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Community-level Interventions for Reconciling Conflicting Religious and Sexual Domains in
Identity Incongruity

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Abstract

Two of the most unstable domains involved in identity formation, the religious and sexual domains come into conflict when vulnerable populations of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community experience oppression from the indoctrination of religious beliefs that persecute their sexual orientation. This conflict, aptly termed *identity incongruity* in this article's discourse, results in a schism that adversely affects these vulnerable populations. This paper investigates the roles of religion, spirituality, Psychology theories and therapies, and available institutional solutions to propose customized, culturally-adapted, contextually-based, and collaborative community-level interventions that would facilitate the reconciliation of the conflicting identity domains.

Keywords: religion, LGBT, identity incongruity, community-level interventions

Simplistically defined as a ritual observance of faith, religion is certainly more than a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, as well as the practice of such beliefs. In his book, “The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life”, French sociologist Emile Durkheim defined religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things that unites its adherents in a single moral community called a church” (Sandberg, 2008). Religion is seen as an institution, a major element of culture that is defined in terms of some supraindividual group, category, or organization – a church, sect, or cult; the “faithful”, the “believers”, the “chosen”– with a history that is associated with theological doctrines; sacred writings; and institutional dogma, liturgy, rituals, practices and beliefs the group considers spiritually meaningful. William James, perhaps the single most influential psychologist of religion, noted that religion consists of “the belief that there is an unseen order and that our supreme good lies harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto” (Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1996).

Hood et al. (1996) believed that these definitions probably represent the dominant view of religion in Western culture, with the ‘inner experience’ of religion as anchored to something external and transcendent or divine, described in the language of faith. The understanding of religion usually connotes faith in a higher being, God, in whom resides the universal, absolute truth, and that a relationship with God is foundation for a moral character. Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus may not agree on the nature of God, or on religious rituals and teachings, but they do tend to agree on moral issues. In fact, when it comes to ethics and morals, major world religions are amazingly consistent with their teachings about right or wrong, especially concerning murder, stealing and adultery (Hood et al., 1996).

Apart from its proximate association with morality, religion is also closely intertwined with spirituality. Whereas religion is often described as a more social, public and organized mode of

relating to the sacred, spirituality is recognized as a more private, personal and eclectic means of relating to the divine. Spirituality does not necessarily suggest any religious faith, but pertains to a transcendental human experience. Tibetan and Zen Buddhism stand as incontrovertible evidence of the possibility of non-theist, profound spirituality based on an inherent aspect of humanity and nature, with traditions that flower into enlightenment (Helminiak, 2006).

Despite the many differences in their manners of expression, religion and spirituality still have a lot in common. Both religion and spirituality can have a significant influence in the disposition, mental health, and behavior of human beings throughout the developmental lifespan (Collins-Mayo, 2008; Hood et al., 1996). They can provide a moral compass and a source of inner peace and strength that could not be as easily attained without their practice and directives. Their scope is far-reaching and pragmatic – on work, love, secular systems, and social relationships, even politics (Collins, 2008; Hood et al., 1996).

Religious Identity

Because of their expansive influence, it is not surprising that several research studies in Psychology have been done to investigate and define religion, spirituality, and the formation of the human religious and/or spiritual identity. Gordon Allport (1950), in the “Individual and His Religion”, described his ideas about how the child moves from no religion to the point where faith becomes an integrated part of the personality. Unlike those espousing the ideas of an ‘innate religion’, Allport (1950) believed that religion is acquired, not inherited biologically, although he allowed that it does to some extent grow out of basic human needs. Hood et al. (1996) used many different stage theories such as Piaget’s cognitive stages, Kohlberg’s stages of moral development, Fowler’s stages of faith development, and Oser’s stages of development of religious judgment to

discuss the development of the religious identity of the individual and how this praxis profoundly affects the individual's being. According to Bell (2008), among the domains of identity, religious identity seems to be the most unstable in our current sociocultural context, and more than ever, individuals are more aware of their own choice and possibility within a marketplace of religious identities. Religious identity is an empirically unique, potentially separable component of identity, but overall, has been positively associated with identity achievement in the development of self (Bell, 2008).

In the last decade, there has been a resurgence of interest in spirituality and its importance, especially with regards to holistic health (Lamberton, 2004). The concept that attention to the spirit as an integral part of being, which contributes to the plenary salubrity of self, has gained massive favor in many who have sought the pursuit of wellness and holistic well-being. Built into human beings is an urge toward self-transcendence, a spiritual drive that perpetuates an inner push toward spiritual growth (Helminiak, 2006).

Religious Oppression

But despite the irrefutable benefits and gains of developing a religious and/or spiritual identity, cultivating religion or the hunger for spiritual growth itself historically has not been without taint and blemish. Like any institution or force that has been used for benevolence, accounts chronicling religion and spirituality as entities used to corrupt, oppress and abuse have been documented throughout time. Religion has been traditionally used, at least in part, in subjugating indigenous peoples in many colonized countries (Jaffary, 2007). Spain, Britain and France have notoriously used Christianity in the last century to keep the native peoples of the North American and Asian countries they have colonized in line. The hunger for spiritual guidance and

direction has been shamefully exploited by new world cult leaders to exert control over and extort from devout followers (Enroth & Melton, 1985; Halperin, 1983). The Christian-based Ku Klux Klan spreads hatred of blacks, Jews and Catholics. Many wars and other battles all over the world are religiously based: Catholics battled Protestants in Northern Ireland; fundamentalist Muslims in the Middle East clashed with their non-fundamentalist brethren; Muslims and Christians fought in the former Yugoslavia; and Sikhs and Hindus died in violent conflicts in India (Hood et al., 1996).

But apart from the onerous, macrocosmic effects that have been linked to religion, many researchers have not only agreed on the oppressive role that religion can take, but have also discussed the different microcosmic, subtle and insidious ways religion can have negative effects on many individuals in the community (Wilcox, 2008). Empirical investigations have led researchers to seriously consider significant correlations between religion and obsessive-compulsive symptoms, certain anxiety-related mental health issues, and topics associated with sexual fulfilment (Masters & Bergin, 1992).

Religious Oppression of the LGBT Individual and Community

Religion and sexual behaviour have had a long and troubled relationship. Apart from concerns on marital satisfaction, contraception, family constitution, and sexual activity, the subject of homosexuality (as well as all other non-heterosexual orientations) is perhaps one of the most controversial topics that have been discussed in relation to religion (Hood et al., 1996).

Many world religions and practices of spirituality have been very clear on their stand regarding sexual activity, most especially on non-heterosexual behaviour. Among the Abrahamic religions, perhaps the most austere and uncompromising with regards to non-heterosexual

behaviour would be Islam. The primary source of Islam – its revealed scripture, Al-Qur'an – is very explicit in its condemnation of homosexuality, leaving scarcely any loophole for a theological accommodation of homosexuals in Islam (Duran, 1993). Islamic law (Shari'ah) and the verbal teachings of the Prophet Mohammed (Abadith) directly outlaw homosexuality (Bouhdiba, 1998; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Same-sex intercourse carries the death penalty in five officially Muslim nations: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Mauritania, Sudan and Yemen. Although not immediately punishable by death in many other Muslim countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Bahrain, Qatar, Algeria and the Maldives, maximum penalty for homosexual acts in these countries can be as severe as corporal punishment; in some, by public execution.

Almost as staunch and fixed on their position on non-heterosexual behaviour, Catholicism, among the many denominations of Christianity, is probably one of the most rigid in their teachings and mandates on homosexuality. Like other Christian denominations, Roman Catholicism considers the Bible as sacred scripture. However, unlike many other Christian denominations, Roman Catholicism has set biblical authority alongside tradition, most strictly adhering to the time-honoured, hierarchical clergy-based interpretations of text against homosexuality including those in Genesis 19:1-11, Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10 (Carmody & Carmody, 1993).

On the heels of Catholicism regarding the strictest fidelity to the oldest interpretations of biblical passages concerning same-sex relations, the denominations of the Mormon Church of Latter Day Saints and the Jehovah's Witnesses are also very firm on their stance on the condemnation of homosexuality. Although they take on more inclusive views of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, Christian denominations such as Baptist, Episcopalian, Anglican, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Presbyterian and United Churches

continue with their struggles to take on a unified position on homosexuality and resolving congregational divide (Brooten, 1992; Ellison, 1993).

The third Abrahamic religion, Judaism, is perhaps the one religion which has had the most progressive changes in their laws and provisions. Although to this day, Orthodox Judaism stringently subscribes to the older rabbinic interpretations of the Talmud and passages from the Torah regarding homosexuality, wherein homosexuals are condemned abominations whose acts are punishable by karet (banishment) and mitath (death) in accordance with Halakha, Reformist and Reconstructionist Judaism have both already rejected all these traditional views in favor of embracing all forms of love known to man (Eron, 1993; Soloff, 1992).

Even in religions and spiritual practices originating from non-western countries such as Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism from India, Confucianism and Taoism from China, and Shintoism from Japan, the issue of homosexuality is terra incognita. There is great paucity of direct references to non-heterosexual orientations and sexual minorities. With attempts to extrapolate positions from various texts and doctrines by scholars or after persistent public prodding regarding the issue, many spiritual leaders and representatives of these religions have revealed their disapproval and censure of homosexuality and non-heterosexual orientations (Cabezon, 1993; Sharma, 1993; Wawrytko, 1993).

LGBT Vulnerable Populations and *Identity Incongruity*

Certainly, religion has been an institution that has traditionally condemned homosexuality. Even with many recent Christian and other spiritual non-Judeo-Christian teachings emphasizing the precept ‘do not hate the sinner, but the sin’, the most prominent religions to this day continue to oppress a large percentage of members of society, the LGBT community. Due to its vast reach and effect on the way of thinking of many members of society, whether on the church-going public or those privately practicing their spirituality, religion has had a profound influence on the perceptions and convictions of heterosexuals on sexual minorities and their preferences. Most religions have continued to perpetuate the discrimination, marginalization and persecution of sexual minorities right into the 21st century. Sadly, these devastating effects are needlessly felt by the LGBT community, but are more so experienced by the most vulnerable populations of this community – the youth, the adults who experience late sexual awakening and realization of their orientation (‘late bloomers’ who ‘come out’ post-adolescence), and those who have sought refuge from religious persecution in their home countries and migrated to nations more tolerant of their nature.

Of late, a rapidly increasing number of LGBT youth have been experiencing emotional distress (Almeda, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009), mental health disorders, psychological issues, and suicidality (Haas et al., 2011; Mustanski, Garofalo, & Emerson, 2010) attributed to bullying by peers and discrimination that have inextricably been linked with perceptions fostered by religious creed. Even their more mature counterparts have not escaped the prejudice sublimated from religious tenets, as gays and lesbians ‘coming out’ later in life have also experienced victimization from the homophobic and heterosexist attitudes present in society (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, Muraco, & Mincer, 2009; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russel, 2010).

The third subset from the LGBT community who have experienced the intense vulnerability from the discrimination of their sexual orientation and identity are the numerous yet undocumented number of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (particularly those from the Middle Eastern countries) who have migrated to nations such as Canada and the United States to seek shelter and sanctuary from religious persecution (Chavez, 2011; 2009).

Among the many things these three vulnerable populations have in common, the threat to the integration of their sexuality into their formed identity is undoubtedly one of the most significant commonalities. Especially true for adolescents navigating the earlier stages of Marcia's identity formation and Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (Bell, 2008), but fitting nonetheless for 'late bloomer' adults configuring the different domains of their identities in later life, an assault on the gradual establishment of an individual's sexual identity as being queer by stern religious indoctrination that non-heterosexual orientation is sinful, deplorable and wretched, places these LGBT individuals in a two-tiered vulnerable position. Not only do the LGBT individuals become vulnerable in the vantage point of a heterosexist society, but also from the prospect of the LGBT individuals internalizing homophobia and self-loathing (Kitzinger, 1991). These circumstances will undeniably cause dissonance between two of the most important domains of one's forming identity – the religious and the sexual – spiraling into what can be termed as an indisputable *identity incongruity* resulting from the clash of two emerging powerful identity domains. The schism that is caused by the conflict of one's religious identity versus one's sexual identity is likely the root of such enormous individual and society level issues such as LGBT emotional distress, depression, unhealthy forms of coping, and suicidality.

LGBT Responses to Identity Incongruity

Due to the enormous strain of having to find a way to reconcile one's emerging, yet opposing, sexual and religious identities, concerned vulnerable LGBT individuals develop strategies in order to respond to the stress and overcome the burden of their identity incongruity. Many of these individuals find that the easiest decision to make is to discard their religious identity as a dissonance resolution strategy if they are unable to reconcile it with their sexual identity (Yip, 2007). For these individuals this strategy will mean having to disidentify with their church, mosque, or synagogue, and for some, the decision and effort to commit to self-removal from their religious community can be very heart-rending. Some individuals, who in time develop a positive self-image, become involved in the politics of counter-rejection of their religious institution (Yip, 1999). Others, like many non-heterosexuals, abandon their structured religion for spirituality to avoid the homonegativity perpetuated by their religious institutions (Jeffries, Dodge, & Sandfort, 2008; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Still others, leave the religious institutions they may have grown up in and attend religious institutions with teachings that are more gay-affirmative or accepting of sexual minorities (Wolkomir, 2001).

Another strategy that these vulnerable subsets of the LGBT community may take to ease their suffering from their identity incongruity is compartmentalizing their religious and sexual identity domains (Yip, 2004). These individuals de-emphasize their sexual identity when celebrating community in their religious institution so that this identity has less psychological salience, but conversely at a non-heterosexual event, de-emphasize their religious identity (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). For the most part, this strategy remains as a temporary measure until a more acceptable form of *identity integration* can occur.

Unfortunately, some members of this vulnerable LGBT community subset may take on less healthy strategies in dealing with their identity incongruity. Especially for the LGBT

adolescent subset whose armamentarium of healthy coping mechanisms has not fully developed, acting out is likely one of the first responses to their adversity. Apart from rebellious responses to authority, teenagers also use avoidant coping strategies by resorting to petty theft, destruction of property, violence, and abuse of illicit drugs (Hampton, Halkitis, & Mattis, 2010)

Then there are others from these three vulnerable populations of the LGBT community who will find that rejection of their religious identity or compartmentalizing their two identities in different situations as unacceptable options because they feel their religion is a very important part of their identity that they cannot separate. They make the decision to stay active in conventionally religious institutions that teach traditional views about human sexuality, but identify other ways to cope with potential stigma (Wolkomir, 2001; Yarhouse & Tan, 2004). A common strategy that these individuals take is supporting newer, more scholastic interpretations of their religion's scriptural passages, doctrines and laws that are more inclusive of their sexual identity. Some, who are established theologians or religious scholars, actually take on the re-interpretation of their primary source of teachings and attempt to effect change from within their religious faith (Balch, 2000; Michaelson, 2011). Like their Reformist and Reconstructionist Jewish counterparts, a handful of non-heterosexual Christian scholarly authors have taken on the task of re-interpreting biblical scriptures because they believe that the time-honoured translations into modern Western languages have tended to obscure sexual aspects, reflecting not only lack of scholarship on the part of erstwhile translators, but suppression of the literary record in the original language, prejudice by the original translators, and in the past century, the superimposition of modern concepts on ancient cultures which knew nothing of them (Dynes, 1992).

Certainly, many not only from the vulnerable populations of the LGBT community, but from the entire LGBT community itself, would welcome the prospect of sustaining a religious or

spiritual identity congruent with (or at least amenable to) their sexual identity. Religion and spirituality, after all, are institutions and forces in the community that could have positive effects on their overall well-being, especially as intermediaries and means to cope with the tremendous stresses of everyday life.

Religious Coping

Many research studies have been done to validate the fact that religion and spirituality have allowed people of different ages, races, ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, and sexual orientations/identities to cope with the various adversities encountered in the human lifespan.

These studies support how religion and spirituality can help alleviate the pressures and torment of physical abuse (Copel, 2008); unemployment (Shams & Jackson, 1993); anxiety, depression, mental health disorders, substance abuse, and suicidality (Berg, 2011; Kirchner & Patino, 2010; Mela et al., 2008; Rasic et al., 2009); cancer (Biegler et al., 2011; Stewart, 2011); chronic illnesses such as emphysema, Parkinson's disease and HIV-AIDS (Drescher, 2011; Glaquinto, Bruti, Dall'Armi, Palma, & Spiridigliozzi, 2011; Woods, 1999); and even loss and death of a loved one (Cowchock, Lasker, Toedter, Skumanich, & Koenig, 2010; Goodman & Stone, 2009).

Despite the feelings of persecution and outright discrimination they may experience from their own religions, many of the LGBT 'faithful' still turn to their religion and spirituality not only to cope with the numerous pressures in life that many heterosexuals encounter, but ironically, also to persevere against the challenges brought about by the oppression and social injustice that religious institutions and indoctrination brings to their lives (Foster, Arnold, Rebchook, & Kegeles,

2011; Hall, 1998; James, Griffiths, & Pedersen, 2011; Jeffries, Dodge, & Sandfort, 2008; Langdon, 2011; Maynard, 2002; McCarthy, 2010; Richards, Acree, & Folkman, 1999).

As paradoxical as this phenomenon may sound, this reality is evidence to the fact that religion, despite the oppressive role it may play, is still used by many LGBT individuals to provide meaning to their existence and improve their well-being. The daunting task then is to find means to take advantage of this revelation and lesson learned from this phenomenon, and come up with ways to use religion and spirituality to help those that have inadvertently been marginalized by heteronormative institutional indoctrination.

Theories and Therapies in the Field of Psychology for Facilitating the Reconciliation of Religious and Sexual Identities

There has been a number of theories and therapies involving identity development, particularly those associated with its sexual and religious domains, that has been published in peer-reviewed literature within the field of Psychology. Scholarly debates between psychologists pitting the philosophical theory of Essentialism against the sociological theory of Constructionism in attempts to define the development of sexual identity have mostly revolved around inconclusive nature versus nurture themes (Seidman, 2003). Queer theory, which has been historically used in attempts to define sexual identity development, has apparently been utilized more to critique previously postulated theories rather than present new ideas for consideration (Seidman, 2003; Wilcox, 2007). In general, these earlier theories have either completely disregarded or taken very little into account the enormous impact of religion on the evolution of sexual identity.

Researchers have used social psychologist Glynis Breakwell's Identity Process Theory to present preliminary insight into the processes of navigating identity threats occurring from the

intersection of religious, ethnic and sexual identities. The research done using her theory reaffirmed current understanding that many religious LGBT individuals of different ethnic backgrounds employ commonly used avoidant strategies such as revising group dynamics and externalizing attribution to cope with identity threats (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010).

A study applying the Communication Theory of Identity by Michael Hecht was conducted to show how interpretations of identity layers created conflict in people's lives that required careful negotiation of the LGBT Jewish identity. Although implications for individual and community support of multiple stigmatized identities were presented, the study fell short of proposed actions to fill what they identified as 'identity gaps' (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011).

Recent research using Throckmorton and Yarhouse's Sexual Identity Therapy emphasizing the application of mindfulness was done to help sexual minorities address methods of self-expression that were most congruent with their values. It was revealed that mindfulness facilitated congruence because it placed less emphasis on changing behaviours, thoughts and feelings, but rather, on changing the individual's experience of having non-heterosexual attractions to something neutral, as opposed to something aversive (Tan & Yarhouse, 2010). A similar level of success was found in another study that used culturally-adapted cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) on gay, Christian, Puerto Rican men, which promoted personal acceptance and active questioning of homophobic thoughts (Duarte-Velez, Bernal, & Bonilla, 2010).

For the most part, research presenting theories and therapies addressing conflicts between religious and sexual domains in identity development have remained solely at the individual level. Unfortunately, not only does the dilemma of identity incongruity require community-level interventions because it affects a collective of individuals from vulnerable populations that make

up the LGBT community, it needs community-level interventions because the sources of conflict that create the dilemma originate from institutional indoctrination and proselytization within communities.

Customized, Culturally-adapted, Contextually-based, and Collaborative Community-level Interventions for LGBT Vulnerable Populations with Identity Incongruity

In order for interventions to succeed in helping the vulnerable populations suffering from identity incongruity within the LGBT community, this paper proposes the need for interventions to be customized, culturally-adapted, contextually-based, collaborative, and implemented at a community-level. Several steps must be taken by interventionists to help guarantee this. To customize the interventions for the supposed ‘target’ individuals of the LGBT community, specific discernment of their individual sexual orientation and gender identity must be kept in mind because there are obvious and subtle differences to addressing gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender needs and issues. A poor understanding of such distinctions could easily lead to offending and further marginalizing the concerned individuals. An approach using methodological caution and humility, and acknowledging the epistemic privilege of the LGBT individuals would be an effective way of customizing specific interventions (Narayan, 1988).

For interventions to be culturally-adapted, agents for change should be aware of particular differences in the religion, denomination, race, ethnicity, beliefs and customs that the individuals they seek to help may have. This guideline will help in incorporating culture more fully into the conceptual frameworks and interventions they seek to promote (Trickett, 1996).

In order for the interventions to be truly contextually-based, not only must efforts be focused on the three identified vulnerable populations of the LGBT community that are oppressed

by identity incongruity, but an integrative framework to delineate the specific stage an LGBT individual is in with regards to the conflict between one's religious and sexual identities must be formulated. An integrative framework that identifies these stages would be helpful to assess the potential options and actions that can be taken to help resolve inner conflict.

This paper proposes an integrative framework which enumerates four *Stages of Identity Incongruity Resolution* that can help establish appropriate options and actions to address the schism caused by the clashing domains of identity. The four Stages of Identity Incongruity Resolution that an individual can be in are as follows: 1) Stage of Reflection; 2) Stage of Rejection; 3) Stage of Reconsideration; and 4) Stage of Resolution (See Table 1).

The Stage of Reflection is the first stage that the LGBT individual may experience. It is described as the stage in which the LGBT individual first encounters persecution and oppression from religious indoctrination against one's sexuality, and realizes that the religious domain of one's identity designates the sexual domain of one's identity unacceptable. The individual wonders what options there are in order to deal with this dilemma and ponders if this conflict is transient and manageable. The individual may experience feelings of uncertainty, confusion, and early signs of distress.

The second stage towards possible reconciliation of the two identities is the Stage of Rejection. Most LGBT individuals in this predicament realize that the inner conflict they are experiencing may soon become insurmountable. One begins to believe that the need to choose between the two domains of identity is likely imminent and inevitable. For many individuals, initial reprieve may result from denial of one's sexual identity in favor of the more reassuring religious or spiritual identity. As the individual reaches puberty or a questioning adult finds it

extremely difficult to suppress one's emerging sexual urges, ultimately, rejection of one's religious identity ensues. The individual may experience feelings of resentment and anger at this stage. More often than not, the LGBT individual trying to negotiate identity integration needs to go through this stage that many find cathartic as a process.

Depending on the outcome from attempting to navigate either of the first two stages, the stage that may follow is the Stage of Reconsideration. Some LGBT individuals who have previously chosen to reject their religiosity or spirituality may in fact at one point later in their life reconsider their decision. This may be due to a resurgence of spiritual hunger, the desire to be a part of a comforting religious community, and/or a need to return to consoling rituals and traditions that help the individual cope with more threatening stresses in life other than one's identity incongruity. The individual may once again embark on a quest to re-integrate religiosity to one's identity. On the flip side, LGBT individuals who have erstwhile chosen to commit to their religious identity in favor of their true sexuality may at one point later in their life reconsider to embrace their sexual identity. One may experience periods of remorse or nostalgia at this stage.

The final stage of the Stages of Identity Incongruity Resolution is the Stage of Resolution. This is marked by an acceptable reconciliation of the religious and spiritual domains of identity that eventually leads to identity integration. Seemingly insurmountable conflicts between the two domains no longer arise. The LGBT individual becomes satisfied with keeping religious convictions and spirituality, as well as comfortable with affirming one's sexuality.

Although the individual from the vulnerable populations of the LGBT community may or may not experience all four Stages of Identity Incongruity Resolution, the significance of identifying this integrative framework remains – it allows interventionists to distinguish which

stage an LGBT individual is at in one's journey, and more importantly, to determine the prospective options and subsequent actions the individual can take to bring the dissonance between identity domains closer to reconciliation. The intervention options and actions that can be offered and pursued for LGBT individuals identified through the integrative framework of the four Stages of Identity Incongruity Resolution are elaborated in the community project proposed in this paper entitled *Support for LGBT under Religious Persecution* (SLURP) (See Figure 1).

For individuals who are apparently in the Stage of Reflection, there are relatively more options and possible actions that can be taken. Apart from allaying the fears and confusion of the LGBT individual in this stage, the person is given the informed choice to either abandon one's current religion, most likely one's religion of origin and the religion they were raised and brought up in, or remain in this religion and persevere with a different plan of action.

The individual needs to know that there is the option to reject the religion of origin at this point, especially if feelings of helplessness and hopelessness from the torment and anguish of religious oppression have become overwhelming. The individual needs to feel safe and not trapped in order to prevent mental health issues such as emotional distress, anxiety disorders, depression, or even suicide. If the individual decides to reject the current religion, two possible actions can be taken to move forward from one's plight. One action is to choose to disidentify from one's religion but maintain spirituality autonomous from rigid dictations and persecutory indoctrination, which allows the individual to practice one's faith freely and naturally. This is the option that is likely to be chosen by an LGBT adolescent at this stage since other options may not be as feasible. A logical follow-through to this action if a non-theist practice is preferred is a referral to an accessible group of spiritual practitioners such as those who practice Yoga or Zen Buddhism (Cabezon, 1993). The second possible action after rejection of one's religion of origin is for interventionists to

recommend another religious institution distinctly close to the individual's original religion that has a more LGBT-affirming and accepting stance. As an example, for those who were raised Roman Catholic, interventionists may recommend the Anglican and United Churches that are very similar Christian faiths to Catholicism, but are churches that welcome LGBT individuals in their congregations (Ellison, 1993). Another example is the choice to join the Metropolitan Community Church, a church that was primarily established to serve the needs of countless LGBT Christians, but welcomes both LGBT and heterosexual believers from different faiths (Bauer, 1992).

If the LGBT individual in the Stage of Reflection chooses instead to remain in one's original religion, similarly, there are two possible actions to take that can be recommended by interventionists. While remaining in one's religion of origin, one action interventionists can help the individual take is to identify a more LGBT-sympathetic church, mosque, synagogue, or organization affiliated or identifying with one's current religion. For Catholics for example, LGBT-friendly churches can be identified that make the extra effort not only to maintain a non-persecutory environment, but also a welcoming stance (i.e. Our Lady of Lourdes, Toronto). They can also get involved in organizations run by LGBT Catholics whose main aim is to seek reform in the church's leadership and teachings such as Dignity Canada, working closely with Catholic organizations such as Call to Action, Catholic Organizations for Renewal, and the Coalition for Concerned Canadian Catholics (Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994). For Jewish LGBT individuals originally practicing Orthodox Judaism, a transition to Reformist or Reconstructionist Judaism may prove somewhat easier. Islamic LGBT individuals, although unlikely to find accessible mosques that could be as welcoming, can with interventionists' aide, locate Islamic agencies with more progressive and democratic LGBT-affirming policies that still profess the same faith, such as the Canadian Muslim Union and the Muslim Canadian Congress.

Although not the healthiest choice to take, a second course of action an LGBT individual in the Stage of Reflection can take if one chooses to stay with one's original religion is to compartmentalize the two domains of identity as earlier explained. This will at least allow the individual to experience a reprieve from the misery of one's identity incongruity. Some individuals, however, find this course of action acceptable and continue with this strategy that allows for some co-existence between their two clashing identity domains.

LGBT individuals who are identified to be in the Stage of Rejection can also choose from the two possible courses of action available to those in the Stage of Reflection who opt to abandon their religion of origin – disidentify from their religious institution and maintain a practice of spirituality outside theist, organized religion, or find another form of structured religion more accommodating of one's identity.

Conversely, LGBT individuals identified through the integrative framework of the four Stages of Identity Incongruity Resolution as being in the Stage of Reconsideration, also have the same courses of action to choose from as the individuals in the Stage of Reflection who choose to remain in or return to the religion they were raised in – find a synagogue, mosque or church they can belong to more accepting of LGBT and/or become involved with institutions identifying with their faith seeking to induce reform in their religion, or compartmentalize the two domains of their identities into appropriate societal settings and enhance this approach with other more secular coping strategies such involvement in social support networks.

These options and actions under SLURP can be augmented by a community program that this paper also proposes, called the *Outreach, Training and Awareness Campaign* (OTAC). The aim of the OTAC program within SLURP is to: (a) conduct outreach activities to pinpoint and

reach government and non-government organizations that commonly come into first contact with the three vulnerable populations of the LGBT community that suffer from identity incongruity, (b) identify appropriate personnel within these agencies and train them on the mission and vision and plans of action of SLURP, and (c) execute an en masse campaign through all the forms of media (radio, film, television, print, and technology/social) to promote awareness of the project and its programs. Examples of the organizations and agencies that could be reached and encouraged to commit involvement to the programs are the public and private school guidance counselling offices, Gay-straight Alliances and networks, the numerous LGBT organizations in the different colleges and universities across Canada, the non-profit agencies that are known to provide other services to these vulnerable populations such as AIDS Committee Toronto (ACT) and People With AIDS (PWA), the community centres catering to the LGBT community such as the 519 in the Wellesley-Church St. Village, the organizations identified to support the LGBT community such as the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) and the Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), and government institutions such as Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Canadian Council for Refugees, the UN Refugee Agency in Canada, and Services Canada (See Table 2).

To bolster the success of these programs, the agents for change that will implement these interventions need to make sure that they are initiated and sustained in constant and consistent collaboration with the individuals from the vulnerable populations of the LGBT community they seek to assist. The importance of the input, experience, reactions, and feedback of these individuals and their families in every step of the planning, execution and evaluation of the program cannot be overemphasized. In order for the interventions to be truly collaborative, an ongoing relationship

must be established between the interventionists and the community from before the program begins to after it is over (Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2001).

Finally, to ensure that the interventions are genuinely community-level, all possible key stakeholders that can influence the success of the project and its programs must be identified and enlisted to fortify the interventions (See Figure 2). Apart from the already mentioned need to identify the existing community government and non-government organizations and agencies that first come into contact with the LGBT vulnerable populations and have the capacity to propagate the objectives of the programs, it is just as important to identify key religious leaders, clergy, and influential laymen, as well as politicians, civic leaders, lobbyists, activists and policy makers who are sympathetic to the plight of the vulnerable populations of the LGBT community facing religious persecution. Their sway of public opinion, capacity to affect social policies and accumulate funding for the OTAC programs under SLURP, and access to far-reaching networks will make them instrumental collaborators and allies who can help propel the community-level interventions to greater heights and engender transformative change.

Conclusion

Reconciling the religious and sexual domains of one's identity may prove to be a daunting task, even an insurmountable challenge, for individuals of certain vulnerable populations of the LGBT community. An identity incongruity resulting from the conflict between one's religious beliefs and sexual orientation may prove to be such a monumental hurdle in life for those affected in the LGBT community that the collective distress of individuals who experience it could lead to various mental health issues at a broader, societal level. In order to acknowledge this phenomenon and aid those experiencing such identity incongruity, not only assistance at an individual level

should be entertained, but interventions at a community and systemic level should be explored. The use of an integrative framework, the Stages of Identity Incongruity Resolution, presented in the discussion of this paper, can be used to help identify the status and needs of individuals experiencing conflict from identity incongruity. The framework can also help determine appropriate options and steps individuals can take towards managing their difficulties and possibly reconciling the competing domains of their identity integration. To address this issue at a systemic level, customized, culturally-adapted, contextually-based, and collaborative community-level interventions were proposed in this article's discourse that included both the Support for LGBT under Religious Persecution (SLURP) project and Outreach, Training and Awareness Campaign (OTAC) program. The hope is that these interventions that have incorporated the fundamental concepts and values of community practice will be able to effect transformative change, which will benefit those vulnerable populations of the LGBT community suffering from religious persecution, marginalization, and torment resulting from identity incongruity.

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Table 1

Integrative Framework: Stages of Identity Incongruity Resolution

Stages	Description and Individual's Experience
Reflection	when individual first recognizes that his/her religious beliefs will not accept his/her emerging sexual orientation; individual may experience uncertainty, confusion & early signs of distress
Rejection	when individual realizes conflict from identity incongruity may become insurmountable & believes that there is an inevitable need to choose one identity domain over another to resolve the conflict; individual may experience resentment & anger
Reconsideration	when individual once again embarks on a quest to re-integrate one's religiosity to one's identity due to resurgence of spiritual hunger or desire for belonging to familiar religious community; or when individual once again embarks on a quest to re-integrate one's sexuality to one's identity due to greater acceptance of one's sexual orientation; individual may experience doubt & remorse
Resolution	when individual finds reconciliation between the two clashing domains of identity & experiences identity integration

Table 2

Outreach, Training and Awareness Campaign (OTAC) Program under Support for LGBT Under Religious Persecution (SLURP) Project

Program	Action
Outreach	pinpoint & reach government & non-government organizations that come into first contact with the three vulnerable populations of the LGBT community that suffer from identity incongruity the most examples: high school guidance counselling offices & Gay-Straight Alliances; college & university LGBT organizations; non-profit agencies that provide other services to target population such as AIDS Committee Toronto (ACT) and People With AIDS (PWA); community centres catering to the LGBT community such as the 519 in the Wellesley-Church St. Village; organizations who support the LGBT community such as the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) and the Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG); Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Canadian Council for Refugees, the UN Refugee Agency in Canada, and Services Canada
Training	identify key personnel from these NGOs & government agencies & train them on the mission & vision, options offered, resources, & plans of action of the SLURP project
Awareness	execute an en masse campaign through all the forms of media (radio, film, television, print and the internet) to promote awareness of the SLURP project and its programs

Fig. 1: Support for LGBT under Religious Persecution Project

Fig. 2: Community-level Interventions