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# Life Stories of Therianthropes: An Analysis of Nonhuman Identity in a Narrative Identity Model

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# Life Stories of Therianthropes: An Analysis of Nonhuman Identity in a Narrative Identity Model

## **Abstract**

Therianthropy is the phenomenon in which a person identifies in varying degrees as a nonhuman animal. The goal of this research was to investigate therianthropic identities through the lens of Dan McAdams's life story model of identity, which posits that individuals engage in a dynamic process of narrative identity construction throughout their lives. Self-identified therianthropes were interviewed with an adaptation of McAdams's Life Story Interview. These interviews were analyzed using grounded theory methodology in order to determine common themes among the life stories of therianthropes and to elucidate how these common experiences contribute to the development and maintenance of a nonhuman identity. Common themes included species dysphoria, social obstacles, animal experiences, and a connection to nature. Therians' conceptualizations of therianthropy, a trajectory of therian identity, and attributions to therianthropy were also analyzed.

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LAKE FOREST COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

Life Stories of Therianthropes: An Analysis of Nonhuman Identity in a Narrative Identity Model

by

Natalie Bricker

April 25, 2016

The report of the investigation undertaken as a Senior Thesis, to carry two courses of credit in the Department of Psychology

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Michael T. Orr  
Krebs Provost and Dean of the Faculty

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Kathryn Dohrmann, Chairperson

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Susan Long

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Carla Arnell

## **Abstract**

Therianthropy is the phenomenon in which a person identifies in varying degrees as a nonhuman animal. The goal of this research was to investigate therianthropic identities through the lens of Dan McAdams's life story model of identity, which posits that individuals engage in a dynamic process of narrative identity construction throughout their lives. Self-identified therianthropes were interviewed with an adaptation of McAdams's Life Story Interview. These interviews were analyzed using grounded theory methodology in order to determine common themes among the life stories of therianthropes and to elucidate how these common experiences contribute to the development and maintenance of a nonhuman identity. Common themes included species dysphoria, social obstacles, animal experiences, and a connection to nature. Therians' conceptualizations of therianthropy, a trajectory of therian identity, and attributions to therianthropy were also analyzed.

*For my people*

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## **Life Stories of Therianthropes: An Analysis of Nonhuman Identity in a Narrative Identity**

The term “identity” may conjure up words or ideas used for self-definition. One might think of gender, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, or race or ethnicity. One could also consider hobbies, professions, or social roles. These are all categories of identity that people use not only to define and describe themselves, but also to differentiate themselves from others. However, one often-assumed commonality among people is humanity. Despite all these other differences, we are all human. Yet, there are some people who do not identify as human. There is thus another category of identification: species identity.

Therianthropy describes the phenomenon in which a person identifies as a nonhuman animal. Therianthropes (or therians) fully acknowledge that they have a human body, but on some internal and integral level, and to varying degrees, they view themselves as an animal or animals. This animal identification can be instead of or in addition to a human identification.

To date, the topic of therianthropy has been given little scholarly attention, and only a fraction of this attention has been from the field of psychology. As such, very little is known about how therianthropic identities develop. Furthermore, there has yet to be a study specifically investigating therianthropy within the conceptual framework of an existing model of identity. It is the purpose of this research to explore the phenomenon of therianthropy using the lens of McAdams’s life story model of identity. As will be discussed in more detail, McAdams posits that identity is a dynamic process in which

people construct ever-evolving narratives about their lives to create a unified self and sense of purpose in the world (McAdams, 2001; 2011).

This paper will provide an overview of identity development, beginning with prominent theories by Erik Erikson and James Marcia, and culminating with Dan McAdams's life story model of identity. After that, a fuller conceptual overview of nonhuman species identity and the language used by nonhuman-identified people to describe themselves and their experiences will be established. Then, the current literature regarding nonhuman identity will be reviewed. Finally, the method and results of the present study will be presented and their implications for future research discussed.

### **Identity Development**

**Overview of identity development.** There is perhaps no better starting point for a discussion about identity development than the work of Erik Erikson. Initially a follower of the tenets of psychoanalytic theory, Erikson diverged from Freud's psychosexual theories and developed a psychosocial theory of identity that focused on relationships with others. Specifically, the development of a typical, healthy identity, according to Erikson, depends upon the successful resolution of stage-based inner conflicts. This lifelong process begins with the conflict of trust versus mistrust, in which a newborn must establish a basic sense of trust with caretakers. The battle for autonomy occurs next, during which the toddler grapples with and must ultimately overcome feelings of shame and doubt in order to secure the self as an autonomous agent. The rest of childhood deals with the conflicts of initiative versus guilt and industry versus inferiority. Feelings of guilt and inferiority have to be vanquished to solidify one's initiative and industry, respectively. The successful navigation of the former stage provides the child with assertive interpersonal skills, while achieving industry in the latter stage demonstrates the

child's sense of competence. Finally, a core identity is completed in adolescence if the individual manages to overcome the conflict of identity versus identity confusion. It is during this identity-focused stage that the individual engages in self-exploration in order to determine who they<sup>1</sup> are and the roles they will take on in society (Erikson, 1968).

It is thus no surprise that the critical aspect of these conflicts for our discussion, and indeed, largely for Erikson as well, is the stage of identity versus identity confusion. It is at this time in adolescence that individuals “try on” various kinds of selves in order to ultimately decide who they are and who they will be. They must learn to integrate the different facets of themselves into a single, unified identity. Erikson (1968) emphasized this process by stating, “[T]he *self-identity* emerges from experiences in which temporarily confused selves are successfully reintegrated in an ensemble of roles which also secure social recognition” (p. 211). The multiple, confused selves represent the identity confusion facing the adolescent, while the totality of successfully integrated selves constitutes the complete, mature identity.

James Marcia (2014) expanded upon Erikson's model and established four possible states of identity that an adolescent may experience as they resolve the identity confusion conflict. Identity diffusion refers to the state in which an individual has yet to begin exploring possible identities and is making no effort to do so. Identity foreclosure refers to the status in which an individual has not done any personal identity-related exploration, but has adopted an identity based upon others' values or expectations. Identity moratorium is the state in which an individual is actively exploring and seeking out an identity, but has not yet committed to it. Finally, identity achievement is the state in which an individual has achieved an integrated identity after adequate self-exploration.

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<sup>1</sup> The author has elected to use gender-neutral they/them/their pronouns in this paper. This is out of respect for those individuals whose gender identities may not be accurately described by the male-female binary.

Marcia's (2014) conceptions of identity statuses builds upon Erikson's work by elaborating on the process of self-exploration required to reach an integrated, mature identity.

Several factors influence this process. Identity theorists suggest that parenting styles and attitudes influence identity development. Authoritative parents encourage autonomous self-exploration and express high levels of acceptance toward their children. Maternal acceptance, in particular, has been associated with identity achievement status (Sandhu, Singh, Tung, & Kundra, 2012). Adolescent autonomy, parental support of that autonomy, and open family communication have also been found to be positively associated with identity achievement (Bosma & Gerrits, 1985). Thus, when exploratory experiences are supported and acceptance is provided, adolescents seem able to reach this status more readily. However, when parents do not encourage autonomy or self-exploration, their children will likely have more trouble attaining identity achievement.

Greater social factors influence identity development as well. Individuals who grow up in poor economic settings may have access to fewer resources (e.g. clubs at school, travel, and other enriching experiences) that would aid in their identity exploration. It is much more difficult for an individual to sample different possible identities if they do not have access to information about such roles. Related to that notion, cultural expectations also play a crucial part in identity development. For example, specific expectations of gender norms may determine which identities individuals can plausibly explore for themselves (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). As we move toward a more gender egalitarian society with less emphasis on traditional gender roles, more options become open for exploration; an individual's final identity thus could be very different than it might have been in the past when such options were not available

(Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). It is important to keep in mind the various ways that one's identity can be influenced by outside sources because it helps us remember that there can be a multitude of possible causes for individuals' identities to have developed in the way that they have. Many factors, from personal traits (e.g. openness to experience, self-esteem) to cultural mores, contribute to how individuals see themselves and their place in the world (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001).

**Dan McAdams's life story model of identity.** Dan McAdams (2001; 2011) focuses on the idea of the construction of a core-identity, but, contrary to Erikson's focus on adolescence, he sees this core-identity formation as a life-long process. McAdams posits that individuals create an integrative narrative of the self that provides unity and purpose. The development and maintenance of the narrative identity continues, in an active way, throughout life. This means not only that new information is added to the life story every day, but also that the person reevaluates past experiences and reconstructs the meaning of those experiences to align with the present story. Sometimes new and old experiences conflict as an individual's thoughts and feelings change. The individual works through these conflicts and integrates them into a coherent story of identity. The key component of this identity model is the evaluative role the individual takes: they construct meaning out of experiences, and it is that created meaning which influences their identity, as opposed to some objective truth. McAdams (2001) even goes so far as to say that identity involves a degree of choice: individuals choose "the events that [they] consider most important for defining who [they] are and providing [their] lives with some semblance of unity and purpose" (p. 110).

McAdams frequently discusses the role of psychological development. Certain developmental milestones are critical to the ability to construct a cohesive narrative

identity. The first of these milestones is the ability to tell and share stories (McAdams, 2013). The individual must be able to conceptualize and communicate their experiences in the form of a coherent story. Engaging in dialogue with parents particularly aids in developing this skill. The individual must also be able to engage in the meaning-making process. This will allow them to construct interpretive meanings of their experiences and determine what those experiences say about them. This meaning-making skill develops and becomes fine-tuned throughout the adolescent years. It is thought that cognitive development, which allows for more complex and abstract thought, is the mechanism by which the individual is able to advance their meaning-making skills (McAdams, 2013). Additionally, as adolescents age they gain more experience discussing their stories with a range of people in a broad range of contexts. These conversations, and the feedback they provide, influence the individual to reinterpret their stories in unique ways (McAdams, 2013).

The conflux of these developmental processes and social experiences occurs and may have its most formative effects in late adolescence and early adulthood, a developmental time period now called “emerging adulthood.” The concept of emerging adulthood was first proposed by Jeffrey Arnett (2000), who defined it as a unique developmental stage occurring from ages 18 to 25. Arnett (2000) argued that this stage is qualitatively different from adolescence or adulthood due to a combination of relative independence not afforded in adolescence and a relative absence of adult responsibilities. Thus, individuals in this time period are free to explore many possible directions for their careers, relationships, and selves (similar to the idea of Marcia’s identity moratorium stage). Building upon Arnett’s framework, McAdams (2011) contends that it is only once an individual is in emerging adulthood (conceptualized by McAdams as between the ages

of 15 and 30) that they can truly begin crafting an integrative narrative identity, an argument based upon the aforementioned developmental processes. As noted, McAdams's identity model thus differs from Erikson's (1968), which emphasized the development of a core identity occurring during adolescence and ending by around age 18, and from Marcia's (2014) identity status model, which focuses on ages 18 to 22. Indeed, McAdams claims that a mature identity can only be created during the emerging adulthood years, which extend past the stages proposed by Erikson and Marcia.

Emerging adulthood has additional developmental significance because a "memory bump" occurs during these years. McAdams explains the "memory bump" in the following way. Typically a forgetting curve shows a smooth decline in memory as one tries to remember farther and farther back. In contrast, when individuals remember the emerging adulthood years, they can remember more than would be predicted by that curve (McAdams, 2011). It is unclear why this is the case. One reason may be that individuals experience many significant developmental memories during this time period (e.g. moving out of the parental home or having their first long-term relationship). McAdams (2011) argues that the memory bump may be a result of the individual's first experience of actively devoting energy to creating an identity. The high degree of introspection and self-exploration during this time makes the time period overall more memorable. Thus, emerging adulthood is of critical importance to McAdams's theory. It is the time during which individuals are actively constructing an identity for the first time, and it is a period rich with defining memories that will be recalled and reevaluated later in life as the narrative identity continues to evolve.

McAdams's life story model of identity has been employed in various facets of identity research. Most notable and relevant of these applications have been instances of

studying the narrative identities of particular populations. Researchers have taken advantage of this style of inquiry to learn about the life stories of peoples who are often underrepresented in classical research, such as women and people of color (McAdams, 2001). An example of one such study involved analyzing the life stories of homeless emerging adults. Toolis and Hammack (2015) collected the life stories of 11 homeless individuals and analyzed them for common themes of discourse about their experiences of homelessness. Common themes included agency and resilience (Toolis & Hammack, 2015). Additionally, a study by Modell (1992) investigated the stories birth parents tell about their experiences of giving their children up for adoption. Common themes included normalizing sexuality and childbirth, a sense of punishment for becoming pregnant, and the beauty of the child lessening the pain of relinquishment (Modell, 1992). Thus, it is evident that McAdams's life story model of identity can be applied to studying the life stories of particular groups of people in order to find commonalities in their narrative identities. These themes can in turn provide a deeper understanding of the way people construct and reconstruct particular life experiences within their social framework. It is with this idea in mind that we now turn to discuss non-human identity.

### **Therianthropy**

**Conceptual overview.** Therianthropy is the phenomenon in which a person identifies as a nonhuman animal. The term "therianthrope" (or "therian" for short) refers to an individual who identifies as an animal. Modern conceptualization of this phenomenon can trace its history back to 1992, when a werewolf fan group (alt.horror.werewolves) was created and members wrote about feelings of actually being werewolves and other were-creatures. The term "therianthropy" was adopted to describe these experiences in 1994 (Sandstorm, 2012).



The focus of this paper is animal identification in self-defined therians who participate in the online therian community. However, a brief overview of the history of other nonhuman terms and related communities is warranted given community overlap.

Simultaneously with the development of the therian communities, there was the development of additional communities of nonhuman-identified individuals, including elves, dragons, faeries, and others. In 1990, the term “otherkin” was first seen to refer to individuals who identify as nonhuman (Sandstorm, 2012). Its initial usage was in relation to the elven community, but over time it came to encompass many nonhuman identities and communities. Today, there is a degree of overlap between the various nonhuman communities (e.g. elves as the original “otherkin” community, draconics, therians, among others), and all such individuals in these communities can be said to be otherkin due to the term’s broad definition of any nonhuman identity. However, there is also a degree of separation still present due to the unique community histories behind each more specific nonhuman identity. This split is perhaps most prominent between the greater otherkin and therian communities. In fact, some iterations of the definitions of “otherkin” and “therian” distinguish mythical nonhuman identities (e.g. dragons) and earth-based animal identities (e.g. lizards), respectively, to note that division. There is a further distinction regarding “fictionkin,” which is a term used to describe individuals who identify as contemporary fictional creatures or characters (e.g. Charizard from Pokemon).

There is language unique to the therian community that has been coined to facilitate discussion of common therianthropoc experiences. Because this language will inevitably be used by participants, it is important to establish it now. These terms are defined by the author according to their common usage in the online therian communities

(e.g. on The Werelist and The Therian Guide forums). A therian is a person who identifies as a nonhuman animal, and a person's theriotype is the specific animal they identify as (e.g. "my theriotype is a dog"). Shifting is a common therianthropic experience which describes any number of specific types of "shifts" the individual experiences as part of their animal identity. Specifically, a mental shift describes the experience in which an individual's mentality or mindset shifts from a more human one to a more animal one. The degree of this change varies individual to individual and shift to shift. Another common shifting experience is that of phantom shifts, which refers to feeling phantom limbs relevant to one's theriotype (e.g. a dog therian experiencing a phantom tail). Finally, another pertinent therianthropic experience is species dysphoria. Species dysphoria describes a type of bodily dysphoria (i.e. anxiety, distress, dissatisfaction) arising from the perception that one's body is of the wrong species.

None of these therianthropic experiences are necessarily universal among therians. The degree to which an individual experiences particular shifts or feelings of species dysphoria is variable. Due to lack of scholarly research, it is unknown to what extent these experiences are in fact generalizable to all therians or what similarities and differences exist between those who share these experiences and those who do not. Regardless, a basic understanding of these terms is necessary for the remainder of this paper. Please reference Appendix A for a glossary of terms.

**Literature review.** There are presently five major scholarly articles published pertaining to therianthropy, specifically, and nonhuman species identity, generally (Gerbasi, Paolone, Higner, Scaletta, Bernstein, Conway & Privitera, 2008; Grivell, Clegg, & Roxburgh, 2014; Laycock, 2012; Robertson, 2012; Robertson, 2013). These articles have been published very recently, between the years of 2008 and 2014. The researchers

are based in academic institutions in the United States, Great Britain, and Australia, and they represent fairly diverse areas of study. Gerbasi et al. (2008) and Grivell et al. (2014) are in the field of psychology, Robertson (2012; 2013) is from the field of religious studies, and Laycock (2012) is in the field of philosophy with an interest in religious studies.

Internet-based research has been the primary methodology for studying therianthropy. For both of her articles, Robertson (2012; 2013) engaged in observation of the online therianthropy community. This was done by perusing therianthropy forums (e.g. The Werelist and Wulfhowl), by reading through therians' personal websites, and by investigating informative websites about therianthropy, such as Project Shift. Robertson (2012; 2013) did not make it clear in either of her articles if she engaged in direct contact with any therians as a method for collecting data. Rather, she appears to have simply read many resources regarding therianthropy and made conclusions based on those observations. This is in contrast with the other researchers who did make a point of directly collecting data from therians. Laycock (2012) obtained much of his data from The Vampire and Energy Work Research Study (VEWRS), a large-scale study conducted through the Atlanta Vampire Alliance (AVA). This study was concerned with people who identify as real vampires<sup>2</sup>, but due to overlap between communities, there were many participants who also identified as otherkin. Additionally, Laycock (2012) used qualitative data from correspondences with members of the otherkin community, and made a point of not relying too heavily on otherkin websites. This ultimately led to a sample size consisting of 850 vampire otherkin from the VEWRS data and the otherkin with whom Laycock (2012) corresponded.

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<sup>2</sup> In the vampire community, real vampires are defined as people with an energy deficiency that can only be alleviated by consuming psychic energy and/or blood. See Appendix A.

Grivell et al. (2014) also had direct (though virtual) contact with research participants. Grivell et al. (2014) conducted online interviews with self-identified therians using a text-based instant messaging system. Therians were approached at various therianthropy forums, and of those who expressed interest in participating, five were randomly selected. Grivell et al. (2014) used interpretative phenomenological analysis to analyze their data.

Gerbasi et al. (2008) were the only researchers to collect data in person. They attended a large furry convention<sup>3</sup>, creating a convenience sample of convention attendees ( $N = 246$ ). They used a survey which assessed participants' demographic information, stereotypes about furies, furry-identity, connections to fursona species, and comparisons between furry-identity and Gender Identity Disorder (GID). The survey also contained a personality checklist to determine furry personality characteristics and the prevalence of personality disorder traits within the furry fandom. They additionally had a control group of 68 undergraduate psychology students.

These studies represent different disciplines, assess different types of groups, and employ different methodologies. It comes as no surprise that their results and conclusions vary. Laycock's (2012) and Robertson's (2012; 2013) topics of interest were similar in that they were concerned with spirituality and religiosity relating to the therian and otherkin communities. In her first article, Robertson (2012) focused on rites of initiation and social aspects such as authority and belongingness within the online therian community. She asserted that the community has a focus on "norming and performing," while the individual therian focuses on self-reification (p. 277). Robertson (2012) further concluded that the therian community exists in order to verify nonhuman identity. This

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<sup>3</sup> A gathering of "furies," people who like anthropomorphic art and may dress up as animals. See Appendix A for additional information.

claim mirrors Laycock's (2012) assertion that a nonhuman identity is only meaningful within the context of the community. He argued that the community fosters the belief in a nonhuman identity by making it easier to accept when others accept it as well. Overall, both of these authors' articles are rooted in religious studies, and thus come at the topic of therianthropy from a strictly spiritual lens. They focus more on how spirituality and religiosity play out within the community than on the identity itself.

This is in contrast with Gerbasi et al. (2008) and Grivell et al. (2014) who both approached nonhuman identity from a psychological perspective. In their analysis of furies, Gerbasi et al. (2008) developed a two-by-two typology for classifying furies based upon their responses to the questions, "Do you consider yourself to be less than 100% human?" and "If you could become 0% human, would you" (p. 213)? Answers to the former question determined one's position on the distorted/undistorted axis, with a distorted label indicating that one considers oneself to be less than 100% human and an undistorted label indicating that one does not consider oneself to be less than 100% human. One's answer to the latter question determined one's position on the attained/unattained axis, wherein attained refers to indicating that one would not become 0% human and unattained indicates that one would become 0% human. Combining these two axes, Gerbasi et al. (2008) proposed four types of furies: undistorted attained, distorted unattained, distorted attained, and undistorted unattained. These are listed in descending order of group size based on Gerbasi et al.'s (2008) results. Taking these ideas in terms of therianthropy, those falling under the distorted category can likely be said to be therians (or otherkin) because by indicating that one considers oneself to be less than 100% human, one expresses a nonhuman identity. Additionally, from a therianthropic perspective, the attained/unattained dimension can be viewed as a possible

measure of species dysphoria because it measures a desire to change one's body to that of another species. Thus, distorted attained individuals are likely therians who experience mild or no species dysphoria, while distorted unattained individuals are likely therians who experience more severe species dysphoria. It is impossible to infer all of this definitively from the methodology used; however, it is not unreasonable to make these general conclusions while acknowledging caveats, and interpreting the results in this manner helps make sense of them and how they relate to the overall study of therianthropy. Gerbasi et al. (2008), however, seemed unaware of the term therianthropy, and proposed the term "Species Identity Disorder" to describe these individuals who feel and express a desire to be nonhuman, paralleling the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder (p. 220).

Finally, Grivell et al. (2014) conducted the only study that intentionally studied therianthropy specifically and did so from a psychological perspective. They analyzed their interviews via interpretative phenomenological analysis, which led to the discovery of three main themes found throughout their interviews: a journey of self-discovery, transspeciesism, and the therian shadow. The journey of self-discovery highlights the therian's journey of realizing that they are a therian. Grivell et al. (2014) determined that this is done largely with the aid of introspection and extrospection, phantom limbs and mental shifts, spiritual and biological reasoning, and the therian community.

Introspection in this sense refers to a therian's longstanding feeling of being nonhuman. It is looking within oneself and seeing oneself as nonhuman. Extrospection refers to outside validation that one behaves in animalistic ways or comes across as animal-like, and it came up particularly when participants were children. Grivell et al. (2014) proposed that such comments by adults may reinforce the nonhuman identification. Phantom limbs and

mental shifts were both observed as playing a role in helping the therian determine that they are in some way nonhuman. Both of these experiences may lead to one realizing they are therian, but phantom limbs in particular seemed to be more helpful in terms of clarifying one's theriotype (Grivell et al., 2014). It was also a common theme for participants to discuss their therianthropy in terms of causation, expressing primarily either spiritual or biological causes. Grivell et al. (2014) noted that therians seemed to incorporate therianthropy into existing beliefs, modifying those beliefs as needed. The therian community itself did not appear to have an impact on one's identification as a therian, though it was found to be important as a safe space in which to explore their identities (Grivell et al., 2014).

Participants in this study also made parallels between therianthropy and gender identity conflict, leading to Grivell et al.'s (2014) usage of the term "transspeciesism" (p. 122). These comparisons were largely based on feelings of species dysphoria that parallel the gender dysphoria that many transgender individuals describe. Additionally, Grivell et al. (2014) described what they referred to as "the therian shadow," based on the idea that therians repress their nonhuman identities and aspects of themselves related to those identities, despite ideally wishing to be able to express their animalistic selves more openly (p. 123). Topics that emerged under this concept were feelings of being "weird," being alienated from human society, and being able to control relevant aspects of themselves, including their animalistic urges and experiences (Grivell et al., 2014). These overall feelings of oddity and isolation led the participants to describe feeling fear at the prospect of "outing" themselves as therians. Most only told a select few about their therianthropic identities, despite wishing they could be more open about it (Grivell et al., 2014).

This concludes a summary of the current state of the field of studying nonhuman identity and, more specifically, therianthropy. Things are moving in a promising direction, but there are still many shortcomings evident in the aforementioned articles. For instance, the three religious studies-based articles focused on therianthropy solely in terms of spirituality. They strictly explored the roles spirituality plays in therianthropy and how the two can influence one another, but they did not investigate therianthropy as an identity itself. Furthermore, the diction used throughout these articles paints therianthropy to be itself a sort of spirituality and therefore suggests that all therians are spiritual and view their therianthropy in spiritual terms. While many therians may tie their therianthropy into their spiritual beliefs (and vice versa), many other therians are atheists or believe therianthropy to be caused by non-spiritual mechanisms (i.e. psychological or neurobiological processes). This was evident in Grivell et al.'s (2014) results. Additionally, according to an informal therian census conducted by White Wolf (2014), a little over one-third of therians surveyed ascribed their therianthropy to spiritual causes, about one-third ascribed it to psychological or "scientific" causes, and a little less than one-third ascribed it to "other" causes. Thus, painting therianthropy and the therian community as a whole as strictly spiritual is misrepresentative.

There were also several methodological and practical issues with Gerbasi et al.'s (2008) study. First, it is questionable whether a control group of psychology students was really appropriate for comparing attributes of personality disorder characteristics in furies and in college students. Due to being psychology students, these participants may be more apt to label things in terms of "disorders." Additionally, the furies themselves may have been less apt to ascribe disorder traits to fellow furies due to loyalty to their group or a desire to paint their community in a positive light. Probyn-Rapsey (2011)



further critiqued this study by pointing out that the proposition of Species Identity Disorder ignores the troubled past and continued pathologizing of transgender identity through the Gender Identity Disorder diagnosis. This is an important concern, as Gerbase et al. (2008) did use charged, pathologizing language when referencing nonhuman identity (e.g. their distorted/undistorted axis). It is inappropriate to ascribe a disordered status to something about which so little is known. Furthermore, the findings of Grivell et al. (2014) seem to indicate that therians are able to cope with any discomfort they experience due to their nonhuman identities and function effectively in society. In sum, based on the little evidence available, it is inappropriate to label nonhuman identity as a disorder.

Much is still missing in terms of the study of nonhuman identity. There have been sampling and methodological shortcomings in past research. For example, only the Grivell et al. (2014) study specifically sampled self-identified therians. Other studies included other groups of people (e.g. furies or otherkin) or did not directly sample participants (Robertson 2012; 2013). This inconsistency in who is being studied precludes generalization of results. It is currently unknown if there are fundamental differences in nonhuman identification between otherkin, therians, and other nonhuman-identified groups of individuals; therefore, at present it is important to make clear distinctions about which groups are being studied, both in terms of sampling and reporting of results.

It is equally important to clarify specific methodologies used in research so that studies may be replicated. Unclear methods were particular shortcomings of the Robertson (2012; 2013) and Laycock (2012) articles. It is difficult to be certain about the validity of findings when the method is not well known. Studies addressing nonhuman

identity should take care to specify their methods in detail so that studies can be replicated and extended. Careful replication and extension of early research is important for new fields.

Finally, no existing studies have investigated therianthropy within the lens of an existing identity model. While Grivell et al. (2014) provided an insightful look into the psychology of general therianthropic experiences, they did not apply an existing identity model to therianthropy as a focus of their study. It is presently unknown what causes therianthropy or how a therian identity is maintained over time. Researching therianthropy within an existing identity framework is the first step towards answering those questions.

### **The Present Study**

The present study sought to extend past research into therianthropy by investigating nonhuman identity within the lens of an existing identity model. McAdams's life story model of identity offers a unique opportunity to explore the subjective lived experiences of therians and how they interpret their identities. Because McAdams's model posits that identity is created through one's ever-evolving narrative interpretation and reinterpretation of one's lived experiences, this paper approached therianthropy from the perspective that the perception of experience is more meaningful than overt, objective experiences per se. Thus, this paper specifically investigated the following questions: What common themes exist in the life stories of therians? How are these themes interpreted by therians? How do these interpretations appear to influence and maintain a nonhuman identity? Due to the exploratory nature of this study and grounded theory approach to data analysis, additional routes of analysis were also pursued as they emerged.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were recruited from two prominent therianthropy-focused online forums: The Werelist (<http://www.werelist.net/>) and The Therian Guide (<http://www.forums.therian-guide.com/>). Permission to post a recruitment script was secured prior to solicitation. The recruitment post introduced the researcher, briefly outlined the purpose of the study and the theoretical framework of McAdams's identity model, and gave information regarding the informed consent and interview processes. (See Appendix B for recruitment script.) Individuals were eligible for participation if they self-identified as therians and if they self-reported an age between 18 and 30. Of the 25 individuals who indicated interest in participation, seven were randomly selected to participate in the study. Three of these were from The Werelist, and the other four were from The Therian Guide. This sampling procedure and sample size was chosen based on recommended sampling in qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Participants' self-reported ages ranged from 18 to 29, with a mean of 22.86 and a median of 24. Three participants identified as women, and the other four identified as non-binary. The following theriotypes were reported: African lioness, black tip reef shark, fox, Northern Rocky Mountains wolf, pleiosaur, raccoon, striped hyena, swan, and wolf. The wolf theriotype was reported by three participants, and three participants reported two theriotypes. With the exception of one European participant, all others were from North America. See Table 1 for additional demographic information.

### Materials

The primary instrument used in this study was an adaptation of the Life Story Interview (LSI) developed by McAdams (2008). The LSI was developed for conducting

research within McAdams's life story model of identity framework; it is used to collect participants' life stories in order to analyze them for themes indicative of their narrative identities. It is typically used in an in-person interview format lasting about two hours. It asks participants to divide their lives into chapters, to describe key scenes (e.g. high point, low point, turning point), and to discuss personal challenges and moral values. It culminates by asking participants to reflect on the overall theme of their lives. The interview taken as a whole can then be analyzed for recurring themes.

The LSI was altered for the purposes of this study in order to make it more directly applicable to the study of therian identities (see Appendix C for the full adapted interview). A question about participants' definitions of therianthropy was added to the beginning of the interview, and a therian emphasis was added to the prompts. For example, "...please say a word or two about...what the scene may say about you as a person," was reworded as "... please say a word or two about...how [the scene] relates or contributes to your therian identity." Thus each question was about the participant's therian identity as opposed to their more general life story. Additionally, some prompts were removed from the standard LSI. Because of the research focus on understanding how therian identities are created and maintained, prompts about the future were omitted. Prompts about health and loss also seemed less relevant and were omitted in an effort to shorten the interview.

If any of the following information was not revealed during completion of the initial life chapters prompt, participants were asked to state their theriotype(s), how long they identified as nonhuman, and the length of their involvement in the therian community. Finally, demographic questions were added to the end of the interview. These asked for participants' self-identified age, gender, sexual orientation,

race/ethnicity, country of origin and residence, and spiritual beliefs. Participants were also asked to provide a pseudonym.

### **Procedure**

After participants were selected, they were contacted in order to determine if they wished to continue with participation in the study. All chose to continue. They were then each sent an informed consent form via SurveyMonkey (see Appendix D). After obtaining informed consent, interviews were scheduled for and carried out during the first week of January 2016.

The interviews took place individually over Skype via text-based instant messaging. Audio and video features were not utilized. Interviews ranged from 1.82 hours to 5.32 hours in length, with a mean of 3.90 hours. In order to protect participants' privacy, the researcher created a Skype account specifically for this study which was deleted at the conclusion of the study. Participants were also informed of Skype's cloud storage policy in the consent form so that they understood who would have access to the interview transcripts and for how long. At the completion of each interview, the transcript was copied into a Microsoft Word document and saved to the researcher's password-protected computer.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview transcripts were transferred over to the data-analysis software ATLAS.ti 6 for analysis. Each interview was coded individually at approximately the paragraph level. Codes were created, defined, and revised as needed based on the content of the interviews according to guidelines by Strauss & Corbin (1998). The creation of new codes was tracked so that after the initial coding process, the researcher returned to each transcript to add new codes as needed and to double check original coding. A section of

an interview transcript was also independently coded by a Psychology department faculty member. Interrater reliability was .80. Codes were then grouped conceptually into larger themes, drawing on recommendations from Strauss & Corbin (1998). This process was primarily guided by the aforementioned research questions; additional routes of analysis were also pursued as they emerged. The specific analytic process for each route of analysis is outlined below.

In order to discover common therianthropic experiences and themes in therian life stories, the codes were organized by frequency and consistency. Overall frequency refers to the total number of occurrences of a given code, summed across participants. Consistency refers to the commonality of codes among participants (i.e. the number of participants with a given code). Conceptually similar codes with both high frequency and consistency were grouped into main themes. This led primarily to themes of common lived therianthropic experiences, including species dysphoria, social obstacles, animal experiences, and connection to nature.

To address the question of how participants' interpretations of their lived experiences contribute to a therian identity, a code called "attributions to therianthropy" was used to mark instances in which participants attributed specific thoughts, feelings, or behaviors to therianthropy. Because each interview prompt asked participants how each scene related to or influenced their therian identity, participants had ample opportunity to reference connections between their specific experiences and therianthropy. Perhaps for this reason, the attributions to therianthropy code was the most frequently and consistently used code. Analyses of these attributions was of critical import to this study given that McAdams's life story model of identity posits that individuals create a sense of meaning and self through the ways in which they interpret their lives. In other words, the

ways in which participants construct therianthropic meaning from their experiences could be indicative of how their therian identities are maintained. In order to analyze these attributions, the researcher reviewed each quote coded as an attribution to therianthropy. These quotes were categorized into larger themes when multiple participants expressed similar attributions and were referenced as individual examples when only one participant expressed a particular attribution.

Based on the coding of the interviews, two additional routes of analysis outside the original research questions emerged. The first consisted of an analysis of participants' conceptualization of therianthropy. In order to analyze this, quotes tagged with the relevant conceptual codes were compared. Common use of language (i.e. specific words) in describing therianthropy was noted. The degree of agreement among participants (i.e. number of participants who described therianthropy in a similar way) was also observed.

Finally, an analysis of the trajectory of therian identity was also possible. In order to analyze the trajectory of therian identity, codes related to chronology of experiences were grouped and organized in sequential order. This timeline of codes was used to revisit each participant's interview so that an individual trajectory could be established for each person. These individual timelines were then compared in order to create a composite trajectory. This process of within-case followed by cross-case analysis was loosely based on analytic procedures outlined by Miles & Huberman (1994). During the creation of this overall trajectory, the researcher noted how many participants had explicitly reported each time point experience. In order for a time point to be included, at least half of the participants (i.e. three of the seven) had to have reported it.

## **Results**

Several themes emerged from analysis. The results were thus divided into four overarching categories: conceptualization of therianthropy, trajectory of therian identity, lived experiences, and attributions to therianthropy. The conceptualization section presents how participants defined therianthropy and gives an overview of therianthropy from their perspectives. The trajectory section posits a timeline for therian identity based upon the time frames of identity discovery provided by participants. The lived experiences section involves other ongoing therianthropic experiences and is subdivided into more specific themes. Finally, the attributions to therianthropy section presents the ways in which participants attributed various thoughts, behaviors, and experiences to therianthropy. Throughout the results section participants are quoted and referenced using self-chosen pseudonyms.

### **Conceptualization of Therianthropy**

At the start of the interview, participants were asked to define therianthropy and explain what it meant to them. The term “identity” or a derivative of it was used in six of the seven participants’ definitions. Participant descriptions of identity included words such as “non-physical,” “personal,” and “integral”. Heket defined therianthropy as “the identification as a non-human animal on a non-physical level that is integral to the self.” Similarly, Song’s definition read, “[T]herianthropy is identifying as an animal, or having an identity more animal than human.” Finally, Thana’s definition was more specific regarding the animal part of the identity:

“I define therianthropy as having a non-human identity, specifically identifying as an earthly animal (either an animal that exists today or one that existed on this



earth at some point in time before going extinct) rather than a mythical creature or a fictional entity.”

This specificity is likely to differentiate therianthropy as an animal-based identity from otherkinity, which can encompass mythical identities, and fictionkin, which describes identification as fictional creatures or characters.

Additionally, three participants’ conceptions of therianthropy stressed the mismatch between their animal identities and human bodies. Joe defined therianthropy in the following way:

“The state of being a non-human animal in a human body, with the non-humanness experienced primarily in terms of drives, instincts, and sense of belonging, recognition, and kinship with non-human animals.”

Joe’s definition emphasized the animal part of a therian’s identity over the human part in saying that a therian is “a non-human animal in a human body.” This definition leaves little room for a human identity at all. Song echoed this sentiment while describing their personal therianthropy, stating that they believe their soul is nonhuman and was for some reason placed in a human body. Similarly, Gray’s definition involved a statement about therianthropy being “a feeling of being in the wrong skin.” All of these definitions stress the importance of the animal identity as the true self, in contrast to the human body which is simply a vessel.

A related theme emerged throughout the interviews which stressed the therian identity as being crucial to the self. A therian’s nonhuman identity is not separate from themselves, and it is not necessarily a distinct facet of self that is detached from other facets; it is rather an integral part of themselves which underlies everything they think,

feel, and do. One participant<sup>4</sup> stated, “I am a raccoon. I know this.” Another participant detailed an experience in which they realized that spirit guides were not an appropriate explanation for their animal feelings:

“I kept getting stuck on the fact that spirit animals were separate entities from myself. It didn’t feel right in my head, something was off. A little voice in my head basically started screaming ‘Because YOU ARE a wolf! IT’S NOT SEPARATE FROM YOU!’ I had been in semi-denial for a few years, and it took me sitting down and reading a book to accept that no I didn’t feel human and no, it wasn’t because of some spirit or totem, it was just another part of my identity.”

The language both of these participants used to explain their identity by stating, “I am X,” is important. For them, therianthropy is not a connection with another animal (“I feel close to X”), it is not a liking for another animal (“I really like X”), and it is not a simile or metaphor (“I am like X”). It is a statement of truth about the self.

Some participants described scenes in which their animal identity was realized to be “intrinsic,” a permanent and fundamental part of the self. Ray recalled a frightening mental shift experience which caused her to come to this understanding:

“That moment of realization, that experience of being terrified in that crowd and needing to run away in a way that my body wasn’t built for, made me truly think about how lightly I had been looking at my situation. I realized, wow, I have been treating this as if it didn’t matter, like it barely affects me. I thought to myself that it was very real, and it was who I am, not just something I can turn on and off when I feel like it.”

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<sup>4</sup> Names omitted for reference of specific theriotypes in order to protect participants’ privacy.

Ray's experience demonstrates the pervasiveness of therianthropy; it affects the individual all of the time and cannot be turned off like a switch. Alex related a similar experience in which they realized the importance of their therianthropy to their sense of self:

“My greatest regret is not recognizing how important my identity was to my being. For so, so many years I saw it as a side thing. I saw myself as human first, and I tried to keep therianthropy under wraps, sort of in the closet.”

For Alex, it was no longer an option to see themselves as human first. That conception of self simply was not accurate for them. Rather, they were animal as well as human, and that animal aspect was just as important to their experiences as a person. Therianthropy is not “a side thing,” as they put it; it is a central piece of self.

### **Trajectory of Therian Identity**

**Always nonhuman.** Nonhuman feelings and/or identification were described as being present from a very young age (i.e. approximately five years old) in six of the seven participants. Heket stated, “I’ve identified as non-human as long as I’ve had a concept of self identity...so since I was little.” Similarly, one participant remembered feeling an identification as a wolf since they were young, “And wolves....they were me. Even as a young child. They were me. I was them.” Joe also identified feeling species dysphoria “since birth,” and Thana “considered [her]self nonhuman even way back in kindergarten.”

**Childhood therianthropic experiences.** Related to these feelings were the therianthropic experiences that participants had in childhood. All seven participants indicated at least one childhood (defined as 12 years and younger) therianthropic experience. One prominent childhood experience, described by four of the seven

participants, was enjoying playing games as an animal. These games seemed to offer special comfort and feelings of naturalness not afforded by typical human play; in other words, this did not feel like pretend play. Rather, it was an opportunity for an alignment with one's animal identity. Thana recalled being young and preferring to play as an animal:

“Basically I would start this story with me at about 4(ish) years old, in kindergarten. That's about the age that kids don't really care about socially accepted behaviours, so they can pretend to be animals and not get judged for it. I remember that no matter what game my friends and I played, I would always be a [theriotype]. I was way more comfortable crawling around on all fours and growling than I was on two feet and talking like a typical 4(ish) year old. It was great because acting this way wasn't a big deal, it was just how I was.”

Ray also expressed a certain comfort and enjoyment out of getting to act like an animal:

“I was running around on all fours for fun, and playing with my cat. I recall being really happy and staring out at the stars outside, sitting like a dog, and just taking in how peaceful everything was...I stayed up til almost 3 in the morning pretending to be an animal and pretending my stuffed animals were my 'pack'. It was really goofy, but one of my fondest memories. I believe that this relates to my therianthropy because I felt like I could sort of take a 'break' from my humanity when no one was looking, feel more like myself, act nonhuman.”

Such instances of childhood play were sometimes also considered to be early shifting experiences. Specifically, two out of the seven participants indicated that they had experienced mental shifts during childhood, while another two indicated

experiencing phantom limbs during childhood. Ray referred to the scene quoted directly above as a mental shift:

“Yeah, it’s one of my earliest detailed memories of what I believe was a mental shift. It was indeed a pleasant experience, and sort of thrilling, as I felt like it was one of the only times I could truly be myself.”

Based on Ray’s experience, it appears that there may be some overlap between shifting and animal play during childhood, though that specific connection did not emerge from other participants’ accounts.

Participants also reported feeling a kinship with nonhuman animals in a way that they did not necessarily feel a kinship with humans. For some participants this lack of connection with humans translated into feeling different and alienated from their peers and humans overall. These feelings of being different in childhood were reported by four participants. Also related to this alienation was the process of realizing that feeling nonhuman was not normal. Three participants explicitly stated that they had initially assumed that everyone felt nonhuman to some extent, only to later realize that this was not a common experience. For the individuals who reported on this process, the realization of being different occurred by around the end of childhood. After the realization of difference, some participants tried to suppress their nonhuman feelings and identity. One participant illustrated this overall process:

“As an impressionable child I have many strange beliefs that eventually vanish, but one that sticks is that everyone is really animals deep down, only temporarily installed in human skin. I would look at swans and cranes and feel myself separated from their flock, which was always crushing...Finding out relatively quickly that most people definitely aren’t animals under the skin, and realizing

how strange it looks to be thinking it, I stop focusing on it, and eventually forget it.”

This person’s experience occurred when they were around six to eight years old. Another participant also came to the realization that their peers did not think of themselves as animals:

“So now I’m about 10 or 11 and nobody wants to crawl around like an animal, they’d rather talk about boys and sports. Now, don’t get me wrong, I was into boys and sports, but crawling around like an animal and calling myself a wolf hadn’t ever really been a game to me. I remember being so confused when everyone else just grew out of it.”

This individual did not indicate ever purposely suppressing their nonhuman identity, though, in contrast to Gray, who struggled with feeling different and suppressing themselves:

“As I got older, around the age of eight, I really started questioning the world. And myself. This was around the time I really started to notice that I was different. I spent some time between eight and twelve really wondering what was wrong with me. I had different behaviors than my peers. I had different thoughts. The world I saw was not the one they saw. I came very close to an answer, but some things in my life at that time (being bullied, losing friends, and eventually moving across the country) caused me to shut all of that progress out. For a long time, I completely denied all of the things I’d thought about...I tried so hard to be ‘normal’ and so denied any part of me that didn’t fit that. I didn’t want to be different, so I pretended I wasn’t and suppressed an intrinsic part of myself.”

Overall, childhood was a time of particular therianthropic experiences for participants. These experiences included playing as animals in order to express their animal identities, childhood shifting experiences, feeling a kinship to animals and an alienation from humans, and possible suppression of the therian identity upon the realization that it is not normal to identify as an animal.

**Moratorium.** All participants then went on to conduct research in order to try to understand what was going on with them and why they felt the way they did. Specific questions about this process were not asked in the interview, but most of the research seems to have been done on the Internet. No one expressed having found the answer right away; instead, participants eventually found the term “therianthropy” and the therian community through other routes. Two participants reported finding it through researching werewolves, two reported finding it through researching Pagan spirituality, and one reported finding it through the furry fandom. The remaining two participants did not specify how exactly they came across the term and community. Additionally, it is worth noting that four of the participants found the term “otherkin” and the otherkin community first, joining the therian community specifically some time later.

The discovery of “therianthropy” (or “otherkin”) occurred during the span of the teenage years (range: 13-19) for all seven participants. Five participants expressed a sense of belonging and everything finally making sense after finding the community. Joe recalled their profound experience:

“I...found the definition of otherkin. I’m not sure what I was thinking, because at that moment I’m actually convinced I wasn’t thinking. Lightning struck. It was like having a blinding flash of light, like a nuclear explosion going off, only mind-wise. Instead of seeing it, it was something that went through my actual

consciousness, my actual mind. The only coherent thought I managed was ‘IT ALL MAKES SENSE NOW’. The only thing I felt was being caught up in a nuclear blast of a rush...[It] gave me the first significant feeling of belonging somewhere and being something definite. I guess you could say that’s the day where I gained an actual identity and became fully aware of it. At the same time I also became fully aware that I wasn’t human.”

Song and Alex had similar experiences. Song recounted, “It seemed to make sense more than I would have liked,” and Alex described their experience in this way:

“I had behaviors, problems with identity, small things that finally made /sense/. I learned the word ‘therian’, and I could apply that to myself, finally, to explain so many things I had been confused and lost about before. Tagging myself as a therian amounted to bundling a bunch of loose code together into something that made sense. The code was always there, it worked, but I had no idea why or how until I had a word for it.”

Alex also expressed a sense of belonging after joining the therian community, exclaiming, “These are my people!” This sentiment was echoed by Thana, who stated, “I just felt so relieved that I wasn’t alone in this.” Thus, finding a label for their experiences and a community of similar individuals was a very positive experience for these participants.

Most participants (five of the seven) still had to discover their exact theriotype after finding the therian community (i.e. take self-understanding from something vague, such as nonhuman or canine, to a specific animal identity, such as wolf). Only Thana and Gray seemed certain of their theriotypes before finding the community. Participants mentioned a number of methods for determining their theriotypes. They researched



animals, compared shifting experiences with information gleaned from research, meditated, journaled, and introspected. They also experienced questioning from community members about the legitimacy of their stated theriotype. This questioning (sometimes called “grilling”) is meant to force the individual to critically think about their reasoning behind their identity. None of these methods came up more times than any other, so it is unclear which method(s) are most common or useful, or why an individual might use a particular method over another.

In sum, over the teenage years, individuals engaged in active exploration to make sense of their experiences and, ultimately, their identities. They sought a label which they could apply to themselves to describe their animal identities. Upon finding such a label (e.g. “therianthropy”), participants felt a sense of relief and belonging. Most participants had additional exploration to do, however, in determining their specific animal identity (or identities).

**Identity achievement.** After discovering their theriotypes, participants reported a certain sense of comfort and confidence in their identities. This was true of all six of the participants who had determined their theriotypes. Participants expressed similar experiences of feeling everything fall into place or make sense upon finding their theriotypes as they reported when finding the therian community. One participant described their experience of finding their theriotype:

“Then, somehow, it clicked, once I saw [the raccoons] begin to climb a tree. I thought it was a pretty good climb, and I wished I could join them. I felt the Sehnsucht, the deep and intense longing to join them. I couldn’t tell why, but it almost hurt. That was when I thought maybe I was wrong. I’m not a wolf? Maybe these are my people? The raccoons, seeing them move, act, all the little things hit

me like a ton of bricks. It was like when a math problem finally clicks and you can solve any variation of it, any time. Everything made sense.”

Additionally, after reaching this level of comfort and confidence in their identities, some participants went on to “come out” to people in their lives as therians. Most of the individuals who did this came out to friends, and one came out to their therapist.

To summarize the overall trajectory of therian identity, therianthropy as described by these participants began early in childhood. Specific childhood experiences included finding comfort in playing as an animal, experiencing mental and phantom shifts, feeling a kinship with animals, and feeling different from other children. Some participants suppressed their therian identities after realizing that having an animal identity is not “normal.” In adolescence, participants began to exert effort in self-exploration, culminating in finding the therian community and eventually determining their specific theriotypes. After achieving this level of certainty and confidence in their identities, some individuals then chose to come out to others as therians.

### **Lived Experiences**

**Species Dysphoria.** All participants referenced some unique negative experiences associated with therianthropy, and, of those, the notion of species dysphoria was most prevalent, being referenced by all seven participants. As noted previously, species dysphoria refers to marked discomfort and/or dissatisfaction with one’s body due to a mismatch between the human body and one’s nonhuman identity. Two participants went as far as to list species dysphoria as the greatest challenge associated with therianthropy. In response to a prompt about the greatest life challenge related to therianthropy, Joe answered:

“Definitely species dysphoria. How it developed I’m not sure about, besides me literally being in the wrong body and in the wrong place...it’s something that’s kind of been part of me since birth. I address it by trying to not think about it and distracting myself with other things to take attention away from it. It’s the single biggest complication of everything, the single biggest problem of therianthropy, and the single biggest reason I don’t think it’s all just a delusion. The feeling is very real and very visceral and always guarantees moments of existential horror. It permeates every moment and creeps into every occasion, although a lot of the time I am distracted enough that it doesn’t influence what I’m doing. But most of the time I have to constantly take precautions, such as try to avoid thinking about certain things, not go near mirrors, not be consciously aware of myself.”

Alex also attributed negative emotions to therianthropy, describing it as being “pain” and “discomfort.” They further explained that they “had been forced into a different sort of peg than [they were] built for.” Finally, Ray illustrated her feelings of dysphoria:

“Then before I knew it, I was sobbing, and I slowly lowered myself to the grass. I was struggling to breathe as [my friend] comforted me, and I distinctly remember saying, ‘[Friend], I hate myself so much. Why am I a human? I don’t feel right at all. I wish I was a cat, or a dog, or something. My body doesn’t feel right. I hate it. I hate it. I wish I was more like [my cat], then I would feel better.’ She didn’t understand why I didn’t want to be human, and to be honest, I didn’t either. I just felt uncontrollable sadness about not being another animal. That’s a key moment I look back on when I think about realizing how negatively therianthropy has impacted my life.”

Each of these accounts demonstrates how the mismatch between participants' internal nonhuman identities and their human bodies manifests as a form of bodily dysphoria which causes them pain in their day-to-day lives. They all refer to an overall sense of wrongness about their physical reality as humans. This dysphoria is thus internal to the individual; it is related to bodily dissatisfaction, not to negative social reactions (e.g. social dysphoria). Joe also described how these intense negative feelings make their identity seem more real to them, indicating that they serve as a tool against doubt and self-suppression of the animal identity. Based on Joe's account, as well as on the ongoing nature of the species dysphoria described by all participants, it would seem that these persistent feelings help the individual realize that their nonhuman identity is an intrinsic and permanent part of who they are.

It is also important to note that alongside many of these renditions of discomfort, participants also listed mechanisms for coping with species dysphoria and other negative aspects of therianthropy. Alex referenced a particular connection with their sense of touch that helped alleviate some of the discomfort they felt from therianthropy. For example, they said they would wash dishes manually in the sink water without looking, and that doing so served as an outlet for venting negative therianthropic feelings. Joe also mentioned, as noted earlier, that they make an effort to avoid mirrors which would remind them of their body's incorrect form. Other participants, including Ray, referred to acting like an animal as a way of feeling more comfortable, related to the childhood play as animals discussed in the Trajectory section. All of these coping mechanisms allow the individual to express their animal identity and minimize any overt awareness of their human form. By focusing their attention on what feels comfortable, they are able to stave off dysphoria.

**Social Obstacles.** Participants reported therianthropy affecting their social lives in myriad ways. The feelings of being different and alienated from peers (as noted in the childhood therianthropic experiences portion of the Trajectory section) are a prime example of this. Additionally, participants also reported experiences of being treated differently or stigmatized, which only further complicated their attempts to fit in and be “normal.” Several times throughout their interview, Joe discussed experiences of being treated differently than others, as well as a sort of alienation and stigma associated with humans finding it “strange” and “repugnant” to identify as an animal. Thana also referred to having to hide her therianthropy from people to “keep people from thinking that there’s something wrong with [her].” Both of these accounts demonstrate the vigilant state therians must maintain in order to prevent others from finding out about their identities. Therianthropy is thus a well-guarded secret that cannot be revealed to others for fear of negative reaction.

Related to having to hide one’s animal identity from others, five of the seven participants alluded to a sort of human “mask” they have to wear around other people, a facade to act human and suppress any animal feelings or behaviors. Alex referenced various masks they had to put on for different situations, including charismatic and social masks. They also specifically referred to the masks as being used to make themselves “a respectable human being.” Gray also referenced the happiness they felt at being able to take off their human mask when meeting another therian in person for the first time:

“To be able to release all the behaviors and instincts that I have to hide or laugh off because others don’t understand or think is weird was freeing and almost euphoric. We could act like our real selves instead of having the human masks we have to wear on a daily basis.”

Evident in these quotes is the notion that the participants equate acting like a human to just that—an act. They do not view those behaviors as natural to themselves. Rather, they are the ways they are forced to behave due to living in human society. The behaviors they attribute more sincerely to themselves, then, are the animal ones.

This was particularly apparent in the ways that some participants discussed difficulties with human social customs and expressed a sense of having to learn how to be human. Alex expressed struggling with understanding human body language:

“I never used the correct sort of body language when I communicated, and I was practically incapable of reading it on other people. It was a wall, where I only had words (so sarcasm was utterly lost to me. Still have issues with it). I think this was largely due to me being wired for different body language, of the [theriotype] variety, or... something...I had been attempting to communicate with other human beings using body parts I didn't have [phantom limbs], expressions I couldn't use. To express apology, I couldn't just tuck my ears and tail. I had to use this human face to do it, I had to stand the right way, look the right way, as /humans/ would do. It was as if my brain had to be rewired entirely just to be on the same level as my peers in conversation.”

This quote exemplifies the notion of the foreignness of human social interaction and the naturalness of animal social interaction, as well as the need to somehow learn to respond in the unnatural human ways. This difficulty in social situations of having one's natural reaction be inappropriate (or not even visible in the case of phantom limbs) in a human setting presents a barrier in communication. This struggle with human communication, in turn, is likely to feed into the other feelings of difference, alienation, and stigma reported by participants. Difficulty with communication is, after all, a very alienating experience,

and humans have a tendency to discriminate against those with whom they cannot effectively communicate.

**Animal Experiences.** Some of the animal behaviors and experiences participants talked about have already been touched upon, such as the naturalness of animal communication over human communication. However, it is important to delve deeper into these experiences, particularly into shifts and instincts. Shifting experiences, either pertaining to mental and/or phantom shifts, were reported by six of the seven participants. Mental shifts were discussed more frequently, and they were often associated with strong emotion. The emotions were negative more often than they were positive. For example, Heket described an early experience of a mental shift while she was being bullied:

“[A] few boys were making fun of me. I don’t remember if they were physically threatening or what, but they must have been threatening in some way because I tried to roar at them...and scratched one with my nails...I can’t say I was thinking much, it was just kind of like an instinct took over after the thought of ‘get away from me’ and I was feeling some mixture of anger, frustration, and sadness/loneliness/etc.”

The threatening situation in which Heket had found herself served as a catalyst for the shift in her mindset toward animal thoughts and reactions. She then reacted in the more animalistic way that felt more natural to her based on that nonhuman mentality.

In contrast to the prevalence of negativity surrounding the mental shifts discussed by participants, phantom shifts were more often associated with positive emotions. For several participants phantom limbs served as mechanisms for self-understanding. Alex had realized their social difficulties were due to trying to communicate with limbs not physically present. Heket reported phantom limbs as being a key experience which led to

her conducting research and eventually finding the therian community. Similarly, Ray described using her phantom limbs as a guide for determining her theriotype. She also expressed euphoric feelings at experiencing a full-body phantom shift:

“I then felt something very distinct on my face, and my arms. Phantom paws/arms covered my own, and I had nearly a full phantom head. I became extremely excited and happy, because I hadn’t had a strong phantom/mental shift in quite a while, and it’s usually fun. I...noticed that my phantom ears felt off. They were in a different spot on my head, and my muzzle was much shorter and stockier. My paws also felt smaller than usual. I then realized that it...was my very first full and detailed [second theriotype] phantom shift, which further lead me to be sure about my 2nd theriotype. I was incredibly giddy and happy about it.”

This experience provided Ray with happiness, as well as helped her feel confident in her second theriotype, indicating that one source of positive emotions surrounding phantom shifts is the way it helps with self-discovery. Self-discovery has been demonstrated to be a particularly rewarding experience for therians (see Trajectory section), so when phantom limbs can play a part in that, it further associates them with those positive emotions.

A final animalistic theme also emerged in addition to shifting experiences: instincts. Instincts here are defined as internal drives to act in a certain way, without much or any thought going into it. Two overarching instinct themes that emerged were pack instincts and predator instincts. This is likely due to the prevalence of wolf and other predator theriotypes exhibited by participants in the sample. Heket described an instance of experiencing a predator instinct while at a concert:



“I often find that I get more prey drive type urges in crowds, and this was no different. It was hard for me to focus on the music and not the pervasive urge to bite down on the spine of the girls in front of me. I was already identifying as a [theriotype] at this point, but experiences such as these make my identity seem more ‘solid’ and ‘real’. I was frustrated at the time because they were annoying and all I could think was ‘just listen to the music and ignore them’ because I didn’t want the drive to get any stronger.”

This scene exemplifies the involuntary nature of the instincts participants described. The instincts can appear at any time, such as at a concert, and they can be difficult to ignore. The instincts do, however, appear to serve a positive function. Similarly to species dysphoria and phantom limbs, Heket described this instinctual experience as making her identity feel more real. Thus, the experience of animalistic instincts serves another function for self-understanding and acceptance of one’s nonhuman identity; it helps validate the individual’s own feelings and conception of themselves as nonhuman.

Participants’ renditions of instinctual experiences also contained the theme of the innate naturalness of animal behavior. Many of the drives or urges described by participants occurred as reflexive reactions. For example, one participant recalled a childhood camping experience:

“[A] wolf started howling about twenty feet away from the tent...I broke out into goosebumps because it sounded so familiar, the way that a song that you haven’t heard since you were really young sounds familiar, I knew the tune but couldn’t remember the words. I felt compelled to just get up, run out of the tent and start howling with it, but I just stayed sitting and listened until the wolf stopped

howling and left...I remembered feeling incredibly happy and excited for the entire rest of the trip after that, it's really a special memory for me.”

As an instinctual reaction to the wolf howling, they too felt the urge to howl, and that urge was natural to them. They described the howling as familiar, and the overall experience made them happy, which demonstrates both the innateness of these animal instincts, as well as the positive emotions the participants have expressed when they have been able to be close to or express their animal identities.

**Connection to nature.** Participants frequently referenced nature. The settings for the scenes described throughout the interview were often in nature (e.g. camping, hiking, walking through the park). Alex even described a pilgrimage they went on during which they sought to find themselves while walking the Appalachian Trail:

“Eventually, I just packed up one day and left. I regret to say I gave no warning to any of the people in that college that I was going, I just couldn't stand being there any longer. I hitchhiked and walked all the way from Nacogdoches, Texas, to Chattanooga, Tennessee. There, I joined up with the Appalachian Trail...it's the longest trail in the Eastern United States, about 1200 miles, spanning from Georgia to Maine. I had always wanted to walk it. At this point in time, I thought I would either die on this trail, or I would find inspiration.”

Alex went out on their own into nature to explore their identity. This provided a unique opportunity for them: “I really got to explore myself, utterly without the distractions of modern day. I could forget everything, and just /live/.” They ultimately described coming to a better understanding of themselves and their identity from this experience.

Similarly, other participants reported feeling a special connection with nature that stemmed from their animal identities. Heket described feeling “a general connection to

nature as an animal that is a part of it.” One participant also recalled a special memory of being in nature with friends that made them feel in-tune with their animal self:

“We had gone on a day trip to a set of waterfalls that you can swim in and slide down. After having spent most of the day around other people who had also come to enjoy the waterfalls, we headed downstream a bit to see one especially large fall. We left all of our stuff back where our canoe was and headed down the river barefoot, in nothing but our bathing suits. I remember feeling so invigorated because I was surrounded by trees and sunshine and water and the fact that I was moving through this environment as a unit with people that I cared about made the whole experience a little surreal. I could easily imagine us all as wolves moving through the forest instead of humans. We climbed up and down rock faces, swam across the river and a few large ponds and up and down rock falls. I lost myself in the joy of it all. We were doing something that a lot of people would consider pretty dangerous, all things considered, but it felt so natural and so right. I can still remember how everything smelled that day, because every single one of my senses was just so in tune and aware. It really was just awesome.”

Being in such close proximity with nature brought them closer to their animal self, and it allowed them to express that self in a particular way which brought them happiness. Once again, this ability to express one’s animal identity was associated with a feeling of naturalness and rightness, and nature served as a catalyst for that ability.

Five of the seven participants also expressed a strong valuing of nature and/or animals. These sentiments largely arose during responses to questions about ethical, social, and political values as participants listed environmental issues as very important to

them. Ray listed “preserving our natural systems and maintaining healthy ecosystems” as one of her important political values. Similarly, Gray stated, “I feel strongly about issues involving nature...and autonomy of both humans and other animals.” Two participants also mentioned environmental issues in their answers to the prompt, “What is the most important value in living as a human being?” Specifically, Heket responded:

“The ability to improve the planet. No other species has the capability to affect both other species and nature in general as we do, so it behooves us to preserve it (if for no other reason than the continued survival of our own species).”

She indicated the unique ability of humans to be able to make a difference in destroying or preserving nature, and she stressed the importance of using that ability for preservation. Finally, Song’s response to the most important value prompt was respect, including, specifically, respecting nature. Overall, the importance of ecological preservation and proper care of the environment was evident among participants.

### **Attributions to Therianthropy**

McAdams’s identity model is largely based on the idea that the (re)interpretation of experience establishes and maintains identity. Attributing particular experiences to therianthropy serves to reinforce the therian identity. This reflects a mutually reinforcing process, in which having the experience contributes to the identity; then the identity not only influences subsequent experiences, but also affects the reevaluation of earlier ones. A key aspect of the interview was to ask participants how each prompt related to their therianthropy.

Several thoughts, experiences, and behaviors were attributed to therianthropy in some way, including many that would not necessarily seem like they would be affected by or related to a nonhuman identity. Some examples of these attributions have been

referenced in previous sections. For instance, some participants attributed their childhood play as animals to their nonhuman identity. They believed they engaged in such play as a means of expressing their identities and acting in ways that were more natural and comfortable for them. Many children engage in animal play, but for these therians the experience was qualitatively different and had a profound connection with their nonhuman identities. Other examples of experiences that participants attributed to their therianthropy that have already been introduced include communication problems, being driven by instinct, and feeling a connection to nature and valuing environmental rights. Alex and Song both felt that their troubles communicating with others and understanding others' communication were attributable to therianthropy. Alex also attributed their closeness to nature to therianthropy, saying, "I feel that therianthropy allows me to have a more personal connection to the natural world than I otherwise would." This sentiment was echoed by Gray, who stated, "I like to believe [therianthropy] brings me closer to nature." Ray also attributed her political opinions about environmental issues to therianthropy, saying, "I think my therianthropy does prove to give me a bit of a bias in regards to only really caring about the ecological side of politics, but not too big of a bias." Finally, Joe and Heket both discussed being driven by instincts, which they attributed to therianthropy.

Similar to this, some participants attributed a certain kind of simplicity to therianthropy. The theme of simplicity came up among three participants. Alex summarized the concept and attributed it to therianthropy as follows:

"I've been told I exude this aura of /simplicity/. I tend to attribute this simplicity to being a therian. Part of me, a small part of me is an animal. And while I won't say that animals are necessarily simple beings, they are certainly capable of a

clarity that human beings are not privy to. The webbing of society, I find, are easy to tear away until we can come to the real meat of an issue.”

Alex indicated a belief that animals are able to simplify things in a way that humans tend not to, and, because therians are, in varying degrees, animals, they are able to simplify things in that same way. Thana also felt that she was able to view the world with a particular, simple perspective due to her therianthropy, stating, “I do believe that my therianthropy contributes to all this, because animals view the world in much simpler terms than humans do.” Therianthropy is thus believed to be the cause of this simplistic clarity that both participants described.

Many participants also expressed liberal political views in favor of social justice which were attributed in part to therianthropy. These attributions additionally seemed to be mediated by the theme of animalistic simplicity just described. For example, one participant described the effects of therianthropy on their political views:

“I definitely think that my therianthropy has at least a little bit of an influence on my political views, and that ties back to the idea of animals seeing things in much simpler terms. Why should a wolf care if two guys get married and adopt a kid? Does that affect my pack negatively? No. Does a wolf care if some people get high? Nope, not unless they end up driving and running over my family (and even then, I would blame the person rather than the drug). I do care a lot about murderers and rapists being alive and well on the streets or languishing in our prisons, because they pose an active threat to my family and the idea of death scares the crap out of [friend].”

They directly related these feelings back to simplicity and therianthropy. Rather than getting hung up on complex human moral conventions, their political views directly stem from how social issues affect them and their pack (i.e. the people they care about).

Other attributions to therianthropy were more specific to each individual. For example, one participant attributed their extreme protectiveness of their friends to pack instincts, which are in turn related to therianthropy. Another participant attributed experiencing the death of their dog at a young age with influencing their protectiveness of their pack. One participant described their curiosity as being attributable to therianthropy:

“I might just be a curious human, or a handsy human. But I attribute it to therianthropy, and I guess that’s where the distinction comes in. I, for whatever reason, attribute touching things as a ‘raccoon’ behavior, when other human beings just consider themselves ‘hands-on’.”

In this quote, this participant recognized that being curious or “handsy” could simply be human behaviors, but they felt, for whatever personal reason, that these were animal behaviors in their case. They also noted that it was this distinction in particular that was important, a sentiment which aligns with McAdams’s model. By attributing a behavior to therianthropy, they make it so.

Finally, Gray explained that therianthropy affects every single facet of their life:

“If I had to pick out a theme from everything that has been said today, I would say it is that therianthropy touched every part of my life. Even parts I wouldn’t necessarily think it would. Therianthropy can shape and affect life in very profound ways.”

This quote summarizes not only how therianthropy is a pervasive, integral identity which affects all facets of one's being, but also how all facets of experience can be attributed to therianthropy. Such attributions, in turn, serve to reinforce the nonhuman identity.

### **Discussion**

This study extended previous research on therianthropy by investigating it within the framework of McAdams's life story model of identity. Guided by research questions and additional routes of analysis that emerged through the grounded theory analytic process, several key findings surfaced. The first finding concerned the ways in which therians define and conceptualize therianthropy. Overwhelmingly, they defined therianthropy as integral—as a core aspect of identity. A possible trajectory for therian identity development was also established. The majority of participants had felt nonhuman for as long as they could remember, and this was further evidenced by certain childhood therianthropic experiences: animal play, shifting experiences, kinship with animals, and feeling different from other children. In adolescence the participants conducted research in order to better understand themselves, culminating in finding the term “therianthropy” and the online therian community. Finally, most participants then went on to determine their theriotype, and some “came out” to others as therians after they were confident in their identities. In addition, four prevalent lived experiences related to therianthropy were found: species dysphoria, social obstacles, animal experiences, and a connection to nature. Finally, participants' attributions of non-therianthropic experiences to therianthropy were also analyzed. Such attributions included childhood animal play, political views, and other personal experiences (e.g. being “handsy”).



Overall, these findings align with McAdams's life story model of identity. McAdams (2001; 2011) posits that identity is an on-going process of constructing an internal narrative based upon the interpretation and reinterpretation of life experiences. This study found that therians do engage in this (re)constructive process of identity creation and maintenance. These therians demonstrated that they consistently evaluated their feelings, behaviors, and other experiences in terms of their nonhuman identities. For example, species dysphoria served as evidence of the reality of the therian identity for some participants. In other words, it was interpreted as a sort of proof for the animal identity, thus facilitating the maintenance of that identity. Additionally, shifting experiences, and particularly phantom limbs, were associated with determining participants' theriotypes. These were used as evidence of a particular animal identity, thus reinforcing that identity.

Participants also interpreted certain experiences as relating to their therian identities. For example, pretend play is common among many children (Lillard, Lerner, Hopkins, Dore, Smith, & Palmquist, 2013); however, for these therians, pretend play was about something more than just exercising their imaginations. It was experienced as an expression of their true selves. It is possible that looking back upon childhood imaginary play through a therian lens further maintains the nonhuman identity. This fits with McAdams's identity model, which focuses on the interpretation of experiences as opposed to those experiences themselves. In this case, both therians and non-therians may engage in childhood animal play, but only therians retrospectively interpret that play in terms of a nonhuman identity.

Additionally, the present results fit well within the existing literature regarding therianthropy. In particular, many of the current findings mirror those of Grivell et al.

(2014). Grivell et al. (2014) found an overarching theme of self-discovery, similar to that of the proposed trajectory of therian identity development from the current study. Both studies found that participants felt nonhuman from a very young age. Both studies also found that shifting experiences played important roles in aiding individuals with determining their theriotypes and, as such, were regarded with some positive emotion. Finally, both studies found that the therian community helped individuals by giving them a label for their experiences and a safe space in which to interact with similar others (Grivell et al., 2014).

Grivell et al. (2014) also found themes of transspeciesism and the therian shadow, both of which are analogous to themes that emerged in the present study. For example, regarding transspeciesism, both studies found a prevalent theme of species dysphoria and some conceptualizations of therianthropy as being an animal in a human body. The theme of the therian shadow generally referred to feeling “weird” for being a therian, as well as having to hide one’s therian identity despite desiring to be more open about it (Grivell et al., 2014). In the current study, participants indicated a process of realizing that feeling nonhuman is not “normal,” along with alienation and suppression of their therian identities. Participants also indicated that they had to keep their identity a secret for the most part, with only a few individuals eventually “coming out” to others after a sense of confidence in their identity had been established. Overall, both the current study and the study by Grivell et al. (2014) found the same overarching themes regarding the therian identity and experience.

Finally, it is important to address the current findings in light of Robertson’s (2012) and Laycock’s (2012) studies. Both Robertson (2012) and Laycock (2012) argued that the therian identity was only meaningful within the context of the therian

community. In particular, Laycock (2012) asserted that it is easier for one to accept their therian identity when surrounded by a community of other therians who have similar identities/beliefs. The results of this study seem to contradict this assertion. The therians who participated in the current study reported a nonhuman identity that predated discovery of the therian community. Feelings of being nonhuman and certain therianthropic experiences (e.g. shifts, dysphoria) existed even in childhood for most participants. It therefore appears inaccurate to say that the identity was created by the community. It is true, however, that participants expressed relief and belonging upon discovering the term “therianthropy” to describe their experiences and the online therian community. In turn, these discoveries may have served to further reinforce participants’ nonhuman identities. Additional research is needed in order to verify this possibility.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

There are several important strengths of the current research. First, a fundamental strength of this study was its ability to replicate and extend upon previous research. The present study found themes similar to those described by Grivell et al. (2014), but also uncovered new ones (e.g. connection to nature, social obstacles). In addition, this research is the first to provide a comprehensive trajectory of the development of therian identity. Finally, this is the first study to specifically investigate therianthropy within the lens of an existing identity model framework. The use of McAdams’s life story model of identity allowed for a unique qualitative design that gave therians an opportunity to share their stories with their own voices. Allowing a small, under-studied group the opportunity to speak on their own behalf in this way is crucial at this early stage of the field.

Despite these important contributions to the study of therianthropy, there were also limitations to this research. Perhaps the most notable limitation is the fact that the

present study's small sample size and qualitative design do not allow for generalization of the results. Thus, the present findings cannot be said to be representative of therians as a whole. Also, the methodology of this study did not allow for assessment of the actual frequency of specific experiences. For example, there were no direct questions about species dysphoria; rather, comments related to dysphoria arose naturally in the context of responding to more general questions. Failure to mention a particular experience therefore does not mean that it was not experienced; thus, this study may underestimate the prevalence of particular therianthropic experiences.

Finally, there were particular strengths and limitations to the specific methodology used in this study. Dan McAdams's life story model of identity was appropriate to apply to therian identity due to its subjective nature and open-endedness. In particular, the adapted LSI was able to cast a wide net via its broad questions, allowing for a range of experiences to emerge. Given the extremely limited scholarly information about therianthropy, this broad and open-ended approach was useful. It is worth noting, however, that a broad approach, such as used here, generally benefits from a standardized set of follow-up questions. Future research should consider a set of standard probes that would allow for exploration of certain topics in more depth.

The use of grounded theory with a narrative model and a narrative measure was important for the exploratory nature of the present study for the aforementioned reasons (i.e. appropriate broadness). However, these narrative aspects mean that there are still important details about therianthropy that remain unknown. For example, the LSI primarily asks participants about notable events in their lives (e.g. a high point), but it does not ask about day-to-day living. Therefore, the current method only elicits information about particularly salient therianthropic experiences, and does not allow for

knowledge about more mundane daily living experiences of therians. If this study had employed a phenomenological approach, which seeks to describe lived experiences, the method could have been tailored to address those day-to-day experiences.

### **Directions for Future Research**

One promising direction for future research would be to further tailor qualitative methodologies to address questions of therianthropy. For example, one could ask in-depth questions about particular therianthropic experiences (e.g. Do you experience species dysphoria, and how do you cope with it?). This type of research would allow for a similar depth of analysis, but it would extend this study by addressing therian experiences in a more direct way. Future qualitative research should also come from a range of specific approaches (e.g. phenomenological, case study, grounded theory) in order to capitalize on the strengths of each method.

Additionally, it may be appropriate to begin quantitative research into therianthropy. One could increase generalizability, as well as our overall understanding of therian identity, by surveying large and representative samples of therians. It would be particularly useful to test the current proposed trajectory of therian identity development against a larger group.

Finally, other routes for future research could include comparison studies between therians and non-therians. It is important to establish not only how objective experiences differ, but also how subjective interpretations of those experiences differ. Studies addressing these questions will allow researchers to begin to tease out what experiences are unique to therians and their development. An example of one such research endeavor would be to investigate childhood animal play among therians and non-therians, addressing questions such as, “How common is animal pretend play among children, and

how is therian play similar or different to non-therian play?” Such developmental studies will help researchers better understand the early development of a nonhuman identity.

### **Conclusion**

The present study extended past research by investigating the phenomenon of therianthropy within the existing identity framework proposed by Dan McAdams. Throughout the qualitative analytic process, several key findings emerged, including the unique ways in which therians conceptualize therianthropy, a possible trajectory of therian identity development, lived experiences of therians, and the ways in which therians attribute their life experiences to therianthropy. The process of self-understanding evidenced by the participants fell in line with McAdams’s identity model. Future research should aim to specifically address therianthropic experiences and to use larger samples to allow for generalization of results.

Table 1

*Demographic Information of Participants\**

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Residence	Sexual Orientation	Spirituality
Alex	24	Genderfluid	Native	North America	Asexual	Agnostic Animist
Joe	28	Genderless	White/Soviet	Europe	Homosexual	Agnostic Animist
Heket	29	Female	White	North America	Bisexual	Non-spiritual Atheist
Ray	18	Female	Mixed	North America	Pansexual	Atheist
Song	19	Non-binary	White	North America	Asexual	Universal Unitarian
Thana	18	Female	White	North America	Demisexual	Atheist
Gray	24	Agender	White	North America	Pansexual	Pagan

\*In order to protect participants' privacy, their types and countries of residence are omitted. Participant self-description is used rather than a classification offered by the author.

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## **Appendix A - Glossary**

**Anthropomorphic** - Having human characteristics

**Anthropomorphic art** - Art depicting anthropomorphic animals

**Dysphoria** - A state of dissatisfaction, discomfort, or anxiety; the opposite of euphoria

**Furry** - A person who enjoys anthropomorphic art and considers themselves to be a part of the furry fandom

**Furry fandom** - The established community of people who take part in viewing and creating anthropomorphic art

**Fursona** - An anthropomorphic character created by a furry to represent themselves or their alternate persona in the furry fandom

**Gender dysphoria** - Used in the DSM-5 to diagnose individuals whose gender identification does not match their assigned sex; in common speech refers to marked discomfort and/or dissatisfaction with one's body due to it not matching one's gender identity

**Mental shift** - A shift in consciousness or mindset from a more human mentality to a more animal mentality, typically reflecting the mindset of one's theriotype

**Non-binary gender identity** - A gender identity that falls in between or outside of the gender binary of man and woman, e.g. androgyne, genderfluid, agender

**Otherkin** - A person who identifies as nonhuman on an internal and integral level in addition to or instead of identifying as human

**Otherkinity** - The phenomenon of identifying as nonhuman on an internal and integral level

**Phantom limbs** - Feeling body parts which do not physically exist, including both amputated limbs and limbs which never existed in the first place (supernumerary phantom limbs)

**Project Shift** - A website that is a collection of essays written by and for therians and interested parties about therianthropy; [www.project-shift.net](http://www.project-shift.net)

**Real Vampires** - People who experience an energy deficiency which is alleviated only by consuming psychic energy and/or blood

**Species dysphoria** - Marked discomfort and/or dissatisfaction with one's body due to its physical species being different from one's species identity

**Therian** - Short for therianthrope

**Therianthrope** - A person who identifies as an animal on an internal and integral level in addition to or instead of identifying as human

**Therianthropy** - The phenomenon in which a person identifies as an animal on an internal and integral level

**Theriotype** - The animal a person identifies as, e.g. My theriotype is a dog

**Transgender identity** - Gender identity that does not match one's biological sex, i.e. being assigned male at birth due to male genitalia but later coming to identify as a woman

**The Werelist** - An online forum relating to the discussion of therianthropy; [www.werelist.net](http://www.werelist.net)

**Wulfhowl** - A now defunct forum on the subject of therianthropy; it has been converted into Kinmunity and broadened its focus to otherkin as a whole; [www.kinmunity.com](http://www.kinmunity.com)

## Appendix B – Recruitment Script

Hello everybody. My name is Natalie, and I am an undergraduate student on the verge of earning my B.A. in Psychology. I am currently working on an undergraduate senior thesis on the topic of therianthropy. I have been a member of the therian community for over five years. Since I was a senior in high school, I have been committed to studying psychology and pursuing a career in the scholarly research of therianthropy. I am ecstatic to be finally starting down that path with my first therian-centric research study. I am thus writing this post in order to solicit participants for my study.

The specific purpose of my study is to investigate therianthropic identities through the lens of Dan McAdams's Life Story Model of Identity. McAdams posits that people create and maintain ever-evolving narratives of their lives in order to construct a unified self with a sense of purpose in the world. His ideas suggest that people construct identities based on the way they interpret their life events and how they reinterpret their memories looking back on them. I believe that this model can be applied to the development and maintenance of therian identities, and I am conducting the present study to test that idea. *My goal is to collect the life stories of therians and compare them to look for themes that will help suggest how this identity is formed and maintained.*

This study will consist of interviewing between five and ten self-identified therians ages 18-30 using an adaptation of McAdams's Life Story Interview. The interviews will be conducted via text-based instant messaging over Skype. These will not involve voice or video chat components. The Skype account I will be using has been created specifically for this study.

The interviews are expected to be a maximum of 2 hours in length. There will be no monetary compensation for participating in this study. The interview will ask participants to reflect upon both positive and negative life experiences. Questions about negative life experiences may cause emotional distress; however, participants can freely choose to skip any question at any time and for any reason. Please keep this in mind when considering participation. You will need to complete an informed consent form in order to participate. This study has been approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee at Lake Forest College. To address any questions or concerns regarding ethics or the treatment of human participants in this study, please contact Co-Chair Sergio Guglielmi of the Human Subjects Review Committee at Lake Forest College at [guglielm@lakeforest.edu](mailto:guglielm@lakeforest.edu).

**Please post in this thread to indicate your interest in participating in this study.** If you have any questions about participation, please post them, and I will answer them as soon as possible. Of all the individuals who express interest in participation, five to ten will be randomly selected to be interviewed for the study. If you are selected, I will send you a private message on this forum to notify you of your selection. At that time you will

be asked whether you wish to proceed with participation. If so, you will need to provide me with a valid email address so that I can send you an informed consent form to submit and so we can schedule a time for the interview.

As stated above, this study is looking specifically for self-identified therians from the ages of 18 to 30. If you are outside of this age range or if you self-identify as otherkin, fictionkin, phytanthrope, or any other kind of nonhuman besides a therian, then you are unfortunately not eligible for participation in the present study.

Thank you very much for reading this and I look forward to speaking with interested parties and future participants!

## Appendix C - Interview

### Introductory Statements:

Hello and thank you for choosing to participate in this study.

You are going to be assigned a number so that your user name cannot be associated with your responses. At the end of the interview, I will ask you to choose a pseudonym to be used when I am writing up the results.

Before beginning the interview I would like to reiterate that your participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw participation at any time. If at any point I ask you a question that you do not wish to answer, for any reason, please tell me and we can skip that question. All of your responses will be entirely confidential and any personally identifiable information will be omitted or disguised in analyses and the research paper in order to secure your privacy. I would also like to take a moment to let you know that I will likely be pretty quiet while you are responding to questions. I will post the question prompt and then give you ample time and space to respond. I may ask some follow-up questions as needed, but otherwise my primary role is to take a backseat and simply allow you to share your story. I promise I will be present and listening the whole time, regardless of how quiet I may seem.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

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Before diving into the bulk of the interview, I would like to take a moment to simply ask you about your understanding of therianthropy. How do you define therianthropy? What is therianthropy to you?

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Thank you. We will now move on to the Life Story Interview portion of the interview.

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### **Life Story Interview Adaptation:**

#### **Introduction**

This is an interview about the story of your life as it relates to your therian identity. As a social scientist, I am interested in hearing your story, including parts of the past as you remember them and the future as you imagine it. The story is selective; it does not include everything that has ever happened to you. Instead, I will ask you to focus on a few key things in your life – a few key scenes, characters, and ideas. There are no right or wrong answers to my questions. Instead, your task is simply to tell me about some of the most important things that have happened in your life and how they relate to your nonhuman identity, as well as how you imagine your life developing in the future. This interview is expected to take no more than two hours.

This interview is for research purposes only, and its main goal is simply to hear your story. As a social scientist, I am collecting therian life stories in order to understand the similarities and differences in therian life stories and the various ways in which therians understand who they are as therians. Everything you say is voluntary.

Do you have any questions?



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## **A. Life Chapters**

Please begin by thinking about your life and discovery of your nonhuman identity as if it were a book or novel. Imagine that the book has a table of contents containing the titles of the main chapters in the story. To begin here, please describe very briefly what the main chapters in the book might be. Please give each chapter a title, tell me just a little bit about what each chapter is about, and say a word or two about how we get from one chapter to the next. As a storyteller here, what you want to do is to give me an overall plot summary of your story as you discovered and came into your therian identity, going chapter by chapter. You may have as many chapters as you want, but I would suggest having between about two and seven of them.

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*[Note to interviewer: The interviewer should feel free to ask questions of clarification and elaboration throughout the interview, but especially in this first part. The interviewer must also preface all follow-up questions throughout the interview the disclaimer that the participant can skip any question at any time for any reason. This first section of the interview should run between 15 and 30 minutes.]*

***[IF THIS INFORMATION IS UNKNOWN BY THE END OF SECTION A, ASK THESE QUESTIONS:***

*I have some follow-up questions. If you do not wish to answer these, please tell me and we can skip them.*

*How many theriotypes do you have and what are they?*

*How long have you identified as nonhuman? How long have you known about therianthropy or been involved in the community?]*

## **B. Key Scenes in the Life Story**

Now that you have described the overall plot outline for your life and journey of nonhuman self-discovery, I would like you to focus in on a few key scenes that stand out in the story. A key scene would be an event or specific incident that took place at a particular time and place. Consider a key scene to be a moment in your life story that stands out for a particular reason – perhaps because it was especially good or bad, particularly vivid, important, or memorable. For each of the eight key events we will consider, I ask that you describe in detail what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling in the event. In addition, I ask that you tell me why you think this particular scene is important or significant in your life. How does this scene contribute to your understanding of yourself as a therian? Please be specific. (Let me know when you're ready for the prompt for the first scene.)

-----

### **1. High Point**

Please describe a scene, episode, or moment in your life that stands out as an especially positive experience. This scene should in some way be related to therianthropy or to your understanding of yourself as nonhuman. Please describe this high point scene in detail. What happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so good and how it relates or contributes to your therian identity.

-----

## **2. Low Point**

The next question may bring up emotional pain and distress. If you do not wish to answer, please tell me and we can skip it.

The second scene is the opposite of the first. Thinking back over your entire life, please identify a scene that stands out as a low point, if not the low point in your life story. Even though this event is unpleasant, I would appreciate your providing as much detail as you can about it. Again, this scene should relate to therianthropy or your understanding of yourself as nonhuman. What happened in the event, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so bad and what the scene may say about your therian identity.

-----

## **3. Turning Point**

In looking back over your life, it may be possible to identify certain key moments that stand out as turning points -- episodes that marked an important change in you or your life story. Please identify a particular episode in your life story that you now see as a turning point in your understanding of your nonhuman identity.

Again, for this event please describe what happened, where and when, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling. Also, please say a word or two about what you think this event says about you as a person and about your therian identity.

-----

#### **4. Positive Childhood Memory**

The fourth scene is an early memory – from childhood or your teen-aged years – that stands out as especially *positive* in some way. This would be a very positive, happy memory from your early years. Again, the memory should relate to your therianthropic experiences and identity as a therian in some way. Please describe this good memory in detail. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you? How do you think this scene contributed to your identification as a therian?

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#### **5. Negative Childhood Memory**

The next question may bring up emotional pain and distress. If you do not wish to answer, please tell me and we can skip it.

The fifth scene is an early memory – from childhood or your teen-aged years – that stands out as especially *negative* in some way. This would be a very negative, unhappy memory from your early years, perhaps entailing sadness, fear, or some other very negative emotional experience. It should still tie back to therianthropy in some way. Please describe this bad memory in detail. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you? How do you think this scene contributed to your identification as a therian?

-----

#### **6. Vivid Adult Memory**

Moving ahead to your adult years, please identify one scene that you have not already described in this section (in other words, do not repeat your high point, low

point, or turning point scene) that stands out as especially vivid or meaningful that relates to your therianthropic identity. This would be an especially memorable, vivid, or important scene, positive or negative, from your adult years. Please describe this scene in detail, tell what happened, when and where, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling. Also, what does this memory say about you and how does it relate to your therian identity?

-----

### **7. Wisdom Event**

Please describe an event in your life in which you displayed wisdom. Again, it should somehow relate to therianthropy. The episode might be one in which you acted or interacted in an especially wise way or provided wise counsel or advice, made a wise decision, or otherwise behaved in a particularly wise manner. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you and how does it impact your therian identity?

-----

### **8. Religious, Spiritual, or Mystical Experience**

Whether they are religious or not, many people report that they have had experiences in their lives where they felt a sense of the transcendent or sacred, a sense of God or some almighty or ultimate force, or a feeling of oneness with nature, the world, or the universe. Thinking back on your entire life, please identify an episode or moment in which you felt something like this that also somehow relates to your nonhuman identity. Please describe this transcendent experience in detail. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what were you

thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you and how does it influence your therian identity?

-----

## **D. Challenges**

This next section considers challenges and regrets you have encountered in your life.

-----

### **1. Life Challenge**

The next question may bring up emotional pain and distress. If you do not wish to answer, please tell me and we can skip it.

Looking back over your entire life, please identify and describe what you now consider to be the greatest single challenge you have faced in your life that is somehow related to therianthropy. What is or was the challenge or problem? How did the challenge or problem develop? How did you address or deal with this challenge or problem? What is the significance of this challenge or problem in your own life story and therian identity?

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### **4. Failure, Regret**

The next question may bring up emotional pain and distress. If you do not wish to answer, please tell me and we can skip it.

Have you ever experienced a failure or regret that you attribute in some way to your therianthropy? Please describe the failure or regret and the way in which the failure or regret came to be. How have you coped with this failure or regret? What

effect has this failure or regret had on you and the way you view your  
therianthropy now?

-----

### **E. Personal Ideology**

Now, I would like to ask a few questions about your fundamental beliefs and values and about questions of meaning and morality in your life. Please give some thought to each of these questions.

-----

#### **1. Religious/Ethical Values**

Consider for a moment the religious or spiritual aspects of your life. Please describe in a nutshell your religious beliefs and values, if indeed these are important to you. Whether you are religious or not, please describe your overall ethical or moral approach to life. Do you feel your therianthropy influences your religious/spiritual or ethical values? Do your ethics or spirituality influence your therianthropy? How do your spiritual beliefs and ethical values contribute to the way you view your identity as a therian?

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#### **2. Political/Social Values**

How do you approach political or social issues? Do you have a particular political point of view? Are there particular social issues or causes about which you feel strongly? Please explain. In particular, does your therianthropy influence the way you view social or political issues? Do your social or political views influence your therianthropy in any way? How do your social or political values contribute to the way you view yourself as a therian?

---

### **3. Change, Development of Religious and Political Views**

Please tell the story of how your religious, moral, and/or political views and values have developed over time. Have they changed in any important ways? Please explain. In particular, have your religious, moral, and/or political values developed in conjunction with the development of your nonhuman identity? How do these views and your therianthropy influence each other?

---

### **4. Single Value**

What is the most important value in living as a human being? Please explain. This question need not necessarily relate to therianthropy, though it can.

---

### **5. Other**

Is there anything else you can tell me that would help me understand your most fundamental beliefs and values about life and the world? Is there anything else you tell me that would help me understand your overall philosophy of life? How do these additional thoughts, beliefs, or philosophies relate to or influence your therian identity?

---

## **F. Life Theme**

Looking back over your entire life story as it relates to therianthropy that we have discussed today, with all its chapters, scenes, and challenges, and extending back into the past and ahead into the future, do you discern a central theme, message, or idea that runs



throughout the story? What is the major theme in your life story or therian identity?

Please explain.

-----

### **G. Reflection**

Thank you for this interview. I have just one more life story question for you. Many of the stories you have told me are about experiences that stand out from the day-to-day. For example, we talked about a high point, a turning point, a scene about a challenge, etc.

Given that most people don't share their life stories or necessarily consider their therianthropy in this way on a regular basis, I'm wondering if you might reflect for one last moment about what this interview, here today, has been like for you. What were your thoughts and feelings during the interview? How do you think this interview has affected you? Has this interview affected the way you think about nonhuman identity? Do you have any other comments about the interview process?

-----

### **Demographics:**

The bulk of the interview is now over; however, I would like to ask you some basic demographic questions before we formally conclude. This is simply to get an idea of who you are in addition to being a therian. Please remember that all of your answers throughout the entirety of the interview are completely confidential and any personally identifying information will be omitted or disguised in the study's research paper in order to secure your privacy. You may also skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

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How old are you?

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How do you define your gender identity?

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How do you define your sexual orientation?

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How do you define your race/ethnicity?

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What country do you currently live in? Have you ever lived in any other countries?

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What spiritual or religious paths do you follow? What do you consider yourself spiritually?

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Thank you. Please choose a pseudonym (or code name) that I can use when I refer to your responses in my research paper.

Please also note here whether or not you would like to be given access to a copy of my final paper.

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The interview is now over. Thank you very much for your participation. Do you have any final comments, questions, or concerns before we part?

Please note: if you have any questions or concerns regarding ethics or the treatment of human participants in this study, please contact Co-Chair Sergio Guglielmi of the Human Subjects Review Committee at Lake Forest College at [guglielm@lakeforest.edu](mailto:guglielm@lakeforest.edu).

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## **Appendix D - Informed Consent**

Please read through the following form and consider the information carefully before deciding to participate in this study.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the therian identity through the lens of McAdams's Life Story Model of Identity. This model posits that individuals create identity through a reconstruction of their past in order to create a unified self with meaning and purpose in the world. More specifically, this study aims to collect therian life stories and then, by comparing those life stories, understand how a therian identity develops and is maintained.

The study will take approximately two hours. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can cease participation at any time for any reason. The interview will ask you to reflect upon both positive and negative life experiences; questions about negative life experiences may stir up emotional pain and distress. You can freely choose to skip any question at any time and for any reason. At the end of the study, the researcher will make every effort to ensure that you are in a comfortable emotional state and will give you an opportunity to ask questions and reflect on your interviewing experience. We cannot offer any monetary compensation for participation in this study.

The interviews will be conducted via text-based instant messaging over Skype. These will not involve voice or video chat components. The Skype account the researcher will be using has been created specifically for this study. It will be deleted at the end of the study. Thus, the instant messaging log for your interview will only be accessible to the principal researcher and you. After the deletion of the research Skype account, the only person with access to the log will be you. Skype does save messaging logs to a cloud for 30 days, but again, the only person accessing those logs will be you, if you so desire. This approach is similar to other data collection techniques, such as Google Forms or Survey Monkey, that are also used in research.

You will not be asked to provide any specific identifying information outside of basic demographics in this interview. You will choose a pseudonym that will be used throughout the research paper. Your responses may be quoted or paraphrased in the researcher's senior thesis, which is a public document, but any potentially identifying information (such as your theriotype), will be disguised.

If you have any questions or concerns or wish to request a summary of the research findings, please contact the primary investigator: Natalie Bricker, [brickernl@mx.lakeforest.edu](mailto:brickernl@mx.lakeforest.edu). For any additional concerns regarding this research project, contact the Lake Forest College faculty advisor: Kathryn Dohrmann, [dohrmann@mx.lakeforest.edu](mailto:dohrmann@mx.lakeforest.edu).

For any other concerns that cannot be addressed by the above individuals or to report any research-related harm, please contact Co-Chair Sergio Guglielmi of the Human Subjects Review Committee at Lake Forest College at [guglielm@lakeforest.edu](mailto:guglielm@lakeforest.edu). Please print or save a copy of this form for your records.

**Agreement:**

The purpose of this study has been sufficiently explained and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to cease participation at any time. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age and identify as a therian. I also agree to allow my interview responses to be quoted or otherwise referenced in the researcher's senior thesis. Once we have received your consent to participate, we will contact you within 24 hours to arrange the interview.

Please consent to participation by clicking the button below on the form.