# Corsets, Headpieces, and Tape:

## An Ethnography of Gendered Performance

## CORSETS, COIFFES ET BANDES:

### UNE ETHNOGRAPHIE DE LA PERFORMANCE DE SEXE

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**Abstract:** Drag queens co-construct their identities in order to become part of one segment of the gay community referred to as the drag queen community. We argue that to act in the identity of a drag queen is to maximize the contrast with ascribed gender identity and minimize the distortion thereof. We adapted Tajifel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory to provide us with the necessary framework, but we built upon Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor and Carbaugh's ideas on social identification. We conducted several interviews with the different performers before and after the drag shows over several weeks. As part of our findings, in order for the drag queens to communicatively create their group identity, there is a certain degree of behavior and attitude conformity. There is an importance placed upon the likeness or dependence/reliance on one another (i.e. a sense of community), and last, there is internalization of these behaviors, exerted both individually and collectively. This helps to solidify their sense of community and belonging through ritualistic behaviors and allows the individuals to gain a better understanding of who they are personally and socially through this membership.
**Key words:** Social Identification; Gender Identity; Drag Queen Culture

**Resumé:** Les drag queens co-construisent leurs identités pour devenir partie d'un segment de la communauté homosexuelle appelée la communauté des drag queens. Nous affirmons qu'agir dans l'identité de drag queen est de maximiser le contraste avec l'identité de genre attribué et minimiser la distorsion de celle-ci. Nous avons adapté la théorie de l'identité sociale de Tajifel et Turner (1979) afin de nous fournir un cadre nécessaire, mais nous avons construit la métaphore dramaturgique de Goffman et les idées sur l'identification sociale de Carbaugh. Nous avons mené plusieurs entretiens avec de différents artistes avant et après les spectacles sur plusieurs semaines. En tant qu'une partie de nos résultats, nous avons trouvé que pour que les drag queens puissent créer leur identité de groupe, il y a un certain degré de comportement et d'attitude de conformité. Il y a une importance accordée à la ressemblance ou la dépendance/confiance entre les uns les autres (c'est à dire un sentiment de communauté), et enfin, il y a une internalisation de ces comportements, exercés à la fois individuellement et collectivement. Cela contribue à solidifier leur sentiment de communauté et d'appartenance à travers des comportements rituels et permet aux individus de mieux comprendre qui sont-ils personnellement et socialement par le biais de cette adhésion.

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# INTRODUCTION

> It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role…It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves (Goffman, 1959, p. 19).

If Goffman's contention is that we are most often "playing a role," then how is it that individuals come to understand their identity? The word "playing" insinuates a disposition that can change. If people do have this ability to change roles, then what types of different identities are out there and at what point are these differences displayed? Goffman (1959) suggests there are two main types of behaviors that individuals display: the "front region behaviors" and the "back region behaviors." The "front region" refers to the time when an individual is most courteous and well-mannered, and the "back region" refers to the relaxed point at which the individual might be less refined.

The driving questions of our study examine the identity phenomenon. Much research has been conducted on the formation of identity. According to Carbaugh (1996), "…One might think of social identities as a dimension and outcome of communication performances…and as socially negotiated and culturally distinct" (p. 27). This "social negotiation" is what we, as researchers, seek to better understand.

One other issue that is of great importance to us is the cultural one; we cannot separate culture from the communicative interactions because we capture "the voice" of a certain social group who perhaps share parts of their identities in one aspect of their lives, but actually have very distinct and individual identities when not in a shared community (Philipsen, 1992). As with most social groups or communities, Carbaugh (1996) considers "the everyday practice of social identities as a cultural accomplishment" (p. 24). It is with this contention we set forth to better understand this second component of culture (i.e. understanding how a certain social group is "culturally distinct"). We further the research on identity and gender because the goal is not to solely understand how identities are formed, but rather at what point the differences in identities are displayed. As Kenneth Burke (1968) believed, "The dramatistic study of language…provides the basis for general conception of man and human relations" (p. 445). It is this analysis of language that would allow us to explore a myriad of contexts where communication and culture are the central components. Burke (1969) examines the grammar, the symbolic, and the rhetoric of identity. According to Burke (1969), "The Rhetoric [of identity] deals with the possibilities of classification in its partisan aspects; it considers the way that individuals are at odds with one another, or become identified with groups more or less with odds with one another" (p. 22).

## Descriptive Theoretical Framework

Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor helps us understand identity. But Carbaugh's emphasis on social identification, specifically discourse of identity, takes into account the necessary social and cultural contexts and this illuminates our goal. According to Carbaugh (1996), "Each discourse of identity will play upon certain presumed (i.e. cultural) premises about what a person is (and should be), can (and should) do, feel (and should feel), and how that person dwells within nature" (p. 29). This "social identification" is directly related to the "cultural agent" both of which assess identification as an "individual [who] has a self or something inside of himself or herself that is special, unique, yet rather stable across scenes and times (e.g. their personality)" (Carbaugh, 1996, p. 28).

After a detailed investigation of our phenomena of interest, we realized that "social identity theory draws a distinct between group-mediated behaviors derived from social identities and interpersonal behaviors that relate to personal identities" (Morton & Duck, 2000, p. 440). We further adapted Tajifel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory to provide us with the necessary framework to more fully examine the range of identity. In other words, we built off of Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor and Carbaugh's ideas on social identification, in accordance with Tajifel and Turner (1979), who claim,

> From a social-psychological perspective, the essential criteria for group membership, as they apply to large-scale social categories, are that the individuals concerned themselves and are defined by others as members of a group. ...Social categorization are conceived here as cognitive tools that segment, classify, and order the social environment, and thus enable the individual to undertake many forms of social action (p. 15).

In order to make our descriptive theoretical framework more applicable, we implemented the following from Tajifel and Turner (1979): 1. "When social identity is significant, individuals order themselves and others according to group membership," 2. "Individuals are motivated to learn the stereotypic characteristics and norms of the in-group through

observation and comparison with others," and 3. "These norms are ascribed to the self and internalized such that subsequent behaviors reflect one's identity as a group member" (Morton & Duck, 2000, p. 440).

There is no one specific way to examine identity and since identities can be multiple and can take on many different forms, we sought to find out how and at which point(s) the identities change. In other words, what do the members of this social and cultural group do to form an identity both within the given group and outside of the given group? And, when and why do these separate identities exist? We discover the answers to these questions through observations and interviews of participants in these shared communities.

# METHOD AND CONTEXT

The context that we explore is the drag queen performing community. In this context, men dress in drag and perform live shows in a gay bar. Our ethnographic study, focusing on the formation of identity within the drag queen performing community, takes place in a gay club in a mid-size Midwestern American city. It is necessary to observe our phenomenon of interest inside of the gay club because historically, this is the primary setting for drag shows. The club is located in the downtown nightclub district of the city. Above the entrance there is a small, pink-neon, upside-down triangle that displays the club's name.

At the back of the club, directly behind the dance floor, is a large performance room, which includes several stages where performances take place. The performance room itself is built in the shape of triangle with the center stage situated in the front corner of the room. A large curtain conceals the center stage and is pulled back when performances begin. Directly in front of the center stage are five round tables with four bars stools each. There are two staircases that lead from the center stage to this table area. A main staircase descends off of the front of the center stage and a smaller staircase with a hand railing is situated off of the right side of the center stage. Behind those five tables is a long narrow satellite stage, which is flanked on each end by two smaller, round stages. When looking towards the center stage from the back of the performance room, several round tables, which are similar to those situated immediately in front of the center stage, are placed along the right and left sides of the room. Three more round tables are situated along the opposite side of the satellite stage. On the back wall of the performance room, four booths are situated back-to-back. Glass windows behind the booths separate the performance room from the rest of the bar. However, because they are clear glass, customers in the bar can still view the drag shows from afar. We chose to sit at the different tables and booths of the performance room to conduct our observations because the majority of the drag queens' interactions took place in this area.

Just to the right of the center stage, when looking from the back of the room, is an elevated room with a large window overlooking the entire performance area, which serves as the control room for the music and lighting. Different lighting effects such as blue and purple triangles are splashed up onto the curtain in front of the center stage before and after performances. Next to the control room and just offstage is the performers' dressing room. It is an approximate 10-foot by 12-foot room with several large mirrors and closets. On the wall above the mirrors are signatures from past drag performers dating back to the year 1991. We conducted several participant interviews in this dressing room because this area was a much quieter and more intimate than the larger performance room, and the drag queens suggested it.

The gay bar, specifically the drag queen shows, is a good context to examine the identity phenomenon because, as indicated previously, this is the traditional place for drag shows. Through our research of this specific club, we discovered that weekly drag shows are performed every Sunday night. This provided us many opportunities not only to observe the performers and their behaviors while in the drag show environment, but out of drag as well. In addition, we also had the chance to build relationships with the performers, which we feel helped us gain a better understanding of their true thoughts and feelings. We also feel that this context allowed us to blend-in more with the other members of this community, since it is a club that anyone can enter. We were members of the audience while we were observing the performers in this context.

## Participants

The participants of our ethnographic research study were men who dressed as drag queens and performed at a gay club in a Midwestern American city. All participants were over 21 years of age. All the men we interviewed, who dress in drag at this club, are gay. These men alter their physical appearance when in drag and we understand there are certain elements of identity switching that are taking place. The drag queen performers represent a unique group of people who are motivated to alter their physical identity (clothes, hair, etc.). Because of this unique transitional behavior, we felt that examining these participants helped us better understand how identity is formed and changed in comparison to other individuals who do not dress in drag.

Furthermore, from our research and experiences, we make certain assumptions about why these men would be good participants. First, Carbaugh (1996) says, "…One might think of social identities as a dimension and outcome of communication performances…and as socially negotiated and culturally distinct" (p. 27). A drag show is certainly a

communication performance. We also know that there is culture surrounding one's sexuality. Since we established that culture could not be separated from the communicative interactions, we wanted to capture "the voice" of a certain social group like gay men who perform in drag. These participants would perhaps be more able to explain why their identities shift or change during certain times, specifically when not in this shared, gay community (Philipsen, 1992).

We established that "identity is formed by social processes. Once crystallized, it is maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 173). It is these "social relations" we observed and inquired about in this specific social community.

## Data Gathering Procedures

The club is a place that most anyone can go, if they choose. There is a cover charge on Sunday nights because of the drag show, but as long as one pays this fee, s/he can enter and participate in the club's activities. This is a fairly open place. People are not turned away based on their sexual orientation, race, religion, or any other potentially discriminating characteristics. As a starting point for our study, we went to the club weeks in advance, before customers arrived, and asked the club owners' permission to conduct our observations. We fully explained our research goals to both the club owners and performers before asking for their participation.

We observed and took notes on the drag shows (performers and audience) before asking the performers if they would like to volunteer to participate in our study and answer some questions. Using the recommendations of Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) to guide our approach to taking fieldnotes, we determined that the layout of the performance room provided us ample opportunities to write jottings in the "natural" performance setting as they actually occurred without being distracting to the audience members or drag performers themselves. We concluded that because of our observation location towards the back of the performance room, we could take very detailed notes of our phenomenon of interest and our research participants while remaining relatively unobtrusive.

We observed the drag performances in tandem, but took independent notes and compared afterwards. We felt that this was important in order to obtain a more thorough and accurate depiction of the events. This method did provide some unnecessary overlap of the same occurrences, but it helped to reduce the chances that any important incidents were mistakenly overlooked during the observations. Also, when we did have similar recognitions of the events, it better ensured our accuracy. We took notes continuously during the performances in the moment that they actually occurred. We then converted our jottings to full fieldnotes immediately after leaving the club.

We conducted twenty interviews with the different performers before and after the drag shows. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed afterwards. At least twenty-four hours before conducting each interview, a pre-interview was conducted with every participant. In the pre-interview, each participant was read an ethics statement, which informed them that the interview would be taped, but that their responses would remain completely confidential. Additionally, the ethics statement informed the participants that they had the right to stop the interview at anytime and could refuse to answer any questions that were asked. Finally, the participants were given the questions of the interview so that they would have time to think about the topic and could then decide if they would like to proceed with the interview sessions. Then, at each individual interview, which was being audiotaped, the ethics statement was read again and the participants were asked if they wished to proceed (all participants agreed to the interview).

## Data Analysis

The data, consisting of our fieldnotes and interview transcripts, were analyzed using the descriptive theoretical framework based on Tajifel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory. The data were coded into categories based on the three tenets of this theory: 1. "When social identity is significant, individuals order themselves and others according to group membership." 2. "Individuals are motivated to learn the stereotypic characteristics and norms of the in-group through observation and comparison with others." 3. "These norms are ascribed to the self and internalized such that subsequent behaviors reflect one's identity as a group member" (Tajifel & Turner, 1979; Morton & Duck, 2000, p. 440).

## Reliability and Validity

To establish internal and external reliability throughout our ethnographic study, we have utilized several recommendations posed by LeCompte and Goetz (1982) as a method for strengthening our research. To ensure internal reliability, we used multiple examples from our fieldnotes and interview transcripts to provide support for our findings. Having two researchers making independent jottings and fieldnotes of the drag performances also helped to further strengthen internal reliability. As mentioned previously, these independent fieldnotes were compared in order to obtain a more thorough and accurate depiction of the drag performances. This process, even though at times seemed to be repetitive, helped to provide an opportunity for "peer examinations" of our findings. Additionally, by having both a male and female researcher, we were able to obtain multiple perspectives of the same events, which we felt was important when

dealing with issues of gender. Finally, internal reliability was strengthened through the audiotaping and transcription of all participant interviews.

The external reliability of our study, according to LeCompte and Goetz (1982), was enhanced through our clear identification of our position of status as researchers. During observations we were among the other audience members, which allowed us the opportunity to be participants while remaining in an observational role. Additionally, we clearly detailed our methods for data collection and analysis, which only serve to enhance our external reliability.

When assessing the validity of our study, we have used suggestions and recommendations from Philipsen (1982). First, as a way to strengthen the validity of our research, we incorporated ethnographic research methods that we had been previously trained and thoroughly instructed on. Additionally, before proceeding with our study, we successfully prepared ourselves by becoming familiar with our phenomenon of interest. We clearly demonstrated that great time and effort was put forth in order to gain access to our context of study, as well as to ensure that participants' confidentiality was strictly maintained. Also, we feel our validity was strengthened because neither of us had had any previous contact with the participants of our study. This helped to keep us more neutral when conducting our observations and interviews. Additionally, by using both methods to examine this class of phenomena, we not only accomplished to some degree, what Philipsen (1982) called a "tri-angulation of methods," but we were also able to take incidents that we observed and confirm the meaning of those incidents during participant interviews, which greatly enhanced our validity.

# FINDINGS

## The Identity Construct: Gender is Not Just Biological

Each evening the drag queen performers take the stage, they are dressed like women. While they are biologically male, they transform themselves in a physical manner to look like women and inevitably become part of a larger community known as drag queens. We argue that while being a drag queen is not a part of traditional society, they do employ certain traditional acts that "pay homage" to the drag queen community. Furthermore, there are elements of identity development and identity acquisition that will help us understand how they order themselves as part of their cultural society. We believe that the larger scale of this research examines how cultural meanings are communicated through drag queens' imitations of women.

## Us vs. Them: The Significance of Social Identity

The social identity of gay men is such that communal order is very powerful. We argue that being gay is already difficult when establishing one's identity. Being a drag queen is even more difficult because as we found out from our interviews, many gay men would never do drag and do not understand why some gay men do want to dress up as women. When asked, how do you perceive drag queens as a group, Joseph (who is a drag queen) said,

> Not very well (laughs). Not really. They tend to be somewhat cliquish, and like a lot of times there's rivalry between [city omitted] and [city omitted]. [One city] has some bigger performers, and [the other city] — when the [name of show] was around, you know, we had a great performance and a great group of people. And there's the older crowd, the newer crowd and then, you know, it's just like friends. I mean it's just like the gay community basically. There's good and bad, ugly and pretty, and there's no really one way to describe the drag queens. Everybody's different.

Joseph describes a situation where rivalry and faction occur, yet they all tend to be in the community, "just like the gay community," as he says. Another drag queen uses the analogy of a family, since family members often support each other because of their bonds and ties, but will often fight and argue with one another. And, as we know, almost all families have an order of some type. Some might say the oldest child gets more opportunities, the youngest child is more spoiled, the parent who sits at the head of the table at dinnertime is more dominant, etc. These all denote a certain social order, not unlike any close knit community.

And, there is certainly a spectrum of behaviors and perceptions of the drag queen community. Keith, another drag queen says,

> Uh, they [drag queens] can be really supportive of each other, but they can also be really bitchy and caddy at the same time. And I don't know, I think for everything, there's an opposite, so if you've got bitchy and caddy on this side, you're going to have supportive and nurturing on the other side, you know.

The fact that drag queens use certain communicative moves in order to maintain social order says a lot about the power of social identity. As Carbaugh (2002) said of social identity, "We all have a mother and a father. This is a social identity. An American father is a social identity, but has a cultural agent" (personal communication). We take Carbaugh's

comments to mean that cultural agency, "American," and social identity, "father," can only be understood as part of the whole when separated, but when used together, depict a much more cultural and holistic perspective. Concomitantly, the term drag queen reflects certain cultural elements of perhaps a gay community or a performance community.

Whichever community is being represented in this context, it is this sense of "us" versus "them." We observed one story that a drag queen named James told at one of the performances. He talked about being in a hotel in a small town of 8,000 people and walking by a restaurant in full drag with other drag queens. He said that these "men, women, and old people" in the restaurant were looking and "cussing" at him, but it was all for raising money for AIDS research of which they raised $1625. This is an example of power in numbers and power with respect to identity. One drag queen in a small country town might be less inclined to walk down the street in drag; however, two or three or four drag queens create a certain perceived norm, not only for themselves, but for the observers as well. This act is representative of the significance of social identity and group membership.

## "Beauty and the Beast": Social Identity, Norms, and Stereotypes

With this given context, identity is socially constructed, but more specifically, it is co-constructed through observation and comparison by the specific group members to further clarify their individuality. There is an interesting irony going on between constructing one's individuality by adapting to certain norms through examination of compartmentalizing group behaviors. Nevertheless, this is what goes on in one of the contests at this gay bar. This contest, known to locals as Beauty and the Beast, depicts an environment where the norms of being a drag queen are learned through watching, observing, and then imitating others (specifically women in this case). In this contest, men are asked to volunteer to become drag queens. These men are typically gay men who want to learn how to become drag queens, but are amateurs by definition. They are then made up by a professional drag queen, whom all of our interviewees termed "drag mother." When asked, how did you learn about becoming a drag queen, Keith replied,

> Uh, it's kind of funny. I was right out of high school, or was I in high school, and she (a man) asked me to come and judge this contest at a gay bar… I was in the closet, I didn't know I was gay. I had a little idea that I was different, you know. And then someone told me about The Beauty and the Beast contest, and so again I was still in the closet. I went and competed, got first runner-up. The next year I was out of the closet, competed and won the contest. And my drag mother uh, is the one that really, she's awesome. She just kind of took me under her wing and guided me and taught me about, you know, there's some people that are all about the image and there's some people that are all about the performance, and I think that truly the best is kind of a good blend of the both, of the two.

In this example, Keith provides an explanation of how he may be socially constructed as a gay man, but his identity as a drag queen was clearly co-constructed by a "drag mother." He further explains that his drag mother was "… a friend that taught me a lot about doing drag and uh, really basically guided me and taught me a lot." In this instance, Keith did not need instruction on how to be a gay man; however, he did need guidance on how to alter his physical appearance and become a drag queen.

Before the actual act of performing, Sam, another drag queen, suggests getting to know the community first. He believes that being a drag queen is not just about the performance; rather, he suggests it is more about being secure among the drag queen performers:

> Any performer, they need to have support. If somebody brand new, because I just had somebody come up to me last week who is new and wants to do it and I thought, I said well I can try to get you into a couple of shows, but he seemed a little iffy, so…it's best for them to get to know the drag queens and the one's that perform and then kind of work their way into a show.

There is a distinct way to be a drag queen, as these interviewees suggest. In this community, there is a certain degree of conforming in both behavior and attitude, and there is an importance placed upon the perception of them to be more similar to one another. In order to get to this point, much observation and then consequently, internalization is needed from the drag queens.

One last issue of significance is called "stereotypic characteristics." We find there are similarities between Basso's joking imitations of the "Whiteman" and drag queens imitations of women. It is this notion of joking that is perhaps most important because "Acts of joking convey messages that are not conveyed when the acts they are patterned after are performed unjokingly, and for this reason, jokes are not intended to be taken literally, 'seriously,' or at face value" (Basso, 1999, p. 37; Austin, 1962, p. 121). It is true that these men are imitating women. They are not mocking or doing harm; rather, they are performing imitations of women. This can be further supported by the fact that they often call themselves female impersonators. We realized this during our second pre-performance observation:

They [two men] then said if we had any questions feel free to ask them. Adam then briefly asked if, in general, drag queens referred to each other as drag queens or if there is another term they use. Keith said drag queens or female impersonators are the right terms.

We believe the larger part of this construct exemplifies that some gay men like to dress up as women; however, they do not feel they are women. If anything, their performances further their identity as part of the drag queen community, not as identification as women. These performers clearly differentiate between dressing up as women and being biologically male. Joseph explains,

> …After the show, I usually hang out and walk around uh, still painted for a while, and I usually like take my makeup off at the bar. And it's nice to get out of it. It takes all that work to get into it, and then it's just like you wipe it off and it's like I'm a boy again. It's nice to be a boy. But it's a little uncomfortable being, you know, tough and things like that uh, wearing a wig on your head.

Joseph still subscribes to the broad sense of male identity as "being, you know, tough." Inherent in his statement is also the idea that to be female is to wear makeup. In his mind, once the makeup is removed, he returns to being male again. These are just a few of the stereotypes of men and women.

## "I can tend to be more uh, bitchy per se": Ascribing and Internalizing Behavior

We believe the identity of male drag queens is co-constructed and negotiated. We attribute this perspective to the fact that they claim their behaviors differ when they are in drag versus out of drag. Joseph says,

> I can tend to be more uh, bitchy per se when I'm in drag. And it's just a drag queen trait I guess, and it's not all the time; it's just occasionally, you know, people come up to you and, oh, you're beautiful and, oh, like, thank you, and, you know, I try to be really cordial, and sometimes it's like go away (chuckles), you don't know who you're talking to. Uh, but, no, my personalities don't differ a whole lot because it's not like an alter ego. I don't have a split personality or anything like that, and so they don't differ a whole lot.

Joseph associates "bitchiness" as a drag queen trait. Keith and Steve also ascribe terms like "diva bitch" or "bitchy" when referring to drag queen behavior. It appears as though this "bitchiness" is a stereotypical attribute that the drag queens conform to in some way. Keith extends upon this by saying, "I think for everything, there's an opposite, so if you've got bitchy and caddy on this side, you're going to have supportive and nurturing on the other side, you know." Keith allots for the fact that one cannot stereotype an entire community; however, Keith and the other drag queens can clearly express some of the traits that most drag queens have internalized and used as part of their drag queen identity.

Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor is predicated upon behavior and internalizing such behaviors. As mentioned earlier in a discussion of identity, Goffman (1959) suggests there are two main types of behaviors that individuals display: the "front region behaviors" and the "back region behaviors." The "front region" refers to the time when an individual is most polite and well-mannered, and the "back region" refers to the relaxed point at which the individual might be less refined. In this context, the drag queens of course exemplify these "front region" and "back region" behaviors as all individuals do; however, we found that when the drag queens are in drag and on stage, they are actually exerting their "back region behaviors." In other words, the drag queens appear to me more comfortable at times when dressed for a performance. Sam says,

> Some people are more, when they're in face or drag, they don't, it's…let me see how I want to do this…You see them out of drag and you're thinking well they are real quiet, shy…in drag, they won't shut up. Because, I don't know, maybe they feel like they're a totally different person or nobody knows who they are. They are just more comfortable or maybe they think they are hiding behind something that they feel comfortable in.

As far as internalization, Steve believes that drag queens, when in drag, are "a little bit more flamboyant – a little bit more bitchy." However, he claims that drag queens become true performers "when they are doing it for them and they're not doing it for their audience." Goffman's metaphor is powerful here because when the drag queens are literally on stage (front stage) they are "bitchy" or "caddy," as the interviewees have stated. Goffman would say that these behaviors are typically "back stage" behaviors; however, it appears as though this group feels more comfortable exerting back stage behaviors while performing in front of an audience. Additionally, as Steve said, for a drag queen to really become a drag queen performer, the individual must internalize the acts, actions, and behaviors so much that the performance is done for the individual, and not the audience. As Carbaugh (1996) discussed, "Each discourse of identity will play upon certain presumed (i.e. cultural) premises about what a person is (and should be), can (and should) do, feel (and should feel), and how that person dwells within nature" (p. 29). For this community, drag queens are gay men, who feel they need to be and should be "bitchy," "caddy," or "flamboyant" at times in order to successfully exist and fit into this drag queen community.

**Drag Queen Resources: Contrast and Distortion**

We have argued that drag queens co-construct their identities in order to become part of the drag queen community. We further contend that to act in the identity of a drag queen is to maximize the contrast with ascribed gender identity and minimize the distortion thereof. As we said, drag queens are not mocking women, nor do they believe they are women. Their roles as female impersonators exemplify women through their lens, which is to "pay homage to" and to entertain. However, "the comic effects produced by the application of these principles cannot be properly appreciated unless the cultural contrasts they are used to highlight are made explicit" (Basso, 1999, p. 45). We believe that the extremes physical alterations that some of these drag queens make are done primarily for entertainment; they are not done to offend women. In fact, these imitations often exist in order to place the individual in a category that s/he does not belong to. The person for whom the imitation is directed represents what s/he is not. Again, this reiterates our point that these drag queens are not women, nor do they desire to be women.

To reassert our link among identity, norms, and stereotypes, we will now provide some data from our fieldnotes that help to prove that stereotypic characteristics and norms contrast the feminine ideal:

> The next performer was a drag queen named Jenny. She has a hot pink wig on with a pink boa wrapped around her neck.. She is wearing a tight black, brown, and white leopard shirt. She also has on tight pants and big rhinestone earrings. She has a big diamond ring on her right hand. She has on sunglasses and a cigarette in her hand. She uses her bra pad to wipe her face.

While most women probably will not wipe their perspiring forehead with a bra pad, this act was humorous and entertaining. Another performer is described as follows:

> Naomi is tall. She has a dark wig in the shape of a bun tied on the top of her head. She has on a long black and sequin dress, long diamond earrings, a diamond choker, and high-heeled black shoes. She has a lot of make-up on – big blue eyeshadow, pink rouge, and dark brown lip-liner and lipstick.

Almost all of the drag queen performers dress to maximize how they see women. They have on grand wigs, lots of makeup, boas, a lot of jewelry, pronounced breasts and hips with the pads they add to look more like a woman. Additionally, they tape their chest and their genitals to their bodies in order to create the illusion of cleavage and a vagina, respectively. All of this is part of what Basso termed "secondary texts." Perhaps the gay men can identify with women, and as such, choose to imitate them. Or as Steve put it, "This is never meant to be offensive. We respect and love women and want to do justice to some of our favorite divas." Again, to act as a woman is to maximize the contrast of being a woman and minimize the distortion of portraying women as ridiculous or ludicrous. Basso further points out that responses to a joke by audience members constitute that it is, in fact, a joke. In other words, if audience members were offended, and the joke was not amusing, then perhaps the joker "stretch[ed] a relationship too far" (Basso, 1999, p. 82).

The last thing integral to this research deals with the cultural meanings of the drag queen performances. We have argued that while being a drag queen is not a part of traditional society, they do employ certain traditional acts that "pay homage" to the drag queen community. These rituals, which include dressing up in women's clothing and make-up, singing, dancing, and performing, acting in a certain way, whether it is "bitchy, caddy," or "flamboyant," and then "becoming a boy again" are all part of drag queens' identity in this community. Furthermore, we discovered that the groups' identity development and identity acquisition are negotiated and co-created both for the group of drag queens as a whole and as individual female impersonators. Last, we now have a better understanding of how drag queens tend to order themselves as part of their cultural society, whereby they employ the following: 1) a degree of conforming in both behavior and attitude, 2) an importance placed upon the perception of similarities to create this group, and 3) a subsequent internalization of these behaviors as they see fit both individually and collectively.

# DISCUSSION

By applying Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory, we managed to discover how a very nontraditional community manages to construct their identity. One of the more obvious and perhaps important aspects of this research is that there are not many theoretical studies of drag queens, and this may be one of the only contexts in which people alter their physical identity in order to fit into the larger community. We have the opportunity to shed light on a speech community that has not had much previous positive exposure.

The other major piece of this research stems from our findings in which we were able to extend upon our initial descriptive theoretical framework, which was comprised of the following three parts: 1) "when social identity is significant, individuals order themselves and others according to group membership, 2) "Individuals are motivated to learn the stereotypic, characteristics and norms of the in-group through observation and comparison with others," and 3)

"These norms are ascribed to the self and internalized such that subsequent behaviors reflect one's identity as a group member" (Tajifel & Turner, 1979; Morton & Duck, 2000, p. 440). The fourth element that we add comes from our interest in Basso and his work with the Western Apache. We inevitably were able to make connections among social identity, norms, and now primary and secondary texts, which emphasize methods of contrast and distortion, furthering an emphasis not only on the drag queen community, but on the audience members whose job it is to interpret these performances, or imitations of women. We claim that this fourth element is as follows: To act in the given identity is to contrast certain behaviors for imitation, while distortion of other acts and behaviors only aims at reassuring the initial set of contrast principles.

At times in this project, we made the critical turn, but only after we had a true understanding and appreciation for this community. As a result, we feel we know much more about the communicative behaviors of this particular group and have created some practical applications for the three main audiences: 1) drag queens, 2) gay people who are not drag queens, and 3) people who have no interest in either the gay or drag communities.

First, we address the drag queen community. As mentioned as part of our findings, in order for the drag queens to communicatively create their group identity, there is a certain degree of behavior and attitude conformity, there is an importance placed upon the likeness or dependence/reliance on one another (i.e. a sense of community), and last, there is internalization of these behaviors, exerted both individually and collectively. This helps to solidify their sense of community and belonging through ritualistic behaviors, and while they are not often seen as conventional, they are, in fact, quite traditional. In other words, these individuals gain a better understanding of who they are personally and socially through this membership.

The second set of applications is for gay people who are not drag queens. As we mentioned in our research, there are many members of the gay community that would never do drag. However, we believe that almost all shared communities engage in certain rituals that bond them as a group. Even though there may be different rituals for each community, what we extracted from our research with drag queens is that there is a certain descriptive element that contributes to identity formation in group membership. These individuals have probably been exposed to this culture at some point, so the pragmatic applications to understanding this drag queen community would involve tolerance, understanding, and respect for individuals who do not act in the traditional ritualistic ways of the larger gay community.

In terms of application to people who have no interest in either the gay or drag communities, the same principles of tolerance would apply. However, perhaps many individuals have just not been exposed to drag queens, although they most likely have experienced people that do not fit into the traditional norms of the given community. We would want to urge the people who are otherwise unfamiliar with this drag queen community to understand that these individuals are not having an identity crisis; they are men who know they are men. They engage in imitating women for the purposes of entertainment and respect to some degree. And as we know, "imitation is the highest form of flattery."

## Future Research

In the future, we should more fully explore the terms that the drag queens used to name one another at times (i.e. "diva," "dance queen," "glamour queen," "shock queen," etc). We believe the use of these terms may depend upon the types of relationships the drag queens have with each other (whether they are good or bad, positive or negative). A possible approach to examining this would be to follow Carbaugh's (1996) study of television station employees and their "terminological system," which was distinct to their organization. A potential parallel could be made between how employees of the TV station described coworkers and how drag queens describe others in their community. Future research could help explore this construct.

Another implication for future research might be to examine the full range of communication acts within the drag queen community. We looked primarily at drag performances, but we feel that all communication operates on a continuum to which we would want to apply Hymes SPEAKING mnemonic (1972) or this "system of categories for [which] observation [is] developed through systematic inquiry and analysis, and which is a general outline of the contexts and components of ways of speaking" (Philipsen, 1992, p. 9). Specifically, we feel that the ends (i.e. purpose, outcomes or goals of the talk), the key (the tone, manner, or spirit in which the talk occurs), the instrumentalities (the particular channel, language, dialect or speech variety in which the talk occurs), and the genre (the cultural category of talk) have not been fully investigated in our ethnography. The exploration of this through Hymes framework might supply more useful data in terms of understanding naming, categorizing, and identification.

Finally, we would like to see an ethnography done on the larger gay community as a whole. Specifically, we would want to know about gay identity and how their identity and culture tie into the smaller drag queen community if at all. We believe there are many associations to be made here because all of the drag queens we interviewed were gay; however, not all gay men are drag queens. Perhaps there may be a co-cultural relationship between these two communities. We feel this would be a worthwhile study to undertake because the comparisons could yield a better understanding of how certain co-cultures communicate.

# CONCLUSION

We aimed to capture "the voice" of a certain social group who share parts of their identities in one aspect of their lives, but actually have very distinct and individual identities when not in a shared community (Philipsen, 1992). This was accomplished with drag queens, because as previously mentioned, this is the one of the only contexts where people change their physical identities, back and forth, over a short period of time.

While we initially began with Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor and Carbaugh's ideas on social identification, we furthered our descriptive theoretical framework with Tajifel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory. We felt it was necessary at times to make this critical turn with our research interpretations in order to effectively learn more about the communicative behaviors of this particular group. The next step for us and future researchers would be to compare, contrast, and conjoin, if possible, the linguistic manifestations that Hymes might bring about with Goffman, Basso, and Carbaugh, who all emphasize the importance of the participants, their specific culture, and their actions. Only when this is accomplished, can we observe and understand communication in all of its explanatory ways.

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