Voices of Older Drag Queens (Age 50+)

Research Team

Emma Chamberlin

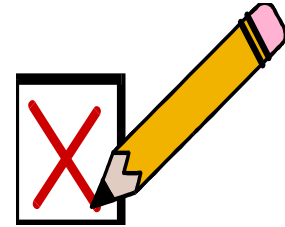Brian Chapman

Laura Donorfio

Nels Highberg

March 8, 2024

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Overview

- ✓ Welcome
- ✓ Meet our Research Team
- ✓ Background to the Study
- ✓ Research Design
- ✓ Meet our Participants
- ✓ Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches
  - ▪ Human Development & Family Sciences
  - ▪ Feminist Theory
  - ▪ Queer Theory
- ✓ Discussion / Q&A

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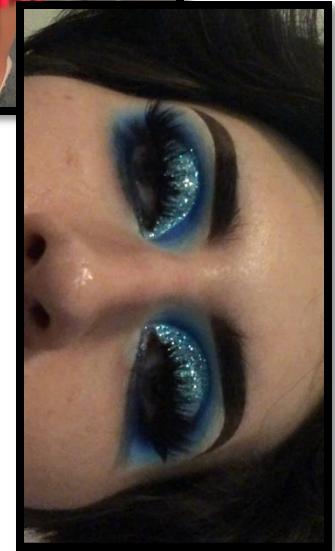# Meet our Research Team

Emma Chamberlin

Dr. Brian Chapman

Dr. Laura Donorfio

Dr. Nels Highberg

Background to the Study

Life Story

Research Design

1. Meaning of Drag Expression (DE).
2. Is DE a mechanism to a healthier state of self.
3. How DE is integrated with one's persona and how it interfaces with dragism (discrimination), coping, resilience, and generativity.

Douglas Knutson
Oklahoma State University

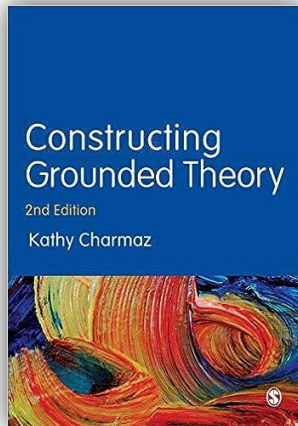| Paucity of Research	Drag Queens (DQ) 50+
Exploratory	Qualitative

Research Design

Phase 1

2021

Pilot

Constructing Grounded Theory
2nd Edition
Kathy Charmaz

Phase 2

2022-2023

Expanded based on Pilot

- ✓ WebEx
- ✓ Semi-structured interview
- ✓ Demographics
- ✓ Psychosocial measures

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Research Design

Semi-Structured Interview 75-120 minutes

1. How do you define drag?

2. How does drag make you feel?

3. What percentage of your time is spent in drag?

4. What are your earliest memories of wanting to dress in drag? Parental Support? Sibling Support?

5. Did you come out as gay first or that you were a drag queen first? Is it a separate process?

6. What Role Does Gender play in Drag? Did you think you were being non-conforming or crossing gender boundaries when you had thoughts of dressing in drag (as a woman)?

7. Drag & Community: Other types of Family, Generativity, Activism

8. Does drag expression help you in positive and/or ways?

9. Does drag expression serve as a healthy coping or resilience mechanism for you?

10. What types of misconceptions exist about what it means to be a drag queen?

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Research Design

Your Life Line

Beginning with the "young childhood" period, plot a "lifeline" representing the ups and downs of your experiences across the lifespan. Represent each milestone / event / trauma with a simple title. Do not be concerned with detail.
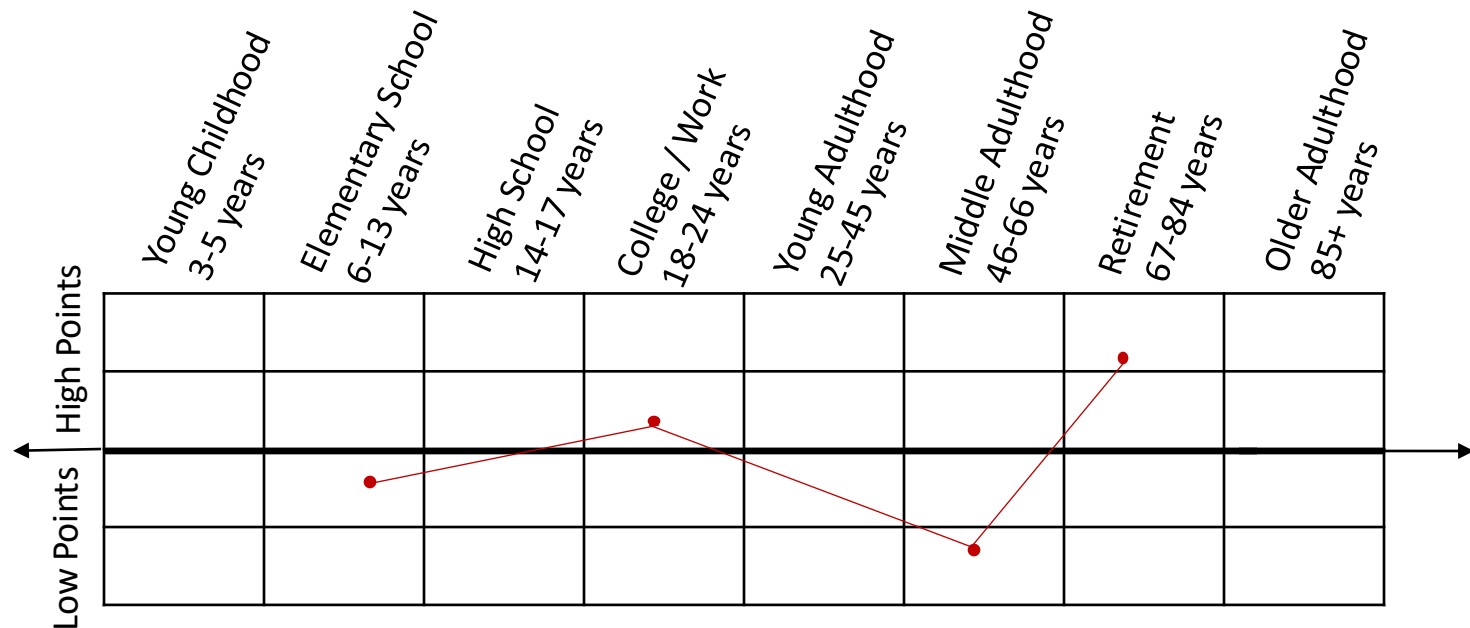
Research Design

Eligibility

- ✓ Self-identified as a DQ
- ✓ Experience in any capacity as a DQ
- ✓ Self-identified as a gender or sexual minority
- ✓ 50+
- ✓ English primary language
- ✓ Resident of U.S.

Meet our Participants

Demographics

- ✓ N=21
- ✓ Male – 20; Female – 1
- ✓ Sexual orientation – SGM – 21
- ✓ Ages – 50-90
- ✓ White 14; Black 5; Latino 2
- ✓ High school only 4; Some College (no degree) 9; Associates 2; Bachelors 3; Masters 1; Doctorate 1; No response 1

Meet our Participants

Genre of Drag

1. Art Drag
2. Black Drag
3. Butch Drag
4. Comedy Drag
5. Fierce Drag
6. Glamour Drag
7. Historical Drag
8. Movie Drag
9. Political Drag
10. Pop star Drag
11. Radical Drag
12. Tough Drag
13. Other

- ✓ 17 Genre Selections
- ✓ Multiplicity of Responses
- ✓ Top 3
  1. Art
  2. Glamour
  3. Historical Drag

DRAG = "**D**ressed **R**esembling **A** **G**irl"

Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Human Development and Family Sciences

- ✓ HDFS Lenses: Attachment, Acceptance/Rejection, Role Models, and Adult relationships (evolution)
- ✓ Not generalizable
- ✓ Range of family experiences
- ✓ Acknowledging some surprises
- ✓ Insight into role models and inspiration
- ✓ Common theme of strong women and motherhood

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Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Human Development and Family Sciences

- ✓ Parental support
    - High regard for mothers overall
    - High regard for female icons and performers, often emulated)
    - High regard for many fathers
    - Stories about fathers more often negative vs. Mothers
- ✓ Sibling support
- ✓ Family stories
- ✓ Chosen families are highlighted

Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Human Development and Family Sciences

Regard for Mothers
Positive: 11
Neutral/Absent: 6
Negative: 5

Regard for Fathers
Positive: 7
Neutral/Absent: 5
Negative: 10

Family "By the Numbers"

Grandparents
Often remarks were positive relationships or positive reference points and memories.

Siblings
Narrative not as detailed
Mix of positive, negative, and neutral. Many references to evolving relationships and acceptance.

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Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Human Development and Family Sciences

"My parents totally came around."

"My parents imparted a business sense . . . which helped me with drag. . .They never made me feel bad [about who I was]. . ."

"I was raised in the South....very Baptist...this was a big no, no..."

Parents

"I would say I am in the top percentile with parental support"

"I did not feel love from my parents."

"My parents are so pro-gay . . . I am so fortunate"

"My parents were both very supportive . . . they were just good parents."

Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Human Development and Family Sciences

"My mother could cook, she was a 'magician,' . . . 'a doctor,'. . .'a lawyer'. . . She could do anything, and she had this elegance and grace about her."

"My mother was the strongest woman I ever heard of or met..."

"My mother did not want my father to see it [drag]."

Mothers

"I went on [name of TV talk show] with my mother..." [positive reference]

"I grew up with a strong matriarchal image."

"I had more models of motherhood than fatherhood."

"Sometimes I am channeling my mother"

"My mother was the fiercest female on the earth. . . so [I] am really embodying her."

"I said I was a "Tom Girl" [to replace "sissy"], my mother hated that!"

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Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Human Development and Family Sciences

"My father said, 'I am old school, and this is going to take some getting used to, but first and foremost you are my son and I love you . . .'"

"My father was most proud of me when he found out I got gonorrhea. He thought I got it from a female."

Fathers

"My father wasn't [supportive]. He came out as gay after my mother died."

"My father was more curious about drag than my mother"

"My Dad said you've got Moxie." [positive tone]

"My Dad was kind of macho. . . He wasn't very positive about any of it."

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Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Human Development and Family Sciences

"My grandfather said to my grandmother, 'He's not going to be like the other boys.' " [positive tone]

"My grandparents were very supportive"

Grandparents

"My grandmother and mother saw me trying on their shoes at very early age."

"My drag name is my grandmother's name."

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Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Human Development and Family Sciences

"My brother is gay [also], but he wasn't thrilled that I am a drag queen. . ."

"My mother and father and my aunt and uncle piled in the car, and they all went to find them [perpetrators of a hate incident]."

Siblings and Other Family Members

"I have children. . .and grandchildren and they love what I do. . ."

"My sister, I feel like she had a lot of homophobia"

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Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Feminist Theory (80s/90s)

✓ Defined
- "Experience" as a both a theoretical construct and a vital category of analysis
- Social-constructivist emphasis in identity theory.

✓ Major contributors

Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Feminist Theory

✓ Drag, Our Research, and Life Stories
  - Feminist Theory Would Ask:
    - To what extent is the desire to "do drag" an internal, essential expression or an external, intellectual decision?
    - How should drag be universalized or localized as an identity and as an experience?
    - Who speaks and who listens?

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Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Feminist Theory: Theme 1

"I don't want to be a woman, you know, I enjoy being gay and being a male"

Drag as Essentialized Identity

"You have to have a gimmick when you're an entertainer, you have to have a gimmick and my gimmick was drag."

"I identify, as I said, biologically female and probably more to the feminine side, although I had a girlfriend who would not introduce me to her mother for 5 years, because I was too butch and everybody, when I tell them that they go You were too butch?"

"I just liked women's clothes as a boy. And I don't believe that as a child I identified as a girl, because I don't now. But I loved women's clothes."

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Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Queer Theory

- ✓ Defined
  - ▪ Challenges notion of a "stable identity"
  - ▪ Questions traditional assumptions about gender & sexual identities
- ✓ Gender as fluid, performance
- ✓ Major contributors
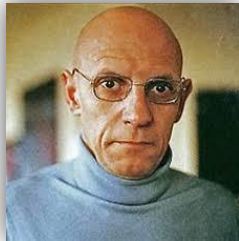
Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Queer Theory

✓ **Drag & Our Research**

- ▪ **RQs probing Queer Theory**
  - How do you define drag?
  - What constitutes drag?
    - Private vs. public spheres
  - What is the role of gender in drag?
  - What is the role of performance in drag?

Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Queer Theory

✓ Research Themes

- ▪ Drag as a fluid identity
- ▪ Performance of gender

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Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Queer Theory: Theme 1

Drag as a Fluid Identity

"Drag is changing your appearance to present as somebody else."

"There is a male and a female in me, and I'm learning to embrace both sides. I have the best of both worlds."

"Everything is drag – who you choose to be every single day, depending on the outfit that you do, how much time you take with your hair. All of that is presenting who you are today. And for me, it can change from day to day."

"Drag is when someone who would be expected to dress one way, chooses to dress in a way that makes them appear different to others – different identity, gender, if you want to be that specific. Drag is dressing in a different gender than you identify with."

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Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Queer Theory: Theme 2

"The idea of drag is total performance."

"When I dress in drag, I present myself as a female. I expect people to perceive me that way. It's not that I want to be believed to be female. It's what I'm presenting to people."

Gender Performance

"Drag is about performance. If someone is doing it in private, they are trans or cross-dressing."

"Drag is when a man dresses up as a woman and performs on stage. It's about performance."

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Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Queer Theory

✓ **Drag Through a Queer Lens**

- ■ Analyzing performance
- ■ Queerness & the intent to be lost
- ■ Gestures & ephemera
  - Refusal of finitude
  - Drag performance = a radical act
    - "Sweet revenge on gender" (p. 69)
- ■ Legacy
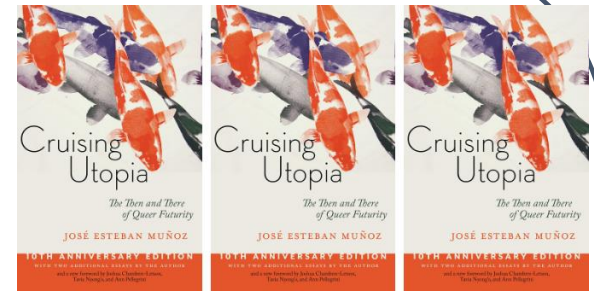
(Muñoz, 2009)

Life Story Results & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Queer Theory

✓ Munoz, Drag Through a Queer Lens (cont.)

"Memories that remain after the actual live performance are the queer ephemera ... that function as a beacon for queer possibility and survival."

(Muñoz, 2009)

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Discussion