

MINORITY PATHWAYS: LGBQ TRANSFORMATIONS INTO WHOLENESS

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Dedication

To my best friend, my heart and my furry canine soul, Shorty. Thank you for your loving, grounding and patient presence throughout this journey. You were with me each and every step of this project but left this realm before it could be completed. For you I am eternally grateful. You reminded me to move from my head into my heart, to slow down and to love what is. Thank you for choosing me that day ten years ago. I will always miss you. I will always love you. Run free.

Abstract

A transpersonal, phenomenological-hermeneutic approach was utilized to honour and examine Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Queer (LGBQ) individual's lived experience embracing non-dual consciousness and non-dual embodiment of sexual orientation and identity. This study sought to illuminate diverse human experiences in addition to understanding the specific transformative experiences and transformational journey of LGBQ individuals. Five research participants were selected for this study and were interviewed about their journey to wholeness and experiences abiding in non-dual consciousness. From analyzing and interpreting the transcripts from the interviews, a total of fifteen themes emerged. The themes that emerged from the participants' journeys were organized into three distinct phases: *Phase One: Descending into the Heart of Desire*, *Phase Two: Pull Towards the Edge* and *Phase Three: Moment to Moment Integration*. A summary of research findings are reviewed. Additionally, strengths and limitations of this study are identified along with directions for future research. The implications for counsellors and helping professionals are also discussed.

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Chapter One: Introduction

We travel on the road to adventure

On a desert highway straight to the heart of the sun

Like lovers and heroes, and the restless part of everyone

We're only at home when we're on the run

On the run

(Peart, 2002, p. 141)

The Implicated Researcher

Prior to diving into the information surrounding this topic, it is important that I first shed light on my own path of transformation and identify my own experiences with the subject. Gadamer (1975) states that the researcher ought to clearly present their biases and influences at the beginning of the research, rather than claim objectivity and adopt a neutral position within their work. This research demands my involvement, my energy and was sparked by my own curiosity about the topic. I did not stumble upon this topic at random, and thus, my personal influences and life journey will undoubtedly impact this research. As a woman continuing on my own transformational journey towards wholeness, my being in the world is inextricably impacted and connected to the research experience. It is relevant to identify and disclose particular aspects of my personal journey that are related to this research study, therefore in this section I will share the most pertinent life experiences as they relate to the study that have influenced my decision to embark on this research journey.

This writer's quest for wholeness began early in my development, and the most pertinent information relating to the proposed research is my experience of gender

socialization, sexual orientation/identity and subsequent depression, shame and isolation in connection to these life events. Paradoxically, it was through my transformative no-self and non-identity experiences where I was able to experience a transcendence of self (along with letting go of all of the constraining labels, shame, pain and ego-bound woundedness) that I experienced a consciousness free from all constraints. This process was and continues to be fluid and dynamic, ever unfolding moment to moment. This is my narrative of this process.

Very early in my childhood experiences I embodied an authentic presence where in each moment I could be anyone, achieve anything and embrace the splendour of each moment. There were no other moments, no tomorrows or yesterdays, simply existing in the here and now. Total unity with existence and blissful connection with what is. However, certain life events have conditioned me to believe life is not always easy, and living, loving and simply existing can be bitterly painful at times. It was early in my memories where a dark aspect of my consciousness communicated to me that I was different than other people. As a young female, I always felt an attraction towards other females and not to males. Because of what I perceived to be “normal” in the world, I always felt like an outsider, a fraud putting on a show. Early on, many sources communicated the message to me that my desires and attractions were deviant, bad, and morally wrong. Societal discourses were extremely influential in my early memories, including authority figures, media and religious doctrines. There was a constant communication of homosexuality as evil, deviant, and morally wrong and this made me internalize shame and resentment of my different authentic self. I felt the need to hide my true self in order to fit in, and I would hide aspects of myself to belong. Early on in my

life, I learned to employ ways in which I could *pass* (Barbara, Chaim, & Doctor, 2004) as heterosexual, and also *pass* as a gender conforming female. I was well aware of my masculine energies from an early age, but once again, felt as if this needed to be concealed from others. I would carefully and skilfully employ strategies to get through the days harassment free, but in my early teens I was awakened to the reality of I was actually doing, where in pleasing others to fit in, I was continually selling myself out. I thought fitting in and belonging were interchangeable concepts. However, Brown's research (2007, 2010, 2012) classifies *fitting in* and *belonging* as different categories entirely, where fitting in involves assessing a situation and becoming who we need to be to gain acceptance, while belonging requires us to embrace our authenticity and not change or hide who we are. Paradoxically, by changing to gain others approval I was only successful at creating walls that kept me from belonging and moving further and further away from my essence.

As I got older, what I chose to put my mind to I succeeded in. I began playing competitive sports at an early age, and it wasn't long before I was on AA and AAA ringette and hockey teams as the starting goaltender, winning provincial and national championships. I was both an athlete and a fraud, existing in two different worlds. I was a hypothetical success on the ice, but a total sell out and failure off. The challenging aspect was when I would be rewarded for being number one, and celebrated for my so-called success. I had a closet full of trophies, medals, MVP awards and championships that acted to solidify my compulsion to carry on with my *fakeness*. Almaas (1996) defines fakeness as "a singularly defining manifestation of narcissism is the feeling of being fake, unreal, lacking authenticity (pg. 163). Almaas (1996) also describes how this concept of

fakeness may translate into experiencing a fear of being found out, or to be seen as a phony. “This sense of phoniness is a reflection of the fact that the normal identity is devoid of the real self, the essential presence” (Almaas, 1996, p. 163). Katie (2005) describes this experience further:

How do you react when you think that you need people’s love? Do you become a slave for their approval? Do you live an inauthentic life because you can’t bear the thought that they might disapprove of you? Do you try to figure out how they would like you to be, and then try and become that, like a chameleon? In fact, you can never really get their love this way. You try to turn into someone you aren’t, and then when they say “I love you” you can’t believe it, because they’re loving a façade. They’re loving someone who doesn’t even exist, the person you’re pretending to be. It’s difficult to seek other people’s love. It’s deadly. In seeking it, you lose what is genuine. This is the prison we create for ourselves as we try to get the love we already have. (Katie, 2005, p. 60)

It wasn’t very long before my closet was beginning to overflow; the fakeness and countless gigs were starting to unravel. I was terrified of being found out, yet I was experiencing validation and approval for my façade. During this time I felt ultimately and frighteningly alone in the world. My compass was broken, and all of my actions lacked direction, orientation and meaning. I truly was lost in the woods, yet the dark forest offered me protection and familiarity. The calming nature of my solitude would turn frighteningly unsafe in a heartbeat. I would not be in control when the path would twist towards the darkness and aloneness. If I remained hidden from the world and could carry on with my superficiality, I believed I would be able to protect myself. This shallowness

of emotionality translated into a limited capacity for self-love. I was sensitive to insult and quick to anger. By directing outwards, I was able to protect my fragile, disorientated identity and underneath it all lived a deep dark depression which would ebb and flow through me. In her book, Miriam Greenspan (2003) describes the ways in which certain emotions in our society have been pathologized as “dark emotions” that are often perceived as unnatural and in need of treatment. This speaks true to my experience, where my experiences and emotions were further identified as unnatural, abnormal, and something to be “fixed.” I was numbed and medicated for several years in the hopes of fixing this part of me. Even through the anti-depressants, these emotions were rooted deep within my body, inseparable. My sadness would make me feel incredibly alone and disjointed from everyone and everything. My pain and sorrow only seemed to grow with medication. “The alchemy of dark emotions most often takes place in life’s valleys: dark nights of the soul when inordinate pain, like a swollen river, breaks through the dam we’ve erected around our hearts” (Greenspan, 2003, p. 23). I would often wonder about who was really in charge. Who was piloting the boat? My soul was navigating trepid unknown waters, and a part of me felt powerlessly along for the ride.

“The practical world of the day is filled with deceit, false value, superficiality and transitoriness, while the night world holds the mystical eternal truth of oneness” (Leonard, 2001, p. 61). This powerful statement speaks to the fakeness and false sense of self I would embrace in my day world, for I was too scared of showing my true self to anyone. I assumed that if I became vulnerable to another, my heart would be immediately disposed of or trampled on, repeating my perception of history. My core driver of I’m unlovable was a voice in my head, and even when I wanted to break free, I couldn’t. The

practical day world where I felt a need to remain number one was filled narcissism, I felt like a prisoner with no hope of parole. I remained in the closet all of my teen years, and felt shame for the broken relationships I had sabotaged, my cowardice, and ultimately my identity itself.

Staying in the closet and making others “comfortable” nearly cost me. Around 14 years of age I reached a point in my life when I thought life wasn’t worth living. My relationships and sanity were being sabotaged by my dark, killer emotions. My shame, guilt, fear and distress were eating me alive, and I felt that I couldn’t tell anyone. Thus began my journey through a dark night of the soul. “A dark night of the soul is dark because it doesn’t give us any assurance that what is happening makes sense and will ultimately be beneficial” (Moore, 2004, pg. 28). My options felt extremely limited, die a physical death, or kill all that was keeping me trapped.

Coming out of the closet was a transformational process I experienced, which was motivated by my overwhelming exhaustion, fakeness and all-consuming fear. I felt as though I had driven myself to the ledge of my universe where I was overlooking the infinite blackness of ocean below. I was drawn closer and closer to the edge, feeling the desire to let it all go. It had all become too much. My gigs, narcissism, shame, and fakeness became a load I no longer had the strength to carry. Something had to give as my suffering had reached a pivotal intensity. I was pulled to the cliff of my soul, looking over the abyss yet some part of me was aching to cling to a small ledge with everything I had. I could feel my grasp weakening. I was clinging to my projections, gigs, false self, and narcissism, my lifelines keeping me safe. But they were slipping away, they couldn’t hold me any longer, and I needed to let them go. Again, my options were

twofold; continue to suffer by holding on or lean into the abyss and let it all go. The choice was not mine to make at this point, and my essence naturally began to breathe in my nothingness and embrace the death of my carefully constructed façade. Effortlessly, naturally I let it all go. Gone. It was in this powerful moment I let go of my survival tools and dropped into the ocean of life, becoming free. Finally, finally I was free and open to the energy within and my deepest aspects of my soul were allowed to see the light. I could share my true self with others for the first time. I was able to feel intense love in every cell of my being and I was finally able to breathe, feel, see clearly, and live from a place of authenticity. I awoke into another state of being after this time in my life. A *coming to consciousness* I had never experienced. Here, with my newly gained perspective I was able to realize what I had been through and how paradoxical all my efforts to hide had been.

Giving in and surrendering to my authentic presence has shown me how all of my “trying” to attain wholeness has been a trap. All of my game playing had resulted in me losing the game. Years of work, dedication, risk taking and effort and I had managed to arrive at a place in my life where I felt hopeless and thought of suicide. It was the paradoxical act of surrender to no-thingness, which freed and connected me to all of existence. This was my first glimpse of no-self experience, and non-dual consciousness. I was able to gain a glimpse into a vast untapped wealth of energy that has continued to shape my existence and my experiences to this day.

Soon after I completed high school I began training in Emergency Medicine. It wasn't long before I became a licensed EMT and worked on a fire department and ambulance for several years. Early on in my work, through a sequence of demanding

calls all of which resulted in several patients dying, I became intimately connected to death and non-being in others. I had met death head on in my own experience, yet for the first time I began to see it in others and soon in everyone around me. My chosen career was founded on fighting death and keeping it at bay through calculated interventions, yet I soon began to feel like a fraud once again. From my own experiences I have never viewed death as a negative state; rather I believe death gives immeasurable significance to live and living in each moment. I saw death as a peaceful, beautiful transition, but I felt trapped in my newly chosen career path where I had to continually deny the presence and power of death.

Apart from the required medical attention I would provide, it quickly became clear to me that I sought more for my patients than just a “Band-Aid” solution to their problems. Specifically, I yearned for a method that was all inclusive of all aspects of the human being living in our society, a therapy that transcends solely the physical aspect of being human. I began my journey to find the elusive method I was searching for by enrolling into the Addictions Counselling Program at the University of Lethbridge. Early on in my studies, I felt an immediate gravitation towards the more transformational theories of counselling, namely Existentialism, Jungian, Transpersonal and non-dual models. I celebrated each aspect of my educational journey, finally feeling as though I have a context for which many of my personal experiences fit. However, little did I know that my journey would radically shift once again. Embracing the transpersonal and non-dual in the counselling room required me to dive in continuously to the unfolding of each moment. This meant shedding away the “I” with all of my stories. I needed to surrender whatever parts of my being that were still comfortable, parts I could prop myself up

upon. This shift hit me unexpectedly as a woman whose “identity” was gay. Suddenly, the identity I had fought so hard to embrace could no longer be narcissistically relied on. I was feeling like a fraud one again. But that’s who I am! It’s mine! I felt a retraction into the comfort of my gay identity, one that could easily jump on the bandwagon of social rhetoric and political conversations or become very easily offended. Clinging onto my identity was beginning to feel cumbersome, eccentric even. What was happening? I thought I had this sorted out...

My journey was shifting, transforming, ready or not. Old stories that continued to linger needed release, wounded daughter, athlete, student, fraud, it all had to go. My experience working within a non-dual paradigm has challenged me to literally drop all attachments and identifications to “self” continually, no exception. When this invitation was surrendered to, I received a momentous gift from existence, one I have never felt while stuck in maintaining my identity. Freedom. Freedom from the expectations, insults, questions, hate, and baggage that came with being a student, a daughter, an athlete, and gay. What a relief! Now I finally have space to *be*.

I am continually reminded that each step on my educational journey has been liberating, meaningful and is an integral aspect of who I am today. Learning about and embracing non-dualism has shifted my life more than I ever could have imagined. I hope that this thesis may illuminate sexual “identity” in a new way for individuals by specifically honouring the spiritual and transpersonal perspectives. Through this research I invite others to dive in with this writer and explore their own experience of identity. Perhaps you may uncover and challenge the various ways our identities may serve to disconnect us from ourselves.

Overview of the Study

For thousands of years, spiritual seekers have undertaken a journey or “quest” to transform the self towards wholeness (Nixon, 1992, 2005). A journey toward wholeness exists in many of the world’s spiritual and religious traditions. A transformational journey, or journey to non-dual wholeness encompasses the unique and intimately personal experience of moving beyond limiting identities and realizing a richer, more loving, present, and compassionate way of being (Tolle, 1999; Katie, 2002).

Unfortunately, ego-transcendence or *awakening* in Western society often exists as a formless concept, often found only in another time or space, not here, but over there. Commonly, in the West the transformational journey is sought after by individuals desiring the end result and looking for the easiest or shortest path to follow. This “McDonaldization” of spiritual seeking facilitates consumers to traverse this journey quickly and conveniently (Ritzer, 2008). With vast increases in technology our modern Western culture is seemingly connected like never before, yet is characterized by a “never enough problem” (Brown, 2010, p. 26). There is a hyperawareness of a lack of safety, connection, love, money and time, yet conveniences and quick fixes are plentiful. To compensate for this pressure, individuals are constantly “hustling” for belonging, worthiness and connection that often involves looking externally for solutions (Brown, 2007, 2010, 2012). This consistent comparison to others, daydreaming of what could be and fond nostalgia for the past solidifies a separate, self-sense. A dualistic ego-mind takes hold, attempting to ensure security in an impermanent world marked by recurrent change, unpredictability, and loss (Welwood, 2002). We will be forever trapped in inner conflict, suffering and pain, what Eastern traditions refer to as *samsara* unless we are capable of

developing beyond the defensive ego-mind (Welwood, 2002). Almaas, (2001, 2004) and Welwood (2002) articulate this process of *coming to consciousness* paradoxically requires a breaking away of the conventional aspects of life. For it is only through this necessary deconstructing process that the internal exploration can begin.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Queer (LGBQ) individuals embracing non-dual consciousness and non-dual embodiment of sexual orientation and identity. While extensive literature exists which examines sexual identity, orientation and lived experiences of sexual minority individuals, there is a small amount of scholarly research that explores transpersonal, sexual phenomena (MacKnee, 1996, 2002; Wade, 2004). Additionally, individuals who have transcended sexual identification or labels altogether while embracing a non-dual existence have not been documented. In this study, a transpersonal framework will attempt to further expand transpersonal psychology's examination of sexually diverse human experiences in addition to understanding the specific transformative experiences and transformational journey of queer individuals. This researcher's passion for the topic, life experiences in addition to an evident gap in the literature have set the foundation for this project. By conducting this study, it is this writer's hope that the information attained may aid psychologists, counsellors, spiritual guides, LGBT community members, allies, therapists and other health and wellness practitioners in gaining a better understanding of clients and their sexual and spiritual lives.

Research Question

To elicit thick descriptions of individual experiences the research question central to this inquiry is, *what has been the lived experience of LGBQ individuals on their non-dual journey to wholeness?* A secondary research question is *what transformational experiences have LGBQ individuals experienced in their journey?* Prior to identifying the pertinent methodology and exploring the study more specifically, I will turn to the literature to illuminate the subject.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Perfection is your very core

But you seldom realize it anymore

Don't identify with the changing, rearranging, outer duality

You are bliss, consciousness

Love's everlasting reality

So breathe deep and open the rainbow door

Enter the bright diamond that is the other shore

Dance to the inner lights, soar to the inner heights

Bask in the inner delights, warm days without nights

In the peace within the outer war

For perfection is your very core

(Gunther, 1983, p.118)

Introduction

This section highlights literature related to the various concepts, terminology and topics of this research. Throughout this thesis the term *sexual minority* and/or *queer* individual will be used interchangeably. Both are socio-political terms which encapsulate individuals who identify as homosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirited, intersex, queer, non-gender conforming and polysexual. This spectrum of sexual minority individuals is commonly identified in the literature as LGBTTIQ with various abbreviations and is constantly changing. In addition to these commonly identified sexual identity labels, some individuals do not identify with any of the aforementioned labels and prefer different terminology entirely such as MSM, (man

who has sex with men) WSW, (woman who has sex with women) and transsexual (person attracted to transgender individuals) will be included (Barbara, Chaim & Doctor, 2004). It is important to include the larger “community” of queer orientations and sexualities in this section to better understand the particular life experiences and contexts of the individuals themselves. While the term queer can be historically traced to a derogatory term for non-heterosexual and effeminate men, its reclaimed use by both academics and activists alike is often intended to signify that all sexual identities are shifting, fluid entities (MacLachlan, 2012).

Orientation and Identity

LeVay, Baldwin & Baldwin (2009) state the direction of our sexual encounters and attractions has an immense impact on our private and public lives, particularly how we are treated and viewed in society. Same-gender relationships do not receive the same validation that most heterosexual relationships receive in society and individuals may feel uncomfortable disclosing their relationships or the gender of their partner (Barbara et al., 2004). *Sexual orientation* is defined as one’s emotional, romantic or sexual attraction, desire or affection for another individual (Barbara et al., 2004). Sexual orientation can be better understood as a fluid continuum that ranges from exclusive same-gender attraction to exclusive opposite-gender attraction with many areas in between (Barbera et al., 2004; LeVay et al., 2009). Sometimes, individuals from marginalized ethno-cultural or racial communities may not identify with the labels associated with the predominantly white, gay communities and may choose a different label or identity such as “woman loving women” instead of lesbian (Barbara et al., 2004). It is important to note the distinction between significant relationships and sexual behaviour and one does not necessarily or

consistently predict the other (Barbara et al., 2004; LeVay et al., 2009). Moreover, sexual orientation can be consistent and fixed throughout their lives while orientation may be fluid and change over time for others (Barbara et al., 2004; Bereska, 2011; Cass, 1979; Meyer, 2003; Doctor, 2003, 2004).

Gender identity is distinct from an individual's sexual orientation and a person may identify as heterosexual, gay, bisexual or any other sexual orientation regardless of their identified gender (Barbara et al., 2004). Gender identity is best described as an individual's own identification of being male, female, intersex, masculine, feminine, transgendered or transsexual, and may not directly correspond with their anatomy given at birth (Barbara et al., 2004; Devor, 1997; Dallas, 1998). Simply, gender identity is best expressed as a fluid continuum that ranges from more masculine to more feminine (Barbara et al., 2004). Many researchers have studied the experiences of individuals who identify as genders other than male and female (Devor, 1997; Barbara et al., 2004, Dallas, 1998; Israel & Tarver, 1997). Gender may be expressed differently in different contexts due to societal roles, and ethno-cultural/racial experiences that may force, pressure or encourage gender expression in more or less fluid ways (Barbera et al., 2004).

In his book *The End Of Gay*, Bert Archer (1999) identifies sexual identity as a socially constructed concept that has been added to the *identity portfolio* in recent history. He invites us to take a closer look and explore the discrete yet immensely significant range of sexual experiences all humans experience. Archer (1999) contends that sexual identity may be tucked away and hidden from view, yet it pervades outwards and ultimately acts and enables us to distinguish ourselves from other people. In short, it allows us to imagine and enact a connection between identity and action, and unfortunately living

sexual identity “makes us, through omission rather than commission, more anxious, less happy people than we might otherwise be” (Archer, 1999, p. 27). He continues:

It’s pretty clear by now though, that sexual identity is a reality. Every time you rebuff a potentially sexual advance by someone of the same sex by saying “Sorry, I’m not gay” instead of “sorry, not interested,” you are negatively defining yourself as straight. Just as every time you rebuff a potentially sexual advance by the opposite sex by saying “Sorry, I’m gay” you are positively identifying as gay. Every time you see a movie on gay themes and think to yourself, “well that’s all and good, but it’s not really got much to do with *my* life,” you are just as implicated in sexual identity as the person who goes to see that movie expressly because its about gayness. Gay, in this not so roundabout way, far from involving the estimated 10 percent of us we usually figure... actually affects approximately 100 percent of us. So we’re all implicated. (Archer, 1999, p. 26)

Symbolic Interactionism and the Construction of Labelling

As with other minority groups, LGBTQ people’s sense of identity has developed from a history of oppression and subsequent struggles against the oppression (LeVay, et al., 2009). It is important to consider the historical context of this population to have a better understanding of this community today. Specifically for this research it is worth examining the historical contexts of labelling and deviance from a symbolic interactionism framework. It is particularly useful for comprehending the ways in which individuals are labelled and the ways in which they engage in impression or identity management. Blumer, (1986) opines the construction of society is created by social interactions occurring via communication through symbols and symbolism. From this

perspective, all types and variances in communication among individuals in society are symbolic in nature, and meaning is derived from this process (Blumer, 1986).

Additionally, these avenues of communication allow for the creation of a unique understanding of ourselves, others and ultimately the world in which we live.

Labelling theory (Becker, 1963) arises from the core assumptions of symbolic interactionism whereby a label of *deviance* is attached to certain individuals and this results in consequences in how others treat them and ultimately how they identify themselves. According to this particular theory, once an individual has been labelled deviant, that label becomes that individual's *master status*, thereby becoming the primary characteristic by which others identify (Becker, 1963). This construction of a deviant or "evil" master status has implications for the individual's future, often resulting in exclusion and stigmatization from the conforming world. Tannenbaum (1938) goes on to further extrapolate this notion, stating observers in society may identify a particular act an individual engages in as deviant or evil, but ultimately shift emphasis of evil and deviance away from the action and onto the person. The person's actions are no longer observed and the individual as a whole is labelled or *tagged* to be evil or deviant (Tannenbaum, 1938). This becomes the identity that is ultimately communicated to, and viewed by society and thus, managing others' perceptions becomes much more difficult. With this overarching label applied it may result in a shift in consciousness, whereby the individual believes they are, in fact an outsider or a delinquent, who can interact only with other individuals who are also labelled outsiders. Becker (1963) suggests this exclusion from the conforming world and acceptance into the world of deviance becomes that individual's lifestyle, created and centered on deviance.

Social constructionism refers to the subjective nature of moral codes, deviance and deviant behaviours and how these are socially constructed. What is considered to be normal and what is considered deviant exist only in relation to one another at a particular time in history enacted and enforced by society's powerful and influential groups (Freud 1999). This notion is best understood as an evolving process, and "what is of sociological significance is not the individual behaviour or characteristic itself, but rather its place in social order; the roles assigned to people who exhibit that behaviour or characteristic and the meanings attached" (Bereska, 2011 p. 18). Symbolic interactionism and social construction are integral to understanding the ways in which individuals who have been labelled, stigmatized, policed, or punished react and behave in society.

Discourses of Deviance and Sexuality

Throughout history there have been various accounts of sexual minorities regarded as possessing greater spiritual capabilities than their heterosexual counterparts. Some revered spiritual teachers have been expressly revered as in the case of homosexual mystics (Kripal, 1998), lesbian healers in American Aboriginal tribes (Allen, 1992), or hermaphroditic mediums in Indian spirituality (Nanda, 1997). Although there have been immense shifts in sociological and psychological understandings of sexual minority individuals, in Western society the notion of *deviant* sexuality has been perpetuated throughout history. Moreover, influential institutions and governing bodies have continued to engage in maintaining these deviant discourses surrounding alternative sexual orientations. Early in the 20th century, homosexuality and same-sex attraction was theorized to be a negative psychological affliction, which was situated in unresolved anger and aggression, arrested development and ego immaturity (Freud, 1962). One

influential institutional body that has historically pathologized and labelled homosexuality is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). The DSM is an influential guide to assist clinicians in identifying, describing and classifying mental health disorders. It was first published in 1952 and the DSM has since been updated and revised five times with the most recent revision being the DSM-V-TR (APA, 2013). This manual focuses solely on diagnosis and does not provide recommendations on treatment. Based in the United States, the DSM is published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) yet the DSM has influential psychiatric implications and is utilized in numerous countries throughout the world by clinicians, researchers, psychiatric drug regulation agencies, health insurance companies, pharmaceutical companies, and policy makers (Daley & Mulé, 2014).

Homosexuality was listed in the inaugural publication of the DSM in 1952 under the classification of a “sociopathic personality disturbance” (Daley & Mulé, 2014; Drescher, 2009). Homosexuality was re-listed as “non-psychotic sexual deviance” in the 1968 Publication of the DSM-II (Daley & Mulé, 2014; Drescher, 2009). By mid-century, prominent researchers including Hooker (1957) and Kinsey (1948) began to study and publish biological and developmental components of homosexuality, including behaviour, desire and social identification. Pressure from the gay rights movement, the shift in research accompanied by the APA’s inability to provide empirical evidence that homosexuality is a mental disorder led to the APA’s declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973 (Daley & Mulé, 2014). Although the APA’s Board of Trustees voted to remove homosexuality from the DSM, they replaced the term in the 1974 printing of the DSM-II with the ambiguous diagnosis of “sexual orientation disturbance”

(Daley & Mulé, 2014; Drescher, 2009; King, 2003). Despite the de-classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder in the third version of the manual released in 1980, a series of disorders subsequently introduced over the past 30 years have allowed for the continued possibility of pathologizing queer individuals (Daley & Mulé, 2014). One such “sexual disorder” which has persisted throughout the various publications of the DSM is a disorder now classified as Gender Dysphoria (APA, 2013).

Gender Dysphoria first became a diagnosis under the title “Gender Dysphoria Syndrome” in 1980 with the publication of the DSM-III (Daley & Mulé, 2014). Individuals with Gender Dysphoria have a marked incongruence between the gender they have been assigned to at birth and their experienced or expressed gender (APA, 2013). Another classification of a “sexual disorder” which is found in the current manual is Transvestic disorder (APA, 2013). According to the text, this disorder occurs in heterosexual or bisexual adolescent and adult males (rarely in females) where cross-dressing behavior generates sexual excitement and may cause distress and/or impairment without questioning their assigned gender (APA, 2013). With this classification someone with Transvestic disorder can be given the additional diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria (APA, 2013). These persisting “disorders” of deviant sexuality can still be found in the latest revision of the DSM-V that contain numerous Paraphilic Disorders including but are not limited to; Sexual Masochism Disorder, Sexual Sadism Disorder, Fetishistic Disorder and Transvestic Disorder (APA, 2013).

After being repeatedly threatened and pressured by anti-psychiatry activists, the American Psychiatric Association has admitted that there is *no* biological evidence of biological abnormality in *any* psychiatric disorder (APA, 2003). However, society’s

perpetual view of this lifestyle as deviant, disordered and biologically abnormal contributes to queer people having negative feelings about themselves (Barbera et al., 2004). Fullagar, (2005) articulates the various institutional bodies (including the DSM) continue to shape the way that young people are socially positioned and come to feel about themselves. This is a far cry from more traditional cultures celebrating or honouring sexual minority individuals for their inherent spiritual gifts. The reality for queer populations today “is that there is a greater degree of fluidity and variance in the expression of gender and sexuality than the APA and DSM are acknowledging—and will allow. A critical queer lens exposes the undermining of such realities” (Daley & Mulé, 2014, p. 1304).

Queer theory has arisen partly from the influence of French philosopher, Michael Foucault and is closely aligned with constructivism. Queer theory argues against biological determinism and views identity groupings and labels such as "heterosexual," "homosexual," and "bisexual," with caution, viewing these as governing and authoritarian constructions of the dominant culture (Carroll & Gilroy, 2001). The principal goal of queer theory is to deconstruct the dominant societal perception of fixed gender and sexual identities as a means of fostering both political and social change (Sedgwick, 1990). Foucault (1978) suggested that homosexuality as a label and a construction of identity has been applied to men and women only recently in history, in the early 1900s. Foucault argued that homosexuality came to exist only when the “homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life” (Foucault, 1978, p. 43). The emergence of an identifiable, categorizable behavior soon became the means by which to medicalize and pathologize the particular individual. As a

homosexual himself, Foucault (1978) pronounced that a power discourse of sexuality was established that constructed homosexuality as deviant and something to be prevented and avoided.

Sexual Minorities and Determinants of Health

The perpetual oppression and associated stigma of this population translates to distinctive health concerns and stressors, which contribute to increased risk of mental health concerns and negative health outcomes (Hequembourg & Dearing, 2013). Cambre (2011) found that LGBT youth are at greater risk of suicidal ideation compared to heterosexual youth, and Bagley & Tremblay (2000) confirm the risk to be at least four times greater than their heterosexual counterparts. Burgess, Lee, Tran, & Van Ryn (2008) summarize health concerns this population faces more generally:

Compared to heterosexuals, LGBTTIQ individuals have poorer mental health (higher levels of psychological distress, greater likelihood of having a diagnosis of depression or anxiety, greater perceived mental health needs, and greater use of mental health services), more substance use, (higher levels of binge drinking, greater likelihood of being a smoker and greater number of cigarettes smoked per day), and were more likely to report unmet mental healthcare needs. (Burgess et al., 2008, p.1)

The queer community experiences a range of health issues that are all out of proportion with the general population as described above. These endemic health issues have arisen in part because of the prevalence of homophobia and heterosexism in our society and in the heteronormative delivery of services and resources (Barbara et al., 2004; MacEwan & Kinder, 1991; Doctor, 2004). Queer individuals have specific life factors

that directly relate to substance use and/or mental health problems which include; “coming out,” gender transition, societal oppression, loss of family support, isolation, and the predominance of bars in LGBTQ communities (Barbera et al., 2004, Bereska, 2011; Cass, 1979; Meyer, 2003; Devor, 1997).

Valentine, Skelton & Butler’s (2002) research found that homophobia often contributes to young LGBT people feeling bad about their own sexuality and developing low self-esteem and self-loathing. Levitt, Phukett, Ippolito & Horne (2012) found additional and influential source of homophobia is *societal homophobia*, which can translate to *internalized* homophobia. Levitt et al. (2012) define internalized homophobia as “the extent to which an individual of a sexual minority internalizes negative sentiment about sexual minorities from general society and suggests their support for their own orientation is severely lacking” (p. 158). All of these sources of homophobia can result in emotions that “can trigger self-destructive cycles of behaviour such as drinking, drug taking, unsafe sexual practices [and] self-harm” (Valentine et al., 2002, p. 13). Levitt et al. (2012) and Valentine et al. (2002) conclude that the numerous and various sources of homophobia make it difficult for individuals to access supports and the ensuing isolation can contribute self-destructive behaviours.

In the context of interpersonal relationships, queer people may be required to endure specific relationship factors such as invisibility of same-gender or trans partners, non-acceptance of partners by family, and a lack of outlets for discussing relationship dynamics and dating concerns (Barbera et al., 2004). Barbera et al. (2004) also acknowledge that queer individuals may also face similar relationship issues that non-queer people face which include issues such as domestic violence or partner abuse, grief

over the death of a partner, relationship breakups, inter- personal problems and parenting conflict.

Religion and spirituality are commonly encumbered with tension for many queer people as most Protestant, Islamic, Judaic, and Catholic doctrines regard homosexuality as abnormal and view sexual attraction and intercourse with people of the same gender as sinful or immoral (Sherry, Adelman, Whilde & Quick, 2010; Yip, 2005). These particular religious cultures often translate to homophobic environments where individuals in the process of negotiating their identity often leave or feel abandoned by their faith (Wood & Conley, 2014; Davidson, 2000; Lease, Horne & Noffsinger- Frazier, 2005; Robinson, 1999). Depending on the degree of inclusion or intolerance, queer individuals within a religious organization may be wounded emotionally, mentally and spiritually, be excommunicated, or feel forced to leave their religion (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005). Super and Jacobson (2011) reasoned that the psychological distress queer people experience can be termed “religious abuse,” where religious institutions use the power of position and teachings to oppress, coerce, and manipulate sexual minority people through stigmatizing, shaming, refusing, ousting, exorcising, and ex-communicating (Super & Jacobson, 2011). Barton (2010) found that gays and lesbians described simply living in a “Bible belt” geographic region of the United States as a “spirit-crushing experience of isolation, abuse, and self-loathing” (p. 477).

Several studies have acknowledged that struggles resulting from conflicting religious and sexual identities is associated with shame, internalized homophobia, suicidal ideation and depression (Mahaffy, 1996; Lease et al., 2005; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). These studies recognize a common occurrence for the queer individual is to

attempt to integrate their various identities. This identity integration process can include changing religions, reducing participation, rejecting their sexual identity, changing denominations or congregations, but it can also mean altering their beliefs or their relationship to beliefs (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Barton, 2010; Brennan-Ing, Seidel, Larson, & Karpiak, 2013).

Sexual Minorities Today

In Canadian society, there have been progressive changes in legislation and public opinion in the past few decades that are more inclusive of the queer population, yet despite these positive advancements, homophobia, discrimination and oppression are still prevalent in society today (Barbera et al., 2004, Bereska, 2011; Cass, 1979; Meyer, 2003; Devor, 1997). Barbera et al. (2004) found that heterosexism, genderism and gender roles contribute to the oppression of sexual minorities and gender diverse individuals. Moreover, the “arbitrary rules assigned by society define what clothing, behaviours, thoughts, feelings, relationships, etc. are considered appropriate and inappropriate for each sex. Genderism does not include or allow for people to be intersex, transgendered, transsexual, or genderqueer” (Barbera et al., 2004, p. 3).

Constructions of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation have shifted away from institutional sources and toward the individual’s agency of their bodies and capacity to self-govern personal desire, will and passion (Melucci, 1996). The term *plastic* sexuality coined by Giddens (1992) recognizes a decentered sexual era, sexuality for the sake of pleasure and not for reproductive purposes. With reproduction ceasing to be a choice for many individuals, both male and female, this shifts the sexual landscape into one of choice, passion, action and control over their sexual encounters (Melucci, 1996). This is a

formidable deviation from the previous association of sex, passion, lust and desire as sinful, and sex as a means to fulfill an expectation to procreate. It is in this new era of plastic and reflexive sexuality where authentic expressions of self through physical, sexual interactions with others are losing their negative connotations. Sexuality, says Melucci (1996), “is no longer consigned to the dark realm of the instincts, but is taken to be a profoundly human form of communication, a relational instrument that introduces us to love. Passion loses its negative meaning and becomes synonymous with feeling rooted in the body” (pg. 72). Melucci (1996) goes on to further state: “Today, there is a growing awareness that the body expresses a vital energy which brings us into contact with reality and with others, an energy which enables us to create and to transform reality” (Melucci, 1996, p. 72).

To some degree, Western society and Western culture is starting to shift beyond the dualistic categorization of sexuality and sexual identities. An important shift occurred when a third identity of bisexuality was acknowledged and popularized (See & Hunt, 2011; Guittar, 2014). Although bisexuality is far from being fully embraced or even understood by society at large, it has been recognized as a viable identity that can exist outside of the heterosexual and homosexual dichotomy (See & Hunt, 2011). This explosion of the dichotomy between gay and straight identities has led to the visibility of varying identities, all of which exist in the central realm or grey areas of the continuum, including as sexually fluid, pansexual, queer, and polysexual.

A social worker by training, Brene Brown (2007, 2010, 2012) has spent the later part of her career researching shame and resiliency in women. She interviewed hundreds of women throughout her research and through their narratives she developed an

operational definition of shame. “Shame is the intensely powerful feeling of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging” (Brown, 2007, p. 5). Although shame is recognized across a range of disciplines as a universal and immense emotion, it is often concealed and unacknowledged in Western societies (Scheff, 2003; Probyn 2005; Brown, 2007, 2010, 2012). As Brown (2007) summarizes, “we experience it, we feel it, we sometimes live with it for an entire lifetime, but we don’t talk about it” (Brown, 2007, p. 3). Queer theorists have proposed that there is a prominent pride/shame binary within the queer identity and state this is an essential component of a queer individual’s navigation through everyday life (Munt, 2000; Probyn, 2000; Sedgwick, 2003). Sedgwick (2003) goes as far as to claim: “I would say that for at least certain queer people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity” (p. 64). Queer theorists contend that enactment of pride of identity relies on the elimination of shame and ensuring shame remains unspoken and hidden. Probyn (2000) indicates: “pride operates as a necessity, an ontology of gay life that cannot admit its other” (p. 19-20). This demonstrates the complex emotional process in the development of sexual identities where shame and pride must consistently be managed and controlled.

Models of Identity Development

The past 30 years have seen a significant increase in research exploring the experiences and issues of gay and lesbian individuals. As a result of this research there have been many models of queer identity development processes documented (Cass 1979; Chapman & Brianock, 1987; Jenness, 1992; Minton & McDonald, 1984; Moses, 1979; Ponse, 1978; Troiden, 1988). Although these models have provided much needed information and insights into identity navigation and formation, their predominate

reliance on Euro-American, middle-class, well-educated sexual minority individuals has largely ignored the interconnections with other identity domains such as culture and spirituality. Of these models, the Cass (1979) Model is commonly used in research today and is understood to be methodologically sound. The Cass Model of Homosexual Identity Development describes six stages of identity development: 1) identity confusion, 2) identity comparison, 3) identity tolerance, 4) identity acceptance, 5) identity pride, and 6) identity synthesis (Cass, 1979). This model posits that all individuals initially self-identify as heterosexual due to the socialization processes within a culture. Moreover, this carries the assumption that all cultures are inherently homophobic or heterosexist.

An additional identity formation process within the queer individual is *Coming out of the closet*. As explained by Levay et al. (2009), coming out as an enduring process, and “though it may involve a dramatic moment or two, is really a lifelong voyage away from the social expectation of heterosexuality and toward a fully integrated gay identity” (LeVay et al., 2009, p. 388). In addition to one crucial and “fabulous” event, coming out involves several elements. As expressed by LeVay et al. (2009), the first element is coming out to oneself, whereby the individual realizes, and consciously accepts the reality of their sexual preferences. This is often the most difficult step in the entire process of coming out, and many factors can stifle the acknowledgment of one's true identity such as religion, internalized homophobia, living in a heterosexist society, and norms which disapprove or deviantize particular sexual behaviours as immoral (LeVay et al., 2009). Many factors can contribute to individuals hiding their sexual identity, and some face living in denial for many years, others their entire lives. Some individuals may engage in homosexual behaviours for many years without considering same sex desire is

a legitimate part of their identity (LeVay et al., 2009). LeVay et al. (2009) identify the second element of the coming out process involves coming out to others, and is commonly a gradual process. Often individuals choose to first disclose their identity to peers, siblings, counsellors or another individual who is perceived as a support, where as parents often find out later, sometimes for good reason (LeVay et al., 2009). Queer adolescents with parents with anti-gay views may react negatively to the disclosure which can cost a teen a home, college education, security and much more (LeVay et al., 2009). The third element of coming out involves individuals joining a gay or lesbian community, and can mean relocating to a large city with a well-developed LGBTQ community (LeVay et al., 2009). Finally, the important fourth element of coming out involves integrating the new identity with the other aspects of who they are (LeVay et al., 2009).

By exploring the lived experience of LGBQ individuals on their transformational journey, this research hopes to expand on these identity formation models and provide much needed insight into the spiritual realm of identity formation.

Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are

It is commonplace for LGBT activists to articulate being *out* is better than staying in the closet and individuals who are not yet out, should do so (MacLachlan, 2012). This notion of a moral duty to come out has its origins in the campaigns of gay political activists like Harvey Milk in the 1970's and has endured through the years, now taking on forms such as the multi-national *Coming Out Day* where the infamous chant is bellowed: "Come out, come out, wherever you are!" (MacLachlan, 2012). This pressure of publicly claiming sexual identification by queer activists is often done so with the intention to advance the political cause of queer rights and the community at large, or

help the wider queer community gain visibility (MacLachlan, 2012). Ultimately, coming out is a self-identification process where individuals speak their authentic voice, claim their identity and become visible members of a minority community.

In her position paper, MacLachlan (2012) argues individuals should not allow themselves to be coerced into a duty to come out, and other researchers agree. A prominent underpinning of queer identity construction is the idea that sexual identities are permanent, stable and impervious to change (Diamond 2005; Kinnish, Strassberg, & Turner, 2005). From this perspective individuals who have come out are ultimately understood, identified and labelled by their identity for the remainder of their lifetime; gay, bisexual, asexual etc. Lisa Diamond's research with non-heterosexual women revealed significant sexual identity fluctuations over time (Diamond 2000, 2005) and has directly challenged the notion of a static sexual identity. The stable sexual identity discourse is a limiting and constrictive view and has been recently challenged by those who argue that sexuality is better described as *fluid* or flexible and for some people, sexual identity and sexual behaviours can vary extensively throughout their lifetime (Kinnish et al., 2005; Golden, 1997; Diamond, 2000).

A study conducted by McLean (2008) examined the practice of *coming out again*, a term first identified in 1997 by Arlene Stein, which is described as relinquishing a non-heterosexual identity initially and having to subsequently come out again as some other identity. This process of re-identification can have an immense impact on feelings of belonging in particular social spaces, such as in the LGBTQ community where there are strong perceived rules, performances and boundaries surrounding sexual identity categories (McLean, 2008).

A Shift to a Transpersonal Vision

For the purpose of this study, it is necessary to comprehend the most recent “force” in psychology, that of transpersonal psychology. There are four “forces” of psychological movements identified throughout the history of psychology. These include a) behaviourism, b) psychoanalysis and depth psychology, c) humanism and existential approaches, and today d) spiritual and transpersonal psychology. All of these movements in the history of psychology have made a significant impact in the field, yet each force has limitations that must be thoughtfully and critically examined. Before this shift to a transpersonal vision, in recent history a sharp distinction had been made between psychology and religion, spirit and physical, biological sciences and the sacred (Cortright, 1997). As articulated by Wilber (1999), transpersonal psychology is a theoretical vision which attempts to acknowledge and embrace all of the life stages including the prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal realms rather than exclusively addressing the spiritual or transpersonal levels of human development. Often considered to be one of the founding fathers of the transpersonal psychology movement, Maslow (1968) stated the spiritual sacred experience is a possibility occurring at the higher, more transcendent reaches of human nature. In his view, this necessitated the expansion of a fourth shift in psychology, one that is “transpersonal, transhuman, centered in the cosmos rather than in human needs and interests, going beyond humanness, identity, self-actualization, and the like” (Maslow, 1968, p. iii-iv). This force in psychology has uniquely integrated all aspects of human existence and acknowledges individuals as “more than psycho-physical, emotionally wounded and conditioned selves but are spiritual beings” (Cortright, 1997, p. 243). A succinct definition states transpersonal

psychology “can be understood as the melding of the wisdom of the worlds spiritual traditions with the learning of modern psychology” (Cortright, 1997, p. 8). By embracing a transpersonal framework for this research, the physical aspects of “self” can be understood in addition to leaving the confines of self altogether to explore the vast spectrum of consciousness, into the realm of no self and non-dual consciousness.

Transpersonal psychology, specifically transpersonal theory, is not static, nor a cut and dried approach and is still a relatively new development. However, this psychological framework facilitates unity, reflexivity, and continual self-awareness and re-evaluation (Cortright, 1997). This approach has a far wider view of the self than previous forces and through this lens; consciousness is understood to be a multidimensional, vast existence where new aspects of being are continually manifested (Cortright, 1997). The movement from self into being is an infinite journey and spiritual traditions affirm there is in fact, no end or destination to this journey (Cortright, 1997).

The Spectrum of Consciousness

Ken Wilber is an indispensable figure in the transpersonal psychology community and in the following section the various phases of his work culminating in his most recent *Integral Theory* will be examined. In his early writings, Ken Wilber (1977, 1979) introduced a full spectrum model of human growth and psychological development. This integral map of human consciousness titled the *Spectrum of Consciousness* integrates both Eastern contemplative traditions and Western schools of psychology and laid the essential groundwork for all of his subsequent publications. This master consciousness template is organized into ten stages or fulcrums and these fulcrums are akin to rungs on a ladder, whereby the self (or self–system) is the climber of the ladder (Wilber, 1999). At

each level of the ladder, the individual has a different perspective of reality, a new self-sense, a new identity with different needs and desires. As the climber ascends during the process of normal development, the previous structures are replaced with a new perspective with the lower levels still remaining in existence, however the limitations of previous levels no longer remain (Wilber 1999). Wilber (1983) states that although the model is ascending and hierarchical, the individual may not advance in a consecutive process. There may be areas of overlap similar to Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs, arrested development or severe regression thorough the levels. If the self is to ascend the levels of structures and climb the ladder of consciousness the self must come to a place where it can freely release its identification with the present level. Wilber (1977, 1999, 2000) describes this crucial process as *integration* of the lower levels in order to strengthen the present level in service of transcending to the next developmental fulcrum. Wilber (1999, 2000) outlines how the various stages of development directly correspond with particular pathologies that may arise at a particular stage of development. Moreover, the spectrum also identifies appropriate therapeutic interventions at each level (Wilber, 1999, 2000).

This model contains ten basic structures of development beginning with the lower fulcrums of prepersonal (pre-egoic) development , levels of personal or egoic development and four transpersonal levels. This model outlines four main levels: (Gross) Ego, Existential, Transpersonal, and Unity consciousness and a brief summary of each will be provided (Wilber, 1999, 2000).

Level 1: Sensoriophysical. In the first several levels of the spectrum Wilber (1999) references the work of Mahler, Pine, & Bergman (1975) as well as Piaget (1977) to help

identify the process of separation and individuation that occurs in one's life. Wilber (1999) describes what Mahler et al. (1975) termed the "hatching phase" occurring at the sensoriphysical level, whereby the "self-system must negotiate the emergence of the physical and sensoriperceptual basic structures of existence" (Wilber, 1999, p.102). This phase is marked by the infant separating itself from the physical world and the emergence of a body-ego, able to recognize personal body movements (Mahler et al., 1975; Wilber, 1999). A disturbance or hatching failure in this developmental stage results in the self system failing to differentiate the marked separation of the body and the physical environment (Wilber, 1999) It is when "consciousness fails to seat in the physical body; thoughts of self and other are confused" (Wilber, 1996, p. 163). Problems at this stage can include a lack of self-boundaries, infantile autism and forms of psychosis (Wilber, 2000). Navigating the first fulcrum is necessary to facilitate entrance into the second fulcrum of development and encounter the next major structure of existence, the emotional and phantasmic (Wilber, 1999).

Level 2: Phantasmic-Emotional. This sexual and emotional developmental level involves a differentiation within the organism itself. A differentiation must occur of internalized self-images from internalized object-images (Wilber, 1999). Put simply, at this level the self must learn to differentiate itself from the thoughts, feelings and emotions of other people. If the self is unable to differentiate from others, the physical world and establish emotional boundaries it will be vulnerable to pathologies of anxiety, depression, narcissism and borderline conditions (Wilber, 1996, 1999, 2000). These pathologies can manifest when the outside world and self are lacking differentiation at this level or the self fixates in this realm (Wilber, 2000). Pathologies occur at this level

when there is insufficient structure to differentiate self and object representations and thus, the aim of therapy at this level is to employ structure-building techniques to help facilitate the individual to complete the separation individuation process (Wilber 1999).

Level 3: Rep-Mind. With the establishment of the emotional self, the next level involves the emergence of the mental or conceptual self (Wilber, 1999). Titled as an abbreviation for “representational mind,” this phase is considerably aided with the acquisition of language, and comprehension of symbols and concepts (Wilber, 1999). Here the individual awakens to their unique sense of self, including sexual identity and gender identity. Similar to Piaget’s (1977) *preoperational thinking*, this stage is when the self “learns not just to *feel*, but *think* – to verbalize, talk, and mentally control its behaviour” also, “in a sense, the mental self (and its thoughts) learns to repress the previous emotional self (and its feelings)” (Wilber, 1999, p.113). Developmentally the self acquires the concept of time along with the ability to conceptualize past and future events. This involves a cognitive awareness to envision things otherwise unachievable through physical means (Wilber, 1999). Wilber (1999) identifies the emergence of the “early ego or persona” at this level which may cause the self to disown or repress feelings and emotions perceived to be unacceptable to others (Wilber, 1999). If this occurs severely and/or for a prolonged period of time, the repressed feelings or split aspects may manifest in the form of neuroses, anxiety, phobias, compulsions, obsessions or hysterias (Wilber, 1999). At this level, therapeutic interventions aimed to dissolve the pattern of repressed emotions commonly referred to as the *shadow* self are employed (Wilber, 2000). Gestalt and Jungian therapies along with ego psychology and psychoanalysis are appropriate for identifying repressed or unconscious emotions and reintegrating into

conscious awareness (Wilber, 2000). The third level concludes the prepersonal stage of development and the progression continues into the next three stages Wilber (1999) identifies as personal development.

Level 4: Rule/Role mind. As the self transcends the level of representational-mind and simple concepts, it begins to identify with the rule/role mind where the self can not only imitate a role but also assume or take on the role of others (Wilber, 1999). Consciousness shifts considerably from an egocentric position to a sociocultural one, “from *me* to *we*” where the self must conform to the rules and roles of society (Wilber, 2000, p. 105). Wilber (1999) states the self expresses a strong desire to feel acceptance from others, to fit in, to belong and to understand the rules and find its role. In addition to a strong aspiration to fit in arises a correlative fear of breaking the rules, losing ones identity or losing face (Wilber, 1999). Because the self is more cognitively developed at this stage, the conflicts arising are more cognitive than the other psychodynamic levels. Thus, the pathologies often contain false beliefs, and inadequate scripts and narratives of oneself (Wilber, 1999). Interventions at this level tend to focus on cognitive therapies to challenge the distorted beliefs held and work to consciously integrate a healthier self-concept and belief system (Wilber, 1999).

Level 5: Formal-Reflexive. Once the self has transcended the previous level and has integrated appropriate rules and roles, the “self is no longer unreflexively bound to social roles and conventional morality; for the first time it can depend on its own individual principles of reason and conscience” (Wilber, 1999, p. 124). It is at this fifth formal-reflexive level where the self is capable of conceiving future possibilities or hypothetical scenarios, successes, failures, desires, goals and fears (Wilber, 1999). The

self is able to move away from conformist roles of society and plunge deeper into a worldcentric, global postconventional self, which is marked by the maturation of the ego (Wilber 1999, 2000). Because the self is now capable of metacognition, the ability to think about thinking, this “reasoning mind” identified by Aurobindo (2001) begins exploration of identity issues and philosophical contemplation. At the heart of pathologies in this level is “identity neurosis” where the self is attempting to stand on its own principles of conscience and think independently but encounters its own vulnerabilities and distress from the newly formed formal reflexive mind (Wilber, 1999). Interventions for this level require the therapist to take an active role as a “co-educator or co-philosophizer” to engage the self by cultivating introspection, specifically utilizing Socratic dialogue (Wilber, 1999). Once the formal reflexive mind is engaged, Wilber (1999) states there will be a natural gravitation towards its own views and philosophies and the ability to climb the ladder to the next fulcrum.

Level 6: Vision-Logic. Once introspection and the philosophizing capabilities of the established ego are engaged and matured, existential concerns begin to emerge in the sixth level of Vision-logic (Wilber, 1999). F-6 is the final level of personal development, the final stage of ego development and immediately precedes the transpersonal realms. This stage is the highest realm conventional researchers and practitioners generally recognize, and directly parallels with Aurobindo’s (2001) “higher mind.” It is at this level where the intensity, reality and ultimate impermanence of one’s existence is realized, a process described by Maslow (1968) as *self-actualization*. Wilber also refers to F-6 as the existentialist stage, for embarking on a journey towards transpersonal awareness will inevitably lead the person towards an experience of existential crisis. Typical affects

experienced as described by Wilber (1999) include; a concern for overall meaning in life, grappling with personal mortality and one's finite existence. Common existential syndromes as outlined by Wilber (1999) include: Existential depression, inauthenticity, existential isolation, aborted self-actualization and existential anxiety.

Existentialists facilitate the process of directly confronting, death, meaninglessness, anxiety, and aloneness (Yalom, 1980; Frankl, 1972; May, Angel & Ellenberger, 1958), dread and angst (Kierkegaard, 1944), being and non-being (Heidegger, 1962), and self-actualization (Maslow, 1968, 1971; Rogers, 1961,1980). Wilber, (1999) May (1958) and Yalom (1995) contend that if one is unaccepting of death, then one is ultimately failing to accept life. Pathology occurs when the existential concerns of "being-in-the-world" overwhelm the newly formed self and halt its functioning (Heidegger, 1962; Wilber, 1999 p.141). Wilber (1999) states that the clearer and more transparent the self can become, the more capable it is of clearing egocentric, inauthentic and power driven modes of being. For it is in authentic living that carries with it "*intrinsic meaning*" (Wilber, 1999, p. 142).

Level 7: Psychic. The Psychic level is where contemporary psychology theory stalls. The subsequent transpersonal levels are characterized by spiritual practices and increases in intensified and unified consciousness. Here, consciousness begins to enter the "subtle sphere" which is divided into two realms; the "low-subtle" (or psychic) and the "high-subtle" (Wilber, 1983, p. 83). Here consciousness enters the first transpersonal and transcendental realm, intensifies and begins to open the "eye of contemplation" (Wilber, 1983). Nelson (1994) states this level consists of "benign sorcery, visionary power, and prophesy (p. 164). According to Wilber (1983), psychic and paranormal

events occur and transpire most easily at this level, although they are said to reach no higher than this level that characterized as the lowest of the transpersonal, transcendental realms. The individual gains an awareness that is no longer entwined exclusively to the ego and experiences dissolution of the subject-object dichotomy/dualism (Wilber 1999). These moments of duality dissolve where cognitions are less world-centric and refined to a universal and integral existence (Wilber, 1983, 1999, 2000).

Level 8: Subtle. Entering the high-subtle sphere, consciousness at this level is mediated through archetypal constructs that include illuminations, sounds and profound clarity (Wilber, 1983, 1999). This level transcends the psyche and witnesses beyond previous levels (Wilber, 1983, 1999). Through transcendental insight the self is able to experience deity and nature mysticism (Wilber, 1999, 2000). Wilber (1980) refers to this concept as *over-mind* in that:

The over-mind simply embodies a transcendence of all mental forms, and discloses, at its summit, the intuition of that which is above and prior to mind, self, world, and body—something which, Aquinas would have said, all men and women would call God” (p.68).

The aforementioned God that Wilber (1980) identifies is not an ontologically constructed entity distinct from humans or creation in general; rather is characterized as an archetypal manifestation of one’s own consciousness (Wilber, 1980). For “one dissolves into Deity, *as* Deity - that Deity which from the beginning, has been one’s own Self or highest Archetype (Wilber, 1983, p. 85).

Level 9: Causal. As the process of integration continues, any archetypal attachments are dissolved and transcended in the causal level (Wilber, 1983). This is

characterized by the witnessing of manifest and unmanifested forms in addition to witnessing the observing self (Wilber, 1999). Here the self is dissolved into a state of pure *Formless Consciousness* where there is nothing apart from boundless consciousness where the subject and object are forgotten (Wilber, 1980, 1983).

Level 10: Non-Dual Consciousness. Interviewing LGBTQ individuals and their lived experience with non-dual consciousness is the main focus of this research, therefore this final level of non-dual consciousness will be explored in depth and in various contexts throughout this chapter. Wilber (1983) defines ultimate or non-dual consciousness as “passing through the state of cessation or unmanifest absorption, consciousness is said finally to reawaken to its absolutely prior and eternal abode as spirit, radiant and all pervading, one and many, only and all” (p.250). This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the Absolute, Zen’s “One-Mind”, Brahman-Atman, and Nirvana in various contemplative traditions. Here the self is entirely liberated from attachments, desires and urges, and consciousness is liberated from the witness (Wilber, 1999). Non-dual consciousness is marked by a total dissolution of the separate self-structure and an embracement and integration of all levels of the spectrum of consciousness (Wilber, 1999). Although this level is the absolute level on Wilber’s (1999) spectrum, this is an ultimately natural state of consciousness and has been present all along only to be concealed by false self-structures (Wilber, 1999, 2006).

Non-Dual Consciousness

Non-dual consciousness is the focus of various pathways to enlightenment including most schools of Buddhism and Taoism, Hindu Vedanta and mystical Christianity and Judaism (Prendergast, 2003). It refers to the understanding and direct

experience of consciousness that underlies the apparent distinction between perceiver and perceived (Nixon & Sharpe, 2009). This state is marked by an expansion of one's identity beyond ordinary thinking and ego self-awareness, a dis-identification with the witness and a release of the separate self-sense. (Wilber, 1983, 1999, 2000). As the pure *Seer* or *Witness* one is able to see objects and not identify with them, residing in openness, freedom and spaciousness (Wilber, 2016). An individual abiding in non-dual consciousness typically experiences an ego death and moves beyond or transcends a personal ego identity (Welwood, 2002). Experiences and feelings associated with this phenomenon include feelings of surrender and expansiveness, all pervading love, bliss or contentment, as well as experiencing no thoughts and stillness (Almaas, 2004; Prendergast, 2003). Wilber (2016) cites the Sanskrit phrase *neti-neti* meaning “not this, not that” used in Vedantic inquiry as a means of arriving at the location of self, not this, not that nor any object that can be observed, rather the opening or clearing in which these are arising in each moment (p.101). This non-dual beingness or awakened awareness is the experience of seeing, moment by moment, that no thought defines identity (Tolle, 1999; Katie, 2002; Almaas, 1996). Ultimately, there is clear awareness marked by a complete stopping/dropping/letting go of the illusion of being a separate, personal self (Almaas, 1996; Wilber, 1999). Almaas (1996) describes the phenomenon:

At this level of realization, we come also to perceive the unity of all manifestation. Since Being is an indivisible medium (not composed of parts), it follows that everything makes up a unity, a oneness. There is one existence, as opposed to two, or many. It is merely an infinite presence that possesses a pattern. This pattern is everything we perceive, including all persons and objects. So

everything is connected to everything; there exist no separate and autonomous objects or persons. (Almaas, 1996, p. 406)

The following section will elaborate and contextualize the phenomenon of non-dual consciousness through Wilber's Integral theory.

An Integral Vision

Wilber's earlier works have undergone several refining phases throughout the years and Wilber's more recent (2001, 2006, 2007, 2016) *Integral* theory provides an all inclusive, comprehensive framework within which all human understanding and knowledge may be organized. This model attempts to integrate as many developmental approaches as possible into its model of human development. As a "meta-theory" or theory of theories, Ken Wilber's Integral theory comprises a multidimensional "meta-framework" for arranging historical, contemporary and emerging theories, philosophies, and worldviews in relation to one another, in an approach that uncovers interconnectedness that might not be obvious otherwise (Wilber, 2006, 2007, 2016). This full-spectrum and integral catalogue of mind states asserts that there are five main components of human psychology that need to be included in any comprehensive theory: developmental *levels* of consciousness, developmental *lines* of consciousness, normal and altered *states* of consciousness, the self or self-system/structure and the four domains of development (Wilber, 2000, 2006, 2007). Wilber titles these five elements "quadrants, levels, lines, states and types" (Wilber, 2006, p. 2). All of these elements are not merely theoretical concepts, rather aspects of each individual's experience and contours of consciousness that are available, right now in everyone's awareness (Wilber, 2006,

2007). Together, these five components comprise the Integral AQAL framework and each element will be described in more detail in the following sections.

Views of Self. Throughout the transformational journey and the road to self-realization, there is a massive transformation of identity that occurs (Almaas, 1996). Thus it is important to define and understand the concept of the self. Various terminology is used in transpersonal literature and terms such as essence, self-structure, soul, being, presence, are often used to describe ones self (Almaas, 1996; Cortright 1997; Wilber, 2000). The integral model of the self or self-system is a comprehensive approach that embraces diverse and relevant research and understandings of how self-sense evolves and acts as the mediator of our experience of the world (Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007). Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter (2007) view the self as akin to the pattern of a whirlpool, consistent, shifting and powerful yet ultimately dependent on outside structures for its existence. Wilber (1980, 2006) articulates the self can be described as a complex phenomenon serving various functions and having several relationships to the unconscious. It navigates, metabolizes, coordinates and integrates both interior and exterior experiences (Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007).

With contributions from Western schools of developmental psychology and incorporating constructs from depth psychology, Wilber (2000, 2006) developed a model of the self-system that is best described through a *ladder, climber and view* metaphor. Within this model, the ladder consists of the developmental instinct and the degree of development or what Wilber (2006) identifies as “altitude” is akin to the rungs on the ladder. These rungs are the basic levels of consciousness and Integral theory represents these through the colours of the rainbow (Wilber, 2000; Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter,

2007). The climber as described by Wilber (2000) and Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter (2007) can be understood as the self or self-system navigating the rungs of the ladder. As the self ascends the rungs of the ladder and increases its altitude, each rung of the ladder presents a new view with broader perspectives (Wilber, 2000). Although the views are permanent for the duration the individual is on a particular rung, the views are subsequently replaced by a new and expanded view once the self moves to the next rung (Wilber, 2000; Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007). According to this model, by transcending and including the previous rung, the individual never regains the view from previous rungs, nor regresses down the ladder to identify with earlier rungs or levels (Wilber, 2000).

Almaas (2012) states the self “can, of course, be experienced as spaciousness, fluidity, radiance, or solidity. It can be all of these things, and it is never just one thing, because it is always changing and moving” (p. 205). Almaas (2011) presents a description to of self similar to the Integral approach as it is dependent on the level or dimension from which the mind operates. Only when an individual is able to expand perception beyond the gross physical realm and beyond one’s egoic identity, consciousness moves from a perception of individuality and separateness to actualized formless interconnected wholeness. (Almaas, 2011, 2014). In the context of this research the term self and self-system will be used interchangeably.

States of consciousness. States of consciousness refer to subjective realities such as waking, dreaming and deep sleep (Wilber, 2006, 2007). Wilber states there are five natural states of consciousness that can be directly experienced by every individual: gross waking states (exercising, reading etc.), subtle dream states (vivid dreaming, vivid daydreaming, visualization etc.), causal formless states (deep dreamless sleep,

experiences of vast openness or nothingness), witnessing states (capacity to witness all the other states) and ever present non-dual awareness (ever-present ground of all states, can be experienced as such) (Wilber, 2006). There are numerous states of consciousness beyond the major states, some of which include *meditative* states, (induced by contemplative practices or prayer, yoga, meditation etc.) *altered* states (such as drug or substance induced) and various *peak experiences* (many can be achieved through sex, experiences in nature, or listening to music) (Wilber, 2006, 2007). On a foundational level, everybody experiences various states of consciousness, which give rise to motivation, meaning and drives in ourselves and in others (Wilber, 2006). Experiencing these states of consciousness also means experiencing their transitory nature. These states come and they ultimately go (Wilber, 2007). From exceptional peak experiences or altered states, such blissful and profound experiences are only temporary (Wilber, 2006).

Growing up: The stages or levels of development. Where states of consciousness are fleeting, *stages* of consciousness are fixed (Wilber, 2006). Wilber (2006) states “stages represent the actual milestones of growth and development. Once you are at a stage it is an enduring acquisition” (Wilber, 2006, p.5). Stages of development are also referred to as levels of development and each stage represents an organizational level or a degree of complexity (Wilber, 2006). Wilber’s (1977, 1979) early consciousness development model as described previously in this chapter has undergone considerable revisions and iterations throughout the years. In his book *Integral Spirituality* Wilber (2006) generalizes three main states where growth and evolution occur: *body, mind and spirit*, however a more advanced and integral description of *Growing Up* through the levels of development or “hidden maps” are explained in his

latest book, *Integral Meditation* (Wilber, 2016). Wilber's latest model is a reworking of the theory of Spiral Dynamics (SD) that is based on the developmental models of psychologist Claire Graves (1970) and was popularized in 1996 by Don Beck and Chris Cowan. SD pictures human developments as a spiral process and attempts to understand and contextually analyze the cultural worldviews and value systems that individuals possess throughout their life (Beck & Cowan, 1996). The SD system is arranged into hierarchical levels that are colour coded and mainly explores interior worldviews and culture of human development (Beck & Cowan, 1996). Both SD and Wilber's Integral theory have integrated aspects of each other's model and view human development as an open ended, ongoing process that integrates and includes the level below into the one above (Wilber, 2016; Beck & Cowan, 1996).

The following section will identify Wilber's maps of progressive stages or developmental levels that unfold one at a time. According to Wilber (2016) this is the process of "Growing Up" in which human consciousness evolves from one level to another. It is important to note that both SD and Integral theory purport each state undergoes a transcendence and inclusion or "transcend-and-include" of its preceding state (Wilber, 2016, p. 21). Each new stage of development includes and transcends the previous, yet adds something new resulting in a "higher" stage with a wider, broader perspective (Wilber, 2016). Wilber's stages are colour coded in the same fashion as the Eastern chakra system that will be explored in greater depth in this chapter. We begin with the earliest, most primitive levels of knowing and feeling, the infrared, "Archaic" stage (Wilber, 2016).

Level one: (Infrared) Archaic. Characterized by the infrared color, in this stage an infant is unable to distinguish where its body stops and the environment begins (Wilber, 2016). Within level one, this “body” stage is contextualized within gross physical reality, and the infant remains in a state of fusion to its surroundings and mother, it does not have a separate self-sense (Wilber, 2016). Here the infant is identified with survival drives such as hunger and warmth (Wilber, 2006, 2016). At approximately four months of age, alternatively titled the “hatching” subphase, the infant distinguishes its physical body from the environment, yet remains emotionally fused in a dual-unity to others (Wilber, 2016). This level is experienced throughout the infant’s first year of life, and remains largely in an undifferentiated, fused state (Wilber, 2016). Wilber (2016) states few adults remain at this stage, yet may have some aspects of their awareness fixated or attached to this stage which results in problems with physiological needs and drives.

Level two: (Magenta) Magic Tribal. Around eighteen months of age, the infant starts to emotionally differentiate self and other (Wilber, 2016). Throughout ages one through four, the child operates with fantasy or magical thinking (Wilber, 2016). Level two is usually called impulsive, emotion-sexual or magical and is characterized by the color magenta (Wilber, 2016). Due to the child’s early differentiation from the environment, it is common for the self to confuse and be mistaken for its surroundings (Wilber, 2016). Within the realm of magical thinking, human motivations and characteristics are often attributed to the natural world (Wilber, 2016). The child exists only in the moment and is driven by immediate gratification and impulse (Wilber 2016). Unlike 50,000 years ago, in the world today few individuals remain in this stage, yet

aspects of fixations and attachments to this stage emerge in individuals who engage in narcissistic, selfish, egocentric, superstitious or magical thinking (Wilber, 2016).

Alternatively, individuals may repress or dissociate from magical or superstitious thoughts that arise, and unconsciously project their shadow onto others (Wilber, 2006, 2016).

Level three: (Red) Magic-Mythic. As the self continues to differentiate itself from its environment, it becomes more aware of its fragility of existence and develops *power drives* that include drives for safety, self-protection, power and security (Wilber, 2016). This stage is marked by a transition between the magical thinking of the previous stage and the mythical influence of the following stage and is identified as the color red (Wilber, 2016). The self at this level is incapable of taking the role or perspective of the other and adults who remain in this stage are often fixated on power and control and are capable of violent and malicious actions (Wilber, 2016). Inflated power drives commonly show up as an “inner critic” controlling one’s actions, while others who repress these power drives may reject or give away their own power continually (Wilber, 2016). Through levels one through three the self remains in an egocentric, narcissistic perspective (Wilber, 2016). This is not by choice; rather they have not developed the capacity to take the role of other at these stages (Wilber, 2016).

Level four: (Amber) Mythic Traditional. During this amber coloured stage, a very important shift occurs where the self can begin to take on the role of other (Wilber, 2016). With this expansion of perspective, identity can shift beyond the confines of self and belong to or identify with groups such as family, tribe, nation, religion etc. (Wilber, 2016). Wilber (2016) refers to this shift as switching from egocentric or “me-focused”

identity to an ethnocentric or “us/we/group focused” identity (p.37). Although this expansion or perspective is hugely important, this stage is marked by very absolutist, mythical-literal and concrete thinking and results in strict adherence to rules (Wilber, 2016). Myths, commonly found in religious texts are taken to be concretely, literally and absolutely true and there is an emphasis on special belongingness (Wilber, 2016). This absolutistic stage is commonly found in seven to twelve year olds, but many adults today are frequently bound by unquestionable, conformist beliefs located in this stage (Wilber, 2016). Wilber (2016) states that many individuals at higher levels of development end up regressing back to this state, taking on a fundamentalist attitude to a new belief or practice.

Level five: (Orange) Rational Modern. At the orange coloured level five the next higher perspective and thought capacity begins to emerge. Here, a third person perspective that facilitates the capacity to take an “objective, scientific, universal perspective” appears (Wilber, 2016, p. 48). The identity shifts from a concrete operational mode (or ethnocentric identity) in stage four to a more universal, global, worldcentric identity (Wilber, 2016). This third person perspective facilitates individuals to move beyond the present moment, reason “what if” and contemplate future scenarios. (Wilber, 2016) Wilber (2016) also refers to this stage as *formal operations* as thought can transcend the gross physical world and can now be aware of thought itself, resulting in a self-reflective, introspective, universal identity. This stage marks the emergence of a deep sense of solidarity for all of human kind, beyond one’s clan, tribe or group of individuals (Wilber, 2016).

Level six: (Green) Pluralistic Postmodern. This stage is also known as relativistic, multicultural, egalitarian, postmodern and pluralistic (Wilber, 2016). This green coloured level came with the emergence of a fourth person perspective, defined by Wilber (2016) as the “capacity to reflect on and criticize 3rd person perspectives including science, leading to a multitude of different or pluralistic views” (p. 61). This level first emerged in the world in the 1960’s with major social revolutions including the civil rights movement, environmental movement, feminism and multiculturalism (Wilber, 2016). Green level six has a strong sense of pluralistic sensitivity, yet often times the belief in many different approaches to reality gets taken to the extreme, where there are absolutely no unified approaches, no big pictures or universal knowledge or truths (Wilber, 2016). Wilber (2016) contends individuals at this level can get caught contradicting oneself by being discriminatory of others who are not as inclusive as they believe themselves to be. Critics of Wilber point out that Wilber himself tends to get fixated at this level due to his intolerance for other’s perspectives, namely citing various theorists and authors as partially correct, yet he asserts himself as still *more* correct (Odjanyk, 1993; Schneider, 2001; Washburn, 1994, 1995, 2003). Specifically, in Appendix III of Wilber’s *Integral Spirituality* (Wilber, 2006) Wilber critiqued various authors who ignore the intersubjective domain, yet in doing so has committed the very error of upholding his view as the only inclusive universal truth. This level of no universal truths or knowledge is in fact believed to be a superior, universal truth (at times even by Wilber himself). As a result, political correctness emerges and individuals often try to impose their pluralistic beliefs and values onto others (Wilber, 2016).

Level seven: (Turquoise) Integral. Each of the previous six levels believe their values and truths are the only ones in existence and that all others (and other levels) are in some way wrong, misguided or in need of reform (Wilber, 2016). Therefore the preceding levels are classified as “1st tier” levels, as they are in some way partial, narrow and incomplete while turquoise integral level seven is “2nd tier” as it is the first level that is fully inclusive, integral and comprehensive (Wilber, 2016). Wilber (2016) describes the recent emergence of this level in human consciousness evolution as “an entirely different type of stage or level, one that was fundamentally and significantly different from anything that had emerged to date in history” (p. 72). The major breakthrough in this level is the understanding of the value and significance in all of the previous levels in existence (Wilber, 2016). This level is truly all-inclusive, all-embracing and comprehensive (Wilber, 2016). The individual at this stage is driven by wholeness, resulting in personal self-esteem needs giving way to self-actualization needs (Wilber, 2016). Wilber (2016) states level seven Integral is the highest level individuals can be expected to reach as individuals at an integral level of development are literally on the leading edge of evolution, and each action, thought and feeling is co-creating the future levels. Individuals at this level are naturally open to the Super-Integral levels (Wilber, 2016). Since evolution is a continual, endless process there is no evidence that this process will cease, resulting in the inevitable emergence of additional levels in the future (Wilber, 2016).

Level eight. (White) 3rd -Tier Super Integral. This level is marked by many of the same features of the previous level although is classified as a 3rd tier or Super-Integral level. By transcending and including all of the previous levels, white or clear light

coloured level eight is yet a more inclusive, more whole, and more conscious than level seven (Wilber, 2016).

Wilber's (2006, 2007, 2016) Integral theory is driven by levels seven and eight and radically shifts everything it approaches.

Lines of Development. Evidence suggests humans have a variety of intelligences and researchers understand that humans have upwards of twelve different multiple intelligences alternatively referred to as developmental lines (Wilber, 2016). In any given person, some of these lines can be highly developed, some poorly (or even pathologically) developed, and others not developed at all (Wilber, 2001, 2006). These various intelligences can be called developmental lines because these intelligences show growth and development and unfold in gradual stages or levels that were discussed previously in this chapter (Wilber 2006, 2007, 2016). Some intelligences include, cognitive, intra-personal, kinaesthetic, moral, musical, emotional, mathematical, spatial, spiritual, and so on (Wilber, 2016). Through the integral approach this acknowledgement of multiple lines brings forth the vast store of unrecognized talent and genius in all of us, within our various lines (Wilber, 2016).

Wilber-Combs Lattice. First introduced in the book *Integral Spirituality*, Ken Wilber and Allan Combs have made a significant refinement in the understanding of relationships between levels and states in a diagram they call the Wilber-Combs Lattice (Wilber, 2006). The realization was that “most meditative *states* are variations on the natural states of gross-waking, subtle-dreaming, and causal-formlessness, then they are present, or can be present, at virtually all *stages* of growth, because even the earliest stages wake, dream, and sleep” (Wilber, 2006, p. 89). This method of differentiating

levels of consciousness from types of spiritual experience is a major step forward from Wilber's early works, such as *Spectrum of Consciousness* (1977) and *The Atman Project* (1980) where this distinction was not made. The Wilber-Combs lattice is a matrix of state by stage potentials and here we see Wilber's use of a coloured spectrum for the vertical axis. According to Wilber (2006, 2007, 2016) an individual can directly experience any state of consciousness at any level of development. However an individual will interpret any spiritual (meditative or altered) *state* of consciousness in direct relation to their *stage* of consciousness (Wilber, 2006, 2007). For example a person at the mythic stage might experience gross, subtle, causal or non-dual states of consciousness but the experience will be interpreted through a mythical lens, comprehending the experience in mythic terms (Wilber, 2006). Hence, an individual at the rational stage experiencing a non-dual state consciousness will interpret that state through a rational lens. These states of waking, dreaming and sleeping are realms of knowing that can be directly accessed at any stage due to the fact that individuals wake dream and sleep even in the prenatal period (Wilber, 1997, 2000, 2006). Therefore, gross, subtle and causal states of consciousness are directly available to any individual, at any stage of their development (Wilber, 2006, 2007).

AQAL. *AQAL* stands for “all quadrants, all levels, all lines, all states and all types” (Wilber et al., 2008, p. 69). This framework offers a holistic mapping of the interrelationships between various perspectives and viewpoints of reality. This Integral map recognizes the various aspects of existence, such as biology, culture, self-concept and social systems as all essential components of the individual's experience. This map is divided into four quadrants and separates the human experience along two axes, the

individual or collective and the interior or exterior of the individual. All of the quadrants contain *Levels* or *Lines* (Wilber, 2000). These lines act as a scale that shows the level of growth, development and evolution the individual has in each quadrant. From an archaic level (underdeveloped, instinctual) to an evolved and highly intelligent level, the individual can fall on any level of development in each quadrant.

The four-quadrant perspective simultaneously represents the interior and exterior dimensions and perspectives of the individual and the collective and each of the four quadrants are in existence and ever-present in each moment which provides an inclusive way of viewing and experiencing the world (Wilber, 2000). The Upper-Left Quadrant (UL), or the *interior of the individual*, consists of the subjective aspects of consciousness or awareness (Wilber, 2000). Thoughts, feelings, sensations, perceptions all described from a phenomenologically personal (“I”) viewpoint are found in this quadrant. The Upper-Right Quadrant (UR), or *the exterior of the individual*, contains objective physical science and individual structures, behaviours, events, material components and processes that can be described in “it” language (Wilber, 2000). The Lower-Left Quadrant (LL) or *interior collective*, contains the intersubjective dimension of the collective consciousness such as culture, worldviews, customs, and shared values and feelings (Wilber, 2000). The language of this quadrant is “we” language. The Lower-Right Quadrant (LR), or the *exterior collective* contains intersubjective perspective of systems such as economic structures, government and social systems (Wilber, 2000). Social phenomena in this quadrant are described by objective “it’s” language.

The four quadrants simply put are the inside and outside of the individual and the collective (Wilber, 2000, 2007). They identify various dimensions of reality that are

present in every life situation and articulate how realities within each quadrant interact and give rise to each moment in our awareness (Wilber, 2000). In the context of this research, an integral approach facilitates a rich understanding of the individual's transformational journey within each of these domains.

Pre-Trans Fallacy. It can be said that the greatest difficulty the field of transpersonal psychology lies in a dichotomy dispute described by Wilber two ways: the *pre/trans fallacy* (Wilber, 1982, 1993) and the *ascender/descender* (Wilber, 1995) debate. According to Wilber (1982), development ascends vertically from prepersonal to personal to transpersonal dimensions. Wilber's (1982, 1993) pre/trans fallacy takes two forms: Pre/Trans Fallacy 1 (PTF1) occurring when early levels of prepersonal development are be confused for higher, transpersonal dimensions, and Pre/Trans Fallacy 2 (PTF) PTF-2 occurring when transpersonal states are reduced to the prepersonal dimension. Wilber (1982) articulates as both pre-egoic, (prepersonal, child-like) and trans-ego (transpersonal, spiritual) states are nonpersonal dimensions, these realms can appear similar.

Patterns of Transcendence

Wilber's Integral theory provides a comprehensive outline of human development, transformation and transcendence. Moreover, this theory of theories provides specific and identifiable characteristics individuals may be presenting with in each particular stage of development. The common path on Wilber's "ladder-to-oneness" model is a straightforward, ascending progression that necessitates a transition to consciousness free of a personal "self" or egoic entrapment (Wilber, 1993; Washburn, 1990). However, to suggest or connote a singular journey of spiritual transformation and

development denies the substantial works of empirical psychology, spiritual traditions and Eastern cultivations. While Wilber advocates climbing upwards towards “higher” levels of consciousness, Washburn (1995) and Grof (1985, 2000) maintain that a journey descending to *deeper* realms of consciousness is necessary for transcendence. Washburn (1990, 1994, 1995, 2003) has specifically challenged Wilber’s ladder-to-oneness theory claiming spiritual transformation or transpersonal development is a process of reconnecting to the *Dynamic Ground* and reintegrating the separate ego. Washburn (1995) describes this in greater detail:

The view presented here is one that postulates the existence of an original dynamic, creative, spontaneous source out of which the ego emerges, from which the ego then becomes estranged, to which, during the stages of ego transcendence, the ego returns, and with which, ultimately, the ego is integrated... Basically, I think Wilber loses sight of the transpersonal potentials of the deep unconscious and consequently mistakenly conceives of the course of (ontogenetic) development as a straight ascent to higher levels rather than as a spiral loop that, after departing from origins, bends back through origins on the way to transpersonal integration. (Washburn, 1995, p. 4)

Contrasting Wilber’s model, Washburn (1990, 1995) and Grof (1985, 2000) assert that early and early prenatal experiences should be viewed as legitimate sources of transpersonal spiritual experience and signify the undeniable presence of *deeper* consciousness. Additionally, individuals developing beyond the personal states may deviate from the unidirectional path and instead require “retracing old ground before breaking new ground” (Washburn, 1990, p. 88). Washburn claims most people are able to

progress to the egoic level however transcending above and beyond the egoic state and into the transpersonal realm is a rare occurrence. In his earlier work, Washburn (1995) describes what he identifies as “regression in the service of transcendence” (p. 220) whereby a period of egoic regression or a spiralling “U-turn towards origins” is a necessary and important preparation to mobilize transcendence towards the higher levels, specifically to transition beyond the egoic realm. Washburn (1990) highlights the spiral theory of transformation holds regression as an inherent component to transformation. This view maintains that the pre/trans fallacy is not applicable, for transpersonal development involves a reconnection with the original Dynamic Ground, which not ontologically distinct (Washburn, 2003).

In a response to Washburn’s (1990) article, Wilber (1990) denies the “straight ascent” element to his model and also denies the presence of one singular U-turn. Instead, he suggests the several, small, “little-deaths” exist at the limits of each stage to occur and “regression is neither theoretically mandatory...not pragmatically always the case” (Wilber, 1990, p. 129). Yet Washburn and Grof’s thesis opens the door to considerable variation in trans-egoic development and spiritual transformation.

As described previously in this chapter, the queer community experiences significant addiction and mental health issues, distinctive life stressors and identity shifts, all of which are out of proportion with the general population. Moreover, a queer individual’s fluidity and embodiment of their identity and sexuality may not fit into a typical “model” of spiritual transformation. Washburn’s critique of the Wilber’s model emphasizes the potential for individuals to have unique experiences of spiritual

transformation. This research will not categorize, but will attempt to illuminate and honour the various paths individuals have travelled on their spiritual journey.

Energy Ecstasy: The Seven Chakras

Complimenting Wilber's (1986) Spectrum of Consciousness, and Integral theory (2006, 2007, 2016) the Eastern Chakra system will be explored as an additional means of contextualizing non-dual consciousness and spiritual transformation. Translated from Sanskrit to mean *wheel*, the chakras are the energy vortexes that connect the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of an individual to the nonmaterial subtle energy structure that surrounds each person's physical body (Douglas, 2002; Feuerstien, 1998). The chakras map the progress of personal consciousness from its emergence from within a living organism and extend towards the highest stages of self-realization and ultimate reunion with spirit (Nelson, 1994).

In the average individual, the chakras are commonly blocked, not harmonized with one another and as a result, the entire self-structure functions below par (Feurstien, 1998). Nelson (1994) states most individuals never progress beyond the third chakra. If the chakras are functioning at a minimal level, a Tantric perspective would state the individual would be in a state of droopy, closed petal lotus flowers, while a Yogic perspective would state the chakras are barely in existence (Feuerstien, 1998). For the individual on the healing journey, through inner spiritual work and transformations in consciousness the chakras become more open, bloom like open lotuses (Nelson, 1994; Feuerstien, 1998). This awakening of *Kundalini* energy is marked by expansions in consciousness that light up or activate new levels of chakras (Cortright, 1997). This process has been identified as being blissful or gradual, or intensely terrifying. It is at this

open flowing state they harmonize and vibrate in unison resulting in a balanced functioning of the self-structure (Feuerstien, 1998).

First Chakra. The first chakra, referred to as the *root* chakra or *Muladhara* is found at the base of the spine in the lower pelvic region and is associated with the colour red and earth element (Nelson, 1994). This chakra is the root and support of the other chakras and acts as the resting location for the divine energy contained within the human body called *kundalini-shakti*. (Feuerstien, 1998). Kundalini awakening results in spiritual energy rising like a serpent up the spine, awakening or opening up the successive chakras associated with levels of consciousness (Cortright, 1997). Although the lowest center, without this essential base, growth towards transcendence and liberation would not be possible (Nelson, 1994; Feuerstien, 1998). According to Nelson (1994) the root chakra guides the development of the pre-egoic fetus towards personal individuation and it's primary purpose is survival. Individuals centered on this chakra typically experience fears of abandonment, grasping and clinging for survival for this chakra and symbolizes impermanence, bondage and physical limitation (Nelson, 1994; Feuerstien, 1998).

Second Chakra. The second chakra, also named the *tymphonic* (Svadhithana) chakra is located in the lower abdomen region. It is associated with the water element and colour orange. This is the endocrine center that influences glands for cleansing and purification such as the spleen and liver (Gunther, 1983). This chakra, more than any other relates to desire, relationships, creativity, particularly to unrestrained sexual urges (Feuerstien, 1998; Nelson, 1994). This chakra embodies magical fantasy, and a relatively free flow of energies between the individual and the Ground (Nelson, 1994). Disconnection or disturbance at this chakra level is linked to greed, delusion, fantasized

relationships, and “feelings of body shame, disgust with sexuality, guilt, impotence and physical powerlessness” (Prendergast, 2000, p. 52).

Third Chakra. The third chakra, *nabhi* (navel wheel) or *Power (Manipira)* chakra corresponds to the solar plexus, the fire element, and the colour yellow (Feuerstien, 1998; Nelson, 1994). This region is also referred to as our *second brain* due to the well-developed and essential structure of our central nervous system (Feuerstien, 1998). This chakra influences the adrenal glands that profoundly affect the mood, circulation, digestion, muscular energy and heart rate of the self-system (Gunther, 1983). This chakra relates to power and control employed to achieve maximum individuation to fortify the ego (Nelson, 1994). Individuals centered at this level may be display inappropriate accounts of anger, display obsessive behaviors, be fearful or highly suspicious of others, highly explosive or emotionally numb (Prendergast, 2000).

Fourth Chakra. The fourth chakra, *heart (Anahata)* chakra is located at the heart region and is associated with the colour green (Nelson, 1994). Heart chakra activation is identified as the key to transcend attachments to the material world and ego by embracing compassion, universal love, kindness and calmness (Nelson, 1994; Feuerstien, 1999). This chakra influences the thymus gland which helps create immunity to disease (Gunther, 1981). If the heart center is not activated, any activation of the higher chakras may cause physical or emotional complications (Feuerstien, 1998). Prendergast states when this chakra is “constricted or distorted, clients typically report believing that they are bad, worthless, undeserving, unacceptable, flawed, unlovable, and all alone” (Prendergast, 2000, p. 53).

Fifth Chakra. The fifth chakra, also named *Inspiration*, pure wheel, (*Visuddha*) is located in the throat region and is associated with the colour blue (Nelson, 1994). This chakra is connected to the element ether, is the center for creativity, self-expression and is associated with maintaining balance (Feuerstien, 1998). This chakra influences the thyroid gland that affects balance, metabolism, muscular control and produces body heat (Gunther, 1983). Nelson (1994) states this is the highest level an individual can reach that Western psychology recognizes. This center stands midway between the physical material body and the immaterial mind one of universal consciousness (Feuerstien, 1998). Pathologies at this level include unbalanced existence, constricted speech, muted feelings and stunted behaviours (Feuerstien, 1998).

Sixth Chakra. The sixth chakra, titled the *Shamanic*, (*Ajna*) or command wheel chakra is situated in the middle of the forehead and is associated with the colour indigo (Nelson, 1994). Commonly referred to as the “third-eye” this *organ* is the transmitter and receiver of clairvoyance, remote viewing and other spiritual paranormal capabilities (Feuerstien, 1998). This center is said to influence the pituitary gland that is the master control center of mind and body, affecting all other endocrines on some level (Gunther, 1983). Activation at this level results in insight and expanded vision, often with direct access to universal knowledge (Nelson, 1994). This chakra becomes disrupted or constricted by belief systems or social conditioning, particularly hypercriticism and denial (Prendergast, 2000).

Seventh Chakra. The seventh chakra, Reunion (*Sahasrara*) or thousand-spoked wheel is located at the crown of the head and is associated with the glow of white (Nelson, 1994). The seventh center influences the pineal gland, which ancient wisdom

states is the *seat of the soul* (Gunther, 1983). This chakra is also known as the “brahmic-fissure” because the moment of liberation results in consciousness leaving the physical body through this exit point to merge with *brahman* also known as the absolute (Feuerstien, 1998). Additionally, this is also the entry port for Divine Energy that flows through all chakras fills the physical body before returning to the Source for it is here the soul merges with it’s divine essence, obliterating all boundaries of self (Nelson, 1994). Illustrated by unity and unconditional surrender, Nelson (1994) states this level of consciousness is often rare and transient.

Summary

This literature review has expanded on information foundational to answering the research questions of this proposed study: 1) what has been the lived experience of LGBQ individuals on their non-dual journey to wholeness? And 2) what transformational experiences have LGBQ individuals experienced in their journey? A substantial component of this literature has focused on investigating and understanding sexual minority and queer individual’s documented life experiences in the academic literature. This researcher attempted to illuminate and contextualize the queer population within a transpersonal framework, specifically Wilber’s AQAL matrix by including literature on social, cultural and behavioural domains and also exploring the intentional experience of “I” within this population. The fourth force of transpersonal psychology, Wilber’s Integral Theory and the Tantric Chakra system have been illuminated in an attempt to provide an understanding of non-dual consciousness in context. This chapter has provided insight into the population this research will be investigating and the phenomenon under

exploration. The following chapter will provide a discussion of the research methodology chosen to explore the research topic.

Chapter Three: Methodology

When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe. (Muir, 1911, p.110)

Introduction

The topic of non-dual consciousness is not extensively covered in the academic literature, and there is a lack of transpersonal research specifically with the queer population. This study aims to shed light on an understudied phenomenon with a minority population and contribute to the greater body of research, particularly in transpersonal psychology and counselling academic literature. Specifically, the lived and transformative experiences of LGBTQ individuals embracing non-dual consciousness will be explored. The following chapter will discuss the methodology chosen for this study in addition the research procedure. This will include the proposed research site, recruitment process, and sampling strategy in addition to selection of co-researchers, interview procedures, and data analysis procedures. Finally, an outline of ethical standards will be outlined and a description of compliance within an ethical framework will be explained.

Philosophical Framework

A phenomenological hermeneutical approach was chosen as the philosophical framework for this thesis. The following sections will discuss the components of the framework in detail by examining the foundations of phenomenology and the importance of a hermeneutic refinement to capture the lived human experience of LGBTQ individuals embracing non-dual consciousness.

Qualitative approach. Quantitative research methods are often considered the “best” way to obtain certain types of knowledge, and are the dominant research

methodology in many disciplines (Yegidis, Weinbach & Myers, 2012). However, quantitative methods have inherent limitations and are not well suited to study certain subjective phenomena. Several figures prominent in the human sciences literature (Heidegger, 1962; Rogers, 1980; Maslow, 1968; Wilber, 2001) view quantitative research methodology ineffective for capturing the subjective lived experiences of individuals. Specifically, quantitative designs are commonly employed to identify, categorize and quantify and characterizable traits that can then be generalized to a larger population. This research study does not attempt to quantify nor maintain objectivity, rather to explore the lived experiences of LGBQ individuals. With a growing number of researchers contributing to a revival in qualitative and descriptive methodology, this provides the necessary framework to obtain and study the meaning of human experiences (Osborne, 1990). Many researchers have maintained qualitative research is profoundly influential in comprehending sexuality in contemporary cultures (Anderson, 2010; O'Neill, 2001; Plummer, 1995). Therefore, in order to capture the full and rich experiences of the participants integrally and entirely, a qualitative approach was chosen for this study and specific philosophical underpinnings will be explored in detail in the following sections.

Phenomenology. Transpersonal psychotherapy explores consciousness and its contents and phenomenological investigations have revealed that consciousness is intentional (Husserl, 1962; Valle, 1998; Cortright, 1997; Osborne, 1990). Rather than a particular methodology, phenomenology is better described as a philosophical *approach* to the research process (Dahlberg, 2006). Phenomenology is the study of the lived experience, and attempts to uncover experience just as it is, without filters or judgements

(Cortright, 1997). There is a particular content to consciousness, and spiritual teachings such as Buddhism speak of consciousness as the “ground from which everything else emerges” (Cortright, 1997, pg. 54). Phenomenology is the fundamental philosophical framework of this research and central tenets of this framework are *intentionality* and human *consciousness* (Husserl, 1962).

Edmund Husserl (1962) is widely recognized as the founder of phenomenology and it was Husserl (1962) who posited the notion that to understand humans one needed to understand consciousness. Subsequently, Husserl’s (1962) notion of intentionality was introduced to explore the intangible vastness of human consciousness. His notion of intentionality refers to the sense that consciousness always has an object, and that even when one thinks that they are not conscious of anything, one is in fact ultimately conscious of being unconscious (Osborne, 1990). Embracing intentionality is tantamount within the phenomenological realm of psychology, and it is through this approach that an individual’s causal way of being is seen as only one of many ways individuals experience themselves in the world (Valle, 1998). Additionally, humans and their surroundings are regarded as implicitly intertwined and inextricably interdependent, humans are a *part* of the world rather than in it (Osborne, 1990). The person and the world are said to “*co-constitute* one another” (Valle, 1998, p. 274). This has significant implications for the research in discussion, for the individual and their environment cannot be regarded independently from the other, for they truly are “two sides of the same coin” (Valle, 1998, p.275). In this sense, the purpose of any phenomenological empirical research project is to articulate in everyday language the underlying structure of any meaningful experience on the level of one’s awareness (Valle, 1998). Meaning then, is identified by

the manifestation of a prereflexive consciousness, which transcends the chaotic stream of senses, impressions, and experiences of the human experience (Valle, 1998). This structure or *essence* exists as only a dimension of a person's life world, and emerges as reflexive awareness *as* meaning (Valle, 1998, Wilber, 1999). Therefore, "the results of such an investigation usually take the form in of basic themes or constituents that collectively represent the structure of experience" (Valle, 1998, p. 275).

Van Manen (1984) describes that "the purpose of the phenomenological reflection is to try to grasp the essential meaning of something" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 77). Also, he articulates the process of describing and capturing language as an essential component to phenomenological research (Van Manen, 1984). For this reflects the lived experience of individuals in a deeper context, ultimately where the essence of the experience lies. "The phenomenological method consists of the ability, or rather the art of being sensitive – sensitive to the subtle undertones of language, in the way language speaks when it allows the thing themselves to speak" (Van Manen 1990, p.111). According to Van Manen (1984), phenomenological research is characterized by four procedural approaches:

1. turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us
2. investigating experiences as we live them as opposed to how we conceptualize it
3. reflecting on the common essential themes of the phenomenon
4. describing the phenomenon through writing and re-writing (p.2-3).

Ultimately, by undertaking a phenomenological approach to this research, phenomenology aims to "understand a phenomenon by having the data speak for itself" (Osborne, 1990, p 81). As a researcher looking to explore and articulate states and

experiences of transpersonal consciousness, it is imperative to attend to the experience and *being* that each individual presents with. It is within the state of being that provides the vast sensory experiences and emotional fullness of the lived experience to be communicated. Husserl's phenomenological methodology introduces a concept called phenomenological reduction, or *bracketing* (Valle, 1998). The search to uncover meaning is achieved by the researcher acknowledging and suspending all beliefs, interpretations, judgements, theories and metaphysical precontentions to inquire into the human experience as objectively as possible (Osborne, 1990; Cortright, 1997). It should be noted that this researcher is implicated in this research project and does not attempt to bracket in any way. The rationale for this process will be revisited in greater depth in chapter five.

The linguistic turn. Of direct importance to this research is a significant "turn" that occurred in twentieth century philosophy which increased emphasis on language within the social sciences field. The "linguistic turn" was a departure from concrete seventeenth century philosophy paradigms such as mind, idea and experience and shifted towards comprehending and acknowledging larger contextual constructs of words and meaning (Koopman, 2011). This principal shift towards the importance of the relationship between philosophy and language was publicized by Rorty's (1967) *The Linguistic Turn* and further refined in 1979 with the book titled *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. The linguistic turn and other similar critical approaches to qualitative research emphasize meaning making as the heart of the investigation (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). Yet, both poststructuralists and postmodernists contend language is context dependent, subjective and ambiguous at best (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000).

Due to the fact that co-researchers in this study will be sharing their life experiences through a semi-structured interview process, this re-constructing of the co-researcher's experience is facilitated solely by language. Empirical work calls for exploration of accessible phenomena, yet the linguistic turn asserts the recollection of personal lived experiences are never fully accessible in the first person by other individuals as they are constrained by the various confines of language (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Rodríguez, 2015). Within the methodology of this research lies a paradox: in order to understand the true meaning of language, it is essential to acknowledge non-linguistic (motivation, feeling, meaning, culture etc.) aspects of language while working to transcend language altogether and honour the shared space in which the re-construction and recollection of experience occurs (Rodríguez, 2015).

The hermeneutics refinement. I begin this section with a brief introduction to the etymology of the term *hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics has an extensive history, dating to ancient Greece where the term originated from two words: the Greek verb *hermeneuein*, meaning to interpret; and the noun *hermeneia*, meaning interpretation (Jacobs, 2014). The limitations in using phenomenology solely as a research method have been addressed by Heidegger (1962), Ricoeur (1976, 1977, 2003) and Gadamer (1975) who called for a necessary refinement in the phenomenological research process, and thus a hermeneutics refinement has been included in this study. According to Jacobs (2014), a current definition of hermeneutics is textual interpretation or, put differently, finding meaning in the hidden word. Several scholars elaborate the concept further; Grondin (1994) states that since its emergence in the seventeenth century, the word 'hermeneutics' refers to the *science or art* of interpretation.

Originally, hermeneutics was utilized to interpret biblical texts, and several different refinements have occurred in recent history (Jacobs, 2014). Martin Heidegger (1962) was instrumental in shifting the focus from interpretation to understanding existence or being. Hermeneutics is at the core of authentic being itself as Heidegger (1962) suggested, for it is impossible to step outside of the world as a witness since we are already always “being-in-the-world.” Within Heidegger’s (1962) view, comprehending a situation is directly mediated by “fore-knowledge” or “pre-understanding” which is comprised of the personal life-world experiences of the person trying to construct sense and meaning of the situation. Therefore, it is the individual’s perception and apprehension which facilitates moving from fore-knowledge to an existential understanding (Heidegger, 1962; Jacobs, 2014). Ultimately by doing so, Heidegger transformed hermeneutics from an epistemological theory of interpretation to one of ontological, existential understanding (Jacobs, 2014).

One of the integral components of this philosophical framework is language. Strongly influenced by the work of Heidegger (1962), Ricoeur (1976, 1977, 2003) and Gadamer (1975) suggest it is language that facilitates creativity and hermeneutic interpretation occurs through an interaction between guessing and validating and by upholding meaning against competing interpretations. An essential component in Gadamer’s work (1975) is the concept of understanding. According to Gadamer, (1975) understanding is not a rule governed procedure or regulated undertaking; rather, it is a condition of being human. As Gadamer (1975) explains, understanding is not “an isolated activity of human beings, but a basic structure of our experience of life.” (p. 87). Understanding is in this context, *equivalent* to interpretation. Gadamer (1975) states that

to comprehend a text hermeneutically, the meaning of a text must also be found in its historical, cultural, and literary context. Tradition is considered to be a bridge between the past and present, and also a filter which passes on interpretations and insights, all standing the test of time (Gadamer, 1975).

Gadamer (1975) rejects the traditional assumption that texts all contain inherent meaning and asserts a fresh angle in hermeneutics where one is continually open to truth and attempts to reach maximum insight into one's pre-conceptions and self-knowledge. Gadamer (1989) articulated that knowledge of self is not freely chosen, but rooted in history, culture, socialization and bodily being. No technique or method is able to secure complete objectivity and this perspective asks the researcher and the co-researchers to embrace the uniqueness of each individual perspective (Gadamer, 1989).

The hermeneutic refinement of phenomenology is suitable for exposing hidden meanings that are found in various language and texts, and maintains the view that we cannot fully understand a text unless we acknowledge the culture and context from which it has emerged (Jacobs, 2014). The purpose of hermeneutics is to explore the socially constructed contexts from which individuals derive meaning. This process acknowledges the subjective biases and prejudices that collectively comprise historical, social and cultural backgrounds. This "is an emancipatory approach that enables us to dig beneath the surface of social life and uncover the assumptions that keep us from fully understanding how the world works" (Jacobs, 2014, p. 301). Husserl's phenomenology elucidates that the researcher is, and should remain a neutral observer to the experience, free from all subjective judgments and interpretations (Osborne, 1990). Hermeneutics by contrast, suggests researchers need to be prepared to embrace the experiences within the

socio-historical context occurring in each moment. From this perspective, a researcher is inherently interpreting all of existence and experience from their ever-present, ever-unfolding consciousness and hermeneutics honors this process. It should be noted that the lived experience of the participants, particularly experiences of transcendent states of consciousness are fundamentally inaccessible to this researcher. They have been experienced by each of the co-researchers in their lives and are described from their unique level of development. The methodology chosen for this study will attempt to illuminate the personal accounts of transcendent states of consciousness and the context from which individuals derive meaning.

The Fecundity of the Individual Case

When conducting qualitative research into the lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals, it is important to consider the fecundity of the individual case. Gadamer (1975) illustrates this concept describes its importance:

The individual case on which judgment works is never simply a case; it is not exhausted by being a particular example of a universal law or concept. Rather, it is always an 'individual case', and it is significant that we call it a special case, because the rule does not comprehend it. Every judgment about something that is intended to be understood in its concrete individuality ...is---strictly speaking---a judgement about a special case. That means simply that the evaluation of the case does not merely apply the measure of the universal principle according to which it is judged, but itself co-determines it, supplements and corrects it. (p. 37).

Hermeneutics rejects the phenomenological position of transparency of the lived experience and instead seeks to inquire about the uniqueness of the phenomena being

studied. Ricoeur (1981; 1983) acknowledged the unfeasibility of presenting an omniscient account of a particular phenomenon. To claim to comprehend the entirety of an experience is to contain the experience into a particular schema or structure such as language as described in the linguistic turn.

Hermeneutics seeks to uncover the ambiguities, exceptional experiences and uniqueness in the individual case, not “fit” the experience into one particular category. The relevance of the fecundity of the individual case is made apparent in this writer’s experience as an implicated researcher where I detailed my personal lived experience in chapter one. This writer is aware of the potential variation within individual cases and it is important to incite the full story of the individual beyond common themes and experiences the participant may communicate during the research process. This will allow an opportunity to transcend the common themes and enter into a deeper realm of differences, experiences and meaning particularly when exploring the unique experiences associated with the transformational journey and non-dual consciousness.

Recruitment of Participants

Recruitment of LGBTQ individuals as research participants is often very difficult, as individuals publicly identifying as such risk experiencing stigmatization, marginalization and discrimination (Meyer & Wilson, 2009). In a study identifying specific difficulties in recruitment of sexual minority participants for academic purposes, Savin-Williams (2001) highlights additional reasons why insufficient recruitment may occur; many sexual minority individuals are not out to other people, some come out only to trusted individuals, others reject the dominant sexual identity labels such as LGBTQ, while others recognize their sexual desires later in life. Acknowledging this potential

challenge to the recruitment process, the initial recruitment of research participants was achieved through purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2012). This sampling method was utilized to help identify research participants who can best help illuminate the central phenomenon being studied, in addition to meeting the eligibility criteria. The researcher posted an advertisement on several online resources, including social networking groups and websites related to transpersonal psychology (a copy of which can be found in Appendix D). Additionally, the advertisement was posted in several counselling agencies throughout Alberta.

Ethical Considerations

The primary considerations of the researcher are the co-researcher's safety, confidentiality, and anonymity. Embracing an invitation from Osborne (1990), I have replaced the term *subject* with *participant* or *co-researcher* as this removes the perceived "us" and "them" dichotomy and help creates a relationship filled with mutual trust and empathic understanding. Moreover, this terminology highlights the voluntary nature of the research process, addresses power dynamics by lessening the differentiation of power, and emphasizes the shared passion for illuminating the phenomenon (Osborne, 1990).

Once co-researchers were screened to meet inclusion criteria and selected for this study, co-researchers were given the ability to ask questions or express any concerns. When participants were selected, a consent form (Appendix A) was provided to each participant and was signed. Any questions about the interview and research project were answered before the interview and all research participants indicated they understood the requirements of the research, the risks, the time commitment and consented for the interviews to be taped and transcribed. After each interview, participants were given a

transcription of the interview were asked to ensure accuracy of the data and thematic analysis. Due to the nature of this research it was explained to each participant that emotional or difficult content may arise during the interviews or afterwards. Contact information for various counselling agencies was made available to each participant.

Selection of Research Participants

In an attempt to select researcher participants who identify as LGBQ and are capable of articulating their experiences of non-dual consciousness, all potential participants of the study underwent an initial telephone screening process. All individuals were asked a series of questions that confirmed each participant had experienced the phenomenon in question and were also able to articulate it in such a way that was meaningful and unique to each participant. Additional screening questions were asked to confirm the individual's sexual orientation/identity, post-egoic or non-dual consciousness and their willingness to articulate their experiences. Of the seven telephone screening interviews, a total of five individuals were selected to participate in this study.

The researcher selected one of these participants whom she had encountered during her own journey, who would fulfill the eligibility requirements of the study and would be willing to participate. Also, the researcher felt this individual was well versed in the area of transpersonal psychology and spirituality. Another participant for the study was introduced to this researcher at a transpersonal psychology conference by her thesis supervisor. A third participant was recruited through a transpersonal psychology online group who then assisted the recruitment process by recruiting additional individuals through her own connections. This snowball sampling technique has been reliably recommended with vulnerable or hidden minority populations and proved extremely

valuable in this study (Xavier, 2000; Clements-Nolle, Marx, Guzman, & Katz, 2001; Kenagy, 2005). Through snowball sampling, an additional three individuals agreed to participate and were chosen for this study.

Interview Format

In order to gain a detailed understanding of the lived and transformative experiences of LGBQ individuals embracing non-dual consciousness, a semi-structured interview format was chosen for this research (Creswell, 2012). Osborne (1990) recommends the researcher employ three phases of interviewing to maximize efficacy of the process: The first phase of the interview is to inform the co-researcher of the nature of the research and develop rapport. The second phase of the interview gathers data in the form of open-ended minimally structured dialogue that is more likely to produce data which might be otherwise be missed (Osborne, 1990). Throughout the entire interview process it is important that the researcher not “lead the witness” nor interrogate or constrain the co-researchers in any way (Osborne, 1990, p. 84). In addition to the initial interview session, the final phase of the interview will give participants the option to further reflect on the phenomenon and communicate any additional insights, descriptions and information to the researcher should they arise at a later state (Osborne, 1990).

The semi-structured interview was loosely organized into three phases of exploration in the form of a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning of the interview explored each participant’s childhood experiences and significant themes or events that presented early in life. The middle of the interview provided an account for their powerful transformative experiences and turning points. Lastly, the end explored each

participant's current life and what is occurring for them at the present time embracing non-dual consciousness.

To facilitate an effective interview and acquire an accurate account of the participant's stories, the researcher employed specific questions targeted to uncover experiences of participants. The fundamental skills in person-centered counselling (Rogers, 1961) were utilized throughout the interview process to facilitate openness and freedom within the interview process. The qualities and techniques of person centered counselling used in the interviews included paraphrasing, reflection of both feelings and meaning and summarizing. Osborne (1990) advocates a person-centered emphasis is the most appropriate theoretical orientation to capture the lived experiences of the co-researchers. Similar to entering a counselling relationship, the research interview process will involve an environment based on mutual trust, respect, equality, and connectedness. Specific Rogerian (1961) therapeutic skills include; empathic reflection of meaning and feeling, open and closed questioning, paraphrasing, and probing questions all assisted the interviewer in drawing out the stories of the co-researchers further. Moreover, attentive body language and verbal tracking employed by the researcher helped identify and link themes in the co-researcher's stories and experiences (Young, 2013; Corey, 2009). The interviews varied in length from 1.5 hours to 3 hours. In addition to exploring various life areas, Appendix C contains specific questions asked to co-researchers that were intended explore and to increase the phenomenological hermeneutic paradigms as described in this chapter. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed by this researcher.

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1990) states the heuristic researcher does not look for cause and effect, rather provides an illumination of a process shared by firsthand accounts of participants who have meaningful and significant experiences of a phenomenon. Six phases of the heuristic research process are utilized as described by Moustakas (1990) are: “Initial engagement, immersion into the topic and question, incubation, illumination, explication, and culmination of the research in a creative synthesis” (p. 27). The data analysis component of this thesis was done using the following steps.

- 1) Each audio-recorded interview was transcribed solely by this researcher and all identifying information was omitted.
- 2) Research participants were given copies of their transcribed personal interview as soon as they became available. They were given an opportunity to delete any revealing information or expand on any particular areas they felt could benefit from further clarification or description. This process facilitated a clearer understanding of particular experiences and parts of their stories.
- 3) No co-researcher requested a follow up interview.
- 4) Once all of the various forms of data including this researcher’s “left-field notes” were compiled, I read and subsequently re-read each transcribed interview in order to engage and immerse into the data and become familiar with the participants stories (Moustakas, 1990; Osborne, 1990). This re-reading process allowed this researcher to identify broader themes that were subsequently coded in colours according to locations, experiences, people, etc.

- 5) Once the transcriptions were organized into manageable clusters of information, I was then able to embrace a period of incubation that translated into illumination of deeper and more specific themes and structures.
- 6) According to Osborne (1990), the researcher's focus at this point in the analysis should be to explore the deeper structures of meaning rather than the language and linguistic structures in the data. At this stage I translated the colour-coded themes into a visual map on this writers home office wall. This process helped identify significant patterns of related experiences from the co-researchers.
- 7) I re-read all transcriptions a third time to make additional notes to expand on the themes that had emerged.
- 8) The researcher compiled all sources of transcripts, notes, quotes, identified themes and data mapping to create the thematic analysis of the phenomenon. Member checking, comparing transcripts and references to the literature were made to ensure accuracy. Member checking was achieved through e-mail where the researcher forwarded a summary of themes to each co-researcher. Each co-researcher was given sufficient time to check for accuracy of the themes and provide comments to the researcher. Each co-researcher confirmed the accuracy of the themes and three co-researchers commented on how “validating” they were of their experience. This member checking procedure ensured accurate representation of the data and thematic analysis (Creswell, 2012).
- 9) The findings of the collected and analyzed data were then reported in a narrative discussion.

10) Once this writer completed the data analysis process of each transcript, the tape recorded interviews were destroyed.

Conclusion

This concludes the coverage of the phenomenological hermeneutics methodological approach and why it has been chosen for this study. Additionally, the data collection process and data analysis procedures have been presented that will be used to investigate the research questions of this proposed study: 1) what has been the lived experience of LGBQ individuals on their non-dual journey to wholeness? And 2) what transformational experiences have LGBQ individuals experienced in their journey? Due to the nature of the phenomenon in question, the lived experience of the participants, particularly experiences of transcendent states of consciousness are inaccessible to this researcher. As described in chapter two in Wilber's Integral theory, the impermanent states of consciousness the participants have experienced and are articulating to the researcher are interpreted at their level of development and communicated as such. Thus the data that emerged through the interview process is a language dependent description of the consciousness state from their level of development. The results of this investigation will be discussed in chapters four and five.

CHAPTER FOUR: THEMATIC EXPLORATION

“It is in the area of sex that we must search for the most secret and profound truths about the individual, that it is there that we can best discover what he is and what determines him. And if it was believed for centuries that it was necessary to hide sexual matters because they were shameful, we now know that it is sex itself which hides the most secret parts of the individual: the structure of his fantasies, the roots of his ego, the forms of his relationship to reality.

At the bottom of sex, there is truth.”

(Michel Foucault, 1980)

Introduction

In the previous chapters of this research paper, this writer has introduced relevant information and literature that pertains to the LGBTQ population and non-dual consciousness. Moreover this writer has introduced personal experiences, ideas and motivations that have compelled the current study. In this study, five individuals participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews in which they described their experiences with sexual identity, transformational experiences and non-dual consciousness. In alignment with phenomenological hermeneutics, Van Manen (1990) states that the reason we engage in the research process and collect information from other individuals is because: “We gather other people’s experiences because it allows us to become more experienced ourselves” (p. 62). The themes identified through narratives of the co-researchers in this chapter will shed light on the transformational journey and provide the reader with the intricacies of the LGBTQ journey to wholeness. The intent of this research is not to extrapolate or generalize the themes to the population more generally, rather explore and honour the significance of the journey to wholeness as

experienced by the co-researchers.

This chapter is organized into three phases, each phase containing several themes. To begin, this writer will introduce and provide a brief background of the five individuals selected to participate in the study and act as co-researchers of this phenomenon. This background narrative is summarized in Table 1. Each co-researcher chose a pseudonym that was used in the research process to ensure confidentiality. The narratives of the co-researchers' experiences of sexual identity, transformation and non-dual consciousness are analyzed and organized into several phases, each phase containing several themes. The following sections of this chapter will identify and organize the themes that have emerged from the stories of each participant.

Introducing the Participants

Joanne is a forty-year-old woman who grew up in a small rural town. She describes her childhood as a juxtaposition of curiosity and conservatism. Joanne's journey towards growth and transformation began early on in her life. As early as she can remember, Joanne felt a deep yearning to question the nature of life, death, and find meaning in all that is. Joanne recalls feeling supported and encouraged particularly by her mother to ask questions and explore in the world. Although her mother struggled with mental health issues and her parents divorced when she was young, Joanne felt "safe" to explore at an early age and continue to explore throughout her journey. Joanne contrasts this "no-rules", "no boundaries" environment facilitated by her mother with a more constricted, conservative worldview from her father and society more generally. Joanne recalls her dad's side of the family as being very closed minded about many things, and

at times she struggled within the dichotomy of a supportive, yet unsupportive environment.

By her teenage years Joanne knew she wanted to begin “helping other people” which came with the realization that “there was a lot to learn about myself and the world.” Joanne began exploring other dimensions of herself using psychedelics around the age of 20 where she states a new world opened up for her. Joanne describes her early psychedelic use as “fun,” yet soon realized a pull towards the therapeutic and spiritual transformative aspects of these substances. During this time Joanne was able to connect with various communities who collectively were able to create and share an inspired, safe environment to continue to explore deeper aspects of herself. Joanne felt that during this time she was able to fully own and honour all aspects of her being including her sexual identity. Joanne currently identifies as; non-binary, bisexual, fluid or pansexual, in addition to being polyamorous in an open marriage. Joanne currently works as a mental health consultant, engages in harm reduction initiatives, in addition to counselling in private practice. She has a strong passion for psychedelic psychotherapy and utilizes various healing modalities such as shamanism, journeying and existentialism in her life and her professional practice.

Sam is a thirty five year old male who grew up the youngest of five siblings. Sam’s father was a Catholic high school teacher who Sam describes as quite traditional with very conservative views. Sam grew up in an emotionally abusive and physically violent home. His father was feared in his family for his unpredictable anger and outbursts that involved throwing things, hitting and yelling. Sam never remembers feeling “safe” growing up and felt anxious, on edge and hypersensitive. Sam also felt

extremely isolated growing up. His immense need to “hide” to survive left him disconnected from peers as he didn’t feel comfortable getting too close for fear they would abandon him if they found out he was gay. Additionally, Sam’s father’s violence and instability proved to be no “safe” environment Sam felt comfortable introducing friends into, so Sam often was alone.

Sam attended Catholic schools where he felt the Catholic messages and values were becoming more and more suffocating. At age ten Sam became aware of his attraction to the same sex which seemed to “come out of nowhere” for him. This attraction and pull towards males continued to become stronger and stronger and in his early teens it quickly transformed into an immense source of fear, shame, panic and guilt. Sam quickly found himself in direct contradiction of Catholic teachings, which made him question if he would go to hell, if he was an immoral person and if anyone would ever accept him. He describes his school years, particularly high school, as excruciatingly painful. Sam found transformation and integration through spirituality. Several transformational experiences led Sam to continue down the path of self-exploration, eventually finding non-dual teachings. Through letting go of ego, identity and ultimately a separate sense of self, Sam was finally able to live a life full of aliveness, openness and freedom. Presently, Sam continues to travel the non-dual and transpersonal path as a career counsellor.

Paula is a thirty nine year old woman who grew up in the shadow of her oldest brother who was diagnosed with mental health issues at an early age. The family did not speak openly about her brother’s mental health struggles, and it soon became clear to Paula that she was never going to be fully “seen” by her parents. Paula fell into a

profound depression and at age eight and during this time she recalls a deep spiritual split open up within her. She felt a pull to the dark, “evil” realm of suicide during this time, as she felt killing herself was one way to escape the pain and suffering she was experiencing in this life. This depression also opened up an inherent awareness that if she did kill herself, she would have to return once again to learn what this life has to teach and also have to incur the trauma from murdering herself. Paula made an intentional decision to eliminate the option of suicide, yet she admits the suicidal thoughts and ideation continued for some time.

Paula describes herself as a very sexual being throughout her life. She experimented sexually with boys around age eleven and soon became intimate and began having sex with women also. In her teens she began experiencing bullying around her sexuality. Paula connected to a spiritual community which provided a safe space to finally “be fully herself” as well as allowed her to hone her skills as an energy healer and psychic. Her spiritual journey has allowed her to travel around the world and Paula sees nature, adventure and travel as an integral aspect of her spirituality. Paula describes herself as an energy healer, card reader, and spiritual guide facilitating others in their journeys towards wholeness.

Frankie is a thirty four year old woman who was born into a family that was dealing with the traumatic aftermath of having their youngest son die suddenly at two years old. Frankie’s mother “desperately” wanted another child to fill the void that she felt existed in her life, while Frankie’s father disconnected himself and began drinking when Frankie was born. Growing up, Frankie felt responsible for her family’s unhappiness and never felt comfortable in her own skin. Moreover, she felt the Christian

God was one that did not love her because of her sexual attraction to women. Frankie struggled with intense feelings of loneliness, disconnection and feeling shame for her sexual desires. Her shame surrounding sex was intensified at age seven when her friend's older brother sexually abused her. She told her mother, but ultimately nothing was done. Frankie was left feeling "strange", "weird" and empty afterwards. She was *outed* at her high school when she was caught with another girl in the bathroom, and she was bullied and tormented afterwards. During her teen years she found drugs and alcohol were an effective way of filling the void she felt within her being. Her drug use continued to intensify until homelessness, multiple overdoses and several near-death experiences began to reveal her path towards transformation.

Multiple attempts at sobriety were unsuccessful. She attended numerous treatment centers but would relapse within several months afterwards. Her relapses into destructive behaviours were becoming more intensely dangerous. A forceful near death accident hurtled Frankie into the intense realm of transformation. At this state she was finally able to break through her narcissism by embracing "no way out" and total surrender to what is. It was at that time she entered AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) where she was able to connect with the spiritual realm of her being and connect with other spiritual individuals. Through this transformative awareness, Frankie's life shifted significantly. Currently Frankie embraces different spiritual paradigms and reclaimed the term God as a loving, universal energetic flow. She experiences transcendent moments and intensely powerful spiritual experiences while living a sober life. Frankie is finally able to "be" in total authenticity, vulnerability and surrender without fear. She continues to travel along her path giving back to others and works as a harm-reduction specialist and outreach worker.

The final co-researcher, Neo is a thirty year old male. His father was absent during his childhood and his mother subsequently raised him and his siblings. In order to support her family, Neo's mother was forced to move frequently to maintain work. Because of repeated and unexpected upheaval in his life, Neo found it very difficult to make meaningful and lasting connections with others. Although he was able to get along and make friends with others easily, these relationships were ultimately "safe" and "shallow." Along with feeling alone and disconnected, Neo felt inherently different from others. Early in his development Neo was sexually attracted to females, yet also held an intense attraction towards the same sex. This attraction was never explored until Neo felt "safe" to do so. This major shift for Neo occurred when he moved out on his own from a small "redneck" town to a larger city. Here he was able to come out and live openly as himself, integrate wild and creative aspects of his being and connect deeply and intimately with others for the first time.

Neo describes moving to a bigger city as a powerful shift on his spiritual journey. Once free from "small town life" he was finally able to explore his creative, artistic aspect of his being. He was able to find immense meaning in connecting with his dancing and prop arts, particularly within the larger LGBTQ community. Another way in which he was able to connect with his creativity was through integrating his creative energies into his work. Neo left a high paying role in corporate work and followed his true calling to connect spiritually with his work and now is a full time entrepreneur/ inventor /designer. Neo now has the freedom to integrate his creative interests and utilize teachings and guidance from sacred geometry and mathematics in his life today.

Now that each participant has been introduced along with relevant background information, several themes will be investigated. These themes will shed light on the lived experience of LGBTQ individuals and their transformational journey toward wholeness.

Phase One: Descending Into the Heart of Desire

The first phase in the co-researcher's journey consisted of early life experiences that shaped each co-researcher's sense of identity, or sense of "I" (Singer, 1994; Almaas, 2001). The combination of physical, mental, behavioural, moral, spiritual and other characteristics define an individual as separate and different than another (Almaas, 2001). Each of the co-researchers identified various experiences, relationships and feelings experienced in childhood shaping an early sense of self.

Early on disconnection. Early in their childhoods, each of the co-researchers spoke about feeling left out and feeling disconnected from others in some way. Several of the co-researchers identified feeling insecure and unlovable which seemed to intensify their isolation and disconnection. These experiences were identified as a significant part of their transformational journey, one that originated from a sense of disconnection, both from self and others.

An influential aspect of Sam's early experience was growing up with a violent, unpredictable father. Sam described himself as a very fear based individual who felt alone and unsafe *all* of the time. His intense aloneness was also by driven by a fear of being found out as gay, he states:

So growing up in a really conservative background and so (father) was also physically and emotionally abusive...Like yelling throwing things, hitting, all that

kind of stuff. Um, so I had a very kind of, strained relationship with him and I didn't really feel safe as a kid so I was always on edge, always anxious and having to um, just be really hypersensitive to my surroundings but trying to kind of predict his mood as well... That was really difficult, I kind of had this isolated childhood where I didn't feel comfortable getting too close to people. I didn't get too close to my friends in case they found out I was gay. Um, and the other thing too was that I also didn't want to get too close to people because of my home life and my dad being so violent.

Paula describes her experience of disconnection growing up with a mentally ill older brother and never receiving the care and attention she longed for. Her intensive desire to be seen and loved was never attained from her parents:

When I was six my parents had another kid, so my baby brother and you know a baby in the family, older problematic child and I was kind of left to my own. But I was really miserable and depressed because I was left on my own from a very young age to like you know, like smile, be happy, like everything is fine even though things were very, very far from fine.

At an early age, Paula received messages from her family that they were not going to provide affection and love in the way she wanted. Unsure as to why she was “unlovable” in her parent’s eyes, she began to sink into a deep depression at an early age.

For Neo, relocating to different cities constantly in his childhood led him to “shut-down” relationships from developing any meaning or connection. Anticipating abandonment in Neo’s life resulted in relationships that were shallow and “safe”, he recalls:

I grew up most of the time um, back-and-forth between lots of different cities, my mom moved quite frequently. Um, so for me that made it a lot more difficult to connect with people on any kind of level of depth, it was always usually fairly shallow relationships with you know, most friends or even parental, mentor type figures that would come and go throughout my life...I would say I was friends and acquaintances with everybody in high school and junior high um, I got along with everybody, but I didn't really, I didn't have any developed and meaningful relationships with a whole lot of people, with any kind of depth at all.

Joanne recalls being very consciously aware of the physical world and the spirit realm from an early age. She felt her mother was incredibly impactful in nurturing this part of her being and helping her along the journey to wholeness:

I was um, encouraged particularly by my mom to be curious about things. And I remember having um, you know conversations even when I was quite young, like you know probably 6, 8 years old kind of thing, about like what happens after we, like life, the nature of life, the nature of the world, like why we are here?...That was pretty much my childhood cause I always sort of felt like, um, you know I had more questions, I was really curious, and I was always kind of like what's going on and how is this all connected?

Joanne identified strong relationships with her family and peers growing up, yet felt a sense of aloneness in her intense longing for spiritual fulfillment at an early age. She found her lived experience to be "different" than others her age and spoke about not being able to connect with others in this realm:

I just remember being a kid and I remember being like, I have this like really specific moment...I think I was probably in grade one or two, and it was this very like, um, strange like sort of existential moment of being like, I had this friend on the playground and I was like do you know we're kids, do you understand what that means? And how we are perceived by adults? Like, we are kids, like right now in this moment! And other people see us as kids. And this other kid was like, what are you talking about?

For Frankie, she experienced intense feelings of disconnection through feeling no sense of groundedness within herself. Her family was unable to provide her love and nurturing, and in response she developed and a profound fakeness to try and hide “being different” and obtain love. The initial relationship where she would “try” to be someone she wasn't was with her mother. Frankie recalls, “I was kind of always this thing to make my mother happy because she was so desperately sad.” She continues:

From the moment I was born and even as a young child I always remember feeling very uncomfortable in my own skin. I didn't really fit in. I learned, um, I learned how to lie a lot. Like to be um, the person that I thought the other person would want me to be you know? And like we moved to (another province) to Catholic school, and I knew again from very young that I was different, that I liked girls, even just I always was just gravitated more towards ladies, and um you know we went to Catholic school, and God that I was being taught about, his love was very conditional.

Greenspan (2003) articulates that emotions expressed by the co-researchers such as feeling “bad”, “different” or defective in some way, not feeling good enough or

unlovable are said to be one's "core defect story" (p. 83). This narrative serves to shame an individual's core sense of self that catapults the process of disconnection from one's authentic self (Greenspan, 2003). Once a "story" is believed to be true, we begin to notice internal cause and effect in each of the co-researchers. Believing a core deficit story as true may trigger self-sabotaging behavior patterns, uneasiness, and feelings that may range from fear to panic (Katie, 2002). Here the root chakra is disrupted, with many of the co-researchers experiencing a disruption from their safety and security on this earth and within themselves (Gunther, 1983; Feuerstien, 1998).

Discovering sexuality and same-sex attraction. Sex and Spirit are not opposites, rather two dimensions of a singular reality (Wade, 2004). Discovering sex and attraction was a massive experience for each of the co-researchers. Also, through sex and sexuality many of them connected to Spirit for the first time. For sex can show the radiance of Spirit and your own deepest nature (Wade, 2004). Awakened to their sexual nature, all of the co-researchers identify feeling sexually attracted to the same sex as an emotionally charged time in their lives. Two of the participants recalled early sexual experiences that were positive, powerful and freeing from the first moment of sexual awareness. They describe being "free" to engage sexually with authenticity, thus allowing them to integrate this aspect of their being. During the awakening of sexual energies the second, sacral chakra opens with creative energies and sexual desires coming into one's experience (Nelson, 1994). Within each positive experience, each participant recalled feeling safe and grounded enough to engage in sexual exploration. Within this safe environment with trusted individuals, both co-researchers were free from homophobia and negative societal discourses.

Paula describes herself as an intensely sexual being at a very young age. She describes the freedom and pleasure that came from exploring with others, she remarks:

I was already playing with sexuality when I was younger like seven, six or seven I had a boyfriend down the street and we were playing with sexuality in ways that were, you know psychologists if they had found out what was going on, (laughs) it was kind of weird...I think there was a very clear kind of knowing that, like, even at very, very young age I hadn't read about psychology, I just understood that kids explore you know, and that I was sexual but I don't really understand how at eight years old my Barbie's were like Ken's prostitutes and he was beating them up. I don't get where at eight years old I got that.

Paula found herself with a great deal of freedom growing up. A lack of attention at home and very "disconnected" parents forced her to run away constantly. During this time she mainly experienced sex with men, for she found them to be much more "safe" than women. However she did feel a strong sexual desire for women that she had tried to suppress and never acted on. She describes the shift that occurred when she was able to connect with women intimately:

A lot of my issues and a lot of the bullying had been with women and a lot of women are, you know especially in your teen years are very catty and very mean and very, like attacking. I was always kind of aware that I just had a problem with women and that I was very nervous around them, like put me in the room full of women and it would freak me the fuck out...The girl that I first had sex with, she dated who would become my boyfriend for a long time. We would have

sometimes little threesomes. And as I started exploring more, um, I think just it happens like, I became more comfortable with women.

Joanne wrestled with her attraction to women throughout her childhood. In her teenage years she was able to gain awareness of and challenge social “programming” which facilitated an intense opening of an ever-present deep attraction to the same sex. This realization was a spiritual opening that she describes as pleasant and profound:

I had a bit more fear about um, you know, lesbianism, and like encounters with other girls and things like that. And I think a lot of that was social construction of like oh, you can't do that cause then you're a lesbian. And then I would, I started having, um, I remember having dreams sometimes that were very like, very homoerotic type of stuff when I was a teenager, and being like, oh that's kind of interesting... like, you're actually interested in this so, you don't think about it in your waking time, but were going to delve into it a little though when, you know, that limiter is off.

Contrasting feeling safe and secure in exploring their sexuality, three co-researchers identified feeling absolute fear and terror about their newly discovered sexuality. Realizing one's attraction to the same sex came with feelings of guilt, shame and fear for being different. These early negative experiences could have resulted in the sacral chakra becoming retracted, or shut-off for the co-researchers. Magical thinking in Wilber's (2016) magenta level two emerge here, where by discovering one's same sex attraction, one feels cosmically doomed by the universe or condemned by existence itself. The critical voices of society, religion or others are interjected into ones experience at this stage which triggers level three red oriented self-preservation mechanisms (Wilber,

2007, 2016). For Sam, sex and sexuality was “never talked about” in his home environment and whatever aspect of sex was discussed was shamed. In addition to a lack of information about sex, Sam began to realize his sexuality was something that he believed to be wrong, sick and immoral. Sam recalls the torment he felt during this confusing time:

My attraction started to get stronger and stronger um, so that also, I was 11 or 12 during that period, yeah, so that was really terrifying for me hey. Like just really early starting to first notice that I was being attracted to guys in my class. Um, and then what happened is that just freaked me out hey, like I got really, really scared. I thought that I would go to Hell, and I felt like I was living in sin as well, so there was kind of a kind of a hard-core Catholic type teachings. And so, yeah that just fucked me over hey, and I thought there was something wrong with me as well like I was defective and that kind of stuff. I also thought really hard to kind of contextualize too like um, I don't know where it came from but these associations that I had bought into like you know, that I would never be able to find a partner if I was gay, I would never get married if I was gay. Um, people wouldn't accept me if I was gay. So it was really hard, it was a really hard space to be in.

Sam's experiences feeling sick, wrong and immoral surrounding his sexuality are mirrored in Frankie's experience growing up in a Catholic environment. She felt as if her attraction to women made her unworthy and unlovable in the eyes of the Catholic God she was brought up with. She elaborates:

I always felt very conflicted because I liked going to church with my family and I liked the worship and I loved all of that stuff right, but the God that I was being

taught about didn't love me. So I always felt very conflicted and it was challenging for me.

Frankie's early experiences with sex and sexuality were further shaped through sexual trauma, an event that impacted her sense of self and subsequent means of coping strategies:

When I was about seven I had some sexual abuse happen to me, my friend's older brother. And I um, told my mom and my, I didn't tell my dad I told my mom and my brother and there was this big huge thing at the school. And again, nothing was resolved and I felt strange and I felt weird...I always just felt different. I never felt I was a part of, I always just felt so awkward and had this uh, big vast emptiness inside of me. Um, so I just continued to um, I acted out a lot as a kid, I was very attention seeking from my family, I was disruptive I was um, I had addict tendencies at a very young age. You know, like I would hoard candy, I would steal. I was just an unhappy kid who acted as such.

At this stage in her life, the stage was set for Frankie's descent into self-destruction. She began using methamphetamines as a means of coping with her unhappiness, and escaping the gaping void she felt existed within herself.

Neo describes how he came to realize his sexuality, yet he was never able to fully honour his same sex attraction until he was in his twenties. Growing up in a "redneck" town made Neo feel unsafe to explore his same sex attraction, and he subsequently denied this aspect of his being: "I felt like I was different than others in regards to my sexuality but never did I feel that was wrong in any way." Neo admits he didn't feel safe enough to explore his same sex attraction at that time in his life, but did keep himself

“busy” with girls and school. Neo states it wasn’t until he became an adult and moved to a bigger city where he was finally able to explore this aspect of himself more.

In the interviews, all of the co-researchers spoke about growing up in a conservative or “redneck” town as having an impact on their sexual exploration. Many were fearful to explore their sexuality early on, and several hid this aspect of themselves from others or rejected it within themselves. It is apparent that many heteronormative messages from religion, family and society more generally permeated each co-researcher’s lived experience, influencing their integration of their sexuality. This fundamentally divorced sex from spirit for many of the co-researchers at this state in their journey. As previously indicated by Greenspan (2003) and Katie (2002) we can see how their negative beliefs and deficit stories shifted to include the realm of identity, sex and sexuality.

Incidents of awakening sexuality and sexual attraction are a momentous experience for all of the co-researchers and serve as an invitation for integration. The co-researchers continue their transformational journey by diving into the realm of sex and sexuality and working to integrate it into their being fully. Wade (2004) states sex all by itself can trigger altered states of consciousness identical to spiritual followers of various traditions: the otherworldly travels of shamans, kundalini yoga, the Void of Buddhism and Western Saint’s description of *unio mystica*. These early sexual and spiritual experiences are an essential aspect of the co-researcher’s transformational journey and offer a glimpse of what’s yet to come.

Hiding out and selling out. Each of the participants identified feeling isolated and disconnected from both others and self early in their experience. A shift occurred for

each co-researcher when they became aware of their sexual desires towards the same sex. Particularly, each made a decision to “hide” or move away from their same sex attraction and identity in some way. The experience of hiding from being found out served to only disconnect the co-researchers from their vulnerability and ultimately their true essence. This is a challenging time for the co-researchers where their chakra systems become unsynchronized at level two, by blocking or denying sexual energies this creates a significant energetic blockage (Gunther, 1983; Feuerstien 1998). Moreover, many of the co-researchers bump up against systems and structures found in Wilber’s (2006, 2016) Lower-Right Quadrant. The co-researchers experienced significant resistance from religious institutions, education and family systems in their journeys. Red level three emerges here and egocentric, power-driven self-preservation takes hold (Wilber, 2016). At this time in the co-researchers journey, we begin to uncover ways in which they “sell out” an aspect of their authenticity to remain hidden or safe in the presence of others.

Joanne recalls experiencing an “aversion” of being attracted to women, LGBTQ issues, and also an aversion to looking into this part of her being. By not honouring this aspect of herself she was pushing it out of her experience entirely:

I remember for myself too, like almost having this aversion to uh, being really open to supporting um, LGBTQ stuff. Like I remember like writing about it and stuff, and it was almost like I was pushing away almost like maybe my worries about it...So I ended up very, I don’t know yeah, socially, family, family constructed.

As Joanne began exploring her sense of sexual identity and sexual attraction toward women, Joanne felt a distinct message of shame from peers at school. She admits it was

still very difficult to honour this aspect of herself at this time in her life:

I just remember um, the idea of, uh, some like the shaming that would happen if there was possibility of entertaining that you might like the same sex... I think you know, junior high populations are just, they're nuts. You know? And I can remember...even from my own family, like my dad's side was very like they're pretty much very closed minded about certain things so I kind of had this dichotomy of like my mom sort of being ok with some things, but not necessarily being like totally ok with other things.

Sam describes the torment he experienced related to his sexuality and how "hiding out" became the only viable option in his opinion:

Yeah, so it was a pretty hard space too. But you know, one thing I consistently did as well, particularly throughout high school, was that I remember just like laying awake at night time hey, and then just start praying to God like just take this away from me. Please. If I'm gay, I don't want to be gay. Um, and things like I don't want to go to hell and really feeling like a reject hey. Like an outcast and a reject from God, yep. And that, there was something wrong with me I was defective, yeah so it was a really hard space to be in, hey. And I kind of feel as though like being a teenager is really difficult as it is right, but I felt like it was just this extra baggage I had to carry about being gay. So it really did feel like a curse for me. Um yeah, so that was kind of interesting, and then on top of that I had like the abusive household that I was growing up in at the same time. Um, yeah so that was really the essence of it hey, just really hiding out.

Hiding was indeed painful for Sam, and he elaborates how he felt as though he was forced to hide in various life roles to stay “safe”:

Directly after high school until twenty-one I actually worked doing security. So, yeah I trained in security and worked at a shopping mall. And so that got a bit scary at times hey, because um the other officer, security officers I was working with some of them were like really, really homophobic...But predominantly it was all male staff and so I had to really hide it hey, like really, really hide it...

And so I just went further in the closet hey and just hid it even more because, um, I just didn't feel safe to come out, like it was still very homophobic.

Paula's experience of wanting to hide out was similar to the other co-researchers. She felt free to embrace and explore her sexuality with her peers outside of school, yet felt it was necessary to hide her sexuality in all other aspects of her life:

In school I never told anyone that I was bi, that I was playing with girls because we all knew the bi girl, and I was like, I don't have a problem with this but I don't think school kids who are idiots need to know my sexuality because all they're going to do is tease me because they're fucking idiots. So why even let them know, why talk about it?

Paula entered a “shut-down” disconnected way of being as a way of keeping herself and her identity safe from bullying and teasing at school, she states: “I just pulled really into my inner self and just ignored what other people said or thought, like I just didn't give a shit anymore.”

Neo felt a conservative community prevented him from fully embracing his sexual identity. He busied himself with school and girls during his school years, something that he found was validated and rewarded by others:

I probably realized my (same-sex) preferences around I would say 14, 15, I knew. Um, shortly after giving it any thought I was like, no this was what rings true to me. Um, but living in a small town made that incredibly difficult because nobody identified with that at all and they're very much the redneck (name of province) style town, so that made that a little bit more difficult. So, I naturally through most of my schooling time kept to myself... I ended up dating one girl I would say in the entire time going through school, but for me I just found I'm like you know this isn't what feels right here for me, so just do the school, focus on that, get it done, move forward with life at that point in time. So I just, I really focused into my education and graduated with 148 credits, both my diploma and tech prep diploma. Um, with a fairly good average and everything so, um, after that immediately I was like okay, school is done, I need to get out of this small town.

Neo's attempts to hide his sexual identity are evident in the "gigs" he engaged in to keep up appearances to others, including remaining in a heterosexual relationship. For Neo, a shallow relationship with a girl and intensive schoolwork proved "safer" than exploring this aspect of himself and sharing it with others.

Similar to the other co-researchers, Frankie hid from others through drugs as a means of hiding her pain and suffering. She also found drugs were an outlet that freed her from her intense feelings of worthlessness. For all of the co-researchers, the fear of being found "out" was a powerful driving force in each of their lives, powerful enough to

further disconnect the co-researchers from this aspect of their identity. By doing so, this hiding out places some co-researchers in the position where they feel as though they must fight for their very survival. Here we begin to see the next theme emerge in the transformational journey.

Fear of annihilation and fighting to survive. The co-researchers experience intense fear at this stage and for several participants it had increased to such a level that at times they feared for their very survival. Trungpa (2009) defines fear as basic bewilderment that comes from being unable to harmonize mind, body and spirit. Fear is nervousness, a tightly contained life force, at times riddled with feelings of inadequacy that we often try to suppress; we hope to overcome our fear by simply taking our minds off our fear (Trungpa, 2009; Masters, 2013). The co-researchers spoke about how fearful their experience had become with the added weight of “hiding” a part of their being. The reality of death and fear of harm or injury retracted the participants to an infrared level fixated on the physiological drive for survival (Wilber, 2016). The first root chakra is spotlighted in this theme also, understood as the survival center. This base chakra is said to contain primitive instincts and desires for safety and security, in short this chakra is the foundation for all transformation (Gunther, 1983). For Sam, his fear of being found out continued to increase in intensity. In high school he describes feeling frozen in fear of his impending death and destruction:

And so being gay, we didn't talk about. But having said that though, in one of my classes, um, I think it was religious education class, we had to watch um, this was in second last year of high school, we had to watch Philadelphia. With um, Tom Hanks, so I think that's like a really progressive movie but what that did for me,

that fucked me up even more. Because I'm like oh, ok so I'm gay I'm going to die of HIV.

It is important to note that Sam experienced threats to his physical safety and survival at times within a homophobic environment. As described in the literature review, there are many reasons an individual may choose not to disclose their sexual identity. One significant reason one chooses to stay in the closet is fearing their personal safety (Barbara, Chaim & Doctor, 2004). He elaborates on this experience:

I kind of felt like there was one particular guy like who um, I felt so unsafe around him hey cause I always felt he was quite homophobic. Um, and he never physically threatened me, but he was the sort of guy where I could just see he had this tendency to fly off the handle and was really homophobic... So it was really horrible yeah, so I guess that was probably the first time I encountered homophobia and felt quite physically scared...But um, yeah it was a just a horrible time for me though, like feeling really unsafe at work. I think as well it kind of influenced my decision not to go into the police force because um, I just imagined the police force would be even more homophobic...I kind of realized that you know, being gay it did influence my career decision making process. And you know I don't regret not going into the police force but I'm still really curious about what would happen if I did go, um, yeah so yeah it's interesting.

When an individual is experiencing an unstable sense of identity, the identity is vulnerable to injury, disintegration and death (Almaas, 1996). This situation places the individual in the position of always having to defend their identity, in an attempt to

counteract the fragility of their identity and feelings of deficiency, worthlessness and sense of insignificance (Almaas, 1996).

Paula recounted an evening where she realized she would not receive any support in ensuring her personal safety and survival; it was up to her alone to survive:

I had spent a weekend in jail when I was 17 and (parents) didn't come get me or whatever... It was very clearly from I was very, very young at this point a decade and a half basically that I take care of myself and they're not going to help me in school, they're not going to help me out of trouble, they're not going to help me with bullying. I specifically was asked, do you need help? I said yes, like really hard to do, I didn't get any help. Juxtaposed next to an older brother who's years of counsellors, and schools helping, and psychologists and special homes and had special programs and I was just like well, fuck you.

In response to this, Paula was awakened to an intense red powered *drive to survive* that fueled Paula on her journey (Wilber, 2016). In response to intensive bullying and teasing from schoolmates, Paula describes the moment she was able to connect to an intense life force she wasn't aware existed within her. From that moment onward, "no one messed with her." She states:

Something clicked and I remember very clearly it was a very specific moment, one of those decisions was, I said fuck this! I would rather get my ass whooped then keep just being tormented. Like, I have never been beaten up, they just tormented me and teased me and you know somebody had stolen my glasses once, they were trying to put super glue in my hair once, like holding me up against the fence of my house and threatening to beat me up but no one had ever

actually beat me up. And I decided fuck this! I'm going to stand up for myself.

And from that moment, something clicked in me and I became like ferocious. And if anybody said anything they were, I could see it in their face, like shock. I just, I just went on the verbal attack. I never beat anyone up, I didn't have to. It like completely changed everything, everything immediately.

Frankie's journey saw her falling deeper and deeper into the depths of drug addiction. Death and non-being presented itself into Frankie's life when her best friend died of HIV and her out of control drug use prevented her from seeing him before he died. She explains:

When he was in the hospital I was too high to go see him, or see his mom, and he died. And that feeling of like it was the first, because I have had friends overdose and I have known people who have gotten murdered and all of that stuff, but it had never really hit home to me. But when um, he first passed just that sense of loneliness and despair and I couldn't get high enough to make it go away. And the guilt and shame I felt for not going to see him in the hospital was so immense, like, and it just set me on a really epic spiral. I um, have also since I was probably about 19 was a cutter and did a lot of self harm, you know so that really reared its ugly head pretty bad around then.

This realm of death and non-being was a powerful time in Frankie's life. A personal near death experience rattled to her core.

I live in a very small town and the speed limit is 50 kilometers through our main strip and he was drunk and I was drunk and we were driving and he started to accelerate very quickly up this hill. A car pulled out in front of us, he was going to

smash into the back of it, we lost control, we flew off and embankment, we took out an electrical pole... I broke all my jaw, my teeth in here, I broke both of my feet I just destroyed both of my feet. And was very lucky to be alive, when I woke up in the hospital and then that was my God moment, I just remember being like how am I not dead? Like how am I not dead after all of this? I have overdosed, I have, you know like put myself in so many horrible situations with the sex work that I have done. And I am still here, there must be a purpose.

Through the awareness gained after she survived a car accident, Frankie experienced a powerful invitation to continue on with her transformational journey.

For Joanne, she describes the insight that came from having a mother battling depression that triggered an intense desire to “see through” any experience she may encounter on her journey to wholeness:

Part of that was having a mom who had some mental health and depression stuff and seeing like, you know, not being able to cope as sort of like this female weakness thing. And I was like fuck, I gotta be able to survive through some stuff so I just you know, gotta push down some of that other stuff, and just like, arrgh! So maybe that was my reaction formation to how to survive like a bit of craziness that happened when I was a teenager and my parents separating. Cause it was like I had to hold on to something and say you know, less emotion is probably good cause then I'll just kind of tune out and keep doing my thing over here.

Chakras one, two and three are all relevant throughout this theme, as are the first three colours of Wilber's (2016) stages with the co-researchers translating self-protective survival willpower into action. Each co-researcher described their journey of

deconstructing the situation around themselves to arrive with intense level of honesty with themselves. During this phase they confront societal expectations, engage in independent thinking, and answer the call for further transformation in consciousness (Wilber, 2016). This phase is marked by an awakening of the heart whereby each individual takes an honest, straightforward look at themselves (Trungpa & Gimian 2010). In the midst of their fighting for survival, we can see the emerging pull for transformation in the following phase.

Phase Two: Pull Towards The Edge

Breaking through the betrayal of self and embracing their authenticity and vulnerability marks this phase of the co-researchers journey. During this phase of the transformational journey all of the co-researchers described undergoing a more conscious and intentional process of transformation. This stage, the awakening of the head as described by Trungpa (2010), the co-researchers were beginning to see the ways in which they were trapped in a false self. The shift towards healing for each co-researcher unfolds when they abandon their old, worn out behaviour patterns and honour the pull to live openly, in full alignment with their sexuality.

Straight gig is up: An invitation for transformation. All of the participants had experienced their own unique path of connecting with their sexuality. This process required each of the co-researchers to look at themselves honestly and challenge ways in which they still were “selling out” aspects of themselves or hiding. Through various life circumstances and at different times in their journeys, the co-researchers all discovered a dynamic invitation to come out of hiding, and embrace who they ultimately are. Almaas (1996) describes this is a time when the participants see the inauthenticity within their

“false self” and move away from this constructed identity. According to Wilber (2016) this is a pivotal time when the co-researchers confront the boundaries of their identity in relation to others and embrace individuality and authenticity.

The process of becoming aware of inauthentic ways of being is a powerful process of embracing love for oneself. Paula describes a powerful invitation she received through deconstructing her tendency to seek love and intimacy through sex. Connected to this experience was the awareness of her sexual nature as normal and natural, not something to be ashamed of. As the reader may recall, Paula describes herself as a very sexual being at a very early age and had positive early sexual experiences. Still, Paula felt a pull towards sexual transformation and sexual revolution, she describes:

You know I thought about it a lot over the years that I was looking for love through sexuality but kind of recently I've looked at it and I was like, well yeah but I was also just a sexual person. And our society crossed those wires so yes I was looking for love from sexuality, but I was also just a sexual person, because I am a sexual being. So, I mean, you know through my teen years that kind of fucked me up a bit.

Paula made a breakthrough in her journey at this time when she dated a man who introduced her to the world of Kink. She describes the ecstatic feeling and freedom that came from connecting to an authentic aspect of her being, she shared: “Oh there is like a term for this, there's a community for this, there are people for this!” Paula was able to integrate this aspect of her being, no longer feeling shame for her sexual desires.

Embracing this aspect of herself, Paula recalls a spiritual experience after she was free

from the effects of hallucinogens and resting in her being at a deep level, she describes what unfolded:

It felt like my ancestors but not necessarily like human ones, but like spiritual ancestors were, I was lying in a bed under the window but it was like they were coming down from here behind me and giving me information, giving me uh, secrets of the universe, of the world, of how we work. And I remember feeling like my body was on this bed but there is a bigger me, that there is another spiritual me that is outside of our space time continuum that like has all of these little choices for every single possibility of life that can possibly happen... So from that experience I learned how to read, do readings without cards, without meeting, like we are all connected, right I knew that already. From that trip I learned how to be able to just feel people and kind of started learning how to translate what was going on through their energy like, doing a full reading but coming out of what their energy, what their thoughts are, right. Because all of these little thoughts are coming out and it's not just conscious thoughts, it feelings, it's all of the many layers of ourselves.

During this phase, many of the co-researchers life concerns are existential in nature. Frankie's inauthenticity and fakeness intensified through her descent into drug addiction. At this stage in her journey her drug use and destructive behaviours continued to increase despite her recent near-death experiences. She found herself homeless at times, starving and unsure where her next fix would come from, yet she maintained the belief that her false self was in control. Frankie's drug use was in full swing when she began experiencing invitations to break through the false self. Frankie arrived at a place

on her journey where cracks were beginning to form in her grandiose identity. Dependent on drugs and short on cash, Frankie quickly found her “empowering behaviours” were having the opposite effect. These external supports to help inflate her own identity were beginning to fail, she describes:

I started to do a lot of sex work because you know again, I was unemployable. And um, again in the beginning like all of the stuff that I did in the beginning served a purpose and made me feel empowered and it did all of these things for me right but um, I was a slave to narcotics. And um, you know it stops being empowering when like you’re dope sick and you have to go to sleep with some creepy man because you have no money.

Questioning the meaning of life, death and finitude, loneliness and disconnection, Frankie was navigating a stage in her journey and finding the courage to live a life that is genuine and authentic (Cortright, 1997). The invitation was there for Frankie to look at herself and honour all aspects of her being. This would mean letting go of the false self she found to be so familiar and turn towards the unknown:

That was huge for me because to admit that I couldn’t manipulate and lie my way through something was crazy for me. You know I could always uh, lie cheat or steal or run away, but I could not run away from this. So I had to admit that I had met my match, that this was it. That I could not beat this.

In order to let go of their false selves each of the co-researchers had to let go of hiding, fear, and any familiarity, comfort and safety that came along with the false identity. In doing so, this meant embracing their sexuality fully with themselves and

others. The invitation to connect and honour the heart chakra at level four arrived. This process unfolds in the coming out journey described in the next theme.

Coming out of a false self and finding freedom. Almaas (2004) contends that while our true spiritual nature is primordially whole, complete and does not need work, we do need to “work” on ourselves to become clear and receptive to this fundamental nature. Once we become aware of the areas where inner transformation can occur, we are better able to see which areas to work on, where to go, which fundamental questions to ask, ultimately this process amplifies the effectiveness of the spiritual “work” we do (Almaas, 2004). In this research, each of the participants had a unique “coming out” experience that provided a powerful opportunity to embrace authenticity and vulnerability. This was a conscious decision and a spiritual breakthrough for the co-researchers. For some, it was a powerful experience of surrendering to what is and who they ultimately are, for this was an opportunity to connect and honour an aspect of their being that had previously been hidden or disconnected from. For others, it was a painful and difficult experience that resulted in bullying, shaming and further disconnection. For each participant, they were fortunate to find family or community support throughout their coming out journey.

Several participants described overcoming their fear of coming out as a crucial step on their transformational journey. For Neo, facing his fear allowed his journey to open up, and resulted in a powerful learning that his fear regarding coming out turned out to be entirely unfounded:

I ended up showing (mom) a picture of the boy I was seeing at the time so, I was like I want to show you something, and I showed her and she’s like oh okay cool,

and I was like so, he's more than a friend he's a romantic friend, and she looks at me and she's like, okay and? And I'm like oh?! She's like, this isn't going to change anything, she's like I don't view you any differently and this is just your choice, do what you got to do. She's like just know I'm going to support you in anything that you're going to want to go and do. And good for you thanks for saying it, telling me, but this doesn't change anything in any way, shape or form. So it was incredibly disarming and I was like whoa, I didn't expect to be quite that easy.

Sam's fears surrounding coming out to his family were immense, and resulted in him hiding his "secret" from his family until he was 20. Similar to Neo, he reached a place where he couldn't fake who he was any longer. Through coming out to his family, he realized his fears were much larger than reality:

The first time I came out was um, I think I was 20... I realized I couldn't keep it a secret anymore because it was such a huge part of who I was. And then so um, I just invited (mom) to go for a walk with me down to the park, and then we just sat there on a park bench I was just smoking cigarettes. She asked me why am I smoking so much, and I just told her, yeah. But I think what made it really easy for me too is that um, mom is really into theatre and dance. And so um, some of her friends were gay anyway. So and I said to her well, you know this friend that you have, I said well I'm like him also because I'm gay... She said you know, it was a shock for her, but like she said it doesn't change anything and she still loves me. Um, yeah so that was really awesome and so I remember feeling like just this massive weight lifted off my chest. Um, so that was really cool and I think um

after that the rest just happened by itself. Like um my sister, like I've got 3 sisters and they are all really cool, really supportive my brother's really cool, really supportive about it as well. Um, so I feel lucky to kind of be really open in my family, it's never been an issue.

Paula recounts coming out to her family as a fearful event. She had found openness and acceptance with her peer group, yet to embrace all aspects of herself she knew she had to come out to family, She describes her conversation with her mom:

So, being so casual about it for so long but not really open, one time in the car, this would have been mid 20s, maybe like early mid 20s, um, I was in the car with my mom it was just me and my mom and I said, you know, she said something about sexuality and I said well would you care if I was bi? And she was like, no. And I said well would you care if I was gay, I mean she obviously knows I'm not gay because I had boyfriends and I'd have boyfriends around and you know. And I honestly wonder how she couldn't hear me with this girl (laughs).

Paula found immediate acceptance from her mom, and although unintentional, Paula came out to her father by being "found out":

(Dad) walked in one day and I was very much making out with this girl, like plastered on each other. (Laughs) Now we weren't drunk we were just like glued to each other...my dad had walked in and my dad had like the most shocked expression on his face and he was just like uh... and just walked back in the house and he came back in and was like so what are you guys doing? (Laughs) I mean that is coming out isn't it? This is the thing is I feel like when you're in an inclusive environment that is open and comfortable and safe, you can just safely,

comfortably be who you are. You don't have to have a huge difficult traumatic coming out...it's not a huge big deal. It's not a big issue it's just, meh, this is what's going on okay, I'm fine, you know?

The co-researchers experience is identified by the heart chakra opening up within each individual. Loving and integrative energy pervades this chakra, extending to self and others. This is a glimpse of the interconnected loving energy that unites us all (Gunther, 1983).

Contrasting a singular, "coming out" event, Joanne describes her coming out journey as a gradual unfolding, moment to moment experience:

In terms of like a coming out thing I think I can't pinpoint a particular thing...

Like I had this group of friends that I've had for about 10 years and um a lot of us sort of were picking apart some things around our identities. You know right around the same time and sort of deconstructing them and what not. So I would say that's probably you know, but it's sort of been this cumulative, gradual kind of thing too, so, yeah.

Frankie recalls her initial coming out experience as a horrible experience for her. It was bound up in being "found out" by her peers and being subsequently bullied throughout her school years:

My first experience with a girl was when I was about 14 at a house party. And we were in the bathroom and these um, stupid hockey boys kicked in the door and that was it, I was outed at my high school and it was terrible. It was horrible because it was just this ignorant small-town so at lunch break we were bombarded

with snowballs and like just stupid stuff like that. So again, not feeling good about myself, not feeling comfortable in my own skin.

She came out to her parents and grandparents shortly afterwards, and admits she wasn't overly fearful of what would happen:

You know, um, and my mother gets it. She gets that I just love people, that it isn't gender-based, that I just love humans, and if you happen to be a boy or girl or whatever you are, and if I'm into you, I'm into you. My mother was very accepting of that, my dad had a hard time.

Through the co-researchers transformational journey, a pivotal moment in their experience was coming out and coming into alignment with their true personal and sexual identity, ultimately by shedding away a false self. Within this process we consciousness shifting upwards through the heart chakra and into the throat chakra, where the co-researchers are finally able to speak their truth to others. As the literature review states, this coming out process is commonly seen in academic research as a "final" stage in connecting with ones true identity or true self. However, as we will see in the following phases of the transformational journey, the coming out process is not the final destination in the co-researchers experience. It should be noted that it is a pivotal experience that provides powerful momentum for a continual deconstruction of identity, exploration of self and connecting to the divine.

Basking in the rainbow cloud. The coming out process is a powerful and profound experience. The co-researchers all described a period of ecstatic bliss that lingered for a time after they were able to fully embrace their sexuality. This researcher decided to adapt a term frequently found in the literature of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

titled the *pink cloud* (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001) to depict this theme. This pink cloud is a period of time marked by emotional and intense energy, typically experienced in early stage recovery. Unfortunately, this ecstatic feeling is characterized by an eventual return to normalcy. The bliss soon wears out and life becomes dull. In the context of this research, after coming out the *rainbow cloud* marks a period of time where the co-researchers were able to embrace love for oneself integrating their sexuality into their experience for the first time. Here the co-researchers break through into orange level five and into green level six (Wilber, 2016). At this stage the worldview expands into a worldcentric, multicultural one and the co-researchers are able to connect to their authentic individuality (Wilber, 2016). This transformative time is filled with feelings of freedom, intimacy, connection with others and self-acceptance.

For Neo, coming out as a gay male proved to be an intensely freeing time in his life when he was finally able to connect with all aspects of his being:

I definitely had gotten myself into a community of people that were very accepting of it, very open of it and very encouraging of it, so that made my life! It was this 180 jump that made it really difficult to not just absolutely love the hell out of it and explore every bit I could. Because I had so much support versus kind of the reality I was used to prior to that...After I moved to (city) I found when I could start being myself was when all of the other cool pieces of myself started to come out...all of a sudden I started finding that now I could start expressing this other half of myself, my more creative side sort of came out...So I found myself starting to get into a lot more creative endeavours. So, wanting to start learning music or dance or you know just other ways of expressing myself through

whatever creative mediums I found that I enjoyed at that point in time. Um, whereas before I just had no desire whatsoever. This part of me just started naturally coming out just because I started honouring that other half of who I was. Sam revelled in the freedom from expectations he was able to embrace by living a more open life as a gay man:

I actually became quite grateful for it too, this was another major shift right, because I feel really grateful because I don't have to have this traditional lifestyle of getting married, having kids, having to like mortgage a house. And you know, hold down a steady job. Yeah, to be really honest I don't think I could handle that like in this lifetime, absolutely could not handle it. Like it's way too much responsibility for me. Um, and I think you know seeing like how my dad suffered through his work and raising family, and how unhappy he was, it's kind of turned me off that whole traditional role of wife, husband, kids. (laughs) So that was pretty cool, so yeah so I started to really appreciate the freedom that comes with the lifestyle of being gay.

All of the participants spoke about the welcoming, inclusive energy that gay clubs, raves and/or music festivals provided for them. They were important spaces where they felt they could truly be themselves and connect to a safe, loving community. Joanne describes her experience connecting to the music community:

I started going to raves and getting involved in the electronic sort of scene, like there was, it just had an open, inviting, welcoming, sort of way about like, you know, all the freaks it was like hey, come on in! This is where we can be okay with uh, however people want to be. And a lot of going to gay clubs and things

like that in (city) you know, after hours clubs and stuff like that, it was just that exposure to it and sort of making it okay... It just it seemed like oh, here's community, and here's people and being able to talk about different experiences and people that were, you know, they were very out about things and what not so it made it safe for me to kind of explore and accept that in my own self.

All of the participants were able to fully embrace their sexuality and found a deep connection to self and others through this process. After coming out, all the co-researchers describe post-egoic, transpersonal experiences during this time. However, this rainbow cloud of bliss eventually loses its lustre and is short lived by the co-researchers. This process propels each to the next theme, whereby they re-examine their "freedom" found within a defined sexual identity.

Descent into the deconstruction of ego and identity. Each of the co-researchers identified a time in their journey to wholeness when there was a further deconstruction of their identity that needed to take place. This time for each co-researcher is marked by an intentional descension into the guts of labels, identity, spirituality and the essence of who they are. Here we see the descent into the dark realm of transformation gaining momentum, for all of the co-researchers realize the "labels" and constraints of existing within a particular sexual identity are in some way inauthentic. By coming out, a trans-egoic state was achieved, yet the ego was not entirely eliminated within the psychic structure. In short, coming out as a particular "identity" was described by the co-researchers as something in and of itself to transcend. The co-researchers were able to identify feeling "trapped" or contained by claiming an identity as their own and many began to see the re-emergence of ego once again. In this theme the LGBQ identity itself

is experienced as an archetype, one that is dualistic, constrictive and at times must be performed for others. In realizing this, the co-researchers were able to identify several ways in which they were not living authentic lives. As referenced in the literature review, Washburn (1990, 1995) posits the spiritual journey may evoke a “U-turn towards origins” rather than a consistent ascension through the states of consciousness as Wilber’s (2016) Integral model describes. In this research, the participants identify a period in their journey where they needed to disengage from their own constructed self-representations, and self-structures and revisit “old ground” before forging a new path. This was not always a smooth, effortless process as the co-participants describe. This is an important feature of the LGBTQ transformational journey that departs from Wilber’s model and will be explored further in the following chapter.

Neo describes his spiritual U-turn and the impact it had on his journey to wholeness:

Because (identity) is what the ego connects to. But when you go through this world and all of a sudden...you realize that’s the ego and the thing that you identify yourself with is actually separate of you, it isn’t actually who you are, it is only an apparition that you have created upon yourself. Um, from there was the first time that I could really see beyond the physical world, beyond this experience that we are having, to be able to see my higher self, and the potential that I could be as my higher self if I let go of the shit, the toxic shit that I didn’t need, the ego-stuff that I didn’t need.

Both Neo and Sam were able to identify how ego was still able to dominate their identity and experience at this stage in their experience. One area they identified their

identity was wrapped up in was their work. Neo describes seeing his fake, egoic work identity clearly:

It felt really good to do the work but very much recognizing I still got drug into the corporate culture, you know that put on the suit, let's play dress-up every single day, pretend were somebody that we are not and all for the hope that our future will be a lot better because of all the time we've put it now. (Laughs) I bought in, (laughs) yeah, I put in about six years of my life into that. And I was good, I won for awards for top trainers and managers, they took me on trips to Nicaragua, Mexico, all over Canada, free trips to go snowboarding, to see the Grey Cup, I did really well with it. But by the end of it...started to create a lot of um, dis-ease within myself, just like I can't be here anymore, this isn't honouring who I truly am...Right, so eventually that um, gradual increase of discomfort from it finally was just like, okay well either you're going to go through some level of depression trying to let this energy out, or you are just going to walk away from it and honour what you need to do for yourself. So, I did that.

The fun and rewarding nature of their "gig" was wearing out, and they could no longer deny that they needed to make a change. Sam's experience mirrors Neo's in becoming aware of the ways in which he was still selling out through his work:

So I worked in Human Resources for 13 years in total. And every day I sold out hey. Because every day it felt wrong for me that I was waking up going to a corporate based environment, absolutely fucking hating the environment and feeling really trapped. But I forced myself through it for 13 years, and so it wasn't until two and a half years ago I left the corporate world and started

working for myself as a career counsellor. Um, and then I started to do my own transpersonal type training here in Australia. So one of the things that's really big for me in terms of areas I come back to this point constantly now in the past two and a half years is really just staying in my own freedom hey. So no grasping back onto core survival.

By re-visiting ways in which ego lingered in their experience or crept into the various roles, responsibilities and expectations of identity, all of the co-researchers experienced a second descent in their transformational journey. Thus begins the process of dis-identification with the self-structure and begin transcending into the higher levels of consciousness (Almaas, 2004). Four of the five co-researchers felt an additional aspect of their sexual identity required transformation and integration. During this period of egoic transformation and movement into trans-egoic states, the polyamorous aspect of sexuality was embraced by four of five co-researchers. This unfolding occurred concurrently with the disillusion of boundaries of "I" or self. Without boundaries or rules to govern their lives, the polyamory aspect of their being unfolded uniquely to each co-researcher. For Joanne, being able to live freely and openly facilitated deeper exploration of her genuine desires in relationships:

Identity and just even sexual orientation... I think that really sort of spring boarded for me more, you know, like it was probably parallel to that because it was all of those things around, um, who am I? How do I see myself? The things that I learned or believed or I've carried myself so far. If I can kind of pull that apart and play around with that a little bit, if I didn't have any rules or boundaries set on that, how would that be and how would I live my life?

Neo reflects on the “evolution” of his sexuality in his transformational journey as he describes his opening to honor this polyamorous aspect of himself:

That’s where I naturally started finding for me that the next evolution to my perspective on relationships at that point in time then started becoming more this polyamory path, this you know, this path of like, I sit here and think of a monogamous relationship, I think of the moment I identify myself as in this relationship with somebody it immediately comes with all of these barriers or these expectations around it. Like the moment I say yes I am your boyfriend, what does that mean? What that means to me and what that means to you are two completely different things right?

Through intensive therapy, addiction treatment and spiritual exploration, Frankie found her intimate relationships were painful, limiting and inauthentic. She realized her pattern within relationships was to sabotage them before her partner had the opportunity to do so.

I had this aha moment you know, like three months was my limit for a dating anybody. First month I would do this, second month I would do this, third month I would destroy it and they would just have enough of me... I always pick these straight ladies to be my best friends because they will love me and snuggle me but never will sleep with me, so I can’t wreck it, like you know? And they’re still my best friends to this day but all of this stuff, and one of the main things I realized is how I am just this actor you know, and like life is a stage and I just put on this performance for whoever is standing in front of me, who I think, who I think they want me to be right?

Still trapped in egoic demands of identity, a further deconstruction of her fake self and ego needed to occur. Frankie's willingness to revisit herself gave her the awareness to embrace multiple romantic partners. She reflects on this realization:

And my partner, my boyfriend at the time was a very lovely human, he was so sweet and so nice but you know, for me like I um, I don't want to just have one partner, you know? Like I *know* that I am Poly... All of a sudden I had permission and I felt okay to be who I really was, because I was, I didn't even know who I was my entire life. I didn't know, you know, I was just kind of going through the motions just trying to figure all of it out. And when I got sober, um, I give myself permission to not feel guilty and not to feel shameful about things anymore. You know, like I had cheated on all of my partners because I'm not a monogamous creature, and they didn't understand that, and then I would have guilt and shame around that because, you know, everyone in my family is still married and monogamous with children, and I felt so...well what's what's wrong with me right? But now I am like there is nothing wrong with me, like this is just who I am and it's totally okay.

Sam did not identify as polyamorous during the interview, but did identify feeling fear about being with one partner for the rest of his life. Sam recalled a transformative experience when a panic attack occurred when thinking about his future existing in only one relationship:

So I did feel really kind of a bit suffocated and a bit trapped...I remember one night like I just had this huge panic attack right. Because we were talking about our future and stuff like that so I had a massive panic attack and I didn't know

what was happening hey, like I thought like, we actually called an ambulance...Just symbolically I remember like um, because I was staying over at his place right, and he had a frame he had both of us in a frame right? But I remember as the paramedics came to the house he turned the photo over.

Sam elaborated further on the awareness he gained through the panic attack:

There is still part of me too hey, like another part I had to work with is that I am still completely terrified of being in a relationship. Yeah, and I think you know it goes back to that whole experience I had with the ambulance and the panic attack, like the idea of being with one partner for the rest of my life just freaks me out. Um, I don't really know where that comes from, I'm still kind of working with that...Um, but then again I don't know like, I just, at the same time I feel like is it really truly possible to be with one person for the rest of your life? Yeah I don't know. Yeah. Maybe if we like book a catch up in 50 years I'll tell you.

Richo (1999) points out that Ego may invite us to embrace the givens of existence, yet it is ultimately dis-satisfied with the limits it represents. Ego is always yearning to make the transition away from the moment, away from *what is* (Katie, 2005; Richo, 1999). This concludes the phase in which the spiritual deconstruction is experienced by the co-researchers. The following and final phase of the transformational journey exemplifies what occurs for the co-researchers when they move away from what could be and embrace what is, abiding in non-dual states of consciousness (Katie, 2002).

Phase Three: Moment to Moment Integration

Within the experience of the co-researchers journey to wholeness, their experiences in this phase illuminate subtle, causal and non-dual states of consciousness as

described by Wilber (2006, 2016). In this realm we see consciousness expanding into open chakras at level five, six and seven. The co-researchers path towards higher states of consciousness was evident in the narratives that described their drive to shift away from grasping onto the “I”, “identity” or “self”. This shift occurred uniquely for each co-researcher and at differing times in their lives, but the breakthrough was made after an additional period of self-deconstruction. In this phase, the researcher participants have highlighted the dissolution of a separate “self” and have transcended the limiting definitions of a particular sexual “identity” altogether. Almaas (1996) describes this experience as moment-to-moment self-realization, and Wilber (2000) articulates this process as self-transcendence. Throughout this phase, the various themes explore how the co-researchers have, and continue to integrate various transpersonal aspects of their being, beginning with obliterating identity.

Obliterating boundaries of identity. Either/or dichotomies, such is the same with sexual orientation, causes splits within our perception of others and ourselves. By identifying “exclusively” with one side of duality, and clinging neurotically to our chosen identification prevents us from moving toward wholeness (Woodman & Dickson, 1996). Woodman & Dickson (1996) describe how breaking through these either/or rigidities creates space for spontaneity, insight, and transcendent consciousness. All of the co-researchers articulate their sexual identity as an ever unfolding, moment-to-moment experience and they describe the various established LGBTQ categories of identities inherently unable to accurately represent the totality of their sexual identity. Because it is a moment-to-moment unfolding, the pre-defined labels, rules and boundaries of the LGBTQ community are not sufficient. There is a distinct theme of being *outside of the*

box, innovative and *fluid(ity)* that emerges for the co-researchers when asked how they identify in their lives today. Neo states:

I prefer to go with homoflexible only because it's fun and creative and outside of the regular paradigms of what people expect people to say for it. It makes it a little bit more fun and a little bit less, um, a little more disarming of people when they ask and find out. But it does give a really good idea of where on the spectrum I fit, right, so that is the term that I use in reference to that. Um, for the most part I personally try to avoid um, categorizing anybody that I meet in to any of the terms, like I understand that we use LGBT for the community as a way of being able to include everybody from the entire spectrum have sexual identities, but, I prefer to stay as that, it's a spectrum of sexual identities and you're going to change where you're on that spectrum all the time and the moment you pin yourself on the one and then share that publicly, that becomes, that then starts to create your identity right? It's just like if somebody goes around and starts saying you know, I found out that so-and-so is gay and now all of a sudden everybody who hears this thing now creates a perspective of themselves around that person, when in all reality it just might be that, maybe they in fact prefer girls, but they've explored with a guy a couple of times and they have enjoyed it. But the people who don't see it, immediately take on a certain identity which now that becomes that person's identity even without them wanting that.

Frankie highlighted the importance language can provide for members of the LGBTQ community, yet ultimately describes its inability to accurately articulate the essence of her identity:

I just say queer because I don't really know. You know what I mean like I, because my sexuality now is just this fluid thing that I don't really, I don't, I think I choose to call it something. So if I am talking to my family or if I am talking to other people that it is this tangible thing that I can talk about right? You know, um, it was always bisexual before because that's all there was. But it's different than that. I am not just attracted to boys and girls you know? I have this epic crush on this transgender lady who I think is very attractive now... Also I think before I didn't know of any language, I didn't, there was no conversation, you know like I, it was like 1995 and I'm like wow either you're gay or you're straight, that was it. And like the lesbians that were portrayed where like really butch lesbians are like really femmie girl ones, and I was neither of those things right? My identity is definitely like, like I am just this person who loves humans, and that's all I know to be true. I choose to probably have language around it so I can talk to other people about it, but it is not of epic importance to me. It is the same with my spirituality, everyone is like, well what are you? Are you Wiccan, are you Pagan? You know, and I say I think I would be the closest to a pantheist because that's the only thing that I can relate to but again it's not of great importance to me.

Sam describes his sexual identity beyond simply "gay":

I like the term queer as well hey. Yeah but um, so gay or queer, but I don't really use queer but to me you know, queer has much more open, its more open its more expansive, its more alternative, artistic that kind of stuff.

Joanne speaks from a place of complete fluidity and freedom in her relationships, both intimate and interpersonal. While she does admit to identifying with conventional

labels such as bisexual or pansexual, she also describes their inability to describe her accurately:

Like even poly like I tend to say, you know, I'll use, I have an open marriage... like, right now, you know, sometimes I say we are poly-inactive or poly-active. But it ebbs and flows depending on like our busy-ness and kind of what's going on with our family type thing.

As articulated in the literature review, Joanne identifies *fluid* as a fitting term to help conceptualize her sexual and spiritual identity (Kinness et al., 2005; Golden 1997; Diamond 2000, 2005). Joanne elaborates:

Yeah, like literally fluid in terms of being dynamic... ask me again in six months and it will be different. Because it's always evolving, it's you know, kind of like anything, like a lot of the questions you asked, like, ask me again in six months some will be the same and some will be different... Right now I'm like, it's funny because I'm the most like, you know how my life is constructed right now is the most heteronormative it's ever been because I'm like mom to two young kids in a hetero marriage sort of thing and so my um, even like hanging out with other people or dating other people was like completely plummeted since especially kid number two.

Freedom from the confines of labels and terms commonly found in the LGBTQ community facilitate embodiment of the non-dual. The “need” to define oneself by a chosen identity dissolves, leaving the individual free to simply celebrate *being*. Joanne describes the fun and celebrates the freedom that exists within a “boundary-less” existence:

Sometimes me and my husband say we'll just figure it out as we go along. Like cause both of us say we have never been parents before, neither of us have been in relationships this long before. Neither of us have been this old before, so I don't know what we're doing! So we kind of have this funny way of looking at that, and just having that permission to be like, ok, well we do the best we can and sort it out as we go along.

Breaking free from the either/or dichotomies emerged though several of the co-researchers experiences with understanding self in terms of gender. Distinct from biological sex, gender exists on a spectrum and individuals may not identify exclusively with one gender, or shift along the gendered spectrum. Joanne explains her experience:

I almost grew up in a kind of a like anything goes in terms in terms of how I wanted to be. So I struggled for a little even with identifying with being female for a while. Probably when I was a teenager like I really, I freaked out about when I started to, um you know, like was in puberty and stuff like that that I just remember like having a huge aversion to the idea of like having a baby and growing a baby and it just grossed me out and I didn't want that cause I sort of like, really sort of struggled with the idea of that for a while and then like it took me a while to kind of like, even still I think I'm still sort of like embracing certain aspects of my femininity cause I, I don't know. I think I'm kind of like yeah like, I don't see myself as like gender queer at all or like, but in terms of like myself, I feel like myself is very non-binary like I'm just a self, you know?

Paula also describes feeling an integration of masculine and feminine energies in her being:

I was um, assistant stage manager at like one of the biggest gay pride events in the world in Sydney Australia, and somebody was like what's with you? Are you gay, are you straight or what? And I was like I am kinky. But, that was before I learned about two-spirit because I've always sort of felt like I have like a little gay boy inside of me, like I am, like part of who I am is like this gay male.

By obliterating any and all constraints in their lives, the co-researchers were free to settle into their authenticity. This facilitates the opening and harmony of the higher level chakras, connected to insight, expanded consciousness and the dissolution of all boundaries between self and the universe (Nelson, 1994).

Transforming the relationship with Spirit/God. All of the co-researchers reported a strong transformation in their relationships with God and/or the divine throughout their transformational journey. As referenced in the literature review, many LGBTQ individuals struggle with reconciling spirituality into their lives, for many religions view homosexuality as wrong or evil (Mahaffy, 1996; Lease et al., 2005; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Several of the co-researchers found that by confronting and honouring their sexuality, they were free to re-establish a positive relationship with spirituality or God. This was a major shift from their previous relationship with a God that was thought to be un-loving and cruel. Richo (1999) contends freedom from dualism occurs when the human, the natural and the divine are no longer polarized. "We are in time the timelessness that once seemed so inaccessible. We are in fact more than we seem precisely because our full extension and dimension in the universe *is* universe; our demons are the creative rascals of our creativity; our union with the divine is our ever richer divinity" (Richo, 1999, p. 276).

For Sam, a meaningful invitation for spiritual transformation came from working with a non-dual therapist who invited Sam to drop the spiritual “techniques” He explains the transformation:

The best thing I discovered through (therapist) was this idea of no technique and no escape... I have been working with (therapist) for about three years right, almost 3 years actually I think, and from that there’s just this kind of organic thing that arose from that was when I started to realize again, similar to what that Zen psychologist said to me all those years ago was that um, it’s just sitting with experience as it is. Like there is nothing to change or to get rid of, um and then the invitation is to fucking sit there and shut the fuck up. (Laughs) And even like you know, even mindfulness, and again, dropping all techniques so even mindfulness-based meditation practice is a technique that needs to be dropped at some point as well. Yeah, and so I kind of think you know that’s the next wave of psychology hey, like everyone’s abdicating more techniques and more mindfulness-based meditation, but ultimately at some point that needs to be transcended as well. Yeah, so in terms of my spirituality practice, yeah like um, absolutely sitting there in my own experience now.

Sam’s current spiritual practice also involves dream work and working with arc angels. Sam found that the awakening process gave him direct evidence of a spiritual realm and that whatever “God” was it was ultimately loving, benevolent and non-judgmental. This was a major shift in his experience and opened the door to transcendent spiritual experiences occurring in his life regularly:

Yeah, and I really um, the other spiritual it's not really a practice but I'm just really acutely aware of my dream world as well so really paying attention to any dreams I have. Um, but making decisions via dreams as well, really trying to honour and stay in alignment to my own truth and what feels right for me, yeah...I still pray heaps hey. And you know, I still, like I have a massive interest with working with Arc Angels. Um, like during one, one experience that I had during meditation was that um, my third eye opened just very briefly and um, yeah I saw like this angel popped up, fucking amazing, yeah incredible and that was just, so vivid like the color, it was just amazing! So again, just a little, this little glimpse into heaven, but like again that really fundamentally shifted my orientations right because it gave me direct evidence that there is this whole other realm out there.

In the context of this research, Sam, Neo, Paula and Frankie found religious messages were internalized early on in their experience, yet through the awakening process all of them were able to transcend red level three, leave all of the suffering they experienced from a particular religious doctrine and experience a loving encounter with the divine (Wilber, 2016). Ultimately the co-researchers were able to see that whatever "God" was, it was indeed non-judgmental, loving and universal force. Frankie describes her transformative experience through spiritual practice and the breakthrough she experienced:

So I started to do those things, I started to go to prayer and these meditations and you know, um, you know we've got readings that we do, and prayers that we do because I didn't know how to pray so I had a little script you know. And I still to

this day pray every morning like upon awakening, the moment my eyes are open, I get down on my knees and I pray. And so I started to do those things and lo and behold my life started to get better. And that self-loathing that I had felt for years was still there it was starting to lighten. You know I could look at myself in the mirror and not cringe. And I'm like oh what magic is this? What witchcraft is this?

Paula describes the powerful spiritual connection that occurred for her while free from religious stipulations. She describes her "church" as a sacred communal space shared with others where learning, creating and love are powerfully present:

If you have people in whatever church if you call it, whenever you have people coming together regardless of what they believe the details are, if they come together and raise energy together and practice together... and focus whether it be light or love or compassion, it builds more. You kind of have your own that you put into the pot, but everyone else's also comes into you, so you grow more you learn more, and you can practice more. Yeah, and I kind of think that's really needed.

She describes how important her spirituality has been throughout her journey:

I've always known that what has pulled me through is my spirituality. So, um, you know whether you call it God or Allah or whatever I mean whether you just call it the universe or an inner sense of light or connection with others, whatever it is though can pull you through fucking awful dark times.

Many co-researchers describe using the specific term God in their lives today to encompass their spiritual connection. None of the co-researchers identified themselves as

exclusively religiously affiliated, rather honour and integrate numerous aspects from various spiritual teachings.

Union with essence part one: Joyous, wild physical body. The theme *Union with Essence* is organized into two parts. By abiding in one's true essence, the co-researchers developed a natural appreciation of the physical body they inhabit. Many of them grew up feeling unlovable, bad, wrong or evil and internalised such messages. Transformation towards blissful unity with their bodies was a powerful revelation away from such negative beliefs about self. "If we aspire to lasting happiness, which coincides with our full awakening in enlightenment, we must pay attention to our bodily experience here and now (Feuerstien, 1998, p. 57). This theme is exemplified in the Upper Right Quadrant of Wilber's (2000) AQAL map with the co-researchers celebrating their physical bodies existence. The felt energy in this quadrant phenomenologically expands from gross to subtle to causal (Wilber, 2006, 2016). Many spiritual orientations call for maintaining a healthy physical body, for it is the field in which we grow and harvest our experiences (Feuerstien, 1998). All of the co-researchers recognize the importance of maintaining a healthy physical body in their lives, for the body is the ground for all higher realizations and transformations.

Part of Joanne's awareness has provided her with a deep appreciation and love for her physical body, for it is through this vessel that all is possible. Joanne describes how keeping her physical body healthy has become an essential part of her spiritual practice.

I think also trying to take care of myself physically too, although I haven't had as much time with having the two kids at home and stuff but even being active and um, making sure that I'm taking care of the physical vessel type of thing, and you

know, doing exercise and things like that cause I need that all to keep functioning in a holistic sort of way.

Neo discusses how his spiritual practice involves intensive introspection to help keep his physical body clear, at times utilizing hallucinogens for spiritual work:

And you know, it really opened me to this idea of like how often is physical sickness generated within people because of all of this psychic garbage that they are keeping built up within themselves that is creating a lack of flow within themselves, which will turn into other problems in their body, you know?

Sam describes the continual work that he engages in to keep honouring the physical domain of his experience.

I realize now the biggest challenge for me where I'm at now is just to keep letting go and keep surrendering and feeling more comfortable in terms of who I am particularly in public. So that's really scary for me hey, yeah that's definitely one theme right, yeah. And just knowing that it safe to be who I am I don't need to censor myself around other people. So continuing to kind of break out of my own self imposed prison. So that's really hard hey like it's really hard work for me.

Yeah.

By becoming more open and loving towards his physical self, Sam has experienced transcendent experiences where openings to other spiritual realms have been granted. He describes one such experience that manifested physically:

I had an injury where my shoulder was semi-dislocated and my pelvis was twisted, so I was in a lot of pain. And so um, I went to get some treatment um, and then I came home from the treatment session and I was in so much pain all I could

do was just lay on my bedroom floor right.... So yeah it was really bizarre for me and so I was just laying there on the floor and then all of a sudden this white light came over me, and then my body went into like all of these yoga type movements. And the thing was I hadn't done yoga before so I had no knowledge of yoga. So it was really profound movements that I can't even remember like, to this day. It was just incredible like twisting and turning and stretching and stuff and then this lasted for about like um, like an hour, like 50 minutes or something. And then the white light just dissipated and then the pain was gone, like my shoulder was back in place and my pelvis was back in place. This is just, fundamentally, like it was *bang* for me! It was like this was massive for me because like it was the first direct experience, it was my first spiritual experience and it verified for me directly that there is this whole other realm out there. And so that, just yeah, fundamentally shifted my life.

Paula also states how important diet, exercise and other physical interventions are to help keep a healthy energy body:

One of the things that I've learned that I think is really, really important is that food is medicine and our nutrition and our physical bodies are medicine or are illnesses... different vitamins and minerals, essential fatty acids all of that, like the whole thing it affects our bodies, and it affects our minds and our emotions and it's very clear one-to-one how, you can have depression and there are so many foods you can take rather than take pharmaceuticals....Like my spirituality might've saved my life but so did food and being healthy. Like, I felt like shit so when I get depressed I immediately start eating healthier, like I start with

blueberries and things with antioxidants to help clear out the very real toxins that it creates in my body. And I start doing things like working out because it creates serotonin it creates oxytocin it creates these things that we need to feel better. So I think it's really important that we approach them hand in hand as well. I would say that would be more of my complete story because nothing worked without it.

Frankie reached a turning point in her journey when she was able to avoid addictive and self-harming behaviours she had engaged in most of her life. Sobriety and a healthy, capable physical body allowed Frankie to celebrate her authentic being:

Because I hated myself forever and I didn't have a clue you know, I wasn't happy for so much of my life... when I started to do some self-exploration and all of that kind of stuff and it was brief intervals of less self-hatred. But I have been hurting and self-harming myself my entire life, so yeah... I am okay with who I am. And I, you know, I like myself right and I think that's huge because I don't know if a lot of people, I know that tons of people don't feel that way about themselves. So I think that's definitely a blessing, I think all of this has just brought me to a place where I am okay with who I am.

The co-researchers hold a deep appreciation for their physical bodies, yet also maintain they are not solely their bodies, nor their minds. A deep sense of gratitude emerges from each of the co-researchers for the physical vessel that houses a constant center of pure radiant energy (Gunther, 1983).

Union with essence part two: Transformative shadow. The second part of the theme *Union with Essence* occurs through the transformation of the co-researchers shadow. The Shadow aspects of the self commonly refer to qualities or characteristics a

person does not desire to be (Jung, 1969; Wilber, 1999; Singer 1994). Singer (1994) states the shadow is what we believe to be inferior in our personality, that part of our being that we do not allow others to see. Wilber (2006, 2016) states this “dark side” of the psyche are aspects of self that are split off, denied, rejected, disowned or projected onto others. All of the co-researchers describe the importance of shadow exploration and integration in their transformational journey. Shadow identification can be a challenging task, largely because the shadow remains unconscious. Wilber (1999) states resistance to shadow exploration can be interpreted as ego attempting to maintain its idealized position against the unconscious content that threaten the image one has of themselves. Through the coming out journey, the co-researchers were able to integrate shadow aspects of themselves into their essence. This is conceptualized in Wilber’s (2000) Upper-Left Quadrant, by increasing awareness of the thoughts, feelings and sensations of the “I” individual. This re-integration of disowned aspects of self was identified by all of the participants as an important part of their transformational journey, in their previous experiences and day-to-day lives.

For Sam, one area in his life that he feels requires content investigation is the shadow realm that manifests through sex. He states:

So even now hey, say after sex right, as much as I love sex obviously right, but like afterwards I still go through this realm where I just feel so bad hey and I don’t really know what it is either. Just feeling like really ashamed, guilty, like I’ve done something wrong or whatever. I still don’t really know where this comes from. Um, but I know part of it is if I think, really connected back to this thing,

this original thing with my Catholic upbringing that all sex is wrong. Yeah whether it is straight sex or gay sex, it's wrong, yep.

Joanne spoke about her sacred connection to nature and described a specific hot springs in British Columbia that she frequents to spiritually connect while in nature. Joanne recalled one significant inward transformational experience that occurred for her while on LSD.

I remember one time I was laying back in this pool and there was like no one else around and it was night time and I was, uh, I had my head sort of a bit under the water and all I could hear inside the water was just like the sound of my heart beating and it was very much this almost like this womb immersion experience. And just looking up at the trees and the stars and having this amazing sort of, kind of, other worldly connection but at the same time, connecting with myself on an inner sense too. Um, and it was probably right around that time too that I also started to, I guess connect with the idea of death and dying as something that wasn't as scary for me as I had previously perceived. Because I thought there was things around, sort of more dark or more negative um, thoughts or images or worries, or whatever and I would um, instead of just pushing them away when they initially came in I would actually allow them to come in and just have them come in sort of without judgment or without panic and just having this more neutral sort of relationship with them.

Joanne found that powerful awareness and integration came through the use of psychedelics. Describing it as a spiritual investigation into her psyche, she uses

psychedelics intentionally as a means of self-exploration. Particularly, she finds shadow work most transformative:

And to me that's actually what is the basis of any sort of, psychedelic psychotherapy work is having difficult information come in, and instead of getting freaked out about it, is just sitting with it and just letting it sort of be there and then just kind of looking at it and going, huh, yeah, there it is, how about that. And then bringing it in in a more gentle pace and uh, so, that was a big thing. Because I think around like, you know, just any of that existential worry, death and isolation and meaninglessness and life overall you know, that really sort of gave me perspectives on that kind of stuff that I wouldn't have got otherwise.

Through various insight and awarenesses gained through self-exploration, Joanne was able to see the value in seeing shadow aspects of herself more clearly:

I think when you decide or when you just sort of live in a way where you end up being conscious and sort of radically related to the world and yourself and others, I can't see how anybody wouldn't have um, profound changes in how they operate...Now having a different relationship with shame because I think that's a really big one. You know, being ok with things that you know, maybe we're not proud of, or you know, are part of our background or part of the way we are being. And you know, being ok with having that come up and not push it down I guess...Like sometimes the most difficult work, the times that are really trying and shitty and um, challenging and soul wrenching, its like, you wouldn't want to necessarily go back and repeat those experiences or be stuck in them for a long

period of time. But the gifts and the learning and the growth that happens in that is like, that makes us who we are, you know?

Neo's shadow realm has shifted in such a way that he finds joyous enjoyment in continuing exploration of this aspect of his essence. The shadow is no longer something to run from, hide or deny, rather enjoy:

I am doing it to dig into those nooks and crannies of my mind, doors that have been sealed in forever. You know, start opening those, dusting out the cobwebs, addressing all the dark areas within my psyche because I can see where they create resistances and dis-ease for myself in my real life...At the end of the day once you've cleaned out your shadows, right, you've addressed the shadows and any ones that are there you are now playing with. You're not necessarily scared of them, or they don't control you, but you've accepted them for what they are and you know dance with your own shadow, play with your own shadow. It's going to be part of who you are, don't let it keep you from being who you are.

Sam was able to embrace a powerful invitation to surrender to what is, and through the process, moving beyond the shadow and resting in pure, integrated essence. Sam reflects on this experience:

I was in bed one morning right, and like heaps of suffering was going on for me because um, like I had just come from seeing my family and my dad was there and all of this kind of stuff right. So really difficult stuff was coming up for me, really painful. And then it was just really weird just this thought came to my mind right, completely random like what would happen if you let go? And then so I just felt, I just relaxed my body and just let go. And then all of the suffering just lifted,

like it was just bang, it vanished. And then the thought came to me um, letting go of separate sense of self, right.

Wilber et al. (2008) states body, mind, spirit and shadow are the minimal areas to focus on in spiritual practice. The shadow realm is an area identified by each of the co-researchers where impactful spiritual “work” is done. Although situated in Wilber’s (2006, 2016) interior, psychological domain, shadow work impacts all other aspects of the individual’s life. Some of the effects of shadow work for the co-researchers include freeing up repressed energy, greater intimacy with others and improving relationships and increased clarity and authenticity. Paula summarizes: “I don’t think transformation and light really comes without shadow because light hitting an object creates a shadow. We are objects, you know, in the wonderful physical realm that our spirits have come into play in.” (laughs)

Nourishing and cultivating sacred creativity. When you realize what and who you are, suffering no longer exists; you are no longer struggling with a conceptual self who is opposed to what is (Adyashanti, 2002). All of the co-researchers had to release societal and external fixations in order to connect and honour a deeper authentic being. By doing so, each participant opened up or reconnected with a creative aspect of their being, originating from a place of vulnerability. Brown (2012) states our willingness to engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and clarity of being, whereas the level that we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measurement of our fear and disconnection. All of the co-researchers describe cultivating creativity as an expression of their authenticity and vulnerability.

Almaas (1996) states that anything by which a person identifies with whether it be a story, a constructed identity, or a self-image we present to the world is a false representation of who and what we truly are. “When the self is not engaged in the act of identifying, it is merely perceiving itself. It is the pure awareness of what is present in consciousness. This pure awareness is totally direct and unmediated” (Almaas, 1996, p. 130). The co-researchers found that by not “identifying” with such constructs, they are free to simply be, awareness is free to reside in total non-identification.

Sam recognizes dream analysis as a powerful way to tap into his creative energy. Sam had wrestled with ending a long-term relationship that he describes as a “really beautiful relationship but feeling complete terror sometimes.” He describes the subsequent break up with his partner and having meaningful dreams afterwards:

And so um, after two and a half years I actually I ended the relationship because um, I just couldn't do it anymore hey. Um, and so that was major for me like it was real, I remember just crying so much when I broke it off um, but also I remember that night after I broke it off I had this really an amazing dream um, where I was flying through the city and there was all these beautiful lights um, and in the dream I felt so free. Um, so that dream for me was really, um, and previous, I don't usually dream in color for some reason and that was one of the rare times I've dreamed in color. And so um, yeah that just changed my life in some ways because again it's like another kind of glimpse into the divine that was being guided and protected....But it was a really good affirmation for me that I had made the right decision and I think that dream kind of helped the grieving process that I was going through with this relationship. And so I think as a result I

never second-guessed that I made the right or wrong decision I just knew it was the right decision to make to end this relationship.

For Neo, his authentic expression of creativity is through dance arts and prop manipulation. Brown (2010) found that many people find no other form of self-expression is as vulnerable as dancing, “it’s literally full-body vulnerability” (p.119). Neo’s willingness to engage vulnerability through dance and creative arts provides allows him to experience the non-dual:

I found especially with the dance arts throughout my life, they connected me to what I just refer to as flow. It’s that natural ability to connect to a motion, movement, feeling, and ride it. Um, so you can take any kind of task in the world, just anything that you really enjoyed doing for the intrinsic value of doing it, you can lose yourself to that flow state. You can, you know, writing a book, reading a book you know you lose yourself, your imagination to this other thing, dancing, listening to music, it takes you outside of this physical world, while you were still physically here experiencing it, your mind goes on this journey within itself along this kind of like, this wavelength of experience that you’re having, I found that your ability to connect to that, to be able to let go of kind of like, your logical brain’s need to use our five senses around you to perceive the world, you can connect yourself to this other form of understanding, which naturally comes from you being in tune two bits of the world whatever that might be for you, whether that’s music for you, whether that’s jogging, building Lego castles, whatever draws you into it.

Joanne describes how maintaining a zestful curiosity about life has helped shift her experience. She describes feeling an immense sense of awe and gratitude for being in this moment in time experiencing the gifts of existence, particularly her two sons:

And then same thing with, um, you know, the birth of my sons too, because that's hugely shifting and shaping sort of journey around the creation of life and I see, you know, those polarities of birth and death as just something that I still can't explain. It's just like how does that happen? Like how does something get created and then it has this life, and then you know, it ends afterwards, it's just magical to me. Like I, you know, the idea of sort of explaining that, you know there's energy and there's matter and all these things that are happening in our lives, but it's just still, it's fucking amazing! It's just so cool. And then yeah, I think even parenting itself like there's certain things about, you know, sort of the soul manifesting aspects of parenting that happen often with my day to day experience that I sometimes don't even think of it in the moment because it's just like I must feed these creatures or somebody's yelling, or somebody needs this, but to be able to see how a human wires up is just pretty crazy, you know, just that sort of becoming of self kind of thing. It's fascinating.

Interconnectedness part one: Sacred and transformative sexuality. The first part of the theme *Interconnectedness* occurs through the realm of sex and sexuality. The co-researcher's described sex and sexuality as a pivotal realm where transformation occurred. The shift occurred when the individuals were able to abide in their vulnerability and through sexual experiences connected to others and self in pure interconnected energy. Greenspan (2003) describes vulnerability as:

about openness. Not only to pain, adversity, loss, and death, but also to the things we desire and cherish: to love, intimacy, creativity, sex, birth, wonder; to being truly touched by another human being, being truly seen for who we are...Vulnerability is what we share as human beings; our openness to be affected by one another, for better or worse, is at the core of our interconnectedness (p.39).

In non-dual realization, the self falls away, and sex and spirit are two dimensions in a singular reality (Wade, 2004). This requires an openness of all chakra centers, in particular chakra two so the energy can flow freely through the system (Gunther, 1983). Through accounts of mystical and transcendent sex, the co-researchers transcend connectedness with self, other, and the divine; for they are no longer in connection to, rather *become* pure interconnectedness (Feurstien 1998; Almaas, 2001).

Tantra historically denotes a particular genre or class of spiritual teachings that involve transforming sexual energies, to achieve realization comprising both immanence and transcendence (Feurstein, 1998). Within a tantric paradigm, the “goal” of human sexuality is to “transcend the experienced world, which is both external and internal” (Feurstein, 1998, p. 25). Tantra’s non-dual element is particularly important within this theme, whereby all of the co-researchers articulated transformation and integration occurring through sacred sex. Although the term Tantra was not utilized by the participants explicitly, many non-dual components of Tantra emerged throughout the interview process including shifting away from identity towards awareness, interconnectedness and essence. Moreover, Transcendent sex as defined by Wade (2004) is present within each co-researcher’s lived experience. Some components of transcendent sex include: an altered state of consciousness where the ordinary sense of

time, space and/or agency is transformed, and the felt experience of a cosmic universal force during sex (Wade, 2004).

For Frankie a profound spiritual union occurred whereby embracing vulnerability and authenticity through sex, she was able to experience a manifestation of the divine.

She states:

That is one of my profound spiritual experiences, you know, the first time that I ever was intimate with someone sober that I loved. Like I thought I was in love and never was actually in love, I know that until this, the first time that I had sober sex with a human that I love, that was like one of the craziest experiences I've ever had in my life. I cried. I couldn't even, I've never in my life felt anything like that.

Sam reflects on a similar transcendent sexual encounter he experienced on his journey. He was able to experience Tantra's non-dual and unitive force of no-separation through this sexual union. He states:

Yeah, so 18 was my first sexual experience, and so that definitely was my first spiritual experience as well, sexually, but what it was, was it felt really heavenly for me because there was this closeness this discovery that I had a sexuality feeling safe. Um, so that was a really beautiful thing for me. And then I think what really started to change there was yeah, discovering my sexuality and then also for the first time I just started to tap into that it was ok. Like this wasn't a mistake.

He describes the subsequent shift in consciousness that occurred:

But then, so that kind of I guess the impact that had on me personally was that I grew to accept myself more...like some big shifts, like, I no longer prayed to take it away from me. And I started to just become more expressive and really start to enjoy it and find freedom in it.

Tantric non-dual openings and transformative sex were also experienced by Paula on her journey. She described the spiritual transformation and cosmic force she was able to experience through a sexual encounter:

Putting it in place with like this spirituality and the sexuality and how this was so comfortable in my community. I was in a hotel room with people, making out periodically...with a guy and his girlfriend all in the same bed who is a very good friend of mine, you know. With other friends in the room who were also like, kind of lovers who maybe we had other people had slept with as well. And I had, like, it was like this amalgamation of spirit and body and just family that allowed me to explore in a way that I feel really allowed me to work on it a lot further than I think some people choose to.

Neo articulates how transformative sex, although a brief and temporary experience has been integrated into his life through spiritual and creative practices. In this passage Neo describes the freedom that comes with a no-expectations, no-destination and “boundary-less” sexuality he embodies in his life:

I prefer that language of approaching (sex and) relationships to just state that like I’m not going to jump into a box with you okay? We’re going to, I’ll happily stand on this piece of cardboard and will create a box around us if we want, but I’m not going to just jump into a predefined box that we’re going to consider a

relationship. And I want to allow it to grow to be as natural as it can possibly be, and un-hindered by societal expectations as possible, to ensure that, that's the best way were going to ensure this is going to work, otherwise it's going to be kind of unhealthy destructive relationship for both of us so why don't we just do it right?

Interconnectedness part two: Finding one's pack. The second part of the theme of *Interconnectedness* is marked by the co-researchers experience finding meaningful connections with others and experiencing love and support from community. In Wilber's (2000) Integral map, the co-researcher's embodiment of "we" in the Lower-Left Quadrant expands from an egocentric state to a worldcentric one and transcends into an integral kosmocentric state, connecting with others on an inclusive and authentic level. Each participant highlighted the importance of a community or "family" as a part of their transformation journey, and the spiritual experience of feeling a sense of interconnectedness. Some communities the co-researchers identified "belonging" to include: LGBTQ clubs, pride parades, family of origin, music festivals and the rave scene, polyamorous communities, peer groups and various spiritual communities.

Paula felt her family of origin was unsupportive and could not provide her with love and acceptance. She found another "family" of close peers, partners, and spiritual members. This powerful connection to others facilitated a re-connection with her family later in Paula's life. She states:

We kind of forget that the parents are not actually old wise creatures who should know it all. It's when we get older that's we are like yeah, you don't. We hoped they would do better, but they are just people and maybe they need time. Maybe they just need time sometimes. And sometimes it's the family that we choose that

can help us have that time and figure out ourselves, and you know, heal first before we can kind of give our parents another chance.

Paula's experience of connecting to a chosen family is common among LGBTQ individuals whose family of origin is unsupportive or doesn't effectively meet their needs (Barbera, Chaim & Doctor, 2004). Paula spoke about the powerful connection with others was established and "protected her" amidst the very real situation of hate and violence towards the LGBTQ community in her hometown.

I mean it's a very bigoted city but we were like a little community, this little family that you know sort of protected each other. We were able to be who we were you know? Yeah, which is part of why I love you're doing research on this because if more people had this openness and this acceptance than we would just be a lot better off. If we don't have to fight ourselves just be who we are.

Paula attributes her energy work, psychic skills and healing abilities were honed through working with other like-minded spiritual individuals.

Joanne currently is connected to many different communities, and she derives a great deal of support from surrounding herself with non-judgmental supportive people. Continuing to step into her own freedom by being transparent with others have been important aspects to Joanne's experience:

Previously I would sort of keep things a bit more quiet and hidden like, so about some things around my, my lifestyle which you know, whichever lifestyle that would be, even around like psychedelic use, going to festivals, being poly or open and definitely being bi or pansexual, fluid, whatever type of thing. And now I'm just like, I don't fucking care who knows. My boss asked or like if people have

asked at work and ill just be like, you know I won't wave the flag necessarily at work type thing but if people ask, I'll just, I am not as concerned anymore about keeping it hidden, cause I'm just like take it or leave it. This is me and I need to have transparency.

All of the co-researchers describe feeling an intense feeling of oneness and connection which expands outward to the LGBTQ community, the cosmos and extending to the universe. Neo calls this unitive force an *Etheric Internet*, he describes: "That level of flow, that is where I start seeing my level of spirituality connected to it then right... You can plug yourself into and connect to that, it's all around you then." Sam's experiences this indivisible etheric internet in his experience with the LGBTQ community more universally. Sam articulates this phenomenon by tapping into the universal consciousness that connects us all:

Probably just the last point that's coming up for me is um, just to really emphasize for me the importance of community. Like I feel that being part of a gay community is what I would call, like by that I mean a broader collective... I honestly I feel so lucky to have this community right? And I think as well like it's so easy to make friends too in the gay community. And like even like say travelling too, like again just that open up Grindr [a geosocial networking application geared towards gay, bisexual, and bi-curious men] and instantly make friends like it's, I feel so lucky to have that. So for me like it's such an incredible resource to have and I feel so lucky for that... I just think it's you know as you know gay, lesbian, transgender, intersex whatever, like it's, I really feel like we share this collective concept like with Jung. We share this collective unconscious

hey like we're all interconnected and that when one person suffers in another country because they're gay or lesbian or whatever, like we all feel that as a community and it just ricochets through the whole community.

Recognizing the powerful experiencing that occurs while abiding in non-dual consciousness, Sam experiences interconnectedness with all that is and without boundary:

Yeah, so that's probably just the last thing to get across and for me that's very much about, I don't know, it's definitely like an interconnectedness and being supported by the universe, a benevolent life force that's guiding us all. So for me that's probably the most transcendental thing to tap into this, yeah sense of community, it's fucking amazing!

Neo's journey of finding a community began when he made the decision to move to a bigger city. Not only did he find connection through the LGBTQ community, but he made several key connections with people who would later become his business partners:

In doing so I ended up connecting with my current group which I now identify as my Wolfpack because these three individuals I just connected with so well. Every single one of them has different interests that align with my own, so I have ways of connecting with every single one of them and for the first time ever in my life I found myself belonging to a group of people. And I'm intrinsically bonded to that group now in a way that I had never felt before you know...I have found my Wolfpack, I found that group that I can go and focus on the things that matter to me and allow the rest to come as it comes, I'm not floundering around in this sea of society alone anymore, right?

With the integration of beyond-ego states of consciousness through the transformational journey, the participants are experiencing a place that has no boundaries. The participants have shifted from old stories of self, transformed and subsequently obliterated constructs of identity to abide in the fullness of their essential truth. With no thought defining identity, no labels to adhere to or perform for others, the co-researchers are free to celebrate in their authenticity and bask in the interconnected gifts of existence.

During this research project the largest mass shooting in United States history occurred on June 12, 2016 at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. A total of 49 LGBTQ people were killed and 53 were wounded during Pulse (a LGBTQ club/bar/music venue) nightclub's Latin night (Stern, 2016). This is the deadliest incident of violence against the LGBTQ community in U.S. history (Stern, 2016). As Interconnectedness emerged as a theme in this thesis, particularly within the LGBT community as a collective, this researcher contacted each of the co-researchers and invited them to speak of their experience about the shooting. Several co-researchers wished to include their experience. Sam stated:

Hearing about the shooting cut deeply. It shattered whatever innocence I had left. Gay clubs are sacred for me. It's the only place for me to feel safe and isolated from the real world. The idea that someone could do this removed whatever safety I could feel in a gay club, even though I know this is an isolated incident. But it does worry me about copy-cat attacks....It's a monumental shift in the level of hate directed towards the community. I think it also forced me to grow up some more, as I released that I can no longer be passive and shut down about my sexuality, that I don't need to make apologies for being gay...The attack made me

see the need for me to fight harder (in a positive way) and get involved in advocacy work. It also renewed my appreciation for gay clubs, as it reminded me how important this space is.

Frankie states:

To be honest it was unsettling, I live in a country where I feel safe to love whom I choose... What happened in Orlando was horrific. I can't even begin to understand the loss many Americans are dealing with. This country, it's people and most importantly it's queer community are suffering. With the election around the corner this country is a flurry of political energy. I have had deep conversations with openly gay humans, they fear what will happen if Trump actually makes it into the white house. ... This trip has been a solid reminder of why I am grateful to be a Canadian citizen. I can love who I want, pray to who I want, love with who I want and just be the human God intended me to be.

Summary

Chapter Four provided an overview of the five individuals and their experiences with sexual identity, transformational experiences and non-dual consciousness. An in-depth thematic analysis was conducted and a total of fifteen themes emerged. The themes that emerged from the participants' journeys were organized into three distinct phases: *Phase One: Descending into the Heart of Desire*, *Phase Two: Pull Towards the Edge* and *Phase Three: Moment to Moment Integration*. Each theme was thoroughly explored in this chapter to provide a rich description of the co-researchers journey to wholeness. The following chapter will present a summary of the research findings. Additionally, strengths and limitations of this study will be identified along with directions for future

research. Finally, the implicated researcher will be revisited along with implications for counsellors and helping professionals.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you

(Whitman, 1900, p.26)

Introduction

This research project attempted to gain an understanding of the lived experience of LGBQ individuals on their transformational journey to wholeness. Specifically, this study focused on specific and significant life events, experiences and transformations on the participant's journey to wholeness. A phenomenological hermeneutics approach was utilized to analyze the data from the transcripts and summarize the themes that emerged from the co-researchers lived experience. The following sections in this chapter will discuss the research findings and provide final reflections of the research process. Additionally, limitations of the study will be explored as well as implications for counsellors and helping professionals. Suggestions for future research will also be made.

Summary of Research

The primary research question guiding this research is: *What has been the lived experience of LGBQ individuals on their non-dual journey to wholeness?* A secondary research question is: *What transformational experiences have LGBQ individuals experienced in their journey?* This study set out to gain a deeper understanding of the unique transformational journey LGBQ individual's experience that could not be found in academic literature or traditional psychological theory. Participants were encouraged to define their personal experience of non-dual as they understood it. Data analysis and

interpretation of transcripts resulted in the emergence of fifteen themes that were organized into three main phases of the co-researchers transformational journey. Many of the identified themes align closely with literature in the field, while others identify a new frame of reference.

Phase One: Descending Into the Heart of Desire, is comprised of four themes. Here, we see how early childhood experiences shaped each co-researcher's sense of "I" or identity. The initial theme *Early on Disconnection*, the co-researchers identified feeling disconnected from others or self in some way. This feeling and early experiences of feeling "different" or "evil" served as the beginning stage of their transformational journey. Feeling "bad" or "different than others was internalized as a *core defect* narrative by many of the co-researchers that propels the process of disconnection from one's authentic self (Greenspan, 2003). Once a "story" is believed to be true, self-sabotaging behaviour patterns begin to emerge, a sense of uneasiness, and feelings that may range from fear to panic (Katie, 2002).

The second theme highlights the intensity and significance of *Discovering Sexuality and Same Sex Attraction*. A meaningful and powerful time in each co-researcher's life was discovering sex and sexuality. Although this theme is universal among the co-researchers, the ways in which the experience unfolded was unique to each co-researcher. Several co-researchers described their early sexual experiences as positive and profound while the others were described as overwhelmingly painful. Two of the participants recalled early sexual experiences that were positive, powerful and freeing from the first moment of sexual awareness. Within this theme the second sacral chakra opens with creative energies and sexual desires coming into one's experience (Nelson,

1994). Contrasting the open, safe and positive space to connect to one's sexuality, three co-researchers identified feeling absolute fear and terror about their newly discovered sexuality. It is apparent that many heteronormative messages from religion, family and society more generally permeated each co-researcher's lived experience at this stage that triggered level three red oriented self-preservation mechanisms (Wilber, 2007, 2016). Through this theme we can see how their negative beliefs and deficit stories shifted to include the realm of identity, sex and sexuality (Katie, 2002).

The third theme *Hiding Out and Selling Out* emerges when each co-researcher made a decision to "hide" or move away from their same sex attraction and identity. The experience of hiding from being found out served to only disconnect the co-researchers from their vulnerability and ultimately their true essence. This was a challenging time for the co-researchers where their chakra systems become unsynchronized at level one and two and many of the co-researchers bump up against systems and structures such as religious institutions, education and family found in Wilber's (2006, 2016) Lower-Right Quadrant. At this time in the co-researchers journey we begin to uncover ways in which they "sell out" an aspect of their authenticity to remain hidden or safe in the presence of others. Many co-researchers chose to remain in the closet throughout their teen years, and many spoke about the specific challenges school presented. All of the co-researchers expressed fear of their classmates and described them as mean bullies who would threaten their physical safety if their true sexual identity was discovered. Many co-researchers engaged in "gigs" to keep up appearances to others, including remaining in a heterosexual relationship, hiding or not acting on their sexual desires or disconnecting emotionally from others. These fake "identities" proved safer for many than honouring

their true essence and sharing it with others. By hiding out and betraying their own self, this fear drives some co-researchers to where they feel as though they must fight for their very survival. Here we begin to see the next theme emerge in the transformational journey.

The co-researchers spoke about how fearful their experience had become with the added weight of “hiding” a part of their being. The first root chakra center is embodied in the fourth theme, *Fear of Annihilation and Fighting to Survive*. This base chakra contains the primitive drives and instincts for safety and security and acts as the foundation for all consciousness transformation (Gunther, 1983, Nelson, 1994). As described in the literature review, there are many reasons an individual may choose not to disclose their sexual identity. One significant reason a sexual minority individual chooses to stay in the closet is fearing for their physical safety (Barbara, Chaim & Doctor, 2004). With many sources in the co-researchers lives seen as a threat to their safety such as religious doctrines, classmates or peers and society more generally, simply enduring amidst the pain and struggle was in of itself transformative. In the midst of their fighting for survival, we can see the emerging pull for transformation in the following phase of their transformational journey.

Phase Two: The Pull Towards the Edge illuminates the co-researchers’ second descent into identity deconstruction and is comprised of four themes. During this phase, the co-researchers were beginning to see the ways in which they were trapped in a false self. The fifth theme emerged at this point on the co-researchers journey, *The Straight Gig Is Up, An Invitation For Transformation*. Wilber (2016) describes this as a pivotal time when the co-researchers confront the boundaries of their identity in relation to others

and embrace individuality and authenticity. This process required each of the co-researchers to look at themselves honestly and challenge ways in which they still were faking or selling out aspects of themselves. Through various life circumstances and at different times in their journeys, the co-researchers all discovered a dynamic invitation to give up the act, and embrace who they ultimately are. The shift towards healing for each co-researcher unfolds when they abandon their old, worn out behaviour patterns and honour the pull to live openly, in full alignment with their sexuality.

In current academic literature, the coming out process is commonly seen in as the final stage in connecting with ones true identity or true self. The sixth theme, *Coming Out of A False Self and Finding Freedom* describes this important time for each co-researcher and is not the end of their transformational journey. In this theme the co-researchers begin to transcend the confines of a false identity entirely and embrace authenticity in all aspects of their lives (Wilber, 2006, 2016). Each coming out journey was a conscious decision and a spiritual breakthrough for the co-researchers. Importantly, this spiritual process was described as “ever-unfolding” and without a destination. For some coming out proved to be a powerful experience of surrendering to what is and who they ultimately are, while for others it was a painful and difficult experience that resulted in bullying, shaming and further disconnection. This process was a pivotal experience in each transformational journey that provided the powerful movement for a continual deconstruction of identity, exploration of self and connecting to the divine.

Basking In The Rainbow Cloud emerges as the seventh theme in the research. The co-researchers all described a period of ecstatic bliss that lingered for a time after they were able to fully embrace their sexuality. Once in alignment and honouring all aspects

of their sexuality, the *rainbow cloud* marks a period of time where the co-researchers were able to embrace love for oneself while vulnerably integrating their sexuality into their experience for the first time. Here the co-researchers break through into orange level five and into green level six (Wilber, 2016). This transformative time was filled with feelings of freedom, connection with others and self-acceptance. With a worldcentric, multicultural lens, many co-researchers highlighted the importance of this time of being able to connect with others within an accepting and non-judgemental community (LGBTQ community, raves or music festivals, gay clubs, peers) for the first time in their experience. Within these collective communities and newly found families, the co-researchers are able to transcend the ego and describe post-egoic, transcendent experiences during this time.

The rainbow cloud of bliss eventually fades and thus begins propels each to the next theme, whereby they re-examine their “freedom” found within a defined sexual identity. The eighth and final theme of Phase Two is a *Descent Into the Deconstruction of the Ego and Identity*. Here we see the descent into the dark realm of transformation gaining momentum, for all of the co-researchers realize the “labels” and constraints of existing within a particular sexual identity are in some way still inauthentic. This important theme in this research supports Washburn’s (1990, 1995) “U-turn towards origins” rather than the consistent ascension through the states of consciousness as Wilber’s (2016) Integral model describes. Specifically, the participants each identify a period in their journey where they needed to disengage from remaining constructed self-representations and self-structures and revisit “old egoic stomping ground” or ego “strongholds” before continuing on their transformational journeys (Almaas, 2004).

Although not a smooth process, within this theme the co-researchers take steps to shed inauthentic or egoic aspects of self that have emerged in their experience. Four of the five co-researchers shifted to embracing a polyamorous aspect of their identity during this time. The following and final phase of the transformational journey sees the co-researchers move away from what could be and embrace what is in each unfolding moment (Katie, 2002).

The final seven themes are grouped within *Phase Three: Moment to Moment Integration* that marks the final phase in the co-researchers journey to wholeness. The participants did not articulate the journey of transformation as a linear progression; rather their experiences, insights and awareness have all been incorporated into moment-to-moment experiencing. This was evident in the narratives that described their drive to shift away from grasping onto the “I”, “identity” or “self”. The ninth theme emerges for the co-researchers by *Obliterating Boundaries of Identity*. Each of the co-researchers communicated the importance of respecting and utilizing established LGBTQ identities in their lives, yet found freedom from the “boundaries” of these terms acts as an intense opening to the non-dual in their lives. The “need” to define oneself by a chosen identity dissolves, leaving the individual free to simply celebrate *being*. All of the co-researchers articulate their sexual identity as an ever unfolding, fluid, moment-to-moment experience and they describe the various established LGBTQ categories of identities unable to accurately represent the entirety of their sexual identity. In this phase, the researcher participants have highlighted the dissolution of a separate “self” and have transcended the limiting definitions of a particular sexual “identity” altogether. All of the co-researchers do not strictly adhere to one particular identity; rather embrace many concepts terms and

labels to articulate their experiences with others. An innovative, effortless sense of *fluidity* emerges in each of co-researchers description of their identities, both sexual and spiritual (Kinnesh et al., 2005, Golden 1997, Diamond 2000; 2005). Two participants even expressly identified fluidity to describe their gender. With a falling away of the false self and labels comes freedom to celebrate in the energy of their essence.

The tenth theme, *Transforming the Relationship With Spirit/God* was a massive shift for many of the co-researchers. Often LGBTQ individuals struggle with reconciling spirituality into their lives, for most organized religions view homosexuality as wrong or evil and God as unloving and judgemental (Mahaffy, 1996; Lease et al., 2005; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Several of the co-researchers found that by honouring their sexuality and transcending into states of subtle, causal and non-dual consciousness, they were free to abide in, and at times become the all-loving essence of the divine or God (Wilber, 2016). Through the transformational journey, many homophobic and hateful religious messages were internalized early on in the co-researchers experience, yet through the awakening process all of them were able to transcend the attachments to the suffering they received from a particular religious doctrine. Ultimately the co-researchers were able to see that whatever “God” was, it was indeed non-judgmental, a truly loving and universal force.

The next two themes are divided into two distinct parts, for each theme of Union with Essence unfolded in two parts. Theme eleven emerged as, *Union With Essence Part One: Joyous, Wild Physical Body*. This theme is exemplified in the Upper Right Quadrant of Wilber’s (2000) AQAL map with the co-researchers celebrating their physical bodies existence. Many spiritual orientations call for maintaining a healthy physical vessel, for it is the field in which we grow and harvest all of our experiences

(Feuerstien, 1998). All of the co-researchers highlight the importance of maintaining a healthy physical body in their lives. The importance of diet, nutrition, sleep and exercise cannot be discounted in each of the co-researchers journey to wholeness, as Paula states: “food is medicine and our nutrition and our physical bodies are medicine or are illnesses.”

Union With Essence Part Two: Transformative Shadow emerged as the twelfth theme. This re-integration of disowned aspects of self was identified by all of the participants as an important part of their transformational journey, in their past and present lives. All of the co-researchers had to release societal and external fixations in order to connect and honour a deeper authentic being. Two of the co-researchers identify using psychedelics regularly to help assist in shadow work. Although a difficult process at times, re-integrating these essential aspects of their being facilitates a welcome embodiment of all aspects of their identity. Through this process in their journeys, the co-researchers were able to integrate shadow aspects of themselves into their essence. This is conceptualized in Wilber’s (2000) Upper-Left Quadrant, by increasing awareness of the thoughts, feelings and sensations of the “I” individual. No longer aspects to be ashamed of shadow work for each co-researcher serves as an invitation to continue to reside with *what is*, however it manifests in each moment (Katie, 2002).

The co-researchers described *Nourishing and Cultivating Sacred Creativity* as the thirteenth theme in their journey. From dancing, creating, dreaming, seeking adventure, travel to embracing the magic within the more mundane moments in life, each co-researcher identified honouring their creative energies as a transformative powerhouse in

their journeys. Embracing their creativity continues to connect the co-researchers to the non-dual states of consciousness many described as states of *flow*.

The final two themes are also divided into two parts. The first part of the theme emerges through the realm of sex and sexuality. The fourteenth theme, *Interconnectedness: Part One: Sacred and Transformative Sexuality* is illustrated by the co-researchers accounts of mystical and transcendent sex. Tantra's non-dual element is particularly present within this theme, whereby all of the co-researchers articulated transformation and integration occurring through sacred sex. Through accounts of mystical and transcendent sex, the co-researchers transcend connectedness with self, other and the divine; for they are no longer in connection to, rather *become* pure interconnectedness (Feurstien 1998; Almaas, 2001).

The final theme, *Interconnectedness Part Two: Finding Ones Pack* highlights the significance of finding a community. In Wilber's (2000) Integral map, the co-researcher's embodiment of "we" in the Lower-Left Quadrant expands from an egocentric state to a worldcentric one and transcends into an integral kosmocentric state, connecting with others on an all-inclusive and truly integral level. All of the co-researchers highlighted the importance of finding a community, collective or "family" along their transformational journey, and the subsequent spiritual experience of moment-to moment interconnectedness. This is an important aspect for all individuals, but essential for those individuals whose family of origin is unsupportive or doesn't effectively meet their needs as commonly seen within the LGBTQ community (Barbera, Chaim & Doctor, 2004). Some collective communities the co-researchers identified include: LGBTQ clubs, pride parades, family of origin, music festivals and the rave scene, polyamorous communities,

peer groups and various spiritual communities. Each co-researcher described feeling an intense feeling of oneness and intense interconnectedness through *etheric internet* consciousness that expands outwards to the universe. When the individual self falls away, each co-researcher articulated their indivisibility from the LGBTQ community, humanity and cosmic community. This was further demonstrated by the collective pain and suffering experienced by the co-researchers in the wake of the Orlando shooting.

The themes identified throughout this research have shed light on an understudied phenomenon and have identified several key transformational experiences of LGBTQ individuals experiences of non-dual states of consciousness. We will now explore both the strengths and limitations of this study.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This study has highlighted the unique and innovative transformational experiences LGBTQ individuals experienced in their transformational journeys. Through this research several strengths and limitations have emerged in the study. While there have been extensive theoretical descriptions and anecdotal accounts of ego-transcendence, qualitative accounts of non-dual states of consciousness are not prevalent in academic literature. As indicated in the literature review contemporary transpersonal literature does not explore the topic of non-dual states of consciousness within the context of spirituality, sexuality, and identity in depth. A strength of this research is that it highlights a specific phenomenon as experienced by a minority population that the research has largely overlooked. This research focused on identifying themes of the participant's lived experience, transformational events, and sexuality. By doing so, this research has illuminated new constructs or concepts of an individual's sexual "identity"

and post-egoic “identity.” Through this account of such experiences, this study will foster a deeper understanding and acknowledgement of various transcendent experiences of the LGBQ individual’s journey to wholeness.

An additional strength of the research is the co-researchers in this study make up a diverse group of individuals on the LGBTQ spectrum. With three females and two males, there were many LGBTQ “identities” represented within the study. This research illuminated the “fluidity” of all constructs of sexuality, orientation and gender. All of the co-researchers have at minimum a high school education and several have a graduate degree in Psychology. One participant currently resides in Australia, while the others live throughout Canada. The varying educational backgrounds, geographic locations and LGBQ identities included in the population sampled for this study provide a rich account of the lived experiences of various LGBQ community members.

This study was limiting by focusing on such a small population. This study was not intended to prove anything, rather gain a depth of understanding of the co-researchers journey to wholeness. Although there were many LGBQ identities included within this study, a limitation of the study was the inability to capture the lived experience of all the “identities” within the LGBTQ spectrum. Moreover, all of the co-researchers were Caucasian, grew up with Western societal values and mainly Catholic religious teachings. The themes that emerged for the co-researchers within this study cannot be generalized to a larger population. This study also does not account for different ethno-cultural experiences of this phenomenon.

A second limitation of the study is that the data was collected over the course of several two to three hour interviews at a single point in time in the co-researchers lived

experience and were limited to exploring a particular phenomenon. The experienced states of consciousness are inaccessible to outside individuals and are communicated through the confines of language. This data represents a small glimpse into the totality of the co-researchers experience of the phenomenon at a particular time in their lives. It is by no means a complete account of each co-researcher's experience of transcendent states of consciousness and this data accounts for what the transformational journey looks like for *some* individuals. Moreover, this researcher performed the interviews, transcribed them and analyzed and interpreted all data over the course of several months. As the researcher continuing on my own journey of transformation, it is likely that my personal experiences influenced the research design and subsequent data analysis. It is important to note that as an implicated researcher, my biases, judgments and personal experiences could not be suspended or eliminated entirely. My role as an implicated researcher will be revisited and further explored later in this chapter.

Further limiting to the research can be the potential expectation that transformation towards wholeness occurs for all LGBTQ individuals. This may not be the case for all individuals, and may not accurately represent all queer individual's "coming out" journey or journey towards identity integration. Many researchers agree that LGBTQ individuals face a more difficult time integrating their spirituality into their identity, and many struggle with spirituality throughout their lives (Wood & Conley, 2014; Davidson, 2000; Lease, Horne & Noffsinger- Frazier, 2005; Robinson, 1999). In addition to this, Nelson (1994) states, many individuals do not transcend level three the chakra system, and Wilber (2016) contends most individuals do not transcend into the Integral levels of consciousness.

This study has numerous strengths but has several limitations that were acknowledged and discussed. The themes that have emerged through this research have many implications for both counsellors and the counselling process. This will be explored in the following section.

Reconnecting To Spirit: Integrating the Transpersonal in the Counselling Room

The implications to the field of counselling are of great importance to the LGBTQ population. As referenced in chapter two of the literature review, the queer community experiences a range of health issues that are all out of proportion with the general population. Compared to heterosexuals, queer individuals have poorer mental health, more substance use, and were more likely to report unmet mental healthcare needs (Burgess et al., 2008). Queer individuals have specific and unique life factors that directly relate to substance use and/or mental health problems which they often seek counselling to help resolve including; “coming out,” gender transition, religious or spiritual alienation, societal oppression, loss of family support and isolation (Barbera et al., 2004; Bereska, 2011; Cass, 1979; Meyer, 2003; Devor, 1997).

Of particular importance to the field of counselling is that these endemic health issues have arisen in part because of the prevalence of homophobia and heterosexism in our society and in particular, the heteronormative delivery of services and resources (Barbara et al., 2004; MacEwan & Kinder, 1991; Doctor, 2004). It is important for the counsellor to become aware of the ways in which counselling frameworks and interventions can be (perhaps unintentionally) oppressive or heteronormative. Many counselling paradigms considered today to be best practice include; Solution Focused Therapies, Cognitive Behavioural Therapies, and Motivational Interviewing (Corey,

2013). In the context of mental health and addictions counselling, these bio-psycho-social interventions are often complimented with medication(s). Although effective for many individuals, these prevalent counselling orientations do not facilitate deep exploration of sexual identity and concurrent spiritual transformations. They may avoid or minimize significant areas of struggle for queer individuals including sexuality, identity or spiritual disconnection. This research has illuminated the significance and impact of the spiritual journey for LGBTQ individuals. Adopting a transpersonal orientation in the counselling room can go further than conventional psychotherapeutic approaches as listed above, because it views optimal mental health as inseparable from spiritual health (Cortright, 1997).

An intersectionality perspective conceptualizes social categories and identities as co-constituting and interacting with one another (Crenshaw, 1989). The richness of human experience cannot be explained by single categories or identities such as race, gender, ability or socio-economic status, rather an individual's lived experience is shaped by the interaction of these complex factors occurring within a context of connected systems and power structures (Crenshaw, 1989; Narvaez, Meyer, Kertzner, Ouellette, & Gordon, 2009). Moreover, this theory realizes identity categories are fluid and individuals understand their intersecting identities differently over time (Narvaez et al., 2009). According to this perspective, intersecting categories result in independent forms of privilege and oppression such as racism, heterosexism, ageism, and sexism (Crenshaw, 1989). By adopting an intersectional approach to counselling, the therapist must move beyond framing sexual orientation and identity as a category of individual difference to

an approach that reflects the complex intersections of identities (Ecklund, 2012, Watts-Jones, 2010).

Let Go and Dive In: An Invitation for Counsellors. Dysart-Gale (2010) argues many practitioners may be inadvertently isolating the sexual minority community through use of non-inclusive terminology or questions. Moreover, many helping professionals express unease or discomfort when working with the LGBT population and some will refuse to work with this population for fear of not being relatable (Barbara, Chaim, & Doctor, 2004; Valentine, Ross, Doctor, Dimitcho, Kuehl, & Armstrong, 2014; Young, 2013). Counsellors can refer to counselling competencies from the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counselling (ALGBTIC, 2013) in addition to Asking the Right Questions 2 (Barbara, Chaim, & Doctor, 2004). Asking the Right Questions 2 is specifically designed for counsellors and therapists working in addictions and mental health, and incorporates inclusive addictions and mental health screening and assessment forms. Both of these resources prove invaluable to helping the professional navigate the counselling process with the LGBTQ population and their allies.

During the interview process, all of the co-researchers highlighted the importance of having a safe, non-judgmental, sacred space to help support their unfolding spiritual journeys. Many of the co-researchers spoke about having a space to talk about their authentic sexuality and spiritual experiences and feel “normal.” Others expressed having a counsellor simply *be* with them and drop the “fancy techniques” aimed to “fix” the situation. This study has illuminated the various ways in which labels, terms and sexual “identities” can, to a certain extent, dictate expectations and initiate stressors within an

individual's concept of sexual "identity." These constructs and concepts of self may, at times be in contradiction with *what is*, or may stifle spiritual awarenesses and transformations.

Apart from inclusive language and inclusive delivery of services while working with sexual minority individuals, it is essential that counsellors are willing to embrace a non-judgmental presence and support the client's journey wherever they may reside in the moment. The invitation for non-dual awareness is always available to counsellors also. Nixon (1992) suggests it is essential for counsellors to embrace their own transformational journeys so they are better able to be vulnerable and present with clients. This process involves intensive work and gaining a clear understanding of one's stories of self and patterns. Yet, this process ultimately helps free the counsellor of ego in the counselling room and able to embrace the authentic richness of self and others in each moment (Nixon, 1992). This is especially helpful for working with clients during a descent into spiritual transformation. For the co-researchers in this study a massive shift in consciousness occurred during the initial descent, yet continued throughout their journey. Moreover, coming out was not the final stage in their transformational journeys. This research has shown multiple arcs in the transformational journey for LGBQ individuals and how their journey continues to unfold in each moment. Counsellors must be able to stretch their understandings of the LGBQ experience and not get stuck on any one perceived "final" aspect of the journey.

Counsellors may need to *dive in* and "abide in the unknown" with their clients, surrendering to each moment as it unfolds. Ambiguity offers a powerful invitation. Perhaps there might be nothing to do in the moment, no place to go, and it is in this

powerful space where transformation can flourish. An invitation from Tzu (2014) is for counsellors to embrace *what is* and simply abide in *loving beingness*. From this place, there is no position of “otherness” to get stuck in, rather simply residing in a loving, open presence. Residing in this energy allows the helping professional to connect and work with anyone, wherever they are, without needing to assert their “effectiveness” as a counsellor. As Tzu (2014) states:

In the choiceless awareness of what is, mind’s discriminations as to what was seen as negative and what was seen as positive dissolve. Now, as I have nothing to defend, I am free to connect with other beings in a relaxed way (p. 168).

The invitation for the counsellor is to dive in to a non-dual place of no-knowing and no-expectations with their clients. It should be noted that in doing so, counsellors are best able to meet clients wherever they are on their journey and are able to support without judgement.

Suggestions for Future Research

This research set out to gain a deeper understanding of the unique transformational journey LGBQ individual’s experience that could not be found in academic literature or traditional psychological theory. Due to the limited range of LGBQ identities explored in this study, there is an opportunity to continue to explore this phenomenon with the countless other “identities” found within the LGBTQ spectrum. The acronym LGBQ contains countless identities comprising relationship(s), culture or race, orientation, gender identity and gender expression, sexual desire etc., yet these constructs are all shifting consistently. New terms are constantly being created and

utilized to encompass the vast spectrum of individuals who do not fit within the usual binaries. Will these labels and distinctions always be necessary?

This writer would also find it interesting to explore the counsellor's role in fostering spiritual transformation within this population. What specifically should counsellors, therapists and helping professionals "do" to support this population?

The Implicated Researcher Revisited

As indicated in Chapter one of this research, as an implicated researcher I have been deeply connected this process. The process of writing a thesis has been transformational, and my journey continues to unfold in each moment. This research has been a spectacular amalgamation of blissful moments, endless energy from existence itself and terrifying, trying experiences. Early on in the research process I experienced periods of intense doubt that this project would come together. I sent out advertisements and reached out to countless agencies, individuals and organizations and did not hear back from anyone, not a single reply. Fear crept into this researchers experience and I felt a need to grasp harder at making this project a reality and a so-called "success." My mind came in and pumped up the suffering with taunts of failurehood. Why did I think this would work? I will never find participants! I should have gone in a different direction. Here I began a descent into transformation, mirroring what would be a similar path for others on their journeys. This was an invitation. By embracing complete and total failurehood of this research project everything immediately shifted. I was free, no longer attached and clinging tightly to this work or it's outcomes. A wave of relief came over me; I was reconnected to what is. The following morning I received several messages and a few hours later I had confirmed three co-researchers. What a massive unfolding. The

process of writing a thesis came naturally in this state of being, I am grateful for all this process has given me.

Never in my journey have I articulated my personal journey of transformation so vulnerably. Yet here it resides alongside others willingly embracing their vulnerability and sharing their stories. My journey aligns quite closely with the themes expressed by the co-researchers along their journeys, and many times I felt as if I was hearing my journey through another being. The interviews themselves were a profoundly powerful experience for this researcher. The co-researchers each embodied a moment-to-moment vulnerability and interconnectedness while at times their presence and recounting of experiences transcended the interview process itself. What an incredible event. By staying in the moment with each participant throughout the interviews and through the transcribing and analyzing process, I felt a joyful energy that helped fuel this research to “completion.” What a beautiful gift.

I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to connect with individuals sharing the deepest aspects of themselves with me, an unknown researcher about their deeply personal journeys. Their recollection of pain and struggles struck me from a place of gut level familiarity at times. I felt as if I had truly been there with them. This was another gift this thesis has provided me with. I was invited to revisit some challenging times in my life alongside my co-researchers, the theme of interconnectedness expanding outwards to infinity in each moment. Throughout the process of completing this thesis I have been continually invited to embrace transformation as it unfolds moment to moment in my journey. This writer has discovered a powerful invitation to continue to break out

of her own identity and continue to dive in to the ocean of existence that knows no boundaries. Moment to moment to moment.

Conclusion

Summarizing the research findings, we see that the co-researchers lived experiences fit well within Wilber's (1986) consciousness developmental model and also Integral theory (Wilber, 2006, 2007, 2016). All of the co-researchers recounted various experiences of non-dual consciousness states with various implications in their lives. The transcendent, post-egoic states as described by the co-researchers are open, expansive loving and unitive, contrasting the pre-egoic states that are understood to be terrorizing, contracting and hellish (Washburn 1995; Wilber, 1996, 2000). The co-researchers describe a circular process of transformation of consciousness unfolding while vertically moving up through the various models of development described in chapter two. All previous experiences and transformations in consciousness have been utilized in travelling each participant's unique spiritual path. The participants describe their experiences of transformation and increased awareness occurring and then continually re-working this awareness into their present existence. This is true for all co-researchers in their lives today, who actively identified "spiritual work" and "working on themselves" continuing in their everyday lives. The co-researchers state there is no final destination of enlightenment identified, rather an ever present, moment-to-moment experiencing of their authentic essence. Co-researchers describe their "coming out" journeys similarly, as a continually unfolding spiritual process. Each co-researcher did not identify their spiritual practice as the "right" one, or "best" practice that others should strive for; rather there exists a tolerant, relaxed energy embodied by each co-researcher and an intense

sensitivity for diversity for other individuals' experiences. There is beauty in the diversity of the uniquely personal journeys.

A significant difference from Wilber's theory that emerged was the co-researchers "U-turn" toward origins to deconstruct aspects of their essence that was preventing further spiritual transcendence (Washburn, 1990, 1995). For the co-researchers, this was a particular time in their journey where they revisited old ground and had to descend into deeper realms of consciousness in order to continue on their path of transformation and break free from ego. This radically transformative experience involved revisiting and deconstructing an aspect of their false sense of being that facilitated breaking through into transcendent states of consciousness, fluidity and freedom. These awarenesses gained through the second descent have also not been left behind nor abandoned, rather absorbed into the total wholeness of their being. Several themes and experiences in this research parallel premises that have been revealed in A.H. Almaas's *Point of Existence* (1996). Almaas states that in order for an individual to realize their authentic essence, it requires working through idealized or counterfeit self image(s), narcissism and subsequent woundedness before realizing the betrayal of authentic self all along (Almaas, 1996). This realization of false self-structures or identities constrained by egoic demands propels the co-researchers into embracing life from a place of authenticity and vulnerability (Almaas, 1996).

Identifying as LGBQ comes with many challenges, yet this thesis has revealed that each journey to wholeness offers a profound opportunity to connect with vulnerability and embrace authenticity. It is with hope this research project invites others to embrace what is, and appreciate the powerfully transformative phenomenon of non-

dual consciousness. Through exploring the personal and transformational journey of the co-researchers in this study, this may serve as an invitation to others to explore these aspects within themselves.

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Appendices



Appendix A

PARTICIPANT (ADULT) CONSENT FORM

Minority Pathways: LGB Transformations Into Wholeness

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled Minority Pathways: LGB Transformations Into Wholeness that is being conducted by Whitney Bryant. Whitney is a Graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions by emailing her at whitney.bryant@uleth.ca or by phone at 403-360-5891.

As a Graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Education in Counselling Psychology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Gary Tzu. You may contact my supervisor at 403-329-2644.

The purpose of this research project is to explore the lived experiences of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) individuals living in non-dual consciousness and non-dual embodiment of sexual orientation and identity. Nondual being involves an expansion of one's identity beyond ordinary thinking and ego self-awareness. Experiences can include a feeling of "oneness", all pervading love or contentment, no thoughts, stillness, and pure consciousness without subject or object. This study aims to focus on important life experiences and explore the personal experience of moving beyond limiting identities.

Research of this type is important because the topic of post-egoic, non-dual consciousness is not extensively covered in the academic literature and there is a lack of transpersonal research specifically with the LGB population. Also, this research may discover unique concepts of sexual "identity" and post-egoic "identity." Acknowledging and understanding the lived experience of LGB individuals can expand knowledge around spirituality, transformational experiences and nondual consciousness.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you may fulfill the study requirements. The specific eligibility criteria of study participants is as follows:

- Individuals 18 years of age and older.
- Individuals who identify as a *lesbian, gay, or bisexual*. This identity includes but is limited to: individuals who are: homosexual, bisexual, queer (must identify as homosexual or bisexual) two-spirited, woman who has sex with women (WSW) or man who has sex with men (MSM).
- Individuals who give informed consent to participate in the research.
- Individuals who have had a transformational experience in their quest for wholeness.
- Individuals who have been living in a state of embodied beingness or non-dual wholeness for a minimum of two years.
- Individuals who are capable of articulating and identifying their personal experiences.
- Individuals who are willing to share their experiences honestly and authentically.
- Individuals who are not currently in a state of emotional/psychological crisis.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will involve a brief initial screening process over the phone and a semi-structured interview for about one and a half to two and a half hours. The interview will include questions that relate to your lived experience of being LGB and your transformational journey. The interview will be transcribed by the researcher and the transcripts will be organized into clusters of information from which themes can be identified. Further communication might be required to clarify the data and ensure thematic accuracy. After the interview you will be asked if you agree to a follow up phone call.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including the time and energy it takes to participate.

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research and they include psychological and emotional risks. The semi-structured interview process may bring up emotional content that might be distressing or uncomfortable. To prevent or to deal with these risks the following steps will be taken. The consent process will clearly communicate the potential for psychological and emotional triggers to arise during the interview process. During the interview special attention will be paid to the discussion of your lived experience as distress may naturally arise from retelling your story. It is important that the participant disclose any distress during or after the interview and that appropriate counselling services be contacted.

Counselling contact information is:

- Awakening Heart Psychotherapy and Consulting – (403) 328 – 2224
- Lethbridge Family Services – (403) 327 – 5724
- Associates Counselling Services – (403) 381 – 6100

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include a deeper understanding of your lived experience and an increase your self-awareness and personal strengths.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without consequences. The researcher will ask no further questions other than to inquire about your level of safety. If a participant chooses to withdraw part way through the study, their data may be used only with the participant's permission. If the participant declines then their data will be destroyed immediately.

Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Anonymity will be ensured through the use of a pseudonym (alias) of your choosing.

Confidentiality will be ensured by the use of password protected computer storage and only the researcher will be transcribing the interviews.

Data will be stored on a digital audio recorder, a USB external storage drive and a desktop computer, all of which will be password protected. To guarantee secure and complete destruction of the data, the function "secure delete" will be used with the data. Any print or material copies

will be stored in a locking filing cabinet in the researchers home office. All electronic and hard copies will be disposed of in two years from the completion of the project.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: Data will be reported in the form of a thesis, and may also be presented in the form of a published article(s) and/or a conference presentation. Upon the completion of the study, participants may request an executive summary of the study.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge (403-329-2425).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix B

Screening Questions

- Individuals 18 years of age and older.
- Individuals who identify with the terms *lesbian, gay, or bisexual*. This includes but is limited to individuals whose sexual preference is: homosexual, bisexual, queer (must identify as homosexual or bisexual) two-spirited, woman who has sex with women (WSW) or man who has sex with men (MSM).
- Individuals who give informed consent to participate in the research.
- Individuals who have had a transformational experience in their quest for wholeness.
- Individuals who have been living in a state of embodied beingness, freedom from ego, or non-dual wholeness for a minimum of two years.
- Individuals who are capable of articulating and identifying their personal experiences.
- Individuals who are willing to share their experiences honestly and authentically.
- Individuals who are not currently in a state of emotional/psychological crisis.

Appendix C

Interview Questionnaire

- Tell me about your sexual identity.
- Did you “come out?” Tell me about this experience.
- Describe your transformative journey.
- Tell me about any meaningful or memorable experience(s) of your transformational journey.
- What impact has your transformative experience(s) had on your life?
- What significant changes in your life have occurred as a result of this experience?
- What thoughts and feelings have emerged as a result of this experience?
- What events, situations or people are connected with this experience?
- Tell me about any meditative, philosophical, religious or spiritual paths that you follow.
- Tell me about the reactions of friends, family members, colleagues, partner(s) to your experiences.
- Has your sexual identity been impacted by your transformative experience? If so, how?
- Have you shared all of the meaningful elements of your story? Anything else you would like to speak to?



Appendix D Recruitment Poster

Do you identify as Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual (LGB)? Are you living in a state of awakened or non-dual consciousness?

This study is a part of the graduate research project on: *Minority Pathways: LGB Transformations into Wholeness.*

Principal Researcher: Whitney Bryant M.Ed. Candidate

Research Supervisor: Dr. Gary Tzu Ph.D.

Volunteers for this study will be asked to share significant and meaningful life events and experiences.

Participants must be at least 18 years old and identify with the terms *lesbian, gay or bisexual*. This includes but is limited to individuals whose sexual preference is homosexual, bisexual, queer (must identify as homosexual or bisexual) two-spirited, woman who has sex with women (WSW) or man who has sex with men (MSM).

This study has been designed in order to promote confidentiality and anonymity of all participants. Participation is voluntary.

Non-Dual Consciousness is understood as:
Transcendence of the Self
Ego Death, Post-Egoic Identity
Awakening

Transformational Events/Experiences may include but are not limited to:
Feelings of oneness or unitive energy
Feelings of stillness, nothingness or no thoughts
Sexual fluidity, transcendent sex
“Coming out”

Participation in this study would require 2-3 hours of your time, as a part of an initial phone screening, an interview and a follow-up discussion.

If you are LGB and living in a state of non-dual or awakened consciousness and you are interested in participating or would like more information, please contact:

Whitney Bryant
whitney.bryant@uleth.ca
(403) 360-5891

Whitney Bryant
403-360-5891
whitney.bryant@uleth.ca

Table 1

Demographic Information of Five Participants

Name	Age	Occupation	Current Sexual Identities
Joanne	40	Registered Counsellor	Pansexual, Bisexual, Mostly Straight, Non-Binary, Fluid, Open Marriage, Polyamorous, Poly-Active/Poly-Inactive
Sam	35	Career Counsellor	Gay, Queer
Paula	39	Writer, Spirit Guide, Energy Healer	Two-Spirit, Kinky, Fluid, Non-Binary, Bisexual, Bi with Hetero Leanings, Greyscale, Woman Who Sleeps With Sexy People, Polyamorous
Frankie	34	Harm Reduction Outreach Worker	Queer, Fluid, Pansexual, Bisexual, Person Who Loves Humans, Polyamorous
Neo	30	Entrepreneur, Dancer	Homoflexible, Queer, Fluid, Polyamorous

Glossary of Terms

It is important to note that there is a process of continual change taking place in thinking and attitudes toward sexual orientation and gender identity. These terms and definitions are not standardized in any way and may be used differently by different people, in different cultures and contexts. These specified terms are understood to change and evolve over time.

Terms and concepts as defined by Barbara et al., (2004) and the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counselling. (2013)

ADVOCATE: (1) a person who actively works to end intolerance, educate others, and support social equity for a marginalized group. (2) to actively support/plea in favour of a particular cause, the action of working to end intolerance, educate others, etc.

ALLY: a (typically straight- or cis-identified) person who supports, and respects for members of the LGBTQ community.

ANDROGYNY/OUS (1) a gender expression that has elements of both masculinity and femininity; (2) occasionally used in place of “intersex” to describe a person with both female and male anatomy

AROMANTIC: a person who experiences little or no romantic attraction to others and/or a lack of interest in forming romantic relationships.

ASEXUAL: a word describing a person who is not sexually and/or romantically active, or not sexually and/or romantically attracted to other persons. Asexuality exists on a spectrum from people who experience no sexual attraction or have any desire for sex to those who experience low levels and only after significant amounts of time, many of these different places on the spectrum have their own identity labels. Another term used within the asexual community is “ace,” meaning someone who is asexual.

AUTOSEXUAL: a word describing a person whose significant sexual involvement is with oneself or a person who prefers masturbation to sex with a partner.

BIPHOBIA: irrational fear or dislike of bisexuals. Bisexuals may be stigmatized by heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men.

BI-POSITIVE: the opposite of biphobia. A bi-positive attitude is one that validates, affirms, accepts, appreciates, celebrates and integrates bisexual people as unique and special in their own right.

BISEXUAL: a word describing a person whose sexual orientation is directed toward men and women, though not necessarily at the same time.

CISGENDER: a person whose gender identity and biological sex assigned at birth align.

CISNORMATIVE: the assumption, in individuals or in institutions, that everyone is cisgender, and that cisgender identities are superior to trans* identities or people.

CLOSETED: an individual who is not open to themselves or others about their (queer) sexuality or gender identity. This may be by choice and/or for other reasons such as fear for one's safety, peer or family rejection or disapproval and/or loss of housing, job, etc. Also known as being "in the closet." When someone chooses to break this silence they "come out" of the closet. (See coming out)

COMING OUT: the process by which LGBTTTIQ people acknowledge and disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity, or in which trans- sexual or transgendered people acknowledge and disclose their gender identity, to themselves and others (See also "Transition"). Coming out is thought to be an ongoing process. People who are "closeted" or "in the closet" hide the fact that they are LGBTTTIQ. Some people "come

out of the closet” in some situations (e.g., with other gay friends) and not in others (e.g., at work).

CONSTELLATION: the arrangement or structure of a polyamorous relationship.

CROSSDRESSER: A person who dresses in the clothing of the other sex for recreation, expression or art, or for erotic gratification. Formerly known as “transvestites.”

Crossdressers may be male or female, and can be straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Gay/bisexual male cross- dressers may be “drag queens” or female impersonators;

lesbian/bisexual female crossdressers may be “drag kings” or male impersonators.

DYKE: a word traditionally used as a derogatory term for lesbians. Other terms include lezzie, lesbo, butch, bull dyke and diesel dyke. Many women have reclaimed these words and use them proudly to describe their identity.

FAG: a word traditionally used as a derogatory term for gay men. Other terms include fruit, faggot, queen, fairy, pansy, sissy and homo. Many men have reclaimed these words and use them proudly to describe their identity.

FAMILY OF CHOICE: the circle of friends, partners, companions and perhaps ex-partners with which many LGBTTTIQ people surround themselves. This group gives the support, validation and sense of belonging that is often unavailable from the person’s family of origin.

FAMILY OF ORIGIN: the biological family or the family that was significant in a person’s early development.

FLUID(ITY) : generally with another term attached, like gender-fluid or fluid-sexuality, fluid(ity) describes an identity that may change or shift over time between or within the mix of the options available.

GAY: a word to describe a person whose primary sexual orientation is to members of the same gender or who identifies as a member of the gay community. This word can refer to men and women, although many women prefer the term “lesbian.”

GAY-POSITIVE: the opposite of homophobia. A gay-positive attitude is one that affirms, accepts, appreciates, celebrates and integrates gay and lesbian people as unique and special in their own right.

GENDER CONFORMING: abiding by society’s gender rules, e.g., a woman dressing, acting, relating to others and thinking of herself as feminine or as a woman.

GENDER IDENTITY: a person’s own identification of being male, female or intersex; masculine, feminine, transgendered or transsexual. Gender identity most often corresponds with one’s anatomical gender, but sometimes people’s gender identity doesn’t directly correspond to their anatomy. Transgendered people use many terms to describe their gender identities, including: pre-op transsexual, post-op transsexual, non-op transsexual, transgenderist, crossdresser, transvestite, transgendered, two-spirit, intersex, hermaphrodite, fem male, gender blender, butch, manly woman, diesel dyke, sex radical, androgynist, female impersonator, male impersonator, drag king, drag queen, etc.

GENDERQUEER: this very recent term was coined by young people who experience a very fluid sense of both their gender identity and their sexual orientation, and who do not want to be constrained by absolute or static concepts. Instead, they prefer to be open to relocate themselves on the gender and sexual orientation continuums.

GENDER ROLE: the public expression of gender identity. Gender role includes everything people do to show the world they are male, female, androgynous or

ambivalent. It includes sexual signals, dress, hairstyle and manner of walking. In society, gender roles are usually considered to be masculine for men and feminine for woman.

GENDER TRANSITION: the period during which transsexual persons begin changing their appearance and bodies to match their internal identity.

GENDERISM: the belief that the binary construct of gender, in which there are only two genders (male and female), is the most normal, natural and preferred gender identity. This binary construct does not include or allow for people to be intersex, transgendered, transsexual or genderqueer.

GRINDR: a geo-social networking application (or app) geared towards gay and bisexual men, designed to help such men meet others in their area.

HATE CRIMES: offences that are motivated by hatred against victims based on their actual or perceived race, color, religion, national origin, ethnicity, gender, disability or sexual orientation.

HETEROSEXISM/HETERONORMATIVE: the assumption, expressed overtly and/or covertly, that all people are or should be heterosexual. Heterosexism excludes the needs, concerns, and life experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual people, while it gives advantages to heterosexual people. It is often a subtle form of oppression that reinforces silence and invisibility for lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

HETEROSEXUAL: term used to describe a person whose primary sexual orientation is to members of the opposite gender. Heterosexual people are often referred to as “straight.”

HETEROSEXUAL PRIVILEGE: the unrecognized and assumed privileges that people have if they are heterosexual. Examples of heterosexual privilege include: holding hands or kissing in public without fearing threat, not questioning the normalcy of your sexual

orientation, raising children without fears of state intervention or worries that your children will experience discrimination because of your heterosexuality.

HOMOPHOBIA: irrational fear, hatred, prejudice or negative attitudes toward homosexuality and people who are gay or lesbian. Homophobia can take overt and covert, as well as subtle and extreme, forms. Homophobia includes behaviours such as jokes, name-calling, exclusion, gay bashing, etc.

HOMOSEXUAL: a term to describe a person whose primary sexual orientation is to members of the same gender. Most people prefer to not use this label, preferring to use other terms, such as gay or lesbian.

IDENTITY: how one thinks of oneself, as opposed to what others observe or think about one.

INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA: fear and self-hatred of one's own sexual orientation that occurs for many lesbians and gay men as a result of heterosexism and homophobia. Once lesbians and gay men realize that they belong to a group of people that is often despised and rejected in our society, many internalize and incorporate this stigmatization, and fear or hate themselves.

INTERSEX: a person who has some mixture of male and female genetic and/or physical sex characteristics. Formerly called "hermaphrodites." Many intersex people consider themselves to be part of the trans community.

LESBIAN: a female whose primary sexual orientation is to other women or who identifies as a member of the lesbian community.

LGBTTTIQ: a common acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgendered, two-spirit, intersex and queer individuals/communities. This acronym may or may not be

used in a particular community. For example, in some places, the acronym LGBT (for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered/transsexual) may be more common.

MSM: refers to any man who has sex with a man, whether he identifies as gay, bisexual or heterosexual. This term highlights the distinction between sexual behaviour and sexual identity (i.e., sexual orientation). A person's sexual behaviour may manifest itself into a sexual identity, but the reverse is not always true; sexual orientation is not always reflective of sexual behaviour. For example, a man may call himself heterosexual, but may engage in sex with men in certain situations (e.g., prison, sex work).

“OUT” OR OUT OF THE CLOSET: varying degrees of being open about one's sexual orientation or gender identity.

PASSING: describes transgendered or transsexual people's ability to be accepted as their preferred gender. The term refers primarily to acceptance by people the individual does not know, or who do not know that the individual is transgendered or transsexual. Typically, passing involves a mix of physical gender cues (e.g., clothing, hairstyle, voice), behaviour, manner and conduct when interacting with others. Passing can also refer to hiding one's sexual orientation, as in “passing for straight.”

POLYAMORY/POLYAMOROUS: refers to the practice of, desire to, or orientation towards having ethically, honest, consensually non-monogamous relationships (i.e. relationships that may include multiple partners). This may include open relationships, polyfidelity (which involves more than two people being in romantic and/or sexual relationships which is not open to additional partners), amongst many other set-ups.

Some poly(amorous) people have a “primary” relationship or relationship(s) and then

“secondary” relationship(s) which may indicate different allocations of resources, time, or priority.

QUEER: traditionally, a derogatory and offensive term for LGBTTTIQ people. Many LGBTTTIQ people have reclaimed this word and use it proudly to describe their identity. Some transsexual and transgendered people identify as queers; others do not.

QUESTIONING: people who are questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation and who often choose to explore options.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR: what people do sexually. Not necessarily congruent with sexual orientation and/or sexual identity.

SEXUAL IDENTITY: one’s identification to self (and others) of one’s sexual orientation. Not necessarily congruent with sexual orientation and/or sexual behaviour.

SEXUAL MINORITIES: include people who identify as LGBTTTIQ.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION: a term for the emotional, physical, romantic, sexual and spiritual attraction, desire or affection for another person. Examples include heterosexuality, bisexuality and homosexuality.

SIGNIFICANT OTHER: a life partner, domestic partner, lover, boyfriend or girlfriend. It is often equivalent to the term “spouse” for LGBTTTIQ people.

STRAIGHT: a term often used to describe people who are heterosexual. **TRANS** and **TRANSPEOPLE** are non-clinical terms that usually include transsexual, transgendered and other gender-variant people.

TRANSGENDERED: a person whose gender identity is different from his or her biological sex, regardless of the status of surgical and hormonal gender reassignment

processes. Often used as an umbrella term to include transsexuals, transgenderists, transvestites (crossdressers), and two-spirit, intersex and transgendered people.

TRANSITION: the process (which for some people may also be referred to as the “gender reassignment process”) whereby transsexual people change their appearance and bodies to match their internal (gender) identity, while living their lives full-time in their preferred gender role.

TRANSPHOBIA: irrational fear or dislike of transsexual and transgendered people.

TRANSPOSITIVE: the opposite of transphobia. A transpositive attitude is one that validates, affirms, accepts, appreciates, celebrates and integrates transsexual and transgendered people as unique and special in their own right.

TRANSENSUAL: a term for a person who is primarily attracted to trans- gendered or transsexual people.

TRANSGENDER: a term for a person who has an intense long-term experience of being the sex opposite to his or her birth-assigned sex and who typically pursues a medical and legal transformation to become the other sex. There are transmen (female-to-male transsexuals) and trans-women (male-to-female transsexuals). Transsexual people may undergo a number of procedures to bring their body and public identity in line with their self-image, including sex hormone therapy, electrolysis treatments, sex reassignment surgeries and legal changes of name and sex status.

TWO-SPIRIT: is an umbrella term traditionally used by First Nations people to recognize individuals who possess qualities or fulfill roles of both genders.