

INTERSECTIONAL INVISIBILITY: NAVIGATING THROUGH SEXUAL IDENTITY AND  
RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AMONG LGBTQQ FIRST-GENERATION CANADIANS

by

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## ABSTRACT

### Intersectional Invisibility: Navigating through Sexual Identity and Religious Identity Among LGBTQQ First-Generation Canadians

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This study will focus on the experiences of first-generation Canadians who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning. A narrative storytelling methodology was utilized in hopes of gaining deeper insight into the experiences of LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians and how they navigate both sexual and religious identities, whilst gaining a further understanding of their experience of integrating into mainstream Western culture. Experiences pertaining to the multifaceted challenges that arise during the interplay of religious, sexual, and cultural identity are examined, and how this population must negotiate their sexualities in light of intersecting identities. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with three participants who belong to a sexual minority group and are 18 years of age and older. Literature focusing on immigrants who belong to a sexual minority are scarce thus, each participant will assist in furthering the scholarship of LGBTQQ immigrants by voicing their stories. Each narrative account provides insight into how social workers can better address and intervene in the dilemmas faced by persons with multiple and at times, incompatible identities.

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## DEDICATION

To those who coexist in multiple worlds yet, belong to none.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) Canadians have advanced considerably and those who identify with the LGBTQQ community are now protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms under s. 15 and are guaranteed equal rights by law (Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Beaman, 2012). With the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2005 (Beaman, 2012), Canada has become one of the most progressive countries to promote rapid growth in the visibility of LGBTQQ individuals (Waite & Denier, 2019).

Despite the increase of the normalization of non-heterosexuality<sup>1</sup> on a social and legal scale in Western Society, non-heterosexuals who uphold a religious faith struggle with the disapproval of their sexuality within religious communities (Yip, 2005). Immigrants however, find themselves in a ‘double jeopardy’ as they face challenges associated with being both immigrants and members of the LGBTQQ community (Munro et al., 2013 as cited in Fuks et al., 2018). According to recent Canadian Census data, nearly one-fifth (20.6%) of Canada’s population are foreign-born (Anzovino & Boutilier, 2014; Statistics Canada, 2019) and this particular group is faced with higher levels of stress in relation to immigration, along with mental health issues in comparison to their Canadian counterparts (Fuks et al., 2018). Additionally, LGBTQQ immigrants are also faced with the complexities of having to cope with seemingly incompatible identities including, religious, ethnic and sexual identities, causing identity dissonance (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010).

This study aims to explore the ways in which intersectional identities held by religious LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians can lead to a sexual and religious identity conflict

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<sup>1</sup> This term is used to include orientations as well as to encompass transgender, queer and questioning identities

experienced during the process of integrating into Western culture. The difficulty of having to navigate through conflicting identities post-immigration often results in being unable to reconcile the sexual identity with the religious self. This often leads to feelings of being forced to disassociate from marginalized identities to satisfy the expectations of their family culture while simultaneously, existing within Western culture where more tolerant views are more widely adopted. The interplay of sexuality and religion often puts LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians in a position of social invisibility, also known as “intersectional invisibility”, denying them the ability to fully integrate within society (Choubak, 2014). This often leads to feelings of being forced to disassociate from one’s sexual identity to satisfy the expectations of a particular faith or discard religion altogether in order to reduce or resolve this psychological dissonance (Stone, 2013; Wilcox, 2013).

With that said, a gap exists in approaching LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians with a healing structure that is sensitive to their—already vulnerable—social position when they assume their intersectional identity: one that consists of a sexual identity that conflicts with their religious beliefs (Chavez, 2011). As a result, this population turns to family and friends as a means to cope rather than accessing support services due to the lack of culturally competent services provided to this very underserved community (Chavez, 2011). Unfortunately, this may pose a greater risk for LGBTQQ First-generation Canadians because often times family, community and religious affiliations that are intended to protect the well-being of new immigrants, end up being the primary sources of discrimination and rejection due to sexual biases (Fuks et al, 2018). Thus, this scholarship is relevant to social work and anti-oppressive practice because of the critical need to incorporate a reintegrative program that not only examines the *sexual-religious* identity conflict experienced by LGBTQQ first-generation

Canadians, but factors in the strong influence of cultural values. While there exists an immense amount of studies on the intersections of sexual and religious identities, research has neglected to represent the realities of this particular population when pertaining to this topic. Being an under-researched population, my Major Research Paper (MRP) aims to recognize and increase the awareness of any existing needs within social work where there is an insufficiency in provided support services for LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Literature related to LGBTQQ studies can be informed by various theoretical frameworks. This study utilizes a conceptual framework guided by various approaches including: Intersectionality Theory, Holistic Theory, and the Identity-Incongruence Resolution Theory, in order to better grasp the complexities of navigating Western culture, maintaining cultural and ethnic identities, and experiencing the challenges of being both a sexual minority and immigrant minority.

#### **Intersectionality Theory**

Coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality theory challenges the notion of a universal gendered experience and argues that the experiences among Black women were shaped by both race and class (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 1981 as cited in Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012). Considering how complex and multidimensional personal and social identities are, there is no single social category that can define an individual due to the social contexts and lived experience that shape one's sense of self (Anzovino & Boutilier, 2014). Hence, this critical theoretical lens is used today when examining the interlocking systems of oppression as a consequence of these various identities (Green et al., 2017). This approach argues that oppression is interwoven within multiple factors rather than a singular factor

(Ramirez & Kim, 2018). Intersectionality theory is relevant to this study as it aims to reveal multiple identities, exposing the multidimensional elements of discrimination and disadvantage that occur as a consequence of the combination of identities (Choubak, 2014; Mattson, 2014; Smooth, 2013).

In the case of this study, there are at least three identity markers: having first-generation Canadian status, identifying as LGBTQQ, and the religion taught at home. Intersectionality theory will be included and utilized as a component to shed light on the prejudicial oppressors and post-immigration stressors such as the following: homophobia, heterosexism, discrimination, and cultural expectations, which significantly influence how the experiences of LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians are shaped. (Choubak, 2014)

Being such a widespread phenomenon, homophobia may pose challenges in relation to various social markers and contexts linked to religion and culture (Costa et al., 2013). Literature suggests that religion plays one of the strongest roles in shaping attitudes towards homosexuality however, the role religion has in explaining attitudes may depend on differences in culture (Adamczyn & Pitt, 2009). Therefore, utilizing an intersectionality approach is appropriate when examining the experiences among first-generation LGBTQQ Canadians in the context of faith and culture.

In addition to the psychosocial issues mentioned above, this study will also examine how first-generation Canadians must navigate through various identities, and whether or not they decide to deny certain aspects of their sexual identity in order to preserve their culture, religion, and family relations (Rahman, 2010). Furthermore, by utilizing an intersectional approach for analysis, I will examine the interplay of how each identity behaves in mutually-exclusive categories, how that plays a major role in the construction of both oppression and privilege, and

then evaluate the overall interaction amongst social structures for this particular population (Mattson, 2014).

### **Holistic Theory**

The second component of this framework is known as the holistic theory. According to Coady and Lehmann (2016), the term “holistic” refers to a “totality in perspective, with sensitivity to all parts or levels that constitute the whole and their interdependence and relatedness” (p.6). This multi-level assessment focuses on the whole person, meaning their physical, emotional, and spiritual qualities in the context of the individual’s surroundings (Boynton, 2014; Coady & Lehmann, 2016). Despite the challenges, oppression, and social injustice that religious doctrine may have brought to the lives of many ‘faithful’ LGBTQQ individuals, some still turn to religion and spirituality to cope with the pressures in their lives (Liboro, 2015). Religion and spirituality are a positive resource in the lives of many individuals and a growing number of studies suggests that religious or spiritual LGBTQQ people experience greater mental health and growth (Liboro, 2015; Paloutzian, 1996; Roseknkratz & Rostoky, 2016; Stone, 2013). According to Liboro (2015), there is an innate need to pursue wellness and holistic well-being among humans which perpetuates a desire to pay attention to the spirit as an integral part of being.

Utilizing the Holistic Theory framework is significant in this research in order to understand the relationship between religion and sexuality, and how it may affect the emotional, intellectual, developmental, and interpersonal development among first-generation LGBTQQ Canadians who practice a particular faith. It is important to understand how this population is affected by their faith and to determine whether their religious identity is an essential component in the formation of their identity. However, despite the benefits of developing a religious and/or

spiritual identity, it is suggested that religion and sexual domains are the two most complex domains involved in identity development, especially among LGBTQQ communities (Liboro, 2015). According to Paloutzian (1996), the influence of religion may be undeniably positive in that it provides some with comfort, hope, and physical aid; however, it may also be undeniably negative and produce feelings of guilt and shame among many. This brings me to the final component of the proposed framework.

### **The Identity-Incongruity Resolution Theory**

The Identity-Incongruity Resolution Theory is relevant to this study because it examines the existing identity incongruities and attempts to aid the conflict caused by clashing spheres of identity (Liboro, 2015). This is an essential concept due to the clash that might occur when religious and sexual domains are involved in identity formation and therefore perpetuating conflict and oppression among LGBTQQ populations (Liboro, 2015). Being an emotionally-charged subject, many LGBTQQ persons consider religion to be a tool of oppression, emotional distress, and a catalyst for psychological challenges which can cause dissonance between two important domains (the sexual and religious) of an individual's identity, commonly referred to as an Identity Incongruity (Liboro, 2015). The Identity-Incongruity Resolution Theory also places emphasis on the two-tiered vulnerable position LGBTQQ individuals are situated in as a result of living in a heterosexist society, as well as the effect of internalized homophobia (Liboro, 2015). Applying this particular concept to the study as an analytical tool is important in examining how first-generation LGBTQQ Canadians understand their sexual identity within a religious context, and the connection between both identities. By doing so, I will shed light on whether individuals felt any challenges in negotiating their sexual identity and religious identity, and if this affected their level of religiosity or sexual self-expression. In doing so, the research will also explore

whether or not reconciliation is possible and whether the need for reconciliation of the two facets of identity exists.

Another important aspect of this model that is vital for this research is that it proposes the need for customized interventions that are culturally-adapted and contextually-based, and must involve collaborative community-level intervention to aid the reconciliation of the conflicting identity spheres (Liboro, 2015). It recognizes that immigrants and refugees who have migrated to Canada are placed in an extremely vulnerable position as a result of their sexual orientation (Liboro, 2015). This aligns with the study since culture plays an important role in the ways first-generation LGBTQ Canadians navigate and experience their sexual identity. Due to values of their family/home culture, this population endures various struggles associated with their immigrant status whilst attempting to integrate to Western culture.

This study also examines the existing gap with regard to the lack of culturally-appropriate assistance available for this population, suitable for their needs. By recognizing the need for supportive services that acknowledge cultural and religious differences, the Identity Incongruity Resolution Theory implements actions to address the clash between the two identities proposed by four stages: (1) Stage of Reflection; (2) Stage of Rejection; (3) Stage of Reconsideration; and (4) Stage of Resolution (Liboro, 2015). The reflection stage involves the realization that the religious identity deems the sexual identity as unacceptable. The rejection stage assumes that the individual must choose between either the religious or sexual self as they both seem imminent (Liboro, 2015). It is important to note that religious identity is flexible and shifting, (Beaman, 2012). Thus, depending on the individual's decision in stage two, the reconsideration stage involves reconsidering religion and reintegrating religiosity back into one's identity even if they decided to reject religion all together (Liboro, 2015). The final stage allows LGBTQ

individuals to reconcile their religious and sexual identity, and to find resolution after undergoing each stage (Liboro, 2015).

### **Researcher's Positionality**

I was reluctant to devote my MRP to this topic and attempted to focus on alternative ideas. Eventually, I found myself running in circles and decided to just 'come out' with it already. Speaking of which, at age 16, I came out as a lesbian within in a Christian Eastern Orthodox Italian and Serbo-Croatian household that does not recognize homosexuality as a norm and shames anyone who falls into that category. This perpetuated negative circumstances and permeated many areas of my life during my youth and early teenage years. My family had a difficult time coming to terms with my sexuality and still does to this day (might I add they are not too keen on my research topic). Coming from an Orthodox upbringing, I experienced a significant amount of guilt, ridicule, shaming, ostracism, abandonment and inter-family internalized homophobia as a result of various involuntary and traumatic "spiritual interventions".

As I grew older, simply hearing the word "church" uttered from someone's mouth made me feel confused and saddened as I was unable to fathom how the idea of an all-loving, omnipotent God could condone the practices I experienced firsthand, as well as condemn me to eternal damnation for something that was out of my control. However, despite my religious trauma, I continued to have a spiritual yearning and dedicated my time and undergraduate degree to studying various religions and sacred texts. Unfortunately, I was unable to find a peace of mind and rid myself of guilt completely during my religious quest in attempt to reconcile my conflicting sexual identity with religion and well, God. With time, I managed to pick up the pieces of my identity that were once shattered in a chapel and put them together with spirituality.

I no longer allow myself to take part in spiritual bypassing and have finally faced my “demons”, so to speak.

In addition to being a first-generation Canadian, I have faced numerous hardships including: being a refugee seeking refuge from a war-torn country, poverty, language barriers, culture shock, and daily struggles when integrating to Western culture. As a result of having to navigate through incompatible identity markers including religious, sexual, and cultural, I am still unable to express my sexual identity in order to preserve culture values and family relationships. My personal experience has instilled a passion in me to assist displaced children and families who face the psychosocial effects of having to emigrate from their homeland to seek refuge in Canada. I have also worked overseas with diverse and marginalized LGBTQQ populations in Guyana, Trinidad & Tobago, and Nicaragua. My most recent endeavor consisted of working with the Waterloo Region District School Board, where I facilitated culturally-sensitive programs for Syrian immigrant high school students; I became exposed to the post-war realities of immigrant students dealing with the daily struggles of integrating into Canadian culture. Both my professional and lived experience has made me passionate about studying this particular topic.

This research paper will also thoroughly examine recent Academic scholarships in order to locate my own research within current works while, recognizing any existing themes. A description of the research design and analysis will also be introduced at the beginning of this research paper to further inform my study. Following a discussion of my research findings, I will end with a discussion of the implications for social work.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent literature in relation to this subject presents five prominent themes: 1) Identity Dissonance, 2) Intersectional Identities, 3) Acculturation, 4) Combined Therapy, and 5) lack of Services/Social Workers. The literature examined primarily utilizes an interpretive paradigm and incorporates various disciplines such as: religious and spiritual studies, cultural studies, social work, counselling, psychology, psychiatry, social policy, and gender and sexuality. By accessing the Ryerson University Library Database, my search consisted of using keywords such as: *LGBTQQ*, *Immigrants*, *Intersectionality*, *Sexuality*, *Religion*, and *Social Work* to see what has been researched and what further study is required on this subject.

### **Identity Dissonance**

There is an extensive amount of literature that places emphasis on the difficulty of harmonizing conflicting religious and sexual identities. As a result of the two incongruent and inconsistent domains of an individual's identity, religious LGBTQQ individuals often experience what is referred to as "identity dissonance"—the psychological discomfort that arises involving these two identities (Anderton et al., 2011; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Meladze & Brown, 2015). Findings among various studies relating to this matter conclude that due incompatible sexual and religious identities, LGBTQQ individuals often experience dissociative self-silencing feelings of (i.e. repressing aspects of the self), shame, fear, guilt, and internalized homophobia (Anderton, 2011; Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Boulden, 2009; Fuist, 2017; Ghabrial, 2017; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Liboro, 2015; Meladze & Brown, 2015; Rosenkrantz et al., 2016; Scroggs et al., 2018; Siraj, 2012; Stone, 2013; Sowe et al., 2014).

The majority of existing qualitative studies on this subject gathered data through the use of semi-structured interviews either in person or online. Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010), and Sowe, Brown, and Taylor (2014) shed light on the complexities of having to cope with incompatible identities including: religious, class, ethnic, and sexual identities, which can cause identity dissonance. Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) explore how a subset of LGBTQQ immigrants, Muslim British Pakistani Gay Men in particular, often fail to reconcile their multiple identity markers and discard religion as a resolution strategy due to its intolerance towards homosexuality. Similarly, Sowe, Brown, and Taylor (2014) touch base on feelings of conflict and dissonance that arise during the interplay of intersectional identities which often cause high levels of internalized homophobia among LGBTQQ individuals who identified as Christian. The article examines how LGBTQQ individuals who self-identified as Australian and Christian faced significantly more internalized homophobia in comparison to their nonreligious counterparts (Sowe et al., 2014). Although the researchers were able to reach a range of community groups with 579 respondents, the majority of participants identified as White Australian and gay, lesbian or bisexual; therefore, the data had a sampling bias that failed to represent participants from more diverse ethnic backgrounds and didn't represent individuals who identified as queer, questioning, or transgender. Sowe et al., (2014) and Jaspal & Cinnirella (2010) propose that clinicians should approach LGBTQQ clients experiencing identity dissonance with gay-affirmative therapy that also explores alternative religious expressions while addressing any mental health issues that may arise.

Although there has been an increase in scholarships relating to sexual minority refugees across Western nations (Lee & Brotman, 2011), researchers seldom examine where LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians experience the most identity dissonance triggered by culture, politics,

intrinsic religious beliefs, and psychosocial factors, which all contribute to internal homophobia (IH). The scarcity of this research is concerning because this particular group can face higher levels of stress due to immigration and mental health issues in comparison to their Canadian-born counterparts (Fuks et al., 2018). LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians are at greater risk of substance abuse, suicide, and high risk behaviours due to multiple stressors that perpetuate a state of conflict between multiple identities (Clements-Nolle et al. 2001; Frost and Bastone 2007; Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; McCabe et al. 2010; Meyer 2003; as cited by Ghabrial, 2017)

Literature concerning experiences among LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians has also been largely overlooked. Future research is crucial in order to deepen the current understanding of the effects that identity dissonance has on this population. Researchers who focus on LGBTQQ populations belonging to a minority group, mention the urgent need for more representation among this particular population due to the identity-conflicts experienced from cultural and religious condemnation in relation to sexual identity. For instance, Ghabrial (2017), points out the lack of available research that measures health and well-being among LGBTQQ immigrants and ethno-racial individuals who balance several conflicting identities and values, Siraj (2012) as well as Beagan and Hattie (2015) mention the lack of research regarding Muslim lesbians navigating their faith and sexuality, and Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) mention the inadequate research focusing on LGBTQQ individuals belonging to other faiths besides Christianity.

### **Intersectional Identities**

First-generation immigrants who identify as LGBTQQ are often faced with the complexity of having to navigate between various intersectional identities including: race, ethnicity, and culture, and the conflict that exists when the interplay of religion and sexuality

occurs. A common theme found within literature regarding the experiences of intersecting identities among non-Western LGBTQQ individuals, is the difficulty in “coming out”.

According to recent studies, stress triggered by the desire to come out are related to the existing norms and beliefs associated with one’s cultural identity and the expectation to uphold traditional gender roles, child rearing responsibilities, and conservative religious values—further contributing to alienation amongst first-generation LGBTQQ immigrants (Beaman, 2012; Boulden, 2009; Fournier et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2015; Ghabrial, 2017; Mao et al., 2002; Siraj, 2012; Schnoor, 2006).

A common highlight among several research studies is that first-generation Canadians who identify as LGBTQQ, still feel a strong sense of kinship despite the challenges they face being unable to negotiate their sexual identity with the expectations and norms of their culture (Boulden, 2009; Chavez, 2011; Fuks et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2015; Siraj, 2012;). This results in certain individuals repressing their sexual identity to adhere to their religious and cultural expectations, completely discarding their religion to espouse their sexual identity, or negotiating their sexual identity within religious frameworks (Schnoor, 2006; Siraj, 2012). The sexual minority immigrant participants in both Boulden (2009) and Jaspal (2012) often describe having to lead dual lives in that they their sexual identity separate from their family whilst negotiating through family cultural expectations and their sexuality.

Research gathered by Siraj (2012) demonstrates the tremendous hardships faced by Muslim lesbians when having to navigate through intersectional identities, whilst also having to accommodate oneself within a religious and ethnic community that is intolerant of homosexuality. As a result, participants either suppress their sexual identity for the sake of their faith, believing that the two cannot co-exist, or use their religion to create a framework in which

they could understand their sexual orientation (Siraj, 2012). A limitation of this study is the small sample size that stems from the difficulties experienced by the researcher in recruiting Muslims lesbian participants, therefore, limiting the generalizability of these findings. Nonetheless, engaging with five participants over a four to six-week period produced comprehensive insight towards the various challenges faced by this particular population.

Similarly, Schnoor's (2006) study reveals that many Jewish Gay males residing in Toronto suppress their sexuality to fulfill religious expectations. They do so by increasing their religiosity in attempt to rid themselves of their gay inclination, while others continually negotiate their sexual identity by challenging the Jewish Theological perspectives on homosexuality. A strength of this study is that it emphasizes the historical and political factors that may contribute to the oppression facing Jewish communities, considering the significant transformation that the Jewish identity has undergone.

Studies by Gray et al., (2015) focus on experiences of gay Latino immigrants by conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews to explore the challenges associated with their sexual identity, immigrant status, and the pressures within Latin culture. The research utilizes an intersectional framework to shed light on the challenges of having multiple marginalized characteristics including, discrimination and a loss of connection to their community in the context of their sexuality (Gray et al., 2015). The strength of this research is that it sheds light on the resilience of participants. Despite the challenges faced by gay Latino immigrants, many are still empowered and motivated to succeed individually and aid their communities (Gray et al., 2015).

As mentioned above, gay males seem to be the focal point of much literature resulting in the lack of representation of first-generation women and transgender individuals. The study of

Abrahamic religions also tends to be prioritized with regards to the sexual and religious identity formation.

### **Acculturation**

The need to acculturate between two cultures post-immigration is a challenge that presents numerous conflicts. Authors such as Chavez (2011) and Parent et al., (2013) shed light on the various post-immigration challenges faced by LGBTQQ immigrants when transitioning to a new culture; these include immigration policies, institutional barriers, residential segregation, decreased access to services, as a result of belonging to both an ethnic minority and sexual minority, and having immigrant status. In comparison to heterosexual immigrants, LGBTQQ immigrants face multiple disadvantages in the sense that they not only subject to racial discrimination and ethnic prejudice, but this also intersects with homophobia in various realms of their lives (Fournier et al., 2018).

The research conducted by Boulden (2009) and Mao et al., (2002) focuses on the challenges associated when acculturating between two cultures and sexual identity among immigrants. Boulden (2009) examines the cultural conflict that first-generation children of immigrant parents experience during the process of acculturation. Gay Hmong/Chinese male participants of this study mention the difficulty of having to maintain Hmong culture to avoid becoming “Americanized”, and speak on religion and family kinship as being protective factors against racism they experience. It is important to note however, religion and family kinship are also factors for discrimination based on the sexual orientation of these participants (Boulden, 2009).

Mao et al. (2002) also focus on the identity-conflict that arises due to cultural and sexual identities. The authors explore the problems faced by Asian gay men when adapting to a

dominant, white, heterosexual society, along with the multifaceted conflict that exists between cultural and sexual identities (Mao et al., 2002). As a result, various participants were faced with identity dissonance due to feeling restricted in expressing their sexuality among their Asian community and family (Mao et al., 2002). Both studies emphasize the need for more supportive programming, and suggest that social workers and social services must explore more culturally-specific issues in order to attempt to aid individuals with multifaceted conflicts (Boulden, 2009; Mao et al., 2002).

Further, researchers also explore how sexual identities among immigrants are affected post-immigration. Authors including Fournier et al., (2018), Kuntsman (2003) and Thing (2010) all explore how sexual orientation can significantly impact the experience of immigration. Based on the personal narratives of Russian Jew immigrant lesbians in Israel, Kuntsman (2003) explores the transformation of sexual identity as a result of immigration and how participants had to “shed” their culture in order to embody their newly acquired lesbian identity. Comparably, the data gathered by Thing (2010), proposes that Mexican gay immigrants who strongly identified with their cultural identity before immigrating to Los Angeles, California, experienced a shift in identity and embraced their gay identity post-immigration. On the other hand, Greensmith and Giwa’s (2012) research reveals that certain ethnically-diverse and racial LGBTQ individuals in Toronto, reported feeling excluded and ignored from various queer spaces, such as gay bars, as a result of the environment being tailored to a primarily white LGBTQQ audience. This further demonstrates that this population is faced with additional barriers both within the LGBTQQ community and the general public.

## **Combined Therapy**

According to recent studies, the LGBTQQ population yearns for a spiritual connection that facilitates their spiritual growth even though traditionally they have been negatively affected and targeted by organized religion (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Liboro, 2015; Rosenkrantz et al. 2016). The scholarship has explored the urgent need to create programs that assist religious LGBTQQ individuals in overcoming psychological distress due to clashing identities while integrating faith in particular therapies for these service users. Researchers such as Stone (2013), outline the negative impact religion and spirituality can have on one's emotional, intellectual, developmental, and interpersonal life. The author proposes the need for combined therapy that consists of both individual and group therapy. This allows for a strong therapeutic alliance between religious LGBTQQ individuals and therapists, whilst providing a unique interpersonal environment in a more collective manner to address religious harm. With regards to this subject, Cole and Harris (2017) also emphasize the importance of integrating faith-based education within social work in order to prepare practitioners to best respond to clients.

In comparison, Rosenkrantz, Rostosky and Riggle's (2016) qualitative study sheds light on how spirituality and religion are a positive resource for love, support, and self-acceptance in the lives of LGBTQQ individuals, despite the potential negative emotional and psychological implications of organized religion. The findings suggest there are numerous positive influences that religion and/or spirituality can have on LGBTQQ individuals; religion and spirituality can provide strength and inspiration during the coming-out process, which can lead to the development of closer relationships with family (Rosenkrantz et al. 2016). Thus, researchers argue for the importance of facilitating more religious and/or spiritual interventions within clinical practice that empower religious and spiritual LGBTQQ individuals who are experiencing

discrimination. A major limitation of this study is that findings overrepresent individuals who are white (75%), Christian, and College-educated. This study does not consider intersectional experiences among LGBTQQ groups which in turn, fails to incorporate cultural implications of the 'coming-out' process and self-acceptance among diverse populations.

Research conducted by Beagan and Hattie, (2015) also notes that counsellors play a critical role in facilitating the integration of spirituality and sexuality when addressing the negative implications religion may have caused among certain LGTBQ individuals. This can include: shame, guilt, sex negativity, disconnection from the body, and dissolving of relationships with self and others. However, it is also important to consider that the scholars are Christian white Canadians and heterosexual as demonstrated in the following statement:

The study was inevitably affected (in recruitment and in analyses) by the fact that both researchers were White Canadians. Although the number of non-White, non-European-heritage participants was higher than the proportion in the local region, there were still too few from any racialized or ethnic group to discern distinct patterns in the analyses.

(Beagan & Hattie, 2015, p. 114)

Although the authors also mention the need for more research focused on the intersections of religion, spirituality, race, and ethnicity when it comes to the integration of LGBTQ identity, 23 out of 35 participants were Euro-Canadian and Christian (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). The results were skewed and further demonstrate a lack of representation of non-Western LGBTQQ populations and their issues. However, the researchers provide a more nuanced way of discussing the ways in which religious identity shapes and impacts sexuality, and propose solutions in aiding LGBTQQ individuals who experience challenges as a result of conflicting identity markers.

### **Lack of Culturally Appropriate Programs**

As demonstrated by the preceding discussion, there is a gap in research regarding LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians. Current literature is dominated by a Eurocentric outlook and perspective on how first-generation LGBTQQ individuals should navigate through their religious identity and sexual identity. According to recent studies, health professionals report not having access to training that would assist in meeting the needs of LGBTQQ clients, as well as, a structure that promotes effectiveness of cultural competence (Champaneria & Axtell, 2004; Lyons et al., 2010; Price et al., 2005 as cited in Borough et al., 2015; Martin et al. 2009; Messinger 2013 as cited in Dessel, 2017). This is a major concern since there are only a few studies that refer to the need to develop culturally-appropriate programs and structures that are sensitive to segments of society that are already marginalized. (Boulden 2009; Ghabrial, 2017; Lee & Brotman, 2011; Rosenkrantz et al., 2016).

Lee and Brotman (2011) propose the need for potential strategies in Canada that further promote knowledge about the experiences of sexual minority immigrants and refugees, and how to properly protect and advocate for these individuals. Through a community-based qualitative research program, the article sheds light on the prosecution experienced by refugee LGBT individuals residing in Montreal and Toronto; findings reveal that Canadian refugee policies and procedures often traumatize sexual minorities seeking asylum in Canada (Lee & Brotman, 2011). The value of this research is that it brings forth the experiences among trans and LGBTQQ women refugees. Also by applying Grounded Theory (GT), which is a systematic methodology where the analysis and development of theories are grounded and developed based on data is collected (Martin & Turner, 1986; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), researchers were able to uncover the multifaceted experiences among sexual minority refugees as a result of migration experiences

(i.e. identity, refugeeness, and belonging) without making assumptions or impeding the discovery of new findings through preconceived notions of a theory (Lee & Brotman, 2011).

Research proposed by Liboro (2015) and Ward (2008), shed light on the often-neglected need for services to offer culturally-specific interventions in order to better understand the relationship between culture and race in relation to the LGBTQQ community. For instance, Ward (2008) mentions that institutions and organizational practices reinforce white normative culture due to the fact that central concepts of coming out, lifestyle, and sexual identity are all rooted in white, middle-class, Eurocentric notions of what is a “normal” relationship between self, sexual identity, and community. Immigrants, being culturally and ethnically diverse, have different needs that are not the same as their Western counterparts when it comes to sexual orientation; therefore, developing programs and services that address their needs is critical (Giwa & Chaze, 2018).

Liboro (2014) proposes a community-level framework to facilitate the reconciliation of the conflicting religious and sexual identity domains through customized and culturally-adapted interventions. In doing so, clients undergo four “stages of resolution” including: reflection, rejection, reconsideration, and resolution, all-the-while, recognizing an individual’s differences in religion, race, ethnicity, beliefs, and customs (Liboro, 2014).

Similarly, Borough et al., (2015) discuss the importance and need for ideal training for LGBTQQ-specific cultural competence among clinical practitioners in order to assess and assist clients from culturally diverse groups. Researchers propose that practitioners receive cultural competence training, develop an awareness of their own biases towards LGBTQQ populations, and become familiar with each client’s societal issues including their legal, religious, and regional subcultural differences, (Borough et al., 2015). The article also demonstrates the

importance of addressing intersectionality and continually revising strategies to provide trainees with knowledge regarding cultural and individual diversity (Borough et al., 2015).

### **Gaps & Research Questions**

While there has been an increase in studies related to religion and sexuality among LGBTQQ individuals, there have only been a few studies exploring the complexities among the lives of LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians when it comes to navigating through their sexuality, religion, and culture. The identified gaps in the literature include the considerable representation among Western-born self-identified LGBTQQ individuals, primarily based in the United States and Canada, and lack of research pertaining to sexual minority first-Generation Canadians. Due to the lack of representation of this particular population, the majority of studies in this review generally concern themselves with exploring white LGBTQQ individuals who are mainly male, based in United States and Canada, and who adhere to a monotheistic religious faith.

Although this literature is valuable in recognizing the need for more research on the effects of identity dissonance, the study is limited in areas that showcase the experiences of LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians and/or racialized people who embody multiple identity markers. In particular, there are gaps in research representing those who identify as Lesbian and transgender, and persons who belong to faith traditions other than Christianity.

By taking the following gaps mentioned above into consideration, this study aims to answer the following research question: *How do LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians navigate their sexual identity and their religious identity; how can we develop interventions that support healing or sense of wholeness by bridging and harmonizing two identity markers?* This question aims to further explore how first-generation Canadians understand their sexual identity in

relation to their religion and culture; moreover, how these persons recognize the existing barriers of integrating into a more individualist dominant culture which places emphasis on self-expression. I will identify and bring forth data gathered through a qualitative research informed by narratives of LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians as discussed in the following chapter.

### CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

A narrative storytelling methodology was utilized in this study in hopes of gaining a deeper insight into the experiences of LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians and how they navigate both sexual and religious identities, whilst gaining a further understanding of their experience navigating Western culture.

According to Chase (2003), Narrative Analysis allows us to understand how people make sense of their experiences, construct the self, then create and communicate meaning. In the past, this specific methodology has allowed researchers to gain further insight of the specific communities existing within society, particularly persons identifying as LGBTQQ. For instance, narratives relating to sexual orientation and sexual identity have been beneficial in establishing an understanding of the cultural meanings, politics, and legal issues concerning sexuality through *coming out* stories among LGBTQQ individuals, and how this may have transformed their lives (Plummer, 1995, as cited in Chase, 2003). Therefore, the use of this methodology was highly applicable to a study of this nature as it assisted in understanding how first-generation LGBTQQ Canadians negotiate their identities within social, cultural, and religious spheres; this was carried out via storytelling of events in relation to the context, allowing study participants to make sense of particular experiences (Lambrou, 2014).

Each individual has a unique story that is both significant in terms of understanding their experiences through a sociological lens (i.e. social interactions), and also in how culture has inevitably shaped one's life (Chase, 2003). Therefore, utilizing a narrative storytelling method was suitable when attempting to shed light on how foreign-born LGBTQQ Canadians negotiate the differences between two cultures; their family/home culture and the dominant/new Western culture; and how they navigate their intersecting identities post-immigration. Through

storytelling, conversations encouraged further investigation gathered by these narratives, in hopes of acknowledging and emphasizing the need for more recognition among this underrepresented population within social work (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012). This methodology further aligned with the study because it provided first-generation LGBTQQ Canadians with the opportunity to share their experience. In turn, it empowered this particular population by gaining a deeper understanding of the existing complexities in their lives. By doing so, this recognized and increased awareness of any existing needs within social work where there is an insufficiency in support services that are currently being provided for LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians

### **Data Collection & Analysis**

The data collection method included conducting one-on-one qualitative semi-structured audio recorded interviews with three participants who are first-generation Canadians, belong to a sexual minority group, and are 18 years of age and older. The focused interviews were of informal nature and consisted of questions contained in an interview guide (Appendix C) to ensure the collection of similar data from each participant (Bagele, 2012). The two-hour interviews took place at a mutually-agreed upon location that provided privacy. As mentioned above, the interviews were audio-recorded on a password protected device for transcription purposes for in-depth analysis.

Once data was collected, a data analysis method referred to as Thematic analysis (TA), was applied in order to interpret data and determine any existing patterns within the findings. Thematic analysis (TA) was used in this study as a tool to analyse classifications and present themes (i.e. patterns) that related to the data. This was necessary as the objective was to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning (i.e. themes) within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017), in relation to exploring any existing barriers and challenges among LGBTQQ first-

generation Canadians. After coding transcripts and organizing, TA assisted in illustrating the data in great detail among diverse subjects through interpretations (Alhojailan, 2012).

It is also important to note that the data collected during this study was solely used for the purpose of being disseminated in a major research paper. All audio recordings were destroyed immediately after the transcription process was complete and data was secured in a locked cabinet. Participants also had the ability to access the final results of the study upon completion by visiting the Ryerson's Digital Repository website (which is the link that has been provided on the consent form).

### **Recruitment & Ethical Considerations**

This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB—please see Ethics Clearance Certificate in Appendix B) and meets current ethical standards for the protection of participants. Recruitment was made through email, and with convenience sampling, which means that I collected data from participants who met requirements and who were readily accessible in my social network (Yegidis et al., 2018).

### **Participants**

In the below table 1., the main characteristics of each participant in this study are presented. The participants included three female-identified first-generation Canadians between the ages of 27-34 residing in Toronto, Ontario. Two of the three participants Irene and Anissa, identified as lesbian and one participant Leila, identified as a bisexual (all identified by pseudonyms). The participants originated from South America, South East Asia and the Middle East (for more detailed demographics please see table 1.). Most of the participants recently immigrated and lived in Canada for about four years although, one participant immigrated to

Canada 14-years ago. Additionally, two participants were raised in a Muslim household and one was raised in Christian Catholic faith tradition.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	SO	Religion	Country of Origin	Occupation
Anissa	34	Lesbian	Muslim Sunni	Indonesia	Performer
Irene	30	Lesbian	Christian Catholic	Venezuela	Teacher
Leila	27	Bisexual	Muslim Sunni	Syria	Analyst

SO: sexual orientation

In recruiting individuals with whom I already have an established relationship, I provided clear and concise guidelines on both the ethics approved consent form (Appendix A) and a script outlining participation expectations (Appendix B). As per the participant facing documents, participation in this study was completely voluntary and refusal to participate did not impact the relationship with the researcher given the dual-role risk. Being strictly voluntary, each individual was given the choice to withdraw from the study, and refusal to participate did not impact the relationship with the researcher or with Ryerson University.

Measures were taken to maintain participants' confidentiality unless they disclosed any information that demonstrated a risk of harm to which there was ethical responsibility for the researcher to report it. Being the sole person who reviewed all information provided by participants, transcripts were only shared with my assigned supervisor if necessary, however, no identifying information was distributed. The possible potential risks were stated beforehand which included psychological distress due to feeling upset or uncomfortable as a result of the nature of the questions asked about personal experiences. Although participation in this study was low-risk, a list of available resources (Appendix D) was provided to all participants at the beginning of the interview if they were be interested in seeking professional counselling services

after participating in this research study. Participants were also given the freedom to take breaks, decline to answer any question at any time, and/or stop participation either temporarily or permanently. All participants signed an agreement that they were aware of the scope of the study and a waiver stating that they authorized me to use their written/audio data for research purposes before the interview took place, stating all that is mentioned above. Participants also had access to the researcher's contact information if further clarification about the study and expectations were required.

Participants assisted in furthering the scholarship of LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians by voicing their stories and contributing data that will allow the progression of research in this subject. With that said, it is also important that I recognized possible limitations when conducting this study. Due to the time constriction, the sample size only represented a small portion of first-generation LGBTQQ Canadians due to the time required to analyze transcripts in detail and produce concise and accurate data. As mentioned above, I utilized TA to depict any existing similarities that existed within data, however, it is important to recognize that each individual's experience varied greatly regardless of the themes that can be generalized among each participant. With regard to my positionality, given the collaborative, dialogic nature between both researcher and participants (Moen, 2006) anticipated by this specific methodology, I was aware that having the opportunity to listen to the experiences relating to the experience among LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians may have prompted an emotional response due to my own lived experiences. Therefore, taking a reflexive stance and being aware of my own cognitive biases, thoughts, and feelings during and after this process was essential.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings derived from interviews conducted with three participants that matched the criteria aforementioned above. By applying a thematic analysis, each interview was thoroughly examined to fully grasp each participant's narrative account of their experience and highlight common themes that emerged. In what follows, I will present five predominant themes in detail, taking into account any nuanced differences among participant experiences based on the proposed framework mentioned in Chapter 1.

### **Theme 1 – Intrapersonal Challenges of Sexuality and Religious Identity: *Damned if you do, damned if you don't***

A major theme that appeared to dominate all three narratives are the emotional and psychological challenges that arise when an individual's sexual identity is incompatible with their religious identity; this is a result of heteronormativity within religious doctrine in conjunction with being taught that homosexuality is a sin by their family and/or respective faith community. The findings indicated that each participant experienced fear, guilt, shame, and internalized homophobia at a certain point in their lives due to the homonegative messages deeply embedded in their faith traditions. As previously noted in Chapter 1, the Identity-Incongruity Resolution Theory recognizes the division caused by the conflict between one's sexual identity versus one's religious identity, and the enormous impact it has on an individual level—often resulting in emotional distress, depression, and various unhealthy forms of coping (Liboro, 2015). Anissa, a 35-year-old Muslim musician and actress from Indonesia, revealed the challenges she experienced with her sexual identity in combination with her religious identity:

I felt really guilty for being a lesbian when I was living in Indonesia. I used to pray in a mosque and was crying because I feel like my sexual orientation is a sin...if this is bad for me then send me a man that I could have feelings for.

Coming to terms with her sexual identity, Anissa experienced guilt influenced by the Islamic position on homosexuality, and also by Indonesia's disapproval of same-sex activity considering that it is one of the world's most populous Muslim-majority country (Mackey & Dolven, 2018). Similarly, Irene, a 30-year old former teacher raised Christian Catholic from Venezuela, experienced and still experiences guilt and psychological implications associated with biblical doctrine and being raised on the idea that her lesbian identity is a sin leading to eternal damnation. She noted in the excerpt below:

Was religion the root of my guilt? It was...it is...from an early age I was put into this religious system that I didn't choose to be part of where I had to follow certain rules or else I would be punished with eternal hell; which meant being cast away into damnation to a paradise lost where all you can feel is eternal suffering and loneliness. That is according to those lectures we had on Bible study, also during the countless mass they celebrated throughout the school year and church every other Sunday of course. Now you tell that to a 9-year-old that she is going to burn forever if she doesn't follow certain rules that were written hundreds of years ago and it's going to leave a mark for sure.

Being raised in a very Catholic family and having to regularly attend church, Bible study, and other religious functions, Irene was taught that homosexuality is a punishable violation of the divine at a very young age, which resulted in ongoing Catholic guilt associated with her sexual

orientation. Comparably, Leila, a 27-year old Muslim analyst from Syria, also expressed her fear of the after-life as a consequence of her bisexuality:

In Islam, it's [homosexuality is] such a sin...I'm scared of going to hell. God will never forgive me for it. My mom would disown me as her own kid. She even told me that she would disown me if I was gay or anything...It's a dead end. You are only allowed to be sexual if you are married and in a heterosexual relationship.

The Holy Qur'an, Islam's central religious text, is considered to be very explicit in its condemnation of homosexuality, leading to difficulty for LGBTQ individuals like Leila, to reconcile their sexual identity with their faith due to the difficulty in finding a loophole for a theological accommodation of homosexuality (Duran, 1993 as cited in Libro, 2015).

In the above excerpts there is an emphasis placed on the notion that homosexuality is considered a sin based on anti-homosexual interpretations of religious ideology and Scriptures and that a consequence of such leads to eternal damnation. Having been taught that condemnation and homosexuality go hand in hand, all three participants exhibited a common internal conflict faced by many religious LGBTQ individuals as a result of being taught that same-sex attraction, desires, and behaviour goes against their religious faith, against God, and human nature. Various literature mentions the strong role religion plays in shaping attitudes regarding the morality of same-sex behaviour and has traditionally condemned homosexuality (Van Geest 2007; Olson and Wildeman, 2008; Elingson et al., 2001; Djupe, Olsen, & Gilbert, 2006 as cited in Sherkat et al, 2010; Libro, 2015). Today, the majority of religions still continue to be a primary catalyst in perpetuating discrimination, marginalization, and persecution of sexual minorities; consequently, low self-esteem, guilt, shame, isolation, depression, anxiety, fear of damnation, feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy, and suicidal ideation are strongly

exhibited among religious LGBTQQ persons. (Barton, 2010; Dahl & Galliher, 2009, 2012; Garcia et al., 2008; Jaspal, 2012; Rodriguez, 2009; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Siraj, 2012; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Super & Jacobson, 2011 as cited in Beagan and Hattie, 2015; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). The Identity Incongruity-Resolution framework sheds light on Islam and Christian Catholicism being the most uncompromising doctrines, taking a firm stance on the condemnation of homosexuality. This contributes to the significant amount of internal guilt, shame, fear, and cognitive dissonance experienced among LGBTQQ followers (Liboro, 2015; Meladze & Brown, 2015; Beagan & Hattie, 2015). Having been taught that same-sex behavior is sinful, unnatural, and/or immoral, each participant experienced psychological distress as a result of their incongruent sexual identity and religious faith as demonstrated in the above narratives.

### **Theme 2 – Coping Strategies: Repressing, Rejecting, Re-integrating**

Another theme that emerged among participants is the need to negotiate their intersecting identities through various approaches in effort to ease the discomfort caused by this identity clash. In attempt to reconcile the incompatibility between their religious identity and sexual identity, the following coping strategies were implemented: (1) repressing homosexual inclination so it does not impede their religious identity, (2) adopting a more tolerant ideology to embrace one's sexual identity by rejecting or decreasing the degree of religious engagement, and finally, (3) reintegrating both identities by still believing in a God or a higher force, but not necessarily adhering to religion. The findings further align with the stages outlined by the Identity-Incongruity Resolution Theory which many faithful LGBTQQ individuals undergo when seeking resolution for their incompatible sexual and religious identity: reflection, rejection, reconsideration (Liboro, 2015).

Both Irene and Anissa chose a similar route resulting in their religious practice being lessened or rejected; seeking alternative approaches or beliefs; and finding a way to combine their sexual and religious identity by developing a spiritual mindset. Anissa discusses her attempt to resolve the clash between her religion (Islam) and sexuality:

When I realized I was a lesbian, I started to practice my religion less than before, but I continue to be thankful to the creator even though I don't practice my religion much. I used to practice my religion more when I was in Indonesia [but] because I don't live with my family anymore and am independent...so I found myself. I wanted to be honest with myself and I couldn't really do that in Indonesia because of the pressures.

When asked what factors contributed to Anissa's loss of religiosity, she continued to discuss how immigrating to Canada allowed her to "express her sexuality freely" and that the pressures to practice her religion are no longer an obstacle as a result of leaving her home country. She also mentioned how her perspective of God has changed post-immigration:

After I left my country and then lived independent and read a lot of books....I realized God is full of love. I practiced my religion back home because you were scared of going to hell if I didn't practice but after I moved to Canada and learned about God more, I realized God is full of love. Now I don't feel as guilty. Only God knows if you will go to heaven or hell. As a human, I believe we were born with love and just do a good thing with your life, don't harm anyone, and love people.

Similar to Anissa, Irene's story illustrates her attempt to resolve the challenges she experienced with religion and her sexuality by exploring other religions that resonated with her outside of

Christian Catholicism, and turning to what she considers to be a more spiritual path. She disclosed:

I have always had a complicated relationship with the almighty. I remember the first time I read *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, I can honestly say that book changed my life. It opened up my mind into new perspectives but also filled me with so many doubts and questions. I began to cherry pick from different things and started to explore the concept of spirituality, there's this mix between Hinduism and Buddhism I feel particularly close to due to some ideas that are within them, but that doesn't mean I see it as religion.

When asked if anything in the religion she was raised with still resonates with her, Irene mentioned that although she no longer believes in the Christian God, she still believes in a higher source: "Despite of me not believing in a God, I feel that there has to be something else out there. Not a God but maybe some source of energy, or vibrations, a cosmic force maybe". Irene also identified activities she practices that she believes keeps her connected to this higher source; this includes "tuning in" with her inner self, meditation, being in the present moment, spending time with loved ones, and understanding that she is in control of her own destiny.

Both Anissa and Irene's story shed light on their adopted strategies for combining their homosexual identity with their religious identity. In their attempt to resolve the incongruity of both mutually exclusive identity markers, Anissa and Irene no longer practice their faith but still have a hunger for a supreme being or force. Therefore, both participants felt compelled to integrate a more spiritual outlook on life; in this case, holding the belief in an immaterial dimension of life without necessarily following principles and practices adhering to their organized religion. Further aligning to the Holistic Theory, both Liboro (2015) and Siraj (2010)

shed light on the paradoxical phenomenon of many faithful LGBTQQ still turning to their religion and spirituality as a means to cope with pressures despite the oppression and discrimination they experience from their religion, and that it still plays a major role in their lives.

It is also common for religious LGBTQQ members to change religions, leave organized religion altogether, or turn to a more spiritual path during the process of identity integration (Kidd & Witten, 2008; Levy & Lo, 2013; Porter, Ronneberg & Witten, 2013 as cited in Beagan & Hattie, 2015). Irene for instance, mentions her belief in becoming in tune with her higher force whereas, Anissa still believes in God or ‘creator’ and maintains her relationship with God by placing emphasis on certain virtues, such as being compassionate and sharing love with others. It is also important to note that immigrating to Canada—a more secular country—also impacted Anissa’s level of religiosity as a result of no longer feeling the pressure to be a practicing Muslim. Although both Anissa and Irene’s sexual identities may have hindered their degree of religiousness, this seemed to prompt an increase in their critical thinking regarding the concept of God and/or other religions by expanding their knowledge. Similarly, in a study conducted by Thomas (2014), several immigrant LGBTQQ participants felt that their sexual identities encouraged a period of critical reflection about their own religions and motivated them to examine other religions.

On the contrary, Leila chose to repress her sexual identity in order to embrace and uphold her religious and cultural identity. She discusses that after having had a sexual and romantic encounter with another woman, she denies herself further engagement in same-sex activities despite enjoying it. She stated:

Hmm...my level of religiousness didn't really change when I realized I liked a woman sexually and romantically, but it stopped me from exploring my bicuriousity or bisexuality further because of fear of damnation like I said. And not just religiously but culturally too. I couldn't let myself go further after that one experience even though I wanted to...I was scared because I liked it. I was like ahh umm...I don't know what I'm supposed to do now. I try to avoid it because it's a huge no no in Islam and my culture. I avoid it because what if I like it too much then what do I do?

Leila's narrative illustrates her inability to resolve the incongruence between her same-sex desires and religious beliefs and cultural norms. Ironically, she mentions that although she was not raised in a strict religious household, she still accepts that homosexuality is indeed sinful and denies her bisexual identity unlike the other two participants. She further shared:

Um... It's funny because I wasn't raised super religious. My grandma was the one who taught me how to pray and taught me about my religion more than my parents did, but it still influences my sexuality. I'm still scared of the consequences to a certain extent religiously and culturally. I'm scared...I don't know how that would affect my social status, my parent's social status and my entire life. I'm just not ready to go there now or ever.

Leila's story exhibits a more fear-driven response to her sexuality. Sacrificing her parents' and her own social status, along with going against Islam, are the primary reasons for her decision to cease any further exploration of her attraction towards the same-sex. She feels that the cost of losing the mentioned above, outweighs coming to terms with her sexuality and allowing herself to act on her same-sex desires. Numerous scholarships shed light on immigrant gays and lesbians

fully embracing their ethnic and religious identities by repressing their homosexual identity as a result of being unable to resolve the schism between their sexual, religious, and cultural identities (Beagan & Hattie, 2013; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Thomas, 2015; Shnoor, 2006; Siraj, 2012). Much like Leila, a secular Jew participant in Shnoor's study (2006), turned to a path of extreme religiosity and became an active member of his Jewish community in order to stop himself from being gay. Liboro's (2015) Identity Incongruity Theory also mentions the inability to integrate both domains among certain religious LGBTQQ individuals; and therefore, many choose to commit to their religious identity instead of their true sexuality.

### **Theme 3 – Compartmentalization of Coexisting Identities: *Sexuality, Culture, and Religious Expectations***

The multifaceted interplay of sexual orientation, religion, familial and cultural expectations was another major theme which emerged from all three narrative accounts. As a result of embodying multiple identity markers, participants not only struggled with the pressures of conforming to their religion, but also having to negotiate their sexual identities in order to preserve their familial and cultural identity. As per Intersectionality Theory, participants experience oppression as a consequence of these various identities due to the prevalence of heterosexism, traditional values, and pressures from their religion and culture of origin. Each participant expressed their inability to fully disclose their sexual identity due to the fear of losing familial relationships, and bringing shame to their family's name and their own reputation. However, those who did come out only revealed their sexual orientation in certain areas of their lives. As a result, participants are forced to compartmentalize their identities by keeping their sexuality private from certain family members and their community. Leila shared the following when asked about how she experienced her sexual identity in relation to her cultural identity:

Any homosexual acts are frowned upon in my culture. Sexuality isn't even allowed to be expressed. If you're a Muslim, you aren't really allowed to talk about sexuality at least in my family. If anyone found out I was bi-curious and had an experience with a girl, they would tell my family right away. My family would send me to the mosque and make me pray against these thoughts. Kinda like Islamic rehab like you might say. I'd be excluded from my community.

When asked to elaborate on her apprehensiveness, Leila explained that it is her fear of negatively affecting her family's name as well as her social status that prevents her from further exploring her bi-curiosity: "If I was to tell people I liked women too...it would mean I have a lot to lose...like my family. I'd have to be fully independent."

Like Leila, Irene's narrative account of her experience also highlighted a similar experience with homosexuality not being considered a norm in her culture, and how her identity and values do not meet the expectations of her heritage culture:

In the Latino culture there is still this macho concept: you go to school, you marry someone, have his kids, take care of the house and work, and that is all. When I tell people I don't want kids they just won't believe it ..and it's not because I am gay it's just that I don't want them. To people from Latin-American countries, it seems that women are only worth something if they have children or a husband to look after. So now picture this...a Latina covered with tattoos who wants no children and on top of it all, a lesbian...Red Flag.

Irene then shared her dismay at having to conceal her sexual identity from certain individuals in her family and community, and that she still feels as if she is "betraying" her family for being a lesbian. Although she mentions that she has accepted her sexual identity, Irene further expressed

the burden of having to conceal her true self: “The scar tissue is something I have to live with— all of those lies, those years hiding how I truly felt and also fighting against such feelings.”

Anissa reported the importance of concealing her sexual identity in order to preserve both her family, culture, and career as a famous musician and actress in Indonesia:

In Indonesian culture, it [homosexuality] isn't as accepted, and I never had any girlfriends even though inside I wanted to explore but I had to hide it. It isn't as accepted there and because of my job, I wasn't able to because if people found out I was gay I would lose my job and people would hate me. It's dangerous back home because I'd get blacklisted from my family. When I go back to Indonesia to visit, I still have to live two lives.

While reflecting on each narrative, it is clear that all three LGBTQQ immigrants express similar feelings in relation to their family, culture, and sexuality. In addition to the role of religion and culture reinforcing heterosexuality as the norm and traditional gender role expectations, each participant emphasizes the importance of preserving family relations even if it means refraining from expressing their sexual identity and keeping it separate from their familial ties. Leila expresses that her primary concern of coming out as bisexual would mean “disgracing her family” and being “disowned” and therefore, has not come out to anyone in her life.

Anissa and Irene, on the other hand, share the hardships they faced when coming out to their family. Irene shared her experience in disclosing her immediate family's reaction and said “My dad exploded, he said he didn't want a dyke living under his roof and my mom took me to a shrink. They didn't kick me out, but our family dynamic changed”. She then further shared how her parent's used biblical scriptures as a means to justify their rationale for not accepting her sexuality: “My mom often gave me these lectures about how it was written in the Bible that

women can only be romantically and sexually involved with men. Leviticus was a big part of those conversations—I just sat there pretending to be listening and that went on for months, even years”.

Like Irene’s experience, Anissa’s father’s immediate reaction was also influenced by his religious beliefs towards homosexuality: “My dad was shocked when I came out because he’s very religious and to him, it was a sin. I told my dad if he really loves me, he needs to accept me but he said *I can’t*.” Fortunately, Anissa mentioned that her siblings supported her and with time her parents accepted her sexual identity; however, she still keeps her sexuality secret from her extended family and those outside her home in Indonesia, but is openly gay in Canada which she indicated “feels like freedom! And you don’t need to hide everything and no fears”. Anissa’s sexual expression changed post-immigration and she considers ‘being out’ as a positive thing whereas, Irene feels the “same” and remains as “private” in Canada about her sexual identity as she did in her homeland. Irene outlined the following reasons as her rationale for not being open about her sexuality post-immigration:

There’s always the possibility that there might be consequences, so I’d rather stay quiet about it. And by consequences, I mean discrimination, rejection, even violence or abuse, so no thanks, I don’t need that. I’d rather mind my own business.

It is interesting to note the differing perspectives associated with coming out among the participants. To Anissa, having the ability to be open about her sexuality is considered both a positive and empowering experience whereas, Irene and Leila view coming out in a more negative light due to the possible consequences of being rejected and discriminated by those inside and outside their homes. However, whether or not they remained closeted, each participant still endures the internal struggles of having to compartmentalize their identities by denying their sexual identity

in all or certain areas of their lives due to the family members who remain opposed to homosexuality.

All three participants expressed their concerns of losing their family and cultural community as a result of being open about their sexuality and those who have come out, were only able to in certain areas in their lives. Each individual mentioned how coming out would negatively affect their family's reputation and lead to rejection by both their family and their community. Anissa, being a famous public figure in Indonesia, also mentions the importance of keeping her sexual orientation private, otherwise it would not only result in loss of family but also cost her her career. Both Leila and Irene mention how identifying with anything other than heterosexual orientation has no place in the heteronormative outlook and traditional gender expectations of their cultures. Irene expresses sadness in having to hide her sexual identity and lie while having the sense that she is continuously betraying her family for being a lesbian. Yet, despite the hardships faced by each participant, it is evident that the importance family and upholding cultural values is a strongly embedded in each participant's identity and therefore, each conceals their sexual identity either all or in certain parts of their lives as a means to preserve their family, culture, and religious selves. Therefore, living a separate or double life so to speak, seems to be the only option in navigating the multiple identity markers.

Literature pertaining to LGBTQ immigrants places emphasis on the multifaceted conflicts that exist when attempting to navigate through multiple worlds relating to culture, family, and religion due to the specific gender role expectations existing in their patriarchal cultures and having to fulfill the roles expected from their family (Boulden, 2009). This in turn creates a dilemma for those identifying as LGBTQ due to the fear of disappointing family, losing familial relationships, as well as bringing shame to their family's name and hence, not

allowing them to disclose their sexual orientation (Fukst et al., 2018). Family is regarded as essential among LGBTQQ immigrants and in most cultures, homosexual desires are often kept private in order to preserve such despite the identity divide it causes (Boulden, 2009).

#### **Theme 4 – Post-Immigration Experience: Integration Stressors and Bicultural Blending**

A commonality that each participant shared when immigrating to Canada were the hardships mainly associated with language barriers, racism, culture shock, and financial difficulties. Although certain participants immigrated for the purpose of seeking refuge from their country of origin and to have better opportunities, they were still faced with various challenges with regard to integrating to Western dominant culture. Discussions surrounding immigrant identity emerged primarily when discussing the experience of having to adjust to Canadian society. Leila shared the difficulties of attending a white dominant school and how the language barrier led to feelings of exclusion as a result of racism in educational institutions. She describes:

When I first came to Canada, I was 14. At the time I spoke very little English. I did experience a lot of...I felt like I was kind of outcasted. When I was in high school a lot of girls picked on me because I didn't know how to communicate what I wanted. However, I had to deal with it, I had no friends at the time but eventually overcame that by studying. Grade 9 or 10 was a nightmare. The school that I went to was all white people.

Along with her social struggles, Leila also mentioned the financial difficulties her and her family experienced post-immigration and how she had to support her family by working long hours after attending school. She also reminisced about the time when her family did not face such

stressors: “Before coming to Canada we were well off back home. My family was financially stable. We didn’t have the same problems back home as we do here”.

Similarly, Irene also disclosed experience with the language barrier along with financial struggles. She shared:

When I first came here [to Canada] I didn’t speak the language, I thought, *what have I done?* I am totally alone in this foreign country, I don’t know anyone. I have no idea how these people behave and worst of all, I have to sort my documents out and spend all the late nights working. Looking back I see that leaving my country, [Venezuela] was the right call. When I was planning to leave, the situation was unbearable—[there was] no food, no medicine, no power, no water, no gas. Being gay is not socially acceptable there—no holding hands, no kisses, no public displays of affection, and I want to be with my girlfriend, as a couple so it was a no brainer for me. I had to find a way to get out before things got worse and I made it.

It is apparent that a motivating factor for Irene’s decision to immigrate to Canada was not only due to the conditions of her country but also due to the intolerance of homosexuality in her country. However, she expressed her dismay in leaving her family, friends, and partner in the conditions of her homeland: “Loneliness has become a regular in my life—I struggle with it”.

Irene also expresses the heartbreak in watching the recent news of what is happening in her homeland not being able to “put them in a bag and bring them [her family] with me”. However, despite the hardships of adjusting to a new life and a new country by herself, Irene is grateful to have the ability to help her family from afar.

Anissa’s story, however, takes a more positive turn despite the language barrier because of her sister, who already resided in Canada before she decided to immigrate. Anissa further

disclosed that the main contributing factor to her culture shock when immigrating was the tolerance of homosexuality:

When I came to Canada, I had culture shock because it's different here—like you're allowed to be gay here and celebrate pride. Even though I live here, I still feel shy holding a girl's hand in public because of how I had to hide back home. I also had troubles with the language because of the English barrier. I never felt any discrimination though, but it was hard to understand things because of the language barrier.

Fortunately, Anissa mentioned that she did not experience discrimination for her sexual orientation; however, it's interesting to note that although she is out in Canada, she still feels hesitant to show public displays of affection with another female as a result of having to abstain from any same-sex activity in public in her home country. Given her successful public career in Indonesia, I inquired as to why she decided to immigrate to Canada and she responded with, "Because being gay, I didn't want to hide and live that way in secret all my life. I was scared I'd lose my job as an actress...I was on tv shows I was too scared about what people would think about me—what they would say about me back home." It is evident that in both Anissa and Irene's narratives, freedom of sexual expression influenced their desire to leave their countries of origin.

Leila, on the other hand, does not feel comfortable expressing her sexuality post-immigration regardless of Canada's social acceptance of homosexuality as a result of her cultural and religious upbringing:

"I wasn't open to anything at all. I didn't even know what masturbation was. I was very sheltered at home so sexual expression wasn't really an option. Dating wasn't even an option. My parents were like, *just because white people are*

*dating doesn't mean you can or have to. It's like you come to Canada and you are allowed to question it [sexuality], but you're still scared because of your own culture."*

The above excerpt demonstrates the interplay of two cultures taking place; Leila must navigate her own culture—that has a more conservative outlook on sexuality—all the while, integrating to Western culture which is more tolerant in terms of sexuality. Leila's passage illustrates the possible cultural conflict that takes place when two cultural identities are incompatible (Manzi et al., 2014).

The multiple stressors faced by LGBTQQ First-generation Canadians in relation to immigration are twofold. On one hand, they must navigate the multilayered discrepancies associated with their intersecting sexual, cultural and religious identities. On the other hand, LGBTQQ First-generation Canadians must navigate through the multiple oppressions and stressors of migration, including the interplay of racism and homophobia, along with acculturative stress, social isolation, financial stress, and a shift in how sexual identity along with other identities are experienced post immigration (Chen & Vollick, 2013; Espin, 1997; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga & Szapocznik, 2010 as cited in Choubak, 2014). As a result of the psychological adjustments due to the conflict between multiple identities, LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians are also prone to substance abuse, suicide, and high-risk behaviours (Clements-Nolle et al. 2001; Frost and Bastone 2007; Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; McCabe et al. 2010; Meyer 2003; as cited by Ghabrial, 2017). It is also interesting to note the psychological adjustment among immigrants that impacts their self-esteem, life satisfaction, and mental health due to having a bicultural identity (Manzi et al., 2014). Having to mediate the influences of the multiple cultural identification, including the cultural baggage of their country or origin while

also integrating to the culture of the country they immigrated to, also influences the well-being among this particular population (Manzi et al., 2014).

### **Theme 5 – Reluctance to Seek Help from Social Services**

Several factors were mentioned when asked if participants have ever sought to receive any social support to assist or lessen the implications caused by their incompatible identities. Each participant disclosed the reasoning for their reluctance towards accessing available social services. Irene mentioned that in the past, before immigrating to Canada, her mother “forced” her to receive support from mental health professionals when she disclosed her sexuality to her parents:

I saw three psychologists, and one psychiatrist but none of them helped. They didn’t seem to care about my feelings—their sole interest seemed to be to brainwash me into their religious beliefs.

When asked if she would or has ever sought to receive support now that she lives in Canada, she stated the following:

I haven’t, no. Mostly because who has time for that when you have to put food on the table? Haha...No but honestly, I haven’t because I feel that it wouldn’t help me at all to talk to social services about it, I don’t know what I am going to encounter. What if I do and I find myself listening to someone yap about how my life would be better if I decided to be straight, or that all I need is to find Jesus in my heart and he will help me find a good husband to take care of me and cure my illness. No thanks, I [would] rather deal with my own issues.

Irene's disinclination to seek support for her identity incongruence stems from lack of time and her belief that mental health professionals will only cause more damage by forcing their religious beliefs on her to convince her that her sexuality is an illness as they did in her homeland a long time ago. She goes on by mentioning:

Religion shouldn't be a weapon and I believe many people use it as such. I am tired of people trying to force me into their religion. It's fine if you believe in something and it makes you happy, but that doesn't give you the right to shove it into other people's faces. Aid should be available for everyone who needs it, but we all know that is not the case

Similarly, Anissa also shared that she has never sought to receive support but instead decided to deal with her challenges on her own. She disclosed, "No, I never did. I don't feel like I need to. I dealt with things by myself." Leila disclosed that her hesitance to seek social support is due to her unwillingness to accept her sexuality and her impression that social workers and counsellors won't fully understand her situation or change her reality. Leila shares:

I've thought about it [accessing social services] but I just didn't.... I'm just...I don't know I'm scared of what's going to happen. Maybe I just don't want to face it—my sexuality. I'm scared to face it. I'd rather just forget about it and block those memories since its easier. I mean I know social workers and counsellors should put their own beliefs aside, but I don't know if they would understand my situation and even if they did, like then what? I don't think that would really change the situation.

When I asked Leila to elaborate why she felt a counsellor or social worker wouldn't understand her situation or be helpful, she said:

If they tell me to come out, I can't express myself freely because [Arab people] are expected to act in a certain manner. There are social and religious and cultural expectations to uphold, and being bisexual is not an option whatsoever. If I came out...my family and community would disown me. I'd be such a disgrace to my family. Like what do I say? I would just say I have suppressed my sexuality because of my upbringing and the way I was raised, and I don't think a random social worker is going to understand that. Plus, if I went down that path how would I face it? Even in my heterosexual relationships, I can't even talk about my boyfriend at home let alone a girlfriend. I don't really think talking to a worker who doesn't understand my culture...or my life is going to change much.

In all three narratives, it is apparent that each participant has the impression that social supports would not be beneficial. Irene has a more negative outlook on social support as a result of her previous experience with mental healthcare in her country of origin; Anissa believes that she has already resolved her challenges on her own; and lastly, Leila feels as though she is not ready to face her sexuality and that professionals would not be able to understand or assist her because of their inability to fully comprehend her culture. Thus, all three take a more autonomous approach when dealing with the struggles that arise as a result of their incompatible intersecting identities.

Chang-Muy & Congress (2016) state that the main challenge practitioners in social service settings face is lacking knowledge relating to law and cultural competence. Furthermore, social workers who are in affiliation with religious or ethnic institutions that may be able to provide more culturally-competent services, are more likely to be viewed with caution by LGBTQQ immigrants as a result of those whose communities persecuted or discriminated

against them in their home country (Chang-Muy & Congress, 2016). Immigrants are generally likely to underuse health service for discrimination reasons whereas, LGBTQQ immigrants are faced with additional barriers to accessing these services due to their minority status and sexual orientation (Giwa & Chaze, 2018).

Similar to this study, Boulden (2009) conducted research based on gay Hmong and the challenges faced when navigating multiple conflicting identities including religion, culture, and sexuality, and the role of social workers. Certain participants spoke of the need for the incorporation of more culturally-competent organizations and mentioned that although Western gay/lesbian support services are better than nothing, they do not address the multiple intersections of oppression and challenges that arise among LGBTQQ immigrants (Boulden, 2009).

Various studies also place emphasis on the need for therapeutic implications related to dealing with culturally diverse LGBTQQ clients with deeply ingrained beliefs that are in conflict or less tolerant to gay lifestyles to not be ignored (Meladze & Brown, 2015). Aside from the cultural friction, appropriate support to aid the conflict resulting from religious wounds should also be prioritized. Stone (2013), and Rosenkrantz et al., (2016) reveal that religion is a challenging subject for therapists and that LGBTQQ clients rarely seek therapy for their religious trauma thus, the effects are generally discovered and still felt overtime. Therefore, there is a high need for effective therapeutic interventions to be established in addressing religious implications. Clinicians must proactively and intentionally educate themselves about religious and cultural implications in order to empower and strengthen religious LGBTQQ individuals who are victim of stigma and discrimination (Rosenkrantz et al., 2016; Stone 2013).

## CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The narratives of each LGBTQQ-first generation Canadian in this study illustrated the interwoven challenges that arise from their seemingly contradictory intersectional identities. The first-hand account of each participant sheds light on the tension associated with sexual identity and religious expectations, and their personal journey to reconcile both domains all while having to preserve their culture and family relations. The intricacies of having to cope with what are considered to be the two most complex domains, each individual expressed the enormous strain and inner challenges of having to cope and resolve the burden of their identity incongruity. As a response to the opposition of identities, the denial of the sexual self in order to embrace religious identity or embracing sexual identity by discarding or significantly reducing religiosity, seem to be the only resolutions among the participants.

In addition, the participants who were interviewed for this study also expressed the hardships associated with having to conform to their family/home cultural values that do not recognize homosexuality; the emphasis placed on traditional gender roles and conservative religious values, leaves participants with no choice but to compartmentalize their sexual identity. For each individual, staying in the closet and having to self-conceal in certain areas of their lives seems to be the only option in order to prevent loss of family ties, protect personal and familial reputation, and to avoid stigma and discrimination. Unfortunately, the challenges do not end here for LGBTQQ-first generation Canadians as they must also deal with various post-immigration stressors related to finances, racism, language barriers, isolation, discrimination, and adapting to Western culture. With that said, findings from this study hold several implications for social work practice with this particular population.

## **Implications for Social Work Practice**

There is a pressing need to recognize the intersectional identities of immigrants, particularly those belonging to sexual minorities who must negotiate their ethno-religious and sexual identities. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the insufficient research pertaining to LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians is concerning as this particular population is faced with higher levels of stress in comparison to their Canadian counterparts due to the overwhelming multilayered stressors aforementioned above. Therefore, further exploration is crucial in order to fully comprehend the existing barriers and distress relative to the interplay of each intersecting identity. The negligence of research on LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians and the multiple oppressions they undergo has further created a barrier in the establishment of suitable aids and programs for this marginalized population. By furthering the scholarship, social work practice can establish and implement interventions that are both customized and culturally-adapted for this underrepresented population. This is essential as the findings presented in this study and relevant literature illustrate the clear distinctions between foreign-born LGBTQQ individuals in comparison to those who are Canadian-born, and how they understand their sexual identity through both a cultural and religious lens. A poor understanding of such discrepancies will not only lead to further marginalization of this population but will also contribute to their reluctance to seek support in the first place, as demonstrated by participants in this study.

That being said, in order for services and programs to be successful, there is a need for ally work to be incorporated in creating both culturally and religiously-adapted interventions specifically geared towards the needs of this population. For instance, having LGBTQQ-affirming religious organizations and clinical social workers join forces would produce an integrative framework that assists in the reframing and restructuring how religious LGBTQQ

individuals understand their sexual identity with regards to their religious identity. This can assist in minimizing the experience of inner conflict and the effects on mental health. Considering the continuous need to evolve and re-negotiate sexual and religious identity among this particular population as demonstrated by the participants in this study, as Shnoor (2006) suggested, taking an approach that recognizes the fluidity of identity formation is more ideal as opposed to creating a framework that supports the notion that identities are fixed. By doing so, clinical social workers assisting LGBTQQ service users with the interpersonal challenges stemming from religion will be well-equipped in intervening religiously charged distress while having the ability to develop strategies that utilize one's religion as a source of strength rather than oppression. This is an important component due to the fact that addressing religious harm tends to be difficult for clinical professionals (Stone, 2014).

Findings from various studies and from the participants in this study, demonstrate the major role religion plays among faithful LGBTQQ individuals and their continuous desire to still remain followers of their faith despite the hardships and oppression organized religion has perpetuated in their lives. Considering the significance religion plays among the lives of many LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians, both clinical and community-level social workers could assist in connecting clients to LGBTQQ-affirming religious houses of worship (mosques, churches, temples, etc.) to further promote a sense of community among LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians, whilst maintaining a relationship with God and their faith in a safe and accepting space.

Another important aspect to take into consideration is the urgency for culturally-informed and appropriate services. Service providers, especially those who facilitate mainstream LGBTQQ programs, would greatly benefit from becoming educated and trained on cultural

sensitivity and the differing views on sexuality among various cultures. In doing so, they would become well-appointed and informed when assisting LGBTQQ immigrants and implement appropriate strategies to respond to the challenges associated with their intersecting identities. By collaborating with first-generation sexual minorities and settlement services, social workers providing LGBTQQ services would be able to create and deliver a more inclusive and multicultural program for sexual minority immigrants and refugees.

It is also important to note that as newcomers, LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians may not be aware of LGBTQQ-friendly services that are offered in their area and therefore, raising awareness through campaigns, school curriculums, public places (visuals), newspapers, and information regarding resources should also be included in the standard information packages immigrants receive upon arrival. This would reinforce the message that LGBTQQ immigrants are welcome in Canada and thus, assist in the socializing this population in both the general and LGBTQQ community (Fuks et al., 2018). It is also worth mentioning that each participant in this study expressed the difficulties experienced as a result of the language barrier post-immigration. This means, hiring more culturally diverse and bilingual staff in social work organizations would be beneficial in order to better assist in oral and written communication with foreign-born service users.

### **Future Research Recommendations**

As mentioned earlier, more research is needed concerning the experiences of LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians. Enriching the scholarship on the topics of sexual orientation, intersectional identity negotiation, and cultural-integration viewed through a cross-cultural lens, would assist in the further exploration of the intricate relationship between the seemingly mutually-exclusive identities LGBTQQ immigrants embody. There is also scarce research

regarding transgender first-generation Canadians due to the focal point primarily being gay males; therefore, I suggest that further research include a larger sample size of those identifying as transgender to gain insight of the nuanced experiences of identity negotiation, post-migration experiences, and any additional barriers they may face. Expanding on literature based on LGBTQ first-generation Canadians will benefit the development of properly informed services exclusively targeted for this population to promote well-being and integration.

According to relevant research and findings from this study, it is evident that family plays a prominent role in the lives of LGBTQ first-generation Canadians. Participants in this study identified the challenges of heterosexism and traditional gender roles in their culture of origin, resulting in a sense of displacement from their community by having to conceal their sexual identity due to fear of bringing shame to their family and losing familial relations. Aligning with Choubak's (2014) study, potential research geared towards understanding how first-generation parents understand their child's sexual orientation would be extremely valuable in discovering the underlying factors that influence their attitudes, perceptions, and challenges associated with their child's sexual identity. This in turn, would assist in the further development of family-centered services that could ease familial conflict and consequently, alleviate stress for both the family members along with the LGBTQ individual. Bridging this gap in mental health services provision to LGBTQ first-generation Canadians is critical. Both available research and this scholarship are consistent with the notion that familial and cultural values play a vital role in shaping how LGBTQ immigrants understand their sexual identity. Further, inadequate information on religious LGBTQ adherent to non-Abrahamic religions is an indication that further exploration is also necessary.

## Conclusion

Within each story lies the puzzling struggle of living in a single body while embodying contrasting identities—several pieces that do not quite fit. Yet we continuously reassemble and rearrange pieces of ourselves desperate to fill the in-between spaces only to find our edges worn. Worn by the instilled heteronormative and homonegative discourses that dichotomize our religious self from our sexual self. Through the use of each narrative, this study reveals how religious LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians piece together the dichotomies of their religious, ethnic, and sexual identities to form a whole—leading a life of compartmentalization, a denial of self in certain areas. In other words, staying in the closet in the name of God and to satisfy familial expectations is the reality for many even if it feels unnatural and unbearable. Greek philosopher Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave'(1943) describes a world where being enclosed from the outside seems to be a safer option than being exposed to what is to come on the other side of the door. For many, opening the door momentarily for little bit of breathing room, but not enough to completely clean out the skeletons in the closet, is the only way. In addition to the interpersonal challenges, this population is also concurrently faced with post-immigration stressors while adapting to Western culture.

In sum, in terms of the previously posed questions: *How do LGBTQQ First-generation Canadians navigate their sexual identity and their religious identity? How can we develop interventions that support healing or sense of wholeness by bridging and harmonizing two identity markers?* Well for starters, a strenuous effort needs to be made in literature in order to represent this underrepresented population in order to address the complex array of obstacles that arise when sexual identity goes against religious and cultural expectations, alongside their newcomer status. Developing an intervention that is both culturally-sensitive and encourages

religious engagement would be highly beneficial considering the strong sense of cultural identity and the notable sense of yearning this population still has for a divine force. This would allow for the aid in internal acceptance among LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians whilst, integrating their faith as a tool of strength rather than a form of oppression. Furthermore, incorporating family-centered services would be advantageous due to the strong sense of family values this population holds. So, what do we do when coexisting in multiple worlds yet belonging to none? Considering the importance both hold, bridging the two worlds is the best option.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: Consent Form



SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK FACULTY OF COMMUNITY SERVICES  
*Accredited by the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work*

#### Consent Agreement

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Please read this consent form so that you understand what your participation will involve. Before you consent to participate, please ask any questions to be sure you understand what your participation will involve.

#### **INTERSECTIONAL INVISIBILITY: NAVIGATING THROUGH SEXUAL IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AMONG LGBTQQ FIRST-GENERATION CANADIANS** **INVESTIGATORS:**

This research study is being conducted by Tanja Ivic, supervised by Dr. Samantha Wehbi, from the School of Social Work, at Ryerson university.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Tanja Ivic at [tivic@ryerson.ca](mailto:tivic@ryerson.ca) or Samantha Wehbi at [swehbi@ryerson.ca](mailto:swehbi@ryerson.ca).

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:**

This study is designed to explore the ways in which various identities held by religious LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians can lead to a sexual and religious identity conflict experienced during the process of integrating into Western culture. For this study, identities represent social categorizations including race, gender and class, etc. and their complex nature of their relationships. This study specifically focuses on the relationship between sexuality and religion that often puts LGBTQQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning) first-generation Canadians in a position of marginalization—affecting their ability to fully integrate within society.

The study will interview 3-4 participants. Participants will be first-generation Canadians that identify as LGBTTTQQ and are 18 years of age and older. Participants must currently live in the Greater Toronto Area. This project is being conducted as a part of the researcher's graduate studies for the partial completion of her Master's degree.

### **WHAT YOU WILL BE ASKED TO DO:**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

#### **One-on-One Interview**

- In a one-on-one interview session with the researcher, you will be asked to share the experiences and stories of your accounts of sexual and religious identities, and your experience with acculturation to Western culture
- The expected duration of the interview is two hours; however, the participant will be able to determine how long they are comfortable in talking for and can take a break or stop the interview altogether if need be
- The interview will take place in a setting that ensures privacy and a safe space for participants
- Participants can expect interview questions such as the following:
  1. What has your 'coming out' experience been like?
  2. Please describe your experiences with your identified sexual orientation and your religious identity.
  3. Do/did you feel any challenges in navigating through your cultural identity and your sexual orientation?
  4. What supports have you experienced in navigating through your cultural identity and your sexual orientation?

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS:**

Potential benefits include the opportunity for participants to share their experiences of navigating through multiple identity markers including; religion, culture and sexual identity. Participation in this study will also further the literature of LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians and increase the awareness of any existing needs within social work where there is an insufficiency in providing support services for this particular group. However, the researcher cannot guarantee that you will receive any personal benefits from participating in this study. The research may be used for future publications, presentations, and workshops.

### **WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISKS TO YOU AS A PARTICIPANT:**

Participants may experience some discomfort due to questions asked about personal experiences regarding acculturation and their sexual, cultural and religious identities. Answering questions about these experiences may be difficult and may result in psychological discomfort including feeling upset or uncomfortable. A resource list of support services will also be provided at the beginning of the interview. Although there is low/minimal risk of personal identity revealed, measures will be taken to maintain participants' confidentiality unless participants disclose any information demonstrating a risk of harm, there is an ethical responsibility for the researcher to report it. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and refusal to participate will not impact the relationship with the researcher given the dual-role risk. Please note that you can take breaks, decline to answer any question at any time, and/or stop participation, either temporarily or permanently however, please indicate this choice to me by May 1, 2019.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY:**

The gathered data from each participant will remain confidential and measures will be taken to protect your identity. Pseudonyms (fake names) will be assigned to participants and any other identifying information will be censored.

Any information provided by you will only be viewed by the researcher and their supervisor; however, no identifying information will be shared. Identifying information will not be accessible to any other parties.

### **DATA STORAGE:**

The interview will be audio recorded on a password-protected audio recorder. The audio will then be transferred to a password-protected computer and, at this time, the audio file on the recorder will be destroyed. The audio file will be deleted from the password-protected on this computer after transcription and verification. Transcripts and participant contact information list will be password protected and destroyed when research has completed.

The transcript will be emailed to you and you will have the ability to review and edit the transcript. The researcher will request participants to return their feedback by email within a week.

Signed consent forms and transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and shredded in one year after the research study has completed.

### **DATA DISSEMINATION**

The data will be transcribed and used for analysis at the researcher's residence on the same password protected computer. The transcripts will be used to produce the researcher's final paper.

The link to Ryerson's Digital Repository is provided below should you decide to access the final results of the study upon completion: <https://digital.library.ryerson.ca/>

### **INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION:**

Incentive to participate in the study will include a \$10 Walmart gift card.

### **COSTS TO PARTICIPATION:**

Full reimbursement of public transportation may be provided at the request of the research participant and provided at the beginning of the interview.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL:**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose whether to be in this study or not. Please do not feel obligated to say yes as there will be no penalties should you decline this offer or choose to withdraw from the study; and refusal to participate will not impact your relationship with me or with Ryerson University. If any questions make you uncomfortable, you can skip that question. You may stop participating at any time and you will still be given incentives and reimbursement as described above. If you choose to stop participating, you may also choose to not have your data included in the study; please indicate this choice to me by May 1, 2019. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with Ryerson University or the investigator, Tanja Ivic, involved in the research.

### **QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY:**

If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact.

Tanja Ivic  
Researcher, MSW Candidate  
[tivic@ryerson.ca](mailto:tivic@ryerson.ca)

Samantha Wehbi  
Supervisor  
[swehbi@ryerson.ca](mailto:swehbi@ryerson.ca)

This study has been reviewed by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in this study please contact:

Research Ethics Board  
c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation  
Ryerson University  
350 Victoria Street  
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3  
416-979-5042  
[rebchair@ryerson.ca](mailto:rebchair@ryerson.ca)

**INTERSECTIONAL INVISIBILITY: NAVIGATING THROUGH SEXUAL IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AMONG LGBTQQ FIRST-GENERATION CANADIANS**

**CONFIRMATION OF AGREEMENT:**

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to participate in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time however, please indicate this choice to me by May 1, 2019. You have been given a copy of this agreement. You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I agree to be audio-recorded for the purposes of this study. I understand how these recordings will be stored and destroyed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX B: Recruitment Email Script



### INTERSECTIONAL INVISIBILITY: NAVIGATING THROUGH SEXUAL IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AMONG LGBTQQ FIRST-GENERATION CANADIANS

Tanja Ivic  
REB: 2018-475

Hello \_\_\_\_\_,

In our last conversation, I mentioned that I am in the process of earning my Master of Social Work degree at Ryerson University. My degree involves the completion of a major research paper and I am excited to invite you to take part in my study!

I am conducting research based on the experiences of first-generation Canadians who identify as: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning. *Just like myself!* In doing so, I hope to gain a deeper insight into the experiences of first-generation Canadians who belong to a sexual minority group. Having had the pleasure of knowing you personally, I am interested in hearing a more detailed account of your experience with your sexual and religious identities. I truly feel your story would help me gain a better understanding of how your experiences were shaped while adapting to Western culture. As you consider participating in my study, I hope you agree that it would be a great opportunity for us to grow considerably closer as friends! If this does not seem like your thing—no pressure! Feel free to pass on this letter on to anyone you may know who is first-generation Canadian and identifies as LGBTQQ, and who may want to share their story.

I am looking for volunteers who are 18 years and older. They have experience with or are dealing with “identity incongruity” in their attempt to freely express their sexual identity while maintaining their religious values. The term “identity incongruity” refers to the identity conflict often experienced by first-generation LGBTQQ persons when religious beliefs clash with sexual orientation during the process of identity formation. The difficulty in reconciling religious beliefs and sexual orientation presents a further challenge for first-generation Canadians whose cultural standards differ from Western culture. I specifically chose to ask you to be part of this study because I feel you would have a unique perspective on this matter being a first-generation LGBTQQ Canadian!

*I'm interested. Now what?* If you decide to say *yes*, no treadmills will be involved during this study, *I promise!* I will simply be conducting a semi-structured audio-recorded interview and

using your story as research to highlight the experiences of the LGBTQQ community. With your help, I hope to recognize and increase the awareness of any existing needs within social work where there is an insufficiency in provide support services for LGBTQQ first-generation Canadians. I want to support and empower you by giving you the opportunity to share your experience in a safe space. The expected duration of the interview is two hours, which I believe would be an ideal length of time to truly understand your story. However, you will determine how long you are comfortable sharing your experience and will also be offered to choose your preferred location for the interview. We could grab a coffee at a public place that offers audio and visual privacy such as Ryerson University or a public library—it is really up to you! Anything that you tell me in confidence will remain in confidence! Research gathered from each participant will remain confidential—you have nothing to worry about!

Participation in this research study is strictly voluntary so please do not feel obligated to say yes as there will be no penalties should you decline this offer or choose to withdraw from the study; and refusal to participate will not impact your relationship with me or with Ryerson University. As a token of my appreciation, should you decide to be part of my study, an incentive to participate will include a \$10 Walmart gift card and full reimbursement of public transportation will be given at the beginning of the interview.

If this study sounds like something you would like to be part of or you have a few questions that need answering, please feel free to contact me at the email provided below. The study is under the supervision of Dr. Samantha Wehbi (swehbi@ryerson.ca); and has been approved by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Sincerely,  
Tanja Ivic, BA, BSW  
School of Social Work at Ryerson University  
tivic@ryerson.ca

## APPENDIX C: Interview Guide

### INTERSECTIONAL INVISIBILITY: NAVIGATING THROUGH SEXUAL IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AMONG LGBTQQ FIRST-GENERATION CANADIANS

Tanja Ivic

#### Interview Guide

##### Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. This interview will be conducted in a semi-structured manner and if you wish to take a break or stop at any moment, please feel free to do so. Since this is your story, there is no set time on how long you need to tell it. I will also be asking you a few questions however, it is not mandatory that you respond to all questions if you do not feel comfortable.

##### Questions:

- 1) As I have described in our initial contact to set up this interview, and in our discussion of the consent form, this is a study about your experiences with your sexual orientation and religion as well as cultural beliefs and experiences.
  - a. Can you tell me a little bit about your experiences with your sexual orientation? (For example, any positive experiences or challenges related to career, family, culture etc.)
  - b. How have your experiences changed (if at all) in terms of your sexual orientation post-immigration? For example, do you feel more or less inclined to express yourself (sexually, religiously and culturally)?
  
- 2) How is your sexual orientation aligned with your religious identity?
  - a. How do you experience the intersection or relationship between your sexual orientation and religious identity?
  - b. How would your religious community view your sexual orientation? What are some positive experiences or challenges in this regard?
  
- 3) How is your sexual orientation aligned with your cultural identity? (prompt for pre and post-immigration experience)
  - a. How do you experience the intersection or relationship between your sexual orientation and cultural identity?
  - b. How would your cultural community view your sexual orientation? What are some positive experiences or challenges in this regard?
  - c. Was your sexual identity more important to you as you emigrated to Canada?

- 4) What have your experiences been in terms of coming out?
  - a. What does that mean to you?
  - b. Have you come out in some areas of your life but not others?
  - c. What was your experience like (prompt for information regarding reactions of family and other social circles)?
  - d. Are there any barriers contributing to your decision to not 'come out'?
  - e. If you did not come out, what are some barriers preventing you do so?
  - f. How has immigration shaped your experiences of coming out, if at all?
  
- 5) What are your support systems like?
  - a. Do you feel that you can express yourself freely (pertaining to all identity markers mentioned above) to your family and other social communities (prompt for any experiences of dual identity, loss of support after coming out)?
  - b. What types of supports do you feel are available or needed in your cultural/religious communities in terms of how you live your sexual orientation?
  - c. Have you ever sought to receive any social services or to connect with other types of social support? If yes, what was your experience like? (Prompt for information about whether or not services met their needs, why they had challenges or positive experiences)

## APPENDIX D: Participant Resources

### LGBTQQ Counselling and Mental Health Services in GTA

<b>Edge West Healthcare for Youth</b> -----	416-652-4363
1900 Davenport Road, Toronto	
<b>Family Service Toronto - David Kelly Services (DKS) Program</b> -----	416-595-9618
128A Sterling Rd Suite 202,	
<b>Hassle Free Clinic – Men/Trans Clinic and Women/Trans Clinic</b> -----	416-922-0566
66 Gerrard St E suite 200, Toronto	
<b>Church Wellesley Health Centre</b> -----	416-463-1500
491 Church S, Toronto	
<b>519 Church Street Community Centre</b> -----	416-392-6874
519 Church St., Toronto	
<b>Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) Support Line</b> --	416-406-6378
<b>Ryerson’s Centre for Student Development &amp; Counselling</b> -----	416-979-5195
<b>www.211toronto.ca</b> -----	1-888-340-1001

## APPENDIX E: Ethics Clearance Certificate



To: Tanja Ivic  
Social Work

Re: REB 2018-475: Intersectional Invisibility: Navigating through Sexual Identity and Religious Identity among LGBTQQ First- Generation Canadians

Date: February 12, 2019

Dear Tanja Ivic,

The review of your protocol REB File REB 2018-475 is now complete. The project has been approved for a one year period. Please note that before proceeding with your project, compliance with other required University approvals/certifications, institutional requirements, or governmental authorizations may be required.

This approval may be extended after one year upon request. Please be advised that if the project is not renewed, approval will expire and no more research involving humans may take place. If this is a funded project, access to research funds may also be affected.

Please note that REB approval policies require that you adhere strictly to the protocol as last reviewed by the REB and that any modifications must be approved by the Board before they can be implemented. Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication from the Principal Investigator as to how, in the view of the Principal Investigator, these events affect the continuation of the protocol.

Finally, if research subjects are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research.

Please quote your REB file number (REB 2018-475) on future correspondence.

Congratulations and best of luck in conducting your research.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Patrizia Albanese". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "P" and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Dr. Patrizia Albanese, PhD  
Chair, Ryerson University Research Ethics Board

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