

## On the Meshing of Nonhuman and Professional Identities

bloodmuffins

2/21/2021

I've been thinking about this for several months but especially over the past few weeks as it's become more and more relevant. I'm realizing that my nonhuman and professional identities are becoming more and more intertwined and that there is more and more reason (pressure?) to be out as nonhuman in a professional context. But this also kind of terrifies me.

I first decided I wanted to research therianthropy and other nonhumanity my senior year of high school. I made it my goal to major in psychology to ultimately go to graduate school so I could conduct such research. However, I did not talk about this openly with anyone at my undergrad. It was only as I was approaching my final year there and my advisor asked me if I wanted to do a thesis that I told her if I were to do a thesis, I would want it to be on therianthropy. I was super torn at the time: on one hand, doing a thesis, especially one on therianthropy sounded great – it would be the first step towards my dream! – but on the other hand, doing a thesis sounded really intimidating. My advisor was incredibly supportive and talked me into it, stressing how my writing abilities and passion for my topic made me a particularly strong candidate for doing a thesis. I'll never forget how she said she would love to do my thesis together with me or how meaningful our meetings each week were; that was truly a special time.

But even during that time, I didn't out myself as a therian. We talked about terminology and community histories, and we analyzed the extant scholarly articles about otherkinity and therianthropy at the time, but I never made it more personal. I don't know what my advisor thought throughout that year – perhaps she knew from the beginning that I must belong to the community, or perhaps she didn't think anything of it at all. I only finally came out in a fit of anxiety during one of our meetings leading up to the student symposium and my thesis defense. I was terrified of giving presentations on my thesis, and I was particularly nervous about people asking me about my connection to the topic. I think my advisor picked up on this because she brought up that I should be prepared with how I would answer that question. I told her, "Well, I don't think it's a secret at this point that I am a therian" but that I didn't want to tell people that during my presentations. I think we settled on some vague answer about personal connection to the community. Honestly I don't super remember because that question didn't end up getting asked during either presentation. The important part is that was the very first time I overtly blended my nonhuman and professional identities, outing myself in a professional setting.

I outed myself a little bit more overtly in the dedication of my thesis itself, which reads "for my people." I went back and forth with myself for ages about whether I should include that or not. I was terrified about outing myself publicly, but it also felt really important to dedicate my thesis to the community that had so supported and inspired me throughout my life. The idea to even do my thesis came out of conversations on Werelist and other forums, and my whole motivation was to do something *for* the community. It felt wrong to leave that intention out of the finished product. So, after much deliberation and discussion with my partner, I got up the nerve to leave in the dedication. That was the second time I overtly meshed my nonhuman and professional identities, and while it still sometimes makes me nervous, I'm ultimately so glad I did. To date, my thesis has been downloaded 2,215 times in 79 countries around the world – I'm glad that anyone downloading and reading my thesis can read that dedication and get a sense of the love and care that went into it and that it was made *by* someone in the community *for* the community.

After graduating college, I took a couple of years before going to grad school, and when I applied to grad schools, I didn't say a word about my interest in nonhuman-focused research. Knowing that this

research wasn't being done anywhere in the US, I focused on applying to LGBTQ+-focused programs/mentors given that this was also a personal topic I was interested in and that it seemed as close to nonhuman identity as I'd be able to get. My plan was to stay absolutely silent about my nonhuman interests to just get through grad school, get my PhD, and ultimately be able to go back to nonhuman research once I could land my own academic job.

However, I ended up deviating from this plan pretty quickly. I maintained my LGBTQ+ focus for my grad school applications and interviews and even early on in my program, but once it came time to apply to research labs near the end of the first year, I decided to be honest in my lab interviews about having interests in both LGBTQ+ and nonhuman identity topics. At this point I had realized that I really did want my dissertation to also focus on nonhuman identity if possible, and so it felt very important to float the idea by my future possible research advisors to see if it was something they'd be supportive of. Fortunately, both faculty members whose labs I applied to seemed open to it, and I ultimately matched with my top choice lab. My current advisor has been extremely supportive of my dissertation topic focused on nonhuman identity.

Doing a nonhuman-focused dissertation has served as powerful exposure for gaining comfort talking about nonhuman identity with people. I have been working on my dissertation for a little over a year now, and that includes doing presentations on my progress during lab meetings. Dissertation topic discussions are also not uncommon amongst conversations with other students outside of lab. All of that is to say that I have had to get a lot more comfortable talking about this topic, and while early on it was scary any time I brought it up, my observed trend has still stood: any time I bring it up in a serious, professional context, it is treated as such. I have not received any backlash or aggressive questioning about it. I think this process of gaining comfort discussing nonhuman identity in professional settings has had a significant impact on incorporating my nonhuman identity into my professional identity and on really building my professional identity around nonhuman identity topics.

Then last summer I participated in OtherCon 2020, the first alterhuman-focused community convention, by doing a presentation on my thesis and giving a sneak peek at my dissertation research. This was a big moment, and I put a ton of deliberation into how to present myself. This was my first time fully blending my community and professional identities, and I wanted to be thoughtful about how to do that to be authentic and within my bounds of comfort. After lots of reflection and discussion with my partner, I decided to go all-in on the blending of my identities. The reality is that if I am going to make nonhuman research the focus of my career while still identifying as and participating as a member of the nonhuman communities, these aspects of myself are going to need to be integrated. They are going to come up together, so I figured I should start embracing that sooner than later and that my OtherCon panel would be a good opportunity to do so. So I decided to put both my legal name and my online username on the panel presentation, as well as include a slide talking about my community identity/presence and my professional one. I think this went well, although if I'm being completely honest sometimes it still makes me kind of anxious that anyone can watch that video on YouTube; I'm nervous that there will be some sort of unforeseen consequence, but I'm not even sure what that would be, so I try my best not to worry about it. And ultimately I am so proud of myself for pushing through the anxiety and doing that panel. It was a remarkable experience, and I had my highest number of thesis downloads in a month *ever* afterward (92 downloads in August, 2020), so it clearly was impactful for others as well :)

The consequence of including my name and username that I did not fully think through at the time was my current research advisor being interested in watching the video after I told her about participating in the convention. She was super supportive and happy for me that I did the panel, so of course it made

sense she would want to see the video. She even suggested I send it to the whole lab, which again makes sense given the mutually supportive environment in our lab. But this made me acutely aware of the fact that I had, like while working on my undergrad thesis, avoided outing myself as nonhuman while conducting this research. I don't know, it just feels like a harder step to say *I'm* one of the nonhuman-identified folks than to just talk about them in a more removed/objective/third-person/abstract way. Sure, everyone's been super nice and supportive about me doing this research, but how will they react if they learn I actually identify as nonhuman? Will they think I'm weird? Will they ask me inappropriate or invasive questions? Will I be put in a position to have to defend my identity? (Wow these worries directly parallel the themes we're finding in our nonbinary minority stress study....not surprising, but interesting to point out lol.)

Anyway, all that to say, that while I have gained much greater comfort and confidence in discussing nonhuman identities in a professional context, and while my nonhuman and professional identities are fully meshed within the nonhuman communities since OtherCon, I have still avoided outing myself and doing a similar full meshing of identities in professional settings because I am just still afraid of how people will react and perceive me. I still haven't sent the YouTube link to my advisor or lab, although she has access to the link through my CV.

But then a few weeks ago I was faced with an essay prompt to write a "professional autobiography," and I was stumped. The *truth* is everything I've written here up to this point. My professional narrative is interlinked with my nonhuman identity, because it is this identity and the community associated with it that led me on this path in the first place. The *truth* is that my nonhuman identity led me to the nonhuman communities, which inspired me to pursue nonhuman-focused research, which further led me to become interested in LGBTQ+-focused research and clinical work, which has further piqued my interest in nonhuman-focused clinical work, too. I don't think I can only focus on my LGBTQ+ interests and identities for this the way I did for my grad school applications. And now that I am "out" as a nonhuman researcher, maybe I shouldn't have to. Maybe these parts of my identity really are blending, and maybe that really does make sense given my life path and goals for the future.

So I wrote the essay honestly, paced around anxiously and talked about it with my partner, and submitted it. Fortunately, this essay was just a draft for a class, not a real practicum or internship application essay. Still, it filled me with dread to have actually outed myself as nonhuman in a professional setting. I anxiously awaited my grade and feedback to see what the professor and TA said about my decision to include that. And they were both supportive overall – the TA noted that she loved the powerful ownership in the sentence, and the professor agreed, only wondering if defining myself as "not" something was the best way to do it. They both recommended I also check in with my advisor for her perspective. This outcome filled me with relief – if they as folks with far more experience than me think it's an okay thing to include, then I think it is probably okay. And fortunately I'm not actually applying to internship for over another year, so I have time to continue thinking about it and building confidence in my meshed identities.

Or so I thought. It turns out one of the practicum sites I'm applying to also calls for a professional autobiography essay. This fills me with mixed emotions: on one hand, yay, I can just reuse the essay I wrote for class, but on the other hand, if I use that essay, that means outing myself as nonhuman in a professional context. And not just any professional context, it means outing myself to someone I have never met, external to my institution, who is evaluating my application to see if I'm a good fit for their practicum site. And I am just so nervous about how that could go, what unforeseen consequences there might be. The site in question is probably not my top pick site, but it might be my second. Will my outness about my identities come across as desirable confidence, the powerful ownership my TA noted?

Or will it weird them out and turn them off of interviewing me? If they do interview me, will my identity come up during the interview? Will I be put in that position of needing to educate, defend, and answer invasive questions about my identity? I really, *really* don't want any of these negative outcomes, so it makes me tempted to rework the essay to leave out my nonhuman identity.

But at the same time, I find myself wondering if I really do need to just pull the band-aid off and be fully out with my blended nonhuman and professional identities in both nonhuman community and professional spaces. As stated earlier, if I'm really going to be making my career essentially out of my nonhuman identity, then these parts of my identity are already inextricably linked. I think if I can get over the anxiety, it could make my life a lot easier to just be open about it. Not that I would need to come out to everyone all the time, but to have the comfort to be open in situations where it's relevant, such as with this essay.

I also keep thinking about the possible benefits of being out, not only the confidence that could be viewed favorably, but also the possibility of getting to integrate my knowledge and experience with nonhuman identities into my clinical work as well. While my initial passion is research, I have come to be more interested in clinical work, too, and similarly to the conversations in community spaces about the lack of research on nonhuman topics, I also see regular conversations about the lack of knowledgeable and accepting therapists. If I could find a way to be out in clinical settings, I could be offering unique experience other trainees wouldn't have, and that experience could really help people if there are nonhuman-identified clients at my site. Offering that knowledge/experience wouldn't necessarily have to come from outing my own identity; just saying I have this knowledge/experience from my research would probably be enough, but then I wonder why I would hide it. Again, if this is my whole career, if I'm hoping to do nonhuman-focused research and clinical work, then does it not benefit me to just be out and open about it all? I am also out and open about my belief that individuals of underrepresented communities should be leading the research and clinical developments regarding those communities to avoid harmful pathologizing and stigma – by being out about my nonhuman identity, I can embody this value by letting others, both in professional and community settings, know my research and clinical focus is to generate awareness, support, and resources *by us, for us*. And *that* feels hella values-congruent.

So maybe it's worth being out.

*Addendum:* I did end up submitting the essay that outed myself as nonhuman in my practicum application. I was interviewed by the site, and they seemed to think I was a very strong candidate, but my nonhuman identity wasn't brought up at all. This served to reinforce to me that I can be successful and out at the same time. As I continue to navigate these experiences throughout my career, I expect I will have more reflections to document and share.