

(Trans)lating Identity: Exploring Discursive Strategies for Navigating the Tensions of Identity Gaps

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This study explored the formation and expression of gender identity among 19 self-identified transgender individuals through the use of qualitative, in-depth interviews. Through the lens of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), we examined how trans individuals form and perform gender identity, the tensions produced between identity frames, and the discursive strategies used to navigate those tensions. We identified the manifestation of three specific identity gaps: personal-enacted, personal-relational, and enacted-relational. Furthermore, we discovered four discursive strategies previously recognized for navigating tensions that emerge from identity gaps: closeted enactment, passing, disengagement, and label changing, and we identified a fifth discursive strategy—hyper-engagement—used to navigate these tensions. Results revealed that these identity layers and discursive strategies collaboratively manifest and coalesce in response to specific communicative contexts. Our results are discussed within the resounding call for greater understanding of trans* identity formation and expression.*

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Trans*¹ identity is about so much more than simply existing in the wrong body (Morgan & Stevens, 2008). Despite society's focus on trans* bodies, trans* existence

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far surpasses mere issues of the body. Through in-depth interviews with trans* individuals, it became readily apparent that the formation and expression of gender identity—a process often taken for granted by cisgender individuals—yields a near-constant vulnerability and sense of struggle. This identity negotiation process is intricately communicative and deeply personal.

Identity management is an especially common practice among trans* individuals. Trans* identities are fluid, dynamic, and liminal, often “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Trans* identities are “cut through with multiple variables such as gender, sexuality, ‘race’ and ethnicity, class, age, transitional time span and geographical location” (Hines, 2007, p. 49). While conceptions of trans* identities often focus most heavily on the ways trans* bodies do *not* align with the heteronormative, dimorphic system of sex categorization in the Western world (Geller, 2009), trans* individuals and advocates have called for a “move beyond the bipolar masculine/feminine model of sex and gender based solely on anatomy” (Boswell, 1998, p. 56) and toward a more progressive view and social reform that respects the multi-dimensional scope of trans* identity.

The foundation of this social reform is a recognition that gender—“a person’s sense of self as female or male” (Zucker & Bradley, 1995, p. 495)—and sex—“a relatively narrow term that typically refers only to those inborn biological characteristics relating to production, such as sex chromosomes or sex organs” (Matlin, 2008, pp. 3–4)—are not the same. The social landscape of gender identity recognition and acceptance directly influences the daily lived experiences of trans* individuals. Recently, policymakers have enacted reforms in an effort to address trans* discrimination, particularly in the workforce. At the federal level, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) of 2013 states that it will “prohibit [employers] from engaging in employment discrimination on the basis of an individual’s actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity” (S.815, 2013). ENDA and similar political reform efforts influence both the safety and welfare of the LGBTQ population, yet these are often highly contested legislative measures. According to the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), similar bills have been routinely proposed in all but one Congressional session since 1994, yet all have failed (HRC, 2009).

Failure to understand the scope of gender identity contributes to lawmakers’ and the general public’s hesitation to adopt measures to protect trans* individuals from discrimination. Perhaps one of the biggest sources of confusion in the social tug-of-war over trans* equality comes from the sometimes misinformed rhetoric of right wing conservatives. For example, during the 2013 ENDA proposal, organizations such as the Traditional Values Coalition (TVC, 2013) released special reports and press releases reporting sensationalized transphobic inaccuracies, such as, “if ENDA passes, students and children in daycare centers all across the nation will be subjected to individuals experimenting with their gender identities” and “under ENDA, employers will have to figure out how to deal with the ever-changing behavior of an employee that shows up to work dressed and behaving as a man 1 day and dressing and behaving as a woman the next” (TVC, 2013). These flagrant rhetorical strategies

sensationalize trans* identity, classifying it as nothing more than a theatrical experiment.

One of the most significant outlets for challenging public and political discourse on trans* identity is scholarly research. Although academic journals are steadily becoming a safe haven for studies on trans* issues, many mainstream journals are still lacking in this research. More specifically, while there is a body of trans* communication scholarship (e.g., Booth, 2011; Kosenko, 2011; Norwood, 2012; Spencer, 2014), few studies have explored trans* individuals' communication of their own gender identity.

Perhaps the lack of literature is partially explained by the absence of a consistent theoretical strain throughout trans* scholarship. Many studies of identity—trans* identity included—are forced to make ontological decisions on the nature of identity. On one hand, essentialist approaches see identity as a fixed, innate extension of the self, often at the consequence of situating it within heteronormative, biological, and binary gender structures (Kimmel, 1996; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). On the other hand, queer approaches to identity directly contradict the heteronormative identity schema (Halperin, 1995). Queer identities, then, are an “open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonance and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick, 1998, p. 208). Consequentially, queer perspectives run the risk of destabilizing and questioning social identities to the point of “disintegrate[ing] the individual's sense of core self within a socially oppressed group, even though such an identity can be the basis for personal empowerment and empowerment to oppose social oppression” (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 432).

Trans Identity*

Numerous scholars located on the feminist-queer continuum have attempted to navigate the “fuzzy” issue of gender in trans* populations (Tauchert, 2002; see also Hird, 2002; Shotwell & Sangrey, 2009), locating trans* embodiment somewhere between essentialist and destabilizing identity structures. This body of scholarship has led to the birth of transgender theory as a theoretical orientation to better understand the multi-dimensional, intersectional nature of trans* identity. This theoretical approach to trans* identity moves away from essentialism out of fear that identity as a fixed construct lends itself to “naturalizing” identity elements, which could “ultimately reify multiple systems of oppression” such as sex, race, and class oppression (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 432). Yet, this scholarship also problematizes the destabilization of identities that occurs through their queering. Instead, transgender theory seeks to incorporate “ideas of the fluidly embodied, socially constructed, and self-constructed aspects of social identity, along with the dynamic interaction and integration of these aspects of identity within the narratives of lived experiences” (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 432). The articulation of these lived experiences allows trans* individuals to negotiate the intersection of

multiple identities, which may be empowering and liberating (Lucal, 1999; Somerville, 2000).

These liberating trans* narratives and identity expressions are inherently communicative (Chepngetich-Mainye, 2010; Gagne, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997; Nuru, 2014), yet mainstream communication research is largely void of communicative explorations of trans* identity. In addition to the consequence of a missed opportunity for validating communication studies as a unique, valuable tradition, failure to extensively explore trans* embodiment—or trans* issues, broadly speaking—is a missed opportunity to help improve the lived experiences of trans* individuals. Schuh (2006) contended that, “communication studies, by developing a new grammar of gender and sexuality, can open a path to greater voice for the transgender and transsexual subject” (p. 35).

Thankfully, the communication research that does explore trans* identity is a high-quality, valuable body of scholarship (see Booth, 2011; Kosenko, 2011; Norwood, 2012; Nuru, 2014; Spencer, 2014). Still, we contend that exploration of trans* identity is worthy of greater attention in communication scholarship. In addition, we believe that the functions that undergird the formation and expression of trans* identity are inherently communicative and discursive, thus this exploration lends itself especially well to a communication perspective. We also support the assertion that, while trans* identities are certainly part of the greater LGBTQ community and that gender and sexual identities certainly intersect, trans* populations have distinct modes of communication, health concerns, and forms of social discrimination (e.g., Bornstein, 1994; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006). As such, we support extensions of valuable communication theories of identity to further explore trans* identity formation and expression and seek to build upon recent communication scholarship exploring this communicative process (see Nuru, 2014).

Communication Theory of Identity

While a great number of communication theories address the formation and expression of identity, Hecht’s (1993) Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) offers a balanced perspective on this process. According to CTI, identity is “inherently a communication process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages and values are exchanged” (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003, p. 230). Identity, then, is built upon communicative functions, enactment, relationship development, and community integration. CTI assumes that identities consist of individual, social, and communal properties that are both enduring and changing. These identities are multiple and overlap. Furthermore, these identities are socially constructed and co-created between individuals. Ultimately, CTI is a valuable theoretical lens for examining trans* identity, in that it neither fully endorses nor eschews essentialist or hyper-postmodern notions of identity. Instead, CTI proposes that identity is located in four (interconnected) frames: personal, enacted, relational, and communal.

In the *personal frame*, identity manifests from individuals’ self-concept, self-cognition, and self-image. In some scholarship, the personal frame even manifests as a “spiritual”

sense of being (Golden, Niles, & Hecht, 2002). The *enacted frame* focuses on the messages (verbal and nonverbal) that individuals send to others to communicatively disclose their identity (Hecht et al., 2003). The *relational frame* focuses on how identities are co-constructed and negotiated through relational influence (Golden et al., 2002; Hecht et al., 2003). Finally, the *communal frame* sees identity as “something held in the collective or public memory of a group that, in turn, bonds the group together” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 237).

By situating the loci of identity within frames, CTI affirms the intersectional, malleable nature of identity. According to CTI, identity is not merely a product of communication nor is communication a product of identity; rather, identity is communication. Thus, the examination of identity is filtered through these frames, which, although often considered separate units for ease of analysis, are multi-dimensional, collaborative, and intersectional. For instance, Jung and Hecht (2004) noted that it is impossible to examine gender identity (located within the personal frame), apart from examination of social ideas about gender and gender roles (which fall within the communal frame). Furthermore, conversations on gender identity must also acknowledge the role of external gender traits on communicative encounters (the relational frame) and the overarching rich tapestry of gendered experiences—male, female, trans*, or otherwise—that have helped shape and constitute the collective public memory that characterizes individuals’ experiences (Middleton & Edwards, 1990). While CTI recognizes that these identity frames may be segmented for ease of analysis, they are part of a greater integrated identity schema and are incomplete, in and of themselves. Ultimately, these frames are interpenetrative and operate concurrently, in tandem, and sometimes holistically (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2004). As Hecht (1993) noted, these frames may simultaneously contradict, validate, and/or complicate each other, depending on context-specific variables (see also Jung & Hecht, 2004). In response, extensions of CTI have focused more on *identity gaps* to better illuminate how individual frames collaborate, contradict, and correlate (Jung & Hecht, 2004).

These “gaps” are simply areas of contention among CTI’s identity frames. Jung and Hecht (2004) suggested that these gaps are unavoidable and present in nearly every communication encounter as one identity layer becomes more salient or multiple identity layers contradict (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Like Nuru (2014), we contend that trans* individuals’ self-presentation and internal identity may often be confused, misjudged, and/or falsely assumed, presenting them with the unique challenge of near-constant identity layer contradictions and negotiations. As such, we propose the following research questions to help better understand the nature of identity gaps, the degree to which they occur, and the discursive strategies trans* individuals use to help navigate contentions among identity frames:

RQ1: *How do identity gaps manifest as trans* individuals navigate the identity formation and expression process?*

RQ2: *How are discursive strategies used to negotiate the formation and expression of trans* identity as identity gaps manifest?*

Method

Participants

Data for this study were collected from in-depth interviews with 19 self-identified “transgender” individuals. In light of our goal to understand and illuminate the dynamic and fluid identities of trans* individuals, we interviewed any individuals who self-identified with the term “transgender.” Because of our stated desire to honor participants’ gender identity, including the labels they claim as their own, we had few requirements for participation in this study aside from identification with the “transgender” label. Participants were recruited via personal connections, snowball sampling, and through advertisements placed within a university-based LGBTQ resource center.

Participants ranged in age from 19–80 ($M = 46.53$) and most ($n = 18$) identified as Caucasian, with the exception of one who self-identified as “Afro-American.” Participants’ level of education ranged from a GED to a master’s degree. Our participants also occupied a wide range of occupational spaces, some of which included: corporate leadership, government, customer service, personal business, and professional drag performance. Perhaps one of the more interesting demographic details was the broad range of terminology that participants used as an identity label. Participants used a variety of labels, including *transgender(ed)*, *trans(s)exual*, *genderqueer*, *male*, and *female*. Many participants also discussed identity and preferred gender labels in various terms related to physical transition, such as *pre-op*, *post-op*, and *non-op*, which refers to their operative status and preferences related to gender alignment surgery.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format and ranged in time from 26 to 102 minutes ($M = 40$ minutes). We followed Leech’s (2002) process for completing semi-structured interviews, which involved gaining rapport and using semi-structured, open-ended questions that were non-prompting. All interviews took place in person, with the exception of one phone interview. We created pseudonyms to protect our participants’ identities, and our university’s institutional review board approved all methods and procedures of this study.

Before each interview, participants read and signed a statement of informed consent. After obtaining consent, we used a semi-structured interview guide to facilitate responses that addressed our research questions. The interview protocol contained 27 questions grouped into six categories: demographics, identity conceptualization (e.g., “what does the term ‘transgender’ mean to you?”), communication and identity (e.g., “how does your identity as a trans* person influence your communication?” and “how do you communicate your identity to others?”), contextual determinants of identity (e.g., “how do you communicate your identity at work?” and “how do you communicate your identity with your family?”), ascribed identity (e.g., “what do you do if someone refuses to acknowledge your gender or preferred pronouns?”), and practical considerations (e.g., “what practical suggestions can you offer for communicating with trans* populations?”). We encouraged participants to

focus as much or as little as they desired on a given topic. In our conversations, we often used probes to facilitate discussion or clarification if answers were vague or unclear (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

Data Analysis

All 19 interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked multiple times for accuracy.² The final transcription of our interviews spanned 220 single-spaced, typed pages of text. As we began the coding process, all three authors had several discussions about how to organize and code the interview data (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). The first and third authors then collaborated to identify more specific thought units in participants' responses. These thought units were identified by participants' articulation of a complete thought, and ranged from a single sentence to a string of multiple sentences. For example, when asked about public enactment of gender identity as a young child, one participant responded:

I'd wear a lot of pink, like probably more so than any guy would wear. So, if I'd find something...I buy it in pink. And so they would just be like, "No, no, only gay people or girls wear pink." And I was like, "whatever...so?"

These sentences were deemed to be a complete thought unit for coding purposes. All thought units were then organized within spreadsheets in order to better connect participants' language with codes produced in the coding process (Charmaz, 2006).

Next, the first author read each of the 19 transcripts multiple times before using an open coding process, which allowed for the development of more substantive codes derived from participants' own words (Charmaz, 2006). During this initial analysis, the first author developed a list of 34 thematic coding units which manifested throughout participant interviews and included a range of units which focused on transition (e.g., *physical transition, social transition, legal transition*), identity (e.g., *gender conceptualization, gender evolution, spirituality, sexual orientation, expressions*), support (e.g., *social support, emotional consequences, discrimination*), communication (e.g., *at work, with family, with friends*), community (e.g., *LGBT community, local community, advice*), and others (e.g., *metaphor, narrative, biology*). This list was shared with the other two authors who, after multiple conversations and iterations, agreed on its classifications. These classifications were used to design a master coding list (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999), which featured hierarchical axial groupings of thematic units under more focused themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The final master coding list included more general coding themes that were developed from the initial open coding sessions. This list involved constant collaboration and comparison among all three authors (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The final master coding list involved sorted hierarchical coding units classified under broader elements of CTI. Although there were four classification layers or frames of identity that we used to examine interview data—personal, enacted, relational, and communal—each of these themes housed several sub-themes that the authors used for sake of data analysis. For instance, under the *personal* identity

theme, open and axial coding led to the development of more specific sub-codes that focused on personal identity recognition, current conceptualizations of identity, the role of emotions in identity formation, self-esteem, and spirituality. The first and third authors engaged in a simultaneous and collaborative coding process using these codes, whereby each examined the data simultaneously and coded each unit of discourse.

These coding procedures were compared and discussed until coders reached a consensus about an overarching theme. True to the theoretical underpinnings of this study, these authors also made detailed notes about the overall “fit” of each unit of discourse, noting where participants’ communication highlighted multiple, competing, and contradicting identity elements. This data analysis process is consistent with the authors’ adherence to an interpretivist-oriented research paradigm (Manning & Kunkel, 2014; see also Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Operating within this paradigm, then, the goal was to give voice to trans* individuals, highlighting their experiences, struggles, and triumphs in tandem with applicable communication theory in an effort to foster a greater awareness and understanding of trans* identity and agency.

Results

Trans* identity is a deeply personal endeavor. As Angela³, one of our participants, noted:

For over 48 years, every single moment of my conscious existence took place on the battlefield between my true self and my physical gender. Some days there were skirmishes; some days were all out war. There were no ceasefires. On some occasions, the battle lines seemed to be drawn between me and the God who created me.

As Angela’s quote suggests, trans* identity is not a flippant theatrical performance (see TVC, 2013). Gender identity is intricately linked to self-presentation and conformity to gendered expectations of appearance, behavior, and communication—all sites of tension throughout the formation and expression of trans* identity. Building upon Jung and Hecht’s (2004) work on identity gaps, we observed tensions between several identity frames within trans* individuals’ discussion of identity formation and expression, including *personal-enacted*, *personal-relational*, and *enacted-relational*. Because of our stated desire to explore personal identity formation, we did not explore any identity gaps related to the community identity frame. In addition to these identity gaps, we identified five discursive strategies that trans* individuals used to navigate the dissonance of these identity gaps. Closer analysis revealed synthesis or alignment with Nuru’s (2014) four identified discursive strategies: *closeted enactment*, *passing*, *disengagement*, and *label changing*; thus, we admittedly build our study upon the well-structured foundation that Nuru has laid. We also identified *hyper-engagement* as a fifth discursive strategy, unique to this study, as a means by which trans* individuals navigated the tensions of identity gaps.

True to the theoretical framework of CTI, we recognize that these identity frames, identity gaps, and discursive strategies are not independent; rather, they are malleable,

intersectional, and collaborative. While each identity gap yielded certain discursive strategies more heavily, these strategies often emerged across identity frames. Our discussion below first highlights the relevant identity gap and the embedded discursive strategy (or strategies) most frequently identified within it.

Personal-Enacted Identity Gap

The personal-enacted identity gap involves a “perceived difference between an individual’s self-view and his or her self presented in communication” (Jung, 2011, p. 316). The disconnect between the personal and enacted identity frames forced individuals to reconcile their internal gender identity with their public enactment of that identity. This identity gap was woven repeatedly throughout the rich tapestry of participant experiences. For instance, Angela noted that her personal identity awakening was closely followed by an immense feeling of shame, which related to how she perceived she could enact (i.e., reveal) that identity:

I don’t remember not having those feelings [that I was a girl]. The first thing that I remember about myself is that I was a little girl who had been born into a little boy’s body. The second thing I remember knowing about myself is that I had to hide the little girl in me anytime I was around people.

Angela’s comment reveals the intricate relationship between internal gender identity and external enactment. Although her first memory involved a disconnect between her internal gender and her biological sex, Angela immediately felt constrained by social obstacles that inhibited the public expression of her true gender identity. As her comment reveals, both gender identity and an understanding of the societal expectations associated with that identity manifest early, even during the foundational years of early childhood. Whether the consequences of enacting external (trans*) identity are real or merely perceived, the tension produced from the personal-enacted identity gap produces significant intrapersonal consequences. Angela was not alone in navigating these consequences. Others, like Carrie, also noted the battle of suppressing public enactment of identity:

Currently, I still check the male box, just because the fact that I haven’t done the legal name change or anything yet, so I feel, I guess I feel I want to check the female [box] but I still feel, legally I’m required to check the male box...I really wish I could check the other box, but I know I’m not to that point yet...but I know I will be to that point at some point, so I try to not let it get to me too much.

Carrie conceptualized her gender in terms of dichotomous boxes. Although she identified as female, she felt pressured to “check the male box” because she had not yet reached the point of legal recognition—an act she connoted with the authenticity of her female identity. As such, she was caught, quite literally, between two gender binary boxes, forced to betray either her internal identity or external authenticity. Throughout participants’ narrative accounts, we identified the use of *closeted enactment* (Nuru, 2014) as a discursive strategy used to navigate the dissonance between the personal and enacted identity layers.

Closeted enactment

As with Nuru's (2014) observations, many of our participants identified *closeted enactment* as one discursive strategy by which they negotiated the tensions of the personal-enacted identity gap. These closeted enactments involved the communicative performance of internal personal gender identity in private and/or designated spaces. These spaces were designated as safe spaces, whereby participants could explore and enact their desired gender presentation, without the consequences of invalidation, embarrassment, outing, or other public consequences.

Some participants, like Hank and Jess, designated these spaces as areas to explore (pseudo) physical body performances of maleness or femaleness. For instance, Hank noted that, by the age of four, he was regularly "putting socks in my pants so I could have a bulge like my brother." Similarly, Jess privately explored the idea of physical body alteration in a much different way:

When I was about 12 and puberty was hitting me like a runaway train, I read about a new castration process in one of my grandfather's agricultural things called "lastration"—putting a stout rubber band over the testes; and I attempted to do that to myself repeatedly....If anyone came into the world aware that two may keep a secret as long as one of them is dead, it was me.

Hank and Jess' experiences once again reveal the intricate nature of the personal-enacted identity gap: Caught between internal identity and external constraints that inhibit the expression of that identity, both felt compelled to validate identity through private personal enactment. While Hank and Jess' closeted enactment involved the direct physical (or pseudo-physical) alteration of genital shape, other participants, such as Kara, explored closeted enactment through more surface-level body performance:

I was picking out clothes for [my girlfriend], and well, I told them they were for her but they were actually more for me, I was just too embarrassed to admit it....I went through the typical—get all these clothes, and then, "oh shoot, I'm being such a terrible, horrible person" and I would purge everything and throw them all out....A couple times, I did get caught by my parents and being the spineless person I was at the time, I got rid of all of it...and then started the cycle again.

Kara's private enactment of gender identity through crossdressing served as an intrapersonal gesture of identity validation, yet was interrupted by the familial-social expectations of gender that had been established for her. As such, she entered into a cycle of shame, whereby she continually explored and then escaped from the comfort of gender validation. In another account of closeted enactment, Meg noted that these private validations run the risk of ensnaring individuals into a denial of identity:

The pressure from society is, "you can't be this way," so you search for any excuse not to be that way. And for some, it's easier saying, "well, I'm a crossdresser" than to say, "I actually need to change"...A crossdresser can do it in private or semi-private in supportive events with supportive people—it's not quite as big of a deal as changing everything...If that's real—great! But if it's not, it's kind of like the race horse that, when the gates open and it goes partway down the track and everybody else continues running and it's just stopped there, looking at the gate and looking back like, "now what? I thought this was all I was supposed to do. How come everyone else is moving on?"

As Meg notes, there is a spectrum of perceived acceptable gender presentation. Whereas there are “safe” spaces for crossdressing, these spaces are defined by their temporality and special designation. For instance, while crossdressing may indeed be enactment of identity, Meg suggests it is not *real* enactment if it does not exist outside of supportive environments (such as drag shows or other queer performance venues). While it might serve as a mechanism of self-validation, performative enactment of identity runs the risk of ensnaring individuals who then become identified by an enacted gender identity built on the guise of performativity. Regardless, closeted enactment, whether as a completely closeted or semi-closeted act, is used as a discursive strategy to negotiate the tensions between personal identity and the perceived consequences of pure public enactment.

Personal-Relational Identity Gap

Because of the link between gender and self-presentation, the nature of gender identity goes beyond mere internal mechanisms. Throughout our interviews, we observed the manifestation of a gap between the personal and relational identity frames. This personal-relational identity gap refers to the tension between individuals’ view of self in contrast to their perception of how others perceive them (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Despite participants’ identification with their personal gender identity, many spoke of the consequences this identity had within specific relational contexts. For instance, Vera recounted how she was constantly forced to validate her gender identity *or* validate familial structure:

When my parents found out that I was gender-conflicted, or wanted to do this....it put a strain on my mother’s marriage. So she made it—and they made it—a very personal issue. I had no choice—I had to go [to a psychiatric unit]....They had [me] tested...but towards the end of it, they concluded that I was not psychotic...but I was generally very confused as to my gender identity....It’s something that...let’s say, [my family is] aware of. My brother and his family totally isolated me; [we] very rarely have any contact. My sister and my father are aware of it, but don’t talk openly. I mean, I don’t just sit down and say, “ok, let’s sit down and talk about my gender identity”...So we rarely talk about things because they have their lives, and rather than upset the situation, it’s better to get along to go along.

These words echo many of the same themes woven throughout our participants’ experiences. Vera found that it was “better to get along to go along,” noting that she often suppressed her identity in the context of familial relationships because of the strain it had put on her personal relationships in the past. While it is easy to dismiss identity as a merely personal mechanism, Vera’s experience shows that identity is also constrained by very public, relational contexts. In response to the tensions produced by the personal-relational identity gap, we observed three discursive strategies used by participants: *passing*, *disengagement*, and *hyper-engagement*. Two of these discursive strategies—*passing* and *disengagement*—emerged out of Nuru’s (2014) study, whereas *hyper-engagement* emerged as a strategy unique to this study.

Passing

The term, “passing” has become a buzzword in social conversations within the trans* community. This term is often used to refer to trans* individuals who publicly enact their internal gender identity in such a way that the general public remains clueless about the dichotomy between their gender expression and their born biological sex (see Garfinkel, 2006). However, like Nuru (2014), we observed passing as a discursive strategy whereby participants performed or enacted gender identity in a way that reflected the gendered expectations associated with their born biological sex—not their internal gender identity. As such, passing emerged as a mechanism by which individuals *invalidated* internal identity and affirmed the gender role assigned to their born biological sex in order to maintain relational structures or satisfaction. Patricia recounted the difficult decision she had to make after coming out as trans* to her partner:

She tried to live with it and I tried to just be a crossdresser—you know, going to the crossdresser club once a month...but it wasn’t working. Finally, she couldn’t take it anymore. She took the kids and left...We both got increasingly frustrated because she couldn’t understand the concept and I didn’t know what it was either. I just knew that I was doing what I had to do.

Patricia attempted to relegate her female identity to designated, temporal spaces, such as the crossdressing club, in order to sustain the guise of heteronormativity that had defined her romantic relationship until that point. Her relationship dictated that she embody and perform maleness in relational spaces. Although she initially complied and “passed” as male in an attempt to save her marriage, she felt continually compelled to make the full transition and live as female. Ultimately, this decision cost Patricia her marriage, custody of her children, and the comfortable familiarity of her day-to-day routine.

Other participants, such as Kayla, went through even more extreme measures in an attempt to conform to the gendered expectations of her born biological sex. For Kayla, a high fat composition in her chest caused her to develop large breasts during childhood. As a biological boy, this abnormal breast development caused great ridicule and shame, even within her own family. After being outed as gay by her parents, Kayla went to great lengths to prove her masculinity as Karl to her family:

My parents said, “you’re gay!” and in our small hick town that means you’re gonna’ get hung and stretched out and shot. And I was like “no I’m not!”...So I tried really hard to prove that I wasn’t a girl and I wasn’t feminine. I started wearing cowboy boots and cowboy flannel shirts, cowboy hats, started chewing tobacco...I got a girlfriend...many years passed and I decided that I needed to get rid of my chest. So I went to a surgeon and...had a double mastectomy.

Although Kayla identified as female throughout her adolescent development, she went to extreme measures, including breast reduction surgery, to further enact the heteronormative maleness that she perceived to best fit within her family’s relationship structures. Less than a decade later, Kayla sought out therapy and explored the possibilities of physically (re)embodying femininity, ultimately transitioning to female and having breast reconstruction surgery to affirm her female identity. Kayla’s experience demonstrates the unrelenting tension trans* individuals may feel as they

navigate relationships built upon their embodiment of a gender that does not conform to their true identity. As such, these individuals are forced to adopt gender-conforming characteristics, performances, and behaviors that ultimately betray their individual sense of identity. As Kayla's story demonstrates, this personal betrayal may have significant internal and/or external consequences.

Disengagement

For some, the tension produced by the personal-relational identity gap may be too difficult to navigate. In these situations, we observed *disengagement* (Nuru, 2014) as a discursive strategy whereby participants removed or isolated themselves from relational encounters that might further complicate or exacerbate these tensions. For instance, Jess' family held to "traditional family values" and rigid conservative belief systems. She strategically disengaged from her family in hopes that she would never be required to reveal her trans* identity to them:

I'm sure that people have seen that my presentation has been changing, but nobody's ever said anything about it. Some of them probably think I'm as queer as a three dollar bill but...I have not talked to my family about it yet. If I procrastinate long enough I won't have to deal with it because my parents are in their late 80s and in poor health.

Jess perceived her identity as a point of shame within her family. Acknowledging gender identity meant dishonoring her family, so she chose to disengage almost completely. Although she held phone conversations with her parents, she strategically avoided their physical presence in hopes that she would be able to conceal her female identity until after they passed away. Jess' story reveals the difficult decisions that trans* individuals must make between their identity and their familial relationships. Unlike Jess, Leslie chose to publicly reveal and enact her female identity to her family, despite their disapproval. After her mom died, Leslie's relationship with her family became even more complicated:

My mom and dad weren't very good with it. We were silent for about a year...and my two brothers weren't terribly supportive either....My mom finally called....we reconnected....A month after I moved here, she passed away kind of suddenly.... That Thursday morning, my brothers called and said, "Mom's service is this Saturday and dad says you can't come." So my dad and my brothers were complicit in this—preventing me from attending my mom's funeral. I still don't know how much of it was dad and I still don't know how much of it was my brothers; but at that point, I had kissed my family goodbye.

Leslie's choice to transition caused a great strain on her familial relationship. Although she had started to remedy her relationship with her mother, her father and brothers remained unwilling to interact with her in her female identity, even barring her from attending her mother's funeral. Consequently, Leslie made the difficult decision to cut all ties with her immediate family.

The valence of disengagement varied among participants. For instance, whereas as Jess and Leslie were forced to make the difficult decision to disengage from

relationships with unsupportive family members, others, such as Sasha, chose to sever ties with those that she felt were a bit too supportive:

I had [a friend] invite me over for dinner. I went over for dinner and she says, “Wait a minute. I gotta’ go get my neighbors to come look at you.” Pissed me off! I got up, told her I wasn’t a sideshow—I’m not in the zoo! And I walked out and left and I haven’t spoken to her since. This isn’t something I’m doing for your entertainment....This is something that I’m doing that is serious to my life and I’m not going to be your token tranny. “Look how cool and accepting I am; I have a friend that’s transsexual”—now you don’t!

Leslie’s relationship was built upon the integrity of her true gender identity, yet she made the decision to disengage from that relationship because she felt that her identity was fetishized. This fetishizing caused tension between the personal and relational identity layers, albeit to a different valence. Thus, as the above narratives indicate, disengagement as a discursive strategy may be undertaken in response to a myriad of multidimensional identity gaps and tensions.

Hyper-engagement

Whereas Nuru (2014) observed disengagement as the “intentional withdrawal from relational contexts as an attempt to navigate tensions between the personal and relational layers” (p. 289), we discovered an additional strategy that participants used to navigate these tensions—*hyper-engagement*. We define hyper-engagement as the intentional outing of identity to invite and engage in critical dialogue with others about that identity. Several of our participants utilized hyper-engagement as a discursive strategy, including Lana, who made no attempt to hide her trans* identity:

I don’t make it a point to like, introduce myself as, “Hi! I’m Lana and I’m transgender.” It’s just part of who I am, just like, you know, a certain type of hair...a descriptor; part of who I am....I don’t have any problem if someone asks me...intelligent questions. I don’t have any problem at all because education is key.

Lana was willing to make herself vulnerable for the sake of educating others about trans* identity. While she did not actively seek out situations to expose her identity, she also did not make any attempt to conceal it. She saw trans* identity as just another extension of her overall self, like “a certain type of hair.” By reducing her trans*-ness to a mere descriptor, Lana helped remove the stigma of trans* identity in her routine interactions with curious or skeptical others. Similarly, Patricia made it a priority to foster critical dialogue about trans* identities with others whenever the opportunity arose:

If it comes up, I talk about it honestly....I was scared to death at first!...I started actually being honest with people, you know? Strangers would ask me about it, or make a comment about transsexuals and I’d say, “What do you want to know?” and they’d look at me and I’d say, “Well, you’re talking to one!”

Patricia’s public enactment of identity awarded her the luxury of passing as female, that is “achieving and making secure her rights to live as a normal, natural female while having to continually provide for the possibility of detection and ruin carried on within socially structured conditions” (Garfinkel, 2006, p. 70). Still, Patricia chose to relegate the

importance of passing to the importance of critical dialogue about trans* identities with those she perceived to have a degree of hostility, confusion, or disdain toward those identities. She chose to forsake her female identity, instead enacting a distinctly trans* identity in hopes to prompt critical reflection and dialogue. It is important to note that this hyper-engagement is merely another discursive strategy used to negotiate the tensions of the personal-relational identity gap. It should not be perceived as a *superior* strategy; rather its use is dependent on a host of internal and external variables.

Enacted-Relational Identity Gap

Throughout our interviews, participants identified a dissonance between the enacted and relational identity layers. This gap was a space of “incongruity between how an individual enacts their identity and how others understand and ascribe their identity” (Nuru, 2014, p. 290; see also; Jung & Hecht, 2004). In this enacted-relational gap, participants negotiated the tensions between their public enactment of trans* identity and the gendered expectations of biological sex-conformity that relational others placed upon them. For instance, Kara noted her partner could not fully come to terms with her female identity:

I met one girl in particular. I wound up dating her and she’s currently my ex-wife.... She knew about my crossdressing and she accounted everything that was going on there to my “multiple personalities.” Every time I got dressed, she thought it was my multiple personalities making me do it. And it’s kind of one of those things, you know—she didn’t fully understand it, but...I enjoyed wearing girl’s clothes around the house. Time went on and our relationship crashed very quickly because she couldn’t deal with a girl at home and a guy outside.

As Kara came to terms with her personal level of comfortable identity enactment, she faced significant relational consequences for failing to measure up to the gendered ideals that had previously helped to define her relationship. Although Kara identified as female, her enactment of this female identity caused a significant strain on her relationship. Failure to enact this female identity caused a significant strain on her personal identity. Ultimately, Kara’s relationship dissolved because of this tension. In response to the tensions produced by the enacted-relational identity gap, we observed the discursive strategy of *label changing* (Nuru, 2014) woven throughout participants’ narratives.

Label changing

As individuals navigated the uncertain territory of gender transition, many used the practice of *label changing*, that is, “the act of changing names, pronouns, and/or other labels as a means to negotiate tensions between enacted and relational layers” (Nuru, 2014, p. 291). This act sometimes preceded, and sometimes followed, adjustments in participants’ physical enactment of trans* identity. Regardless, the act of label changing served as an officiating tactic to confirm trans* identity. For instance, Hank recounted the following:

Up until the point that I started passing as male, it wasn't really a big deal....But when I started going by "Hank" and "he," that's when I had to be in rigorous communication with [my family] about it, because they didn't get it and then they kind of freaked out....My brother, who has seen me as his little sister his whole life, couldn't believe that people ever thought I was a guy until we were at a restaurant and the waitress walks up and says, "what would you guys like to eat?" And he was, like, shocked about it....I had to be more rigorous about communication.

For Hank's family, it was not his public enactment of male identity that caused contention; rather, it was the adoption of the name "Hank" and the pronoun "he" that signified the end of the sister and daughter his family had previously acknowledged him as. Despite passing as male and receiving support for his public enactment of male identity, the act of label changing caused the most significant tension within his family. Leonard also used label changing to discursively negotiate his identity with his family. He recounted the following conversation after informing his mother that he desired to be referred to as "he":

My mother said..."Well, why did you do this?"...I said, "Well, you know, I just feel like I haven't truly been who I've always been. I was just never allowed to achieve that and now that I'm living this way and taking the testosterone—now I feel whole. I don't expect you to understand. I don't expect you to accept me but I do expect you to love me." She says she did and she loves me...the last thing she said was, "You'll always be my little girl." I just smiled at her and said, "You can see it however you want, but I'm a grown man."

Leonard used label changing to connote the permanence of his transition to his mother. As both Leonard and Hank's narratives demonstrate, label changing is a distinct discursive strategy and often a significant step in the public acknowledgement of personal identity. Engaging in the act of label changing serves notice to relational others of the authentic, permanent nature of trans* identity and the expectation of altered gendered enactment. While the act of label changing manifested at different points during participants' transition journey, it universally signified the specific demarcation of (trans)gender identity.

Discussion

Throughout our interviews with 19, self-identified trans* individuals, we observed the multidimensional, intersectional nature of identity through the manifestation of three specific identity gaps: personal-enacted, personal-relational, and enacted-relational. As trans* individuals navigated the tensions that emerged from these identity gaps, they articulated the use of five specific discursive strategies: closeted enactment, passing, disengagement, hyper-engagement, and label changing. Four of these strategies—closeted enactment, passing, disengagement, and label changing—are consistent with, and emerge from, Nuru's (2014) findings on trans* identity through the "It Gets Better" video narrative project (Savage, 2013). In addition to these four strategies, we identified a fifth strategy—hyper-engagement—as a means by which trans* individuals navigated the tensions of identity gaps.

In response to our first research question (RQ1), we observed tensions between the personal, relational, and enacted layers of identity. These layers and their corresponding gaps affirm the multidimensional, malleable, and intersectional nature of trans* identity. None of these identity layers manifested more saliently; rather, they collaboratively contributed to the formation and expression of trans* identity. Sometimes these layers supported or coalesced with another, thereby influencing a third layer (e.g., when relational others affirmed personal identity, thus influencing individuals' willingness to publicly enact that identity). Other times, these layers produced significant tensions because of their incongruity (e.g., when relational others affirmed personal identity, but not the public enactment of that identity). These findings reinforce original findings on (e.g., Jung & Hecht), and recent extensions of (e.g., Nuru, 2014), identity gaps in the formation and expression of identity.

Our data ultimately affirm the intricate complexities of trans* identity, including the ways in which intersectional identity elements (i.e., gender identity, sexuality, religion, etc.) manifest, coalesce, and contradict. Throughout our analysis, participants never situated their gender identity in a vacuum. It was not a standalone feature; rather, it was merely an (admittedly important) element in their overall identity project. They were not a *trans* person*, a *religious person*, or a *gay person*—they were a *person*, with trans*-, religious-, and/or sexuality-related identity elements (among others) that collaboratively contributed to their overall identity. A key strength of this study (and its accompanying theoretical framework) is the examination of intersectionality in the formation and expression of identity.

In response to our second research question (RQ2), we observed the use of five distinct discursive strategies used to navigate the tensions produced by identity gaps. As participants navigated these tensions, we observed a multidimensional, intersectional journey from secrecy toward transparency (albeit to different degrees), through the use of specific discursive strategies. Whereas individuals' self-formation of trans* identity often manifested through private behaviors (i.e., closeted enactment), the expression of that identity (i.e., passing, disengagement, hyper-engagement, and label changing) catapulted individuals through a journey of near-constant negotiation between self and relational others. The differential degrees of significance and consequence of these situations often dictated the level of public enactment of identity that trans* individuals were comfortable embodying.

Ultimately, the use of these discursive strategies reveals the magnitude of difficulty trans* individuals may face as they make their physical and/or social transition. We believe our findings are valuable and contribute to a better understanding of the expression of trans* identity, ultimately creating the potential for greater trans* equity. We believe this study is valuable for several reasons. Below, we highlight its relevant contributions to Hecht's (1993) CTI, to the discipline of communication studies, and to the greater social conversation on trans* equity.

First, we believe that our study builds upon relevant extensions of CTI by further exploring the concept of "identity gaps" (Jung & Hecht, 2004). While these gaps have been explored in a variety of populations, including international students (Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008), intergenerational familial relationships (Kam & Hecht,

2009), intraracial encounters (Drummond & Orbe, 2009), and others, CTI's potential to contribute to normalized public conversations on queer/trans* identity remains largely unexplored. Only a handful of published reports on queer identity using a CTI framework exist (i.e., Faulkner & Hecht, 2011; Nuru, 2014). These works, however, illuminate both the personal and social mechanisms of trans* identity and further validate CTI as a uniquely qualified framework for examinations of complex identity elements. Our study builds upon Nuru's (2014) work, which has had an admittedly significant impact on the design and analysis of our study. Yet, our study does not merely replicate Nuru's project; instead, it contributes an additional strategy (i.e., hyper-engagement) and further illuminates the role of identity gaps in trans* populations. Our data extends current literatures by highlighting relevant and practical discursive strategies that might be used to navigate the tensions that emerge from identity gaps.

Second, we believe that our results contribute to the alarmingly light body of mainstream communication research focusing on trans* identity. While there is a growing and respectable body of trans* communication literature (see Kosenko, 2011; Norwood, 2012; Nuru, 2014; Spencer, 2014), we believe that mainstream communication research is still lacking a substantive body of scholarship on trans* identity. For instance, at time of article submission, a search query of published, peer-reviewed articles located in the *Communication and Mass Media Complete* database returned 210 results for communication reports related to the keyword, "transgender." Comparatively, the term "gay" yielded 2,031 returns, while "African American" returned 4,369 results. While we are not suggesting that investigations of trans* identity are more (or less) important than investigations of sexuality, race, or other marginalized identities, we argue that the discipline of communication studies has the unique opportunity to improve the lived experiences of trans* individuals through the production of high-quality, trans*-inclusive research but is still largely void of these investigations. Our study contributes to filling this void and we believe our findings further validate the discipline of communication studies as one of practical merit.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we believe our results contribute to improving the lived experiences of trans* individuals and fostering a greater concern for social equity. Throughout our results, we have highlighted the difficult intrapersonal and interpersonal negotiations that trans* individuals face as they form and express identity. We believe that our results can be used to help further illuminate trans* identities and perhaps aid in the process of normalizing these identities. By calling attention to the relevant identity gaps in trans* identity and highlighting the tactics that trans* individuals use to navigate these gaps, our hope is to bring awareness to, and to help remove the stigma from, trans* identity expression. We argue that communication research is especially valuable in achieving this goal, as it makes public the communicative mechanisms of identity and reveals the complex tapestry of political, social, and interpersonal barriers that inhibit and suppress the formation and expression of trans* identity.

While we believe our findings offer valuable and practical solutions to help improve the lived experiences of trans* individuals, it is important to recognize the limitations of our study. First, as demonstrated in our results, individuals identified with a variety of

terms that connoted their gender non-conforming identity. In our recruitment materials, however, we sent out calls for participation using only the umbrella term, “transgender.” While it is important to precisely define the research sample, our language may be considered exclusionary by some (see Stryker, Currah, & Moore, 2008), which could have influenced our sample pool. Additionally, although one of our participants was interviewed by phone, most of our participants were interviewed face-to-face and were located in the Midwest, with a significant portion of the sample living in the same state. Perhaps directly related to residency, most of our participants identified as White. This fails to contribute to the resounding social call for intersectionality in LGBTQ research (see Erel, Haritaworn, Rodriguez, & Klesse, 2010; Manning et al., 2008). Future scholarship should attempt to be more inclusive of all trans* bodies and identities.

Conclusion

In sum, we believe our findings can greatly inform public understanding of trans* identity. Increased mainstream research on trans* issues is a foundational first step in decreasing trans* discrimination and normalizing and validating *all* identities. Patricia, one of our participants who suddenly passed away shortly after our interviews, noted how influential the role of education and scholarship is in cultivating critical dialogue. We conclude with a statement from Patricia:

Knowledge and information are the keys to acceptance and understanding. Fear and ignorance are the locks. When one person shares, it is like putting a key into a lock. If one person listens, the key turns and the lock opens. Another human being has a bright, new, shiny key. Together, one person at a time, we change the world.

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Notes

- [1] We use the term “trans*” to describe those individuals who self-identify within the umbrella term, “transgender,” or some derivative. We understand this term as a descriptor for individuals whose gender identity transcends, breaks, transgresses, cuts through, or otherwise deviates from traditionally established gender categories (see Green, 2004; Sears, 2005). Additionally, we situate trans* identity in opposition to cisgender identity or a gender identity that coincides with the socially acceptable gendered expectations associated with biological sex.
- [2] We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to K. H. for her initial help in conceptualizing and conducting interviews for this project.
- [3] All participants have been provided with a pseudonym to help protect anonymity.

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