

Trans Men's Positive Emotions: The Interaction of Gender Identity and Emotion Labels

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Abstract

The current study used grounded theory methods to analyze trans men's positive emotions. The sample included 11 participants who were assigned a female sex at birth and currently identify with a binary male identity. Results yielded eight positive emotion themes emerging for trans men, which included the following: confidence, comfort, connection, feeling alive, amazement, pride, happiness, and interpersonal reactionary emotions. Participants reported specific gender experiences within these themes, including a sense of brotherhood, excitement related to taking testosterone, authentic pride in identifying as a man, and happiness connected to others using correct gender language (e.g., pronouns, family labels, greetings). A theoretical model from the eight themes and 39 higher order categories emerged, indicating the importance of initial internal emotions, confidence related to trans men's identity processes, and the ways in which positive interpersonal interactions affect positive emotions. Implications include using emotion-focused therapy and including more positivity into trans individuals' experiences and emotions.

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Historically, the field of psychology has primarily focused on understanding and alleviating the negative aspects of life while neglecting the positive aspects. Rather than focusing on negativity and individual weaknesses, the field of counseling psychology has traditionally and purposefully focused on individuals' strengths and assets to foster personal change and mental well-being (Lopez et al., 2006). Recently, positive psychology has also begun to address this imbalance by bringing positivity, strength, and resilience to the forefront of interventions for mental health concerns (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Research related to trans (a term to denote an individual whose gender identity is not congruent with the sex assigned at birth; this term is often used as an umbrella term for many different gender labels) individuals has followed this trend of focusing on the negative aspects of identifying as a gender minority. These studies largely focus on the mental health concerns of trans individuals, such as suicidality, depression, and anxiety (Bocking, Miner, Swinburne, Hamilton, & Coleman, 2013; Budge, Adelson, & Howard, 2013; Clements-Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2006; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Mustanski, Garofalo, & Emerson, 2010; Nemoto, Bodeker, & Iwamoto, 2011; Nuttbrock et al., 2010). Although emotional hardship is a reality for many trans individuals, this narrative provides a narrow version of their emotional experiences. The current study addressed these issues by exploring trans men's accounts of how they label and experience positive emotions through various stages of their identity process.

Emotions are conceptualized as response tendencies to changes or shifts in an individual's circumstances and are, consciously or unconsciously, experienced as having personal significance (Fredrickson, 2001; Garland et al., 2010). Positive emotions (e.g., joy, love, affection, warmth) emphasize these response tendencies as subjective states of pleasant, free-floating feelings coupled with physiological changes, such as facial and body expressions and cognitive thought processes (Fredrickson, 2003; Garland et al., 2010). The field of positive psychology has provided a clear rationale to focus on positive emotions. Fredrickson's (1998, 2001) broaden-and-build theory posits that positive emotionality broadens an individual's attention and cognitive processes, while building their personal resources (i.e., physically, psychologically, socially). This theory indicates that these initial processes ultimately create an upward spiral to increased emotional well-being. Research supports the broaden-and-build theory by indicating that positive emotions increase happiness (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002), expand thought-action

repertoires (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005), increase successful outcomes in major life domains (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005), mediate the relation between daily stress and experienced negative emotions (Ong, Bergeman, Bisconti, & Wallace, 2006), foster resiliency against adversity (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), regulate emotional experiences (Panagioti, Gooding, & Tarrier, 2012; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), build resources for coping (M. A. Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, & Conway, 2009; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005), and reverse the effects of negative emotions (e.g., Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998; Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, & Tugade, 2000; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

Although many benefits of positive emotions are known, research and theory are mixed related to how masculinity interacts with positive emotions. There is a large literature base to support the interaction of gender and how emotions are experienced and expressed. A common gender role stereotype suggests women express more positive emotions than men, whereas men express more negative emotions (e.g., aggression, anger) than women (Briton & Hall, 1995; Brody, 1997; Brody & Hall, 2008). Some self-reported and performance-based studies have purported women to be more emotionally expressive or emotionally aware than men (e.g., Bradley, Codispoti, Sabatinelli, & Lang, 2001; Ciarrochi, Hynes, & Crittenden, 2005; Fujita, Diener, & Sandvik, 1991; Nolen-Hoeksema & Aldao, 2011; Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002), whereas others reported no gender differences in emotional expressiveness and experience (e.g., Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009; Barrett, Robin, Pietromonaco, & Eyssell, 1998; Blier & Blier, 1989; Stroud, Salovey, & Epel, 2002). Similarly, some studies reported that women were physiologically more reactive than men (e.g., Bianchin & Angrilli, 2012) but did not report experiencing more emotions (e.g., Kring & Gordon, 1998; Stroud et al., 2002), whereas other studies reported no differences in physiological reactions but differences in reports of experienced emotions and emotion expressivity (e.g., Kelly, Forsyth, & Karekla, 2006; Kelly, Tyrka, Anderson, Price, & Carpenter, 2008).

The way in which men are socialized (i.e., lacking emotional expression) has been theorized to contribute to men's emotional inexpressiveness (see Kilmartin, 2000), rather than men being incapable of positive emotional expression (A. M. Cohn, Jakupcak, Seibert, Hildebrandt, & Zeichner, 2010). Gender role stereotypes related to emotions are pervasive (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009; Simpson & Stroh, 2004; Strauss, Muday, McNall, & Wong, 1997) and influence the self-reporting of emotions by men and women (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012; Robinson & Clore, 2002). For example, the belief that women express more emotions than men because women are "emotional creatures" has been linked to the stereotype that women are overly emotional (Barrett &

Bliss-Moreau, 2009). The extent to which individuals internalize gender roles and adhere and conform to traditional gender ideology appears to affect their positive emotional expressiveness, as well as their behaviors, interpersonal relationships, and self-perception (Jakupcak, Salters, Gratz, & Roemer, 2003; Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carlson, 2003; Simpson & Stroh, 2004).

Despite recent inquiry into how gender relates to positive emotions, several questions remain unanswered. To date, almost all published research related to positive emotions has focused on cisgender (a term indicating that an individual's sex assigned at birth is congruent with the current gender identity) individuals. Although there is a clear lack of research on trans individuals' experiences of positive emotions, a small body of research has begun to focus on overall positive experiences reported within the trans community. For example, in one study researchers found that self-identifying as trans facilitated congruency between an individual's inner conceptualization of gender and perceived appearance (Riggle, Rostosky, McCants, & Pascale-Hague, 2011). Furthermore, being able to define one's own gender identity was a source of resiliency that assisted trans individuals with accepting their self-worth and provided them with hope for the future (Riggle et al., 2011; Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011). Consistent with general research on positive personal traits within the positive psychology literature, agentic (i.e., independent, self-confident) and communal (i.e., interpersonal connection through emotions, empathy) personality traits have been found to be negatively associated with depression among trans women (Gonzalez, Bockting, Beckman, & Durán, 2012).

Research also indicates there are several coping mechanisms that assist trans individuals in achieving higher levels of positivity. These coping mechanisms include utilizing positive behaviors (e.g., acting "as if" and seeking therapy; Budge, Adelson, & Howard, 2013), experiencing higher levels of collective self-esteem (Sánchez & Vilan, 2009), having access to financial and medical resources (Bockting et al., 2013; Singh & McKleroy, 2011), engaging in activism (Riggle et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2011), and cultivating spirituality (Singh & McKleroy, 2011). A review of the research indicates the most common positive coping mechanisms utilized by trans individuals are engaging in relationships with family, peers, and community (Bockting et al., 2013; Budge, Katz-Wise, et al., 2013; Riggle et al., 2011). Gender identity may moderate this specific coping mechanism; when compared with trans women, trans men reported using more help from their families when making decisions and that their families provide more support (Budge, Adelson, & Howard, 2013).

The research is clear that embracing identity and facilitative coping mechanisms assist trans individuals to experience more positivity. In addition to

these factors, understanding the developmental processes of trans individuals is essential to conceptualize their positive emotions. Research supports that emotional hardship is experienced primarily in the initial identity formation stage and when coming out to others, but that positive emotional experiences are expressed more than emotional hardship in later stages of the identity process (Budge, Katz-Wise, et al., 2013). In addition, Gonzalez et al. (2012) found that trans women reported more positive coping mechanisms when they were further along in their transition process. Although this research illuminates important positive processes for trans individuals, there is a large gap in the research to indicate how trans men developmentally experience positive emotions.

The current study was designed to explore and examine the positive emotional experiences of trans men throughout their identity process. Previous research has primarily described negative experiences and emotions of trans individuals (e.g., Bockting et al., 2013; Budge, Adelson, & Howard, 2013; Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Mustanski et al., 2010; Nemoto et al., 2011; Nuttbrock et al., 2010). Because of the evidence of masculinity as a moderating variable within the quantitative literature for cisgender men (e.g., Bradley et al., 2001; Ciarrochi et al., 2005; Fujita et al., 1991; Nolen-Hoeksema & Aldao, 2011; Tamres et al., 2002), we sought a deeper understanding of how masculinity and trans identity interact with one another to affect positive emotional experiences. In addition, as emotional experiences have been shown to vary based on developmental pathways of the trans identity process (Budge, Katz-Wise, et al., 2013; Gonzalez et al., 2012), we were also interested in examining how trans men's emotional experiences may differ based on the transition process. As we were using grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006) for this study, we did not hypothesize research questions. Instead, we rooted our interview questions in previous research and theory to examine how gender socialization may affect trans men's positive emotional experiences.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 11 individuals who were assigned a female sex at birth and who currently identify with a male identity. The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 49 ($M = 32.91$, $Mdn = 33$, $SD = 10.29$). Reported sexual orientations included gay ($n = 3$), heterosexual/straight ($n = 3$), queer ($n = 2$), pan-romantic asexual ($n = 1$), and pansexual ($n = 1$); one participant ("Anthony") indicated, "Good question. Before transitioning, it was lesbian.

Then I thought of myself as straight. Now I think I might be kinda bi.” Participants were instructed to fill out an open-ended question to identify their race and ethnicity. Regarding race and/or ethnicity, the majority of the sample identified as White ($n = 9$), one individual identified as Latina/o, and one individual identified as Asian. During the interview process, one of the non-Latina/o White individuals also identified as an immigrant from the Middle East. All participants have been given pseudonyms, and the names of other individuals in the participants’ lives were changed within the text.

Researchers

There were three researchers who contributed to the analysis for this study. The first author identifies as a queer, non-Latina/o White, cis (cisgender) woman, and is an assistant professor in counseling psychology. Her main research focus is the emotional and coping processes for trans individuals. The second author identifies as a gay, non-Latino White, cis man, and is a doctoral student in counseling psychology. He focuses on masculinity and emotional processes, as well as suicidality in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) populations. The third author identifies as a queer, Vietnamese American, trans man, and is a doctoral student in counseling psychology, currently developing a line of research focusing on the mental health processes and identity experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander trans and queer individuals.

As part of the process of engaging in rigorous qualitative methodology, we recorded our biases and assumptions prior to analyzing the data. Primary biases included worries about hypermasculinizing the men in the study, as stereotypes might have been evoked for expectations about what men are “supposed” to be like. An additional bias was that, as trans researchers, we search for positivity within the community and make assumptions that there is positivity in trans individuals’ lives. Having either identified as trans or been allies to trans individuals, we have heard many positive stories and experiences that lent to this assumption. Although the purpose of the study was to find out about trans men’s positive experiences, we wanted to be sure to not ignore the negative or difficult experiences that might be discussed in the interviews. Finally, because we were asking directly about feelings and emotional experiences, we also noted that we were making assumptions that participants would discuss their emotional processes and answer questions with feeling/emotion words.

Interview Protocol

The primary instrument for this study was a semistructured interview that was rooted in grounded theory methods. We used Charmaz’s (2006) grounded

theory approach to assess the emotional processes of trans men, as we wanted to understand their processes from the “ground-up.” Prior to each interview, participants responded to written demographic questions. Each interview began with two questions that asked participants to describe their identity process: (a) an initial question about preferred labels, pronouns, and length of identifying as trans, and (b) “Tell me about what your overall process of identifying as trans has been like.” The purpose of asking these open-ended questions was to ground the interview in a shared understanding of how the participants identified and to ease into the subsequent questions in the interview. We then asked participants to describe their experiences of pride in their identity, the best aspects of their identity process, the developmental process of their positive emotions, coping processes related to positive emotions, advice to others undergoing the identity process, positive experiences with therapists, and how others have commented on their positive processes. Although we asked a myriad of questions, only codes that pertained to emotions were retained for the analysis in the current study. Codes that were considered to have emotions embedded in them either needed to have a word included in the code (e.g., “I felt so overjoyed,” “I was much calmer than I expected”) or an exclamation of emotion (e.g., “I was jumping up and down—it was like, wahoo!”). The protocol questions were modified as needed based on participants’ trans identities and their preferences in regard to how they wanted to be addressed throughout the interview (see Appendix for full interview protocol).

Procedure

Participants were recruited via emails sent to LGBT centers (both community and university), trans-focused blogs, trans-focused social networking sites, and online groups focused on trans individuals. All of the interviews were conducted in person, usually in the researchers’ private offices or in rooms at a local university. Therefore, emails were limited to locations within the central Midwest/Southern region (Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio) of the United States. Prior to the interviews, participants were emailed a consent form to review; participants were also provided a consent form in person. The first author conducted the first interview, which was transcribed by a graduate student. Once the first interview was finished, the other interviewers read through the interview transcript and discussed the process of the first interview. The first author and five graduate students conducted the remaining interviews, which usually lasted between 30 and 90 min. Participants were asked to discuss each question for as long as they desired. Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using grounded theory. Because so little is known about the positive emotional processes of trans men, we thought this particular methodology was the best fit given the goals of this study. We chose to adopt Charmaz's (2006) approach to grounded theory as this method encourages researchers to include institutional and contextual factors within their analysis. As recommended by Charmaz, we analyzed the data in three phases. In the first phase of the analysis, we used line-by-line coding, in which two research team members (second and third authors) individually parsed out the meaning from each sentence of the transcript into short sentences that ignored extra words or aspects that were not relevant to the study. After both coders completed their line-by-line codes individually, they came together and each line was coded by consensus, during which both team members approved the code; if the line-by-line code was not initially agreed upon, it was discussed until there was agreement.

After coming to consensus on the line-by-line codes, the two coders incorporated the line-by-line codes into the second phase: focused coding. In the analysis of the first interview, both coders collectively placed all of the line-by-line codes into higher order categories. In the subsequent interviews, in addition to the creation of new higher order categories, the higher order categories derived from previous interviews were used to inform the process of coding. We used constant comparison of the data by placing each new interview's line-by-line codes into prior higher order categories. After all 11 interviews had been line-by-line coded and had undergone focused coding, an auditor (the first author) read through all codes and provided feedback. The majority of the feedback was related to line-by-line codes not fitting within the higher order category or if bias seemed to affect the names of codes or where codes were placed.

The last phase of the analysis process, theoretical coding, included all three authors compiling all the line-by-line codes and higher order codes from each of the interviews to determine the primary themes. In addition, these higher order categories and themes were categorized to inform our theoretical model. As in the previous phases of analysis, the three team members completed these tasks individually and then came together to reach consensus and determine the meaningful themes. After themes had been devised, each member of the team drew a theoretical model individually and described the model to the team as a whole. From these three individual models, we theorized one major model (see Figure 1).

To ensure rigor throughout the analytic process, we used several different methods: consensus coding, triangulation, member checking, and use of an

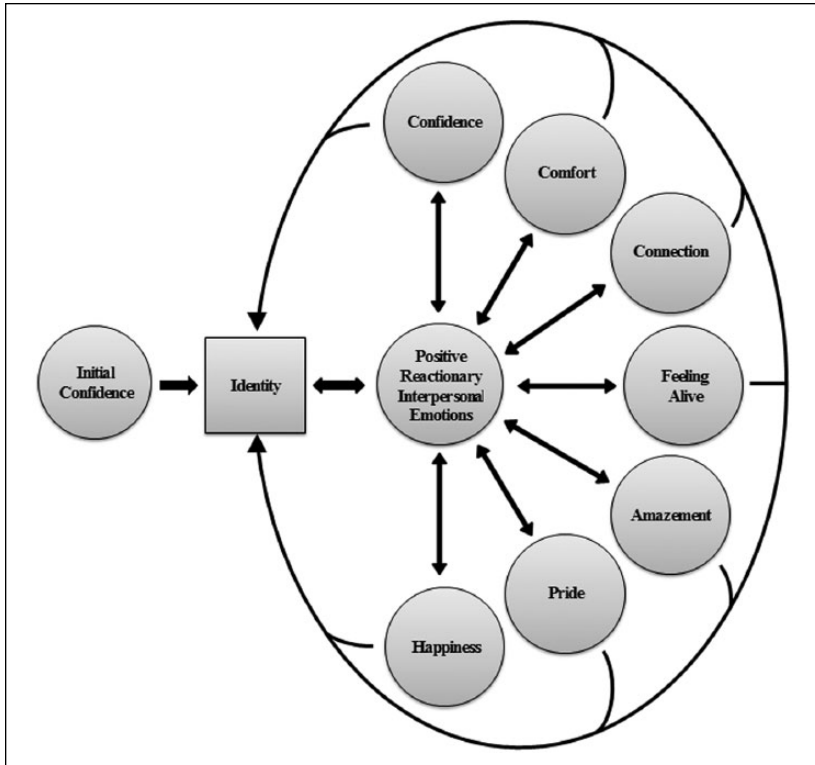


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

auditor. Although Charmaz (2006) and other grounded theory methodologists do not require consensus coding, we believe it is one way to check assumptions within a group, keep biases at a minimum (or at least acknowledge them within the process), and ensure that essential pieces of data are not missed. Hill and colleagues (2005) indicated that consensus is an imperative part of qualitative research, as it takes into account all research team members' viewpoints and requires a common understanding of the data, while also allowing individual team members' viewpoints to be upheld. In addition, consensus coding stems from feminist and multicultural approaches to psychological research, whereby a diversity of opinions are upheld, honored, and protected (Williams & Barber, 2004). Another method of rigor used within the process was triangulation. Typically triangulation involves the use of other data points or previous research is consulted. Due to the dearth of research and

available data regarding the positive emotional processes among trans men, we triangulated the data with comprehensive qualitative data sets examining emotions and identity processes. First, we compared emotion-focused phrases from the current study with phrases from previous data (see Budge, Katz-Wise, et al., 2013) to note whether there were qualitative differences in positive emotion word use (there were questions from the previous study that asked about positive experiences; for example, “What has been the best aspect of your transition process?”). Although the data differed in overall content, there were initial themes from the previous data to indicate we were following, and adding to, the trajectory of participants’ processes. We also compared the higher order categories and themes with a data set for 15 trans women (Budge, Tebbe, Orovecz, Barr, & Keller, manuscript under review) and 13 genderqueer individuals (Budge, Rossman, & Sinnard, manuscript under review), who were interviewed with the same protocol as the trans men in this study. We noted that trans women indicated very similar emotional processes (six of the eight overall themes overlapped) and that the genderqueer data did not converge on overall themes, but that there were emotion phrases that overlapped. For example, one of the participant noted “I guess that kind of just complete acceptance, really, was just amazing,” which would have been coded in *amazement* in the current study.

We also used member checking prior to data analysis, where we sent the completed transcripts to the 11 trans men who participated in this study. Only 4 of the 11 participants responded, and all 4 participants indicated that the information in their transcripts was accurate and they did not wish to change information from their narratives. Last, we intentionally did not include the first author in the first two phases of the coding process so that she could serve as the auditor of the data. She assessed the relevance of the participants’ line-by-line codes to the higher order categories, as well as the labels used for the higher order categories. The auditor’s feedback was incorporated into the final results, such as splitting several categories, combining certain categories together, and renaming categories that were colloquial or ill-fitting.

Results

There were eight overarching themes that reflected participants’ positive emotional experiences throughout their identity processes: confidence, comfort, connection, feeling alive, amazement, pride, happiness, and positive reactionary interpersonal emotions. All participant names are pseudonyms, with identity markers being the exact words participants used to describe their identities (e.g., some trans men use Female to Male, FTM, or Male to label their gender identity). Results are reported based on the theme, with

Table 1. Themes and Higher Order Categories.

Confidence	Pride
Clarity	Lack of shame
Courage	Pride in self
Confidence	Pride in others and relationships
Self-acceptance	Pride in work and advocacy
Feeling whole	Happiness
Self-actualization	Feeling happy
Comfort	Feeling glad
Comfort	Feeling good
Shedding fear	Feeling fortunate
Relief	Feeling hopeful
Feeling at ease	Positive interpersonal reactionary emotions
Indifference to negativity	Confidence
Connection	Self-acceptance
Positive feelings through community	Relief
Feelings of belonging	Excitement
Love	Positive surprise
Feeling for others	Feeling good
Feeling Alive	Pride in self
Feeling alive	Appreciation of others
Excitement	Feeling supported
Amazement	Feeling validated
Awe	
Positive surprise	

Note. Themes are depicted by bolded headings.

higher order codes indicated in italics. For a summary of all themes and higher order codes, refer to Table 1.

Confidence

As trans men began and continued through their identity processes, they experienced *confidence*, *courage*, *self-acceptance*, *feeling whole*, and *self-actualization*. Participants described having or needing an initial confidence before identifying as men and before transitioning. This initial confidence came in the form of *courage*. As participants began to recognize their male identities, *courage* was needed to embrace those identities and to transition, an experience John discussed:

Making the steps towards doing this in the first place . . . take[s] a lot of courage and, in the beginning, it was like, is this really what I need to do? Can I do this really? And finally, the thought was, “Hey, you know, I’m 49 years old, I can make these decisions for myself, and I know I am male.” And so, I have to take these steps to do what I need to do. (Female to Male)

Through engaging in the identity process, participants came away feeling confidence, self-acceptance, wholeness, and self-actualization. Sam described how he experienced confidence as a result of the identity process:

The confidence that I have in myself I never had before . . . It’s [the identity process] given me enough confidence where I put down everything that I was before and I am pursuing my dreams which I honestly never thought I’d be able to do. (Female to Male)

Comfort

Identifying as male and transitioning led to feelings of comfort for participants. In addition to *comfort*, participants described *shedding fear*, experiencing *relief*, *feeling at ease*, and having an *indifference to negativity*. As participants acknowledged their male identity and began to act upon it, they experienced *relief* and began to lose fears related to their identity. Brian expressed, “Once I kind of was like, OK, this is my plan, this is what I’m going to do, I felt part of this greater brotherhood, and . . . there was a weight lifted off my shoulders” (Trans male). Participants noted that through transitioning they felt more comfortable with themselves, appeared more at ease to others, and were more comfortable with their gender expression:

. . . the more that I looked at that [identifying as trans], the more that I talked with people who have the same experiences . . . everything lights up. It makes sense and I feel like I’m at home in this. (Don, FTM)

Marco also revealed,

I’m a lot more comfortable with who I am and I’m comfortable being more feminine because when it started out, I was concerned about having my hair longer because I thought people wouldn’t take me seriously and I work at a [school], and I thought that’s weird because. . . [there are] two other guys that work there, but it’s not a stereotypically masculine job. (FTM)

Being more comfortable with gender expression often contained two components: (a) being comfortable expressing oneself as a man, and (b) as Marco

noted, expressing characteristics that are considered to be feminine while identifying as a man. Comfort also manifested for participants through no longer caring about the negativity of others, a feeling of indifference which Don explained further: “I feel good about being like, ‘Hey, I am transgendered [*sic*] and I don’t care if you care about that or not. If you have a problem with it then that’s your problem, it’s not my problem”” (FTM).

Connection

Participants noted experiencing emotions related to connection with others as they progressed through their identity development, had a chance to interact with other trans people, and met people they cared about and who cared about them. These experiences yielded *positive feelings through community, feelings of belonging, love*, and a process of *feeling for others*. Spike explained how some of these emotions manifested for him through his involvement with the trans community:

Being a mentor [to other trans individuals] you really, that’s a good feeling. You feel like you’re giving back and helping, it definitely is a positive feeling and being involved in the community just being able to help people is just reaffirming and that’s all positive, knowing that other people are going to have a much better experience, that’s positive. And the progress that society has made in a short period of time, that’s really positive too. (FTM)

Stewart described his experience of connection through meeting people during his identity process: “I am proud of, I love all of the people that I meet through this process and the people who accept me for who I am and other trans people” (Male).

Feeling alive

During their identity processes and at the time of the interview, participants reported *feeling alive* and experiencing *excitement* in regard to aspects of their transition and involvement with the trans community. In accepting their identity and coming out as male, participants reported experiencing *excitement* despite their fears—a process John compared to bungee jumping: “I identify as male. And saying that out loud for the first time was scary and exciting at the same time. Like, you know, like bungee jumping off a bridge” (Female to Male). Participants also noted a great deal of *excitement* around testosterone and its effects as Spike highlighted: “I loved the side effects of the testosterone, my voice got deeper, my period went away, and I’m like, I

really like this” (FTM). Participants also reported experiencing *excitement* through their connection with the trans community, in particular doing advocacy work and trying to make positive change for others. Stewart described his passion for advocacy: “I love teaching people about trans issues and knowing that they come out with a better understanding of trans people and are more accepting” (Male).

Amazement

In reflecting on their identity processes and the experiences they have had, participants reported feelings of amazement including *awe* and *positive surprise*. These two emotions manifested similarly for participants in that they predominantly related to *amazement* over the identity process and the participants’ positive feelings toward themselves. Sam used an analogy to describe his sense of *amazement* over the identity process:

Back in my home state I saw something that I’ve never seen before. It was a foggy morning in the mountains and I saw a rainbow that crossed. It literally made an X going in two directions, and it’s just one of those things that you only get to see once in a lifetime. It’s a miraculous experience and nobody gave you that sense of the miraculousness but you. You saw it. You were there. That’s kind of all this [the transition] has been. One of those impossible strings of circumstances that came together to give you this sense of awe and wonder about the world that’s . . . even if it doesn’t make sense it makes sense, and all this is going on for a reason and I don’t know, it’s just a whole self-awakening thing. (Female to Male)

Participants also reported feelings related to *amazement* when getting to know more about individuals who identify as trans, seeing the potential for positive change for trans individuals in society, and in experiencing the effects of testosterone. After having heard negative things about being trans, Tim related the impact of seeing trans individuals on the Internet and hearing their stories: “I’m just like ‘I can really do this? This really happens?’ It’s just like wow, there’s this whole world opening up” (Female to Male Transsexual).

Pride

Men in this study talked about their experience of pride manifesting in several different ways, including *pride in self*, *lack of shame*, *pride in others and relationships*, and *pride in work and advocacy*. Participants described having a sense of pride in being themselves, as John indicated,

Well, I wouldn't necessarily put it that way as more of just that I'm proud that I'm myself now, that I'm being myself. You know? And that I wasn't like that before, and now I am. I'm me. And I'm proud to be me. (Female to Male)

John's response also illustrated how *pride in self* tended to be felt currently and reflected participants' ability to live their lives authentically. Participants also discussed having a *lack of shame* around their trans identity, noting that they no longer felt embarrassment or shame around their respective identities as they once did. Spike discussed how his *lack of shame* related to him and his experience:

I don't know how proud I am, it's a struggle. There's so many, just day-to-day stuff. I guess I would say that I'm not ashamed of it any more. I just feel like I wouldn't be proud if I were this really handsome GQ person, I don't think that's something I would be proud of, I guess I don't conceptualize things that way. It's hard to explain . . . I'm never gonna be what I see, what I really want and so I'm always gonna have this acceptance of this is what I'm gonna get and I have to be happy with that, but I'm no longer as uncomfortable. I don't have that, I don't carry the stigma anymore and the embarrassment and the fear, now I really don't give a crap what anybody thinks, but before I was paranoid. (FTM)

Don, an Asian participant, also described a combination of a lack of shame being included as pride, but was not sure if he would use the terminology "pride":

I'm not sure if pride would be the word I would use [laughter] . . . I guess it would be pride. It's a kind of thing where you finally feel, "Hey, this is who I am." You know what I mean? All the other labels people give you like, "Asians are smart," I'm like, "Oh wait a minute!" Or Asians like math. No, I went in calculus and I was happy to get a C. You don't understand, there was no liking of math there. I feel good about being like, "Hey, I am transgendered and I don't care if you care about that or not. If you have a problem with it then that's your problem, it's not my problem." . . . Confucius says that "Every interaction that you have, every conversation it continues to grow you." (FTM)

Along with feeling proud of themselves, participants talked about being proud of others and their relationships with others, an experience Stewart relayed, "I am very proud in my relationship. I am in a relationship with a genderqueer person and we are both very proud of our identities" (Male). Participants also discussed experiencing pride in their work or their ability to advocate for their community or others. Brian highlighted the pride he experienced as a result of the ability to advocate, which he believed his identity

gave him: “It’s a really cool place to be in the world, I think. Because, I mean, I guess, what I’m most proud is that I’m able to be a male feminist voice in society” (Trans male).

Happiness

Through identifying as male, taking steps in the identity process, and currently living as themselves, participants felt emotions connected with *happiness*. In addition to *feeling happy*, emotions related to *happiness* included *feeling glad*, *feeling good*, *feeling fortunate*, and *feeling hopeful*. As an example, Stewart talked about how transitioning allowed him to experience happiness and to feel good despite struggling with depression:

I just feel better. In a general sense, I just am happier now. I still, I have had depression for a really long time and I still have bouts of that. That is not going to go away. But [in] general every day, I feel so much better about myself and better . . . I am able to do more and experience more because I am not afraid of going out, being read the wrong way, you know. (Male)

Participants also discussed how others noticed, and how they have become happier, as John related:

I’ve had people say, my friends say, you know, you’re so much more relaxed. You’re so calm. You know, much more easygoing and happy. That I look happy. You know? I’ve known some of these people that I hadn’t seen in a while, hadn’t seen for 25 years, and they knew me from way back when and then meeting back up again with them now, it’s like man, you just look happy. (Female to Male)

Several participants noted *feeling fortunate* either for having access to resources that facilitated their transition or for having the perspective of someone who previously lived life as a woman. Tim talked about how he felt fortunate to have his perspective:

I feel glad that I was who I was during all of the different stages . . . I think about all the things that I would’ve missed out on if I’d been a young man you know? Things that I wouldn’t have ever experienced and gotten to see from that perspective, you know, I guess at this point, I consider it a real blessing to have that perspective. (Female to Male Transsexual)

Feelings of hope were attributed to taking steps to transition as well as a belief that negative circumstances or experiences will continue to improve

with time. Sam described beginning to identify as male and beginning to transition in the following way:

When I first started sticking my toe in the water and the water felt good, I was like “this really feels good, no, no it doesn’t, no” but “I will try the whole foot now and see how that works and I’m liking this and I shouldn’t” . . . before, [it was] darkness. Now, a little glimmer of hope. Maybe the pieces of this puzzle can fit together . . . discovering this piece fits somewhere, and discovering more pieces. As the picture begins to build out it was actually beginning to look like something that was pretty cool, so hope I guess would be the high point of that. (Female to Male)

Positive reactionary interpersonal emotions

Participants reported various positive emotions which arose as direct responses to statements, actions, or lack of actions of others toward them. Seven of these emotions were represented earlier, but appear again in this section as they occur specifically in the context of this theme; they include *confidence*, *self-acceptance*, *relief*, *excitement*, *positive surprise*, *feeling good*, and *pride in self*. When previously discussed, these seven emotions were seen as broadly being generated through various aspects of participants’ internal processes, but in this theme they were immediate responses to interpersonal interactions. Another emotion, *appreciation of others*, was also an aspect of this theme and related to a sense of thankfulness participants had for the actions of others or the interactions they had with others. In tandem with these emotions, participants reported *feeling supported* and *feeling validated* through their interactions with others. In fact, the first eight emotions that comprised this theme primarily manifested through these two experiences with other people. Participants noted experiencing support, help, and acceptance from others, including friends, members of their family, coworkers, and therapists. For instance, when participants reported *positive surprise*, the emotion of surprise was related to anticipating that others would respond negatively and feeling happily surprised when they received warm responses to coming out. These interpersonal experiences led to feeling supported and one or more of the first eight emotions. As an example, Chris explained how, for him, pride came from being accepted by others:

A lot of mine [pride] comes from being accepted by the fellow soldiers in my unit and when I was deployed. A few of them actually knew I was trans and had no problem referring to me as [Chris], and goofing off just as any other guys would, so that’s been my best experiences. (FTM Trans)

Participants also reported that people using the correct pronouns, people addressing them as men, being asked about their identities, and having successful dating experiences, lead to feelings of validation as well as one or more of those first eight emotions. John described just how exciting it was for him to have his identity recognized and embraced by at least one member of his family:

. . . if my stepmother was sending me a card or talking to me, she would say “he” or “son.” We’re working on that part . . . Especially my stepmom. She’s just so cool. And the other day, she said “[John], you’re a really good man.” And man, that just . . . I was flying high all night. (Female to Male)

Theoretical Model

Figure 1 depicts the positive emotional process for trans men, which includes cyclical relationships among themes. The positive emotional process for trans men primarily begins with feelings of confidence related to identifying as a man. Once participants felt the courage to identify as trans to themselves, their identity process led them to begin coming out to others and interacting with others as men, which in turn led to *positive interpersonal reactionary emotions*. Internal emotions of initial *confidence* led to the other seven emotion themes (*confidence* [later], *comfort*, *connection*, *feeling alive*, *amazement*, *pride*, and *happiness*) via positive interactions with others. For example, repeated positive interactions with others led to higher levels of *confidence* (primarily through feeling confident that they will be validated in their male identity) and *comfort* (relief that they are being seen as men). Positive interactions with others also led the men in this study to feel more appreciative of, and supported by, others (*connection*) and to feel excited about the possibilities of what their relationships would continue to look like in the future (*feeling alive*). These positive interactions also led to positive surprise (*amazement*) that people were being more supportive than expected. Pride in self (*pride*) was difficult to achieve without first seeing that others were responding positively to the participant, and feeling good after positive interactions with others (*happiness*) was a common emotional response. All seven themes were also described as internal processes that were achieved outside of interpersonal interactions. Because many of the emotions were not felt in a linear fashion, they are depicted in a circle with lines that indicate a bidirectional relationship between the emotion labels and positive reactionary interpersonal emotions.

Discussion

The current study is the first of its kind to explore specific positive emotions that trans men experience throughout their identity and transition process.

Although previous studies have researched overall emotional experiences for trans individuals (e.g., Budge, Katz-Wise, et al., 2013), positive transition experiences (e.g., Riggle et al., 2011), and resilience (e.g., Singh et al., 2011), the examination of the specific emotions that arise during this process has not been conducted in trans populations and has not been explicitly determined for trans men. In addition, a broader narrative has gained momentum within popular culture to define the trans experience as “hard,” “difficult,” “traumatic,” and “depressing” (see Kaufman, 2013; C. M. Wong, 2014). We will not deny that many individuals experience difficulties throughout their transition process, yet this lopsided narrative fuels anxiety and anticipatory negative emotional processes.

The theme of confidence was of particular importance, specifically related to feelings of connectivity in their relationships with others. Previous research indicates that individuals with low self-esteem often rely on interpersonal connectivity and social approval (Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996), which leads to individuals’ hypervigilance to determine if others care for them (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (2000) proposed a model based on dependency regulation, whereby interpersonal support mediates confidence and well-being. Participants also described feelings of comfort when they were able to be authentic with others. Authenticity in trans individuals appears to be a developmental process, whereby comfort is related to learning ongoing communication strategies and learning the risks/benefits of context (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014) and increases as individuals negotiate their identity through time (Budge, Katz-Wise, et al., 2013). It is likely that the interrelatedness of these variables is more complex among trans males, as shown by the descriptions of self-acceptance and self-actualization.

The findings from the current study extend previous research by acknowledging the emotional reactions that trans men have when they experience support after coming out. For example, the men in this study noted that feelings of connectivity (e.g., belongingness, love, and pride in relationships) were instrumental in moving them forward to feel additional positive emotions. Throughout many of the themes, of particular importance for the men in this study was a sense of “brotherhood” that also contributed to these feelings. Social support has been critiqued for being limited in its measurement due to the lack of attention to minority populations and vague assessments of the construct of social support (S. T. Wong, Nordstokke, Gregorich, & Pérez-Stable, 2010). It is well known that social support is an important buffer for mental health and coping with stress in general (Cohen & Wills, 1985), and there is research support to show the importance of social support for trans individuals specifically (e.g., Budge, Adelson, & Howard, 2013; Budge,

Katz-Wise, et al., 2013; Factor & Rothblum, 2008; Golub, Walker, Longmire-Avital, Bimbi, & Parsons, 2010; Nemoto et al., 2011). It is possible that the findings from this study indicate the importance of the inextricable link between emotional connectivity and social support.

The men in the current study indicated that they felt alive and excited as part of their positive emotional process. Ryan and Frederick (1997) discussed feeling alive as subjective vitality—“this positive sense of aliveness and energy . . . concerns a specific psychological experience of possessing enthusiasm and spirit . . . [which] represents a significant indicator of personal well-being” (p. 530). Some of the men in the current study equated their emotional experiences with a sense of risk taking (e.g., putting oneself “out there” to be vulnerable) and a rush of excitement subsequent to the risk. For the current study, it appears that taking the risk, regardless of possible consequences, led to an adrenaline rush or feelings of excitement. Izard (2004) noted that excitement can sometimes derive from a feeling of ambivalence, whereby there is an initial fear of the unknown and then a resulting excitement from future possibilities of the unknown. This theory is consistent with our data, whereby the men described fear of unknown reactions from others and then the positive emotional process following this fear.

Because the men in this study were focused on anticipatory negative emotions in the beginning stages of their identity process (e.g., Tim’s worries about how people would respond to his trans identity), when they did encounter positive experiences and emotions, they reacted with amazement. In their scholarship on awe (considered synonymous with amazement), Keltner and Haidt (2003) noted that this emotion occurs due to two central appraisals: perceived vastness and need for accommodation. This framework enhances the understanding of amazement for trans men: because the overall trans experience is purported to be negative and difficult (e.g., happiness portrayed as being unattainable), participants in this study experienced this strong positive emotion as a reaction to what they had anticipated.

After describing amazement, the men in the current study described their feelings of pride. It is well known that pride is considered one of the final stages in identity models (e.g., Cass, 1979; Devor, 2004) and is an emotional reaction to shame (McDermott, Roen, & Scourfield, 2008). Pride also has interesting considerations related to gender expectations of emotionality. Research findings indicate that men often report feeling more pride than women (e.g., Brody & Hall, 2008; Hess et al., 2000; Plant, Hyde, Keltner, & Devine, 2000). However, the construct of pride is important to decipher when considering identity processes—There are two separate types of pride: authentic pride (reflection of feeling proud of an accomplishment or achievement) and hubristic pride (feeling proud of the self or arrogance; Tracy &

Robins, 2007). Previous research indicates a gender difference related to hubristic pride, with men reporting higher levels than women, and men and women reporting authentic pride equally (Brody & Hall, 2008; Tracy & Robins, 2007). In the current study, men expressed authentic pride—primarily related to being able to be themselves as trans men and also pride in being a man who can provide a feminist viewpoint. Some of the men struggled with the word “pride,” and indicated that it was not quite the right word for them. It is likely that gender socialization is at play here: If men are typically presented with more hubristic pride, it may feel at odds for a trans man to discuss his authentic pride without misinterpretation by others. In addition, pride can be conceptualized as a factor of resilience to internalized transphobia, whereby individuals use this emotion as a coping mechanism to overcome barriers related to minority stress (Singh & McKleroy, 2011).

One of the final emotions that trans men described was happiness, which was described as a positive consequence to living authentically. As noted in the results, some participants described happiness as an internal, overall emotional experience. Some participants reported that others noted how happy the participants seemed, which in turn led to self-reflection on feeling happy and how they must have been perceived emotionally prior to transitioning. It is important to note the feelings of happiness for the men in this study, as one of the broader narratives for trans individuals, in general, is that they have difficult lives. Reporting trans men’s happiness could have broader implications than possibly imagined; the concept of social contagion indicates that affect can spread from an initiator to a recipient without conscious perception (Levy & Nail, 1993). Happiness specifically has been studied as a construct of social contagion, whereby happiness is propagated through social networks and can be conceived as a form of “social infection” (Fowler & Christakis, 2009).

The theoretical model that has emerged from the current study adds to gender and emotion theories in several ways. Most theoretical models including positive emotions either rank-order emotions (e.g., Parrott, 2001), discuss the neuropsychological impact of positive emotions (Ma, 2014), or theorize that positive emotions expand awareness to build coping skills (Fredrickson, 2001). In contrast, theoretical models related to positive emotions with men have collected information from the literature to propose 10 different male strengths that can enhance men’s positive emotionality and change in psychotherapy (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010); although useful, there is a lack of understanding regarding how men process and prioritize emotions. Thus far, there is not an emotion model that combines emotions, masculinity, and trans identity. Our theoretical model proposes that initial confidence is positively and directly related to an emerging trans identity, which in turn

leads to a host of positive emotions that have bidirectional relationships (e.g., happiness, pride, connection). The implications for practice from this model are manifold. If therapists focus first on positive reactionary interpersonal emotions or on internal emotional experiences that are not related to initial confidence, it is possible that clients will not feel ready to experience those positive emotions. As well, therapists should focus on interventions that initially boost confidence. Most trans individuals are primarily afraid of how others will react to their trans identity, thus leading to lower self-esteem and fear (Budge, Katz-Wise, et al., 2013). However, men in particular may need interventions that initially boost confidence to break down several barriers related to masculinity and emotions (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010)—which is consistent with our theoretical model. Examples of interventions may include behavioral techniques such as exposure therapy, whereby the client practices going out in public and introducing himself. Simultaneously, the therapist can process the emotional experience of what authenticity feels like and provide encouragement about how the trans male client is presenting in therapy. After initial confidence has been shown in the therapeutic context, our theoretical model would indicate that deeper identity work would need to be conducted to access more positive emotions. One example of this would be Brian's understanding that he could have values that are stereotypically feminine, but embody a traditionally masculine identity at the same time—which then felt freeing and prideful for him. Because the rest of the model indicates bidirectional relationships and nonlinear relationships among emotions, the final aspect of the theoretical model is most useful to therapists in that it will help them provide language to their trans male clients related to positive emotions.

There were several limitations to the current study. We conducted member checking to determine whether participants felt that they had expressed themselves in the way they intended within the final transcript. However, we did not complete member checking with the codes; it is possible that participants may have had different interpretations than the coders.

Also, a sample size of 11 trans men may be considered small for a qualitative study. Although there is no consensus about the “right” sample size for qualitative studies, the sample of 11 participants for the current study yields important information that has never been examined in the psychological literature. The findings from the current study lend to future research directions for qualitative and quantitative studies to examine how trans men understand emotional suppression, how cognitive dissonance about pride manifests in trans men, and broader understandings of how positive emotions of excitement and amazement lend to positive coping processes for trans men. Only 3 men out of the sample of 11 (73%) reported a racial/ethnic minority identity;

it is clear that future research should focus on trans men of color and their emotional processes to determine how multiple minority statuses affect the positive emotional process.

There are many implications derived from the results of this study. Trans men described emotions related to internal and interpersonal processes. In a therapeutic context, these findings indicate the importance of exploring multiple emotional processes with trans men and helping them navigate both negative and positive emotions. By using the terminology provided within this study (e.g., excitement, awe, comfort), therapists can use emotion-focused therapy (see Greenberg, 2011) to deepen trans men's emotional experiences. For example, if a trans client is having difficulty describing an emotional experience, it may be helpful to lend a statement such as "Some trans men have described that feeling as self-acceptance. How does that fit for you?" In addition, it may be useful to have clients read several of the quotes for this study and see how the experiences from the participants in this study differ or converge with the client's emotional processes. It may also be useful to use interpersonal techniques to discuss the impact that positive interpersonal interactions may have for trans men's emotions and to process in the here-and-now how the therapist may be reacting to the client with his emotional expressiveness. More specifically, therapists can adapt the positive psychology/positive masculinity (PPPM) framework (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010) for trans men. This would include infusing the 10 male strengths from the PPPM model and intersecting themes from the current study. For example, Kiselica and Englar-Carlson noted that male courage and risk taking should be validated within psychotherapy; as one of our findings was related to the positive emotions from risk taking, it would be beneficial to explore these feelings and encourage these types of behaviors within therapy.

From a broader standpoint, it is essential that the media and institutions that affect socialization begin to address the positive aspects of trans identity. The men in this study anticipated negative experiences and emotions and described the anticipation and ambiguity as being more difficult than the actual outcomes. For the field of psychology, an essential application of the information included in this article is to ensure that masculinity as a construct is discussed throughout training programs. Because masculinity is often discussed in the context of privilege (Coston & Kimmel, 2012), the barriers to, and positive aspects of, masculinity are often ignored. Training programs should not only focus on having broad discussions of gender, in general, but also focus on the positive aspects of gender—especially incorporating trans issues into the curriculum and addressing how to promote resilience through interventions. It is time for counseling psychology to broaden the trans narrative to incorporate positivity and resilience.

Appendix

1. What terms do you typically use to identify your trans identity? How long have you identified this way? And what pronouns do you prefer?
2. Tell me about what your overall process of identifying as trans has been like.
3. The purpose of this study is to learn more about how trans individuals come to feel pride about their identity and also the positive experiences that have occurred throughout their identity process. Would you say that you experience pride regarding your trans identity?
 - a. If yes: Describe what that feels like. How did the process of feeling prideful about your identity come about? How has the feeling of pride changed or shifted or morphed over the course of your identity process?
 - b. If no: move on to next question.
4. What have been the best aspects of your identity process?
5. What positive experiences have you had that you did not anticipate when you first began identifying as trans?
6. I'd like you to think about your identity process. Some people describe having different feelings when they first thought about identifying as trans as compared to their feelings a little later and even compared to how they feel now. Can you describe specific positive feelings at different stages of your identity process? (At the beginning, what kinds of positive feelings did you experience? When you first came out, what kinds of positive feelings did you have? What are your positive feelings now? Describe how these feelings have changed over time for you?)
7. What kinds of things helped you to experience more positive feelings (e.g., Who helped you to experience positive feelings? What kinds of thought processes helped you to experience more positive feelings? What kinds of behaviors helped you to experience more positivity around your identity process?)
8. What other things do you wish had been in place to make your identity process easier or more positive?
9. If you were to describe your positive experiences to individuals who are in the process of identifying as trans, what would you say to them?
10. What would you want therapists to know about your positive processes related to your identity?
11. How have others commented on your positive feelings or experiences?
12. What else would you like me to know about your identity process?

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