Published: THE JOURNAL OF RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY & AGING – REVISION


UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOSITY IN THE TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR AGING

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RUNNING HEAD: Spirituality in the Aging Transgender Community

VCU IRB APPROVAL NUMBER: HM10279

KEYWORDS: Abuse, Aging, Faith, Religiosity, Spirituality, Transgender, Transsexual, Violence

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ABSTRACT

We focus on issues arising in the assessment of the religious, spiritual, and faith beliefs and practices of female-to-male (FTM) transgender people, individuals whose natal (genital) sex is female but who now claim a culturally more masculine gender identity. Results are compared to those found in the larger mixed transgender population Transcience Longitudinal Aging Research Study (TLARS). Religiosity/spirituality/faith were measured by the Fetzer Multidimensional Measurement of Religiousness/Spirituality instrument and by the TLARS survey instrument, violence and abuse sub-component. The researchers found that the religious beliefs of the respondents differed so dramatically from the normative Judeo-Christian-Islamic belief systems on which conventional psychometric instruments were based that many of the survey respondents expressed difficulty in completing the religiosity/spirituality/faith component of the survey. The researchers conclude that traditional religiosity/spirituality instruments are not effective for the study of religion/spirituality/faith in both the FTM and more general transgender-identified populations. These findings indicate the need for both a comprehensive ethnographic investigation of FTM religious/spiritual/faith structures and also a re-construction of conventional religiosity/spirituality/faith psychometric instruments more reflective of the life experiences of FTM-declared individuals and more generally the transgender-identified population as a whole.
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The importance of religiosity/spirituality/faith in normative lifecourse aging has been documented by a numerous researchers (Ai, 2000; Birren & Schaie, 2006; Brennan & Heiser, 2004; Daaleman, Perera & Studenski, 2004; Idler, Kasl & Hays, 2001; Kennedy et al., 1996; Krause, 2006ab; Krause & Ellison, 2003; Langer, 2000; MacKinlay & McFadden, 2004; Moberg, 2001; Peacock & Poloma, 1998; Wink, 1999). Levin (1994) points out that religion impacts the well-being of older adults in a number of ways it “reduces the risk of chronic and acute stressors which adversely impact morale, offers cognitive or institutional frameworks, such as coherence or order or meaning that buffer stress and facilitate coping, provides concrete social resources, such as religious fellowship and congregational networks and enhances internal psychological resources such as self-esteem and feelings of worthiness.”

The gerontological and geriatric literature supports the argument that social conditions (Kraaj et al., 2002; Kubzamsky, Berkman, & Seeman, 2000), social network support (Lyyra & Heikkenen, 2006; Pinquart & Sorenson, 2000; Grossman, D’Augelli, & Hershberger, 2000), racial identity (Anderson et al., 2004; Smedley et al., 2003), socio-economic status (Rautio, Heikkinen & Heikkinen, 2001), and even social role (Krause & Shaw, 2000) can all have significant impact, positively or negatively, on mortality, morbidity, health status, depression prevalence, overall psychological well-being (Zhang & Hayward, 2001), successful aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1997), and numerous other life course outcomes that are of current importance in the Healthy People 2010 Project (Healthy People 2010, 2000). The results of these studies can be briefly summarized as follows: the lower the income, the less social support (e.g., friends, spiritual activity, supporting organizations, neighbors upon whom one can depend), the less habitable the social conditions (isolation, poor environment), the less education, the higher the risk for psychological dysfunction, long-term poor quality of life, poor health status, increased morbidity and mortality, and reduced
likelihood of being “a successful ager” in the sense of the MacArthur Foundation’s Successful Aging Project (Crowther et al., 2002; Tornstam, 2005; Kaye, 2005; Parker et al., 2002; Reuters, 2006; Rowe & Kahn, 1997). Also, important to successful aging are the effects of both perceived and actual violence and abuse across the lifespan (Witten, 2004).

Religiosity/spirituality/faith have also been demonstrated to have significant impact in near end of life and end of life struggles (Belongia & Witten, 2006; Krause, 2003; Krause & Ellison, 2003; Witten, 2002b; Idler et al., 2001; Daaleman & VandeCreek, 2000). Literature dealing with fear of death (Cicirelli, 2002); palliative care (Keay, 1999), family and significant others (Haley et al., 2002), terminal illness (McGrath, 2003) and Alzheimer’s Disease (Stuckey, 2001) demonstrates the diverse impact and importance of both an individual’s as well as a family’s religiosity/spirituality/faith during the later and last stages of life. However, little work has been done on the effects of religiosity/spirituality/faith as mitigators of the long-term, age-related effects of perceived/actual violence and abuse in and against highly stigmatized minority populations (Creighton, 2001; Sisk, 2006; Witten, 2004); in particular, we speak of the world-wide, transgender and intersex-identified populations.

With the worldwide number of transgender-identified individuals on the rise (Witten, 2003) and the highly stigmatized nature of the transgender-identity in many countries (Witten & Eyler, 1999, 2007ab; Witten & Whittle, 2004), coupled with the elevated degree of violence and abuse suffered by many members of these populations (Gender Education & Advocacy, 2005; Herek et al., 2002; Lombardi et al., 2001; Sisk, 2006; Witten & Eyler, 1999), the importance of understanding religion/spirituality/faith effects in mitigating the effects of perceived and actual violence and abuse across the lifespan in these populations is particularly important for healthcare practitioners, spirituality-based counselors and therapists, and Social Workers (Greene, 1986; Kaye, 2005, Reese, 2001; Tirrito, 2000), as well as elder care facilities staff (Witten, 2002b, 2005b;
We begin with a brief overview of transgender identities.

**Brief Overview of Transgender Identities**

Transgender is a term used broadly “to describe people who transcend the conventional boundaries of gender, irrespective of physical status or sexual orientation” (Feldman & Bockting, 2003). The term is used to refer to groups such as transsexuals, cross-dressers, drag queens, drag kings, and gender queers, as well as myriad other members of the “gender community (Sims, 2007; Witten & Eyler, 1999; Witten et al., 2003).” While the exact number of transgender-identified individuals is difficult to estimate, an international survey administered by Witten and Eyler (1999) found that 8% of the TLAR survey respondents identified their gender identity as something other than completely feminine or masculine. Based upon these estimates, Witten (2003) projected a range of 4.1-12.3 million elder transgender-identified persons (65 years and older) worldwide. Her work did not include the various cultural variations of transgender discussed in Witten and Eyler (2007ab) and is therefore likely to underestimate the actual size of the global elder transgender-identified population.

Within the diverse collection of gendered identities, one of the most invisible is the female-to-male (FTM)-identified population. FTMs are individuals whose natal (genital) sex is female but who now self-profess a more culturally masculine gender identity. FTMs sometimes, but not always, adopt a more culturally normative masculine gender expression through aesthetic, cosmetic, hormonal, and/or surgical means. Several other identity labels falling within the FTM category are transman, man-born-woman (MBW), as well as numerous others.
SPIRITUALITY, RELIGIOSITY AND FAITH IN MINORITY POPULATIONS

Application of Religiosity/Spirituality/Faith Measures to Minority Populations

Many researchers (Nagayama Hall, 2001; Campesino & Swartz, 2006) have expressed doubts about the applicability and efficacy of conventional psychometric instruments for studying minority populations; particularly those groups with histories of stigmatization and discrimination. This is clearly appropriate to the transgender and intersex-identified populations. Nagayama Hall (2001) describes these conventional research methods as having given rise to “empirically supported therapies” (ESTs). Despite their effectiveness in treating certain disorders in the general population, they are only empirically applicable to “ethnic minority persons... who are acculturate, speak English, are educated, are not socio-economically disadvantaged, are not strongly identified with ethnic minority cultures, and have not experiences much discrimination and disenfranchisement” (Nagayama Hall, 2001, p. 502).

Often researchers opt to simply replace the conventional Euro-Caucasian vocabulary of an EST with more culturally appropriate vernacular; taking an “etic approach” that emphasizes the universality of psychological conditions. However, Nagayama Hall advocates for the creation of “culturally-sensitive therapies” (CSTs) which factor into both the language and methodology a minority population’s unique life experiences, historic discrimination, historic/systemic disenfranchisement, and cultural influences, thereby avoiding reductionist findings.

The ineffectiveness of conventional psychometric instruments also appears to apply to the religious beliefs of ethnic minority populations which are not necessarily identical to those of European, middle class people, on which many of these instruments were normed (Nagayama Hall, 2001). Even when researchers attempt to create instruments that are reflective of contemporary religious plurality (King et al., 2001), they often rely heavily on majority religious traditions (e.g., Christianity and Judaism) and/or conventional concepts within Euro-Caucasian
religious discourse (e.g., monotheism, after life, near death experience, divine anthropomorphism). We shall momentarily demonstrate that this type of approach portents significant problems, when dealing with the transgender-identified community. By means of example, consider the following.

Conventional research instruments, normed on Euro-Caucasian Judeo Christian followers, are not applicable in Latina/o populations who do identify themselves as Catholic because of the incorporation of cultural principles such as personalismo and familismo (respectively, intimate connections with other people and with one’s immediate family), and the use of pre-colonial symbolism (e.g., Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe) that is not present in the same manner or degree in European Catholicism (Campesino & Schwartz, 2006). An instrument that measured religiosity only as it is configured in European civilizations would not adequately assess or examine this branch of Latina/o spirituality/religiosity/faith. “Simply translating items in questionnaires from English to Spanish is not sufficient if the underlying concepts of the questionnaire are reflective of dominant Anglo-European, individualist perspectives (Campesino & Schwartz, 2006).”

In response to some of these issues, some researchers have attempted to create various culturally sensitive/alternative instruments (i.e., Adel-Khalek, 2004; Daaleman et al., 2002; Hatch et al., 1998; Hays et al., 2001; Horn et al., 2003; Krause, 2002b; MacKinley & McFadden, 2004; Reker, 2001b). However, none of these instruments has been normed on the transgender or the intersex-identified populations worldwide. And even if they were, it is highly likely that they would not accurately reflect the religious/spiritual/faith experiences of these populations, given their diversity and frequently non-traditional nature.

Application to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQI) Populations

A similar phenomenon of unique religious orientation has been observed in populations of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) Christians. “In response to heterosexist and unwelcoming [religious] communities, LGB-affirming faiths have evolved, either by altering traditional faith
doctrine to be inclusive (e.g., Dignity for LGB Catholics) or creating entirely new faiths specifically serving the LGB community (e.g., the Metropolitan Community Church” (Lease et al., 2005, p. 379)

A recent study by Sullivan-Blum (2004) further illustrates this evolution and conglomerator of religious identity as well as the diversity of religious expression in LGB populations. Sullivan-Blum ethnographically examines the religious practices and spiritual beliefs of four drag queens, all of whom identify as gay men. Given the FTM survey’s operational umbrella definition of “transgender,” it is also possible to use of this label to describe the gender components of these four individuals’ identities who have collectively experienced a variety of Protestant upbringings and anti-gay congregational attitudes. The four respond to this homophobia in different ways. One stopped attending church altogether, still calls himself a Christian, but legitimizes his gay drag queen identity by drawing on the Native American third-gender concept of “Two Spirit People” (Jacobs, Thomas & Lang, 1997; Sullivan-Blum, 2004; Witten & Eyler, 2007b). Borrowing from Hindu and Taoist perspective of gender (Witten, 2002a), he also claims to reproduce the divine om of creation through the unity of his conventional belief in Jesus’ teachings (ying) and his sexual and gender subversion of Christian doctrine (yang). Another interviewee adheres literally to Protestant teachings and ritual, even condemning his gay male identity.

The experience of religious isolation places many LGB (and T) people outside the realm of those for whom Nagayama Hall (2001) says psychotherapeutic research will be “most useful”. These biographies also illustrate the ways in which non-normative, non-binary gender identities can affect religious identity formation and transformation. The participants in the Sullivan-Blum (2004) study “... mine the inconsistencies and contradictions in Christian discourses of sin, sexual morality and theology to carve out a space for their spirituality that is reconciled to their gender
and sexual identity even if this requires going beyond traditional Christianity” (Sullivan-Blum, 2004).

The inapplicability of conventional religiosity/spirituality/faith psychometric instruments can be further explored using “standpoint theory” as articulated in Hartsock (1995). While Hartsock's core claim in “The Feminist Standpoint” speaks only of genetic women, many elements of her analysis can be extrapolated to the sociological and historic experiences of transgender people. Drawing on historic materialism, Hartsock states that “material life (class position in Marxist theory) not only structures but sets limits on the understanding of social relations” and that the material lives of two groups are constructed in opposition then their worldviews similarly diverge, leaving the “rulers” with a “vision. . . [that] will be both partial and perverse (Hartsock, 1995).” Transgender people possess an identity which directly opposes the dominant notion of binary gender (Doyal, 2001; Eyler & Wright, 1997; Greenberg, 1998). This gendered opposition results in many, if not all, transgender people leading lives from fundamentally different perspectives than non-transgender people. A psychometric instrument based solely on the perspective of the dominant gender binary worldview will most often result in “partial and perverse” conclusions, reflecting the limited vision derived from a ruling “standpoint.”

**Spirituality/Religiosity/Faith in the Transgender-Identified Communities:**

**What Do We Know? Prelude to Late Life: Mid-to-Late Life Issues**

Witten (2004) and Hunter (2005) address many issues related to mid-to-late life struggles in the LGBT populations in general (Hunter, 2005) and the transgender-identified population in particular (Witten, 2004). Midlife for the transgender-identified person can be a time of importance at a number of levels (Witten, 2004). For many MTF identified individuals, they will be “coming out” and addressing their gender struggles (Witten & Eyler, 2007ab). For many FTM individuals, who typically come out at a younger age than MTF, they will be examining their life
path and addressing traditional midlife issues as seen through the lens of a gendered lifestyle that might have been in existence since their late teens or early twenties. Thus, the spiritual life path for many of these individuals will be a very personal experience that is potentially profoundly affected by their gender journeys (Witten, 2002a).

It is particularly important to take note that there is an increase in spirituality and religiosity (Jones, 1996) of the mid-life transgender-identified parent. Moreover, it is frequently within the context of spiritual, religious, and/or faith isolation and disenfranchisement that the transgender and/or intersex-identified individuals experience the need to maintain a religious/spiritual/faith component within their lives. Many of these transgender and intersex individuals now, because they are now newly “out,” no longer have access to the traditional spiritual dwellings of their past lives as most traditional religions and spiritualities see non-normative sex, gender, and sexualities as not only unacceptable, but a sin. Others, who have been out for long periods of time, may wish to return to the fold and find that they are no longer welcome. Thus, the transgender/intersex person is frequently isolated from family, friends, job, and the spiritual support network. Consider the following quotations from both the TLARS and from this survey (spelling and grammar retained as written):

- Clergy: when my sister was married in my hometown church, I was only permitted to view the ceremony from the loft. not allowed into the church with the others.
- Insulted by Catholic priests Re: my chosen dress being incongruent with my gender.
- My church said that they didn’t mind my being a transsexual woman and that I could attend services as long as I promised to remain celibate for the rest of my life.
- Religion let me down. The Bible, which meant so much to me, is being used against me.

Sadly, the only mention of anything in the Bible that could be interpreted as possibly related to transgender identities is Leviticus 20:13 which states that, “If a man has intercourse with a man
as with a woman, both commit an abomination. They must be put to death.” However, it is also clear that use of this as an anti-transgender mandate conflates the binary body (birth body/genital body) and the constructions of emergent sexuality and gender identity based upon that body without an understanding of such genetic differences as intersex or the fact that it is possible that there is a conflation between the “right mind and the wrong body (Cassell, 1998).”

Intergenerational issues surrounding religion, spirituality and faith are also an important priority (Witten, 2003; 2004). Many TLAR respondents had one or more elder parents, relatives or family members about whom they were worried. For some, showing up as the “new” self could create problems for the other family members as well as for themselves around issues of religion, spirituality and/or faith. For example, one respondent asked,

- What happens at a funeral? Everyone knows they had a son. How do I show up and explain myself? How do we handle the life crisis issues?

Another respondent’s brother has a brain tumor.

- My parents have forbidden me to come home. They will not let me talk to him. I can’t go to see him. I can’t go to the funeral. How am I supposed to handle this?

This study seeks to demonstrate to Social Science and Gerontology/Geriatrics researchers the need for a new frame of analysis that incorporates the viewpoints and vision of transgender-identified people, who also experience the world differently. Research that moves beyond the viewpoint of a “simple dualism . . . posits a duality of levels of reality, of which the deeper level or essence both includes and explains the ‘surface’ or appearance... (Hartsock, 1995; Witten & Eyler, 1999, 2007b).” This type of research would not only enhance our understanding of the life experiences of transgender-identified individuals, but would also increase our knowledge of society
in general. And, in the process, provide potentially useful constructs that could be translated to a more general population.

**METHODS**

*Participants*

The TLAR study design and implementation are reported elsewhere (Witten & Eyler, 1999; Witten, 2007b). In this current FTM survey research project, surveys were administered to 33 self-identified, natal females who also self-identified as female-to-male (FTM) transsexual/transgender persons. In this study, the FTM label was not defined. This research project was approved by the Virginia Commonwealth University’s Institutional Review Board. Of the 33 surveys distributed, 13 surveys were returned by postal mail (39% response rate). This response rate is in line with other studies that focused on LGBT populations (42%, Comstock, 1989; 42%, Bradford et al, 1994; 68%, Witten & Eyler, 1997). The FTM survey respondent age range was 18-42 years old representing a much narrower and younger range than the larger TLAR survey. Eleven of the FTM respondents were Caucasian (85%), one respondent was Latino (8%), and one was African-American (8%). This is a much narrower racial distribution than that found in the larger TLAR survey ($n = 206$) in which the respondents were 72.3% Caucasian, 5.8% Hispanic/Puerto Rican/Cuban/Spanish, 9.7% African-American, 8.3% Asian Pacific Islander/Filipino/Asian Indian, 0.5% Native American/Aleut/Eskimo and 3.4% Biracial/Multiracial/Other descriptors. Note that, while the TLAR survey contained a broader base of racial respondents, the percentages of response are quite similar (not statistically testable).

Five of the FTM respondents (38%) had post-secondary education, with four of those having undergraduate or graduate degrees (31%). These results are consistent with the TLAR respondents who reported 43.3% having a college degree and 24.9% having a graduate degree.
With respect to employment status and personal gross income, 1 FTM respondent was unemployed, 9 employed full-time, 2 full-time students and 1 part-time student. The income range was $1,500 - $45,000.

**Materials**

The FTM survey instrument consisted of four clearly identified sections: Demographics, Religiosity/Spirituality/Faith, Experiences of Violence and Open Concluding Comments. All four sections contained a mixture of qualitative and quantitative items. Surveys were collected over a six month period from June 2006 through the end of December 2006.

The demographic section of the survey instrument asked for such items as respondent’s race, employment status, gross annual income, level of financial strain, relationship status, highest level of education, biological sex, and chromosomal sex (if known). Where relevant, respondents were also asked about the gross annual income of their partner(s). Qualitative questions were used to determine the respondent’s gender identity and sexual orientation so as to allow for a more nuanced answer.

In the religiosity/spirituality/faith section of the survey instrument, respondents were first asked to identify their own religious orientation and that of their partner(s), if applicable, from a number of choices provided. This list was compiled using responses from the TLAR survey Wave 1 (Witten & Eyler, 1999; Witten, 2006; Witten & Eyler, 2007ab) demographics sub-survey component. The researchers provided respondents with 19 options as well as “None” and “Other” options. Table [1] illustrates the full range of options of available to respondents. The Fetzer Multidimensional Measurement of Religiousness/Spirituality (Fetzer, 1999) was also used to quantitatively assess religiosity/spirituality. Long forms of the Fetzer instrument were used in order to assess daily spiritual experiences, private religious practices, and meaning making. Short
forms of the instrument were used to assess organizational religiousness and religious/spiritual coping.

(Table 1 Approximately Here)

Experiences of violence were the focus of the third portion of the survey. Both quantitative and qualitative items were used to acquire information about the types, frequency, and specific nature of violent incidents experienced by the respondents. Questions were drawn from the TLAR (Witten & Eyler, 1999) violence sub-survey component in order to allow comparison with TLAR results. Respondents were also asked whether the incidents they experienced were hate crimes given the following operational definition of a hate crime: “Intimidation, abuse, harassment based on bigotry or bias with respect to one’s actual or perceived race, religion, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. This can take a physical, verbal, emotion, or sexual form.” Unlike the TLAR survey, the researchers did not provide the survey participants with definitions of the different forms of abuse/violence. The Fetzer (1999) subscale entitled “Religious/Spiritual Methods of Coping to Find Meaning” was used to assess the degree to which religion enabled the respondents to cope with their experiences of violence. Respondents were also given qualitative items related to coping and meaning making.

The final section of the survey offered the respondents a space to provide any last thoughts that were either survey or non-survey related.

Design and Procedure

Surveys were distributed via two regional Virginia support and social groups for female-to-male transgender-identified persons. One of these groups was primarily a discussion group for FTM; the other was more loosely organized and was a predominantly social group. Surveys were distributed to respondents either in person or by postal mail. Respondents then returned the
survey to the researchers in a pre-stamped, pre-addressed envelope. Potential survey contacts were also made via snowball/word-of-mouth sampling.

**ANALYSIS**

SPSS v13/14 (SPSS, Chicago, IL) was used for all of the statistical analyses. Differences in means between groups were tested with t-tests, differences in modes using Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon tests, frequency differences between groups using \( \chi^2 \)-tests, correlations using Pearson correlations and standard descriptive measures when needed. Where relevant, all distributions were tested for normality. When normality testing failed, we used distribution-free methods to test for differences. Significance was set at \( p < 0.05 \).

**RESULTS**

*Body, Sex, Gender & Sexuality*

All FTM survey respondents reported a female genital (natal) sex. Sexual orientation and gender identity of the respondents were determined qualitatively. Self-identifications with regard to sexual orientation included such labels as bisexual, queer, straight, and “heterolesbian,” indicating the plasticity of the sexual identification process. A number of questions were asked of the TLAR participants in order to sort out respondent’s sex, gender identity and sexuality. For example, when asked for their biological self-identification (genital sex), most replied female, male, or intersex. However, 3.5% responded with such items as “gay boy, sex change, transgender, and FTM/transman,” indicating the conflation and fluidity of sex, gender identity and sexuality within the transgender identified population (Witten, 2004, 2005a).

FTM gender self-identifications varied similarly and included male, boy, mostly male, transgender, “genderqueer,” FTM, transsexual, queer, “straight male living in a female body,” and trans-man. It is very interesting to note that male, rather than masculine, was used as the gender identifier. This is consistent with the results of Pryzgoda & Chisler (2000) who found that there were numerous terminology conflations, misunderstandings, and misuses around words used to
describe sex, gender and sexuality. These results were further supported by the work of Witten (2004).

Current and Past Upbringing Religiosity, Spirituality and Faith of the FTM and TLAR Respondents

With regard to current religious orientations of the respondents, only five (38%) of the FTM respondents were able to match their religious orientation with one of 19 possible choices provided in the FTM survey (Table [1]). This is significantly different from the larger TLAR survey results which demonstrated that 76% of the survey respondents were able to match their current religious preference with the available list choices. 24% (n = 200) of the TLAR respondents chose “Other” as their current religious preference and wrote in alternatives despite the fact that thirteen options were provided, including such choices as Taoist, Buddhist, Quaker, and Alternative Healing Circles, along with the traditional Judeo-Christian-Islamic choices. It should be noted that this choice offering is considerably more comprehensive than that of conventional reports such as those given by the American Religious Data Archive (ARDA), a leading source of information about religious beliefs and practices in the United States. This organization, which is cited by the U.S. Census Bureau (2006) as a source of religious data, only reports data in terms of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Data reported by the ARDA (2000) does not include individuals who identify with so-called “Eastern” faith traditions (Witten, 2002a), Paganism, Wicca, or myriad other possible religious traditions or spiritual orientations (Connor & Sparks, 2004; Kaldera, 2002; Teh, 2001; Witten, 2002a).

The religious identities of those five FTM respondents (38.5%) who were able to match their identity with one of the choices provided were Pagan, Quaker, Buddhist, Atheist, and Agnostic. For the TLAR survey, 64% (n = 200) were able to match with one of the choices provided. One of the remaining eight FTM respondents (7.7%) chose “None” as his religious orientation. This is lower, but not inconsistent with the larger TLAR survey in which 14%
responded with none as their choice. The other seven (53.9%), who could not identify their religious orientation from the choices given, chose “Other” and wrote in a number of alternative religious orientations, which were as follows: “Christian” (reported by two respondents); “Church of Christ,” “Methodist,” “Spiritual,” “combination of beliefs,” and “just spiritual, not religious.” The TLAR survey respondents who chose the “Other” (24%) category, wrote in over 30 additional options including such choices as, “Christian/santaria, Colonial alliance church, Discordian, Goddess worship, Krishna conscious, LDS, my own beliefs, Neo-Pagan Celtic, Native American, Non-specific spirituality, Wiccan Solitary, and Pagan/nature-based.”

Religious upbringing of the TLAR and FTM respondents was equally varied. 90.2% of the TLAR respondents were able to identify their religious upbringing from the options available; Agnostic, Atheist, Jewish, Christian faiths, Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim/Islam, Alternative Healing Circles. Nine (69.2%) of the FTM respondents were able to identify their upbringing from the choices given. These nine were: Roman Catholic (n=2), Protestant (n=4), Pentecostal/Charismatic, Mormon, and Quaker. One of the remaining four respondents chose “None.” The other three chose “Other” and wrote in the following: “Baptist,” “Christian: Baptist,” and “Christian.” TLAR respondents wrote in an additional 12 options for religious upbringing.

**FTM God Constructs**

FTM survey respondents were also asked to qualitatively describe their individual God-constructs. Table [2] illustrates all thirteen of the respondents’ reported God-constructs in relation to their religious upbringing and current religious orientation. We observe that there is a broad diversity of God-construct from the traditional Judeo-Christian-Islamic to Eastern belief structures through Pagan, Agnostic and Atheist.
Results from the Fetzer (Fetzer, 1999) instrument, which made up the remainder of the religiosity/spirituality portion of the survey, are not reported at this time, as many of the participants were not able to complete these sections. One individual who left these portions blanks indicated in the margin of the survey:

(Table 2 Approximately Here)

- I tried to do this survey for you, but I cannot continue to answer the questions as worded. You continually refer to a higher power as a conscious being and although I believe in a higher power – I do not believe it has intelligent direction.

Similar problems were reported in the TLAR survey, in which some respondents reported:

- I believe in a higher power, but I have no religious affiliation
- I have a non-specific spirituality

In addition to those who left these sections blank, some of those who did answer the questions qualitatively expressed difficulty in doing so.

**DISCUSSION**

The second major conclusion of this study is that conventional instruments such as the Fetzer Multidimensional Measurement of Religiousness/Spirituality (Fetzer, 1999) are not sufficient for studying religiosity/spirituality/faith in the female-to-male (FTM) transgender population. This result, for a more general transgender-identified population, is supported in the work of the TLAR Survey Wave 1 (Witten & Eyler, 1997; Witten, 2004).

One emergent theme that seems to explain this conclusion is the prevalence of non-Judeo Christian-Islamic religious identities within the FTM population.
• Most of the questions were more applicable to conventional western monotheistic spirituality and many didn’t make sense for my belief system,

commented one FTM respondent. Kaldera (2002) notes this prevalence for polytheistic religions and faith tradition with gender-fluid or gender ambiguous deities. This dynamic makes sense given the body of research demonstrating a tendency for minority individuals to either practice religious traditions different from that of their upbringing or to adopt alternative interpretations of their current faith to reinforce, support, and normalize their minority, and often stigmatized, identities (Connor & Sparks, 2004; Kaldera, 2002; Nagayama Hall, 2001; Sullivan-Blum, 2004; Teh, 2001; Winter, 2006; Witten, 2002a).

Moreover, a number of the FTM and the TLAR participants possessed religious beliefs that defied categorization, even by the respondents themselves. Many of these individuals chose the “Other” option when asked about their religious orientation and subsequently described religious orientations ranging from “spiritual” to “a combination of beliefs,” thereby supporting the adaptive and creative nature of the FTM religiosity/spirituality/faith base. Others chose “None,” not finding a choice in the rather extensive list given that adequately captured their belief system. One respondent who chose “None” described their religious belief system as follows:

I feel like I pushed christianity away b/c [because] it was so beat into my brain as a child . . . I found myself later on still feeling like there is some sort of energy that connects us & I agreed w/ [with] some aspects of many religions but never all of any one. Praying in general to whatever has helped me to deal w/ [with] day to day of being a transexual person” [sic].
Another emergent explanation for the inapplicability of the Fetzer instrument in FTM populations is that even those individuals who self-identified as Christian (Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Mormon) did not report god-constructs congruent with those held by conventional, mainstream Christian denominations. These respondents reported highly ethereal images God; in contrast to the anthropomorphic imagery dominant in European and North American Christianity. Only one respondent out of the 13 reported an image of a God who

- walks & dwells among us here on Earth,

and even he diverged from conventional divinity imagery by adding,

- God is not some being or entity in the sky . . .

It is also possible that there are generational cohort effects that are entangled with the religious/spiritual/faith systems of the respondents. For example, younger individuals may be disenchanted with classical religiosity/spirituality/faith constructs currently available and find it necessary to reinvent their own structures at a much earlier point in their lives. What we do not know is whether or not they maintain these reinvented belief systems until later ages (although the TLAR research appears to support this to some extent), or whether or not they revert to their earlier belief systems acquired during their upbringing. Thus, instruments such as the Fetzer may apply during some periods of the life course and not during others or not at all.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study possesses a number of limitations. The first is that all questions relating to violence, coping and meaning-making around violence were asked retrospectively. Therefore, responses were dependent upon the respondent’s ability to accurately recall what happened during and after highly traumatic events across their lifetime. Many of the inconsistencies in retrospective reporting were alleviated by asking respondents to first describe any incidents of social
mistreatment they had experienced and then later in the survey again by asking them to classify and describe the incidents based on what portion(s) of their identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.) might have motivated the perpetrators.

A second limitation of this study is its small sample size (n = 13), impacting the researchers’ ability to generalize the results. This sample size does, however, demonstrate two important points. First, a 33% response rate demonstrates that FTMs are willing to assist researchers in this type of scholarly work (Witten, 2007), even a study which promises no immediate benefits to the participants. Second, this sample represents mostly Caucasian, middle class, FTM individuals who are reasonably well-adjusted to living as transgender people. These individuals also possess a strong social/support network via their participation in groups such as the two used to gather study participants. If individuals who possess ethnic/racial privilege, financial stability, and a social/support network reported such grave statistics with regard to victimization and such frustration with conventional religiosity instruments, one can reasonably presume that the less privileged conditions of most transgender people would exacerbate both their experiences of violence and their frustration with the survey instrument used.

Using the term “Female-Male Transgender (FTM)” in the study’s title also presented difficulties that were somewhat unique to transgender-identified populations. The term “FTM” is understood operationally by the researchers. However, the scope of what is considered “FTM” may not have been clear to the diverse groups of people whose participation would have benefited this study. The post-modern de-construction of gender which defines transgender communities and defies conventional gender binarism makes the use of binary vernacular like “female-to-male” a limiting factor in this study. For instance, a chromosomally female individual who works as a drag king while still identifying primarily as a woman may or may have felt eligible to participate. Many of those individuals who did participate described their gender identity with words such as
“queer” and “boy” to simultaneously give a more nuanced description and to challenge a binary system that did not accurately reflect their complexity gender identities. In future studies, the problem of language is one that the researchers wish to address in a more careful way so as to gather a sample that is as large and representative as possible.

Very few scholarly studies have been published on the religiosity/spirituality of transgender people. In addition, none of these studies have focused exclusively on female-to-male (FTM) transgender individuals. The current literature studies consist primarily of male-to-female (MTF) transgender-identified individuals. While the experiences of MTFs are in some ways analogous to FTMs, they are by no means identical. FTMs are presented with many unique challenges and social/cultural obstacles. Therefore this study serves as a catalyst for further research. It’s findings both highlight the ineffectiveness of current psychometric instruments in FTM populations and present the violence and abuse life experiences of FTMs to a scholarly audience for the first time, illuminating areas of research that beckon to be explored.

Two basic, research needs have been identified through this research project: (1) a thorough ethnographic investigation of the particular religious/spiritual/faith beliefs of FTM-identified populations, as well as (2) a re-construction of conventional religiosity instruments to develop an instrument applicable to the lives and experiences of FTMs and transgender-identified persons in general. Such an instrument would incorporate the effects of non-binary, fluid gender identity on the evolution of religious belief and expression. Deeper studies would allow for the gathering of information that would better inform all healthcare practitioners dealing with FTM-identified persons, as well as the more general transgender-identified population, particularly with respect to the lifecourse needs of these populations around issues of religiosity/spirituality and faith.
Having said all of this, it is the researchers’ hope that the results detailed in this study and the research catalyzed through its publication will ultimately benefit FTMs by giving scholars a glimpse into FTMs’ identities and experiences, including experiences of violence and abuse. It is also the researchers’ goal to encourage the development of more culturally-sensitive research studies to provide greater visibility for FTMs as well as greater access to quality medical and mental health services that truly meet the unique needs of this population. Lastly, we hope that researchers will develop more culturally sensitive research for the larger transgender-identified population as a whole. As one of the TLAR survey respondents so profoundly stated in her closing comments to the survey:

- I am not a disease. I am not an experimental animal. I am not damned to burn in eternal hellfire. I am a human being who has been forced by society to live with a dreadful debilitating birth defect for far too long.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, we would like to thank the FTM survey respondents as well as the TLARS survey respondents. Without their honesty and willingness to participate in this research effort, we would be unable to provide any information on this subject of importance. Next, we would like to thank Drs. Andrew Achenbaum, Monika Ardelt, A. Evan Eyler, Martha Horn, Neil Krause, Susan McFadden, Ellen Netting, Gary Reker, Lars Tornstam and Brian de Vries for their numerous discussions, provision of measurement instruments, and reprints. Their enlightenment graces this research effort. TMW would also like to acknowledge Dr. Michael Sheridan for her teachings and her enormous impact on the author's early interest in spirituality and Social Work.

CONTACTING THE PROJECT

To find out more about the TranScience Research Institute, the research being sponsored, conducted, and/or to participate in any of its projects, you may visit the TSRI website at http://www.transcience.org/ or you may reach Dr. Tarynn M. Witten at transcience@earthlink.net or transcience@transcience.org.
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http://www.asaging.org/LGAIN/outword-063.htm


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LEGENDS FOR TABLES

1. Table [1]: Religious/Spiritual orientation choices given to respondents. Respondents were asked to provide descriptions of their religious/spiritual/faith orientation if they checked the box marked “Other.”

2. Table [2]: Religious upbringing, current religious orientation, and God-constructs of the 13 FTM-identified respondents. Spelling and grammar retained as written.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[ ] Atheist</th>
<th>[ ] Unitarian Universalist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Agnostic</td>
<td>[ ] Pagan (all denominations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Jewish</td>
<td>[ ] Scientology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Roman Catholic</td>
<td>[ ] Mormon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Protestant</td>
<td>[ ] Seventh-day Adventist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Including Anglican/Episcopalian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] “Fundamentalist”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Pentecostal/Charismatic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Buddhist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Taoist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Muslim/Islam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Hindu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Christian Scientist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Quaker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Alternative Healing Circles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Other:__________</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1**: Religious/Spiritual/Faith orientation choices given to respondents. Respondents were asked to provide descriptions of their religious/spiritual/faith orientation if they checked the box marked “Other.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Religious Orientation</th>
<th>Religious Upbringing</th>
<th>God-construct (all are direct quotations from respondents)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other: Christian</td>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>I have never given the image of God any thought. When I think of God as a physical being, I think of Jesus Christ – a man of hebrew [sic] heritage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: Church of Christ</td>
<td>Other: Baptist</td>
<td>God is in all and through all. God is a parent Mother/Father/Everything God. God is not some being or entity in the sky, but God walks . . . here on Earth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: Christian =</td>
<td>Other: Christian =</td>
<td>God is not a man or woman. God is an entity . . . to me God is a power. A spirit. . . God is humanity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Methodist</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>I find encouragement and divinity from all aspects of life and find that certain aspects can be grouped together and idealized in traditional pantheological dieities [sic]. Science teaches that all things are made up of moving particles. Movement creates energy. Those energy fields all touch &amp; overlap. Therefore my belief is that what man call god is actually all things connected &amp; surrounded by that energy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pagan</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>I find encouragement and divinity from all aspects of life and find that certain aspects can be grouped together and idealized in traditional pantheological dieities [sic]. Science teaches that all things are made up of moving particles. Movement creates energy. Those energy fields all touch &amp; overlap. Therefore my belief is that what man call god is actually all things connected &amp; surrounded by that energy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: Spiritual</td>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>I think we are all vessels of energy. We get recycled when we die. No one god controls this its more a universal law theory. I don’t rule anything out. I think that if we were supposed to know [the image of God], we would know beyond a show of a doubt; like we know how to breathe. I think our creation is beyond our understanding. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: a combination</td>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>I think we are all vessels of energy. We get recycled when we die. No one god controls this its more a universal law theory. I don’t rule anything out. I think that if we were supposed to know [the image of God], we would know beyond a show of a doubt; like we know how to breathe. I think our creation is beyond our understanding. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of beliefs</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>I think we are all vessels of energy. We get recycled when we die. No one god controls this its more a universal law theory. I don’t rule anything out. I think that if we were supposed to know [the image of God], we would know beyond a show of a doubt; like we know how to breathe. I think our creation is beyond our understanding. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: just spiritual,</td>
<td>Pentecostal/Charis</td>
<td>I have no particular image. I see God or the potential for God in all people and in the natural world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not religious</td>
<td>matic</td>
<td>I don’t know I go back and forth on the existance [sic] of God. I want to believe in Her/Him/It, but the skeptical side of me has too many doubts about an all-powerful being actually existing. I believe that their [sic] is some form of higher power, which different cultures/faiths may view or express slightly differently. For me, that higher power is best described through the Christian verison [sic] of God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quaker</td>
<td>Quaker</td>
<td>loving Universe with a sense of humor who cares deeply about me [sic]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: Christian</td>
<td>Other: Christian</td>
<td>I go back and forth on the existance [sic] of God. I want to believe in Her/Him/It, but the skeptical side of me has too many doubts about an all-powerful being actually existing. I believe that their [sic] is some form of higher power, which different cultures/faiths may view or express slightly differently. For me, that higher power is best described through the Christian verison [sic] of God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>I go back and forth on the existance [sic] of God. I want to believe in Her/Him/It, but the skeptical side of me has too many doubts about an all-powerful being actually existing. I believe that their [sic] is some form of higher power, which different cultures/faiths may view or express slightly differently. For me, that higher power is best described through the Christian verison [sic] of God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>loving Universe with a sense of humor who cares deeply about me [sic]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>loving Universe with a sense of humor who cares deeply about me [sic]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2:** Religious upbringings, current religious orientations, and God-constructs of the 13 FTM-identified respondents. Spelling and grammar retained as written.