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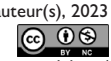

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Complicit silence, fluid identities and a shift to personalized faith: LGBTQ+ experiences in conservative Christian communities

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Abstract: Using in-depth interviews with six participants, this qualitative project examines LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and others) experiences in conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta, Canada, through the lens of queer theory. The research questions guiding this project are: (1) Does there continue to be a code of silence surrounding LGBTQ+ identities within conservative Christian communities? (2) How do LGBTQ+ individuals deal with the perceived incompatibility between their religion and their sexuality and/or gender? (3) How do LGBTQ+ individuals understand their LGBTQ+ identity when situated within a traditionally heteronormative religious community? The findings indicate that the participants view the silence surrounding LGBTQ+ issues and the subsequent lack of formal support for LGBTQ+ individuals as complicit in perpetuating rhetoric that LGBTQ+ identities are abnormal, sinful and shameful. All of the participants shifted to a more personalized faith and view Christianity as a resource instead of a requirement, and the majority of the participants frame both their gender/sexual identity and religious identity as fluid and liminal, subject to change depending on the context.

Résumé : Grâce à des entretiens approfondis avec six participants, ce projet qualitatif examine les expériences LGBTQ+ (lesbiennes, gays, bisexuels, transgenres, queers et autres) dans les communautés chrétiennes conservatrices de Colombie-Britannique et d'Alberta, au Canada, à travers le prisme de la théorie queer. Les questions de recherche guidant ce projet sont les suivantes : (1) Existe-t-il toujours un code du silence entourant les identités LGBTQ+ au sein des communautés chrétiennes conservatrices ? (2) Comment les personnes LGBTQ+ gèrent-elles l'incompatibilité perçue entre leur religion et leur sexualité et/ou leur genre ? (3) Comment

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les personnes LGBTQ+ comprennent-elles leur identité LGBTQ+ lorsqu'elles se trouvent dans une communauté religieuse traditionnellement hétéronormative ? Les résultats indiquent que les participants considèrent que le silence qui entoure les questions LGBTQ+ et le manque subséquent de soutien officiel aux personnes LGBTQ+ sont complices de la perpétuation de la rhétorique selon laquelle les identités LGBTQ+ sont anormales, pécheresses et honteuses. Tous les participants sont passés à une foi plus personnalisée et considèrent le christianisme comme une ressource et non comme une obligation. La majorité des participants considèrent leur identité de genre/sexuelle et leur identité religieuse comme fluides et liminales, susceptibles de changer en fonction du contexte.

Keywords
Christianity, gender, sexuality, queer theory, qualitative methods, LGBTQ+

Mots clés
Christianisme, genre, sexualité, théorie queer, méthodes qualitatives, LGBTQ+

Introduction

This qualitative project examines LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and others) experiences in conservative Christian communities, specifically focusing on how these experiences influence the formation and understanding of LGBTQ+ individuals' sexual, gender and religious identities. Christian communities are understood here as comprising a variety of areas in an individual's life, often including family, friend, church and school contexts. Examining and understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals from conservative Christian communities continues to be a pressing issue contemporarily. Research on religious contexts suggests that even people who are not personally religious may be influenced by the religious culture in which they live (Adamczyk and Pitt, 2009: 339). O'Brien (2004) argues that religion matters, and is important to consider for three reasons: as a significant basis for self-meaning and understanding; as a major socio-historical force that reflects the variations in cultural dominance and political climates; and as a basis for determining inclusion and exclusion across families, communities, networks and organizations. Sexual-minority religiosity has been found to serve as both a developmental asset and a source of risk for sexual-minority individuals (Dahl and Galliher, 2012: 1612), demonstrating a clear need to examine this topic in more depth to better understand these complex relationships between LGBTQ+ individuals, their religions and their religious communities. In this research, I try to make sense of the diverse specificity of lived experience as it impacts the history of individuals, cultures and societies in flux (Hammack, 2005).

There is a growing recognition in North American society that more needs to be done to support LGBTQ+ individuals in religious contexts (Wright-Maley et al., 2016). Significant qualitative studies that focus on LGBTQ+ experiences in religious contexts do exist; however, these studies largely focus on the religious climate present within the USA. Canadian studies on this topic are few and far between, and no longer reflect the current social and religious climate. To my knowledge, only three studies exist that focus

on LGBTQ+ identities in Christian communities in Canada: one conducted by Beagan and Hattie (2015) situated on the east coast of Canada examining LGBTQ experiences with religion and spirituality; one conducted by Dueck (2012) situated in Manitoba, which addresses lesbian, gay and queer perspectives on being Mennonite (both an ethnic group and Christian denomination); and, more recently, Young and Shipley's (2020) mixed-methods study, which examines religious, gender and sexual identities among youth in Canada. The current study addresses this gap in the research by presenting the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in conservative Christian communities on the west coast of Canada, specifically within the provinces of British Columbia and Alberta.

'Identity' in this study includes the individual and personal sense of who someone feels they are, as well as public manifestations of this in roles and social categories (Lawler, 2015). This study focuses on two main aspects of identity: sexual/gender identity and religious identity. In this project, these identities are subjectively defined and understood by each participant, rather than being defined by an objective or predetermined category. Sexual/gender identity is typically defined as how individuals situate themselves within known sexual and gender categories (Levy, 2008: 22). For the purposes of this study, I will interchangeably be using the terms 'LGBTQ+' and 'non-normative gender/sexuality' to refer to any individual who does not identify as both heterosexual and cisgender. The different experiences of individuals holding these various identities are complex and fluid, and these complexities are explored throughout this article; however, it is necessary to provide a general definition here in order to specify on whom this research is focusing, and emphasize how these particular identities often contrast with the assumed norms of the communities being examined.

Religious identity can also be a complex and fluid category for individuals. Although I asked the participants to describe their current religious identity, I intentionally did not provide them with a definition for the term in order to allow their own subjective views on religion and religious identity to shine through more clearly in the interviews. Therefore, instead of providing a limiting definition of the term, I will just say that religious identity is understood differently for each individual and is often seen as fluid and open to change. In this project, I also chose to focus on conservative Christian communities as a whole, instead of a specific aspect of Christian community such as church, family or school, in order to better understand the intersections of these various aspects of community. It has been noted by Kilmer (2014: 283) that religious identity can no longer be understood as linear and formed primarily within the church; instead, it can be characterized as a complex, continual formation throughout an individual's life. Religious identity intersects with multiple categories and therefore requires intersectional dialogue to accurately address areas of dissonance (Kilmer, 2014: 283).

This project uses queer theory to address gaps in the literature on LGBTQ+ experiences in conservative Christian communities. In order to understand how LGBTQ+ people experience non-normative genders and sexualities within the context of conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta, the research questions guiding this study are: (1) Does there continue to be a code of silence surrounding LGBTQ+ identities within conservative Christian communities? (2) How do LGBTQ+ individuals deal with the perceived incompatibility between their religion and their sexuality and/or gender? (3) How do LGBTQ+ individuals understand their LGBTQ+ identity when

situated within a traditionally heteronormative religious community? I argue that the silence around LGBTQ+ topics and the lack of formal support for LGBTQ+ individuals in these communities is complicit in perpetuating rhetoric that LGBTQ+ identities are abnormal, sinful and shameful. All of the participants have shifted to a more personalized and individualized version of their religion, and view Christianity as a potential resource instead of a requirement in their lives. Additionally, the majority of the participants framed both their gender/sexual identity and their religious identity in fluid and liminal terms, demonstrating an openness to change depending on the context.

Literature review: heteronormativity, codes of silence and conflict

Previous research emphasizes the presence of institutionalized heteronormativity within Christian communities, resulting in a culture of heterosexism. Heterosexism is defined as an ideological system that denies, denigrates and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relationship or community (Herek, 1990: 316). Heteronormativity is thus understood as the fundamental, unexamined and unquestioned normative standard which grounds discussions about sexuality, and by which all else is judged and evaluated. In many Christian communities, cisgender heterosexual identification and curtailed sexual practices are central features of belonging, which often celebrate uniformity rather than diversity (Dueck, 2012). Institutional religion has historically been used as a mechanism for heterosexist intolerance and oppression towards those with non-normative genders and sexualities (Grozelle, 2017; Levy, 2008). Heteronormativity has thus remained the fundamental, unexamined norm that is grounding most discussions on sexuality within these communities (Dueck, 2012). Individual religiosity continues to be a strong and persistent predictor of negative attitudes towards same-sex sexuality specifically and non-normative genders and sexualities more broadly, shaping the behaviour and well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals (Wilkinson and Pearson, 2013: 181). Previous literature indicates that the message from a majority of Christian institutions has often been a message of condemnation towards non-normative identities.

A common theme in the current literature on LGBTQ+ experiences in Christian communities is that there has been what I refer to in this context as a ‘code of silence’ surrounding the acknowledgement and discussion of LGBTQ+ identities in these communities. This can be characterized as the formal discourses that systematically eliminate the plethora of desires, sexual practices, bodies and genders present in these communities, which in turn pathologizes, limits and ‘others’ that which contests the unspoken and unexamined heterosexual norm (Dueck, 2012). When LGBTQ+ identities remain hidden or ignored, a heterosexist culture can continue to thrive and remain unchallenged (Griffin and Ouellett, 2003). Additionally, when LGBTQ+ individuals are afraid to disclose their LGBTQ+ status, the community is only aware of heterosexually identified individuals, which in turn perpetuates further silence on these topics and enforces a culture of institutional heteronormativity (Craig et al., 2017; Herek, 1990). The silencing of LGBTQ+ individuals and their allies ultimately reinforces the predominance of heteronormativity and gender normativity within these communities, and fuels fears of

disclosure (Craig et al., 2017: 12). This absence of support for LGBTQ+ individuals in religious contexts tends to undermine the qualities of unconditional love, openness and equity often espoused in these communities (Wright-Maley et al., 2016: 189).

Conflict

The role that religious faith plays in individuals' lives can be very important, often providing emotional and social support. It has also traditionally been understood as protective for a variety of psychosocial health outcomes (Dahl and Galliher, 2012: 1611). However, the literature questions the generalizability of these findings to those who identify as LGBTQ+ due to varying Christian denominational teachings on same-sex attractions and sexual behaviour (Dahl and Galliher, 2012: 1611). Doctrines that condemn homosexuality constitute the ideological backdrop against which individuals initially experience their non-normative gender or sexuality (Levy, 2008; O'Brien, 2004). As a result, LGBTQ+ individuals often feel alienated within non-affirming religious organizations, which tend to be rooted in fundamentalism. The assumption that there is an inherent conflict between non-normative sexual/gender identities and religious identities often requires individuals in these situations to repress aspects of their non-normative identities as a response to external norms rather than an internal struggle (Young et al., 2015). This presents a significant predicament for LGBTQ+ individuals in Christian environments: abandoning Christianity may mean losing a sense of meaning, purpose and community, yet remaining means facing the prospect of damnation and community rejection (O'Brien, 2004: 185). For many LGBTQ+ individuals who grew up in Christian communities, religious and sexual/gender identities are both highly personal and deeply rooted, and the experienced conflict can lead to aggravated harms (Joldersma, 2016; Murr, 2013). Those in religious communities are often taught that being LGBTQ+ means the severance of a relationship with their religious communities, though many people are raised in religious social contexts that include family, educational and church systems (Craig et al., 2017: 13). Ultimately, faith development and sexual identity development are intertwined and fluid constructions for many LGBTQ+ individuals in Christian communities (Levy, 2008: 200).

Consequences

Struggling with conflict between religion and sexuality or gender identity, as well as living in an LGBTQ+-adverse environment, can have significant and long-lasting consequences for LGBTQ+ individuals. When LGBTQ+ people find themselves in anti-LGBTQ+ religious contexts, they are at risk of victimization, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, despair, self-loathing, isolation, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, internalized homophobia and transphobia, difficulties in school, feelings of shame, guilt, substance abuse, dysfunctional peer group and family relationships, and attempts to change their gender identity or sexual orientation through reparative therapy or prayer (Beagan and Hattie, 2015; Grozelle, 2017; Joldersma, 2016; Levy, 2008; Moon and Tobin, 2018; Murr, 2013; Quinlivan and Town, 1999; Wright-Maley et al., 2016; Yip, 1998).

Individuals are more likely to act out their prejudices when they consider them to be culturally legitimate and shared by others (O'Brien, 2008: 498). Because most anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes are learned through normal socialization in society, internalized homophobia and transphobia can be particularly insidious stressors (Barnes and Meyer, 2012: 506). A lack of religious affirmation and acceptance can lead to internalized homophobia or transphobia, whereby LGBTQ+ individuals incorporate into their self-concept these negative views about their gender and sexuality (Yip, 1998: 42). These broader teachings that non-normative genders and sexualities are sinful and have no place in Christianity, combined with the underlying assumption that those within these communities are cisgender and heterosexual, can then result in internal tensions for those LGBTQ+ individuals growing up in this culture.

However, the consequences of conflict between one's non-normative gender/sexual identity and one's religious identity are not always negative; previous research shows that there may also be positive consequences related to this conflict. There is evidence that religion and spirituality may also contribute to the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ people. In their interviews with 19 LGBTQ+ adolescents and young adults raised within a Christian religious context in the USA, Dahl and Galliher (2012) found four themes related to positive outcomes: the participants described their own experiences coming out in a religious context as facilitative of their own self-acceptance; they described themselves as more open-minded; they shared that they had incorporated some of their childhood religious values into their current identity; and they discussed positive social experiences and support. Despite disengaging from their childhood religious communities, many of their participants highlighted the way their religious upbringing impacted their value orientation and sense of self (Dahl and Galliher, 2012: 1617). In this way, the participants highlighted their ability to carefully select the values from their religious upbringing that affirmed their identity, suggesting that religiosity may serve as a protective benefit for some sexual and gender minorities who integrate childhood religious values into their overall identity (Dahl and Galliher, 2012: 1615).

LGBTQ+ people comprise an important segment of religious and church life while experiencing challenges around acceptance and inclusion (Harris et al., 2020). Previous literature and academic work on this topic clearly demonstrate that Christian communities are important places for resolving conflict between religious and non-normative sexual/gender identities (Joldersma, 2016: 43). The literature shows that LGBTQ+ individuals in Christian communities have experienced institutional heterosexuality, silence surrounding their identities, conflict between their sexual/gender and religious identities, and both positive and negative consequences of this conflict, with many individuals choosing to maintain their religion despite negative experiences. These apparent contradictions in the literature demonstrate a clear need to further explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within these contexts.

Theoretical framework

Queer theory

This study utilizes queer theory to frame the experiences that LGBTQ+ individuals have in conservative Christian communities. Queer theory insists that gendered and sexual

subjectivities and positionalities are located within religious, cultural, economic, racial, colonial and class contexts (Ioannides, 2014: 126). Queer is, then, a process of problematizing and scrutinizing the genealogy of categories, and throws into focus the inadequacy of binary distinctions as categories that both enable and constrain individuals (Ioannides, 2014: 128). Identity is viewed as fluid, multifaceted, ever-changing, flexible and open-ended (Levy and Edmiston, 2014: 67). Therefore, queer theory moves beyond exploring sexual orientation, gender and religion in isolation and instead considers how religious identity interplays with sexual and gender identity in ways that simultaneously produce a context of empowerment and disempowerment (Siraj, 2014: 200). With its radical focus on difference and subverting the normative, queer theory, by definition, has the responsibility to question deeply the social power accorded to members of dominant groups (Wilcox, 2006: 93).

Queer theorists question the concepts of heterosexuality and homosexuality, as well as the duality and binary implied by these terms (Dueck-Read, 2015: 118). Queer, then, is seen as an identity without an essence – it is necessarily indeterminate, is differently valued in different contexts, and refers to self-identification rather than empirical observations (Jagose, 1996: 96). Queer theory provides a lens by which to examine religion and sexual/gender identity as fluid and intertwined concepts (Levy, 2008: 55). This conception of identity provides an alternative understanding to the essentializing narrative of gender and sexuality that some LGBTQ+ individuals in these communities adopt – one of being 'born this way' (Van Klinken, 2015; Wilcox, 2002). This study, then, moves beyond exploring various identities in isolation, instead considering how religious identity interplays with sexual and gender identity in a way that may simultaneously produce a context of both empowerment and disempowerment (Siraj, 2014: 200).

Sacramental shame and coming out as confession

Coined by Moon and Tobin (2018), 'sacramental shame' refers to the elevation of heteronormativity to the level of the sacred, rendering those who violate it not as persons, but as monsters. Conservative Christian communities that see LGBTQ+ attractions and experiences as sinful end up, often unintentionally, treating shame as a special sacrament just for LGBTQ+ members, requiring that they constantly display this shame as a sign that they have not turned their back on their religion (Moon and Tobin, 2018: 455). In dispensing this shame as a sacrament, non-affirming Christians require constant displays of shame as proof that LGBTQ+ members love God and belong in the community. Sacramental shame, then, is a ritualized, spiritualized form of shame that both grows out of and serves to protect fundamentalist Christian theologies, and, when internalized, prevents LGBTQ+ individuals from embodying their LGBTQ+ identities (Moon and Tobin, 2018: 460). Moon and Tobin (2018: 451) argue that the use of sacramental shame poses as love while also locating the shame in the shamed person's own constant failures of will. This shame, then, becomes an instrument of oppression, as it is dispensed unevenly and unjustly amid social hierarchies (Moon and Tobin, 2018: 452).

Coming out still tends to call into question the validity of one's faith, one's commitment and loyalty to one's community, and even one's very existence (Wilcox, 2003). Anderson (2014: 211) argues that the act of coming out by LGBTQ+ individuals in

religious contexts is perceived by those within the religious community as a public confession of sin and guilt. This framing of coming out as a confession of sin relegates LGBTQ+ individuals who are 'out' to an inferior position within the ideology of God's created order in that cisgender heterosexuals are seen as created more in the image of God than those with non-normative genders and sexualities (Anderson, 2014: 217). This works to coerce LGBTQ+ individuals into avoiding discussing any struggles they may be having for fear of admitting to what is often perceived as an irredeemable sin. Ultimately, cisgender identities and heterosexual desires become the largely uncontested basis for ethical existence in many of these conservative Christian communities (Dueck-Read, 2015: 128).

Methodology

In this study, I utilize queer theory to inform my research and to sensitize myself to particular elements of the participants' experiences, with a focus on not predetermining the meanings of those experiences. Actively checking my own subject position and positionality in relation to the data was essential to allow the data to be presented accurately and to limit the presence of preconceived notions regarding the topic and findings. A way to facilitate this was to use the constant comparative method. Hallberg (2006: 143) explains that the constant comparative method of grounded theory involves every part of the data – including emerging codes, categories, properties and dimensions – being constantly compared with all other parts of the data to explore variations, similarities and differences. The collection and analysis of data in this perspective is a simultaneous process, starting with sampling that seeks to maximize variations in experiences and descriptions by using participants from a variety of backgrounds (Hallberg, 2006: 143). Thus, diversity in this study was sought regarding both Christian denominations and gender or sexuality; the heterogeneity of the participants was hoped for to draw common themes from a variety of experiences.

Sampling and recruitment

As LGBTQ+ identities are often stigmatized within traditional Christian contexts, it was logical to gather participants through snowball sampling, starting with my personal connections. Although I personally knew five of the six participants prior to this study, only information that was provided during the interview with informed consent was used as data. The personal connections contacted for this project are primarily situated in Victoria and in the Fraser Valley in British Columbia, and as such the majority of the participants in this study are from these two areas, although they discussed growing up and living in various areas throughout both British Columbia and Alberta. In order to ensure as diverse a sample as possible in terms of the genders, sexualities and denominations represented in this study, the initial seed participants were heterogeneous. Potential subsequent participants were chosen based on their diversity in relation to the initial wave of participants and whether they consider themselves current members of their conservative Christian communities. In order to participate in this study, the participants had to: not identify as both cisgender and heterosexual; have been part of an evangelical or Protestant

conservative Christian community in Canada for a minimum of six months, and within the last eight years; and be between the ages of 19 and 35.

During the interviews, I asked each of the participants to state their current gender and sexual identity, as well as their current religious identity. The participants used a variety of diverse labels to describe their sexual and gender identities, including bisexual, cisgender, gender-void, gender-queer, gender-fluid, questioning, agender, non-binary, queer, asexual, aromantic, transfeminine, transmasculine and gay. They were also members of a variety of different conservative Christian communities and denominations, including Mennonite Brethren, Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, Mennonite Christian, Pentecostal, Baptist and non-denominational. These conservative Christian communities often comprised the participants' family, church, school and friend groups.

Interviews and analysis

The data for this project was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with six participants who either are currently part of a conservative Christian community or have been within the last eight years. The interviews for this project took place at a time that was convenient and comfortable for the participant and happened over Zoom, a secure video platform, in accordance with the research guidelines at my university in light of COVID-19. Signed consent forms were obtained by email prior to each interview, and the interviews were audio-recorded for transcription purposes. The interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes and utilized an interview guide with open-ended questions and probes to structure the discussion, although the participants were encouraged to speak about whatever they felt was important or relevant to the topic.

The interviews were recorded on my password-protected computer, and I transcribed them verbatim while excluding any identifying characteristics. Member-checking was utilized at this stage; the transcripts were returned to the participants so they could confirm the validity and accuracy of my transcription of their words and the information provided, and add or remove any details if necessary (Creswell and Miller, 2000: 127). The transcripts were analysed with NVivo software using thematic analysis to identify codes, themes and categories. I engaged with researcher reflexivity throughout the research process, and acknowledge my own subjective views and experiences with this topic that may influence the presentation of the data and findings (Creswell and Miller, 2000: 127). The analysis, which relates to time, culture and context, ultimately reflects both the participants' and the researcher's way of thinking (Hallberg, 2006: 146).

Ethics

Because I conducted interviews with human subjects for this project, I obtained ethics approval from my university's Human Research Ethics Board prior to contacting the participants. This project was approved as minimal risk, with specific precautions taken during the interview process to limit the risks associated with interviewing stigmatized populations about potentially uncomfortable experiences. Additionally, confidentiality was emphasized by assigning the participants pseudonyms in the final article and by removing all identifying characteristics. However, this confidentiality is potentially

limited as my reliance on snowball sampling meant that some of the participants were aware of the identities of other participants. I obtained informed written consent from all of the participants prior to interviewing them.

Findings

For this study, I interviewed six participants regarding their experiences in conservative Christian communities. Payton, Charlie, Quinn, Shay, Kieran and Parker were asked about how they understand their LGBTQ+ identity when situated within Christianity; whether LGBTQ+ individuals or issues were ever discussed in their Christian communities; and how they reconciled the perceived incompatibility between their LGBTQ+ identity and their Christian identity. The participants discussed how the cisgender heterosexual norm presented itself within their different communities; the different responses their communities had to non-normative genders and sexualities; the impacts this had on them personally; and what their current religious identity is. I also asked the participants how their conservative Christian communities could better address and support LGBTQ+ individuals and issues moving forward.

Cisgender heterosexual norm

Throughout the interviews, the participants discussed the different ways norms and expectations were conveyed to them regarding gender and sexuality within their various conservative Christian communities. Ultimately, even if LGBTQ+ identities were not openly addressed or discussed, a cisgender and heterosexual identity was still assumed and enforced both implicitly and explicitly in these communities. In Charlie's words: 'I was told I was a girl and I was told I was straight. Maybe not explicitly but like expected to fit that mould'. Shay similarly said that she was assigned male growing up and that although she was 'not a very straight kid', she did not have any words to describe her identity, and therefore heterosexuality and a cisgender identity were assumed: 'I had zero knowledge that there was anything more to life than cis-heteronormativity'. This cis-heteronormativity was often enforced through religious doctrine. Quinn characterized their community as 'a very heteronormative, gender-normative group. Literally, like, women are to be submissive in the congregation'. Quinn's options as someone perceived as a cis woman were to 'either get married, or devote my life to God'. The explicit enforcement of these norms tended to occur when a perceived transgression of the norms was taking place. Charlie discussed how one of the teenagers who attended the youth group 'really tried to dress in boy clothes at church and they tried to join the boys' activities instead of the girls' activities but they were forced to stay with the girls'.

Additionally, this cisgender heterosexual norm was often enforced implicitly and indirectly. Parker's community was 'very heteronormative' and she noted that a non-normative identity was never even a possibility for her when she was in that community because 'the only thing that I could imagine ever doing was being a wife and a mother'. Part of the cisgender heterosexual norm in these conservative Christian communities was an emphasis on abstinence from sex, which Parker, Payton, Quinn and Kieran discussed in relation to the development of their own sexualities. Parker noted that her high school

required students to sign a code of conduct specifying that students would not engage in 'what they term as "destructive behaviours", so any drugs, alcohol, swearing, any type of sexual diversity, any type of sex'. She characterized this as 'a means to really police the boundaries of their communities'. Inaction by those in the community was also cited by the participants as a way this norm is enforced. Shay referenced inaction when discussing her transition, explaining that her homophobic doctor in the community 'held me back for wearing pants, held me back because I had a girlfriend, and "Shouldn't you have a boyfriend?" And stuff like that'.

Responses to non-normative genders and sexualities

Silence surrounding non-normative genders and sexualities was a prominent theme throughout the interviews. In Kieran's community, he noted that LGBTQ+ individuals and issues 'didn't really get talked about' because no one 'felt like they had a reason to talk about it'. The people around Payton were generally neutral on non-normative identities, but she acknowledged that one 'unfortunately can't be really neutral in a predominantly heteronormative society so it leaned that way'. She concluded that 'silence in that case is a condemnation of any sort of diversity'. Shay similarly said that LGBTQ+ individuals or issues were 'never' discussed in her conservative Christian community: 'We didn't have words for it, we didn't have any knowledge of it . . . It was just, there is black and white, blue and pink'.

When there was not silence surrounding non-normative genders and sexualities in the participants' conservative Christian communities, the response from these communities was often that LGBTQ+ identities were sinful and shameful. The participants saw this perspective being shared explicitly through formal channels in the community, as well as implicitly, often through the rhetoric of 'hate the sin, love the sinner'. Quinn's community discussed LGBTQ+ individuals and issues 'but always negatively or in a "don't do that" sort of way'. Homosexuality was framed as 'a product of imperfection'. Kieran worked at a church for five years and explained that the rhetoric was similar in that the church's approach was 'we'll talk about it once in a while and we'll frame it as empathetically as possible but still end on this note that's like, "Well, you gotta deny it for the rest of your life"'. When discussing her family kicking her out of the house as a teenager because of her non-normative gender identity, Shay touched on the seriousness of this perceived sin when she explained that her family 'somehow see queerness as being more sinful than actively causing harm to other people'.

Charlie, Quinn, Parker, Shay and Payton mentioned explicit hate towards LGBTQ+ individuals and issues in their conservative Christian communities, in which there was little possibility for redemption. Charlie talked about how, in the Mormon church, one of the apostles 'is well known for his violently homophobic and transphobic rhetoric, even for a Mormon', and said that, in their experience, 'most of the other leaders of the church hold homophobic and transphobic views too'. Parker also talked about how her community 'had very, very oppressive and even violent attitudes and behaviours towards anyone that wasn't fitting into that very perfect, heteronormative nuclear-family structure'.

The participants also noted that the norms around discussing non-normative genders and sexualities in their conservative Christian communities have been changing over the

past few decades. When discussing the way LGBTQ+ individuals and issues were talked about, Charlie explained that, when they were younger, the view was that LGBTQ+ people were 'doomed to hell'. However, over the years as 'social norms in North America specifically have become more accepting of queerness, the church and its members have kind of relaxed on the homophobia'. Kieran similarly explained, 'I just caught the tail end of the period of Christian, BC culture, right at my childhood [being gay] was something that got talked about in a little more defined, "this is bad" terms'. But now Kieran feels that the opinion of the majority of these communities is that it is 'such a touchy subject' that the communities do not want to talk about non-normative genders or sexualities anymore. While the lessening of explicit hate over time towards non-normative genders and identities in the participants' conservative Christian communities was acknowledged, the refusal of many of these communities to openly address or embrace LGBTQ+ identities was a point of frustration for many of the participants.

The participants talked about how many people, including themselves, were often just repeating the rhetoric they were taught regarding expectations around gender and sexuality. This was framed by some of the participants as ignorant and a result of living in an insulated community, but not as intentionally hateful; explicit hate towards LGBTQ+ individuals was attributed more to the leadership in the participants' communities and a misreading of scripture. When I asked Payton if a negative view of gay people was present with her peers, she explained that, with her friends in high school, 'some of them were very much I think believing those kinds of things and the rest were, like, "We've been told this, so it must be true"'. Quinn explained that the majority of the people in their community 'are wonderful people, who are genuine, who have just been either manipulated into it or just, like, "This sounds fine" and went with it, or were raised in it'.

Impacts on the participants

The participants described a lack of education, language and exposure regarding non-normative genders and sexualities in their conservative Christian communities. This affected all of the participants' understandings of their own identities, and many of the participants did not understand their LGBTQ+ identity or feel comfortable identifying as LGBTQ+ until they began interacting with LGBTQ+ individuals and issues outside of their Christian communities. Shay explained that 'not having support, not having that knowledge growing up, having to figure everything out so quickly, alone, negatively impacted my life in ways that I am still experiencing today'. Charlie talked extensively about the impact that the lack of language regarding LGBTQ+ identities had on them in their community. Within the community, they always knew that the labels they had been assigned were not accurate, 'but I didn't know how to communicate that I'm not, without knowing how to communicate what I actually am'. Charlie also talked about the lack of exposure in their Christian community, which contributed to their own negative views of LGBTQ+ identities while they were in the community, explaining that 'until I had actually, like, been exposed to the things that trans people actually say about their actual experiences, I didn't know anything else'.

Throughout their conservative Christian communities, the participants noted a lack of formal support for those exploring non-normative genders and sexualities. Charlie

explained that they never sought help in their Christian community because 'I just never saw the merit in it. . . . The views that members held and their behaviour toward sexual and gender diversity just discouraged me from seeking anyone else's opinions on the matter'. Kieran's experience in his community was expressed as follows:

> It felt like I had to do it on my own. Or at least I chose to because I was, like, well no one really seems to like talking about this and I don't want to try and figure this out in this weird awkward environment that has been created. So it just felt like there was no point in doing that.

When I asked the participants if they missed anything about their conservative Christian communities, Shay, Kieran, Payton, Parker and Quinn talked about the importance and subsequent loss of community they experienced on leaving. They valued the sense of community and willingness to support others present in their churches, schools and families, and some of the participants have struggled with finding this same sense of community outside of Christian institutions. Growing up, Kieran experienced his Christian community as 'a place where I made tons of really good friends'. After he accepted that he was gay, his main struggle was with 'how that is going to be in all of these communities'. Quinn saw the people in their community as 'wonderful people who really do care about other people, and I miss that'.

Current religious identity

After discussing the impacts that this rhetoric around non-normative genders and sexualities had on the participants, I asked each of them what their current religious identity is, and whether they would ever consider returning to a Christian community. Interestingly, none of the participants have completely rejected religion and many are open to their religious identity changing in the future. However, it is important to note that this finding may not reflect more general experiences due to this study's small sample size. Charlie explained that although 'I wouldn't put a label on it specifically', they do describe themselves as a religious person: 'I formed my own set of religious beliefs. And so I would describe my beliefs as centred on intentional unconditional love for all living beings and our environment'. Both Payton and Shay currently identify as agnostic. Payton's current stance is that a higher being 'could be out there, and if he is out there, they're out there, they're not what I learned about when I was in Sunday school'. Kieran is not currently attending a church, but explained that while he 'wouldn't say that I'm going through a huge crisis of faith at the moment', he is also 'not in a super-big rush to land on something'.

I also asked the participants if they would ever consider returning to a Christian community in the future. Most of the participants explained that they are wary of Christian communities due to their past experiences within those communities, but returning to a Christian community is not completely out of the question for any of them. Shay 'would consider returning to a Christian community if I found one that I felt was truly Christian'. If she 'encountered a faithful community that was based in compassion, love, the betterment of the people around us, I would totally be on board for that!' Kieran explained that, for the time being, he does want to return to a Christian community:

> [It's] just that at some purely social level I want to see people again. But do I want to go back to a religious community and have them pick apart my identity? No, I don't if that's going to be the case.

Discussion

Silence as complicit

My first research question asks: Does there continue to be a code of silence surrounding LGBTQ+ identities within conservative Christian communities? The results from my study indicate that there does continue to be a code of silence within the participants' conservative Christian communities. These findings are consistent with previous literature on this topic, although my study provides more nuance as to how this phenomenon presents itself in the context of these participants' experiences in British Columbia and Alberta. I argue that this complicit silence and implicit assumption that being LGBTQ+ is sinful frames the act of coming out in the participants' communities as a form of sacramental shame and a public confession of sin and guilt (Anderson, 2014; Moon and Tobin, 2018), and coerces LGBTQ+ individuals to avoid discussing their struggles with anyone. Meanwhile, the participants' conservative Christian communities are able to maintain their 'neutral' stance on the topic and avoid any consequences associated with taking a side.

The silence surrounding non-normative genders and sexualities that was present in Kieran's, Payton's, Shay's and Quinn's Christian communities was understood by the participants as perpetuating cis-heteronormativity in these communities. Similar to Levy and Lo's (2013) findings, strict views of gender identity and gender roles based on the Christian religion did not match up with the experiences of the participants, resulting in an invisibility of any identity outside of the norm. When LGBTQ+ identities are not represented, a cis-heterosexist culture can continue to thrive and remain unchallenged (Griffin and Ouellett, 2003). In line with previous research by Beagan and Hattie (2015: 99), the participants in my study experienced their Christian communities as broadly sex-negative, and this negative view of sex outside of cisgender heterosexual marriage included a negative view of those individuals embodying non-normative genders and sexualities. A lack of discussion surrounding LGBTQ+ identities was seen by these participants as perpetuating cisgender and heterosexual norms in their communities, regardless of whether the communities were intentional about this.

The silence surrounding these topics is also perpetuated by a lack of formal support for individuals with non-normative genders or sexualities in these communities. Wilcox (2003) notes that the way in which LGBTQ+ individuals reconcile their predicament is often a solitary process, which reflects aspects of a culture of religious individualism rather than community and congregational support; this was reflected by all of the participants in my study. The participants talked about how they felt like they had to go through these struggles on their own because no one in their communities was discussing LGBTQ+ identities, and Shay talked about how she would have accessed resources if they had been available, but 'there's just nothing there'. While Shay found some support in online forums and Kieran discussed reading books and listening to podcasts on the intersection of LGBTQ+ identities and Christianity, the other participants did not talk

about seeking support for their identities outside of their Christian communities until they had already begun to distance themselves from those communities.

This combination of a culture of cis-heteronormativity, silence surrounding LGBTQ+ identities, and a lack of formal support for those with non-normative genders and sexualities contributes to the framing of LGBTQ+ identities as abnormal, sinful and shameful within conservative Christian communities. Like in Levy's (2008) study, although it often was not made explicit, the rhetoric from the participants' communities in my study implied that LGBTQ+ people were sinning. This was often framed through the lens of 'hate the sin, love the sinner'. As the participants explained, and as previous research has noted, what makes this so harmful is that these Christian communities often voice this rhetoric with apparently sincere expressions of care and affection, compounding the sense that the capacity of LGBTQ+ people to give and receive love is damaged (Moon and Tobin, 2018: 451). In order to avoid these uncomfortable and condemning situations, the participants in my study either avoided disclosing their non-normative identity until they were able to distance themselves from their conservative Christian communities or only confided in those they knew would be accepting and supportive. Both my study and previous literature indicate that this ritualized, spiritualized form of sacramental shame regarding LGBTQ+ identities both grows out of and serves to protect fundamentalist Christian theologies and, when internalized, prevents LGBTQ+ individuals from embodying their LGBTQ+ identities (Craig et al., 2017; Dueck, 2012; Moon and Tobin, 2018).

The findings in this study align with previous research which demonstrates that when LGBTQ+ individuals are not able to come out in conservative Christian communities without experiencing shame and condemnation, many will choose not to come out until they leave these communities. This was seen by Kieran, Payton and Shay as perpetuating the silence surrounding these topics and allowing conservative Christian communities to maintain what appears to be a 'neutral' stance on LGBTQ+ issues, while still framing these identities as sinful and wrong. Although this particular nuance has not been examined extensively in previous literature, it is supported by findings regarding the consequences associated with taking a side on controversial topics in Christian communities. Harris et al. (2020) note in their study that, both historically and currently, denominational and congregational decisions about controversial topics, including current discussions with respect to LGBTQ+ inclusion, can lead to members leaving due to disagreement. My findings indicate that the participants' conservative Christian communities will simply avoid openly having these controversial discussions while still implicitly enforcing a strict cisgender heterosexual norm within the community. I argue that this encourages continued silence and a lack of discussion around these topics – when conservative Christian communities maintain this 'neutral' stance without explicitly addressing LGBTQ+ topics and issues within their communities, they are able to avoid any consequences associated with taking a side.

This understanding of silence as a more insidious version of condemnation of LGBTQ+ identities by the participants is emphasized by their call for transparency in these communities. Specifically, transparency regarding the community's stance on LGBTQ+ identities on a formal, official and policy level was advocated for by Kieran and Parker. They explained that even if the community states that they are not affirming, transparency on this issue is still appreciated by the participants in this study who are

considering rejoining a Christian community. Official denominational doctrine does not necessarily reflect the thoughts and actions of individual churches or church members (Levy, 2008: 37), and while Kieran, Parker, Shay and Quinn recognized this in their interviews, Kieran and Parker talked about the official stance of the community being more indicative than an individualized or more personal stance of whether or not they would be fully accepted into, and be able to be fully part of, the community.

Shift to personalized faith

My second research question asks: How do LGBTQ+ individuals deal with the perceived incompatibility between their religion and their sexuality and/or gender? My findings indicate that the LGBTQ+ individuals in this study shifted to a personalized and individualized version of the religion they were raised in. However, for many of the participants, shifting to this personalized faith was no easy task – they reported feeling a significant loss of community as they distanced themselves from their conservative Christian communities, which many continue to miss today.

All of the participants have shifted, or are in the process of shifting, to a personalized version of what they were taught in their conservative Christian communities. This aligns with previous research which similarly notes that one of the ways LGBTQ+ individuals have dealt with unaffirming religious and faith contexts is by personalizing and individualizing their faith, instead of rejecting it outright (Beagan and Hattie, 2015; Benson et al., 2018; Gardner, 2017; Levy, 2008). Wilcox (2002) frames this personalized faith as 'religious individualism', and argues that, in cases of uncertainty about or direct challenge to one's place in the social order, this societal shift towards religious individualism actually facilitates LGBTQ+ individuals' efforts to create coherence between their religious and sexual/gender identities. Wilcox (2002, 2003) argues that, for LGBTQ+ individuals, religion has become a resource rather than a rule book – something to be utilized when it is expedient and ignored or rewritten when it is not. This view of religion was expressed by the participants in my study as well. Charlie explained that they have thought about returning to a religious community, but because they have their own set of beliefs, they have not encountered a Christian community that aligns closely enough with their beliefs. Kieran similarly explained that he was open to returning to church after the pandemic ended, but if attending a church was not going to be helpful and beneficial for him, it did not need to be a requirement in his life.

In Luvuyo et al.'s (2020) study, their participants used the strategy of renegotiating their Christian identity, rather than their sexuality, and most were able to separate their relationship with God from the church itself. The participants in my study also separated their faith and spiritual relationship with a potential higher being from religious doctrine and the church itself, thereby effectively renegotiating their Christian identity to better support their gender/sexual identity, rather than the other way around. Some of the participants in Murr's (2013) study walked away from their religion for a period of time and did not engage in spiritual practices. Quinn, Parker and Kieran also talked about needing to reject their religious identity for a period of time, although the possibility of returning to a Christian community was left very much open for all of the participants.

Interestingly, Kieran and Parker talked about their shift to a personalized version of their religion within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. With in-person religious gatherings in British Columbia largely non-existent for much of 2020 and continuing into 2021, a few of the participants described this as facilitating the development of a more personalized version of the religion they were taught in these conservative Christian communities. Kieran came out during the pandemic and explained that while he is not going through a crisis of faith at the moment, he is currently utilizing this forced time away to take a step back from the social aspects of his Christian community and examine whether it is something with which he personally still wants to be involved. Although the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on LGBTQ+ individuals in Christian communities have not been discussed at length in previous literature, my findings here are similar to what Luvuyo et al.'s (2020) study touched on: they explain that the pandemic is an opportunity to understand how LGBTQ+ individuals routinely engage with spirituality in solitude and in an isolated manner.

Barnes and Meyer (2012: 512) found in their interviews with lesbians, gay men and bisexuals that even when they perceive homophobia in their religious institutions, individuals may retain affiliations with non-affirming settings because they derive great personal meaning from the religious setting to which they have been accustomed – these settings provide an affiliation and connection with a community that it is difficult to discard. The participants in my study experienced these difficulties; Quinn, in particular, talked about how if they left their community, they would essentially lose everything, and choosing to leave was an extremely difficult decision for them due to this. For the participants in my study, shifting to a personalized version of their religion and distancing themselves from their conservative Christian communities in order to embrace their non-normative sexual/gender identities was not an easy decision.

Fluidity and liminality

My third research question asks: How do LGBTQ+ individuals understand their LGBTQ+ identity when situated within a traditionally heteronormative religious community? The participants in this study understand both their LGBTQ+ identities and religious identities in fluid and liminal terms, although, due to the small sample size and recruitment methods, this may not be generalizable to broader populations. Five of the six participants described their gender/sexual identity as fluid, with the potential and openness to change the labels they are using in the future if they themselves change, or if they find a label that better describes them. Some of the participants also described their sexual/gender identity as liminal, in that how they identify often depends on the context. All of the participants similarly described their religious identities as fluid, and many described them as occupying a liminal space in that they identify as Christian or not depending on the context, and they embrace some Christian teachings and discard others. However, when taking into account this fluidity of sexual, gender and religious identities, Payton noted that outwardly embracing fluid and liminal identities in these communities, especially identities that are already marginalized, can have negative consequences for individuals who identify as LGBTQ+.

In terms of sexual and gender identities being fluid and liminal, Charlie explained that they would prefer not to be seen through the lens of gender at all. Payton identifies as bisexual but emphasized the fluidity and complexity of this label since she does not fit into a 'typified bisexual experience'. Payton also noted that although she currently identifies as a cis female, she could see this potentially being more fluid as well, leaving her gender identity very much open to change and occupying a liminal space between a normative and non-normative gender identity. Shay framed her gender identity as 'a very genderqueer person', explaining that she uses 'they', 'she' and sometimes 'he' pronouns with the people with whom she is closest. Quinn used a variety of different terms to describe their gender identity and sexual orientation, noting that 'that might change in the future'. The participants did not feel the need to settle on a specific label or identity, and embraced this fluidity and liminality, recognizing that their identities may change as their lives change. This is consistent with Young and Shipley's (2020) findings that youth in Canada find singular categories insufficient to describe their identities, and that this fluidity and multiplicity is not simply a result of their age.

As with their gender and sexual identities, the participants also tended to frame their religious identities as fluid and liminal; they embraced aspects of the religion they grew up with and discarded others, and identified as Christian or not depending on the context. Shay and Payton identify as agnostic, but all of the participants characterized their religious identities as a fluid and liminal process that they are in the middle of – not as a specific label that they will adhere to for the rest of their lives. Charlie and Shay also expressed fluidity between their sexual/gender identities and their religious identities, noting that these are not always two separate categories and highlighting the intersectionality of these identities. While sexual/gender identity and religious identity are often framed as two separate entities within these specific conservative Christian communities, the participants recognized and emphasized the inherent interconnectedness of these identities in their lives. They found comfort in these fluid and liminal identities, embracing the in-between state and seeing it as facilitating growth and self-acceptance.

However, an important caveat needs to be acknowledged in this discussion surrounding the fluidity and liminality of identities: the conservative Christian communities that the participants in my study were part of, and that many of them still tangentially participate in through family and friends, often value stable and fixed identities and see fluid identities as disingenuous. The tensions between essentialized and fluid LGBTQ+ identities in Christian communities have been noted in previous literature (Wilcox, 2002: 503). Interestingly, the majority of my participants avoided essentializing their LGBTQ+ identities in favour of a more fluid understanding of identity. Payton acknowledged these tensions during her interview, explaining that she is still questioning things and does not want to come out to the people in her life who are part of a Christian community until she knows something concrete, 'or else it feels disingenuous, especially with the kind of people I want to come out to, they want – the stability aspect of it is huge to them'. Heteronormativity creates a binary between the identification as heterosexual and non-heterosexual (Abes and Kasch, 2007: 621). Although previous literature has addressed both the cisgender heterosexual norm present in these communities and the tendency for LGBTQ+ individuals in these communities to lean towards a fluid and liminal religious and sexual/gender identity, the dissonance between these two points has not been

examined in depth despite undoubtably affecting how LGBTQ+ individuals are able to express themselves in these communities.

Conclusion

This project examined LGBTQ+ experiences in conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta, Canada. Due to a small sample size and the use of snowball sampling for recruitment, the participants in this study are likely over-represented by those who have not explicitly rejected their religion. This project also did not collect any demographic data other than the participants' gender/sexual identities and their religious identities. Future research should consider utilizing a larger and more representative sample, and collect more demographic data in order to better characterize the diverse intersections and particularities of different groups in the broader population. Additionally, researchers should keep in mind the latent functions of the silence surrounding LGBTQ+ individuals and issues in many of these communities, and consider probing deeper below the surface of this silence to examine the ways it can support the oppression and marginalization of non-normative identities. Finally, the participants' emphasis on the fluidity and liminality of both their gender/sexual identities and religious identities points to potential issues with asking participants to confine and categorize themselves using predefined, stable and static labels. Future researchers should take this tendency towards fluidity and liminality into account when researching sexual- and gender-minority individuals, and when examining the ways these individuals resolve conflict and attempt to integrate seemingly contradictory identities. Ultimately, the goal of this research is not to discover universal truths, but to make sense of the diverse specificity of lived experiences as they impact individuals, communities and societies in flux (Hammack, 2005). The experiences of the participants in this study are fluid, diverse and ever-changing, as are the communities of which they were and continue to be a part.

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