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# The role of faith in the experience of grief among sexually diverse individuals: a systematic review

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## ABSTRACT

This Prisma-compliant review summarises the intersections of faith, grief, and sexes, or sexualities. Following the protocol, the authors searched 11 electronic databases and three publisher collections. The search was limited to empirical research published in English between 1980 and July 2020 that explored the impact of faith, religion, or spirituality on the grief experiences of sexually diverse individuals. After reviewing abstracts and full texts, from a total of 5,670 papers, five met the selection criteria and were systematically reviewed and quality assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme. Thematic analysis found that rituals and rites of passage were seen to assist the sexually diverse bereaved in maintaining valuable connections with the deceased, accepting the finality of the loss, accessing social support, and making meaning through bereavement. Prominent in the reviewed literature were the strategies of spiritual coping, primarily by facilitated personal and spiritual growth, beliefs in spiritual transcendence, and spiritual resources. Of particular note, was that all the studies were conducted in the '90s and did not include transgender or nonbinary participants leading to significant gaps in our understanding. Further research is needed to investigate the current interplay between faith and grief across gender identity and sexuality spectrums.

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religion; spirituality; grief;  
LGBTQIA+; sexually diverse

## Background

The role of faith, religion and spirituality in grief is changing across society. In spite of these changes, faith, religion, and spirituality continue to play an important role in the way people grieve (Garces-Foley, 2014). Non-heteronormative sexual identity and non-patriarchal gender identities are often seen as incompatible with religious beliefs. Research has highlighted the disconnect from belief once one publicly expresses their diverse sexual orientation or non-normative identity (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Faith still plays a part in sexually diverse people's lives when grieving the loss of a loved one, but the knowledge base remains underdeveloped. This paper addresses a significant gap by systematically reviewing empirical studies that have examined the role of faith in the grief experiences of sexually diverse people. To date, there have been no previously published systematic reviews about this topic. Throughout, we use the term sexually diverse people and understand it as a reference to those individuals who seek sexual or romantic relationships with the same and/or multiple genders, but recognise and refer to the term LGBTQIA+ when discussing evidence from other studies as it better reflects how those have reported on the data. In this review, the acronym LGBTQIA+

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encompasses Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Agender, Aromantic, and all gender, sex, and sexuality identities not fitting in the normative features of society. Further, this introduction uses the acronym LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, or Questioning) to refer to literature that has not focused on intersex identities, to maintain the accuracy of information.

According to Shuchter and Zisook (1993, p. 32), religious faith is 'one of the most frequently used and effective means of coping with death'. Among other authors, Becker et al. (2007) and Wortmann and Park (2008) made observations that indeed confirm this by emphasising the benefits of spirituality and religiosity when coping with losses and death. Religion, nonetheless, in the last few decades, and especially since the 1960s with the first waves of migration following the Second World War, has seen many changes in the way people perceive it, associate with it, or believe in it.

As Western societies progress and evolve, individuals belong to organised religions less and less, becoming more secular (Davie, 2014). This secularity has by no means led to the elimination of religion but the embrace of a more personal and spiritual endeavour (Coleman, 2018), what Davie (1990) called *believing without belonging*. An alternative to this view is presented by Hervieu-Léger (2000), who embraced the idea that religion and faith have not declined, but their meaning and ways individuals associate with them have transformed. The main difference between the two approaches is the following: Harvieu-Léger suggests that the term spirituality refers to the transformed version of religion, rather than a concept in its own right, as suggested by Davie (1990).

Faith, religion, and spirituality remain important aspects of people's lives, regardless of the abovementioned changes. These human identities often become psychosocial resources at times of personal, familial or societal crises (Galea, 2018; Haynes et al., 2017; Wortmann & Park, 2008). Crises vary in depth, magnitude, and scope, and in every case lead to outcomes that are either reversible or not. The latter case contains losses by death, one such crisis that impacts people's lives and is typically expressed with grief and mourning. Research has explored continuously the intersections of faith, religion, spirituality and death, grief and mourning generally (Doka & Morgan, 2016; Gorer, 1977; Phillips, 1970), but also more specifically about chronic illness and end of life care (Balboni & Balboni, 2017; Daaleman, 2000; Jenkins & Pargament, 1995; Pentaris, 2019). A niche area of research that links these two subjects is the exploration of the role of religion and spirituality in grieving.

According to Koenig and Bowman (2013, p. 30), religious institutions, as well as unorganised faith and belief systems, provide a 'community of faith' that offers social support to individuals, families, and communities that grieve. Numerous studies either measure the prevalence of religiosity when grieving or examine the lived experiences of those who are grieving through a religious or non-religious perspectives frames. Some examples include Kurian (2014), whose work connected faith, spirituality, and healthy grieving among adolescents. Cowchock et al. (2010) argued that faith could be of great importance when grieving after a pregnancy loss; similarly, Klaassen et al. (2015) argued that following parental loss, faith, and religion turn into sources of support. Studies emphasised the positive impact of faith and religion on the grieving process following homicide (Wellman, 2014); or the positive impact of religious belief in older adults when grieving the loss of a spouse (Damianakis & Marziali, 2012); and the role that religion and spirituality play in online suicide bereavement (Krysinska et al., 2014). Lastly, the study by Bohannon (1991) sets the ground for future research that shows that higher levels of religiosity and church attendance are positively associated with higher levels of death anxiety. Yet, this does not negate abundant findings in studies like Cowchock et al. (2011), who explored the correlations between variables in the Perinatal Grief Scale, the Impact Event Scale, the Duke Depression Inventory, the Generalised Anxiety Disorder-7, and the Hoge Scale for Intrinsic Religiosity. Such findings remind us of how religion and faith become coping strategies for learning how to process a loss and express grief.

Although the breadth of the existing literature in this area is wide, there are aspects of grief that have received limited research attention and continue to deem further investigation; namely the role of faith, religion, and spirituality among grieving LGBTQIA+ individuals. Beagan and Hattie (2015) examined the experiences of LGBTQ people when transitioning between spiritual or religious belief

systems. This study highlighted that once individuals publicly disclosed their sexual or gender identity, they also experienced a spiritual crisis. The same authors found three forms of occupational adaptation: reduced participation and engagement with religious institutions, shifting the meaning of engagement with religion, and converting belief systems altogether. The findings about occupational adaptation are new here, but the religious or spiritual crisis that follows the public acknowledgement of LGBTQ identities is not. According to Hart (1953), religious institutions and scripts have more comfortably promoted malicious ideas in recent history and enabled the hatred of LGBTQ people and communities. As Hart explained, ‘religious freedom’ in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century can also be called anti-LGBTQ bigotry; an idea that repelled LGBTQ individuals by the thousands (Michaelson, 2011). Nonetheless, many members of LGBTQIA+ communities worldwide maintain their religious beliefs and practices (Comstock, 2011; Westwood, 2017).

Many studies have focused on faith and religiosity vis-à-vis HIV/AIDS and (gay) men. An example is Franks et al. (1991), who explored religious variables to death anxiety among gay men with and without AIDS and argued the positive correlations between high levels of religiosity and death anxiety. Further, Cody (2000) investigated the lived experiences of adults self-identified as HIV-positive injection drug users. This exploration intended to uncover both challenges and coping strategies in relation to being HIV-positive, whether since the HIV/AIDS crisis or in more recent times. Such studies are important and have added to the body of knowledge; yet, these studies do not explore the interconnectedness of faith, religiosity, LGBTQIA+ status, and grief or bereavement.

The important role that faith, religion and spirituality play in death and grief, the ongoing debates between religious and LGBTQIA+ rights, as well as the continuous religious and spiritual affiliations among LGBTQIA+ communities, beg the question, ‘What role does faith play in the experience of grief among LGBTQIA+ adults?’ O’Brien et al. (2002) reported that both heterosexual and same-gender attracted men who had religious beliefs and belonged to a religious institution found faith communities to be of instrumental support to them and their mourning of their dead spouse. Studies like this are scarce, and often lack the external validity to gain more insight about the wider community of LGBTQIA+ individuals. This paper aims to review available empirical studies that explore the role of faith when grieving, among LGBTQIA+ individuals, and accumulate this knowledge, while underlining research trends and gaps on which future projects might focus.

## Method

### Search strategy

The PICO model (Santos et al., 2007) was used to define the research question and develop a literature search strategy. This review scanned literature associated with the original terms LGBTQIA+, grief, and faith. Truncation was used to enable a wider search of the literature; similarly, Boolean operators (Timmins & McCabe, 2005) were used to further structure the literature search and diversify the results. In addition to the database search, an ancestral approach (White, 1994) was used – scanning reference lists of papers. Table 1 shows the variations of the terms used in this search, based on the PICO model.

**Table 1.** PICO model.

Description	Terms
<i>P: Population, patient</i>	LGBTQ+ people
<i>I: Intervention, indicator</i>	Faith, religion and/or spirituality
<i>C: Comparison, control</i>	LGBTQ+ people with no faith or religion
<i>O: Outcome</i>	Decreased complications with the grief process. Increased engagement with family and community, improved scores on validated measures of grief, e.g. (Tomita and Kitamura, 2002)

The developed Protocol for conducting this systematic review was presented at the seminar series of the University of Greenwich, where it received feedback, including a more diverse range of search terms. The presentation included the rationale for developing the Protocol and the step-by-step guide for conducting this review, while feedback strengthened the guide.

The evidence-based guidelines for systematic reviews outlined in the PRISMA statement (Moher et al., 2009) informed the design of this review to ensure quality assurance. A computer-based search of a range of databases was conducted to reflect the wide diversity of disciplines and chronological periods examining this area. The searched databases included Web of Science, Scopus, International bibliography of the social sciences, ProQuest Central, WorldCat, Academic Search Premier, Science Direct, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection, and CINHALL. A search was also conducted in Sage Publications, Emerald, and Wiley Online Library. The initial searches were conducted by the first two authors between 14 and 20 December 2019. To ensure the search was up to date at the time of completion, the same searches were run on 28 July 2020, with no further additions to the original data set. The following search string was entered into each database: (LGBTQ OR LGBT OR LGBTQI OR LGBTQI+ OR Lesbian OR Gay OR Bisexual OR Intersex OR, Trans OR Trans\* OR Queer OR Questioning OR Asexual OR Gender OR Aromantic OR Homosexual OR same-sex OR same-gender OR diverse gender\* OR sexualit\*) AND (grief OR mourn\* OR bereave\* OR griev\* OR loss OR griever\* OR death OR dying) AND (faith OR belief OR religion OR nonreligion OR non-religion OR spiritual\* OR believe OR religious OR religiosit\* OR Christian\* OR catholic\* OR Islam\* OR Hindu\* OR Buddhist\* OR Sikhis\* OR Judais\*). The retrieval of full text articles was determined by the titles and abstracts from these citations. Bibliographies from existing review articles (Oram et al., 2004; Richards, 1997; Richards et al., 1999, 2000; Tarakeshwar et al., 2005) were hand searched.

### *Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

The search of the literature applied limiters to narrow its scope and achieve its intentions. Only studies published after 1980 were included, due to the AIDS pandemic outbreak in the early 1980s. This pandemic had a huge impact on the lives of LGBTQ+ people and radically altered their connection to grief (Schaub, 2021), meaning that pre-1980 knowledge about sexually diverse grief would be significantly different than current experiences. Studies like MvNutt and Yakusho (2013) and Sikkema et al. (2000) highlight the impact of the AIDS pandemic on both men and women infected with HIV and affected by grief. Table 2 shows the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the present review.

### *Sifting process*

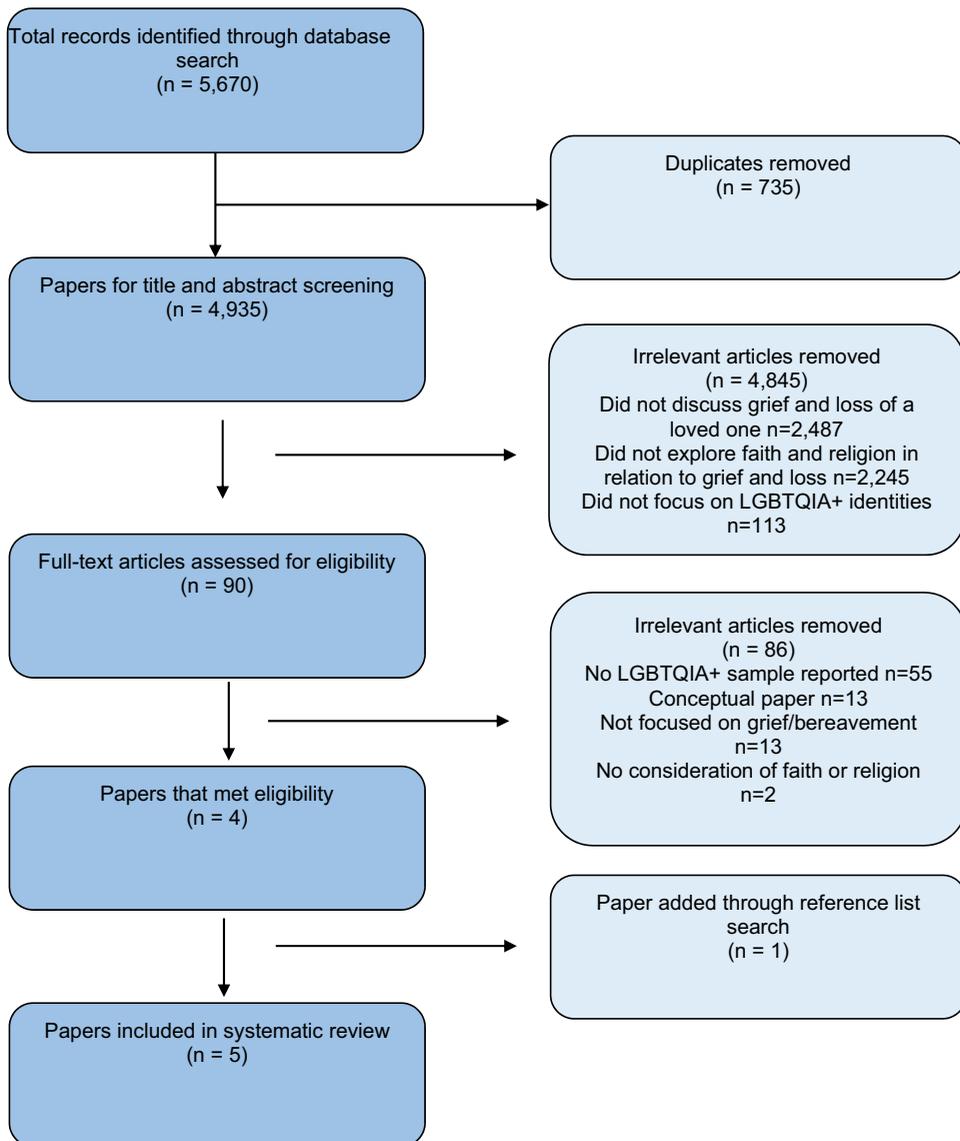
An initial search in the databases resulted in 5,670 papers. After duplicates were removed and limiters applied, a total of 4,935 papers remained. The papers were organised using Covidence (i.e. a systematic review management software; Veritas Health Innovation, 2020) and two authors reviewed their titles and abstracts. Inter-reviewer discrepancies were

**Table 2.** Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Peer-reviewed	Non peer-reviewed
Published in English	Published in languages other than English
Empirical and non-empirical studies	Grey literature, conceptual and theoretical pieces, editorials, literature reviews; textbooks, books
Quantitative, qualitative and mixed-method study designs	Study designs that were other than quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method.
Published 1980–2020	Published before 1980
Sample included LGBTQIA+ participants	No data gathered LGBTQIA+ individuals
Studies with ethical approval	Studies without ethical approval

discussed and reconciled, resulting in 90 papers for full-text review. Full-text screening resulted in four papers that met the full inclusion criteria and were included in the review. The reference lists of these papers were scanned to locate potentially relevant studies. This search yielded one additional paper, resulting in five papers for inclusion in the review. [Figure 1](#) describes the sifting process.

A notable challenge when searching for literature on the role of faith in the experiences of grief among LGBTQIA+ individuals is the variability with which the terms faith, religion, and spirituality have been used in literature (Bregman, 2014). Some authors refer to spirituality as a religion while some separate the two and consider religion as an institution and spirituality as a more personal endeavour, wherein people try to make sense of their experiences. When reviewing articles for this review, the authors considered these variations and reflected on them and in relation to the findings.



**Figure 1.** PRISMA flow diagram of paper selection.

The five identified articles were reviewed against quality criteria (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018; Pluye & Hong, 2014) and were deemed to uphold ethical research standards and report valid results that were the outcome of rigorous analysis.

Whilst only five studies met the robust inclusion criteria, there are good reasons for conducting systematic reviews with a small number of studies. These reviews not only tell us what scholars are working on and in relation to this topic, they also outline gaps in the knowledge base, but importantly can describe the state of evidence at a particular point in time (Yaffe et al., 2012). A review that is effective and well-conducted, even with a small number of studies included, creates a robust foundation for advancing knowledge and negotiating the progression of theory (Webster & Watson, 2002). Last, Snyder (2019, p. 1) argued similarly that a review of either many or less studies 'can address research questions with a power that no single study has'. Table 3 includes details of the reviewed studies.

### *Narrative synthesis*

NVivo qualitative data analysis software (version 12; QSR International, 2020) was used for the data analysis and synthesis. NVivo both organises documents and facilitates their analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) was used to organise and summarise the results of the papers included in the present review. Papers were inserted and coded by two researchers separately. The findings of studies were analysed and coded. Both sets of coding were merged into one file, and discrepancies were discussed and reconciled. The codes were clustered into overarching thematic areas comprising subthemes commonly identified across the five papers included in the review, and that informed the research question.

## **Results**

The majority of the selected studies used qualitative methods ( $n = 4$ ) and one quantitative. All studies were from North America, with four of the studies originated in the USA and one in Canada. All studies focused on lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals who were grieving the loss of a partner, or another loved one. A thematic map Figure 2 depicts the identified concepts. The two overarching thematic areas reflecting broad commonalities in the findings are (1) rituals and rites of passage and (2) spiritual coping. The two thematic areas and their subthemes are described below. Exact quotes from the papers are used to supplement the description of findings and maintain the authenticity of themes.

### *Rituals and rites of passage*

Bereaved LGB individuals honoured the deceased through traditional religious rites and secular or customised rituals. Engaging in these practices enabled participants to maintain their relationship with the deceased and accept the finality of their death. Further, participants drew valuable social support during these rituals and rites. In most of the reported cases, bereaved individuals practiced the preferences of the deceased regarding their death rituals.

### *Continuing bonds*

Bereaved LGB individuals practiced spiritual rituals and rites of passage to maintain valuable connections with the deceased. Through these practices, research participants experienced the presence of the deceased, cherished their memories and communicated with them. Continuing their relationships with the deceased facilitated participants' grieving process.

The romantic relationship persisted posthumously for 23 (43%) of the surviving partners with spiritual phenomena in the study by Richards and Folkman (1997). To continue their relationships, participants redefined them by rendering a guiding or mentoring role to the deceased in areas of life

Table 3. Summary of included studies.

Authors (Year)	Title	Journal	Country	Aim	Methodology	Time frame	Sample size	Participants
Oram et al. (2004)	Coping with multiple AIDS-related loss among gay men.	Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services	British Columbia, Canada	Explores how gay men coped with multiple AIDS-related losses.	Part of the West End Relationship Project (WERP). Telephone survey – 1 <sup>st</sup> phase 2-hour in-depth interview – 2 <sup>nd</sup> phase	1998	141	Gay and Bisexual men who have experienced multiple AIDS-related losses
Richards et al. (1999)	Spiritual aspects of loss among partners of men with AIDS: Postbereavement follow-up	Death Studies	US	Explores spirituality and how it influences coping strategies, 3–4 years after the loss	Part of a longitudinal study (i.e. UCSF Coping Project). Qualitative longitudinal study – in-depth interviewing Follow-up /continuation study	1992–1997	70	HIV+ and HIV- gay partners of men who died of AIDS
Richards and Folkman (1997)	Spiritual aspects of loss at the time of a partner's death from AIDS	Death Studies	US	Explores how spiritual phenomena interlink with the grief of men whose partner died of AIDS. Linking spirituality with early stages of grief.	Part of a longitudinal study (i.e. UCSF Coping Project). Qualitative longitudinal study – in-depth interviewing	Within one month of bereavement April 1990-June 1992	125	HIV+ and HIV- gay partners of men who died of AIDS

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Authors (Year)	Title	Journal	Country	Aim	Methodology	Time frame	Sample size	Participants
Richards et al. (2000)	Death rites in the San Francisco gay community: Cultural developments of the AIDS epidemic.	OMEGA – Journal of Dying and Death	US	Examined rituals of death and dying following the death of a partner to AIDS/HIV in the gay community of San Francisco)	Part of a longitudinal study (i.e. UCSF Coping Project). Interviewing: a) two weeks post-bereavement and b) four weeks post-bereavement.	June 1990 – March 1997	52	Gay men in committed relationships with a partner diagnosed with AIDS, for whom they were the primary caregiver
Tarakeshwar et al. (2005)	Gender, ethnicity and spiritual coping among bereaved HIV-positive individuals.	Mental Health, Religion & Culture	US	Focus on how gender and ethnicity influence coping strategies, inclusive spiritual coping, of HIV-positive bereaved individuals	Quantitative screening – survey Cross-sectional study	June 1997-April 1999	252 (164 men – 77% homosexual and 88 women)	Bereaved, HIV-positive individuals

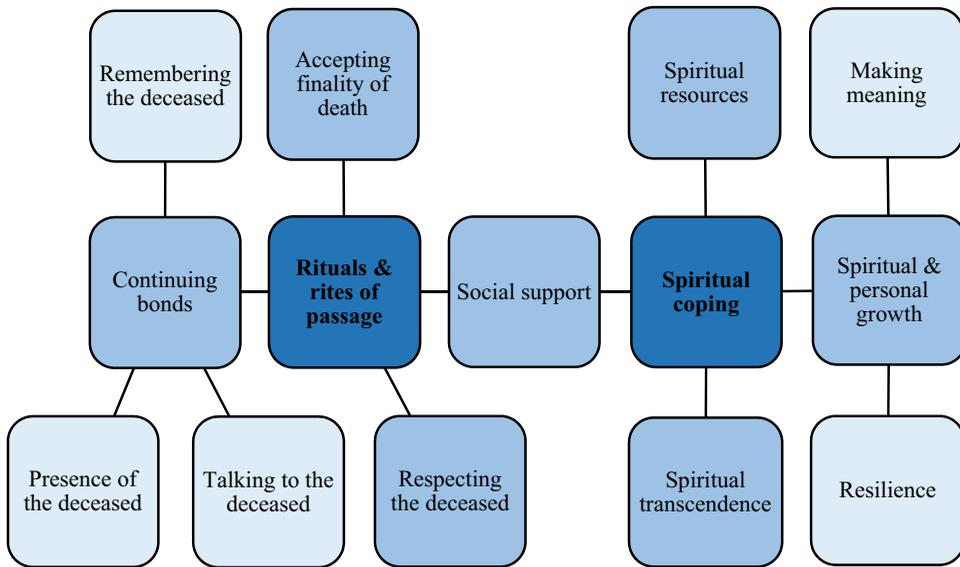


Figure 2. Thematic map.

where they had previously provided support. The surviving partners' communication with the deceased helped them preclude interruptions in their posthumous evolution and resolve their concerns about the wellbeing of the deceased. In the follow-up study (Richards et al., 1999), participants declared their commitment to remembering the deceased and integrating their remembrance into their sense of self. As one participant noted,

My remembrance of him is a prime factor of my being. It is one of my essential elements. There is a portion of my brain that is devoted to his memories. There is certainly a large portion of my heart that is devoted to the same thing. (Richards et al., 1999, p. 117)

In the same study, participants found comfort in sensing their deceased's presence in the first few weeks after their death.

### ***Accepting the finality of death***

In the study by Richards and Folkman (1997), participants reported that engaging in death rituals facilitated their acceptance of the new reality without the deceased. One participant noted,

So we took the pillows away and we laid him down. Then we just decided to start to shave him and give him a bath, a bed bath, and dress him in the clothes that we wanted to put him in which we had already talked about. It was all I had to hold on to at that point. I just needed to do the rituals of doing those things one more time and knowing that it was the last time (Richards & Folkman, 1997, p. 541).

Through the practice of death rituals, participants appreciated their meaning and accepted the finality of their death. In the follow-up study (Richards et al., 1999), participants felt at peace with their partners' death and knowing that they were also in peace. In the study by Oram et al. (2004), the majority of participants (87%) reported that accepting the death was particularly helpful in dealing with grief.

### **Respecting the deceased**

Participants in the reviewed articles respected the memory of the deceased by upholding their promises about the execution of death rituals and rites and materialising their wishes posthumously. In the study by Richards et al. (2000), most of the deceased's final requests were respected and performed by their next of kin regardless of their religious and personal beliefs. These requests related to the type and place of the body (cremation or burial) and specific implementation of the rituals. The same study reported that although in some cases disagreements about the choice of cremation between the surviving partner and the family of the deceased caused conflict, the partners used their power of attorney to make executive decisions. Similarly, one participant in the study by Richards and Folkman (1997) claimed, 'So he's directed exactly what is supposed to happen. What he wanted is what's going to happen by hook or by crook, period'. (p. 541). At the final stages of their partners' illness, some carers expressed their respect by permitting their partners to die (Richards & Folkman, 1997).

### **Social support**

Participants in the reviewed articles reported gaining support from friends, family, pets, and hospice carers who attended or facilitated the death rituals. In the study by Richards et al. (2000), visitations during the vigil period allowed participants' social contacts to farewell and honour the dying person in a peaceful space. Secular and religious memorials and private rites of passage extended the period of social support for bereaved partners. In the study by Oram et al. (2004), gay men who experienced an overload of loss due to a history of multiple deaths considered the funerals and memorials as less helpful than those with no overload of loss. The authors attributed this between-group difference to the attrition of participants' social support network (partners, close friends, and supportive acquaintances) due to multiple deaths. In the study by Richards and Folkman (1997), participants drew spiritual social support from close friends with similar spiritual beliefs and through participating in church groups and receiving spiritual counselling or support from lay ministers and clergy.

### **Spiritual coping**

Spirituality was an integral aspect of caregiving in the early phases of participants' bereavement. Spirituality was also endorsed as one of the most valuable sources of coping. More specifically, spiritual and personal growth, the transcendence of the spirit, and spiritual resources were commonly identified in the reviewed articles.

### **Spiritual and personal growth**

Spirituality and self-awareness increased through self-reflection while grieving (Richards et al., 1999; Richards & Folkman, 1997). A comparison on coping types as measured by the Ways of Coping Scale (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988) between bereaved participants who made spiritual references and those who did not indicated that the former group used more positive reappraisal ( $M_{dif} = 3.78$ ,  $p = .0003$ ), increased planful problem solving ( $M_{dif} = 1.68$ ,  $p = .015$ ), and more confrontive coping ( $M_{dif} = 1.13$ ,  $p = .002$ ; Richards & Folkman, 1997). No statistical differences were reported in the rest of the assessed types of coping. Nevertheless, in the follow-up study, the only statistically significant difference between the two groups was observed in positive reappraisal ( $M_{dif} = 3.91$ ,  $p = .003$ ; Richards et al., 1999). At the conclusion of the longitudinal study, participants reported a substantial increase in references to spirituality, with 77% of participants noting spiritual growth as one of the valued learnings they acquired from caregiving and bereavement (Richards et al., 1999).

Notably, one participant in the study by Richards et al. (1999) remarked, 'I've learned a lot about myself and what weight I'm able to carry. And delving way down deep inside myself about not only mental issues, physical issues, but spiritual' (p. 115). In the same article, spiritual coping was reported to facilitate the acceptance of death, as discussed earlier. Through the practice of spirituality, bereaved individuals strengthened their beliefs or created new ones in order to make sense of the death and alleviate the intensity of grief (Richards & Folkman, 1997). As a result, bereaved individuals' resilience was enhanced (Oram et al., 2004) despite the varied disparities in the use of spiritual coping. In the study by Tarakeshwar et al. (2005), for example, bereaved homosexual individuals reported lower use of spiritual coping than heterosexual individuals ( $r = -0.25$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ), and white gay men used spiritual coping the least.

### *Spiritual transcendence*

Participants reflected the belief that the spirit of the deceased surpassed physical constraints and continued to exist posthumously. At the time of death, the spirit was perceived to transcend to a new dimension or merge with other spirits and maintain communication with participants. As reflected in the study by Richards and Folkman (1997), participants were comforted by beliefs of spiritual transcendence at the time of death:

In this situation it was a very gentle kind of passing and I've never been in a room with a dead person before, and it was nice to know that I could do that and I could hold that person and recognize that his spirit was no longer in the body and that was nice. (p. 538)

To facilitate the transition, bereaved individuals accompanied the spirit with religious artefacts and items meaningful to the deceased (Richards et al., 2000). Adopting beliefs in spiritual transcendence reflected a personal way of coping with the death of a loved one (Oram et al., 2004).

### *Spiritual resources*

Participants with spiritual beliefs employed various resources when grieving to facilitate their coping. These spiritual resources can be broadly classified as either internal or external. As noted earlier, acceptance of the death, personal and spiritual growth, and resilience were identified as supportive inner resources (Oram et al., 2004). In addition, prayer and spiritual beliefs facilitated the development of meaning through bereavement, which subsequently improved participants' coping (Richards & Folkman, 1997; Tarakeshwar et al., 2005). Helpful external resources of spiritual nature included spiritual counselling, prayer groups, and social support from religious communities (Richards & Folkman, 1997; Richards et al., 1999).

## **Discussion**

This literature review aimed at investigating the ways in which religion, spirituality, and faith play a part in LGBTQIA+ individuals' bereavement. From narrative synthesis, two main themes emerged, highlighting the ways faith affects one's grief for a loved one. It is noteworthy that studies exploring the intersection of LGBTQIA+ identities and faith primarily focus on the loss of a spouse or partner. Further, only studies examining the grief of lesbian, gay, or bisexual people were identified. There is a significant gap about the faith and grief experiences of gender diverse people, as no studies met our inclusion criteria that included transgender or non-binary individuals. The experiences of transgender and nonbinary people are often subsumed under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, which can create research that does not include their experiences (Fish & Karban, 2015).

This review identified four main ways in which religion, spirituality, and faith are of importance to bereaved LGB individuals: (1) maintaining bonds, (2) acceptance of new reality, (3) social support, and (4) meaning making. The identification of all four is not surprising, but certainly the synthesis of other studies assists in accumulating knowledge and developing new understandings of it while testing the corroboration of the results with previous work.

The concept of 'continuing bonds' has for over 70 years featured in bereavement literature. Starting specifically with Bowlby's seminal work on attachment theory and the impact of separation and loss (Bowlby, 1979; Holmes, 1993), and focusing on more contemporary works, like those of Klass et al. (2014) and Klass and Steffen (2017), there is a persistent paradox with continuing bonds. On the one hand, the bereaved person seeks ways to maintain a relationship with the deceased and allow themselves an ongoing bonding with the relationship they had with them. On the other hand, the pathologization of the continuation of such bonds poses risks; the debates about how continuing a relationship with the deceased is an indicator of complicated grief are telling of this (Currier et al., 2015; Neimeyer et al., 2006).

The results of this review regarding continuing bonds corroborate with studies that investigated the role of faith and religion in bereavement, but across non-LGB populations. Suhail et al. (2011) found that Pakistani Muslims maintained their links with the deceased through either cultural or religious rituals; they used prayers and celebrations to ensure a continuing relationship and communication with the deceased. Hussein and Oyeboade (2009) similarly argued that culture and religion highly influence, and in similar ways, the bereavement of Pakistani Muslims in the UK. Other studies, like that of Mangione et al. (2016), also highlighted the significance of religion as a means to an end, i.e. maintaining bonds.

Maintaining bonds is not the only key finding across literature or this review. Through continuing bonds, bereaved individuals engage in a more intrapersonal endeavour, wherein they construct the meaning of their loss, grief, and subsequent life without the deceased in it (Neimeyer, 2001). Matthews and Marwit (2006) have, among many in the literature body, highlighted the influence of religion and belief in making meaning of one's experience in loss. As Neimeyer et al. (2014) suggested, meaning is often socially reconstructed after a loss; in other words, the context in which meaning is sought is paramount. Religion, spirituality, and faith play a big part in framing and contextualising the meaning-making processes for the bereaved. This review sheds light on research about LGB individuals particularly and identifies that religion and spirituality are a resource for meaning making, whether through more practical approaches, such as prayers, or personal, like thought processing.

Similarly, religion, spirituality, and faith, whether used as a framework or a set of rituals, seem of great significance in the processes of reconciliation (i.e. acceptance of new reality). At the same time, faith promotes social support, inviting the bereaved to engage with other individuals, like the clergy, who act supportively. According to Davies (2008), death, loss, and bereavement, as well as the varied rituals associated with these experiences, are an indication of a culture and a religious or spiritual school of thought. With this in mind, religion, spirituality, and faith not only frame these experiences, but the latter become evidence of the former.

As suggested by Davies (2002, p. 1), 'from an evolutionary perspective, [...] death is part of the environment to which the human animal needed to adapt'. That said, rituals and rites of passage are part of the human animal's response to death, an adaptation method to this very reality. Yet, as argued by Turner (1985), rituals are constructs of religious, and often grotesque approaches to life, with a long history attached to them. In other words, this review recognises not only the lack of evidence in the area where LGB grief and religion, spirituality, or faith intersect but also the ritualisation of grief in those circumstances as a necessity to come to terms with the new reality and seek further support.

In addition to the above, this review highlighted two areas. First, reviewed literature showed, unsurprisingly (Davies, 2002; Pentaris, 2019), that faith is important regarding meeting the needs of the bereaved, but also concerning the needs of the deceased. Specifically, meeting the deceased's wishes communicated to their loved ones before their death. Next, this review surfaced a more

unprecedented reality in response to the query, 'what role does bereavement play in spiritual growth?'. The review found that research shows that bereavement helps those grieving to grow spiritually. Such growth appears to be complementing the motivation to seek social support, accept the new reality, and make meaning of the loss. In other words, there is a strong link between all concepts that emerge from the current literature on this subject.

Van Gennep (1960) established a more structured dialogue about rituals associated with culture and religion, called *rites de passage*. Rites of passage refer to ceremonial actions following a life crisis, according to van Gennep – in this case, prayers, or inviting the clergy in, or meditating and communicating with the dead, are all ceremonial actions that serve a different purpose. Van Gennep explored such rites based on their content and order and classified them into three categories: separation (*séparation*), transition (*marge*), and incorporation (*agrégation*). It is in the second stage – transition – wherein the results of this review are placed. During the transition stage, individuals are experiencing what van Gennep identified as liminality; individuals have moved from the pre-rites stage where their development depended on circumstances that are no longer the case but remain in a pre-incorporation stage, where they would experience adaptation. LGB bereaved individuals seem to turn to religion, spirituality, and faith while in the transition stage, to cope and find ways to adapt to their new reality.

### **Implications for practice**

The identified themes across the reviewed articles can inform professional practice (i.e. medical, clinical, health and social care) when working with bereaved LGB populations. Considering the crucial role of rituals and rites of passage in bereavement, inclusivity should pervade the practices and management of end-of-life and funeral services. Inclusion and acceptance may encourage the uninhibited expression of sexuality, faith, and spirituality, and thus prevent disenfranchisement and facilitate the processing of grief (Curtin & Garrison, 2018). As the findings pointed clearly at the value of social support in grief coping, it is critical that community engagement is encouraged through religious and spiritual institutions. Further, systemic approaches that aim to support families during bereavement may foster a sense of belonging and meaningful connection with loved ones that can subsequently enhance psychological wellbeing.

Spirituality was prominently observed in grief coping as it promoted personal and spiritual growth. Developing resilience may be an unsolicited, secondary gain acquired through bereavement. Spirituality-adapted approaches in the understanding of grief and associated counselling have the potential to improve positive outcomes. Further, internal and external spiritual resources may assist grieving LGB individuals in making meaning through bereavement, increasing their overall coping and wellbeing.

### **Methodological critique**

The reviewed literature facilitates an essential understanding of the role of faith, religion, and spirituality in the grief of LGB individuals, but does not test the possible tensions found in the relationship between organised religion and the lives of LGB individuals. The latter is an area worthy of exploration in its own rights. Several strengths of the reviewed articles amplify the importance of the present findings. Firstly, the large samples of the articles produced reliable and rich data that enabled complex analyses. As a result, the authors communicated a thorough understanding of participants' experiences. Further, including both qualitative and quantitative data comprehensively captured the interplay between grief and faith, religion, or spirituality, and produced in-depth findings. The use of longitudinal research also enabled the attribution of causality among the examined variables.

The findings and implications of the present review should also be interpreted within the limitations of the reviewed studies. Although the study samples were suitable to address the research aims, women and bisexual individuals were poorly represented across the literature.

Three studies exclusively included gay men, one study included both gay and bisexual men, and one study included non-heterosexual men and women. Most studies neglected the experience of grief following the death of a family member, friend, or acquaintance by focusing specifically on the death of a spouse or partner. Further, the studies predominantly used samples of Caucasian ethnicity. Hence the generalisability of the findings is limited to populations of this background. Although two articles were published in the '00s, all studies were conducted in the '90s, when the AIDS pandemic resulted in a higher number of deaths in the LGB community. The extended timeframe between the collection and reporting of some of the findings restricts their interpretation, as attitudes towards faith, spirituality, and diverse sexualities have shifted over the years (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019; Schnabel, 2016). Finally, the study by Tarakeshwar et al. (2005) included limited extractable findings about the faith of bereaved LGB participants.

### *Limitations of present review*

The findings of the present review should also be viewed in light of its limitations. Firstly, the inclusion of the same authors (Richards & Folkman) in three of the five reviewed articles might have increased the risk of research bias. It is also worth noting that two articles (Richards et al., 1999; Richards, & Folkman, 1997) reported findings from the same longitudinal study – albeit drawing from different data sets. The present review's selection criteria did not allow the inclusion of studies that were written in a language other than English. Further, all studies were conducted in North America, including four studies in the US and one in Canada. Therefore, the generalisability of the findings to non-Western populations is unclear, as culture and ethnicity influence one's faith and grief, and societies engage with these issues differently (including between US, Canada and UK). Lastly, the review included studies that explicitly investigated the role of faith in grief. However, studies that explored the interplay between variables as part of a broader analysis did not provide deductible findings and, therefore, were not included in the present review.

### *Suggestions for further research*

The limitations imposed by the designs and methodological approaches of the present study can be addressed by further research on the faith, religion, or spirituality, and grief of LGBTQ individuals. The role of faith in the grief of, trans and gender-fluid individuals remains unexplored. Similarly, the experiences of bereaved intersex individuals warrant investigation. Therefore, future research should explore the experiences of individuals across gender, sex, and sexuality spectrums. Comparative studies among subgroups would also highlight the specific influences of gender, sex, and sexuality on grief. Considering that all identified literature was conducted in the '90s, further research may shed light on contemporary understandings of faith or spirituality, grief, and diverse identities. Longitudinal and experimental research designs will expand the existing body of literature by enabling the investigation of causal relationships among the variables.

### **Conclusion**

The literature on the intersection of grief, diverse sexualities, and faith highlights the important roles of rituals and spiritual coping in the experiences of the bereaved. The findings of the present review expand the existing literature by shedding light on the ways that faith, religion, and spirituality assist bereaved LGB individuals in maintaining valuable connections with the deceased, accepting the finality of the loss, accessing social support, and making meaning through bereavement. Spiritual coping was primarily facilitated by personal and spiritual growth, spiritual transcendence beliefs, and internal and external resources. The large samples of participants and diverse research

methodologies strengthen the implications of the reviewed literature. Future research must investigate the interplay between faith and grief across gender, sex, and sexuality spectrums.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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