

## Transgender and the transpersonal: An introduction and a call for research

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*While a tradition of research in relation to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) community and religiosity, there is a paucity of research relating to spirituality. Additionally, classifying such 'non-conforming' groups into a general classification has inherent problems, specifically in relation to transgender more likely to engage in spirituality opposed to religion than other groups. With the high prevalence of personal distress and harm to mental wellbeing experienced by individuals identifying as transgender, especially with the increased risk of suicide attempts, effective support and counselling are required. Such existential crisis could potentially be addressed through greater engagement with spirituality: indeed, several cultures identify transgender as relating to spirituality. This paper explores transgender and spiritual identity in different cultures, while highlighting research in the more secular society, culminating in an evaluation of various models which may provide spiritual support to help integrate the predominant dysphoria between mind and body, through engaging the spirit to harmonise the conflict.*

**Keywords:** transgender; spirituality; transpersonal; LGBT/LGBTQI+; non-binary.

THERE has been a tradition of research in religiosity and spirituality within marginalised groups, specifically among the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) community (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Halkitis, Mattis, Sahadath, Massie, Ladyzhenskaya, Pitrelli, Bonacci & Cowie, 2009; Rosenkrantz, Rostosky, Riggle & Cook, 2016; Wood & Conley, 2014). The evolving vernacular embraces a wider spectrum than just LGBT; for example, LGBTQIP2SAA: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, pansexual, two-spirit (2S), androgynous, and asexual, despite acknowledgement that the term could be further extended (Milgran, 2014). From an inclusive perspective, even using terms such as 'non-conforming' in relation to sexual and gender identities are deemed problematic as this implies that there is an accepted way to conform. Within this paper, however, the term 'transgender' is adopted to identify individuals who experience gender dysphoria (the medical term), defined as a conflict between a person's physical or assigned gender and the gender with which they identify (APA, 2019), or a mismatch between a person's biological sex and gender identity (NHS, 2019). For further simplicity, transgender will be adopted for this paper to include any stage of transition from simply acknowledging dysphoria, through to social transition, hormonal or surgical intervention. Additionally, opposed to using the term 'transgender' to refer to anyone experiencing gender dysphoria, to avoid labelling, the more laborious term, 'individual identifying as transgender' has been adopted.

Given the prevalence of suicide attempts and ideation within the transgender community compared with the general population, a critical level of psychological distress is experienced which is not being addressed (Haas, Rodgers & Herman, 2014). Results from the NTDS identified that there is a 41 per cent suicide attempt among those identifying as transgender, exceeding the 4.6 per cent of the overall US population, or the 10 to 20 per cent of lesbian, gay and bisexual adults (Haas et al., 2014). Such rates among the transgender respondents is higher for 18 to 24 year olds (45 per cent), those on a low income (54 per cent) or with low educational attainment (48 to 49 per cent), and increase as high as 57 per cent if rejected by family, and 69 per cent if the individual has experienced homelessness (Haas et al., 2014). The figure of 41 per cent has similarly been demonstrated in research by others (e.g. Maguen & Shepherd, 2010).

Possible reasons for those identifying as transgender presenting to counselling are not necessarily for pre-existing or organic mental health disorders, but instead a response to circumstances in a world that discriminates through prejudice, stigma and violence, which can result in significant loss in relation to family, friends, career and financial difficulty (Hunt, 2014; Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2002). However, there is acknowledgement that

spirituality and religion can be beneficial to the emotional wellbeing of LGBTQI+ individuals (McGeorge, Carlson & Toomey, 2014).

According to Porter, Ronneberg and Witten (2013, p.113), individuals identifying as transgender demonstrate 'higher levels of engagement in religious and spiritual traditions than their lesbian, gay, or bisexual counterparts'. These findings are echoed by Beagan and Hattie (2015), that individual spiritual beliefs and practices are more common within the transgender community, than the LGB communities. They proceed to identify a tension from this, that 'spiritual selves are often unwelcome' in the LGB communities (Beagan & Hattie, 2015, p.114). Consequently, this paper explores available sources in relation to how religion and spirituality may be of benefit to the psychological wellbeing of individuals identifying as transgender, initially through exploring how transgender is perceived from an anthropological perspective, before analysing the role of religion and spirituality.

### **Anthropological perspectives on the link between transgender and spirituality**

Transgender has been recognised crossculturally and through history, generally with a connection between transgender and spiritual or religious belief (Bocktin & Cesaretti, 2001). For example, many Native American tribes recognise the multiplicity of genders, for example, the berdache were physical males but did not conform with masculine dress or behaviour. They identified as neither male nor female but an alternate gender combining both elements, where their spirit was held in high regard, which signified their close alignment to the spiritual, mediating between the physical and the spiritual planes (Bocktin & Cesaretti, 2001). In Myanmar, the *acaunt* are similarly respected, with the belief that such feminine males are possessed, then married to, the female spirit, *Manguedon*, the spirit of good fortune and success. As with the berdache, the *acaunt* are similarly deemed to mediate between people and the spiritual realm (Coleman, Colgan & Gooren, 1992). Although both the berdache and the *acaunt* are males by birth, a female equivalent who similarly mediates between the physical and the spiritual is that of the *maa khii* in northern Thailand, individuals believed to be possessed by *phii*, or ancestral spirits (Bocktin & Cesaretti, 2001). One suggestion for why such individuals were recognised relates to their cultures not having a monotheistic religion and in turn having a more diverse perspective of gender (Bocktin & Cesaretti, 2001).

Despite the assertion that pluralistic cultures are more likely to identify more than two genders, within the monotheistic religion of Judaism, the Mishnah identifies a number of different genders and sexes as summarised by Kukla (2006),

- Zachar: a term derived from the word 'pointy sword' and thus referring to a phallus. As such, the term is translated as 'male'.
- Nekevah: a term derived from the word 'crevice' and thus referring to a vaginal opening. As such, the term is translated as 'female'.
- Androgynos: a person who has both 'male' and 'female' sexual characteristics.
- Tumtum: a person whose sexual characteristics are obscured or indeterminate.
- Ay'lonit: a person who is identified as 'female' at birth but develops 'male' characteristics at puberty and is infertile.
- Saris: a person who is identified as 'male' at birth but develops 'female' characteristics at puberty and/or is lacking a penis.

According to Meyer (2018), the Kabbalah addresses the notion of transitioning from one gender to another, and that Jacob's daughter, Dinah, had the soul of a man, while Abraham's son, Isaac, had the soul of a woman, explaining how the 'cycling of souls' or *gigul ha-neshamot*, is a form of reincarnation, where the soul of a male may enter the body of a female, and vice-versa, which in turn is remedied through being transgender. This explanation for the disharmony between the soul and the body in-part relates to Jung's concept of the subtle body of gender and sexuality, which he suggested resided in an intermediate realm between mind and matter: that this subtle body

'shimmers and hovers' around the body in a continual motion, similar to the *unus mundus* and the relationship between the world and the psyche (McKenzie, 2006). What is however less clear is whether the different genders and sexes recognised in Judaism specifically link to a wider spiritual realm, which is perhaps an area to be identified for additional research.

Although this brief anthropological overview highlights significant cases that identify the link between transgender and spirituality, they are limited to specific cultures. With the prevalence of transgender in more secular cultures, attention is directed to a more widely encompassing discussion of religion and spirituality.

### **Religion, spirituality and transgender**

A brief distinction between religion and spirituality is required to establish terms. As such, religion can be considered as an organised attempt by a collective group to make sense of themselves, their purpose and their environment. Extending this further, Sperry (2001) states that religion concerns an awareness of the Transcendent, where that awareness is expressed on conceptual, cultural, and social form, with a shared belief system and communal ritual practice. Spirituality is centred more on an individual's search for meaning and belonging, identifying core values that influence their behaviour in an attempt to transcend the self towards the identified core value (Schneiders, 1986).

Those identifying as transgender have encountered problems with traditional religion: indeed, this has been the case since Joan of Arc (1412–1431) was executed purportedly for cross-dressing, despite her insistence in her inquisition that her male attire and short hair were for pragmatic fighting purposes (Feinberg, 1996). Such disharmony between traditional religion and transgender has been discussed by several authors (e.g. Beegan & Hattie, 2015; Grossoehme, Teeters, Jelinkek, Dimitriou & Conrad, 2016; Halkitis, Mattis, Sahadath, Massie, Ladyzhenskaya, Pitrelli, Bonacci & Cowie, 2009; Porter, Teeters, Jelinkek, Dimitriou & Conrad, 2016; Reinsmith-Jones, 2013; Wood & Conley, 2014; Yarhouse & Carr, 2012).

Researchers have highlighted how individuals identifying as transgender (rather than those identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual) may leave organised religion, instead seeking an alternate spiritual pathway. For example, Reinsmith-Jones (2013, p.65) explains how a necessary parallel development of the spirit accompanies the transition of the body, yet asserts that while medical intervention is highly developed to aid such transition, 'less is known about their spiritual transformation that accompanies the newly developed physical outer persona', and that this can lead to 'existential, spiritual suffering' (ibid. p.67).

In relation to transgender and spirituality, there are fewer publications in this area (Rodriguez & Follins, 2012; Yarhouse & Carr, 2012). Indeed, research indicates that there is likely to be a greater engagement with spirituality than religion (Halkitis, Mattis, Sahadath, Massie, Ladyzhenskaya, Pitrelli, Bonacci & Cowie, 2009). Their research with 498 respondents identified that those identifying as LGBT were significantly more spiritual than religious: religiosity mean score = 2.45 (SD-1.21), subjective spirituality mean score = and 3.41 (SD-1.28), ( $t(481) = 16.27, p < .001$ ) (Halkitis et al., 2009, p.254). A suggestion for the spiritual orientation related to the feeling of interconnectedness with others, with the world around them, and with the universe: that such an orientation helped individuals to make sense of their place, especially with the prejudice and discrimination they experience (Halkitis et al. 2009).

Research by Porter et al. (2013) supports the work of Halkitis et al. (2009), in that older individuals identifying as transgender are less likely to affiliate with organised religion but that 19 per cent engage with non-specific spirituality (which is an 18.4 per cent difference compared to the general population). The next significant spiritual practice likely to be affiliated with consist of Wiccan/Earth Goddess/Celtic/Pagan (5.1 per cent compared to the

general population of 0.4 per cent), or Taoism/ Buddhism/Confucianism (4.8 per cent compared to the general population of 0.4 per cent).

Consequently, spirituality appears to offer greater support to those identifying as transgender. From this, Bocktin and Cesaretti (2001, p.291) suggest that 'greater attention to the spiritual dimensions of the transgender experience benefits not only the individual, but also the family and community, including the community of faith'. Furthermore, Bocktin and Cesaretti (2001, p.295) assert, 'self-affirmation of one's identity as transgender alleviates shame and is experienced as liberating. The pressure of trying to conform... the fear of being read; the secrecy, shame and isolation associated with hiding... constitute a psychological burden that can be released through coming out'. Additionally, they suggest that psychotherapy and spiritual counselling can assist in transforming shame and stigma into pride, with not just internal spiritual benefits, but also externally through the giving of one's authentic self to others.

In aiding such spiritual support, several models have been advocated. The models by Devor (2004) and Etscovitz (1997) focus on identity formation, with the latter resonating more with transpersonal themes. Reinsmith-Jones' (2013) model which embraces both the physical and spiritual transformation, while Karasu (1999) proposed a model of spiritual psychotherapy which has been adapted for transgender by Bocktin and Cesaretti (2001).

Devor's model consists of 14 stages, from abiding anxiety, through to acceptance, transition, integration, culminating in pride. Etscovitz's model consists of just four stages: self-recognition, self-acceptance, self-integration and self-transcendence. This latter construct resonating with transpersonal themes (see Buckler et al., 2019, this journal). Specifically, Etscovitz discusses how transformation continues beyond these stages, also that there was an inner process which facilitated the identified stages consisting of reaching in (a process of addressing feelings, desires, hopes, while finding inner strength and courage); reaching out (engaging with the world and discovering how they are unique); and reaching up (finding a wider purpose) (Etscovitz, 1997).

The Reinsmith-Jones Model of Physical and Spiritual Transformation consists of three phases divided into six stages:

- Beginning phase
  - Feeling at odds
  - Discovering the transsexual option
- Middle phase
  - Choosing life or death
  - Inner development
- Latter phase
  - Becoming authentic
  - Expanding (Reinsmith-Jones, 2013)

Karasu's model consists of six tenets that guide spiritual psychotherapy: love of others, love of work, love of belonging, belief in the sacred, belief in unity, and belief in transformation, (Karasu, 1999). These tenets are outlined in Table 2.

Rosenkrantz, Rostosky, Riggle & Cook (2016) have identified five core benefits of spiritual engagement, ranging from those most frequently reported to the least. These are: to help develop self-love and self-acceptance; to seek a deeper sense of meaning and purpose; to develop a greater sense of empathy, openness and compassionate action;

to enhance positive relationships with family, partners, and the community; also to increase spiritual strength in order to engage with challenges related to coming out, and for coping with prejudice and stigma.

**Table 2. Karasu’s model aligned with transgender**

**(Adapted from Bocktin & Cesaretti, 2001 pp.297-298).**

Love of others	Individuals identifying as transgender are unable to discover their authentic self and sense of self-worth alone, consequently there is a need to acknowledge oneself, and develop love and trust towards oneself and to others. ‘Coming out’ is perceived as an opportunity to become more vulnerable, which in turn deepens intimacy in relationships, previously paralysed by shame, detachment, and alienation.
Love of work	The love directed into work, undertaken with profound regard and a depth of devotion, will come back as love of self.
Love of belonging	Individuals identifying as transgender tend to lack a sense of belonging among cisgender people (those who identify with the gender that they were assigned at birth). This sense of belonging can also be problematic for those identifying as non-binary whereby they can lack a sense of belonging within the transgender community. Consequently meeting others who similarly identify, whether in group therapy, online, or in real life can provide a sense of belonging.
Belief in the sacred	A time is required for solitude to internally reflect on one’s inner feelings, which in turn enables a sense of belonging to a larger presence.
Belief in unity	For individuals identifying as transgender, a sense of unity is experienced when breaking through the barriers of isolation, in meeting other transgender people, and recognising gender for everyone, both transgender and cisgender. Furthermore, a sense of connectedness between mind, body and spirit, specifically due to the intense conflict experienced between mind and body, and a sense of connectedness to the natural and supernatural world.
Belief in transformation	During the ‘coming out’ process, individuals identifying as transgender risk losing everything, yet gaining everything, specifically their sense of self. Consequently, there is a belief in spiritual continuity and rebirth due to the death of the old identity and the associated grief, both by the transgendered individual but also their loved ones. Such grief also relates to questioning why they identify as transgender, yet by understanding the role of transgender in the past and the present, also through receiving validation from others, and through engaging in self-reflection, grief and shame can transform into pride.

## Conclusion

Given the high degree of distress experienced by individuals identifying as transgender, an initial review of literature demonstrates that engagement with the spiritual may be beneficial. Indeed, the concept of transgender is not new despite the increased media prevalence in recent years. Cultures have long identified and understood that gender is a continuum and not defined by physical characteristics defined at birth. Furthermore, several models have been proposed to support individuals who have identified as transgender. Specifically, Karasu’s model provides a clear direction for further research in enabling individuals identifying as transgender to engage with the spiritual: while their mind and body have been in conflict since as far as they can remember (often around the age of three or four years’ old), the spirit can help harmonise the conflict and bring the triad into unity.

This is an area in desperate need of further research and an area which transpersonal psychology could play an active role.

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