a new appreciation…Because of being faced with this, it forced me to really be like, "Okay, what does walking with Jesus really mean? What really matters?". I don't know if that's something that I would have evaluated otherwise.

His experience with gender has given him the opportunity to evaluate more deeply his relationship with religion. Their "whole experience with gender identity and sexuality… have given [them] and opportunity to have an experience with and to know why religion is important to [them]". Jaden was given a unique opportunity to evaluate his personal relationship with religion on a more serious level than other individuals not faced with his experiences may have.

In addition to this opportunity to evaluate his relationship to religion and to God, Jaden developed an increased resilience and self-acceptance throughout his journey. He said,

> I know that I always think like, worst case scenario, somebody outright is like, 'you're not welcome here, you have to leave', and I have to deal with that. And of course, that would be painful. And of course, that's something I'm afraid of, but it's not something that I think would be totally detrimental to my well-being at this point.

In addition, Jaden said, "I'm at a place now where I'm pretty comfortable with the prospect of rejection". This shows Jaden's continual growth towards self-acceptance and comfort with his own gender identity. He is now at a place where he can face rejection while his mental health remains intact. Jaden's navigation of his gender identity and his Christian faith has helped him to

become resilient to the challenges and discrimination that he is faced with.

Kay emphasized that religion did not contribute positively to their life. They stated, “I think honestly…the impact has been more negative than positive…it’s always been a lot of guilt and a lot of feeling like I’m not good enough”. The positive outcome that they experienced was their relationship with God, “I have this running dialogue with God in my head…that just helped me in my day-to-day to be calmer and to appreciate the little things”. On the other hand, their gender identity journey has allowed them to “just be me”. Kay said that the more they “settle” into their gender identity, they are “less anxious…less upset” and that are “a little more calm and just a little more me”. The more they accept themself and their gender identity, the more positive their mental health is.

Access to and Importance of Resources, Education, and Representation

Participants consistently asserted that having access to resources, education, and representation is essential for not only transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, but also for the general public and the church community. Exposure and education lead to more acceptance and affirmation of the TGNC community. Without access to representation, resources, and education, individuals tend to be unaware of the issues that TGNC individuals face and miss an opportunity for humanizing individuals who are different from them. Without this information, TGNC individuals can be seen as an abstraction.

Importance of Education About and Exposure to LGBTQ2S+ Community – Non-LGBTQ2S+ Individuals

Participants stressed the importance of non-LGBTQ2S+ members having exposure to the community and interacting with LGBTQ2S+ individuals closely and frequently. Many

participants invite questions and conversations with individuals who have not been exposed to the TGNC community. Nicole said, about interacting with a woman at church,

> I'm glad that she's asking questions. I don't want her to be afraid of me, right. I would much rather she asked questions 'cause the reason they don't know–the reason they think those things is they don't know people like us. They don't know they're talking about *me.*

Ainsley similarly stated that their church members "have been hurting me, but they don't even know it…they don't understand". The church members are unknowingly harming Ainsley. They have not actively included and interacted with TGNC individuals in their life on a regular basis, and therefore may not understand what causes harm to the TGNC community. In part, Ainsley lays blame on themself, saying, "I haven't actually given them the opportunity to understand at this point". This implies that were the church members given an opportunity to understand and to be educated about Ainsley's identity, they may be able to see the community through a different lens. Jaden echoed this statement, saying, "Sometimes I think it takes…personal connection to really push somebody into that [acceptance]". He provides the example of his mother, who was initially unaccepting and rejecting of his identity, but through being exposed to someone whom she loves, researching, and watching videos, she is now Jaden's "biggest cheerleader". He continues to state that "it's important for queer people to show up in people's paths who, like, might not otherwise approach that [TGNC identity]".

Without readily available information or people, there is less of an opportunity for learning, or even the catalyst for learning. Ainsley commented on how "the church is not totally on board with these aspects of culture [LGBTQ2S+], and so it just discards the opportunities to reach people where they're at". If the church did in fact want to start reaching out to the

LGBTQ2S+ community and become a more affirming place of worship, “there aren’t resources or…tools or just acceptance of using those tools”. Although Jaden stated that “it’s important for queer people to show up in people’s paths”, it is also important to note that all the work should not be done by LGBTQ2S+ individuals. People and institutions that are unfamiliar with the community have a responsibility to educate themselves. As Jaden stated, “It’s important for churches to like, do their [own] research”. For change to occur, whether institutionally or individually, access to information, willingness to act on with the information, and concrete action are required.

Access to Resources, Education, and Representation Aids Self-acceptance

All four participants shared a similar experience of having next to no access to resources, education, and representation of and about transgender and gender non-conforming individuals at the beginning of their gender identity journey. Nicole lives in a small central Albertan city and Kay grew up in a small central Albertan city. They shared the experience of having a lack of representation and opportunity to connect with TGNC individuals. Nicole stated, “People like me aren’t really common out here. There’s a few of us, but not very many”. In addition to the lack of representation, Nicole did not have access to educational resources or the language to describe their experience. As she said, “There’s no school for this shit”. Nicole identifies as male to female non-binary, but when she was younger “that term didn’t exist…and like, nobody really understood this stuff”. Eventually, Nicole was able to access a group for transgender individuals through a pride centre as well as researching and viewing videos on YouTube. They were able to see “a bunch of perspectives” on what being non-binary is and learned that people who are non-binary fall on a “spectrum”. Through this access to information their journey and their identity

was acknowledged and affirmed. They came to realize that “I’m fine. I’m normal. Everything I went through was exactly what people like me go through”.

Kay similarly recalled, “I didn’t know anyone who was queer. Like, everyone was cis, straight, like, mostly white…Not a lot of diversity”. As previously mentioned, Kay was homeschooled through a Christian homeschool institution. Along with growing up in a small town, the existence of LGBTQ2S+ people, and concept of being part of the LGBTQ2S+ community, were uncommon ideas. Their Christian homeschooling sheltered them from gaining access to information that could build their concept of gender identity. Kay said, “I wasn’t taught about like, you know, LGBTQ topics. The church never talks about them. Homeschooling: we definitely didn’t talk about them. Like, so these things weren’t even really options. Like, I didn’t know they existed”. This isolation from ideas led Kay to feel “weird or strange or broken”. They said that when “these things aren’t talked about you don’t have the option and then you’re like, ‘I’m just weird’”. It was not until the last year that Kay realized that they were non-binary, solely because they acquired the language “non-binary” which accurately captured their experience. The fact that Kay was “not exposed” to the queer community and TGNC individuals hindered their journey of self-discovery:

> I probably would have come out y–like, and realized all these things years ago. If I had, say, gone to a public school, where, you know, learning about queerness was part of the curriculum, and I was able to realize like, "Oh, these things match my life". Because they weren't talked about, I didn't even learn about them until like, two or three years ago.

Kay added that if they had been exposed to the community and come from a more “open” background they likely “would have come out way sooner, and then been way more like just comfortable with who I was”. Kay eventually began doing their own research and curating a

friend group that was supportive and educational. They learned language that captures their experience, and when asked how finding those words felt said, “Oh my gosh, it was amazing because like before, I was just like, there is something wrong with me”.

Ainsley, similarly, was not exposed to information about the TGNC community. They “didn’t have the vocabulary to actually express how I was feeling”. Without access to this information, they faced significant confusion about their gender identity. They “had no idea” that someone could use different pronouns and simply dealt with pronouns being used that they did not like. Even without access to information about pronouns and TGNC individuals, Ainsley “used they/them pronouns for myself.” The problem they faced was that they “wouldn’t know how to get somebody to do that [use the correct pronouns] for me.” Having access to words to describe yourself is empowering, and Ainsley is glad that they “waited to transition until now”, because they have access to all the language that fits how they identify.

Jaden, like Kay and Nicole, was not exposed to the LGBTQ2S+ community until high school. He described it as realizing “there’s this whole new world…I don’t think I realized that there were different things…It was super, super overwhelming”. Jaden spoke enviously of individuals today who have access to the many resources and representation available today: “I wish that I had seen that when I was growing up too”.

Lacking resources, education, and representation hindered participants’ gender identity development. They clearly remained in a state of confusion and uncertainty longer than they may have with greater access to knowledge and representation. It was not until they were able to access and be exposed to information that they were truly able to consolidate their identity. Knowledge is powerful, and access to that knowledge is empowering.

Importance of Story Sharing

Unsurprisingly, participants shared how much they value sharing their personal gender identity and religious journey. The benefits range from self-empowerment, to TGNC representation, to education. It is important and beneficial to them to share their stories, and as Ainsley said, "[Their story] should be something that we are constantly talking about," and when they share it, they consider how their "testimony [can] ring true" and "impact" the people that are hearing their story. Nicole has started her own YouTube channel where she shares her own experience with gender identity and religion. She received a patriarchal blessing, in which an ordained priesthood member declares individual's lineage and "provides inspired direction from the Lord". According to the church, people who study and follow their blessing will receive "guidance, comfort, and protection" (Patriarchal Blessings, n.d.). In this blessing priesthood holder told Nicole that she is "going to teach people in an unconventional way". She has embraced this blessing and used it as a guide to start sharing her story. She desires that church members with whom she has been open "know 'I've been in your lives for years now, I've been that the whole time, so these things that you're saying that are bad, they're just not true'". The blessing she received empowers her to share her story and create representation for herself and the TGNC community. Nicole hopes that sharing her story may help others to be more affirming. By sharing her story with people who love her for who she is, she believes she is opening their eyes to see that being TGNC does not make one invalid or unacceptable.

Jaden shares his story through his music performances. His gigs include a "storytelling aspect" that is "educational and kind of informational for service providers, like counsellors, education, [and] healthcare". He was not sure how his performances would be received, but they have resulted in people being curious and approaching him with "positive things to say, or

want[ing] to ask questions, or be interested in learning more about it". He has come to understand that, "people are just afraid because they don't understand it", and if more people are exposed to or "willing to or forced to and like, hear that or to have a conversation, that more people would be open". Jaden creates an environment that "allows people to…be introspective", but he hopes that his performances will be the "catalyst" for conversation and questions. Jaden is on the path to create space for conversations that he wished he would have been able to have growing up. He believes that "it's important for queer people to show up in people's paths who…might not otherwise approach that". It opens the doors for non-affirming people to become open to different identities. Seeing how people have received his performances, especially church members, has "helped [him] to feel more confident".

Jaden also wants to be open about his journey because he wants

> … queer people who have grown up in religion or who have been hurt by the church to see that there are people who exist, who are also queer and who have also been hurt by the church, but have like, gotten through it and found a way to still have faith.

By sharing his story, he is showing others that it is possible to move through the cognitive dissonance and reach a point where one can be comfortable with intersecting identities. It is important for him to do that in part because he "wish[es] that [he] had seen that when [he] was growing up". Through having that open dialogue and transparency Jaden aspires to inspire hope and confidence in other queer and transgender individuals who may be going through a similar experience.

Coping Strategies

Coping strategies were necessary for participants to healthily navigate their way through the two conflicting identities of participating in a non-affirming church and identifying as

TGNC. These coping strategies range from acts of self-protection to actively seeking help from mental health professionals.

Acts of Self-preservation

Self-preservation in the context of religion and gender identity entails taking a break from practicing faith, situating yourself in church in an inconspicuous place, outwardly adopting extreme beliefs, and not sharing your gender identity with the people who would likely disapprove. Each participant executed different acts of self-preservation that helped them feel safe and secure.

Nicole was unsure about attending church in a dress and decided to sit in the back. She said, “I just went, and I sat in the back, and I expected to be ridiculed. I expected to be like the black sheep at this point”. She did this to minimize the expected ridicule as much as possible. Though her act of going to church in a dress was courageous, she was still fearful, and sitting where she would be less noticed helped her to feel more comfortable.

Another way that Nicole performs acts of self-preservation is by minimizing the importance of her transition and the importance of connections. For example, when describing steps in her transition she would like to take she said, “I mean…it’s just for aesthetics, mostly, right”. She also called the expenses attached to her transition as “frivolous” and stated that “it doesn't really matter”. Throughout our conversation it was evident that the changes she wanted to make were not merely for aesthetics and that they did in fact matter to her own sense of self and comfort. These physical changes would help her move more freely without being misgendered and experiencing more of the hurt that she is currently experiencing. She is minimizing the importance of transition steps to prepare for and minimize the inevitable hurt she will feel if it is something that she is not able to achieve. She is afraid of putting too much stock in how

important it is to her. Similarly, when seeking out connection with a transgender individual in her apartment building, she did not get the reaction that she had hoped for and seemed to rationalize the reasons why anyone would not want to hang out with her - a subconscious strategy to avoid harm. “I thought I’d give this one a shot…She wants nothing to do with me. I’m like…I think I just irritate her. Well, you can see how it’s like I can do that to people sometimes”.

Ainsley adopted transgender exclusionary radical feminism and became conservative in their political beliefs. Transgender exclusionary radical feminism is exactly as it sounds, feminism that rejects transgender individuals’ identities and their rights. They described this as something that they had to do to “make it [their gender identity] work for me”. Adopting these beliefs, which conflicted with their own identity, acted as a shield against their oppressors, likely also a response to internalized oppression. Not only did it act as a shield, but Ainsley used that time to try and “legitimize how I might be able to stay as just a female for the rest of my life”. This resignation of their identity and adopting transgender exclusionary radical feminism was an attempt to not have to confront parts of who they are. This tactic ended up being a short-term strategy, but during the time that they adopted these beliefs they felt a sense of safety because they were aligned with the people who made them feel unsafe and lesser than in the first place.

Kay and Jaden performed self-preservative acts as self-protection. Kay decided not to come out in their church community because of fear of the outcome. They said, “Maybe that fear is a bit of a safety thing. Like, you know, I’m scared of rejection, so I just haven’t told people…but I mean, it’s also self-protective too”. Jaden has moved between acts of courage through attending church and self-preservation through taking breaks from being a part of the religious community. He said, “I kind of took a break for a couple years…I just feel like I’ve

gone through periods of just denying it [religion] because it's safer and easier". Both Kay and Jaden took action to protect themselves and preserve their own feelings of safety and attempt to preserve any shreds of positive self-regard.

Self-preservation is a balancing act between being courageous, using grit, and taking steps to protect your own safety. Each of these participants made careful decisions to preserve their own safety and sense of well-being.

Gender-Normative Coping

Gender-normative coping is the "modification of gender presentation and utilization of traditional gender coping styles to deal with experiences of transphobia" (Mizock & Mueser, 2014, p. 152). Participants utilized gender-normative coping in different ways - some conformed to their assigned gender at birth and some made efforts to appear more traditionally the gender that they identify as. Nicole, as a child, was fluid in her gender and at the age of 10 decided to present as "him" or her assigned gender at birth. They stated, "Until 10 I could be whatever I wanted, and it didn't matter…so I didn't have to openly be her [Nicole]". This pattern continued into adulthood. Nicole would present as Nicole for a period of time and then make the decision to present as male because of the ease of moving through the world when presenting that way. Ten years ago, Nicole came out to a few people in her life and started attending meetings for transgender individuals, but with her commitment to the church she "decided [she] wasn't going to do it and decided to put it [gender identity] all away". She then "suppressed the shit out of it [gender identity] for the next ten years". The suppression of her gender identity made it easier for her to attend church and participate in traditional Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints activities such as getting married in the temple.

Jaden currently experiences cisgender-passing privilege. This means that when people perceive Jaden, they attribute and believe his gender to be male. His presentation conforms to societal expectations and cisgender-based standards (Begun & Kattari, 2016). When transgender people have passing privilege, they often face less prejudice and discrimination (Kattari & Hasche, 2015). This cisgender passing privilege allows Jaden to decide whether to disclose his identity when he enters new spaces. This is a privilege that he is experiencing at this point in his life and is not something that he has always experienced. Jaden currently is in a space where he feels "content to like not disclose". When he is seeking out new churches, he can make the decision to disclose or not, and "the way that I thought about it was…it doesn't really matter anyway. Like at the end of the day, whether I'm trans or cis, or how I was born or whatever, right?". Because Jaden passes as cisgender, he is able to choose when and how to disclose his identity. In some situations, conforming to societal expectations for gender is safer and more comfortable than disclosing his transgender identity.

Ainsley is wrestling with how and when to disclose their gender identity to their church, and at the time of the interview their decision was to conform to the church's gender normative expectations. They leave their gender identity "at the door" and are hoping to "fly under the radar" until they are comfortable sharing their identity. They have made this decision to conform to expectations because they "don't want to stir anything". They want to protect the members of the church while also protecting their position in leadership. By conforming, their position is safe, and the members of the church will not experience a "challenge" to their faith.

Seeking Mental Health Support and Counselling

Participants accessed supports in varying ways to help them navigate their gender identity and religious affiliation as well as other issues they have faced along the way. Nicole, Jaden, and

Kay all sought traditional counselling. Nicole said, “we got five [sessions] done…in five sessions, she got me to realize I am enough”. Kay has attended counselling which specializes in “working with people that come from like a faith background…and are dealing with like LGBTQ issues and like identity issues”. Kay has most recently spoken to a counsellor about “looking into top surgery”. Jaden has the most extensive history with seeking mental health support. At a young age he went into treatment for drug addiction and has been seeking mental health support on and off ever since. Through his counselling while in treatment, he was able to come out to his mom and begin to use male pronouns. His therapist said, “Why don’t we just start…calling you what you want to be called and we’ll use male pronouns, and we’ll just see how you feel”. It was this experience that was the first step towards self-acceptance for Jaden. Jaden told his therapist in treatment, about his gender identity, that “if I don’t do this, regardless of what people say, of how my family might react, if I don’t try to pursue this, I’m gonna end up killing myself”.

In addition to traditional counselling, Jaden has attended Narcotics Anonymous meetings and identified this as his “main way of getting support” for at least five years after he left the treatment centre. Throughout this time, he was also seeing an addictions counsellor. Jaden is not currently accessing mental health supports but knows that therapy is available for “maintenance”, and he feels that he is getting what he needs from “other aspects of [his] life”. He has gotten to a point in his life where he is able to identify the signs for when he needs to go, and it is something that he will “revisit” and “explore” again in the future when it comes up. Knowing that there are supports available to him if he needs it provides a safety net and an additional mode of support when he cannot find that in his own life.

Maintaining Healthy Relationships

A major coping strategy that Jaden has implemented in his life is maintaining only the healthy relationships in his life. This looks like keeping meaningful and fulfilling relationships, while ending those that are negative. He said, "I think that's the most important thing [meaningful relationships], like in order to be healthy…". Jaden has experienced "a really toxic relationship" that contributed to his struggle with drug addiction and an inability to take good care of himself. He is currently in a "very healthy" relationship where they "look after each other and are interested in actually getting to know each other for who we are". He believes that having this healthy relationship has made a "huge difference" and has impacted his own self-concept. Besides maintaining a healthy romantic relationship, Jaden has cultivated healthy relationships with his family, while also "having healthy boundaries and not talking to other members of family". His ability to develop and learn what healthy boundaries are has contributed to his own self-worth and his ability to walk through life with people who are positive contributors.

Purposeful Activities

Participants also engage in personal activities that bring them joy and a sense of catharsis. These activities provide participants a space to express themselves and can act as a form of emotional coping. Kay writes in a journal. Jaden and Ainsley both utilize music as a coping strategy. When asked what they found supportive and helpful when navigating their relationship with religions, Ainsley said, "music especially is so important to me…full music and vocal artistry, I would say, and my passion for that got me through". They found that music provides a cathartic "experience of tuning out and tuning in". Jaden, similarly, stated that "channeling the way that I felt into like song really, really helped". His "main coping strategy" of song and

poetry writing, and journaling, create a place that he is able to "get [his] feelings out and express the way that [he] felt". Music and performing music provide him with a space that is free from anxiety. He summarizes well when he says, "When I'm on stage, I'm not afraid at all. And it's like everything else in the world is terrifying".

All participants employed various coping strategies either very specifically and intentionally, or sometimes less consciously, but always with the intent of minimizing pain. Participants seem to have a toolbox of strategies, selecting the tool that serves the greatest need in a particular situation. Kay, Nicole, and Jaden access counselling when needed, all perform acts of self-preservation and employ gender-normative coping, and each participant utilizes different purposeful activities to find a sense of reprieve.

Knowing Yourself

Originally, I viewed these following themes as "helpful personal attributes", but once I examined each theme alongside one another it became evident that each "attribute" is actually a manifestation of knowing oneself. Knowing yourself means knowing what is required of you, knowing who you are, what you need, and what you need to do to get by. These attributes transcend characteristics that are merely helpful, but were essential to helping participants define who they are, figure out where they fit in the world, and understand how they want to be treated and perceived. One cannot exercise these attributes without knowing oneself. As Kay said "I think that's [self-awareness and self-reflection] important in any journey, but especially when you're doing a journey that has such big steps. You definitely have to be self-aware to be able to do them".

Courage

Courage, or "the deliberate choice in the face of painful or fearful circumstances for the sake of a worthy goal" is an attribute that most participants displayed (Putman, 2001, p. 463). Courage of stepping into the unknown in the face of rejection, mockery, condemnation, and loss of community requires vulnerability and fortitude. Participants made courageous decisions to come out, some calculated decisions, and some, as Kay said, would say, "Screw it, let's do it," diving into the challenge. Kay decided to share their pronouns in a church group Zoom call, saying, "If they have a problem, it's their problem. I don't even care". In this case, the participants in the Zoom meeting did not seem to react outwardly; their response was neutral. The news seemed to have been received neutrally, but in a different group on a different day the result could have easily been negative. Kay demonstrated courage through this decision. However small this action may seem, sharing that they use gender neutral pronouns with a church group is not only a giant leap of faith, but a decision of vulnerability.

Other participants made more bold and public decisions to share their gender identity and gender expression. Nicole discussed multiple acts of courage. She went to church and "wore a skirt and then went to the class [relief society] at the end". Not only did Nicole have the confidence to attend church wearing a skirt, but she was able to stand her ground and attend the women's class at the end of the day. Although Nicole has not come out to everyone in her congregation, she has displayed the courage of coming out to one of her church leaders, while being aware of the consequences she could face as a primary school teacher. She said, "I went to the bishop and said, 'You know I've got this stuff in my head and I don't know why'." Church is not the only place where Nicole displays courage. She headed out to a local bar and as she described, "I put on my flashiest shirt…and I put on my makeup…and I looked like a trashy

teen. But I'm like, it's the best I can do dammit. So away I went anyway". As Nicole described her journey, it became evident that as her story progressed, she has become more courageous. She can now express herself however she wants and is open to "roll[ing] the dice and see[ing] what happens". She is able to use her courage to live her life authentically. Being able to walk out in the world as a transgender or gender non-confirming individual takes courage in itself. Nicole embraces that and walks out in the world with courage and fortitude:

> If I want to dye my hair, I dye my hair, and if I want to paint my nails, I paint my nails and I try and put on something that I think is cute. Even though I know I don't pass yet, so it's not really all that cute.

Courage is not only presenting to the world as trans or gender non-conforming, but also openly sharing your story with the world and with the people you love who are in it. Jaden embodies both presenting to the world and sharing his story. He came out to his mother in spite of the fear of rejection that he faced,

> I called her and I–I can't remember exactly how I said it was something along the lines of like "I–I'm a boy and I need to transition". And she was really quiet. And I was really quiet. And it was really awkward and scary. And I could hear her, like, start to cry.

This action resulted in two years of a tumultuous relationship, but eventually, Jaden's courage paid off, and he and his mom are, as Jaden said, "closer than we ever were before. She's like, my best friend". His courage did not pay off immediately, but throughout those two years, he continued to show courage by being open to working on a relationship with his mom. This act of courage has no doubt influenced who Jaden is today and how courage continues to show up in his life. He is continuously and unabashedly open about his identity and shares it with people

within the Christian community as well as the LGBTQ2S+ community. He "made a decision where I was like, 'this is something that I want to be open about'". Courage breeds courage.

Courage opened these participants up to gain a deeper understanding of who they are. To be courageous, it also takes vulnerability and strength to deal with whatever consequences lie beyond the courageous action. These participants' courage and confidence outweighed the fear they faced and allowed them to become progressively more courageous and strong.

Grit

Grit, similar to courage but not identical, is the "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit requires working arduously towards challenges and maintaining a persistent effort over years despite any setbacks, failures, or adversity (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit serves as the overriding factor that provides participants with stamina to stay the course amid challenges and setbacks (Duckworth et al., 2007). Participants stay the course, because they must in order to stay connected to their church, and grit plays a huge role. Kay said that "I have definitely had struggles in my life, and I've overcome them". They recognize the guilt that they have been living with in relation to their gender and religion, and consistently work to overcome that. Kay stated, "I don't want to let something have that power over me anymore. And you have to just keep reminding yourself of that because it's not something you want for your life…it's really difficult". Kay constantly works on living their life outside of guilt, and this takes consistency, grit to reach the goal of solace, with themself, their gender identity, and their religion.

Nicole persists because she has to: "I don't quit because I can't. You know, nobody is going to do this for me". She recognizes that transitioning is hard ("It's so freakin' hard to

transition.") but she must use her internal strength and her grit to move forward. Grit is active; it is a constant choice to stay the course. Nicole recognizes this:

> It's better for me to express her by painting my nails and dyeing my hair than it is for me to get mad at every little thing and everything makes you angry and you want to go and do self-destructive things.

She recognizes that she is actively making the choice not to be a "puppet" of the church, and that being bound by the traditional gender norms and rules of the church may be more harmful to her. Going against the grain takes courage, grit, and perseverance.

Most participants recognized that they are going to be in situations where they have to "white-knuckle" it. Ainsley makes compromises to continue to attend church, despite the pain that they may feel. They said "I'm able to put up with [microaggressions] just because I–I love worshipping. I love worshipping with other people. I don't want to do it alone". Ainsley uses grit to face the pain they feel entering a non-affirming space to be able to worship with the people they love. "Continual forgiveness" is also a part of how they are able to face situations where they experience non-affirmation. They "have to keep dishing out…forgiveness constantly". Despite facing a space where they feel unwelcome, they remain positive and state that "life should be a thing that we want to keep dealing with because it should be something that we are parsing through". They liken their ability to enter these spaces to Jesus laying pieces of himself down for people: "I lay down pieces of me at the door [of the church]…because Jesus did the same thing…I am going to have to–to be humble or to lay something down everywhere I go". Ainsley's compromise is to not reveal their gender identity in their church, to remain a part of the congregation. By not coming out, they open themselves up to unintentional microaggressions,

such as using the wrong pronouns, from other church members. Ainsley demonstrates unyielding and persistent grit by willingly entering a non-affirming and painful space on a regular basis.

Similarly, Jaden has found comfort with "whatever would happen even if it was negative". As long as they make it through the day and

> as long as I don't hurt anybody else, then I can sit with myself at the end of the day and be like, like, maybe somebody was mean to me, but that's their stuff, and I can like separate those two things.

In spite of the disagreement between Jaden's gender identity and his religious affiliation, he has made the decision to persist: "I've gone through periods of just denying [his religiosity] because it's safer and easier. But…when it kind of finally comes to a head, it's really in my face. So, it'll be like, I really need to do this, even if it's hard". Jaden needs a connection with the church even under negative circumstances and is willing to face the hardships and damage that may come from it. Jaden's grit allows him to maintain this complex relationship with the church. The benefits of participation in the church outweighs the drawbacks.

Self-advocacy

All participants shared acts of courage and grit. Ainsley and Jaden went beyond courage and grit and moved toward advocating for themselves. Ainsley enters the non-affirming space of their church, worships with their congregation, and continues to face this non-affirmation by sharing who they are with members of the church on a one-to-one basis. Ainsley shared:

> The real ticket is, you know, me entering a space, worshiping for half an hour, and then going out for lunch with somebody after a service and letting them know who I am and sitting across from somebody who's a real human and, and having those real moments

> and so then it's exhausting because it's–or the execution of that simple philosophy is only exhausting because I am always my own advocate, and it's–and I'm the only one.

Ainsley embraces the act of self-advocacy, despite the exhaustion that the task entails. The church is not speaking up for Ainsley, so Ainsley is speaking up for themself.

Jaden puts himself out there for the world to see; he shares his story on stage and on the internet through words and music. He said,

> It's important to me to put that out there and for people to see that, not like in your face way, but like, I'm just being true to who I am, and this is me and people who, who see that will absorb that. And so, I yeah, that was something that I was really really afraid of for a while I just, and I sort of just sort of, in small ways, kind of started to introduce that like I started doing on my Instagram a regular every Sunday, I'll post a video of me singing a worship song.

He finds empowerment through advocating for himself and sharing his story. Jaden shares that standing up on stage and having people come up to him after a show with positive things to say or who are interested in learning about his experience has "helped me feel more confident". His self-advocacy has led to empowerment and boosts in self-confidence and self-esteem.

Ainsley and Jaden actively have conversations about who they are and spend time educating other people in hopes that they will benefit from these conversations. They are hoping to make the spaces that they enter more affirming and accepting of who they are.

Self-acceptance

Self-acceptance, "an individual's satisfaction or happiness with himself" is empowering (Shepard, 1979, p. 140). Self-acceptance can result in increased self-worth and a more positive self-concept. Multiple participants discussed how they have reached a point in their life where

they are happy with who they are as transgender or gender non-conforming individuals. Nicole said, “My existence is valid”. They are now in a space where they accept themselves as opposed to berating themselves for not conforming to the gender binary. They can be themselves. Nicole sees themself as enough, and says, “I’m fine, just the way I am”.

Kay said, “I realized that I’m non-binary because I realized that was a thing and that I wasn’t like weird or strange or broken…and I’m not just like some really strange weirdo”. Their self-worth is no longer defined by their inability to conform to their church’s gender expectations. They have found comfort and reprieve from viewing themselves as weird, or invalid, or “wrong”. They took steps to get to this point by trying out different hairstyles and different presentations that made them feel comfortable with who they are. Kay discussed how a simple haircut made them feel “amazing” and that breaking away from the “constraint of gender” has allowed them to “just be me”.

Self-awareness

In addition to becoming more comfortable with who they are, courageous, gritty, and positive about their experience, participants expressed the ability to understand their own emotions and decision-making skills and what helps them to get through the day. They understand what types of hurt they can handle and in general have come to a more solidified understanding of who they are as people. Participants referred to self-awareness as a journey, as if they are peeling back layers of themselves to understand who they are. Nicole, when discussing standing up for herself, said, “I can stand there if I have to for myself, but it’s taken me a long time to get there”. As Nicole developed an understanding of who she is, she has become more confident in herself and her ability to stand for who she is.

Jaden discussed developing a greater understanding of what they can handle emotionally. He said, “I'm very like all or nothing in most aspects, um, and so that–it was very much so that way for me it was like if this is complicated and it's hard and it hurts, then I don't–I just, I don't want it”. When discussing when he seeks mental health services, he discussed having a greater understanding of when help is required. He said, “I think I've gotten better at like telling when I do need to go because I think usually it's like, okay, now that my life has completely blown up [laugh] now I'll go get help, you know”. This gradual journey of self-awareness has led Jaden to move “from feeling very insecure and unsure” of himself to a “point now where I am quite sure of myself and I am quite comfortable in my own skin.

Participants' awareness is an evolution as they use their courage and grit to negotiate their journey. The more they learn about themselves, the more they are able to negotiate the complex relationship they have with their religion. This progression in self-awareness allows them to be more confident in who they are.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how transgender and gender non-conforming individuals experience the complex relationship between gender identity and participation in a non-affirming religion. While experiences of each participant varied, they shared many similarities such as questioning their relationship with the church and Christianity itself, experiencing negative consequences from religious involvement, sharing a fundamental relationship with God, seeking social support and connections, utilizing individualized coping strategies, and possessing courage and grit. In this section I will summarize my findings in relation to current research, discuss implications for practice, identify limitations of this study, give direction for future research, and share updates from two participants.

Summary of Findings

Findings from this study indicate that TGNC individuals' experiences within their non-affirming religion are complex, personal, and unique to each individual. Though each individual had separate and unique experience, they each presented with similarities. Each participant was involved with their church for a lengthy period of time and described their congregations, and sometimes the entire denomination as non-affirming.

Sources of Trauma and Non-Affirmation in a Non-Affirming Religion

In accordance with Lefevor et al. (2021), participants experienced non-affirmation and trauma on structural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels. They experienced structural trauma through formal cis- and heteronormative doctrine and through the encouragement of gender identity and sexual orientation change. Participants described specific rules and doctrine that their churches had in place such as refusal to marry same-sex couples, inability to take part in church leadership due to their gender identity, and non-acceptance and condemnation of

transgender and gender non-conforming individuals who engage in medical affirmation of their gender. In addition, participants described the use of the bible to denounce same-sex relationships and diverse gender identities.

Where there are formal policies, doctrines, and practices within religious environments, individuals may experience interpersonal trauma and non-affirmation through their interaction with other members of that religious community, including leadership, friends, and family. Participants expressed that their congregations had non-affirming environments and a generally negative attitude towards gender minority individuals. Participants identified non-affirmation through their own interactions with church leadership and also by witnessing the non-affirmation of other individuals. They personally experienced rejection and/or isolation from congregations due to gender identity, and by having a lack of representation of gender minority identities within their congregation. In addition, they experienced interpersonal trauma through the encouragement they were given to abstain from gender affirming medical procedures; family members' negative reactions regarding their gender identity; and the expectation of being rejected, condemned, and discriminated against by the church, congregation, and family. Participants, whether directly or indirectly, were encouraged to abstain from their gender expression and sexual orientation. Witnessing members and leadership of their congregations discuss "what to do with" sexual and gender minorities influenced participants' decisions to conceal their identity.

According to Lefevor et al. (2021), lack of acceptance from a religious community as a result of non-affirming and non-accepting practices and doctrine can increase feelings of conflict between religious and gender identities. This has the potential to be extremely damaging to one's mental health and well-being. In addition, many participants made the decision not to disclose

their identity to their congregations. Although identity concealment can be protective, long-term concealment can be stressful and isolating (Lefevor et al., 2021). When concealing their identity, TGNC individuals may be less likely to access resources that could support their navigation of gender identity and religion (Lefevor et al., 2021). Two participants, Jaden and Nicole, were open about their identities in their respective religions, and two participants withheld their gender identity. Despite Jaden and Nicole being open about their gender identity, they still experienced stress, isolation, anxiety, and conflict between their gender and religious identity.

Participants also experienced intrapersonal trauma and non-affirmation through self-conflict. Each participant questioned their participation in their current congregation and described looking for religious acceptance with other congregations and/or other denominations. They questioned the values and teachings of their church and reflected intently on how they could disagree with certain values and teachings while continuing to participate and believe in other teachings within the church. Lefevor et al. (2021) described this as *internalized spirituonegativity or* internalized negative feelings and beliefs about what it means to be a religious person. Internalized spirituonegativity can lead to individuals distancing themselves from their religion and congregations in ways that may not be true to their beliefs.

We saw this internalized spirituonegativity presented by Kay, who discussed struggling to find another congregation to participate in because of their strongly held Adventist beliefs and practices. They participated less frequently in their congregation out of discomfort in attending because of their gender identity. Participants were repeatedly exposed to cis- and heteronormative ideals through teachings, norms, and community attitudes. It is likely that this crisis of faith and identity contributed to internalized transphobia or a rejection of self. Participants were faced with deciding whether to live authentically in their religious environment

and experience the rejection and discrimination they expected, or hiding their gender identity to continue their religious participation in a safe yet inauthentic way. This dilemma aligns with Lefevor and colleagues' assertion that TGNC individuals may feel pressure to choose between or separate their religious self and their TGNC self.

Gender Minority Stress and Resiliency Measure

The results of my study reflect the *Gender Minority Stress and Resiliency* measure (GSMR), developed by Testa et al. (2015). Testa and colleagues expanded on Meyer's (2003) minority stress model to better represent the range of stressors experienced specifically by TGNC individuals. Participants shared experiences represented in all seven minority stress factors and both resiliency factors. Though I cannot say definitively how participants would score, it is evident that they have all experienced varying degrees of gender minority stress.

Stressors. Participants shared experiences related to the seven stressors identifies by Testa et al. (2015). These seven stressors are: gender-related discrimination, gender-related rejection, gender-related victimization, non-affirmation of gender identity, internalized transphobia, negative expectations, and nondisclosure of identity. Participants experienced gender-related discrimination through rules that did not allow them to participate in certain classes unless supervised. In addition to gender-related discrimination because of church rules and norms, participants also experienced gender-related rejection, gender-related victimization, and non-affirmation of gender identity. It is likely that the experience of all the above gender minority stressors led to the internalized transphobia participants spoke about. Participants experienced conflict and internalized negativity, seeing their gender identity as wrong, or as in opposition to what their church believes to be right and true. Added to this internalized transphobia, all participants discussed expectations of rejection, condemnation, and

discrimination from the church community. The last measure of minority stress discussed by Testa et al., was that of nondisclosure. Each participant, whether out in their religious setting or not, discussed nondisclosure of their gender identity and the struggles that they would face if they came out. Nondisclosure can look like making modifications to how they speak, gender-normative coping, and nonverbal cues such as how an individual walks or sits.

Resiliency. In addition to the gender-related stressors participants discussed, they also described what has helped them survive this complex relationship between their gender identity and religious identity. In line with the resiliency factors on the GMSR, individuals discussed the importance of community connectedness and pride. I presented these findings above in my discussion on the importance of social support and community and self-acceptance. Self-awareness and social supports assisted participants in becoming confident in who they are and what their gender identity is. Participants discussed feeling a sense of pride and self-confidence when they were able to identify their gender and ascribe meaning to their feelings. In addition, participants reported that having an affirming community outside of their church environment provided them with a safe place to be themselves.

Participants shared other personal attributes that assisted them in the navigation of their gender identity and religious identities. It is not surprising that these factors are not present on the GMSR as it was created for TGNC individuals in general, not specifically TGNC individuals who are also part of a non-affirming religion. Three factors that contributed to participants' resiliency stood out to me: courage, grit, and self-awareness. Participants used courage to face many of the painful and fearful situations arising within their religious context. They faced rejection, mockery, condemnation, and loss of community. Participants continuously made courageous decisions to come out or present their gender identity in places where they could be

rejected. Their courage not only contributed to their ability to be their true selves but acted as a protective factor when walking into fear.

Participants also possessed grit, or the tenacity to endure and pursue long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit and courage go hand in hand. Courage emerges in the short run and acts as an igniter, then allows grit to take over for the prolonged and difficult journey ahead. Participants utilized this grit and endurance to persist through the rejection and discrimination that they faced. They made compromises, endured discrimination, faced rejection, all to be able to continue participating in their religion.

Finally, participants discussed their own self-awareness, although they did not label it as such. They described self-awareness as a journey to understanding who they are. Possessing self-awareness for these participants looked like being attuned to themselves, aware of their own emotions and decision-making skills. This self-awareness and understanding of their emotional capacity contributes to their ability to use courage and grit in a productive way to navigate their relationship with gender and religion.

Surprises

In an IPA study, researchers go into the interviews and analysis with no expectations. Despite going in with no expectations for results, my own personal experiences and research led me to be surprised by the accounts being shared.

The first surprise to me was each participant identified that they had a fundamental and personal relationship with God. I described this relationship as fundamental because it acts as a base for their relationship with their religion and as a support to navigate that challenging balance between their gender identity and religious identity. This personal relationship with God seems to supersede or override their need to be accepted by their church and their church

community. The relationship with God is not an abstraction; it is very personal. God has an active presence in their life and their relationship with God is mutual. This came as a surprise because during my review of the literature, I focused on the benefits of participation in religion as a whole and did not identify specific factors that may play a protective role. Upon further investigation, it is evident that a secure and strong relationship with God benefits individuals by providing a source of support outside of individuals' immediate religious communities (Dangel & Webb, 2017). The better the relationship with God, the more meaning and purpose individuals ascribe to their life (Galek et al., 2015).

The amount of courage, grit, tenacity, and perseverance participants shared was not only surprising, but impressive. Their ability to continue walking into a space where they experience non-affirmation, discrimination, and fear of condemnation is striking. The strength of their belief in their religions and God outweighed the hostility and fear they faced. They displayed a massive amount of fortitude and grace throughout their experiences. Participants displayed forgiveness to their congregation members and made efforts to understand their positions as opposed to giving up on their ability to learn and grow.

Implications for Practice

These interviews provide new insight into how TGNC individuals navigate their relationship with a non-affirming church. These shared experiences compel practitioners to familiarize themselves with the available literature and guidelines, and strive toward continuing education. To provide affirmative care for this population, practitioners must educate themselves about this complex experience. It is imperative that practitioners do not rely on their clients to educate them about nuances about gender identity. Practitioners must take personal initiative to access the vast array of resources available about gender identity. In addition to seeking out

resources, it would be valuable for practitioners to challenge their own cisgender and heterosexual normative beliefs. This looks like examining the norms that have been internalized through social and cultural messaging as well as examining personally held beliefs and values about gender. Not only is self-education useful, but practitioners who strive to surround themselves with TGNC individuals may have the opportunity to develop connections that encourage personalized education and experience. Literature, books, and conferences are great tools, but they do not replace the authenticity of real relationships. Personal connections and relationships can lead to authentic and objective understanding.

It is important to understand that individuals who experience this conflict of gender identity and religious identity will come into counselling with different goals. These goals will depend on what their situation is within the religion, how far along they are on their gender identity journey, what supports they currently have, and what personal strengths and resiliencies they possess. These TGNC individuals walk into a religious space that places multiple harmful expectations on them; the counselling room should be the opposite. Clients should be able to walk into a counselling room without any expectations being placed on them. They should feel safe and comfortable being themselves and be able to identify their goals without judgement. Creating a space without client expectations could contribute to a more affirming and safe counselling space.

Affirming therapists will approach clients where they are at and place no expectations on what their relationship is with religion or what they want their relationship with religion to look like in the future. Being an affirming therapist does not mean avoiding discussing the risks clients may face when staying in or leaving their religion. It is pertinent that practitioners discuss all risks such as facing micro and macro aggressions when entering their place of worship, losing

community and family support if leaving the church, and the difficulty they may face finding a new place of worship. Each route clients decide to take come with their own host of positive and negative consequences. Without a thorough examination of potential consequences, practitioners will find it difficult to guide clients in utilizing their current strengths, supports, and resiliencies to navigate their gender and religious identity.

This research has shown that there are similarities and shared experiences across this population, but it is essential that practitioners recognize that every individual's experience is unique. Practitioners should approach each individual as a unique entity. Each individual will come with different personal, religious, and community strengths. Through highlighting these individual strengths and developing a collaborative therapeutic relationship, practitioners will be able to work with clients to use their strengths as a building block for therapy. Acknowledging and understanding these differences will help guide and inform individualized counselling plans. This could look like inquiring specifically about clients' relationships with their congregation. Do these relationships with members of their church function as a support, a hinderance, or both? If your client is navigating how to stay in the church, examine how to amplify the supportive aspects of their church relationships and how clients can protect themselves from the aspects of those relationships that may be harmful. Exploring what has been effective for clients navigating these relationships before they sought out counselling support and as mentioned previously, highlighting the success that they have had already, will likely contribute to a positive therapeutic experience and outcome.

Based on the experiences of the participants of this study, a thorough examination of what draws TGNC individuals currently attending their non-affirming church towards their continued attendance is necessary. It is imperative that practitioners do not overlook the more

nuanced aspects of religious attendance. The individuals in this study discussed carrying their religion with them outside of the church and into their daily personal lives. Thus, focusing solely on aspects related to in-person church attendance may result in missed information. By that focusing on how clients carry their religion with them outside of the physical church, practitioners may gain a more comprehensive understanding of their religious experience and participation. One of these aspects of religious attendance, is the relationship with God. Examining the relationship with God could lead to a more thorough understanding of client strengths as well as highlight a significant area of support. The relationship with God can act as protection, or as a safeguard, to the stressors and aggressions that clients face in their congregations. Clients may feel alone in their journey and ignoring or dismissing their relationship with God would not only be dismissive, but would be a detriment to their progress in counselling.

Finally, counsellor education plays a pivotal role in determining the effectiveness of future practitioners. I hesitate to say that this research must be included in counsellor training programs because of the already dense and stringent curriculums. What I hope to instill in counsellor educators is the importance of helping their students identify what it is that they do not know and in turn, helping them learn about where they can access the missing information from reliable sources. Effective knowledge seeking skills are essential to continued competency and education. Without the passion to continue learning and the ability to identify what they do not know; counsellors may become stagnant. Ideally, mental health practitioners will enter the professional field with a sense of responsibility for their own learning and professional development.

Limitations and Strengths

This study provides insight into the experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals who participate in a non-affirming religion. While the findings are based on a small sample size of four, this sample is reasonable within IPA methodology (Smith et al., 2009). Through using IPA, I was able to hear directly from TGNC individuals about their own experience. I provided space for them to share their story in their own words and highlight what has been most influential throughout their experience as opposed to me ascribing importance. With a small sample size and an interpretative research approach, I was able to utilize participants' words to create rich and full descriptions of their experiences while gaining an in-depth understanding of their unique experiences. Though the small sample size allowed for in-depth and rich descriptions, the experiences of these four TGNC individuals may not be representative of all TGNC individuals' experiences in a non-affirming religion.

All participants in the study were Caucasian. This homogeneity limits the applicability of this research to a wider population of individuals. Transgender and gender non-conforming identities are not homogenous. This sample did not represent or examine the multiple intersecting identities that make up the individuals in the TGNC community (e.g., race, ability, socioeconomic status). TGNC individuals who hold multiple minority identities are more likely to experience discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, Rood et al. (2017) found that being a TGNC person of colour, does not hold the same social value as being a white TGNC individual. They also found that TGNC people of colour reported that their experience with racial discrimination helped to prepare them for the gender discrimination they face. McGeorge et al. (2021) state that for TGNC individuals who are marginalized on the basis of race, religion,

and socioeconomic status, minority stress can be compounded. I did not examine those compounding effects of minority stress in this study.

Though there are limitations present due to lack of racial diversity, each participant identified their gender differently. This provided a glimpse into the diversity of gender identity experiences as well as highlighting the similarity in the experience of non-affirmation across marginalized gender identities.

In addition to ethnic homogeneity, each participant identified as part of a Christian faith denomination. I see this as both a strength and a limitation within this study. The purely Caucasian sample likely contributed to the lack of ethnic diversity of participants. Christianity in Canada is widely associated with colonialism as well as some denominations being historically and publicly discriminatory. Because each participant was affiliated with a Christian denomination, the findings of this study may not be applicable to other TGNC individuals who are part of a non-Christian non-affirming religion. On the other hand, we have gained a deeper understanding of what the non-affirming experience may be for TGNC individuals who are part of specifically a non-affirming Christian religion. Participants' shared belief in Christianity provided an unexpected opportunity to examine the similarities and differences between experiences in a non-affirming Christian environment. Thus, the findings of this research are more generalizable to Christian TGNC individuals.

I completed this study during the COVID-19 pandemic. With social distancing guidelines constantly in flux, participant recruitment was limited to social media platforms. Thus, I was only able to access individuals who had access to the internet. In addition, as a thesis student with a timeline, I chose to recruit the first four individuals who met the qualifications for this study. Future research should prioritize examining intersecting minority identities in relation to

TGNC individuals participating in a non-affirming religion. This looks like intentionally seeking out and prioritizing participants of colour, people with disabilities, and individuals from various social classes and education backgrounds. Gender identity and religious affiliation are not separate from other aspects of identity.

Directions for Future Research

My study has provided a rich and detailed account of four TGNC individuals who participate in a non-affirming religion. This detail provides the groundwork for filling a gap in the current literature. The goal of this research is to fill the gap about TGNC individuals participating in non-affirming religion in order for mental health practitioners to be harnessed with knowledge to assist this population effectively and confidently. I hesitate to say that I have fully filled this gap as I believe this is just the first step of many. I can confidently say that this research contributes to filling this gap in the literature.

Learning about TGNC individuals who are part of a non-affirming religion is a small but essential step towards developing competent counselling practice, education, and guidelines. Further research is necessary to move towards filling this gap in a more robust way. An obvious first step for future research is conducting similar studies with TGNC individuals who participate in other non-affirming religious congregations that are not Christian. To have a well-rounded understanding of these experiences and to inform best practices, we must examine a variety of non-affirming religious experiences. Without acknowledging diversity in religious experiences, we are ignoring a large sub-population of the TGNC community. It is also pertinent to conduct studies with individuals who are at different points in their public acknowledgment of their gender. Without examining individuals that are at various stages on the continuum of coming out, there will be gaps in our understanding of how to best serve this population.

It will also be essential to examine how TGNC individuals, who are part of or were part of a non-affirming religion, experience counselling relationships. This will provide insight into clients' experiences of what has been helpful or unhelpful, if they have experienced harm, what should change, and what should stay the same. Examining this experience through an IPA lens would allow researchers to gain, as I've done in this study, a full and rich understanding of their experience.

Not only do we need to understand how TGNC individuals experience counselling and the counselling relationship, but we also need to understand where counsellors sit on the spectrum of understanding the TGNC community as well as TGNC individuals' relationships with religion. Thus, to provide direction to counsellors, we need to first understand where the gaps in their knowledge are.

Participants Afterword

Connecting with participants after the completion of data analysis provided a unique opportunity to see hear about new developments in their experience of gender identity and participating in their non-affirming congregations. Two of the four participants responded to my invitation for a follow-up conversation. Kay and Ainsley, shared updates about their experiences with me. Kay shared with me that they have changed their name in their personal and public life. They have not yet legally changed their name, which is unsurprising since the process can be arduous and costly. When I first met Kay, they had, within the previous three months, discovered their gender identity and began using they/them pronouns. Changing their name is a public demonstration of the courage and grit that is key to identifying as TGNC and participating in a non-affirming religion. This name change is the next step in their journey as a non-binary person, and it was a privilege to hear their continuing story.

Ainsley and I met via Zoom and discussed the results of the study and how their experience is similar to other participants'. Ainsley shared that they found comfort in knowing that they were not alone in their experiences with their gender identity and religious affiliation. Additionally, Ainsley has changed their pronouns publicly from they/them to him/them. Ainsley has also chosen to go by Ainsley in addition to a more male presenting name. He said that his name change is not official yet, and that when sharing his new name, he informs people that they can use whatever name they are comfortable with. This is not surprising considering Ainsley's desire to ensure that the people around him are comfortable and that their beliefs are not being challenged to the point of discomfort. Finally, when Ainsley and I spoke, he was one year on hormone replacement therapy.

Not only did Ainsley choose a new name and change his pronouns, but he also did all of this publicly and shared all this information with the church. He found a way to come out that was safe and comfortable for him, while reaching all the people from different areas of his life. This process involved a series of posts on Instagram, a photo-sharing social media platform, over several days. Sharing this information via Instagram allowed Ainsley to respond to questions in a reflective and thoughtful way when he had the emotional capacity and make conscious decisions about what content and people he wished to engage with. He shared photos of himself with a short new haircut as well as more masculine centred clothing choices. Each post was accompanied with a theme ranging from love and kindness to patience and self-control. He included information about his gender identity and name change as well as quotes from the bible that support his decision and his identity, and expanded on the theme that he chose. These posts also highlighted verses from the bible that have been helpful to him along his journey. These bible quotes were filled with information about God's unconditional love and support. Ainsley

shared that the reception in the church was nothing but positive. In our initial interview, Ainsley was full of laughter, lightheartedness, and a deep love for God. In our follow-up interview, his light and laughter and happiness radiated even more.

These post-study connections with Kay and Ainsley show that the experiences TGNC individuals have with non-affirming religions and with their identity is always evolving.

How this Research Changed me as a Researcher and Practitioner

My interest in this research grew out of personal experience as a queer woman in a non-affirming church. I have had my own experiences of non-affirmation and went through my own journey with religion. The result of my journey was that I left the church, and harboured negative feelings towards my specific denomination of Christianity. This research has not changed my attitudes towards my previous congregation, but it has expanded my understanding of why LGBTQ2S+ individuals stay part of their non-affirming religion. I initially assumed that individuals stay in their congregations and denominations because of a fear of loss of community and starting over. These interviews have made it evident that their desire to stay goes beyond just belonging to a community. It goes beyond seeking the line of least resistance. Individuals make a concerted effort, with their heart, their soul, and their faith to maintain connected to their strong beliefs and their relationship with God. This has shown me that people will walk into the lion's den if it means that they are able to continue practicing their faith. Not all people have a desire to leave their religion to find a safe space. They are so sturdy in their beliefs that they are willing to go through just about anything to continue practicing in their religious community of choice.

This research has ignited in me a deep interest and a desire to learn more that will likely continue for years to come. My interest has expanded beyond the counselling relationship and counselling guidelines. I want to examine how affirming churches have succeeded in creating

spaces that are affirming for the LGBTQ2S+ community. If there are churches now that are affirming, there must be other churches and religious denominations looking to find a way to become an affirming and safe space for all individuals. How have these religious spaces moved beyond performative action to active affirmation? I want to learn what affirming religious spaces look like for TGNC individuals and how these spaces have been successfully created.

In addition to filling the gap in research, it is my hope that my future research and work in academia will lead to more robust counselling and mental health practice guidelines for working with the TGNC community. This will be accomplished over time with a collaboration of research findings and practice findings.

Conclusion

My study provides a comprehensive account of four TGNC individuals who are part of a non-affirming religion. Individuals shared many similar challenges, personal triumphs, internal processes, and other experiences that played a role in their navigation of this complex relationship. Participants described how they were able to step into a non-affirming environment every week using grit, courage, and self-awareness. They identified the intricate thought processes and self-reflection necessary to their continued participation in their non-affirming congregations. Participants also provided a detailed description of their indispensable relationship with God and how that has provided a foundation for their continued faith. Each participant found strength to persevere by drawing on different resources including community, family, artistic expression, and stalwart friendships. Through these four accounts, counsellors and mental health practitioners now have a glimpse into what this experience is like for TGNC individuals. Because of the recommendations from the community advisors and the social change tenets of participatory action research, I will be sharing this research in more than

academic circles. I will be creating consumable content, such as pamphlets and infographics, to share with practitioners and organizations who provide services to TGNC individuals. This research is important, and ease of access will ensure that individuals have access to information that will inform their work. It is imperative that practitioners be aware of how intricate and complex each TGNC individuals' experience is. Practitioners must strive to provide personalized and affirming care while leaving assumptions and expectations at the door.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide – Community Advisors

The following questions are possible prompts for an informal and open-ended discussion with community advisors.

1. Questions about informed consent?
2. Tell me a bit about yourself and your involvement and knowledge of the community.
3. Tell us how you were introduced to the transgender and gender non-conforming community?
4. What do you think should be the priorities for a researcher working with the transgender and gender non-conforming individuals?
5. My research question is "How do transgender and gender non-conforming individuals navigate the complex relationship between their gender identity and non-affirming religion?" What are your thoughts on the value of this research question? How would you change it to make it more valuable to the transgender and gender non-conforming community?
6. What are the potential applications of this research, and will it benefit the community?
7. What methods of collecting data would you suggest I employ to make data collection more congruent with the transgender and gender non-conforming community?
8. Where would be a safe space to conduct interviews with participants?
9. In IPA, credibility checking is used. What methods of credibility checking would you deem appropriate for this community?
10. What would be the best way to disseminate my results to you and to the transgender and gender non-conforming community?

11. How can I ensure that my research is accessible to all TGNC individuals who want to participate?
12. I am planning on offering a session with a psychologist for participants who feel they need it; do you think there is anything else that I should offer due to the sensitive nature of the topic?
13. What would be an appropriate incentive for participation in the research?
14. Is there anything else about this research you would like to share? Concerns?
15. Can I contact you for follow-up and clarification if needed?

Appendix B: Informed Consent – Community Advisors

LETTER OF INFORMATION / INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The Experiences of Transgender or Gender Non-Conforming Individuals Participating in a Non-Affirming Religion

[April 30, 2020]

Principal Investigator (Researcher):
Rachael Babcock
780-710-7644
Rbabcock1@athabasca.edu

Supervisor:
Dr. Jeff Chang
1-866-901-7647
jeffc@athabascau.ca

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled *The Experiences of Transgender or Gender Non-Conforming Individuals Participating in a Non-Affirming Religion*

This form is part of the process of informed consent. The information presented should give you the basic idea of what this research is about and what your participation will involve, should you choose to participate. It also describes your right to withdraw from the project. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research project, you should understand enough about its risks, benefits and what it requires of you to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully as it is important that you understand the information given to you. Please contact the principal investigator, Rachael Babcock if you have any questions about the project or would like more information before you consent to participate.

It is entirely up to you whether or not you take part in this research. If you choose not to take part, or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you now, or in the future.

Introduction
My name is Rachael Babcock and I am a Master of Counselling student at Athabasca University. As a requirement to complete my degree, I am conducting a research project about trans and gender non-conforming individuals' experience with non-affirming religions. I am conducting this project under the supervision of Dr. Jeff Chang

Why are you being asked to take part in this research project?
Prior to conducting my main study, I am engaging community advisors to provide me with insight and advice on engaging transgender and gender non-conforming individuals in research. You are being invited to participate in this project because you are a leader in the LGBTQ2S+ community and have knowledge that may be helpful to informing my thesis research.

What is the purpose of this research project?
The purpose of this study is to build on the growing body of literature surrounding the transgender and gender non-conforming community. Without research and extensive guidelines in place, counsellors are not serving this population to the best of their ability. This study will reveal factors that contribute to transgender and gender non-conforming individuals' successful navigation of the complex relationship between gender identity and religious affiliation. The

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1

knowledge gained will provide a steppingstone to create guidelines for best practice with transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, giving current and aspiring practitioners insight into this community's experience as well as increase the limited knowledge available on this population.

What will you be asked to do?
You and I will meet for a maximum of two hours at a time and location that is convenient for you. A meeting over Zoom, Skype, or the phone is an option. I will ask you some questions to gain your insights and thoughts on my research question, study significant, and proposed methods of data generation. Your responses will be audio recorded.

What are the risks and benefits?
There are minimal risks to participation in this advisory process. Benefits include: co-authorship on future presentations and lay publications, inclusion of advisory activities on CV or resume, and identification of contributions in final dissemination of research. Additional gifts may be offered pending funding approval. In addition, you will be contributing to the growing body of research on the transgender and gender non-conforming community.

Do you have to take part in this project?
As stated earlier in this letter, involvement in this project is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw consent to participate at any time. The information collected will be used to inform my research design, unless you choose to withdraw your data. Data withdraw can occur up to one month following the interview. There will be no consequences to withdrawing from the study.

How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected?
The ethical duty of confidentiality includes safeguarding participants' identities, personal information, and data from unauthorized access, use or disclosure. Any information you share will remain confidential, however direct quotes may be used in dissemination with any identifying information removed.

How will my anonymity be protected?
Anonymity refers to protecting participants' identifying characteristics, such as name or description of physical appearance. The data you will provide will remain anonymous with identifying characteristics removed. Your participation will remain anonymous, unless you wish to be identified as a co-author on publications or presentations. I will make every reasonable effort to ensure your anonymity; you will not be identified without your explicit permission.

How will the data collected be stored?
I will record our interview using an encrypted password protected electronic device and transferred to an external password protected hard drive for storage. Audio recordings and transcripts will be accessed by me, the primary investigator, my supervisor, Dr. Jeff Chang, or a research assistant. All identifying information will be removed from transcripts and audio recordings prior to being accessed by my supervisor. I may contact you for follow-up information; any of the information you share via email will be done using a password protected word document.

Athabasca University

2

Who will receive the results of the research project?
The results of this study may be disseminated by publication or presentation and professional and/or research conferences. In addition, results from this study will be shared with Edmonton's LGBTQ2S+ serving organization. Findings may also be shared with professionals working with the LGBTQ2S+ community in Edmonton.

The existence of the research will be listed in an abstract posted online at the Athabasca University Library's Digital Thesis and Project Room and the final research paper will be publicly available.

Direct quotations from participants may be included in both publications and presentations with identifying information removed. In addition, the final project will be provided to participants upon request.

Who can you contact for more information or to indicate your interest in participating in the research project?
Thank you for considering this invitation. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact me, (the principal investigator) by e-mail rbabcock1@athabasca.edu or by phone, 780-710-7644, or my supervisors by email jeffc@athabscau.ca. If you are ready to participate in this project, please complete and sign the attached Consent Form and return it to me by email. Alternatively, contact me by phone or email to set up an interview and you can sign a paper copy of the consent form at that time.

Thank you.

Rachael Babcock

This project has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this project, please contact the Research Ethics Office by e-mail at rebsec@athabascau.ca or by telephone at 1-800-788-9041, ext. 6718.

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3

INFORMED CONSENT

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research project.
- You have been able to ask questions about this project.
- You are satisfied with the answers to any questions you may have had.
- You understand what the research project is about and what you will be asked to do.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw your participation in the research project without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now, or in the future.
- You understand that if you choose to withdraw after data collection has ended, your data cannot be removed from the project.

	YES	NO
I agree to be audio-recorded	☐	☐
I agree to the use of direct quotations	☐	☐
I am willing to be contacted following the interview to verify that my comments are accurately reflected in the transcript.	☐	☐
I would like my anonymity to be maintained	☐	☐

Your signature confirms:

- You have read what this research project is about and understood the risks and benefits. You have had time to think about participating in the project and had the opportunity to ask questions and have those questions answered to your satisfaction.
- You understand that participating in the project is entirely voluntary and that you may end your participation at any time without any penalty or negative consequences.
- You have been given a copy of this Informed Consent form for your records; and
- You agree to participate in this research project.

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

Principal Investigator's Signature:

I have explained this project to the best of my ability. I invited questions and responded to any that were asked. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in participating in the research project, any potential risks and that he or she has freely chosen to participate.

_____ _____

Signature of Principal Investigator Date

Athabasca University

4

Appendix C: Informed Consent – Participants

LETTER OF INFORMATION / INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The Experiences of Transgender or Gender Non-Conforming Individuals Participating in a Non-Affirming Religion

[July 15, 2020]

Principal Investigator (Researcher):
Rachael Babcock
780-710-7644
Rbabcock1@athabasca.edu

Supervisor:
Dr. Jeff Chang
1-866-901-7647
jeffc@athabascau.ca

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled *The Experiences of Transgender or Gender Non-Conforming Individuals Participating in a Non-Affirming Religion*

This form is part of the process of informed consent. The information presented should give you the basic idea of what this research is about and what your participation will involve, should you choose to participate. It also describes your right to withdraw from the project. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research project, you should understand enough about its risks, benefits and what it requires of you to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully as it is important that you understand the information given to you. Please contact the principal investigator, Rachael Babcock, if you have any questions about the project or would like more information before you consent to participate.

It is entirely up to you whether or not you take part in this research. If you choose not to take part, or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you now, or in the future.

Introduction
My name is Rachael Babcock and I am a Master of Counselling student at Athabasca University. As a requirement to complete my degree, I am conducting a research project about transgender and gender non-conforming individuals' experience with non-affirming religions. I am conducting this project under the supervision of Dr. Jeff Chang

What is the purpose of this research project?
The purpose of this study is to build on the growing body of literature surrounding the transgender and gender non-conforming community. Without research and extensive guidelines in place, counsellors are not serving this population to the best of their ability. This study will reveal factors that contribute to transgender and gender non-conforming individuals' successful navigation of the complex relationship between gender identity and religious affiliation. The knowledge gained will provide a steppingstone to create guidelines for best practice with transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, giving current and aspiring practitioners insight into this community's experience as well as increase the limited knowledge available on this population.

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1

Are you a good fit for this study?
If you identify as transgender, gender non-conforming, or any other gender besides cisgender, are over the age of 18, and participate in a religion or spiritual practice that you deem as non-affirming, you have valuable stories to share with me. You need to be willing to reflect on your current and past experiences with your current religious affiliation. You must also reside in Canada. You must also be able to understand the information in this letter and provide your consent to participate. You are welcome to ask any questions you have about the consent process or this study.

What will you be asked to do?
You and I will meet for a maximum of two hours at a time and location that is convenient for you. A meeting over Zoom, the phone, or online text-based chat. Before participating, you will complete a survey, either online or by phone, to identify your desired mode of participation, best time to meet, and whether there is anything I can do to support you in participating. Within a few days of you providing me with answers, I will contact you to find out if there is anything additional you want to ask me, tell me, or clarify with me.

After our interview, I will ask you to complete a short survey that asks questions about your demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. This can be completed online.

Approximately 4-8 weeks after providing me with answers to my questions I will contact you again. I will ask you to provide clarification and feedback on my understanding and interpretations of your answers. You may wish to review the original audio file or written transcript in order to refresh your memory.

What are the risks and benefits?
There are minimal risks to participation. Benefits include contributing your first-hand knowledge about your experience. You will have the opportunity to voice your experience in a safe place where you are the expert. There is the possibility that you will find the sensitive topics of this study upsetting. I ask you to carefully consider if you have the internal and external supports you require to cope with any troubling feelings you may develop as a result of talking about your experiences with your non-affirming religion.

If you do choose to participate, I will provide you with a list of local mental health resources, including resources that are queer and trans-affirming. In addition, I will provide funding for one session with a counsellor. You will need to set up these appointments on your own. If you require a referral, I can provide you with the contact information for qualified and queer and trans friendly psychologists and counsellors. You can pay for the sessions yourself and then send me the receipt. Upon receival of the receipt, I can e-transfer the amount that you paid. If that option does not work for you, you can have your counsellor or psychologist contact me and I will pay them directly. You will have six months following the interview to access this service. In addition, to thank you for your participation in the interview, I will provide you with a $25 gift card of your choice. A second $25 gift card will be provided for the time that you spend verifying my understanding and interpretation of your answers.

Do you have to take part in this project?
As stated earlier in this letter, involvement in this project is *entirely* voluntary. You may withdraw consent to participate at any time. The information I have collected from you will still be used in my research, unless you tell me that you would like to withdraw your data. Data withdraw can occur up to the point that you check the data for accuracy. There will be no consequences to withdrawing from the study.

How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected?
The ethical duty of confidentiality includes safeguarding participants' identities, personal information, and data from unauthorized access, use or disclosure. Any information you share will remain confidential, however direct quotes may be used in dissemination with any identifying information removed.

How will my anonymity be protected?
Anonymity refers to protecting participants' identifying characteristics, such as name, where you are from, or description of physical appearance. The data you will provide will remain anonymous with identifying characteristics removed.

How will the data collected be stored?
I will use Zoom Meeting to record phone, video, and chat interviews. Following our meeting, I will delete the video recordings and only store the audio file of our conversation. I will store the audio and video recordings on a password protected external hard drive. Audio recordings and transcripts will be accessed by me, the primary investigator, and my supervisor, Dr. Jeff Chang. Dr. Jeff Chang is also required not to share your personal information or data. All identifying information will be removed from transcripts and audio recordings prior to being accessed by my supervisor. I may contact you for follow-up information; your responses will also be stored on the password protected external hard drive.

We may decide to use your data in a future analysis for another research question. If we do, the ethics board will review the study to ensure we use the information ethically.

Who will receive the results of the research project?
The results of this study may be disseminated by publication or presentation at professional and/or research conferences. In addition, results from this study will be shared with Edmonton's LGBTQ2S+ serving organizations and professionals. Findings may also be shared with professionals working with the LGBTQ2S+ community in Edmonton.

The existence of the research will be listed in an abstract posted online at the Athabasca University Library's Digital Thesis and Project Room and the final research paper will be publicly available.

Direct quotations from participants may be included in both publications and presentations with identifying information removed. In addition, the final project will be provided to participants upon request.

Who can you contact for more information or to indicate your interest in participating in the research project?
Thank you for considering this invitation.

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3

If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact me, (the principal investigator) by e-mail rbabcock1@athabasca.edu or by phone, 780-710-7644, or my supervisor by email jeffc@athabscau.ca. If you are ready to participate in this project, please complete and sign the attached Consent Form and return it to me by email. Alternatively, contact me by phone or email to set up an interview and you can sign a paper copy of the consent form at that time.

Thank you.

Rachael Babcock

This project has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this project, please contact the Research Ethics Office by e-mail at rebsec@athabascau.ca or by telephone at 1-800-788-9041, ext. 6718.

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4

INFORMED CONSENT

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research project.
- You have been able to ask questions about this project.
- You are satisfied with the answers to any questions you may have had.
- You understand what the research project is about and what you will be asked to do.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw your participation in the research project without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now, or in the future.
- You understand that if you choose to withdraw after data collection has ended, your data cannot be removed from the project.

	YES	NO
I agree to be audio-recorded	○	○
I agree to have chat logs saved	○	○
I agree to the use of direct quotations	○	○
I agree to email responses being stored as data	○	○
I am willing to be contacted following the interview to verify that my comments are accurately reflected in the transcript.	○	○
I understand that the interview data I provide for this study may be analyzed for future studies.	○	○

Your signature confirms:

- You have read what this research project is about and understood the risks and benefits. You have had time to think about participating in the project and had the opportunity to ask questions and have those questions answered to your satisfaction.
- You understand that participating in the project is entirely voluntary and that you may end your participation at any time without any penalty or negative consequences.
- You have been given a copy of this Informed Consent form for your records; and
- You agree to participate in this research project.

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

Principal Investigator's Signature:

I have explained this project to the best of my ability. I invited questions and responded to any that were asked. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in participating in the research project, any potential risks and that he or she has freely chosen to participate.

_____ _____

Signature of Principal Investigator Date

Athabasca University

5

Appendix D: Interview Guide - Participants

The following is a guide used for the semi-structured interview with participants.

Prior to Questions:

1. Provide background information: the inspiration for the study, my background, and my personal experience. Acknowledge the discrepancy in power and invite equality to the conversation while recognizing the importance of participants' perspectives.
2. Invite participants to make themselves as comfortable as possible (e.g., to include pets, a fidget device, etc.)
3. Invite participants to ask for a break at any time.
4. Ensure participants know that this is a safe space and that I welcome diverse viewpoints; I will not disregard participants' data if their perspectives differ from mine.
5. Encourage questions.
6. Remind participants of the purpose of the study and that I welcome stories from any time throughout their life.
7. Ask participants if they have any questions before we start.
8. Remind participants that they are agents of their own identity and get to choose how to describe their lived experience and what you want to share. If they are uncomfortable answering any of these questions, they should feel free to do so.

Questions

1) When you first heard about this study, what went through your mind? (Probes: what caught your attention? What motivated you to reach out?)
2) I would like to get to know you a bit, so please tell me about yourself. (Rapport building).
    a) Where did you grow up?

3) Inquire about how it was growing up there (ex. Rural, urban).
    a) What was the makeup of your family?
    b) What did your friend circle look like growing up?
    c) Were most of them members of the same church (if you were part of a church as a child)
    d) What does your friend circle look like now?
    e) What types of activities do you participate in for leisure?
    f) Describe what you do for a living? (Probe: if a student: what are you studying?)
    g) What is your gender?
4) What does *non-affirming religion* mean to you? (Probes: What does non-affirming religion make you think of? What is another word or phrase you would use to describe *non-affirming religion*? What thoughts or images would come to mind if somebody told you they had or are experiencing a non-affirming religion?)
5) Tell me about how you came to be a part of your religion? (Probes: Did you grow up in the religion? Did you begin participating in the religion later in life?)
6) Describe your involvement in your current religion? (Probes: Describe your involvement in your religion's services/gatherings? If prayer is a part of your religion, how often do you pray?)
7) Please describe your involvement in the LGBTQ2S+ community where you live. (Probes: What does your friend circle look like? Are you involved in any community events or organizations?)
8) Please talk about how you came to understand your awareness of your gender identity. (Probe: Talk about the evolution of your awareness of your gender identity).

9) In what ways did religion play a role in your learning and discovery of your gender identity? (Probes: Please describe how your gender identity fits within your religion?)
10) Please describe how and if your mental health was affected during this process of discovering your gender identity.
    a) What did you find helpful or supportive during the initial process of discovery? (Probes: What tools did you use? Describe the personal and/or familial supports that you had. Describe the support you had within the LGBTQ2S+ community. Describe the support you found within your religion. Describe any supports you found outside the aforementioned.)
11) Despite the non-affirming nature of your religion, you have chosen to continue to participate. Please describe the process of coming to that decision. (Probes: What tools did you use to make this decision? What supports did you lean on during this decision-making process?)
12) Please describe how and if your mental health is currently affected in light of your gender identity and religious affiliation.
    a) How have your strategies and supports evolved?
13) Describe how you balance identifying as (insert gender identity) while also being part of your current religion. (Probes: Describe a time when you have had to hide your gender identity. Are there times where you have not had to hide your identity? When? How did you navigate that difficult situation?)
14) How do you think your gender identity and your relationship to religion has affected you as an individual? (Probe: What impact has this had on the person that you have become? Would you describe yourself as resilient? Why?)

15) Describe your level of comfort discussing religion with your LGBTQ2S+ friends. (Probes: do you feel comfortable having discussions about religion?)
16) Please describe your feelings of safety within your religious practice. (Probe: are there times when you feel safer/less safe?)
17) Please describe a religious gathering, event, or setting where you feel most comfortable. (Probe: What factors may contribute to this feeling of comfort?)
18) Please describe religious setting where you feel the least comfortable. (Probe: What factors may contribute to this feeling of discomfort?)
19) Can you please tell me about what aspects of your religion or religious community are non-affirming? (Probe: What rules or doctrines are in place? Are there unspoken rules? Describe.)
20) Please describe some of the reasons that you have chosen to stay in your religion. (Probe: How does family and community play a role?)
21) Please describe the level to which you feel accepted in your current religion. (Probe: To what degree do you feel you are able to be open about your gender?)
22) How has your gender identity changed your relationship to your religious practice?
23) Can you describe the integration of your religious practice into the rest of your life? (Probe: How often and in what circumstances do you feel like you have to hide one part of your identity?)
24) How has your religion contributed to your overall sense of well-being (self-esteem, self-identity, happiness)? (Probe: How has your religious practice contributed to your sense of community?)

25) How has your gender identity contributed to your overall sense of well-being (self-esteem, self-identity, happiness)? (Probe: How has your gender identity contributed to your sense of community?)
26) What do you think is the most important thing that contributes to your ability to participate in your religion while identifying as (insert gender identity)?
27) What personal attributes do you think have contributed to your integration of gender and religion? (Probe: To what degree do you consider the integration of gender and religion successful?)
28) Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experiences?
29) How was this experience of participating in this research interview for you? (Probe: How comfortable has this experience been for you? Is there anything you would change about the process?)

Post-interview information

- I will contact you in a few days to follow-up on our conversation, to give you a chance to ask any questions or tell me anything else you think is important. What is the best way to contact you?
- You have access to one free counselling session. You are welcome to see any counsellor you choose, or I can refer you to someone. You can pay for the session yourself and send me the receipt. I will e-transfer you the amount you paid. Alternatively, you can ask the therapist to contact me, and I will pay them directly. They do not need to reveal your name to me. You have six months following our interview to claim this.
- Reminder that I will also follow-up in 4-8 weeks for you to offer feedback on the accuracy of my understanding of what you have shared with me.

Appendix E: TCPS-2: CORE Certificate

PANEL ON RESEARCH ETHICS
Navigating the ethics of human research

TCPS 2: CORE

Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Rachael Babcock

has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement:
Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans
Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)

Date of Issue: **15 May, 2019**

Appendix F: Low-Cost Resources

Resources for Mental Health

November 2019

211

Visit www.edmonton.cmha.ca to obtain a new copy if more than 6 months old.

Advocacy / Information / Referral

Alzheimer Society of Alberta (*Edmonton*) 780-488-2266
Boyle McCauley Health Centre 780-422-7333
E4C 780-424-7543
Wellness Network 780-488-0851
The Office of the Alberta Health Advocates
Mental Health Patient Advocate 780-422-1812
Schizophrenia Society of Alberta (*Edmonton*) 780-452-4661

Assessment / Testing / Treatment

Alberta Health Services (AHS) - *Access 24/7, Adult Intake Services*
(FKA: Community Assessment and Treatment Services, Adult / Edmonton Mental Health Clinic) 780-424-2424
Child and Adolescent Intake Services 780-342-2701
CASA Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health
(under 5yrs; for over 5yrs access through Child and Adolescent Mental Health Intake, see above) 780-400-2271
Psychologists' Association of Alberta
Psychologist Referral Service 780-424-0294
University of Alberta - Faculty of Education
Clinical Services (September - April) 780-492-3746

Counselling *(low / no cost)*

Catholic Social Services - *Mercy Counselling* 780-391-3233
The Family Centre - Edmonton 780-424-6103
Drop-In Single Session Counselling ..... dropinyeg.ca
Jewish Family Services Edmonton 780-454-1194
Momentum Walk-In Counselling 780-757-0900
For more counselling options available in your area 211

Employment / Living Skills / Training

Edmonton's Food Bank - *Beyond Food* 780-425-2133
EmployAbilities 780-423-4106
Excel Society 780-455-2601 x0
Goodwill Industries of Alberta
Career Connections 780-944-2768
On Site Placement Services Association (OSP) 780-488-8122
Prosper Place Clubhouse 780-426-7861

Housing / Supported Independent Living

Alberta Health Services *Community Care Access* ... 780-496-1300
(telephone screening for programs in residential settings)
Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)
Housing Program 780-414-6300
E4C 780-424-7543
The Salvation Army - Edmonton
Cornerstone Transitional Residence
(for women without children) 780-399-8928
Supportive Residence 780-428-4405

Crisis *(Call 911 if in immediate danger)*

Alberta Health Services (AHS) - *Access 24/7, Adult Intake Services*
(FKA: Adult Community Urgent Services / Adult Crisis Response Team / Community Urgent Services and Stabilization Team / CUSST) (24/7)
..... 780-424-2424
Mental Health Help Line (24/7) 1-877-303-2642
Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)
Distress Line (24/7) 780-482-HELP (4357)
Government of Alberta - *Mental Health Act* 780-422-1812

Immigrant Mental Health Services

Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers
Health and Well-Being Services 780-423-9696
Multicultural Health Brokers Co-op 780-423-1973

Inner City Mental Health Services

Bissell Centre - *Mental Health Supports* 780-423-2285 x130
Boyle Street Community Services 780-424-4106
Hope Mission - *Health Centre - Psychiatrist* ... 780-422-2018 x278

Recreation and Social Programs

Addictions and Mental Health Community Linking Program
Challenge by Choice 780-700-2189
Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) 780-414-6300
Prosper Place Clubhouse 780-426-7861

Suicide Education and Support

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)
Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST)
..... 780-414-6300
Distress Line (24/7) 780-482-HELP (4357)
Mental Health and Wellbeing Education 780-414-6300
Suicide Bereavement Support Services 780-414-6300
Suicide Caregiver Support Services 780-414-6300
Unlimited Potential Community Services Society
Professional and Educational Services 780-440-0708

Support Groups

Anorexics and Bulimics Anonymous www.aba12steps.org
Caregivers Alberta 780-453-5088
Co-Dependents Anonymous 780-436-6853
Eating Disorder Support Network of Alberta 780-729-3376
ElderCare Edmonton - *Caregiver Support* 780-434-4747
Emotions Anonymous *(depression, anxiety, etc.)* 780-690-3338
Momentum Walk-In Counselling - *Drop-In Support Groups*
(bipolar disorder, anxiety, depression) 780-757-0900
Organization for Bipolar Affective Disorders 1-866-263-7408
Schizophrenia Society of Alberta (*Edmonton*) 780-452-4661

Dial 2-1-1 within Edmonton for more information or if you cannot find the particular service you are looking for.
If 211 is not yet available in your area call 780-482-INFO (4636).
Inclusion of an agency or service on this list does not constitute an endorsement by 211.

300, 10010 105 Street, Edmonton, AB T5J 1C4 Tel: 780.414.6300 Fax: 780.482.7498

211 Alberta – Edmonton and Area is a program of Canadian Mental Health Association Edmonton Mental health for all

Appendix G: Participant Recruitment Poster: Detailed

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH IN

The Experiences of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People Participating in a Non-Affirming Religion

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals who are actively participating in a non-affirming religion, religious denomination, or religious practice that they experience as non-affirming.

Participants will:

- Reflect on their experiences as a non-cisgender person who is participating in a non-affirming religion
- Share their thoughts on the impact these experiences have had on their lives

What will I be asked to do?

- Answer questions either verbally or in written form
- Review the work of the researcher to ensure the accuracy their understanding of your answers.

Who can participate?

- Transgender, gender non-conforming, agender, non-binary, genderqueer, agender, etc. individuals who are over the age of 18
- Must currently be part of a religion, religious denomination, or religions practice they experience as non-affirming
- Individuals willing to reflect and recount their experiences of participating in a non-affirming religion.
- Individuals who feel they have internal and external mental health supports

What else do I need to know?

- Your participation is **entirely voluntary**
- You will have the option to choose your mode of participation, however there will be no in-person interviews due to physical distancing requirements

To learn more about this study, or to participate in this study, please contact:

Principal Investigator: Rachael Babcock
Master of Counselling student, Athabasca University
780-710-7644
rbabcock1@athabasca.edu
This study is supervised by: Dr. Jeff Chang jeffc@athabascau.ca

This study has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board.

Athabasca University

Appendix H: Participant Recruitment Poster: Simplified

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH

Project Title:
The Experiences of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People Participating in a Non-Affirming Religion

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals who are actively participating in a non-affirming religion, religious denomination, or religious practice that they experience as non-affirming.

We are looking for volunteers who:

- Are 18 years of age or older
- Live in Canada
- Identify as transgender, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, non-binary, agender, etc.
- Currently participate in a religion or faith where the experience has been non-affirming.
- Are willing to share their experiences of navigating their current religion and gender identity

To learn more about this study, please contact:

Principal Investigator: Rachael Babcock

Master of Counselling student, Athabasca University

780-710-7644
rbabcock1@athabasca.edu

This study is supervised by Dr. Jeff Chang
jeffc@athabascau.ca

This study has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board.

Athabasca University

Appendix I: Ethics Approval

Athabasca University
RESEARCH CENTRE

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: 23912

Principal Investigator:
Ms. Rachael Babcock, Graduate Student
Faculty of Health Disciplines\Master of Counselling

Supervisor:
Dr. Jeff Chang (Supervisor)

Project Title:
The Experiences of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People Participating in a Non-Affirming Religion

Effective Date: April 15, 2020 **Expiry Date**: April 14, 2021

Restrictions:

Any modification or amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year.* An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

A Project Completion (Final) Report must be submitted when the research is complete *(i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable))* or the research is terminated.

Approved by: **Date: April 15, 2020**

Simon Nuttgens, Chair
Faculty of Health Disciplines, Departmental Ethics Review Committee

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Athabasca University Research Ethics Board
University Research Services, Research Centre
1 University Drive, Athabasca AB Canada T9S 3A3
E-mail rebsec@athabascau.ca
Telephone: 780.675.6718

Appendix J: Ethics Approval Renewal

Athabasca University
RESEARCH CENTRE

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL - RENEWAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: **23912**

Principal Investigator:
Ms. Rachael Babcock, Graduate Student
Faculty of Health Disciplines\Master of Counselling

Supervisor:
Dr. Jeff Chang (Supervisor)

Project Title:
The Experiences of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People Participating in a Non-Affirming Religion

Effective Date: April 15, 2021 **Expiry Date**: April 14, 2022

Restrictions:

Any modification or amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year*. An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

A Project Completion (Final) Report must be submitted when the research is complete *(i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable))* or the research is terminated.

Approved by: **Date: March 29, 2021**

Carolyn Greene, Chair
Athabasca University Research Ethics Board

Athabasca University Research Ethics Board
University Research Services, Research Centre
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Telephone: 780.213.2033