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Transgender people’s reflections on identity, faith, and Christian faith communities in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT
Relational therapists have limited access to resources and information about transgender people’s faith beliefs and experiences in Christian communities of faith, which is largely absent from the professional literature. The purpose of this article is to examine the Christian religious and spiritual experiences of transgender people located in the U.S. Seven self-identified transgender people participated in in-depth interviews. Results of the study indicated that participants had various experiences in faith communities, with both supportive and discriminatory responses from others. The results also suggest that participants maintained their faith beliefs even when they experience rejection from faith communities. Moreover, participants reported feeling a connection with a higher power, and specifically viewed themselves as made transgender by God. Findings from this study may be particularly relevant for relational therapists who work within Christian faith communities and organizations. Implications for transgender inclusive and supportive therapy are discussed.

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Introduction
Participation in a faith community is an important aspect of many peoples’ lives (Abdel-Khalek, 2006) as 80% of individuals in the United States identify with a religion (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009); however, transgender people’s experiences of marginalization or inclusion may influence how connected they are to religious faith and communities. Rodriguez and Ouellette (2002) found that the more involved lesbians and gay men, a group who similarly experiences marginalization, are within the church – such as being a formal member, attending services, taking leadership roles, and participating in activities – the more likely they were to report spiritual beliefs as integrated into personal identity. Many studies have shown that positive
religious experiences and participation in faith communities also increase quality of life by reducing stressors, establishing supports, and fostering a sense of belonging and community (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; French & Joseph, 1999; Koenig, 1997). Further, Yarhouse and Carrs (2012) found that although transgender people report struggling with organized religion, some also report positive experiences which were helpful to transition. Given that spiritual relationships and participation in faith communities is beneficial to well-being, research exploring how transgender people view their place in those communities is needed. Research has demonstrated the positive effects religion and spirituality has on health and well-being (Abdel-Khalek, 2006), thus it is also important to understand how faith is experienced by transgender people which is the aim of this study. Although we did not seek to focus on Christian faith beliefs, this belief system emerged in the data. Therefore, this article will examine current literature on transgender people’s Christian faith beliefs, and address the limited practice of incorporating discussions about faith and gender identity in therapeutic conversations. We then explore results regarding transgender people’s personal experiences of Christian faith as well as how they interpret the influence of Christian faith beliefs by cisgender people. Finally, we address clinical implications.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) spirituality has been explored in the social sciences (Halkitis et al., 2009; Heermann, Wiggins, & Rutter, 2007; Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, & Quick, 2010; Tan, 2005). However, this literature has typically excluded the faith experiences of transgender people; individuals who identify their gender differently from the sex they were assigned at birth as compared to cisgender people, or people whose gender identity and assigned sex is congruent. Research shows that religion and spirituality play a major role in the lives of cisgender people by creating supports, reducing stressors, and fostering inner peace (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; French & Joseph, 1999). Therefore, we believe that understanding how transgender people experience personal faith, or beliefs and trust in God or a higher power, and faith communities are relevant to transgender peoples’ well-being. Research clearly demonstrates that transgender people in the U.S. encounter significant ignorance and discrimination in many aspects of their lives, including family rejection, housing, and employment discrimination, and access to healthcare (Grant et al., 2011). Unfortunately, many Christian faith communities perpetuate discriminatory stances, leaving transgender people without a spiritual home (Bockting & Cesaretti, 2001). Findings from 27,715 participants in the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey indicated that nearly one in five (19%) of respondents who had ever been part of a spiritual or religious community left due to rejection and 39% left out of fear of being rejected because they were transgender (James...
et al., 2016). Discrimination and negative responses toward diverse gender identities from members of religious communities contribute to weakened ties to formal religious institutions (Bockting, Knudson, & Goldberg, 2006). Further, leaving transgender people without a welcoming place of worship can contribute to the rejection of religion altogether (Lease, Home, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005).

Some Christian faith communities are intentionally inclusive and have established lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) welcoming policies and public statements (National LGBTQ Task Force, 2016). Many of these organizations have addressed same gender marriage explicitly and include transgender-inclusive language; however, the extent to how transgender inclusive they are in practice is in need of further study. Although not an exhaustive list, LGBTQ inclusive dominations and organizations include: Unitarian Universalist, Metropolitan Community Church, United Church of Christ, Lutheran Reconciling in Christ, United Methodists Reconciling Ministries, Episcopal Church Integrity USA, Catholic Dignity USA, The Evangelical Network, and More Light Presbyterian. Further, events such as the annual Why Christian Conference (www.whychristian.net) curated by evangelical blogger and author Rachel Held Evans and Lutheran pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Weber has included transgender Christian speakers and created a space for transgender inclusion. Although there has been a cultural shift regarding transgender acceptance and inclusion in U.S. Christian communities, many denominations maintain discriminatory stances. Yet, even when LGBTQ people are not accepted in faith communities, those belief systems remain important (Wilcox, 2002). Despite barriers, the need for a spiritually fulfilling life has prompted some transgender people to seek inclusive faith communities, as indicated by developing resources to help congregations be transgender inclusive (e.g. National LGBTQ Task Force).

Although most therapists believe religion and spirituality are important to therapy, therapists are often not trained in how to approach spiritual topics with clients. In fact, although clinicians and couple and family therapy faculty claim that spirituality is important to them personally and professionally (Grams, Carlson, & McGeorge, 2007), many therapists are uncomfortable or unsure about how to talk with clients about spirituality and religion (Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, & Killmer, 2002; Haug, 1998). Moreover, research has highlighted a need to better integrate spirituality into clinical practice (Carlson, McGeorge, & Anderson, 2011). Additionally, couple and family therapists receive little to no training on gender identity outside a pathological context (Lev, 2004). For example, the Commission on Accreditation for Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE) suggests that programs offer course content that meet the Marriage and Family Therapy
Core Competencies (2004), which includes clinical assessment and diagnosis. This course covers the DSM diagnostic criteria; therefore, many students have historically been exposed to Gender Identity Disorder and Gender Dysphoria. Yet, COAMFTE accreditation educational outcomes require understanding cultural diversity which is not clearly defined and do not require material that specifically includes information about gender identity or affirms diverse gender identities.

While the transgender community has become more visible in the past decade, research has only begun to explore transgender identity outside of a pathological and medical context (Bockting & Cesaretti, 2001; Kolakowski, 1997). As more transgender people live openly, positive depictions demonstrate healthy, functioning members of society who deserve a fulfilling quality of life. Couple and family therapist who are able to address both spirituality and gender identity can provide opportunities for personal and relational growth. This study explores transgender peoples’ experiences with religion, which was guided by the following research questions: (1) how do transgender people experience their faith? (2) How do transgender people interpret the influence of religious faith on cisgender people’s views of them?

**Conceptual framework**

Phenomenology is an approach that explores, through personal perspectives, participants’ lived experiences of their world (Patton, 2002). The researcher assembles information through inductive methods, in this case interviews, and presents it from the participant’s viewpoint (Creswell, 1998). We approach phenomenology as interpretive inquiry (Dahl & Boss, 2005) where we interpret the meaning of participants’ lived experience as influenced by a broad cultural and political context. Thus, it is important that we situate our positionality. The first author identifies as a cisgender, queer woman from a middle-class background. She is a faculty member in a Couple and Family Therapy graduate training program, and her research and clinical interests focus on transgender inclusion. She conceptualized this project, invited participants, conducted interviews, and led the analysis. The second author identifies as a queer, transgender man from a middle-class background. He graduated from a Couple and Family Therapy graduate program, and currently works for a local government agency supporting homeless populations. For this project, he transcribed several of the interviews, and coded and analyzed the data under the guidance of the first author. The third author is a scholar-practitioner-activist faculty member at a diverse, Urban Research University in the northeast, and identifies as a cisgender, queer white man from a rural, southern, and middle-class
background. Although his queer identification provides some amount of broad, emic insight into the project, and its population of interest, his role in this project was positioned to infuse a more etic perspective. The phenomenological approach in this study was informed by a queer feminist framework (van Eeden-Moorefield, Martell, Williams, & Preston, 2011; Weed & Schor, 1997), which seeks to deconstruct normative definitions of “real” men and women (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). We exist in a culture that privileges Christianity and is also organized around gender, thus a queer-feminist framework allows us to queer the process of religiosity by challenging tradition ideals of gender and sexuality within a religious context. This guides all aspects of this study due to the marginalization transgender people face, specifically in regards to experiences with religion.

**Integrating faith beliefs and gender identity**

The majority of studies about the LGBTQ populations’ experiences with religion have focused on gay and lesbian identity integration and religious beliefs, while excluding information about bisexual and transgender people (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Buchanan, Dzleme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Heermann, et al., 2007; Lease, et al., 2005; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2002). Currently, many religious leaders and communities seem to view transgender identity as a variation of gay or lesbian identity, and not separate from sexual orientation, based on Biblical interpretations of sex and gender (i.e. Pope Benedict XVI, 2008, representing Catholicism; Mohler, 2017, representing the Southern Baptist Convention); however, there are significant differences. Gender identity is a person’s internal understanding of their own gender (Landsittel, 2010) whereas sexual orientation is based on a person’s emotional and sexual attraction to one or more genders (Grossman & D’augelli, 2006); all people have both a gender identity and a sexual orientation. Many Christian denominations view gender and sexuality as “tied to faith via the mechanism of sexual morality” (Sullivan-Blum, 2004), which is interpreted in various ways.

Religion refers to an institutional and structured expression of spiritual beliefs (Stander, Piercy, MacKinnon, & Helmeke, 1994). More specifically, religious beliefs help many people make sense of the world, which can have significant implications for the conceptualization of gender in a faithful context. Most traditional religions have not recognized identities other than biological male and female (Bockting & Cesaretti, 2001; Kidd & Witten, 2008; Kolakowski, 1997). For example, the American Religious Identification Survey (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009) did not recognize gender/sex categories other than male and female. Religions have failed to critically examine gender identity, which is a person’s internal understanding of their
own sex and gender (Landsittel, 2010). They tend to conflate gender, which refers to the socially constructed categories of “woman” and “man” based on gender roles, with sex, which is a classification of people as male or female in accordance with anatomy, chromosomes and hormones (Landsittel, 2010), behaviors, and presentation (Dozier, 2005). Most congregations in the United States have been silent on the issue of transgender identity and membership in the church.

It is understandable that many transgender people struggle to incorporate faith beliefs into their lives because religion has been portrayed as incompatible with transgender identity (Buchanan et al., 2001). Similar to gay men and lesbians, transgender people who are involved in traditional religions are sent messages that they are not welcome because their identities and behaviors are sinful (Barret & Barzan, 1996). This leaves transgender people to accept the church’s negative teachings about gender identity and sexuality, reject religious doctrine, or develop a new or modified belief system that is compatible with transgender identity (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Kidd & Witten, 2008). Some transgender people make sense of how gender identity and religious identity can coexist by interpreting scripture passages as affirming transgender identity (Kolakowski, 1997). For example, in the Christian Bible, Matthew 19:11-12 Jesus speaks about accepting the eunuchs, a group of people who were celebrated as they transgressed gender in the Bible.

**Addressing faith beliefs and gender identity in therapy**

Widely held beliefs and cultural norms about gender expectations influence a transgender person’s feelings about themselves and their self-worth (Gagne, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997). For example, Paparella (2013) reflects their experience of questioning both identity and spirituality during puberty, a time when community and acceptance were critical, as coinciding with identity configuration. Therefore, clinicians must recognize that minority stress is a result of ignorance and discrimination and can lead to isolation, low self-esteem, and suicide (Grossman & D’augelli, 2006; Heermann et al., 2007; Landsittel, 2010). Minority stress can also leave transgender people vulnerable to mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression (Bockting, 2009; Murad et al., 2010), and chemical abuse and dependence (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). We believe a person’s sense of their spiritual worth may circumvent the risks associated with minority stress; therefore, clinical competence in addressing these areas is key with transgender populations.

Mental health professionals working with transgender clients who are pursuing transition are often put in the position of gatekeeper, determining
who will and will not move forward with transition procedures (O’Reilly, 2011). The majority of clinicians have not received training to work effectively and inclusively with the transgender population (Lev, 2004), which results in transgender clients serving as educators to their providers (author cite). Clinicians who have training are primarily familiar with the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder, which relies on pathology and fails to provide a liberatory framework to address quality of life issues, such as the role of religion in one’s life. Although Gender Identity Disorder was recently removed from the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), the long-standing belief that transgender people exhibit deviant sexuality continues to influence clinical work. Instead, it is crucial that therapist view transgender people as healthy, happy, functioning, and productive members of society in order to provide inclusive treatment. Given that research has demonstrated the positive effects religion and spirituality has on health and well-being (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; George et al., 2000; Ross, 1990), it is important that therapist address faith with the transgender people they work with.

Methods

Participants

The criteria to participate in the study were to (a) self-identify as transgender; (b) be over the age of 18; and (c) be able to meet for a face-to-face interview. Creswell (1998) suggests interviewing a sample of no more than 10 for a phenomenological study in order to capture the depth of participants’ stories; therefore, seven participants who self-identified as transgender were recruited for this study. The ages of participants ranged from 24 to 57. Three participants identified as female-to-male (FTM), and four identified as male-to-female (MTF). The sample was predominantly white (n = 6), and one participant identified as Latina. Six of the members were living with a partner, including three who were legally married, two of which had older adolescent children living in the home; one participant was divorced and had primary custody of two young children and was the primary caretaker for her aging mother. All of the participants attended at least some college; two participants were enrolled in college courses, one was enrolled as a full-time graduate student, and four reported they had earned graduate or professional degrees. Six of the participants identified as Christian, with three specifying denominations of Catholic or Roman Catholic, one Episcopalian, and one Protestant. One participant did not specify a religious affiliation. While all of the participants indicated that they identified with a religion, religiosity was not a requirement for participation in the larger study, and was not included in the call for
participation. Due to the primary identification with Christian faiths, this article will focus on Christian communities as it is reflected in participant interviews.

Procedure

This project is part of a larger study on transgender people’s personal and relational experiences (Benson, 2013). Purposive and snowball sampling (Patton, 1990) allows for the researcher to ask well-situated people within a specific group who they might recommend the researcher speak, which was utilized to recruit a sample of self-identified transgender participants. The first author provided known transgender advocates and allies with study recruitment materials, and they shared information with potential participants who contacted the first author via phone or email. The first author spoke with each participant on the phone to discuss the study in further detail, review informed consent and confidentiality, and schedule an interview. Interviews took place with (first author) in locations convenient to participants and included a private office and participants’ homes. Semi-structured interview guides included open-ended questions. Examples of questions include: do your spiritual or religious beliefs relate to your gender identity? How does this relate to how you see yourself and how others see you?

Trustworthiness indicates validity and reliability in the data (Guba, 1981; Patton, 2001) and was established by use of member checks, peer debriefing, researcher reflexivity, and use of participant’s direct quotes. For example, once interviews were audio recorded, they were transcribed and sent to participants for feedback to ensure that the interviews accurately captured their experiences and to offer an opportunity for participants to provide feedback. Each participant was assigned a pseudo name in the transcripts to protect their privacy.

Data analysis

Research questions were analyzed through the use of inductive qualitative thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six phases of thematic analysis, which the first and second author used as a guideline: (1) We (first and second author) became familiar with the data by reading and re-reading transcripts in their entirety, and noting ideas; (2) we broke down and clustered all similar data from the entire transcript into initial codes by organizing into meaningful groups; (3) we searched for themes by collating codes into different categories; (4) we reviewed and refined themes by reading the collated extracts for each theme to determine if they formed a
coherent pattern; (5) we defined and named the themes by refining the overall story, and generated clear definitions and names for each theme; and (6) we produced the final report by selecting examples that provided a vivid account of the story the data tells, within and across themes. We used an inductive approach to form categories that reflected frequently reported ideas and experiences in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We determined themes by organizing the data into groups of similar ideas and experiences that reflected religious experiences. To further ensure trustworthiness, the first and second author independently coded transcripts. We eventually produced a list of codes that helped us to identify overall patterns and issues in the data. The codes were given meaningful names that indicated the ideas that support the themes and at subthemes (Creswell, 1998). After all, coding completed, the third author reviewed themes and subthemes.

**Findings and discussion**

This study explored transgender people experiences of faith and how they interpret the influence of religious faith on cisgender people’s views of them. The following section is organized by research question, themes, and subthemes, followed by discussion.

**Experiencing faith**

Our first interest was to understand how transgender people experience faith. More specifically, we wanted to examine how transgender people conceptualize their relationship with a higher power. Although my (first author) intention was not for research questions to directly ask about God, participants frequently spoke about their beliefs about and relationship with God, and specifically their Christian faith. Analysis of relevant data suggested the dominant theme: I am part of God’s plan: God doesn’t make mistakes, which includes subtheme 1: Child of God, and subtheme 2: Gender is a human construct.

**I am a part of God’s Plan: God doesn’t make mistakes**

The first theme highlighted how participants comprehend God’s view of them. The majority of participants believes that they were intentionally made transgender by God, and therefore, are not “mistakes” as some of the dogma they had been exposed to suggest. Rather they are created as a part of God’s plan. Donna stated, “I have come to accept my being transgender as part of God’s plan for my life.” She believes that God had a specific reason for creating her as transgender, and she has faith in God’s plan for her.
**Child of God**

Participants addressed their relationship with God as similar to parent-child relationship which exhibits unconditional love. Participants describe God’s love and acceptance of transgender people, like that of a parent. More specifically, they stated they are “God’s child.” For example, Amy, a 57-year-old transwoman stated:

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

Donna, a 46-year-old transwoman described God as being her divine parent who loves her unconditionally.

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

Amy found strength from believing that being transgender was what God intended for her life. She cautioned that believing she was made to be anything other than transgender, or trying to be anything other than her authentic self, is going directly against what God wants for her life. She shared this sentiment, saying:

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

**Gender is a human construct**

Participants believed that gender categories are too narrow for God whose focus is love and justice. They stated that God is more interested in what kind of person one is, and if they live their lives according to Jesus’s teachings, rather than the human social rules of adhering to a gender binary. Travis, a 24-year-old engaged transman explained:

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

Amy claimed that in Heaven, there is no gender or other human constructs. She explained that the sex of her physical body does not confine her.
... in the kingdom of heaven, in the kingdom of God, there is not male or female. There’s no marrying. In whatever kind of body that is, I’m fine. This physical body is not all of who I am. Not by a long shot! I’ve already been blessed with personal evidence of that, so if I’m not just this body, then why does it limit me? Why does my mind limit me? It doesn’t. I’m much more than this, and I’m a child of God. And I know this. It’s been brought home to me again and again and again. Enough times that I can believe it.

Furthermore, participants described God as being more concerned with their spiritual characteristics, than with their physical bodies.

Reconciling faith and gender identity

Although several reported negative experiences with faith communities at some point due to their gender identity, a connection with a higher power helped participants to reconcile their religious beliefs with their gender identity. Our findings indicate that some participants in this study used prayer, reading the Bible, and attending welcoming churches as ways of coping with and understanding their identity. For example, Donna talked about the struggle she encountered when coming to terms with the plan God had for her life as a transgender person. She stated:

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

Travis, who identifies as a devout Catholic, described that God’s love and acceptance was not only comforting, but affirming. He stated that:

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

Travis gained strength through prayer with his ability to converse with God about his gender identity. Rather than feel as though he is not worthy as many mainstream Christian denominations may claim, he was able to draw on his faith in God for support, and felt a sense of affirmation from God. Many participants described having to override the messages they have received from others, such as church and family, and focus on what they feel is God’s plan for them.
**Biblical scripture**

Although we did not ask participants directly about scripture, several referenced Bible passages as they explained their process of reconciling their gender identity with their religious beliefs. Sally described that through the process of coming to understand God’s plan for her life, she became a more devoted Christian in knowing that Jesus would spend time with her despite her marginalization, and explained:

> I understand more about what it meant to be an outcast in society. And in my own theology that, that is who Jesus spent time with. He didn’t go to the religious people. He went to the people that nobody else cared about, no one else would have. They weren’t good enough for the established religion. That was who Jesus chose to spend his time with… And that’s very, very comforting to me.

Sally drew directly from the Bible to explain that self-hatred would be a violation of God’s will for her. She stated:

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

Donna also described that God has love for all things created by God. She emphasized that all people are valuable and should live without judging others when she stated the following scripture from Matthew 7:1:

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

Travis described how he found scripture helpful when considering how to respond to anyone at church who might question is transition when he stated:

> If anybody comes up to me I’m gonna just let them know my Catholic education. Catholic is including all... if you were a real Catholic, you’d be inviting prostitutes, transsexuals, and all these people to sit at the head of your table.

This reasoning is well-founded in the Bible, as the scripture contains many stories where Jesus showed compassion to those considered outcasts in society. Travis’ statement echoed the belief shared by most participants that Jesus and God are benevolent entities that view them with love and understanding. Participants described finding strength from and being comforted by scriptures in the Bible that portrayed Jesus as being an ally to those who were outcasts in society, or scriptures that described God’s creations as flawless. Another common response in the theme was to focus on God’s message, instead of what other people thought of their identity.
Discussion

Participants held a tension between their beliefs and dominant cultural messages about gender and scripture. Dominant discourse regarding gender reinforces rigid gender norms and binary gender categories, reinforced by religious messages about gender, while discouraging and further minimizing identities that do not fit that discourse. They challenged the cultural belief that gender is clear cut, innate, and unchangeable with biblical scripture they found to be gender inclusive. Although holy scriptures are open to interpretation, these passages are among several that serve as affirmations for those who believe they were created as spiritual beings and as transgender by God (Phillips & Stewart, 2008). Wilcox (2002, p.506) found that some LGBTQ people view their identity as “a sacred gift from God…something not just to be endured, but to be celebrated.” Others have determined that transgender identity brings them closer to God because both display a “duality of spirit” (Sullivan-Blum, 2004). In a personal essay, Moore (2004) suggested that transgender people are inherent, intensely spiritual beings because they transcend their physical form.

Perceived influence of faith beliefs on cisgender people’s treatment of transgender people

Although participants described feeling at peace due to the belief that their being transgender is a part of God’s plan, much of the conflict they experienced came from cisgender people. They reported experiences with cisgender people who make assumptions about transgender faith by questioning the compatibility between Christian religious beliefs and transgender identity. One dominant theme emerged in the data: church and faith communities, which include three subthemes: (1) acceptance: they try really hard to let us know we are welcome; (2) rejection: the box they keep their God in is too small; (3) confusion: conflating sexual orientation and gender identity.

Church and faith communities

When asked about their perspectives regarding how they believe cisgender people think about and treat them, participants focused on church and faith communities. Finding a welcoming church community was important to participants, and attending multiple churches was common. Participants view their ideal faith community as being a place of love and acceptance, where they would not experience judgment or rejection. Travis described his feelings about how others at church should receive him, stating, “I’ve always felt like my church was a place where…people wouldn’t judge
me… If they were really, truly Christians… it would just be a place of love and acceptance.” Travis explained that he and his fiancé were actively searching for welcoming church communities and stated: “The unique thing about us is we don’t go to the same church every single Sunday because we haven’t found the church that we feel quite at home yet for various reasons.”

**Acceptance: they try really hard to let us know we are welcome**

One factor that was important to participants when finding a supportive church encouragement to express their gender as it reflects their identity. Suzanne stated, “Last year I went to the first service I ever went to as Suzanne. And it was wonderful to be able to worship with all of me.” Suzanne also talked about being encouraged by a pastor to come dressed as female to church. She described the pastor’s insistence:

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

Suzanne’s experiences are in line with the position of open and affirmative churches or reconciling ministries which take a stand as LGBTQ-inclusive faith communities that welcome all people into the full life of the church. This process involves the church taking a public and firm stand to welcome those who have experienced exclusion, persecution, or excommunication from churches who maintain anti-LGBTQ stances.

Travis shared experiences where church members explicitly welcomed him, and made him aware that he was wanted in the church community. Travis describes a priest who had been a strong supporter and advocate for him, and was planning on marrying him and his fiancé. Travis explains coming out to the priest and the response he received:

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

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

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

And goes on to recount that others have told him, You have a lovely singing voice… So a lot… some… some people will do, try really hard to let us know we are welcome which is nice.
Rejection: the box they keep their God in is too small

Participants experienced rejection from their faith communities; all but one participant shared painful stories of discrimination and instances they felt like outcasts. Suzanne described leaving her denomination entirely, stating, “I no longer consider myself to be a Southern Baptist because they… I can’t support a group of people who won’t support me.” Travis described his desire to one day become a priest. When he shared his dream with his priest, the priest responded using his given name, “You know Jennifer, you might have to move to another church to do that.” While he experienced this individual priest as accepting, this response reflects the position of the Catholic Church as being unwelcoming of transgender identity. We went on to discuss the underlying feeling of rejection by church members who did not directly address their disapproval by stating, “That’s the hard thing… maybe they just stopped talking to me and I didn’t realize that was the reason.”

Several participants experienced clear discriminatory reactions after revealing their gender identity, reinforcing the notion that faith is tied to sexual morality. Suzanne talked about feeling demonized by, saying:

I’m the devil incarnate because I wear women’s clothes. So, I got to be doing something that is not right. They’re not sure exactly what that might be but I must somehow be subversive for family values.

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

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

Several participants cited sections of the Bible that are used to justify exclusion of transgender people. Amy talked about rejection stemming from how people interpret the Bible. She says,

Unfortunately, many people are stuck with that view of scripture. And it’s sad because it limits them. It limits their view of the world. It limits their view of God. The box they keep their God in is too small.

Transgender people who are involved in traditional religions are often sent messages that they are not welcome because their identities are morally wrong (Barret & Barzan, 1996). Participants were left to accept their current church’s teachings about gender identity, reject the teachings, or develop a new or modified set of beliefs, as previously found by Kidd and Witten (2008). Several participants stated that they were actively searching for faith communities because their current faith community was not supportive of their identity. These participants rejected the discriminatory teachings of their churches, and sought to find inclusive churches.
Because gender norms are acted out and reinforced constantly, religious communities often prescribe a “correct” way to perform binary. At times, transgender people in this study internalized negative messages and subscribe to the cultural beliefs that because they are stepping outside of expected gender roles, they must be doing something wrong or something God would not approve of. This led some of them to question if there was a place for them in the realm of religion. For someone who views religion as a very important part of their life, these feelings of exclusion and shame can be detrimental.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On the other hand, some have experienced being labeled as gay because they do “pass”. Amy was taken for a lesbian because she looked like a woman, and when she was with her partner, they appeared to be a lesbian couple. Amy described her experience with being asked not to come to church dressed as a female and then as a male. She says:

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

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

It seems that most participants faced conflation of sexual orientation and gender identity in their faith community. Many religious leaders and church community members view transgender identity as a variation of gay or lesbian identity (Southern Baptist Convention, 2008; Pope Benedict XVI, 2008). Several of the participants discussed their experiences at church where members assumed they were gay, highlighting the need for further education about gender identity.

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

Since gender identity and sexual orientation are often conflated, people in church may not understand the difference between being transgender and being LGB. Depending on the church, that could make the difference between whether or not a transgender person is accepted. Stepping outside of gender norms in churches that are not welcoming toward LGBTQ individuals seemed to cause backlash from other members, and resulted in transgender members feeling unwelcome.

**Polarization: can you be a transgender Christian**

This final theme explores the tensions that transgender people experience in regards to dominant discourse surrounding who cisgender Christian people assume embrace faith. As some mainstream denominations view sexual orientation and gender diversity to be choices against God, they view transgender Christianity as incompatible, which emerged during interviews with participants. Although participants were concerned about hostility in this regard, they also found that as they took risks and sought out faith communities, congregation members were “curious,” indicating that people are unsure about, but are also open to learn more about how transgender identity and religion co-exist. Travis describes being worried that his Christianity will be questioned because of his gender identity. He explains revealing his identity to a Catholic friend:

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

Travis seemed to anticipate that others would reject the two identities that are most important to him – his identity as transgender and his identity as a Catholic. He admits that “a lot of people are very surprised when I tell them I’m Christian… much less when I tell them I’m Catholic.” He describes that,

> It (revealing transgender identity) usually just increases their curiosity like, how do you reconcile the two?

**Discussion**

The participants discussed that members of their church often conveyed surprise and confusion when they revealed their transgender identity. At some churches, surprise and confusion were mixed with unwelcoming or even hostile reactions from others. For example, some participants describe
a church climate where they were required to be in line with expected gender roles, or they were not welcome in the church. If they did not conform, they were viewed as deviant or immoral. This has broader implications because it encourages justification of heterosexism and transphobia, which leads transgender people to feel uncomfortable about attending and worshiping in those churches. For transgender people who believe spirituality is an important part of their lives, not being able to find an accepting place of worship could affect their quality of life. Not having a place of worship could affect the many positive benefits that church attendance has been shown to have. Not all the participants had negative experiences at church. The participants also described their experiences at churches that had an affirming stance. At these churches, they felt love and acceptance from church members. This is important because positive experiences promote participation in church, which in turn increases quality of life by reducing stress, establishing emotional support systems, creating community, and increasing feelings of peace (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; French & Joseph, 1999; Koenig, 1997). Societal norms, gender roles, and social policies that affect the transgender community could be significantly more welcoming if religious communities hold a less rigid view of gender and embrace gender diversity.

**Implications and limitations**

**Clinical implications**

For therapists to help families with these complex issues, they first need to have an understanding of both gender identity and religion. Families often struggle when a member reveals that they are transgender due to lack of information or misinformation about transgender people (Ryan, Huebner, & Diaz, 2009), which may be reinforced by organizations that claim to be helpful regarding these concerns (Focus on the Family, 2008). Families may be coping with the loss of the member’s pre-transition gender assignment, while simultaneously adjusting to the physical and social transition of the family member (Lesser, 1999). Organizations that are anti-LGBTQ, such as Focus on the Family, reinforce the idea that transgender people are deviating from God’s divine plan, citing Bible verses such as Genesis 1:27 and Mark 10:6 which states that, “God created them male and female” (Focus on the Family, 2008). These messages from faith-based organizations influence how families view gender identity. Therefore, therapists be aware that transgender clients and their loved ones may have experienced religious abuse (Super & Jacobson, 2011), and be prepared to engage in religious healing conversations.
Religion is significant in the lives of most people, but there is little research about how faith is experienced by clients and how to incorporate clients’ spirituality into therapy sessions (Knox, Catlin, Casper, & Schlosser, 2005). To address therapist’s discomfort discussion spirituality and religion Carlson et al. (2002) and McGeorge, Carlson, and Toomey (2014) suggest that family therapy training that integrates spirituality and religion helps students to therapists develop congruence between their spiritual and/or religious beliefs and the practice of LGBTQ inclusive therapy. Further, clients spiritual and religious beliefs can be used as a resource with transgender clients (McGeorge et al., 2014), which is supported by the findings of this study. For example, Yarhouse and Carr (2012) suggest transgender Christian clients may benefit from the integration of prayer, sacred texts, use of religious resources, and the exploration of the image of God.

Including spirituality and religion in family, therapy specifically teaches trainees about the importance of faith in the lives of LGBTQ people, as well as the harms from experiences with non-affirmative faith communities (McGeorge et al., 2014). Integrating clinical frameworks regarding faith (Bozard & Sanders, 2011; Haug, 1998), awareness of experiences as reflected in this study, and gender inclusive therapy (author cite) can positively inform clinical practice with transgender people and their loved ones. For example, Haug (1998) suggest three primary stages to become a spiritually literate therapist which include 1) teachers and supervisors personal work to increase clarity about their faith beliefs; 2) inclusion of assignments that foster students self-awareness of faith in their own lives and its impact on therapy, and 3) supervisors’ intentional inquiry about faith as a resource in clinical case supervision. Haug’s (1998) stages closely resemble similar suggestions for LGBTQ inclusive therapy. For example, gender inclusive therapy involves training that involved learning about gender identity, encourages self-awareness of heteronormativity and cisgender privilege, exploration of how gender privilege impacts therapy, and intentional statements about inclusion of inclusive stances in supervision and clinical work (McGeorge & Carlson, 2009).

Limitations and implications for future research

One limitation was that six of the seven participants identified as Christian. This gives us a limited view of the experiences transgender people have with diverse faiths, since no other faiths were discussed. Future studies could include a larger sample that incorporates a wider range of religions and faith beliefs. As race and ethnicity and religion create other unique experiences, future research should focus on a more diverse sample, featuring many genders, socioeconomic statuses, ages, races/ethnicities, and faiths.
There are several suggestions for future research based on the findings of this study, particularly further exploration about how transgender people are able to develop a sense of self-acceptance while coming to terms with and integrating faith beliefs. Future research should further explore participants’ direct experiences with church and faith communities, and how that influences their experience of religion. For example, some participants described leaving their church or visiting multiple churches to try to find a place where they would be a welcome member. Additionally, this study was limited to question about interactions with faith communities, and we suggest that future research explores other religious practices and how communities influence faith experiences. For example, research could focus on the role of prayer and readings of religious texts in reconciling their faith with gender identity. We recognize that the demographic questionnaires offered limited options to indicate gender identity, which in hindsight should have been open-ended to allow participants the ability to define their gender for themselves. We realize that providing predetermined categories to indicate gender limits the complexity of people’s gender identity and their ability to claim their identity in their own words.

Conclusions

This research will be beneficial for therapists working with a couple or family that has a transgender member and families that feel discontent due to religious beliefs. It appears that the people in this study drew on God for support and reassurance. The finding supports literature that states gender identity and religious identity can coexist by interpreting Bible scriptures as affirming transgender identity (Kolakowski, 1997). Participants viewed God as having a specific plan for their lives. All of the participants challenged the position that gender is the core of a person’s spiritual being. They experienced that their physical form and spiritual form were separate identities and that God only cared about the spiritual characteristics of a person. Some religions, like Catholicism, are very strict about the roles of men and women. For example, Travis discussed that Catholicism is very clear that only men are allowed to be priests. The Catholic Church’s position is that women, while being spiritually equal to men, have an inferior physical form that is incapable of receiving sacrament (Ross, 2005). Furthermore, Ross (p. 5) goes on to state that “sexuality (gender) has ontological significance—that is sexuality is at the core of one’s being. Christ’s maleness has an ontological character, which priests must share.” Travis challenged and questioned this stance when he expressed desire to become a priest. The response from his priest was that he would need to
switch churches if he wanted to pursue that, indicating that it would not be a possibility for a transgender or a female-bodied person.

This study explored not only how transgender people experience religion internally, but also how they think others view them based on their (others’) spiritual beliefs. The literature indicated that negative responses and discrimination against transgender people contributes to cut off from their religious institutions (Bockting et al., 2006; Lease et al., 2005). Participants in this study received many social messages from other people that they were going against God’s plan, subversive to family values, and that their identity is sinful or something to be ashamed of. This reflects the beliefs the larger culture has about transgender identity and gender in general. People who step outside of expected gender roles are questioned and made to feel as if they are doing something wrong or immoral. Thus, transgender identities are associated with the sacrilegious. However, it seems that negative responses prompted participants in this study to seek out faith inclusive communities. Participants’ responses indicated that religious faith was important to them, and others would not influence them to give up their beliefs or change the way they worshipped. The participants in this study seemed to accomplish something unique in that they were able to come to terms with their religious and spiritual identities, instead of rejecting that part of themselves. All participants maintained strong beliefs even when faced with opposition and marginalization. Participants appeared to tailor their belief systems to fit their specific faith needs and values, instead of accepting or internalizing discriminatory religious beliefs, which helped them to maintain a strong connection to a higher power.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**References**


