

LGBTQ Research Symposium 2024

The Joy, Activism, and Healing of Drag Performers Over Fifty

Research Team

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HDFS

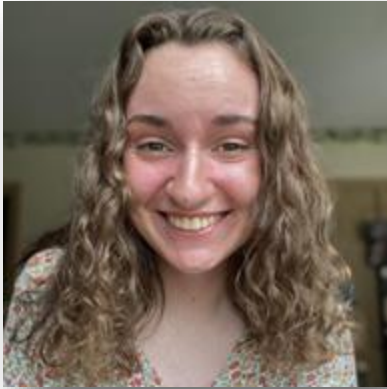
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Overview

- Welcome
- Meet our Research Team
- Research Design
- Meet our Participants
- Life Story Results
 - The Meaning & Joy of Drag
 - Activism
 - Healing
 - Synthesize Findings
- Discussion / Q&A



Meet our Research Team



Emma Chamberlin



Dr. Brian Chapman



Dr. Laura Donorfio



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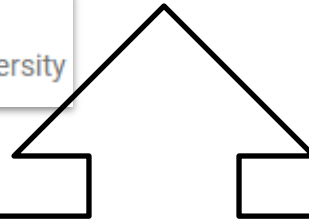
Research Design



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



Douglas Knutson
Oklahoma State University



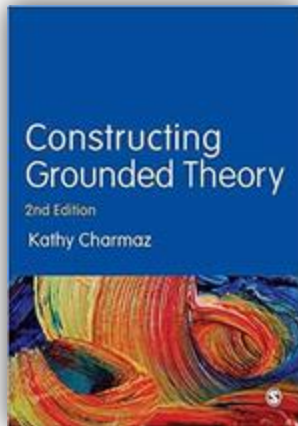
1. Meaning of Drag Expression (DE).
2. Is DE a mechanism to a healthier state of self?
3. How DE is integrated with one's persona and how it interfaces with dragism (discrimination), coping, resilience, and generativity.

Research Design

Phase 1

2021

Pilot



Phase 2

2022-2023

Expanded based
on Pilot

WebEx
Semi-structured interview
Demographics
Psychosocial measures

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

Art

Glamour

Historical Drag

DRAG = “Dressed Resembling A Girl”

The Meaning & Joy of Drag

Defining Drag

- Type of performance
- A fluid identity
- Gendered character vs. essentialized identity

"The idea of drag is total performance."

"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 changing your appearance to present as somebody else."

"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."

The Meaning & Joy of Drag

Defining Drag: Specificities in Older Age

- Bodies, physical components
- More integrated sense of identity w/ age
- Aging & reflection

"My issue now is my mobility... I lost a lot of my mobility."

"So, it's hard getting old. And I can't—I know I can't perform the way I did."

"My world was opened up and expanded immensely. If I never did drag that first time, I don't know where I'd be now."

"I think I'm always [drag name]. I don't know if I have to get dressed to be [drag name] ... I think it's fully now a part of me that I don't feel... compartmentalized. I don't feel like I need to do anything to access being [drag name]"



The Meaning & Joy of Drag

The Power to Shape: Impact of Drag on Life

- Armor, resilience
- Community (i.e., chosen families, drag lineage)

“Drag gives me that confidence ... It kind of gave me that extra layer.”

“I can say and do anything [in drag]; when I’m out of drag, I have to be a little careful.”

“I’m closer to my inner circle than I am my own family. I relied on my chosen family a lot more.”

“I look about it now and I think about it ... I think the drag queens saved me ... I think the drag queens saved me. Drag queens let me—to be able to do what I love to do. Perform.”

The Meaning & Joy of Drag

The Creation & Extension of Joy

- Exploration of identity, otherwise impossible
- Personal reflection

“It [drag] empowers me to do things that I would not have ever done.”

“It’s [drag] always just been another way ... like a sort of artistic expression, something that I was able to do that I couldn’t do all the time. So, it [drag] gave me a little bit of extra freedom to sort of do stuff that I can’t do every day.”

“My world was opened up and expanded immensely. If I never did drag that first time, I don’t know where I’d be now. No, honestly. My life has been expanded and enriched exponentially.”

“It [drag] makes me feel great It brings me life. It makes me happy.”

Activism and Drag Artists

Activism and Shared Episodic Events

- HIV/AIDS surfaced in nearly every interview
- Same Sex Marriage
- Trans Rights, Anti-Gun Violence, Voting, etc.

"I was an activist before AIDS...I can't talk about AIDS, it was horrible!"

Caring for a man living with AIDS:
"Nobody came to visit him, nobody talked to him . . .I was a an 'AIDS buddy' and they all died."

"I was a young person, watching my age die."

"In the early 1990's, of course so much death . . A lot of people who influenced me when I moved here died that year."

Activism and Drag Artists

Activism as Work

- Overwhelming hours of work
- Always/often saying “yes!”
- Drag performances, Drag presence

"I have chosen a different charity every year for 27 years...If I couldn't make money for charity I don't know if I would do it!"

"This is my art form...I also do activism through it."

"HIV/AIDS...Same Sex Marriage...Gun Violence...There are so many issues I have done shows for..."

"That's sort of how drag took over my life...I was raising a lot of money..."

"We made sure everyone was registered to vote."

"I did a lot of AIDS benefits...but I had to stop...I did over 300 of them..."
"We raised money for five (5) years. . . I am a 29 year survivor!"

Activism and Drag Artists

Activism as Purpose

- Defining Activism
- Parental Influence
- Political Will
- Speaking to Power/Truth

"My mom was very vocal...if she saw something wrong...she spoke on it."

On Activist Feminism: "I give my Dad credit for this avenue of my life...My Dad at 87, it's still his life's work everyday."

"You're creating a reaction...you are an activist, period....It's a positive moving forward."

"Let's go back 54 years and acknowledge Sylvia [Rivera] and Marcia [P. Johnson] of the Stonewall Rebellion...Drag queens have never been people to sit back and do nothing."

"This is not backlash against drag. There is a christian-fascist community trying to use queer people as a wedge issue. so White men stay in power...this is about power and White supremacy"

Healing and Pain

The Body in Pain by Elaine Scarry (1985)

“Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4).

*To have pain means to have certainty.

*To hear about pain means to have doubt.

There are political implications to personal pains; the personal is political.

Healing and Pain

Pain

- Drag is not easy.
- Drag hurts.
- Drag itself does not necessarily heal.

"What is drag to
you?"
"Uncomfortable."

"It takes more to go on stage
than just going to put on a wig
and lip sync."

"And that's where I
was like, okay,
this is the pain."

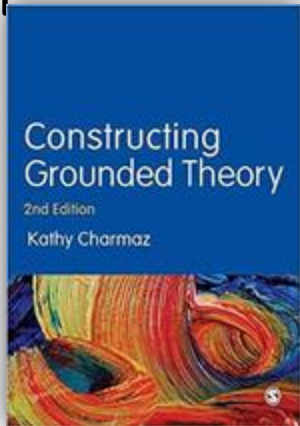
"There is a lot of physical pain and I know a lot of Queens who can't do
things anymore. I rarely wear heels right now."

Healing and Pain

- What kinds of healing do drag queens need and what is the role of drag in that healing?
 - Drag queens need to get paid!
- How can we turn the pain of drag queens into actions to challenge anti-drag legislation?

Synthesize Findings

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.



Resilience
Identity Across the Lifespan
A Force for Social Change

Resilience

Drag Expression = Healthier State of Self Coping

Emulating Strong Women Provides Power & Armour

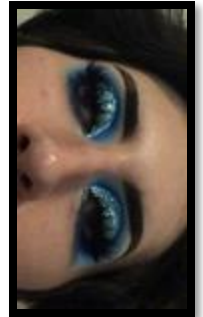
"My mother was the fiercest female on the earth. . . so [I] am really embodying her."

"I did use it [drag] as a coping mechanism for just life in general. People escape into drag...to help you with... insecurities"

Exploration of Internal & External Self
(reflection through the eyes of others)

"Oxygen, that's what drag means to me. Its a suit of armour. It is protection."

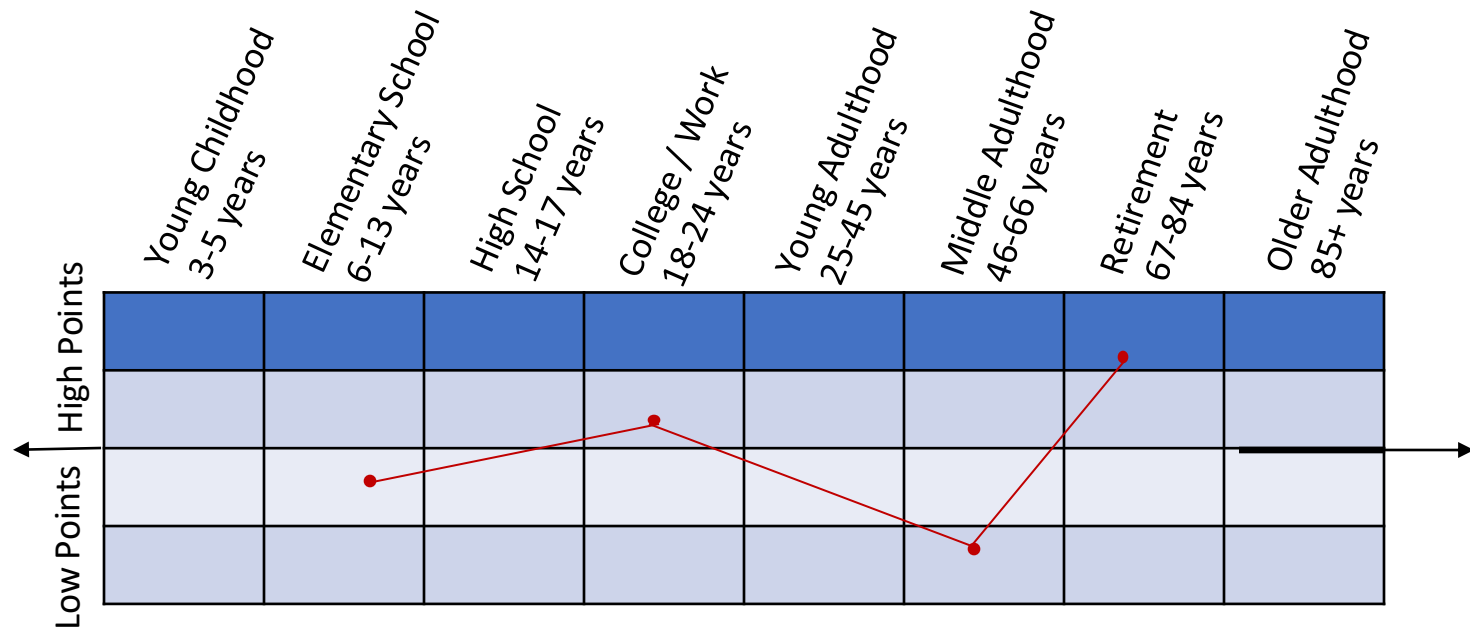
Acceptance by Society
Acceptance of Self



Identity Across the Life Span

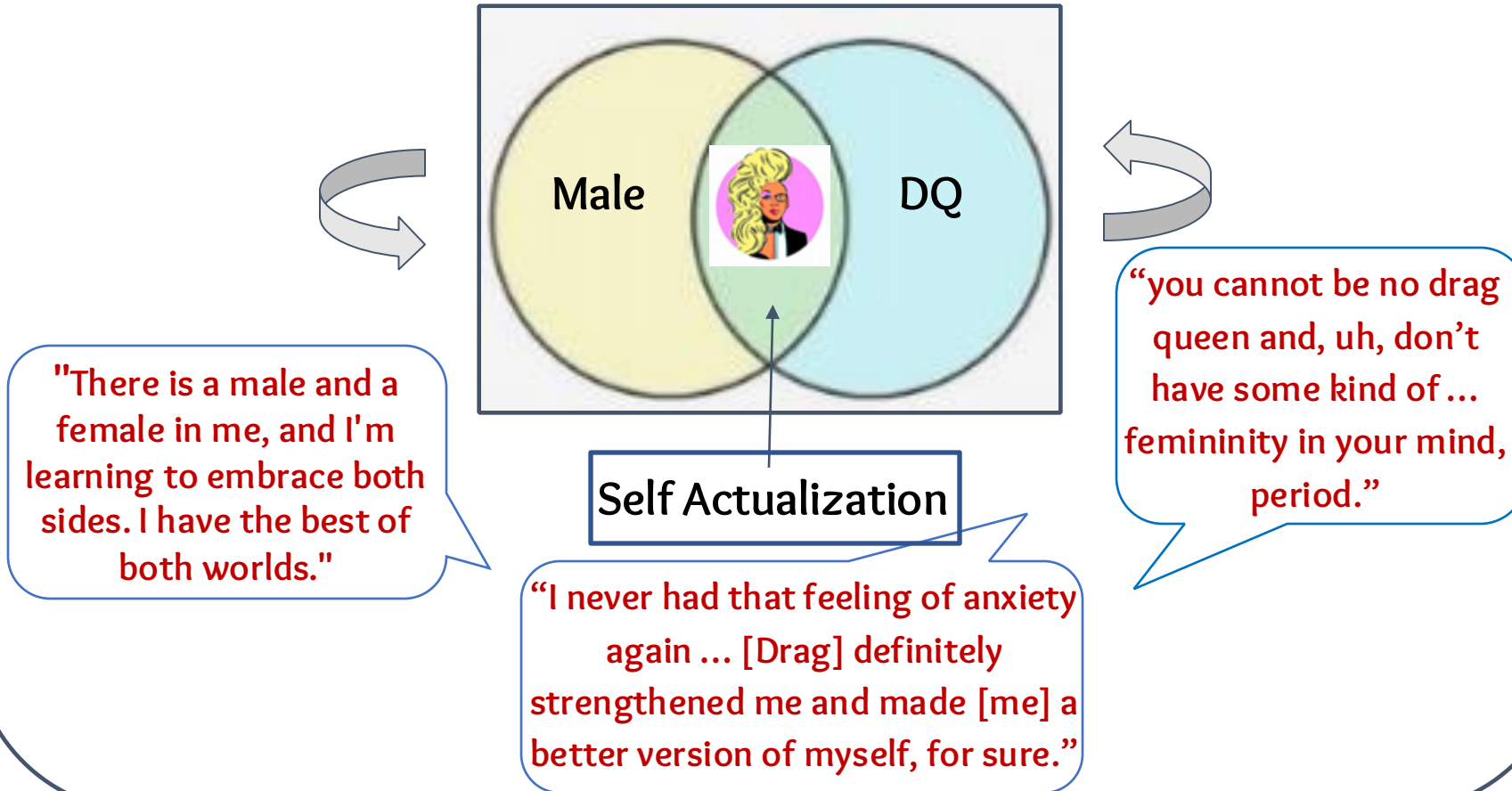
Your Life Line

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.



Identity Across the Lifespan

Aging Integration / Merging of Male & DE Identities



A Force for Social Change

Participants revealed how vital it is that drag be seen not simply as entertainment but as a necessary force for social change across society as a whole, not just in LGBTQ+ communities.

“...the ones who dared being the face of the gay community.”

Agent of Change

Stonewall
HIV/AIDS

Educating Public &
Next Generation

Health & Wellness

Underground Newsletter

Fundraising
Benefit Dinners
Social Justice

Political

Activism

Liberation



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A Force for Social Change

The stories of older drag queens provide a vibrant, lived history of personal, social, and political change that blossoms not diminishes throughout their lives.



**Meaningful
Purpose**



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