Acculturation Experiences Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Immigrants in Canada

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Abstract
In the current study, we used a grounded theory methodology to understand the acculturation process of LGBT immigrants in Canada. Results revealed two parallel themes: Cultural Identity Development and Sexual and Gender Identity Development. Heterosexism and cissexism in the culture of origin was a central phenomenon in the development of the cultural, sexual, and gender aspects of LGBT immigrant identity. Moreover, LGBT immigrants’ culture of origin and Canadian culture influenced their sexual and gender identity development before and after immigration. Results suggest that many LGBT immigrants assume a Western orientation as a coping response to heterosexism and cissexism in their culture of origin, even before immigration occurs. The current study identified the perceived challenges and advantages that LGBT immigrants experience during the acculturation process as well as various acculturation outcomes. We discuss clinical implications and future research directions in light of the results.

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The experiences of immigrants in North America have been studied extensively (e.g., Chun, Organista, & Marin, 2003; Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2009). Upon arrival, immigrants face multiple challenges including, but not limited to, language barriers, finding a place to live, recognition of educational credentials, securing employment without local experience or training, anti-immigrant discrimination, and homesickness (Guieb, 2009). Accordingly, immigration is often directly related to psychological distress (Kirmayer et al., 2007), making cultural adjustment more difficult (Joseph & Linley, 2008; Monat & Lazarus, 1991).

In addition to the challenges related to immigration, once arrived, members of the LGBT community face heterosexism and cissexism, hate crimes, and discrimination (The National Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Centers, 2008; Shankle, 2006; Zwiers, 2009). Members of the LGBT community report higher rates of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and trauma compared to the general population of Canadians (Oetjen & Rothblum, 2000; Vincke & Bolton, 1994; Zwiers, 2009). Thus, LGBT immigrants find themselves in a “double jeopardy,” identifying with at least a double minority status. That is, they are exposed to the mental health risk factors associated with being both immigrants and members of the LGBT community (Munro et al., 2013). This “double jeopardy” can be particularly problematic when social support and social integration are not available. More precisely, family, community, and religious affiliations, which usually protect the health and well-being of new immigrants, can become primary sources of rejection and discrimination due to sexual prejudices (Boulden, 2009). Likewise, language, cultural barriers, and racism within the mainstream LGBT community itself can make it difficult for LGBT immigrants to integrate into the local LGBT community (Ibañez, Van Oss Marin, Flores, Millett, & Diaz, 2009).

Despite the many challenges facing LGBT immigrants, research examining the experiences of this unique group is scarce. Moreover, the research that is available is largely based on LGBT immigrants to the United States (U.S.). Although there are many similarities between the U.S. and Canada, there are also several differences between these two countries that can significantly impact the experiences of immigrants. Historically, Canada and the U.S. have followed similar paths in terms of immigration practices and procedures. However, differences began to emerge in the 1960s after racial preference
was removed from Canadian and U.S. immigration policies. These changes resulted in more racial, geographic, ethnic, and religious diversity, as well as the introduction of a refugee component to immigration policy in both countries (Turegun, 2007). Following these reforms, Canadian and U.S. immigration policies took on different trajectories, whereby Canadian policy emphasized selection of immigrants based on skills required in the country, and U.S. policies focused on family reunification (Borjas, 1999). During the Cold War, both the U.S. and Canada played an important role in the resettlement of refugees from communist countries of Eastern Europe, but the focus of Canada’s immigration policy still remained economic (Turegun, 2007). During the term of Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau in the 1970s, multiculturalism (defined as the appreciation, acceptance, and promotion of multiple immigrant cultures) was adopted as the official policy of the Canadian government (Duncan & Ley, 1993). On the other hand, U.S. immigration policy during this time mostly revolved around border control, and immigrant integration was mostly considered beyond the scope of responsibility of the state (Turegun, 2007). Currently, the U.S. government does not actively promote immigrant settlement, and most immigrants who arrived in the U.S. after the 1960s received little state assistance with integration (Bloemraad, 2006). In contrast, the Canadian government focuses on growing immigrant settlement programs and developing diversity policies that encourage multiculturalism with a strong emphasis on acculturation (Bloemraad, 2006).

Acculturation is the process through which immigrants acquire the beliefs, values, and behaviors of a host country, while either preserving or modifying those of their country of origin (Chun, Organista, & Marin, 2003; Sam & Berry, 2006). This process, supported by the Canadian government, allows immigrants to preserve their original culture while adapting to, and accepting, the new culture. On the other hand, the dominant discourse on immigration in the U.S. remains assimilatory (i.e., replacing immigrants’ home cultures with the U.S. culture; Jeter, 2007; Turegun, 2007). Therefore, due to governmental programs in combination with interventionist immigration public policy (i.e., the government is actively involved in the development and implementation of immigration policies), Canada represents a more inclusive setting to immigrants in terms of integration compared to the U.S. (Bloemraad, 2006).

Research on LGBT immigrant acculturation to Canada is limited; however other international research has identified complex relationships between certain aspects of LGBT immigrant experience (e.g., the development of sexual and gender identity, sexual and gender expression, closetedness) and level of acculturation to the host country (Boulden, 2009; Kuntsman, 2003). Level of acculturation also plays an important role in health outcomes among
LGBT immigrants. For instance, lower levels of acculturation in gay and bisexual male immigrants in the U.S. were found to predict higher levels of sexual risk behaviors (Bianchi et al., 2007; Poppen, Reisen, Zea, Bianchi, & Echeverry, 2004). In addition, lower levels of acculturation were related to greater mental health help seeking among LGBT immigrants in the U.S. (Dasgupta, 2007). Postcolonial and social constructivist writings, such as Anzaldúa’s (1987) work on borderlands, demonstrate that immigrants face economic consequences for not acculturating.

Although most research has identified acculturation as a critical factor in shaping various aspects of the LGBT immigrant experience and its outcomes, an examination of the acculturation experience itself is notably absent. That is, although multiple studies on LGBT immigrants have shown acculturation to play an important role in the development of sexual identity and expression, closetedness, health outcomes, and mental health help-seeking behaviors, LGBT immigrants’ experience of acculturation has never been directly investigated. Based on the size of the immigrant and LGBT populations in Canada (nearly 20% and 2–8% of the total population, respectively; Statistics Canada, 2004, 2006), understanding the acculturation experience of LGBT immigrants in Canada and those factors influencing acculturation outcomes is needed.

Although the Canadian government is doing more for immigrant integration than the U.S. government (Bloemraad, 2006), LGBT immigrants in Canada continue to face a number of challenges. According to the findings of Munro et al. (2013), difficult issues facing LGBT immigrants in Canada include experiences of homophobia and racism (a) within interpersonal relationships, (b) in the LGBT community, (c) in their respective ethnic communities, (d) in social service settings, and (e) during the immigration process. Consequently, a more comprehensive understanding of LGBT immigrant acculturation experiences is required to further improve the Canadian settlement process.

The purpose of the present study was to generate an in-depth understanding of the migration and acculturation process among LGBT immigrants in Canada. The overarching research question guiding our study was: “How do LGBT immigrants perceive their process of acculturation?” To answer this question, the study assessed the influence that sexual orientation and gender identity have on the acculturation experience, as well as the perceived barriers, challenges, and advantages of being LGBT when actively experiencing the acculturation process. Specifically, we focused on (a) identifying the factors that LGBT immigrants viewed as important in their acculturation process and acculturation outcomes, (b) exploring the ways that LGBT immigrants perceived their process of acculturation to be different from non-LGBT
immigrants, and (c) eliciting LGBT immigrants’ views on the ways that helping practitioners and organizations could influence their acculturation outcomes. Ultimately, our goal was to derive clinical implications that can be used to help organizations and counseling psychology practitioners better serve LGBT immigrants.

**Method**

**Epistemological Frame**

Given the current status of the literature and the exploratory nature of the research, a qualitative approach was considered to be most appropriate for this study (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Because there are currently no theoretical frameworks that describe the acculturation process of LGBT immigrants, a grounded theory approach was deemed a good fit, as it emphasizes the generation of theory from data collected (Charmaz, 2006). This vision of grounded theory is constructivist in nature, making it a more nuanced and reflexive approach to research, where the participants and researchers coconstruct meaning from the results (Charmaz, 2006).

In addition, Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2005) suggested using an interpretive perspective when researching marginalized groups to account for the influence of race, gender, social class, religion, culture, dominant discourses in the country of origin and in the Canadian context, sexuality, and geography on social identity construction. Thus, the exploration of the acculturation process of LGBT immigrants, in light of the cultural and historical constructions of their identity, was framed within queer theory (K. Watson, 2005). Queer theory assumes fluidity in identity and recognizes its historically contingent and socially constructed nature (E. Watson, 2009). It represents a resistance to identity categorization and takes a defiant stance toward the rigidity with which identity categorization continues to be enforced. Queer theorists believe that identities are not fixed because they are comprised of a great variety of characteristics (K. Watson, 2005). Thus, taking into consideration the fluidity of identities is essential for the understanding of LGBT immigrants’ identities. In this effort, the choice of study participants went beyond sexual orientation characteristics to include such components as race, age, religion, gender identity, and country of origin, to adequately cover a range of aspects of immigrants’ identities.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) claimed that being reflexively aware of potential biases is key for social scientists. Reflexivity entails disclosure and consideration of the researcher’s own position, past experiences, prejudices, and biases that might have an influence on the interpretation of the data as
well as on the overall approach to the study. This research team conducted the study based on the assumption that social realities are constructed as a result of social interactions (Gergen, 2009). Therefore, in the process of data analysis, interpretations of participants’ voices were carefully considered and negotiated in light of previous research findings on the topic of LGBT immigrants, as well as the researchers’ personal, professional, and academic backgrounds. The authors and collaborators who participated in the research process represented a wide and diverse range of individuals in terms of sexual orientation, gender identity, and ethnocultural backgrounds. We acknowledge that our personal, professional, and academic backgrounds are reflected in the interpretation and analysis of participants’ voices presented in this paper. It is critical to note that the vast majority of team members identified as queer and that professionally, we are predominantly situated in educational and counseling psychology with a specialization in mental health of LGBT individuals. Specifically, the first author is aware that having personally gone through acculturation in Canada as a cisgender gay man, he might have been naturally better attuned to certain aspects of the acculturation experience of gay male immigrants, in particular, than of the other participants. Thus, there might be some nuances that he was able to note for gay male participants during the data analysis that he might have missed for lesbian or trans participants. We are hopeful, however, that any potential shortcomings in data analysis stemming from our past experiences and biases, were addressed through the methodological strategies proposed to enhance the quality and trustworthiness of the research.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants in the present study consisted of 20 self-identified LGBT immigrants who had been living in Canada from 6 months to 18 years. Participants’ ages ranged from 21 to 42 years old ($M_{age} = 31; SD = 6.5$). Participants came from East Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Middle East, South Asia, and Western Europe. In terms of gender identity, participants self-identified as male, female, trans, genderqueer, and open. Sexual orientations disclosed by participants were lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, straight, and other. Education level ranged from completion of high school to the doctoral degree. Please see Table 1 for a summary of participants’ characteristics.

We recruited participants through convenience sampling and snowball sampling using our social networks. Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was employed through a combination of maximum variation and theoretical sampling. Maximum variation sampling is a type of purposive sampling where respondents are selected on the basis of being as different as possible from one another (List, 2004). Instead of attempting to achieve representativeness via
### Table 1. Participant Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tr>
<td>25–29</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
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<td><strong>Region of origin</strong></td>
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<td>East Asia</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Europe</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Europe</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race or ethnicity</strong></td>
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</tr>
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<td>East Asian</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/Hispanic</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asian</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender identity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td><strong>Sexual orientation</strong></td>
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<td>Lesbian</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Religion/Spiritual beliefs</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not religious</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not religious but from religious background</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>High school diploma</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate degree</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
equal probabilities, as in maximum variation sampling, representativeness is achieved by including a wide range of extremes. Through maximum variation, diverse variations of LGBT immigrants (i.e., by age, race, ethnicity, religion, country of origin, gender identity, and sexual orientation) were documented to adequately cover most aspects of the immigrants’ identities; working with a diverse sample of LGBT immigrants allowed the researchers to identify important common factors related to participants’ acculturation experiences.

Since its inception, theoretical sampling has been used in the context of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This sampling approach is performed on the basis of emerging concepts, with the goal of exploring the

### Table 1. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional status</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in Canada</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;2</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>2–5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11+</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language usea</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More comfortable in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both (English/French and native)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English/French</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both (English/French and native)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English/French</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With friends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both (English/French and native)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English/French</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media preference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both (English/French and Native)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English/French</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aFrench was the native language for one participant; for the rest of the participants, the native language was neither English nor French.*
dimensional range of conditions along which the properties of an explored concept vary. More specifically, this sampling strategy helped the researchers develop a comprehensive understanding of the dimensions of a concept across a variety of settings and conditions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, participants were strategically chosen to help the researchers best form the theory by means of an iterative ongoing sampling process based on emerging theoretical concepts. Theoretical sampling was employed during the data collection stage to help identify initial concepts and their dimensions through selecting a homogeneous sample of participants who shared similar characteristics (e.g., sexual orientation, gender identity, geographic area, age). In particular, the first two interviews we conducted were with cisgender gay men from the same country in the Middle East who were close in age. Once the initial categories emerged, we made the sample more heterogeneous to see what conditions were responsible for the variations on the continuum of the property. We were able to achieve that heterogeneity by conducting subsequent interviews with participants from neighboring countries in the Middle East, then with significantly older participants, then with participants of a different gender and sexual orientation, and so forth. Theoretical sampling continued until data saturation was reached at 20 participants, a sample size consistent with recommendations for a grounded theory qualitative study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Data Collection

The first author conducted all individual interviews. We designed a semi-structured interview protocol based on recommendations by Evans (2007). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews took the shape of reflexive conversations; that is, the questions were formulated based on a thorough review of the research on immigrant acculturation and LGBT issues, and the interview protocol mostly served as a framework for an open-ended discussion during which the participants were encouraged to explore additional issues and ideas not covered in the protocol (Carlson, Siegal, & Falck, 1995; Fontana & Frey, 1994; Rutledge, 2007). This interviewing approach allowed the interviewer to build rapport, heighten collaboration, and gather contextual elements of lived experience to establish a good understanding and enhance interpretation of LGBT immigrants’ acculturation stories. The interviews lasted from 1 to 3 hr, and averaged 2 hr. We adjusted the interview protocol (see Supplemental Material available online at http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/0011000018768538) after each new participant interview to help saturate emerging concepts requiring further exploration, or to explore new concepts that might have not been
covered by previous respondents. Typically, the interview included a general discussion of what it meant to participants to be LGBT, followed by the development of their sexual orientation and gender identity before and after their immigration to Canada. We then switched the focus of the interview to the cultural identity of LGBT immigrants with such questions as “What cultures do you feel you belong to, share your beliefs and values with?” and “Do you feel caught, as if you have to choose between North American and home cultures? Explain.” Additionally, participants were asked what government and community organizations could do to make the adjustment of LGBT immigrants more comfortable. Finally, we explored the perceived influence of sexual identity on the life trajectory of LGBT immigrants.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were coded using the procedures originally outlined by Glaser (1965), referred to as constant comparison. They consisted of the following: the researchers took one piece of data at a time (e.g., one interview) and compared it to all other pieces of data collected (e.g., other interviews), while also trying to understand what made this piece of data either similar to, or different from, other data collected. By following these inductive procedures of analysis, the researchers examined data critically, drew new meanings from the data, and consequently generated theory. Through the process of open coding, the basic concepts were identified through abstracting data into categories; these categories were named using the participants’ own words. Open coding was followed by axial coding, whereby the categories identified were reexamined and reassembled in new ways to determine the linkages between them, and to form initial theories and hypotheses. This process was followed by selective coding, where theories and hypotheses were used to connect categories in order to arrive at a “story line” that explains the acculturation experience of LGBT immigrants. Finally, an integrative diagram depicting the actual theory in the form of a visual model was developed.

Quality and Trustworthiness

To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the research process, we engaged in the following methodological procedures. First, following Poland’s (2001) recommendation, we carefully compared all audio recordings of the interviews against the resulting transcripts prior to coding. Second, we addressed the conditions for quality assessment. As previously described, researcher bias was clarified from the outset of the study to clearly disclose the
researchers’ positionality, past experiences, prejudices, and any biases that might have influenced the inquiry, interpretation of the data, and the overall approach to the study. Finally, peer review was used to provide an external check of the research process (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

Four graduate students in counseling psychology were peer reviewers for the study. The first two interviews were first open coded by each reviewer separately, followed by a meeting between the three reviewers during which the codes were reconciled into the initial coding system.

**Results**

The aim of the current study was to understand the process of acculturation of LGBT immigrants in Canada. We used the grounded theory approach to obtain an in-depth interpretive understanding of the lived experience associated with the acculturation process of LGBT immigrants. The emerged grounded theory presents the acculturation experience of LGBT immigrants over time (see Figure 1 for an integrative diagram of the emerged grounded theory). Two broad themes emerged: (a) Cultural Identity Development and (b) Sexual and Gender Identity Development. The acculturation process often occurred at the intersection of these two themes and can be understood through three chronological categories: before immigration, during the decision to immigrate, and after immigration. Within these three categories are

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**Figure 1.** Integrative diagram of cultural, sexual, and gender identity development.
multiple subcategories that emerged during the grounded theory coding procedures to form the model explaining the perceived acculturation process of LGBT immigrants. The subcategories are linked by process sequences (i.e., one subcategory was influenced by one or more other subcategories; see Figure 1). Furthermore, in addition to discussing their acculturation experiences, participants identified the important roles of the Canadian government and community organizations in making their acculturation experience positive, along with ideas for other ways these organizations can help LGBT immigrants. This additional theme that emerged is not included in Figure 1, but is reviewed at the end of the Results section.

**Cultural Identity Development and Sexual and Gender Identity Development**

The emerged grounded theory demonstrated that heterosexism and cissexism in participants’ cultures of origin were instrumental in shaping the processes of cultural identity and sexual and gender identity development of LGBT immigrants; the latter two processes comprised their acculturation experiences. The Cultural Identity Development theme refers to the main stages that emerged in the process of cultural identity formation during the acculturation process. In turn, the Sexual and Gender Identity theme describes the key stages that emerged in the process of sexual or gender identity formation during the acculturation process. These identity development stages (subcategories) are grouped within three chronological categories: before immigration, during the decision to immigrate, and after immigration. In fact, all the key milestones in the acculturation process occurred at the intersection of the two themes. For example, the early cultural identity of LGBT immigrants, strongly influenced by the heterosexism and cissexism in their culture of origin, resulted in participants struggling with acceptance of their sexual and gender identity due to both internal (e.g., internalized homo-, bi- or transphobia) and external challenges (e.g., stigma). Our findings presented next demonstrate that LGBT immigrants often found validation of their sexual and gender identity in Western values, something that was virtually impossible to find in their culture of origin. As a result, participants’ sexual and gender identity development played an important role in the development of their cultural identity. They often rejected their culture of origin and adopted a Western orientation, therefore starting to acculturate even prior to immigration. In many cases, the choice to immigrate was dictated by their desire to live a life fully consistent with their sexuality or gender, which was not possible in many countries.
Furthermore, we found that the “collaboration” between the sexual and gender and cultural parts of LGBT immigrant identities continued after immigration—the more they internalized the perceived Canadian values of acceptance and diversity, the more they shed their internalized stigma. The heterosexism and cissexism preserved in immigrant communities made the participants choose the queer community as their community of initial acculturation. Unlike their heterosexual peers, they were not limited by their ethnic community but instead were integrated into Canadian society often immediately after immigration. In turn, as the perceived Canadian values of acceptance and pride were internalized and replaced internalized stigma, the participants no longer needed to reject their culture of origin in its entirety and were able to reintegrate the positive aspects of their culture back into their lives, successfully integrating the cultural, sexual, and gender parts of their identity.

Before Immigration

In this section, we discuss the emergence of LGBT immigrants’ sexual orientation and/or gender identity in the context of the culture of their country of origin. We start by describing the process that LGBT immigrants go through as they first become aware of and form initial meaning and understanding of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Furthermore, we explore the role that values, traditions, norms, and beliefs from their countries of origin play in forming their sexual and gender identity.

Feeling different from peers. Participants often became aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity early in life. The first awareness usually came as a result of feeling different from their peers, without being able to label what it was that made them different. For some participants, it was gender nonconforming behaviors or interests. For example, some participants who were born male reported liking to play with dolls or assuming household chores traditionally associated with females in their home culture, whereas some participants born as female spoke about expressing themselves as a “tomboy.” Peers were often seen as being aggressive toward them because of these differences, and participants felt that they could not express their interests openly for fear of being bullied or excluded. For many, these experiences were their first encounters with heterosexism and cissexism in their culture of origin—it was a first clash between the cultural and sexual and gendered parts of their identity. Manuel, from Latin America, explained why the realization of being different was so scary for him:
Because you have to think that one day you will have to face everyone and say, “No, I am different.” When you are a kid, you do not want to be different. You just want to belong. Imagine, you know, when you are a teenager in school. Everybody talks about girls. You are the only one that is going to come and say: “No, I like boys.” You do not want to be different. So it is hard. And I think that kids, even though I like kids a lot, they can be pretty cruel. So if you are different, it is hard. Being called ‘fruity,’ ‘sissy,’ all the names. It is bad. You do not feel right. And when I was a kid, I used to go out and I watched the sky and just wished that an alien [would come] and [take me away] because I could not imagine my life there. I knew I was different.

Becoming aware of sexual orientation or gender identity. Most participants found themselves well-aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity at an early age, while still living in their countries of origin, due to gender nonconforming interests, experiences, or behaviors; attraction to the same-sex; or lack of attraction to a different sex. For trans participants, the awareness of sexual orientation often came before becoming aware of their gender identity. For example, Yaron, from the Middle East, remembered:

Well, my sexual orientation . . . I think I kind of came to terms with it before I realized my gender identity. So my sexual orientation, I think, was around when I was 13. For me then it was like realizing that I am perhaps a lesbian. I think only later that I started thinking about my gender in a different way. But I knew what lesbian was.

Heterosexism and cissexism in the culture of origin. Often as soon as participants became aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity, heterosexism and cissexism in the culture of origin—a central phenomenon (a core subcategory at the heart of the emerged grounded theory that was present in each of the three chronological categories)—started to play the dominant role in the development of cultural, sexual, and gender aspects of LGBT immigrant identity. The subcategories presented throughout the remainder of the Results section show that heterosexism and cissexism in the culture of origin are central to the acculturation experience of LGBT immigrants at all the main stages in the acculturation process—before immigration, during the decision to immigrate, and after immigration. For example, before immigration, heterosexism and cissexism in the culture of origin could manifest itself as a clash between the cultural and sexual and gendered parts of participants’ identity, which resulted in participants feeling negatively about these aspects of their identity. Furthermore, heterosexism and cissexism in the culture of origin often led to disconnection from their home culture, assumption of a more Western orientation, and
movement toward self-acceptance, which was instrumental in LGBT immigrants’ decision to immigrate to Canada. Finally, after immigration, heterosexism and cissexism in the culture of origin was usually responsible for the further disconnect of LGBT immigrants from their culture of origin, and for their accelerated acculturation into Canadian culture.

Participants reported numerous instances of heterosexism and cissexism in their culture of origin before immigration, during the decision to immigrate, and after immigration. For example, most of them reported that their native language stigmatizes queer sexuality. Many participants shared that their native languages do not contain nonevaluative terms to describe sexual orientations that are not heteronormative. Terms used to describe queer sexuality usually have negative connotations and are often used as curse words or derogatory terms. Denis described his native language and its use in his country in the Middle East:

> Even the word “gay” does not exist. It is really the word “pédé,” which is “faggot,” so there is not even a vocabulary just to say that somebody is of different sexual orientation. That does not really exist. You can say it in French, but in [country in the Middle East] people do not talk like that about gay people.

**Struggling with acceptance.** Awareness of their differences in terms of sexual orientation or gender identity, combined with experiences of heterosexism and cissexism, often served as the starting point of feeling “othered” in their culture of origin. As participants developed into adolescence and early adulthood they became increasingly aware of being different, they often experienced a need to understand their sexuality and gender. However, most LGBT immigrants reported not having access to any resources that would help them better understand their sexuality or gender identity—it was not something taught at school or discussed in magazines or on television. In most cases, there was no LGBT community or any social support resources available to LGBT people. Therefore, the participants often learned about their emerging sexual orientation or gender identity from the perceptions and attitudes of people surrounding them, as well as from the values, norms, and beliefs in their culture of origin. Most of the time such perceptions, values, and norms were severely negative, predominantly of a heterosexist or cissexist nature. For example, some participants first learned to understand what their sexual orientation meant from religion, thus viewing their sexuality and themselves as something sinful and perverted. Ahmed, from the Middle East, recalled that it became “really difficult” to deal with his sexuality after first learning about it from the Quran:
And I was reading Quran, and I came to one of the verses that was talking about, explicitly talking about, sex between men and how bad it is and all that, and that was my first real encounter with the explicit sex between men in any written form. I mean, even when my parents were talking about the taboos and all that, they never referred to sex between men, like that was my first time ever I was reading or hearing anything about the topic. And that is when things started to become very difficult—when I started to understand the society better, when I started to understand the terms of sex better. As you grow up, your conversations with your friends start to, especially as a teenager, you start to talk about sex a lot with your friends and you start to get this informal knowledge about sex, and that is when I realized that what I was doing was inferior to what other people were doing. And of course, from further readings I found out how this is shameful and all that, especially being a bottom.

Interestingly, although important components of LGBT immigrants’ identity, including their country of origin and religious background, did emerge on multiple occasions in the analysis, they were not saturated enough to demonstrate distinctions between acculturation trajectories of LGBT immigrants. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that even the participants from less religious societies seemed to experience similar or equivalent levels of stigma and/or exclusion on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Jean described his experience growing up in a democratic country in Western Europe:

Fifteen years ago, being gay was something not easy. Especially in the province of [a country in Western Europe]. . . . It is very hard to explain because it was not acceptable, it was not common to admit that people could be gay. . . . So the challenge was to admit to yourself that you are gay, then you have to be strong enough to tell to your family, to your friends. And back then, I knew a lot of gays who were rejected by their family. . . . Then it was very common to be rejected because you were gay. It was really common in the 80s and 90s.

**Decision to Immigrate to Canada**

This section discusses the role that participants’ perspectives towards their home culture and expectations of the immigration experience played in their decision to immigrate to Canada. For the majority of the participants, the roots of their decision to immigrate often went as far back as early childhood, to their first awareness of being different. As discussed earlier, participants mentioned feeling different from others around them because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Often, in response to their culture rejecting a
major part of their identity, the participants chose to reject their own culture as well. This rejection led to them feeling disconnected from their home culture and beginning to assume more of a Western orientation, which was instrumental in their decision to immigrate to Canada.

**Feeling disconnected from home culture.** Due to the prevalence of heterosexism and cissexism in the context in which they were living, participants often had no social support to help them deal with their emerging sexuality or gender identity. Most of them came from countries where there was no LGBT community; therefore, meeting other LGBT people with whom they could share their concerns was a challenge. In fact, a number of participants reported never meeting other LGBT people or not having any LGBT friends prior to immigrating to Canada. Moreover, they were unable to request support from their heterosexual friends because by disclosing their sexual or gender questions and concerns, they risked rejection and stigmatization. Family was also unavailable as a source of support. Participants were unable to share their sexual or gender identity with their family for fear of disappointing family members, bringing shame to the family name, and losing familial relationships. Some even spoke of the possibility of being killed by their family members as a result of the shame their sexual or gender identity would bring to the family name. Furthermore, many participants reported that in their countries, anti-LGBT stigma extends to people who stay in touch with, or support, queer friends or family, thus making the issue of finding support even more challenging. Yusuf, from South Asia, noted: “You are going to bring a big shame to the name of the family if you, if you are doing something like that.”

Thus, due to internalized heterosexism or cissexism, and external heterosexist or cissexist pressures from their culture of origin, the LGBT immigrants tended to feel negatively about their sexuality throughout their formative years. They spoke about being afraid of the implications of being different, and felt concerned about their well-being and their future. The awareness of being LGBT was associated with feelings of shame, guilt, and loneliness. They often perceived it as a burden and would have changed their sexual orientation to heterosexual if they were able. These feelings led participants to feel disconnected from their traditions, norms, culture, and ultimately, from their country of origin. For example, Fadi, from the Middle East, felt that his sexuality was a burden because it would prevent him from being understood and accepted by the society in which he lived: “I felt different, I felt like I would not be understood because of the culture . . . I felt sad most of the time that I had that burden.” Moreover, Yusuf, explained:
To be honest, I always felt a bit uncomfortable, as a misfit, back in my country. Not just because I was gay, even before that, even before realizing that, I always felt myself to not be a part of that community. I know you would ask me why. It is just different values, different traditions. I would not agree with most of them. I always felt that I would have been much better, and doing much better in a society like here. When I came here, I was pretty much aware of what I was going to expect here and I do not associate myself with my community that much now. Even when I was back home, because I was always so annoyed by everything, I acted kind of differently from everybody else. So I was getting that comment already back home, that I am different.

Beginning to acculturate by assuming Western orientation. Quite often, the only affirmative reference to the LGBT community these participants found came from Western music, film, and magazines. For many participants, the discovery of these affirmative references was an eye-opening experience. This discovery was a turning point for numerous LGBT immigrants in terms of rejecting their culture of origin and assuming a Western orientation. In fact, many immigrants felt so disconnected from their culture of origin and became so Western-oriented that they started acculturating even before immigrating to Canada. For Sergey, from Eastern Europe, Western culture was associated with affirmative gay images and the ability to be able to openly live his sexuality:

When I was growing up, and I was a teenager, an early adult, 17 years old, I was aware at a certain level that the gay culture existed in the free world. I mean I was always Western-oriented, all the time. I never listened to [country in Eastern Europe] music; I was snobbish on that part. I knew that people can be openly gay, and there was Madonna, and there was all this crap, and gay dancers, and that. Things “gay associated” with Madonna, Pet Shop Boys and all that crap, you know. Very romantic gay images.

Deciding to immigrate to Canada. For most participants, heterosexism and cissexism in their culture of origin led to disconnection from their home culture, assumption of a more Western orientation, and movement toward self-acceptance. These processes, in turn, were instrumental in their decision to immigrate to Canada. Participants explained that because of their desire to explore or live their sexuality or gender identity, staying in their home countries was not an option. Indeed, most participants felt that immigration would not be something they would have considered were it not for heterosexism and cissexism. They would have had no reason to leave their country of origin, where they had strong family and support networks, in order to begin anew in an unknown country. However, the need to live their sexuality and gender
identity, and have it accepted by people around them, prevailed and was instrumental in their decision to immigrate to Canada. According to Sergey:

If I were not LGBT, I would probably not be in Canada to start with. As I told you, I came here because of my sexuality. If I was a straight person, I would probably stay in [a country in Eastern Europe]. Because it is easy, you have all your language, you know your culture; you have your family and friends, infrastructure, family, circle of friends, all set for you. . . . And I was LGBT from the beginning, so I could not live this life the way they do unless I am not being true to myself.

Likewise, Luisa, from Latin America, explained:

My childhood was very different from [that of] most children. I knew that I did not want to live back home the rest of my life. I knew that I wanted to get away. I knew ever since I was 8, 9, 10 that my life was not going to be there, that I have something else, that I just have to find my way to get where I want to be. And that is exactly what I did . . . that is how I came up with the plan of leaving home. And so I did leave home, and I am grateful because here it is very different. Life is totally different, you know? You can express your sexual orientation, or whatever you feel without being as stigmatized as you probably would be back home right now.

Participants discussed hearing about the large and well-established LGBT community in Canada, or having traveled to Canada themselves and discovering the Canadian LGBT community. Such discoveries were liberating for participants, as they were validating and affirming of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Participants felt that immigrating to Canada would present them with the opportunity to escape the heterosexism and cissexism of their culture of origin, to be able to live their sexuality and gender identity comfortably, and form a long-term relationship, possibly leading to marriage. Thus, for many LGBT immigrants, coming out of the closet was equated with coming out of their culture of origin. However, as will be discussed next, heterosexism and cissexism continued to play an important role in the development of the cultural, sexual, and gender identities of LGBT immigrants following immigration.

After Immigration to Canada

Although LGBT immigrants often had an understanding of what life in Canada is like, they still reported experiencing a culture shock upon their arrival. Soon after immigration, they became aware of cultural and language barriers. Despite
this, many participants reported making a conscious decision to integrate and acculturate to Canadian society due to their strong orientation towards Western values and lifestyle, which developed prior to immigration.

**Evolution of cultural identity.** Although some participants still felt closer to their home culture than to Canadian culture after spending a few years in Canada, most reported feeling like they had integrated both their home culture and Canadian culture due to a strong initial orientation toward acculturation. Heidi, from the Middle East, said:

> I think culturally I am half-half. I am not Canadian. . . . I do not believe that I am [a person from a country in the Middle East] or Canadian, I am an open-minded guy. . . . I mix cultures everywhere. I am not more [a person from a country in the Middle East] or more Canadian.

A majority of the participants enjoyed learning about other cultures and having a diverse circle of friends in Canada. Some participants noted feeling more Canadian in terms of self-identification after spending a few years in Canada because they feel Canadian values and beliefs are better aligned with their own in comparison to those of their home country—they felt more comfortable and accepted as an LGBT person in Canadian society. Denis, for example, lived in two countries prior to immigrating to Canada. Still, he reported feeling Canadian because Canadian society reflects more of who he is, compared to the two other countries that are also a strong part of his background:

> I would say Canadian, Canadian or even, even more and more Quebecois. I felt that quite early, that I am more comfortable here, this society reflects more of who I am than either the [Eastern European country] or the [liberal Middle Eastern country] society. If I had to choose between [liberal Middle Eastern country] and [Eastern European country], probably I would say [Eastern European country] I feel closest to. But still, I do not feel [a person from the Eastern European country], I do not feel [a person from liberal Middle Eastern country], but I do feel Canadian. It happened quite early in the process, I mean, after a few years in Canada I felt like “yeah, this is my place.”

**Sexual orientation or gender identity not accepted by ethnic community.** Although the participants acknowledged that their ethnic community in Canada was more accepting of their sexuality and gender identity than the community in their country of origin, they believed that this increased acceptance was merely a function of the legal protection afforded to LGBT people in Canada. Therefore, participants often reported feeling uncomfortable with being openly LGBT in
their community of origin in Canada, continuing to hide their sexuality or gender identity, even though they were out everywhere else. Sergey explained:

It is most of the time that I do not believe in the good faith of my community. I do not think they will understand. And I do not want to start repeating, to explain the story, how it works. I am not interested in explaining. I did a couple of times, explained how gay things work, and how we are attracted and what is what but not interested in explaining to everybody . . . I am not going to talk about it, unless I want to confront them.

Participants felt that the attitudes and the way immigrants from their country of origin related to them changed dramatically as soon as they disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity. They reported feeling judged and not genuinely accepted, with the focus shifting solely to the sexual or gender aspects of their identity. Participants felt that being out about their sexuality and/or gender identity in their community of origin resulted in them becoming the object of gossip and stigma, and being excluded from the social life of their ethnic community. Overall, experiences within their ethnic communities were similar to their experiences in their country of origin, which was often the reason they immigrated to Canada. Moreover, participants often felt as if the integration of both parts of their identity would be impossible if they were to stay involved with their community of origin. They often felt that they had to choose between their sexual and/or gender identity or their cultural identity. Many chose their sexuality and/or gender identity, and therefore, unlike most immigrants from their country, they did not enculturate to their community of origin in Canada. This often led to distancing themselves from their ethnic community.

Losing touch with ethnic community. It was mainly heterosexism and cissexism in the culture of origin that was responsible for the further disconnect of LGBT immigrants from their culture of origin and their accelerated acculturation into Canadian culture. In fact, most participants reported choosing to relinquish contact with their ethnic community in Canada after immigration due to experiences of heterosexism and cissexism similar to those they faced in their country of origin. For example, Ahmed felt that people from his country “import their thoughts” from their country of origin, rendering his experience identical to what it was back home, preventing him from feeling comfortable about his sexuality:

People from my country who move as a family or as a community, who try to connect here as a community, they just import all their thoughts from back home, so you are just suddenly in a mini-[conservative country in the Middle East], you know—it is not different from what it was there, so I would not be able to openly declare my sexuality or come out.
Yusuf also spoke about not being able to be himself in his ethnic community. He felt that it would be impossible for him to be out if he were to stay in touch with his community, and he made a conscious decision to distance himself from it:

When I moved, I kind of decided not to be in touch with people from my own country. I just wanted to start from scratch, or start a new life where I do not have those feelings, or I do not have to deal with the same thing that I was dealing with back home. You know, I would still have to pretend with them, with people from my own background, I would still feel uncomfortable and I would still pretend that I am not what I am. So that is what I did not want to do. So here I wanted to be what I am, so that kind of required me to not see them that much and to keep my distance from them . . . If you are in touch and are part of [South Asian country] community, then you will still be hiding yourself. So you still would not be able to be out. You still will not be able to be out with your community . . . within your community.

As the participants grew increasingly comfortable with their sexual and/or gender identity, the need for acceptance of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity by people around them also grew. The development of sexual and gender identity was influenced by the perceived Canadian values of acceptance and diversity. The participants thus further rejected internalized heterosexist or cissexist notions, and began to internalize the values of pride and acceptance of their sexual and gender identity. This, in turn, facilitated a further disconnect from their ethnic communities.

**Evolution of sexual or gender identity.** Integration into the LGBT community was not always as smooth as the participants had expected. First, participants’ internalized heterosexism and cissexism did not disappear once they crossed the border. Furthermore, they reported experiencing yet another culture shock due to the culture of sex positivity and overall openness of sexual expression prevalent in the Canadian LGBT community. For example, some of the realities of Canadian LGBT people, such as polyamory, open relationships, or bathhouses, were counterintuitive and difficult to comprehend for many participants.

Some participants struggled to accept the new reality in Canada because of their internalized heterosexism and cissexism and cultural values from their country of origin. For example, many participants interpreted sex positivity as promiscuity, something that is looked down upon in their cultures of origin, which made it challenging for them to relate to Canadian queer culture. Other participants spoke of feeling like the LGBT communities in Canada are “overdoing the celebration of sexuality,” referring to such events
as pride parades and other events targeted at celebrating queer sexuality. Therefore, a number of the participants did not feel like they belonged in the LGBT community at first. Yet, the need to further explore their sexual and gender identity and the lack of acceptance in their community of origin continued to be strong motivating factors in working through such challenges. Denis explained:

When I came here, I had all the sex notions that I had in [a country in the Middle East], that people do have in [a country in the Middle East]. There was never such a sexual revolution, so certain things are not viewed as [they are] here. I was kind of shocked, I go to a bathhouse, and I see people [having sex] everywhere, you know. That was shocking for me to see. But now it is not shocking. . . . I had to go over certain shedding, letting go, so I can do that, because for me it was stigmatized, as if I was lowering myself in a way. So it would take some time. And then I realized—it is bulls***, nothing bad happens to me basically, it is fine to engage in this sort of behavior, and it is fine. . . . [After] several years, I do not know exactly, it was really gradual, but you know, at certain point, I just hit the point when I felt free, and I realized that there is no moral that keeps me anymore.

Queer identity becomes stronger than cultural identity. Most participants reported working through the initial culture shock and finding their social circle within the LGBT community fairly quickly. In fact, with the exception of the challenges mentioned previously, participants reported having mostly positive experiences with LGBT communities in Canada. To begin, most participants did not have an LGBT community in their countries of origin, which made finding a large and well-established queer community in Canada significant on its own. Participants found the community flourishing and diverse, and seeing that queer people are accepted and respected in Canada was also validating and encouraged them to get in touch with, and explore, their sexuality and gender identity. This usually resulted in their queer identity becoming more prominent. They often praised the education and awareness surrounding LGBT issues offered by the Canadian government and community. They spoke about feeling safe in queer areas of their cities, and even outside of them, and finally not being afraid about being attacked on the basis of their sexuality or gender identity. They spoke about the acceptance and support they received in the Canadian LGBT community that made them feel like an essential part of it. Yaron was one of the few participants who was able to maintain some type of connection with his ethnic community. Still, he felt that the queer community was his “welcome card to Canada” and attributed a lot of success during the early stages of integration to his queer identity:
In terms of community and feeling a part of something, the first community that I have felt a part of here in Canada was the queer community. You know, it was a double whammy. Like not only do I feel a part of the queer community, finally I am queer and finally I can be queer with other queers but also, oh my god, I found a place in Canada. . . . I am not feeling able to connect with the [Middle Eastern] community here, which I also tried because I was like: “Oh, [Middle Eastern] community—that could be my community too.” And that is a community that I am part of but more peripherally. Like I worked in the [Middle Eastern] community and accessed services in the [Middle Eastern] community, but the first community that I felt fully integrated, it was like a welcome card to Canada too—was the queer community as well. So it was major for me. Because not only am I queer but also I have a place in Canada. Like “Oh, I can meet people. I am meeting new people, people are interested in me.” You know, I am building friendships through this community, and I am going out, and I am finding work, and I am finding apartments. The queer community and that network of people has helped me find a job in the past, find health care practitioners, helped me transition, has helped me find a place to live. . . .

Thus, participants felt that being queer presented them with the unique opportunity to experience life in Canada to a greater extent compared to their heterosexual peers. The participants spoke about not being “stuck in the ethnic ghetto,” but instead integrating into the larger Canadian society immediately after arrival. The vast majority of the participants felt that they had a significantly easier time in terms of building a diverse circle of friends and seeing the larger picture of life in Canada through the exposure provided by the LGBT community.

**Integrating sexual and cultural parts of identity.** As was discussed earlier, participants often perceived the Western lifestyle and values as superior to those of their culture of origin and, therefore, were eager to understand the way Canadians live, adapting accordingly. They often spoke about the process of acculturation in terms of shedding the notions and values of their home culture and adjusting their behaviors and ways of expressing themselves to the Canadian lifestyle in order to build their new identity. The more acculturated the immigrants became, the more the internalized heterosexism and cissexism stemming from the culture of origin was replaced by the Canadian positive affirmative values encouraging sexual and gender diversity. Even some of the participants who spoke about experiencing great discomfort with accepting their sexuality felt positive about it after spending sufficient time in Canada. When describing the way he felt about his sexuality initially, Denis explained that he would “flip the switch” if he was given a choice to become heterosexual, even a few years after coming to Canada. However, the way he feels now is significantly different:
Somehow, before my 30s, I started to realize—I had a boyfriend then, and I had a really cool relationship, and I realized that I would not “flip that switch.” And that was slightly before, or around being 30. So I would not, I would not go back.

Finally, once LGBT immigrants reached a certain level of integration of previously conflicting parts of their identity, the need to reject their culture of origin significantly decreased. Many participants reported missing and appreciating certain aspects of their culture of origin once they achieved a level of self-acceptance of their sexuality or gender identity and integration into Canadian society. Thus, the need to reject their ethnic community and culture lessened and they were able to successfully reintegrate some aspects of their culture of origin back into their life. Yaron explained:

I feel like I am doing a lot of work of forgiving and coming to terms with some of the trauma I had back home, and realizing things that I like about myself that are connected to my culture, and wanting to be closer to my family.

These cultural identity and sexual and gender identity processes all translated into participants feeling that they were able to live fully and authentically.

**Role of Canadian Government and Community Organizations**

As noted earlier, in addition to discussing their acculturation experiences, participants detailed the important role that the Canadian government and community organizations played in their positive acculturation experience, as well as their ideas for other ways these organizations can help LGBT immigrants. In addition, participants provided a wealth of data relating to government and community organizations that did not fall within the broad theme of explaining acculturation. As such, this additional theme that emerged relating to government and community organizations will be reviewed next.

Data analysis demonstrated that the vast majority of the participants were fully satisfied with the help they received in Canada. Most participants struggled at first when asked about what the Canadian government and community organizations could do in order to make the integration of LGBT immigrants more comfortable. However, it is important to keep in mind that because most LGBT immigrants came from countries where being LGBT was either illegal or strongly discouraged, receiving equal treatment in Canada was already significant for them. For example, Philip, from Eastern Europe, felt that the government is doing enough to help LGBT immigrants because there is no discrimination during the immigration process:
Honestly, I think that the government of Canada is doing enough. There is no discrimination, if you are gay or straight, I think that the immigration process is pretty much the same. Maybe you get more points if you are married and you got children. But I find it fair because Canada needs young and healthy people, this is the logic.

However, some participants felt that governmental support of LGBT immigrants who come from countries where queer people are persecuted should not stop once they cross the border. Many of them spoke about how the effects of internalized heterosexism and cissexism continue even after crossing the border and of the importance of disseminating the message of tolerance and acceptance among immigrants. Other participants also voiced the need for specialized mental health support services to help LGBT immigrants navigate and integrate the different, and often conflicting, parts of their identities during the settlement process. Sofia, from Eastern Europe, explained the need for social workers who are well-versed in both LGBT and immigrant issues:

I know we had a lot of assistance from [an immigrant-focused community agency]. . . . They have a whole division that assists [people from a country in Eastern Europe] immigrants with different things, in terms of settling into their life. . . . I do not know if they have something that targets specifically people of non-heterosexual orientation, LGBT people. . . . So I think that could be a gap to fill in because . . . none of those cultures are extremely welcoming to LGBT people. I think they could have something that would allow people to reconcile these different parts of their identity because people definitely sometimes feel like they have to choose [between their ethnic and sexual orientation identities]. I think they could have social workers who are trained in terms of dealing with LGBT issues and LGBT identity.

Many other participants also highlighted the importance of offering specialized settlement services to inform LGBT immigrants of risks they may not know about, given their cultural knowledge. For example, Ahmed felt that immigrants are often less aware of the dangers associated with condomless sex and are less concerned with safer-sex practices, and thus they represent a group at risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. He explained that most of the immigrants from his region chose not to discuss any health concerns with their doctors for fear of being outed and suffering other negative consequences. Therefore, Ahmed felt that LGBT immigrants need to be made aware of the existence of LGBT-friendly health care resources:
I think awareness would be very important. . . . Lots of [immigrants] have issues; lots of them do not really have the awareness, most importantly the health awareness. In [a country in the Middle East], the HIV, for example, the HIV issue is not that serious because the percentages are way lower than here. So people are not as careful when they have sex with others. But if they have the same mentality when they arrive here, chances are they will get HIV in no time. So they need to know this, they need to feel more comfortable with pointing out their issues to doctors. Because I am one of the people who could never go see a doctor with certain health issues in [a country in the Middle East] because I was afraid that the doctor would find out that I am having gay sex in life—I did not really want to go through that embarrassment. So people have to be reassured here that it is fine to address their issues, to speak about them and seek healthcare or any other help they need with their sexuality-related problems.

Elsa, from Western Europe, also felt that the government should be targeting people from ethnic communities, especially the ones where LGBT sexuality is traditionally stigmatized or where religion plays a strong role. She explained, “If they cannot be out at work or they feel that their religious beliefs contradict their orientation—I am sure that for those populations it would be way harder to integrate themselves into society for a whole range of reasons.” Katrina, from Eastern Europe, also felt that there is a need for programs to cater specifically to the needs of LGBT immigrants during their integration process, “They have some sorts of other instructional programs for assimilating or getting comfortable with the culture of Canada, and there should also be a program that is accessible to LGBT immigrants.”

Furthermore, many participants spoke about the importance of the utilization of modern technology as a means of reaching out to the segments of the population that are hard to reach because they are not openly LGBT, and thus would not have access to LGBT resources. Ahmed believed that making use of dating websites and mobile device applications to target new LGBT immigrants would help to reach those populations:

I believe that most of the people who come from the Middle East would use [the] Internet to date. So maybe by having sort of announcements in dating websites, dating gay websites, to direct people, maybe even having sort of agreements with these dating websites to guide people, not only give them space to meet other guys . . . because I know that any gay man who comes will start looking for sexual dates through the Internet, in the beginning at least.
Discussion

Using a grounded theory approach, we examined the acculturation experiences of LGBT immigrants in Canada. The results revealed a dual, interrelated process of cultural identity development and sexual and gender identity development, which accounts for the acculturation experiences of this group of LGBT immigrants. The integrative diagram presented in Figure 1 demonstrates that the important steps and milestones in the process of acculturation happen in the overlap of the two themes—the negotiation of their cultural identity and their sexual and gender identity. These two processes are always co-occurring such that the culture of their country of origin, as well as Canadian culture, strongly influenced their sexual and gender identity development before immigration, during the decision to immigrate, and after immigration.

Importantly, the theory clearly demonstrates the important role that heterosexism and cissexism in the culture of origin played in the participants’ development of cultural, sexual, and gender identities over time. Perhaps what is unique to this population is how heterosexism and cissexism continue to influence the experience of LGBT immigrants even after immigration. The grounded theory findings suggest that for many LGBT immigrants, the acculturation process begins long before the actual immigration process, as LGBT immigrants often assume a Western orientation in response to heterosexism and cissexism in their culture of origin. Although most researchers view the acculturation process starting after immigration to the host country (e.g., Chun, Organista, & Marín, 2003; Sam & Berry, 2006), this experience does not seem to be the case for LGBT immigrants.

It is important to mention that most of the existing research utilizes a bimdimensional conceptualization of acculturation. Acculturation has been traditionally seen as an immigration-based process, defined as a bicultural interaction between heritage and receiving cultures (Ozer & Schwartz, 2016). However, recent research on acculturation introduces the notions of globalization-based and remote acculturation, suggesting that in culturally complex contexts, the acculturation process may involve an interplay of multiple intersecting cultural streams. Exposure to globalization could induce the beginning of the acculturation process without international migration having taken place. For example, similar to the participants of the current study, research participants in a recent study by Ozer and Schwartz (2016) experienced globalization-based and remote acculturation by being exposed to global cultural streams without international migration, while continuing to live in the North Indian region of Ladakh. Furthermore, Ferguson and Bornstein (2012) found that remote acculturation, which they define as indirect interaction between geographically separate cultures, often happens
through popular mass media. Such was the case in the current study, where multiple participants spoke of assuming a Western orientation and starting to acculturate prior to immigration to Canada as a result of exposure to Western media sources.

The recently introduced tridimensional acculturation framework (Ferguson, Bornstein, & Pottinger, 2012; Ferguson, Iturbite, & Gordon, 2014) seems to be a good fit when it comes to capturing the experience of LGBT immigrants. This framework builds on the bidimensional acculturation framework by Berry (1997) used by most of the studies reviewed in this paper. The tridimensional acculturation framework reflects the experiences of minority immigrants possessing three cultural dimensions. For example, Ferguson et al. (2012, 2014) described the tridimensional acculturation experience of Jamaican immigrants to the U.S., where 39% to 46% of the participants were found to be tricultural—they had a strong orientation toward Jamaican culture, European American, and African American cultures. Similarly, LGBT immigrants in the current study can be seen as acculturating along three dimensions: the culture of the country of origin, Canadian culture, and queer culture. Furthermore, the participants in our study reported having both greater culture shock and greater identity-related adaptation than their heterosexual (and presumably bicultural) counterparts, consistent with findings of Ferguson et al.’s (2014) study of Jamaican immigrants. Participants in the current study often described experiencing culture shock as they tried to navigate the sex-positive Canadian queer culture with the often conservative heterosexist and cissexist norms of their cultures of origin; on the other hand, they reported that having multiple dimensions to their cultural identities was adaptive, noting benefits such as better diversified social networks, a broader spectrum of life experiences, and ability to appreciate and adjust to different norms. As a result, the participants in both our study and Ferguson et al.’s (2014) study demonstrated a stronger proclivity for cultural acculturation compared to bicultural immigrants, often due to similar factors. For example, tricultural individuals in both studies, being outsiders to both native majority and host countries’ minority groups, felt more compelled to establish new social connections and affiliations as newcomers. In addition, both Jamaican immigrants to the U.S. and LGBT immigrants to Canada went through the process of remote acculturation, as described previously. This, in turn, facilitated and accelerated participants’ cultural integration into the cultures of the host countries upon immigration.

However, our findings related to sexual orientation or gender identity of LGBT immigrants prior to immigration are different from most of the literature reviewed. Whereas previous research has indicated that immigrants often do not self-identify as LGBT prior to immigration, the vast majority of our participants were well aware of their sexual and gender identity prior to
leaving their native countries. In fact, their sexual orientation or gender identity was the main factor in their decision to immigrate to Canada. This finding seems at odds with Kuntsman (2003) who conceptualized sexual identity formation as not fully developed, but as cycling through various stages postimmigration. Among our participants, as a result of sexual and/or gender identity being central to their decision to immigrate to Canada, many chose to fully disconnect from their ethnic communities in order to be open about their sexuality and/or gender identity. Boulden (2009) noted that LGBT immigrants try to manage multiple parts of their identity by “living in several worlds at once” (p. 148), thus being forced to constantly bounce between their heterosexual immigrant and LGBT mainstream communities. However, most participants in this study chose the local LGBT community as their main acculturation community and relinquished connection with their ethnic community, thus avoiding the struggle of having to deny some aspect of their identity.

Likewise, most findings of the current study do not support the existing literature on immigrant populations in general. Research on acculturation in general reveals that strong communities, supportive families, and spirituality and religion serve as key protective factors (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Indeed, family, community, and religion do buffer the effects of racism and discrimination for heterosexual immigrants, but for the LGBT immigrants in this study, they were primary sources of stigma and rejection. Most of the participants spoke of losing social support from their ethnic or religious communities as soon as their sexual orientation or gender identity was disclosed. Additionally, for most participants, family became their largest source of anxiety rather than a source of support. Although the current results diverge from existing research on heterosexual immigrants, they are consistent with the limited research examining sexual minority immigrants. The findings of Boulden (2009), focusing on the experience of Hmong gay and lesbian immigrants, are consistent with our results. Boulden also found that family, community, and religion were primary risk factors for rejection and discrimination for sexual minority immigrants.

The current results are also in line with some extant findings regarding sexual minority immigrants. Kuntsman (2003) argued that queer immigrants often view immigration as a discovery of LGBT identity, detachment from their culture of origin, and regrounding in the host country’s queer community. Participant narratives in the study by Kuntsman usually reflected a personal transformation process accompanied by a geographic move in search of a new, queer home; for these participants, immigration was a way of transitioning into their new LGBT identity. The participants
in our research study similarly spoke about moving to Canada as means of leaving heterosexism and cissexism behind and building their new queer identity in Canada. This finding is also consistent with the research of Bianchi et al. (2007), which suggested that many Latino gay men reported immigrating to the U.S. to escape homonegativity and to acquire greater sexual freedom.

**Limitations**

The main limitation of the present study is related to the challenges in gaining access to closeted participants who are disconnected from the LGBT community. Although participants in this study varied in their level of outness, and some considered themselves closeted for the most part, still they were accepting of their sexual identity and/or gender identity and “out enough” for us to be able to gain access to them. Thus, our sample may have been comprised of participants who are accepting enough of their sexual and gender identity to self-disclose in a research setting, which may not be representative of the larger LGBT immigrant community.

Also, in the context of this study, we treated LGBT immigrants as a homogeneous group. To generate a grounded theory, the study focused on identifying trends and themes that are common across various groups of LGBT immigrants. However, it is important to keep in mind that LGBT immigrants in Canada are a diverse group, and several unique features (e.g., country of origin, age at time of immigration, time spent in Canada, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, religion or spiritual beliefs) define individuals’ acculturation experience and outcomes. Furthermore, this study focused on the acculturation experience of LGBT immigrants in Canada. It is possible that some aspects of the model might not be fully representative of the experience of an important segment of LGBT newcomers to Canada, namely LGBT refugees, whose motivations for immigration are likely different from those of participants in the current study.

An additional limitation is that study participants were recruited through convenience sampling and snowball sampling using the social networks of the research team members. Accordingly, the recruiting method used may inherently contain sampling bias. For example, nearly half of the participants in the current study held advanced levels of education (i.e., 9 out of 20 participants held at least a master’s degree). This outcome may be a function of the recruiting method, given that the researchers themselves hold advanced degrees and likely know a higher proportion of people with similar formal education backgrounds. Thus, our results may have been different with a sample of LGBT immigrants with less formal education.
Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

Despite the limitations described, the current study offers implications for practice, policy, and research. The results suggest that understanding the role that culture of origin plays in the acculturation of LGBT immigrants is essential when designing interventions for, and doing clinical work with, LGBT immigrants. Thus, counseling psychologists need to examine LGBT immigrants’ cultural scripts to understand the ways they influence immigrants’ self-identification, acculturation process, and well-being.

Participants in the present study identified heterosexism and cissexism in their culture of origin as their biggest challenge, as these factors left them feeling displaced from their ethnic communities. For example, they mentioned how concealment of sexual identity due to the fear of shaming one’s family is often given less attention in mainstream LGBT support groups, despite the regularity of this experience among LGBT immigrants. In fact, the lack of interventions focused on family-centered values is an important gap to close in mental health service provision to queer immigrants, as our research showed that such values play an important role in defining LGBT immigrants’ attitudes toward their sexuality. This is consistent with previous research (Colon, 2001), which suggests involving the family members of LGBT immigrants in the delivery of health services whenever possible. For example, research by Yoshikawa et al. (2004) identified that, due to family-centeredness of many LGBT immigrant cultures, those with low levels of family support are at high risk for contracting HIV. As such, facilitating and fostering discussions about discrimination in family and friendship networks is important in reducing HIV risk behaviors among LGBT immigrants. Such findings are well-aligned with those of the current study, as virtually every participant noted the important role of family and community in the development and acceptance (or challenges to acceptance) of their sexual and gender identity. Finding creative and unique ways to include family members in mental health interventions seems warranted. For example, siblings or cousins of clients could be offered psychoeducation on how to act as allies and to collaborate on larger-scale family interventions focused on acceptance of clients’ identities.

In regard to public policy implications, participants felt that it should be the role of government and community organizations to facilitate the introduction of LGBT immigrant programs into various ethnocultural communities. Specialized settlement services that provide education and awareness about LGBT immigrants in Canada are needed. Citizenship and Immigration Canada could introduce such programs through existing immigrant settlement agencies. Currently, Canadian immigrant settlement agencies already offer a multitude of programs that are customized for specific immigrant groups (e.g., services for older adult immigrants). Settlement services could
be advertised through the media and newspapers associated with these ethnic communities and delivered in their native languages. Moreover, these services could be included in the standard information packages that all immigrants receive upon their arrival to Canada. If implemented, settlement services could reach LGBT immigrants in their ethnic communities, socialize the community into Canadian LGBT acceptance, and reinforce the message that LGBT immigrants are welcome in Canada.

In terms of research, counseling psychology stands to benefit from cross-cultural studies between Canada and the U.S., as well as further research specific to the Canadian context that addresses the differences between the experiences of LGBT immigrants in these countries. This study showed that LGBT immigrants in Canada are a diverse group and that several unique variables define individuals’ acculturation experience and outcome, such as level of acculturation prior to arriving to Canada, ability to access and utilize LGBT-immigrant specific resources and settlement services, and presence or effectiveness of support networks in both ethnic and LGBT communities. Future research should identify the unique risk and resilience factors associated with these variables to better inform culturally relevant interventions. Certainly, identifying segments of the LGBT immigrants who are most at risk of negative health outcomes is also an important step in developing customized, culturally relevant micro- and macro-level programs and interventions. For example, engaging at-risk LGBT immigrants, such as individuals who are closeted and not in contact with local queer communities, requires that we understand their unique challenges. Finally, a natural next step in this research program would be the design of studies to explore the acculturation processes of LGBT immigrants at various intervals following their immigration, as well as identify the variables responsible for respective acculturation outcomes. Quantitative research could test the theory presented in the present study by collecting and analyzing data from a significantly larger, representative sample of participants.

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