

# **Communities of Practice of Transition: an analytical framework for studying change-focused groups**

Carrie Paechter  
Nottingham Centre for Children, Young People and Families  
School of Social Sciences  
Nottingham Trent University  
Chaucer Building  
Goldsmith Street  
Nottingham NG1 5LT

[carrie.paechter@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:carrie.paechter@ntu.ac.uk)

+44 115 8488 2412

Twitter: @CarriePaechter

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3050-5571>

Andolie Marguerite  
Department of Computing  
Goldsmiths, University of London  
New Cross  
London SE14 6NW UK

Twitter: @andandolie

## **Abstract**

In this paper we consider a previously unidentified form of community of practice: the community of practice of transition. Our exemplar data comes from two separate studies, one of a group for trans young people and one of an online divorce support community. Such communities differ from other communities of practice because the transition process itself is the focus and the shared practice of the community. We argue that communities of practice of transition differ from 'classic' communities of practice in four main ways. First, and most salient, there are differences in relation to time and its importance. Second, and following from this, there are differences in relation to the focus of trajectories

into and through the group, which affect who is able to become a central member. Third, the role and characteristics of central members of the community are different from those found in a traditionally conceived community of practice: moving out of a transitional state (and therefore, out of the community) is key to old-timer status. Finally, reified events are highly salient in communities of practice of transition, and more important than reified objects. We argue that the concept of a community of practice of transition challenges and expands many of the assumptions underpinning the community of practice as a framework for analysing the dynamics and operation of groups and how identities are forged in and through them. Most significantly, we argue that time needs to be taken more seriously in relation to communities of practice.

## **Introduction**

The idea that people construct their identities within communities of practice (Cox, 2005, Lave and Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998) has been used as an analytical framework for studying communities of many kinds (Danielsson, 2012, Davies, 2013, Eckert, 1989, Koliba and Gajda, 2009, Mason-Schrock, 1996, Ostermann, 2003, Paechter, 2003b). The concept is useful because it allows the study of how people learn and develop within communities, how they take up multiple and overlapping identities, how communities form and change, and (once fully theorised (Paechter, 2003a, 2007)) how power relations shift and are resisted within communities. Many of these communities follow the pattern of those originally studied by Lave, Wenger and their collaborators, in being relatively stable, with the status quo maintained by central expert members. In

this paper we focus on a hitherto unidentified form of community of practice: the community of practice of transition, using as illustrative examples two very different groups which we have separately studied. A community of practice of transition differs from other communities of practice specifically because the focus of the community is the transition process itself. In such a community, the shared practice is transition, and the purpose of the community is mutual support in negotiating that transition. In this paper we will use our analyses of our two communities to outline how the concept of the community of practice of transition expands the scope of community of practice theory as an analytical framework for the study of groups.

We argue that communities of practice of transition are different from 'classic' communities of practice in four main ways. First, and most salient, we suggest that there are differences in relation to time and its importance. This is because transition is something that happens over time, so time, and timeliness, are central to communities of practice of transition. Second, and following from this, there are differences that stem from the focus on the transition and trajectory through it, and from the parameters around which this trajectory is conceptualised, which affects who is able to become a central member of the community. Third, the role and characteristics of central members of communities of practice of transition are different from those usually found in a community of practice. In particular, actively moving out of a transitional state (and, usually, therefore out of the community) is key to old-timer status. Finally, reified events are more salient in communities of practice of transition, because they mark stages in that transition and, by association, that someone is more deeply and authentically embedded in the practice.

## **Introducing the two studies**

Before we go on to discuss these four differences in detail, however, we need to introduce our two communities. While substantially different in membership, mode of interaction, and the transition involved, they had several features in common: transition as a shared practice; exit from transition (and therefore the community) as a main goal; a clearly defined trajectory through and out of the community; and a perception of transition as part of an identity shift that had both public and private elements.

A community of practice has to fulfil three criteria: mutual engagement; joint enterprise and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). Different aspects of the three criteria will be more or less significant at different times, and members' engagement with them will depend in part on their position in the community, as a new or more established member. The content of the mutual engagement, that is, those aspects of the practice that the members negotiate, indicates the joint enterprise of the community. The shared repertoire is produced through the engagement of the community members and, in turn, facilitates that engagement. Identities and trajectories within a community of practice depend on the individual's relationship with these three requirements. For example, a central member will make substantial use of the shared repertoire and show a commitment to key aspects of the joint enterprise. Power relations are also bound up with these processes: power is mobilised through engagement with joint enterprise and, especially, through the skilled use of shared repertoire to demonstrate one's central position within the group. All of these elements were evident in both the communities of practice studied.

The first community, based around an online divorce support website, was the subject of an retrospective online ethnography conducted by Carrie (Paechter, 2012b, 2012a, 2013). The site, Wikivorce<sup>1</sup>, was established in 2007 to provide support for people in the UK going through divorce. The study focused on the first nine months of its operation, when the community was still developing. The study involved: an analytical reading of all postings on the site from March to December 2007; a detailed analysis of the posts of 42 'virtual key informants'; plus asynchronous online interviews with six people who had joined the site in 2007 and remained involved in Wikivorce in 2012. Carrie had been an early participant in the community and gradually realised that a community of practice had spontaneously formed among its members. She subsequently took advantage of a period of study leave to use it as a retrospective case study in the serendipitous formation of an online community of practice: for further details see: (Paechter, 2012a).

The joint enterprise, or shared practice, in Wikivorce could broadly be described as 'getting through divorce'. This involved such things as: coming to terms with the end of one's marriage; learning how the legal system worked; developing a new social and personal identity in relation to one's anticipated divorced status; dealing with the practicalities of forming a new household, either as a single person (possibly a single parent) or with a new partner; and, for some, learning different ways of parenting. Mutual engagement in the site was in itself part of the shared practice of 'getting through', with people swapping experiences and advice. This was part of the joint enterprise of the group: a collective engagement and performance of the individual activity of moving through and surviving the divorce process in all its aspects. This was

supported by a complex set of shared repertoire which ranged from insider language of various kinds, including divorce-related terminology and abbreviations for it, to running jokes. There were also shared assumptions about members, their approaches to divorce and to relationships, which made it harder, if not impossible, for some people to become legitimate participants, or to move on to full membership. A mutually understood aspect of the shared practice within this community was that it was about getting through, surviving and recovering from something that was being forced upon one.

Our second community of practice is a youth group for trans and gender questioning young people up to age 25 which was the focus of an ethnographic study by Andolie (Marguerite, 2018). The group, 4D<sup>ii</sup>, was set up to support young people who were questioning their gender identity or who identified as trans. At the time it was the only such youth group anywhere in the UK. Andolie was already involved in the group as a volunteer and had established a trusting relationship with the staff and young people, making it an obvious place to study young people identifying as trans. Andolie's data include fieldnotes from over 40 youth group sessions over a period of two years, and in-depth interviews with 11 members. The members of 4D were mostly assigned female at birth, aged between 16 and 22, and white, with a minority of black and mixed-race young people. They attended the group for a variety of reasons. Some had sought medical help for gender dysphoria and had then been referred to 4D by medical professionals. Others were involved in queer and trans communities and wanted to enjoy activities with other trans young people. Some saw themselves as falling within the medical model of gender dysphoria, while others had a more

transgressive approach to gender, and might or might not have been seeking surgical or hormonal interventions.

The joint enterprise in 4D was broadly focused around learning and establishing how to be and live as trans young people, which for some included a future in which they lived unproblematically and unchallenged in their new identity. This included several key aspects: having their preferred identities as trans or questioning legitimated within the group; developing a shared knowledge of transition possibilities, both around legal and medical processes and about different forms of identity; engaging with each other's transition possibilities to determine how they as individuals would transition; and learning how they might have their preferred identities accepted and legitimated outside the group. This took place as part of the mutual engagement between group members, for example by sharing feelings about their identities and identity trajectories and discussing how they might come out as trans to friends and family. Some of these discussions expanded the possible transition outcomes for members, by, for example, introducing the idea of a non-binary identity to young people who were not previously aware of this. Members also worked together to acquire and share knowledge about transition processes such as medical procedures and legal name changes.

Related to this was a considerable amount of shared repertoire, which came in three main forms: knowledge; language; and presentation. Demonstrating knowledge of how to engage with medical practitioners, and about possible medical interventions (for example, how to take hormones) was an important part of the shared repertoire, and an ability to do this marked one out as a more central member. Such demonstrations might include use of specialist language,

including medical terminology, identity terms such as 'genderqueer', and the names of specifically trans-focused objects, such as packers and binders<sup>iii</sup>.

Presentation was focused on actively attempting to appear, and be recognised, as their preferred identity. Most group members conformed to gender expectations and aspired to present in ways that were consistent and conventional for their preferred gender. Conventionally gendered clothing and hairstyles were thus part of the shared repertoire in 4D.

It can be seen from these descriptions that, while substantially different in focus and makeup, the two communities shared an orientation to transition in a context in which successful transition implies a departure from the group. Once one is divorced and has successfully negotiated the taking up of a new, single, identity, one should no longer need the support of a group focused on getting through the process. Similarly, those members of 4D who successfully transition to their preferred gender can then move on with their lives as members of the wider community who are recognised as having that gender; they no longer need the support and legitimation found within the youth group, *or, in most cases, other trans support groups*. Both communities had the process of transition itself as a major focus of their shared practice, with exit from the community into a new life as the main goal. Both also had a clearly defined trajectory through and out of the community: in Wikivorce this took place through a set of prescribed legal processes plus a (often longer) period of reorientation following the breakup of a major relationship, while in 4D it reflected a series of legal and medical procedures involving outside agencies as well as personal and social change. Finally, both communities saw transition as part of an identity shift that



was both public and private, involving questions of self-perception, identity and presentation, including changes of names and titles, and coming-out events.

### **How does the idea of communities of practice of transition extend the community of practice as an analytical framework?**

As mentioned earlier, communities of practice of transition provide a variation on the classic community of practice in four main ways: in relation to time; in terms of the relationship between the trajectory through the community and the practice; the role and positioning of central members; and with regard to the salience of reified events. These aspects all diverge from Lave and Wenger's original conception of the community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998) and from subsequent understandings of it, and provide an opportunity to broaden and make more complex some of the key aspects of the theory. In particular, the salience of time, from which the other differences follow, marks a clear distinction between Wenger's (1998) exposition and the community of practice of transition. We will now discuss these four differences in turn.

#### **Changes in approach to the role of time in the community of practice**

Transition takes place over time. This means that the position of any individual on the temporal trajectory through transition becomes highly relevant to their status in a community of practice of transition and their situation with respect to power/knowledge relations. In particular, how far an individual has travelled through a series of expected stages, or reified events (see below) will affect the extent to which their knowledge of these events (and therefore of the practices of the community) is seen as accurate and trustworthy, and this will, in turn,

have an effect on the extent to which they can mobilise power. In this, communities of practice of transition differ fundamentally from classic communities of practice, in which time appears to be relatively unimportant. While Wenger (1998) argues that ‘identity is fundamentally temporal’, he goes on immediately to say that ‘in using the term “trajectory” I do not want to imply a fixed course or a fixed destination’ (154). In communities of practice of transition, by contrast, a fixed destination is at least implied, and in the two communities studied there was also an expected route to get there. Those heading for a different destination and/or along a different path usually found it impossible to be accepted as full members. Furthermore, while Wenger sees the temporal aspect of identity as ‘critical’ (155) and argues that identities develop over time and incorporate past, present and future, the significance of timeliness in relation to an individual’s trajectory in and through the practice does not have the same importance. In the communities we studied, time pressure was, in itself, an important part of shared community understanding and a factor in judgements about who was a central member and who was not.

In both the communities studied we saw examples of how personal experience of a particular point in the transition process was cited to demonstrate expertise in the practices of the community. Brendan, for example, explained to Andolie how experience of the different stages of transition brought respected and valued expertise *within 4D*, and how it was related to time:

OK. This is how I stage it in my mind...[chuckles] You have the people who’ve literally just come out and they often go to the youth group also to...who haven’t come out yet and they’re questioning and all that. And then you have people like me who are pre-

hormones, still the beginning of all the doctor stuff. And then you have the people who are in the first year of hormones, so not all the physical stuff has completely happened to them yet. Then you have the people who have been on hormones for ages, but they're still pre-op and stuff but they'll pass all the time and everything. And then you have the people who are hormones for ages, post-op, and feel like they're the helper people who you can ask anything, and they've been down the road, [chuckles] they know.

Within Wikivorce, timescales were a frequent discussion topic, with foci ranging from how long the divorce process might take to the time it could take to get over a failed marriage. In this post, a woman reassures another member from the point of view of having got to the end of the process, again emphasising the temporal element of the practice of 'getting through':

It took a while. I think you may just have to trust that things get better. Prepare to muddle through and do your best for a while - and note the little things you enjoy. Even a moment of pleasure is a sign that you'll survive.

I hope that helps a bit - I know some people may feel as though life will never get better, because that's how it seemed to me this time last year<sup>iv</sup>.

The presence in both communities of people at all stages in their journey through transition reminded people of their previous situation, showed them an expected direction of travel, and gave them some idea of how long their period of transition might be, taking into account individual variables such as age or access to medical support in 4D, and children, spousal co-operation and financial

resources in Wikivorce. However, it led to an emphasis on the speed and consistent forward trajectory of transition, and an expectation that it should only be slowed or interrupted for reasons deemed (through unwritten and unspoken assumptions) to be 'acceptable' to the community.

This was more of an issue in 4D than in Wikivorce, where it was understood that becoming personally ready to undertake the divorce process might take some time. Some people also joined Wikivorce in the days or weeks after discovering adultery, or their spouse leaving, and might at that point hope to save their marriage. Nonetheless, there was an overall expectation that people should move through transition over time. Young people joining 4D had usually been questioning their gender for a while, and joining the group was seen as a definite stage along a transition journey that had already begun. In this community there was a clear understanding that the trajectory of full members was one of forward motion through a process of gender transition, across binary genders, over time. Pausing or halting the process could be seen as a failure of authenticity as trans, something that was very important in this group, and would mean that an individual would lose status, or even legitimacy, within the community. This emphasis on binary transition (variously interpreted) also made it difficult for those identifying outside the gender binary to become full members. Because their presentation and pronoun use varied, these people were frequently seen as failing to move forward, or even as moving backwards, along a gender trajectory.

The most visible trajectory within 4D was the conventional trans male trajectory involving both social and medical transition. A few people in the group also moved from being questioning or genderqueer to the more conventional

trans male trajectory. A few transitions were also halted or reversed. Those whose trajectory did not conform to that of a trans male tended to disappear from the group. Those who nevertheless remained included Chrissy (a trans woman) and Lee, who were noticeably marginal: Lee, in particular, (discussed below) was increasingly marginalised as it moved from a trans masculine to a more feminine presentation. Brendan, while a trans man, did not want a medical transition, and therefore was outside the conventional trajectory. This meant that he had to work hard to claim the authenticity of his identity.

Time, and the forward direction of transition, were also salient because there were aspects of each transition process that were, or were seen as, irreversible. For the young trans people, these included the changes resulting from taking hormones or undergoing gender confirmation surgery, which made significant and permanent changes to their bodies. Even if they subsequently changed their mind about transition, or moved to a more non-binary identity and presentation, those changes would remain. For Wikivorce members, there were personal and legal changes that were also, to all intents and purposes, irreversible. Receipt of the decree absolute, for example, is a legal point at which a marriage is ended: even if one later reconciles with one's spouse one cannot undo divorce. It was also believed that once a divorcing person left the family home they were unlikely to be able to return, so taking this step was seen as a significant marker towards ending the marriage, even if it was not always possible until a financial settlement (another irreversible point) had been reached. Within both communities, having taken the risky step of going through an irreversible process was a sign of experience, knowledge, and therefore power within the community, conferring not just authenticity in relation to the desire for

transition, but also a tangible sign of being further on in their temporal and status trajectory than those who had not.

### **Changes in the relationship between the trajectory and the practice**

In a classic community of practice a person transitions *into* the community of practice and then continues to change while they remain a member. While an individual is altered through participation, change is not the main focus of that participation, and it is assumed that central participants stay in the community. In the case of a community of practice of transition, transition and change are the main focus of community members, and success is measured in terms of someone's transition *into, through, and then out of* the community. This has an effect on the shared practice, which becomes firmly focused on a forward trajectory of transition, with legitimated personal changes being strongly associated with moving through the community towards a new life beyond it. Those whose trajectories do not fit this pattern are unlikely to be legitimated as full members and will certainly not be treated as experienced 'old-timers' by others.

Wenger (1998) argues that there is a multiplicity of trajectories through any community. While he suggests that some are 'paradigmatic' (156) within a community, he implies that this is fundamentally up for negotiation and that a community of practice is therefore

a field of possible trajectories and thus the proposal of an identity.

It is a history and the promise of that history. *It is a field of possible pasts and of possible futures, which are all there for participants, not only to witness, hear about and contemplate, but to engage*

with. They can interact with old-timers, who offer living examples of possible trajectories. (156).

The two communities of practice we studied, however, were notable for having only one legitimate trajectory: anyone who was not seen to conform to this found it difficult to be accepted into the community. In 4D there were also limits on members' possible pasts, with an expectation that people would have a history of unease with or rejection of their assigned gender from an early age (Mason-Schrock, 1996). There were constraints on members that reflected this legitimate trajectory, which were reinforced by central members, who both supported actions and approaches along the dominant trajectory and ignored or discouraged those at odds with it. For example, in 4D, in order to become a fully central member a participant had to be on a trajectory across the binary from assigned female at birth to male. Their gender presentation and performance had to conform to this trajectory. That is, as well as declaring themselves to be he, and male, they had to be seen to be moving towards presenting consistently and conventionally as male. This reflects Lave and Wenger's (1991) analysis of the functioning of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and Mason-Schrock's (1996) earlier research on a trans support group. In both of these, both understandings of identity and trajectories into the group were supported by individuals telling stories about their own histories in group meetings. These histories were both affirmed and shaped by longstanding group members, who made supportive comments when stories reflected acceptable identities and trajectories, building on and developing these aspects, while ignoring discrepancies, implausibilities and other features that did not 'fit' the expected narrative. Both 4D and Wikivorce also made use of informal storytelling as part of their practice

(including, in Wikivorce, a blogging space which some used for this): the ways in which these stories were received and reacted to reflect similar mechanisms. Furthermore, 4D had a formal 'pronoun circle' at the start of every meeting, in which everyone told the group their name and preferred pronoun. It was harder for those people whose choice of pronouns was different at different times, or whose presentation varied, to be recognised by other group members as authentically trans.

For example, Lee's inconsistent gender presentation while attending 4D, which included a move towards a more feminised presentation despite having previously taken masculinising hormones, as well as its non-binary identity, meant that, over time, it became more, rather than less, marginal within the group. This was exacerbated by the dominance of trans men in 4D, so that the predominant and expected trajectory was from female to male (a move that Lee had made in the past), and not the reverse. As Brendan explained to Andolie:

A lot of people are coming down hard on them because they think that they're – what's the word? – going back, reverting back to what they were...[...]...Yeah, they were assigned female at birth, and they transitioned to male and now they are identifying more with genderqueer, but also sometimes on occasion using female pronouns, which a lot of people have been like really outraged about...

Lee's original transition, before coming to 4D, had been a traditional cross-binary female to male transition. Lee had chosen a male name, Leon, and male pronouns, and changed presentation, with the help of hormones, to passing well as male. Leon met the usual criteria for central membership: legal and medical



knowledge and presentation. However, Lee then began to identify as non-binary. Its gender presentation was often gender transgressive: using the pronoun 'it', and contradictory presentations such as a beard and make-up, or a beard and a dress. These did not fit with significant aspects of the shared repertoire of presenting as male, or masculine. It seemed that to become a central member of 4D required a consistent and conventional male presentation and identification, and Lee's failure to conform to this caused 'outrage' among other members.

The pressure to conform to a particular trajectory was also present within Wikivorce. Generally, it was expected that participants moved from thinking about divorce, to being an actively divorcing person, and then to having divorced, and this was reflected in profile-based labels that were automatically attached to individual posts. In addition to a repeated reference to 'stages of divorce' and 'stages of grief' there were certain beliefs that underpinned this trajectory. In particular, it was assumed that adultery was unforgiveable. People who joined the site admitting to having been adulterous were at risk of being hounded out in short order, and those who were considering forgiving adulterous spouses were discouraged from doing so. The expected trajectory also assumed that members were 'victims' in the divorce process, which was usually taken to mean that divorce had been forced upon them by the misdeeds (adultery, violence, desertion) of their spouse. Those who did not present themselves in conformity with these assumptions found it hard to be legitimated as full participants. One person new to the site, for example, who said that she was feeling 'wretched' despite it being her decision to divorce, rather than being supported, was told that she was acting like a spoilt child and would regret it later.

The effects of this relatively narrowly boundaried trajectory to central membership, combined with the position of the central members as on the point of transitioning out of the community, mean that most, if not all, new members to a community of practice of transition join under the assumption that their aim is eventually to leave it. Nevertheless, engagement with both communities was intense, reflecting the life-changing nature of the process. Members of both groups expected to emerge from transition as a different person, in terms of both private identity and public persona. Moving briskly along the 'approved' identity trajectory enhanced an individual's status within the community, demonstrating both authenticity and a commitment to change.

#### **Differences in relation to the nature of 'old-timers'**

In the classic communities of practice model, a central member of a community sits, metaphorically, at the centre of the practice, firmly embedded in the community. Because of their knowledge of the practice and expertise within it, they are able to mobilise power, for example, to influence what counts as acceptable practice in the community and who can be legitimised as members. This is also the case for the 'old-timers' in communities of practice of transition, who have a similarly strong influence on what is central to the community and how its practices are understood. However, rather than being ever more deeply embedded in the community, the highest status members of a community of practice of transition are those who are in the process of moving out of the community altogether. The more 'central' a member one is, the nearer one is to the exit, and vice versa. Indeed, individuals only really achieve full 'old-timer' status in these groups when they are manifestly on their way out of them, and most people did not stay long in either group after this point, though they had

considerable influence while they remained. Power/knowledge relations between members, then, do not differ much between classic communities of practice and communities of practice of transition. It is the position of those who are able to mobilise the most power that varies.

Zak, a member of the trans youth group, is a particularly clear example of this, especially with respect to how taking an irreversible step along an expected transition trajectory affects power relations within a community of practice of transition. Zak did not attend 4D for very long, but he moved quickly from legitimate peripheral participation, through central membership and out of the community. While a member, he was treated with some awe by others, as someone moving rapidly through his transition process, but he attended only one session after his chest surgery<sup>v</sup>. Zak was 19 or 20 when he first attended 4D. He had already come out to his family and chosen a male name and pronoun, but at that point had the appearance of a young teenage boy, pre-puberty, as he had not started hormones. After attending a few sessions, he started on hormones and had chest surgery privately. Even though he only attended for a short period, he was clearly seen as a significant member by other group members, with his surgery specifically underpinning his claim to authoritative central status. This is illustrated by Andolie's fieldnote from his last session, when he had just had surgery:

Slightly earlier Zak has made it clear he's had surgery by saying to keep away. He is also explicit about the stitches aren't dissolving ones so they are poking into him. Nathan makes a comment about Zak making too much of a fuss ... Zak is making quite a big thing, but

is Nathan letting himself get wound up? Nathan passes really well.

Is there some concern that Zak is further on than him?

Nathan, like Zak, identified as male. Nathan had been on hormones for a long time, and his appearance was very conventionally male: receding hairline, strong beard growth and masculine hair and clothes. He had attended 4D for several sessions and due to his gender transition and willingness to share knowledge was accepted as one of the more central members. However, Zak's surgery changed his position in relation to Nathan. Nathan's comment and behaviour suggested that Zak's surgery put into question both Nathan's identity and his legitimacy as one of the central members of the community, as it showed that it was possible for Nathan to have made an even greater commitment to gender transition.

In both communities there were also people who were not strictly part of the community but who acted as experienced guides, described above by Brendan as 'the helper people who you can ask anything, and they've been down the road, [chuckles] they know'. In 4D (apart from Andolie, who had a participant researcher status through acting as a voluntary youth worker), these were the trans men who ran the group or who had 'intern' status as helpers. It is possible that their male status is one reason why only trans men were fully legitimated within 4D, as they represented a clear endpoint to the process that was not available to the trans women: living their lives within society as men. They differed from group members as they were older, had completed transition some time ago, made the arrangements for and planned the meetings, and acted as gatekeepers. While there were other aspects to legitimation within the group, the first step was to meet and satisfy Graeme (the paid youth worker) that one

was trans or questioning one's gender. Although powerful within 4D, these people's authority came at least partly from their structural positions as older youth workers: they were not central participants in the main community of practice because they were not themselves undergoing transition.

Within Wikivorce, the experienced guide role was taken by a few people who were not divorcing themselves but had joined the community in order to support others. These included the founder of the site, who had set it up as a resource after his own divorce, several practicing divorce lawyers, some of whom posted regularly for long periods, and two individuals who positioned themselves as experts in particular areas. These people commanded considerable respect, and could be called on by name for advice within the forum, but they were not really members of the community as they did not share the practice of getting through divorce.

Both groups also had a small number of 'remainers': people who had stayed on to work with the group while no longer fitting the criteria for membership. However, the nature and status of these people was very different between the two groups. In Wikivorce, they were people who had gone through the divorce process as members of the community, transitioning through to central status in the usual way, after which they were no longer personally involved in the shared practice of getting through divorce. At that point, rather than moving out of the community, they stayed on as experienced helpers, often with official roles and the identity 'TeamWiki' on their profiles (Carrie had a different position, being simultaneously a pseudonymous community member in the final stages of divorce, and a researcher studying the site under her real name (see (Paechter, 2012b) for details of this and how it was negotiated and presented to members).

Similarly to Graeme, the main youth worker in 4D, these people provided the benefit of their experience and the expertise they had developed as a result, and also acted as gatekeepers, not to entry to the group, but as forum and chat room moderators, who could order the suspension or ejection of badly behaved members. They were respected (if, like the youth workers, occasionally resisted) by the community, but, in proportion to the membership as a whole, there were very few of them.

The position of the sole person in this situation within 4D was very different, but also illustrates the salience of time and the importance of conforming to an expected trajectory. As a trans woman, Chrissy was never a fully legitimate member of the community of practice, as her transition pathway (male to female) did not conform to the trajectory expected of members. As the only woman in most of the sessions, she could not share specific aspects of her transition (buying a bra, for example) with other group members, and was excluded from their shared repertoire of packers, binders and top surgery. In addition, she did not progress at a rate considered appropriate for central membership. She found it harder than male members to arrive dressed stereotypically in her preferred gender as she was able to 'pass' as female in the world outside less well than they did as men. She therefore tended to come to the group in gender-ambiguous clothing, such as a shaped t-shirt and jeans, later also applying make-up on arrival. This meant that she was not doing something generally seen as a step on the transition pathway: wearing 'appropriate' clothes for her preferred gender more or most of the time. Chrissy had also encountered several setbacks in accessing medical support. Her physical transition was, therefore, slower than expected, as she had access to neither hormones nor

surgery. Once she reached the age of 25 and was too old to be a youth member of 4D, because she was identified as benefitting from continuing to be part of the group, she was allowed to move to a volunteer role that enabled her to continue to come to meetings. However, she did not have the status of Graeme, who had fully transitioned, or of Andolie, who was seen as living their life in their preferred gender.

### **Differences with respect to the comparative importance of reified events**

In his exposition of the nature of a community of practice, Wenger (Wenger, 1998) does mention reified events, but only in passing: he is more focused on reified objects. In communities of practice of transition, by contrast, reified objects are mainly important because they are associated with reified events. The fundamentally temporal nature of transition and its centrality to these communities makes events much more significant: they become markers of a person's position within the transition trajectory, their proximity to the point at which they could leave, and, by association, their status within the community. In both communities, reified events were associated with stages in transition that were seen as important, and those people who had put more of these behind them were more able to mobilise power.

The most significant of these reified events were, as discussed above, irreversible. This meant that they demonstrated movement along the expected trajectory, and that passing through them showed determination and commitment to this movement. In both communities some events also required engagement with formal institutional structures such as name changing or medical processes, or those of divorce law. In Wikivorce, these included obtaining one's decree absolute, which meant that one was legally divorced, and

having the financial aspects of divorce signed off (or adjudicated) by the court. In 4D, the most significant reified events related to taking steps towards permanent bodily changes, such as (for men) starting to take masculinising hormones and having top surgery, or (for women) taking feminising hormones and having vaginoplasty. These were frequently discussed, with those who had experienced them using this to claim or demonstrate central status. This could occasionally extend to experience at second hand. Tyler, a newcomer to the group who had yet to go through any permanent changes, but whose partner, Nathan, had been transitioning for three years, used this relationship to position himself as knowledgeable about the effects of hormones on mood:

...his sexual drive, etc., is changing dramatically at the moment, and we've got to be understanding of that...Because I've experienced it, not myself, but because I've been with Nathan through his transition also, I kind of know what I'm looking at, if you know what I mean?

Such permanent changes involved members of both communities in an element of risk with respect to the future, and marked a transition towards their future lives. Being prepared to go through them was a marker of authenticity in their trajectory, and so conferred insider status.

At the same time, both communities had a variety of other, less permanent but still highly significant reified events that marked people's progress through transition. Coming out was important for both groups, though it was not named as such in Wikivorce. Announcing one's new status to family and friends was something fraught with anxiety and much discussed. For participants in 4D, the first haircut that reflected their gender was highly significant, while for



Wikivorce members the act of taking off one's wedding ring could be both salient and traumatic. In one long forum exchange about this, people described in some detail what they had done, including these two examples:

Hiya. This was a biggie for me taking it off. We were on our last holiday with the kids in Malta. The holiday was a total disaster. I took mine off on that holiday. This was August 2006 and I had been doing trial runs with it off.

i have left my engagement ring on my right hand finger as i think it's a pretty ring it don't mean anything else to me , my wedding ring right now is sitting on my coffee caddy dunno why , i feel it represents a lie i have lived and it's not worthy of being in my jewellery box as i have rings that belonged to my grandmother's in there.

Name change (and in the case of 4D, pronoun change) was another reified event for both communities. 4D members exchanged information about how to change one's name legally via deed poll, while divorcing women discussed whether or not they should keep their married names, and the process of returning to one's former name if one wished to do so.

Other reified events focused more around negotiating specific situations in one's new identity. For members of 4D, using a public toilet was particularly salient, as it is a binary gendered space where one has to choose which to use and be accepted by others as having made that choice correctly. It was a source of pleasure for many of the young people to have passed (or been accepted) when using the toilet appropriate for their preferred gender. For others, the significance of successfully using their preferred toilet was that they had

demonstrated that they had sufficient knowledge to navigate the world as a visibly trans person. Brendan, for example, described using the toilets during a university exam:

I needed to use the bathroom in the exam, so the woman looked really confused and then eventually she just sent me with the man that was bringing the other guy, who I know but I'm not out to, and I thought, OK, I'm just going to use the accessible ones anyway...So the boy went into the bathroom and I just waited, and said, OK, I need to use the accessible ones. And he just pointed to the female. I was like, "I'm not female." You see, I'm very careful, I don't say, "I'm male." I just say, "I'm not female."

Wikivorce members also had to negotiate events in their new identities as single people. Family occasions, especially weddings, were a particular source of anxiety, and some people opted out of these for a while, until they felt more confident.

Navigating oneself through reified events demonstrates one's position in the community. This was particularly clear in 4D, as a face to face group in which physical presentation was significant. Although the official line was that people were who they said they were, those whose identities were not conventionally reflected in dress and hairstyle or did not fit well with the expected trajectory across binary genders could be seen as uncertain about their gender, and therefore as delaying transition, rather than being fully committed to it. Those people in Wikivorce who did not follow the divorce trajectory, either by delaying divorce indefinitely or by reconciling with their spouses, were not evident as full members, and appear to have drifted away from the group rather than

progressed out via a central position. Generally, because many reified events are part of an overall expected timeline for the process of change as a whole, they underline the importance of time and timeliness as fundamental to group practices and power relations. Progressing through the expected stages, as marked by reified events, was for both groups a sign of both authenticity in one's claimed identity (as trans or as a divorcing person) and of determination to pursue the transition that was core to the collective practice. As markers of progress that could be measured against time passed, they were treated as an indication of an individual's commitment to the practices of the community, and could not be avoided or bypassed by those aspiring to become central members.

### **Conclusion: extending communities of practice as an analytical framework**

As we have demonstrated, communities of practice of transition challenge many of the assumptions underpinning the community of practice as a framework for analysing the dynamics and operation of groups and how identities are forged in and through them. While the communities we studied were demonstrably communities of practice, with mutual engagement, shared repertoire and an identifiable joint practice, they differed from classic communities of practice in four key ways: in relation to time and the importance of timeliness; in relation to the relationship between the practice and an individual's trajectory through it, including the prescriptive nature of that trajectory; in relation to the role and position of central members; in in relation to the salience of reified events compared to reified objects.

Our investigations into communities of practice of transition and our finding that they operate in different ways from traditional communities of practice have implications for communities of practice theory more generally. The most significant of these is time. Temporality does not feature strongly in classic communities of practice, or in the theorising that underpins their analysis. Although it is briefly discussed in Wenger's (1998) exposition of the nature of a community of practice, the analysis of time does not feature highly in discussions of communities of practice in the literature, even in those such as Mason-Schrock's (1996), which could themselves be understood as communities of practice of transition. In such communities, reflecting the temporal nature of the transition process, community members are recognised and given status in relation to their progress along a commonly accepted transitional path, with those moving rapidly respected as central members and those going more slowly in danger of losing legitimacy. Progress is measured in relation to engagement with the higher-risk, more irreversible, aspects of transition, and 'old-timers' are recognised by their proximity to the outbound borders of the community: they are those who have braved the risks and are now on their way out. We anticipate that taking time more seriously in relation to communities of practice will result in further developments in their theorisation. By drawing attention to the centrality of time for communities of practice of transition, and to the importance of timeliness to their transition processes, we hope to make such communities more visible to researchers and expand the analytical tools available to those studying them.

The central importance of time to communities of practice of transition results in a concomitant prominent role for reified events, which become much

more significant compared to reified objects than they are in classic communities of practice. In particular they mark stages in the transition process and, as a result, become indicators of authenticity for group members. This is because the rate at which a member moves through the expected sequence of reified events, and the perceived timeliness of each change, is a measure of their commitment to the change process. Those members whose rate of progress through these reified events is slow or non-existent can have their legitimacy, and, potentially, the authenticity of their claimed identity, called into question by more conventionally progressing members.

Our discussion of communities of practices of transition rests on two very different case studies. While allowing us to demonstrate the diversity of the application of this concept, our analysis is at the same time limited by them. We only realised the fundamentally transitional nature of each of our communities, and the ways in which this made them different from classic communities of practice, late in the process of Andolie's data analysis, and long after Carrie's study had been completed. There is now a need for further studies that focus explicitly on communities of practice of transition, to further elaborate and develop the concept. To do this is important: if communities of practice of transition are not recognised as such, their specific elements will be missed during analysis. In particular, the importance of time and timeliness to power relations within the community will be overlooked. It is also likely that researchers are currently failing to identify such communities as communities of practice at all, due to the position of central members as on the point of exiting from the community, rather than deeply embedded in it. Our work therefore

provides an additional framework for analysing communities of transition more widely.

The concept of a community of practice of transition offers both an expansion of our understanding of the nature of communities of practice, and a new way of theorising and understanding groups focusing on transition. It allows the development of new approaches to the analysis of identity change, when it takes place within a group focused on that change. We hope that this paper will inspire others to uncover and examine other communities of practice of transition, and to develop these ideas further through additional empirical studies.

## References

- COX, A. 2005. What are communities of practice? A comparative review of four seminal works. *Journal of Information Science*, 31, 527-540.
- DANIELSSON, A. T. 2012. Exploring women university physics students 'doing gender' and 'doing physics'. *Gender and Education*, 24, 25-39.
- DAVIES, J. 2013. Trainee hairdressers' uses of Facebook as a community of gendered literacy practice. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 21.
- ECKERT, P. 1989. *Jocks and Burnouts: social categories and identity in the high school*, New York, Teachers College Press.
- KOLIBA, C. & GAJDA, R. 2009. "Communities of Practice" as an analytical construct: implications for theory and practice. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 32, 97-135.
- LAVE, J. & WENGER, E. 1991. *Situated Learning: legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- MARGUERITE, A. 2018. *Who do they think they are and what do they think they are doing? The construction and establishment of trans and non-binary or genderqueer identities in a trans youth group*. PhD, Goldsmiths, University of London.
- MASON-SCHROCK, D. 1996. Transsexuals' narrative construction of the 'true self'. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 59, 176-192.
- OSTERMANN, A. C. 2003. Communities of practice at work: gender, facework and the power of *habitus* at an all-female police station and a feminist intervention centre in Brazil. *Discourse and Society*, 14, 473-505.
- PAECHTER, C. Learning masculinities and femininities: power/knowledge and legitimate peripheral participation. *Gender and Education* Fourth

- International Conference: Revisiting Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Education, 14th-16th April 2003 2003a University of Sheffield, UK.
- PAECHTER, C. 2003b. Masculinities and femininities as communities of practice. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 26, 69-77.
- PAECHTER, C. 2007. *Being Boys, Being Girls: learning masculinities and femininities*, Maidenhead, Berks, Open University Press.
- PAECHTER, C. 2012a. Online Learning in Divorce: how the formation of a community of practice in a divorce support website enables and inhibits learning. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 9.
- PAECHTER, C. 2012b. Researching sensitive issues online: implications of a hybrid insider/outsider position in a retrospective ethnographic study. *Qualitative Research*, 13, 71-86.
- PAECHTER, C. 2013. Concepts of fairness in marriage and divorce. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 54, 458-475.
- WENGER, E. 1998. *Communities of Practice: learning, meaning and identity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

---

<sup>i</sup> [www.wikivorce.com](http://www.wikivorce.com). There has been no attempt to anonymise the site due to the ease with which it can be found via searches using content quoted in research papers. Various measures, however, have been used to prevent readers making connections between anonymous interview data and publicly available data from the site's online forum and blog posts. See Paechter, 2012b for details of this and other ethical matters in relation to this study.

<sup>ii</sup> The name of the group and all participants are pseudonyms. Pronouns used reflect the pronoun preferred by an individual at a specific time in the research so may vary here, as some people's preferred pronouns varied.

<sup>iii</sup> These are both used by trans men. Packers are placed inside the underpants to give the illusion of a penis once clothed. Binders bind the breasts to give a flatter chest profile.

<sup>iv</sup> Quotations from Wikivorce posts are given verbatim, including spelling and grammatical errors, typos etc.

<sup>v</sup> 'chest surgery' is the usually accepted term for mastectomy within the trans community.