

# Exploring the B/ordering Processes for Non-Binary Youth

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## Abstract

Non-binary genders are gaining increased attention with younger generations identifying in diverse ways, although there is a lack of cultural recognition of such genders. Additionally, there has been little academic interest focusing specifically on non-binary youth (Hammack et al., 2021; Paechter et al., 2021). Youth are often positioned “transitionally”, occupying a space between childhood and adulthood, with expectations of meeting certain developmental milestones and achieving a stable identity (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Developmental milestones are based on cis- and heteronormative assumptions, therefore, non-binary youth face unique challenges in their transitional positioning (Tatum et al., 2020). Borderland theory (Anzaldúa, 1987) was used as a theoretical framework of selfhood to explore the complexity of identities that cannot neatly be categorised.

I used qualitative methods, informed by feminist and trans theories to explore the regulation of non-binary youth. I interviewed 10 U.K.-based participants who identified as non-binary and were aged 16-21. Interviews were semi-structured and invited participants to talk about their genders, adolescence, and identity borders. I used feminist relational discourse analysis to capture both discourse and experience simultaneously and produce a personal-political account of identity borders and regulation for non-binary youth (Thompson et al., 2018).

The findings show how professionals used the participants’ ages and mental health to question the “legitimacy” of their genders, requiring them to “prove themselves” by educating others about non-binary genders, which was exhausting. The participants voiced their loss and vulnerability from such questioning and drew on the collective queer community to preserve their energies. Physical transitions away from home(towns) provided distance from the exhaustion of educating others and “brain space” to connect with their genders, which was freeing. Relationally, connections with other queer people increased which fostered an affirming space for their identity development and a sense of belonging in the world. Finally, contextual understandings of “the self” as continually developing provided “freedom” from the restrictions of the gender binary. However, pressure to be an individual and to do “identity work” by yourself increased. The participants struggled with a desire to “be themselves” and resist regulation and internalised pressures to conform which caused the participants to self-censor themselves.

This thesis concludes that a “transitional positioning” is complex to navigate and that non-binary youth draw on community and contextual understanding of themselves during their identity development. Therefore, future research should use feminist and trans-informed approaches that can embrace multiplicity and resist demands to simplify personal-political experiences.

Recommendations for practice include the need for practitioners to ensure they are educated about gender diversity and communicate their inclusivity.

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## Glossary

Before presenting the key terms used in the thesis, I want to recognise the previous scholarship on which my understandings are based and which made the current research possible, as a form of relational feminist practice. “Citation is feminist memory. Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 15). The references are not exhaustive but reflect key researchers who were influential in shaping my thinking and approach to the thesis. Non-binary genders (Richards et al., 2017; Richards & Barker, 2013; Vincent, 2020), critical developmental psychology (O’Dell et al., 2017), and borderland theory (Anzaldúa, 1987; Callis, 2014).

Here I present some key terms that I use throughout the thesis and my explanation of what they mean and how I have used them. The definitions that I provide below were established through drawing on non-binary, trans, queer, and feminist literature. In the [literature review](#), I argue that terms in gender research are often conflated e.g., gender and sex, therefore, I wanted to be transparent with how I use terms in the thesis. I also recognise that language evolves, particularly in areas of gender, where there is much literature on the nuances of identity labels (Galupo et al., 2016; Garrett-Walker & Montagno, 2021; Hammack et al., 2021). In the following chapters, I have provided direct quotes for some of the terms from the literature e.g., gender and discourse, that capture the semantics of how other researchers have used and understood them.

**B/ordering process(es)** – a way of recognising that borders are social processes that are constructed and maintained, rather than existing independently of history, culture, and relations with people (Newman, 2003). The way of writing bordering as b/ordering is to draw attention to the resulting creation of separation and ordering (Van Houtum et al., 2016).

**Borderland(s)** – are the in-between “spaces” that emerge within current dominant systems that create their own cultures and social practices, whilst resisting hegemonic ideologies (Callis, 2014). The borderlands are transitional places that embrace fluidity, multiplicity, and plurality, blurring ideas of stable and clear boundaries (Anzaldúa, 1987). Through embracing qualities of change and fluidity, the borderlands are considered spaces of social and cultural possibility (Rosaldo, 1993).

**Cisgenderism** – an ideology that assumes that cisgender identities are the norm and default (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012; Riggs, 2019). Cisgenderist assumptions subsequently reinforce essentialist understandings of gender and sex.

**Discourse** – a practice and way of thinking that is expressed through language, producing and constructing particular versions of events and realities about the world (Burr, 1998; Foucault, 1977; Parker, 1992). Multiple discourses may exist that tell different stories of phenomena, for example,



trans as condition constructs medical understandings of gender (ab)normality, whereas trans as movement produces alternative understandings of flexible and changing identities (Pearce, 2018). Language is central in speaking about and simultaneously constructing objects and identities, and is, therefore, the main focus in discourse analysis (Thompson et al., 2018).

**Gender identity** – an understanding of oneself concerning cultural and historical gender norms, typically femininity and masculinity, which often includes aspects of behaviour, expression, and presentation (Ellis et al., 2020c).

**Non-binary genders** – an umbrella term of identities that are not exclusively male or female, which may include additional labels, such as genderqueer (Richards et al., 2017; Richards & Barker, 2013). Definitionally, non-binary genders exist within the trans umbrella, as they are identities that differ from what was assigned at birth. However, within the thesis, I recognise that there are nuanced experiences for non-binary people, some of whom do not identify as trans (Darwin, 2020b).

**Trans(gender)** – a broad umbrella term for gender identities that do not “align” with a person’s sex/gender that was assigned at birth. (Nagoshi et al., 2014; Richards & Barker, 2013).

**Youth** – a socially constructed developmental period between childhood and adulthood, which may overlap with adolescence (Kehily, 2013). In the U.K., youth is positioned transitionally and is based on chronological age, during which time people gain various additional legal rights (Farrington et al., 2012).

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

### 1.1 Situating the Research

Throughout the process of doing my PhD (2017-2021), there have been significant social and political moments concerning non-binary and trans rights, with shifts in cultural meanings and acceptance, and increased polarisation (Hammack et al., 2021). Firstly, there has been an increase in the visibility and representation of gender diversity, such as more celebrities “coming out” as non-binary, e.g., Demi Lovato and Elliot Page. There has also been an increase in the number of young people identifying as non-binary and trans, a separate, but related issue, which is likely due to the growing acceptance of gender diversity (Paechter et al., 2021). Cultural shifts in language use and labels highlight how the current youth may be distinct from previous generations in their understandings of gender and identities (Barsigian et al., 2020). For example, there is now more expansive language around gender, sexuality, and relationships, which enable the articulation of nuanced experiences, such as bigender and demiboy (Hammack et al., 2021). Whilst new language around gender has opened up possibilities for articulating experiences, issues of recognition and visibility remain for gender diversities, such as non-binary, given the systemic dominance of the gender binary.

In situating the research, I recognise that although non-binary acceptance and recognition is increasing in the U.K., it is not “new”, as examples of gender identities beyond the binary can be found throughout space and time (Iantaffi, 2020). However, in recognising the history of non-binary genders, I do not impose current cultural understandings on historical and indigenous experiences, as this would risk Westernising and erase any nuances (Vincent & Manzano, 2017). In exploring recent non-binary recognition, it is important to look back across feminist scholarship that challenged ideas of the gender binary, essentialism, and heteronormativity, and activism, such as trans, queer, and bisexual movements (Bergman & Barker, 2017).

In 2017 the government announced plans to reform the Gender Recognition Act (2004), which enables trans people to change the sex marker on their birth certificates, to make the process less medicalised and to support self-determination of gender. Since the announcement, there has been a surge in anti-trans movements, with increased media attention and subsequent precarity for trans people, which has been coined the “trans moral panic” (Hines, 2020; Pearce et al., 2020; Todd, 2021). The main concerns centre primarily around what the reform would mean for the protection of women’s-only spaces. During the following years, the moral panic gave rise to the “TERF wars” (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) (Pearce et al., 2020), where biological essentialist arguments were/are being used by TERFs and religious fundamentalists to delegitimise self-determination for trans authenticity. Consequently, there has been a rise in hate crimes and discrimination specifically

towards non-binary and trans people in the U.K., which became increasingly polarised around the reform of the Gender Recognition Act, (2018) (Pearce et al., 2020).

The increased polarisation has also impacted young specifically as the anti-trans movements have vocalised concerns around gender-affirming services, which provide support for people experiencing distress with their gender, by perpetuating narratives of easy-access and permanent interventions (Ashley, 2020). Whilst there has been an increase in referrals to gender services, the average waiting times, at the time of writing (April 2021) were around three years (e.g., Northamptonshire (Northamptonshire NHS Foundation Trust, n.d.), Nottinghamshire (Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, n.d.), and Leeds (Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, n.d.)). Therefore, there is misinformation in public knowledge of gender-affirming healthcare for youth and resistance towards educating young people about gender diversity, resulting in complex personal and political dynamics for non-binary youth.

The climate of the U.K. consists of the reform of the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) (Government Equalities Office, 2018; Scottish Government, 2019), the trans moral panic, and the increasing number of young people identifying in diverse ways, which reflects wider arguments around self-determination and essentialism/biological determinism. Such issues reach beyond the borders of the U.K., as they exist globally and also outside of psychological and sociological fields, e.g., there are various healthcare and legal implications for understandings of gender. Therefore, there is a clear justification for research on how non-binary youth navigate the world, focusing on what forms of regulation they experience.

## **1.2 Why Non-Binary Youth?**

“Youth” encompasses developmental periods, e.g., young people, adolescence, and early adulthood, which are traditionally considered as transitional times, where various normative social transitions can be observed, such as completing compulsory education, pursuing further education and/or employment, and moving away from the family home (Kehily, 2013). Youth studies literature shows how such normative transitions may be non-linear and/or stalled due to economic and social changes, such as, the inability to leave the family home due to the house crisis (Crafter et al., 2019). Politically, some transitions enable new possibilities, for example, being able to vote, get married, the legal age of consent (Crafter et al., 2019). Therefore, for most youth, many new developmental, social, and political opportunities are opened up during these years. Throughout the thesis, I use the term “youth” to include chronological ages of 16-21 years. I acknowledge the limitations of chronological age in representing “alternative” development, however, most social, developmental, cultural, and political practices are based on chronological ways of conceptualising age, and shape discourses which the research seeks to explore.

The construction of youth as a period of the lifespan is assumed to be universal. However, Burman (2016) has argued that youth, and development more broadly, is culturally and historically based. The understanding of youth as a socially constructed and situated developmental period is significant for the current thesis as it deconstructs genealogies of youth that assume universal developmental “milestones”, and shows how they reflect privileged identities, such as cisgender, heterosexual, white, and able-bodied (Apgar, 2017). Critical psychologists have challenged mainstream understandings of development for privileging normative trajectories and pathologising any deviation (Halberstam, 2005; O’Dell et al., 2017). Since many developmental norms are achieved relationally, through comparison with similar peers and sociocultural expectations, and given that non-binary genders are only recently gaining visibility, non-binary youth must navigate unique discourses of identity development (Cosgrove, 2021).

Additionally, research on non-binary and trans adults has shown that awareness of gender diversity often occurs in childhood, however, due to the pervasive regulation of young people, many conceal their identities to conform (Kennedy & Hellen, 2010; Rickett et al., 2021). Due to the transitional positioning of youth, and increased autonomy, exploration, and visibility of gender diversity is often located within this period of development. However, non-binary people often challenge linear development, therefore, how they navigate childhood regulation, transitional positionings, and developmental milestones require further attention (Matsuno, 2019). Therefore, I argue that non-binary youth must negotiate additional transitional positionings that are not considered in mainstream cisheteronormative discourses of development. For example, although LGBTQ+ youth must also negotiate cis- and/or heteronormative discourses, non-binary youth face unique challenges as their genders are not legally recognised and the structuring of physical spaces and understandings of identities is shaped by the gender binary (Bradford et al., 2019). Therefore, non-binary youth are likely to experience challenges in their genders being socially recognised, and subsequent difficulties in navigating a binary culture.

Despite the increased public attention on non-binary genders, there has been little focus in academic research (Cosgrove, 2021; Hegarty et al., 2018; Richards et al., 2016). The small amount of research in this area has explored unique experiences for non-binary youth, such as Rankin and Beemyn (2012), however, the milestones identified in their research reflect gender non-conforming youth broadly (e.g., trans, “cross-dressers”, and genderqueer). Barbee (2019) notes how grouping non-binary genders with other forms of gender diversity may be problematic:

Overall, this work [Connell, 2010; West & Zimmerman, 1987] has shown how trans-centered scholarship can help us theorize the gendering of organizations and trans people’s interactions, but it has tended to presume rather than analyze the gender binary and neglect nonbinary-

identified trans people or conflate their experiences with binary-identified trans people (Barbee & Schrock, 2019, p. 574).

When encompassing non-binary genders within broad trans narratives, youth may face transnormative expectations, such as “born in the wrong body” narratives and wanting to transition to the “opposite” gender (Tatum et al., 2020). Matsuno and Budge (2017) provided a critical overview of non-binary literature, identifying common experiences, however, they did not centre youth in their review. Goldberg and Kuvalanka (2018) explored identity development especially on non-binary youth, which contributes to the area of focus for the present research, providing a U.S. perspective. Therefore, I argue there is a strong rationale for focusing specifically on non-binary people’s gender development and how they may be regulated in the U.K.

The focus of the thesis is important as non-binary youth experience higher levels of mental health difficulties and discrimination than other cis and binary trans LGB youth and face unique struggles for recognition and cultural intelligibility (Bradlow et al., 2017; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Vincent, 2020). Furthermore, youth are using identity labels in nuanced ways and adopting new ways of understanding gender that justify focusing research on this age (Garrett-Walker & Montagno, 2021; Hammack et al., 2021). However, the literature base for diverse gender development is small and research suggests the focus on non-binary youth is missing from the field (Paechter et al., 2021). Therefore, despite research highlighting areas of concern for non-binary youth, there is a need for increased attention in the literature on how they navigate the forms of regulation. Understanding how non-binary youth negotiate their gender identities against normative developmental regulation may help provide an understanding of how this youth’s wellbeing can be better supported.

### **1.3 Positionality and Research Journey**

When conducting qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge and make explicit my positionalities as a researcher and to consider how I came to do a PhD thesis on non-binary youth. As part of my Masters degree training to become a child and young person therapist, I undertook a placement at a local charity that provided free counselling, sexual health, and LGBTQ+ youth groups for 12–25-year-olds. As a queer person who was in education during the latter years of Section 28 (Wise, 2000) (a law which prohibited schools from teaching about homosexuality), LGBTQ+ representation was lacking for most of my school years, meaning that opportunities such as LGBTQ+ youth groups were not available. Therefore, being on placement at a service that was explicitly visible and inclusive of LGBTQ+ young people, was a new experience to me. The visibility during placement, combined with the lack of education on gender in my course, started my interest in

being involved with the youth group's services to better understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth.

Therefore, I focused my MSc dissertation on the experiences of non-binary youth, recruiting from the youth groups. I was interested in hearing the youths' experiences in general, as there seemed to be large gaps in what counselling students were being taught, and the needs of young, LGBTQ+ people. I became a youth leader for the young person LGBTQ+ youth group whilst completing my MSc, which is also the start of my PhD research journey. I consider my PhD an extension of my Masters' research, where I concluded that non-binary youth face multiple forms of regulation that were unique to their challenging of various binary concepts (Ward & Callaghan, in press). Therefore, my PhD focuses on non-binary regulation to explore the nuances of identity borders and how they are maintained, traversed, and challenged.

At the start of my PhD journey, I identified as a binary, cis male, and I was conscious of my gender identity, and my role as a researcher, during recruitment and interactions with participants. Having worked with LGBTQ+ young people in my youth leader role, I had become familiar with issues that were significant, such as pronoun use, nuances within identity labels, queer history, and the legacy of "psy" disciplines (i.e., psychology, psychiatry, and psychotherapy) (Eckstrand & Potter, 2017; Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). As a psychologist, the pathologising legacy of "psy" research was significant, as I heard from the young people their distrust of professional figures, such as therapists and medical practitioners. Therefore, it was important for me to be transparent about my background and intentions for the research throughout the process. I ensured that I did not reproduce essentialist, pathologising, or cisgenderist discourses in my approach to the research by informing my theoretical and methodological frameworks with trans theories (Ansara, 2010; Ansara & Hegarty, 2012, 2014; Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). I also attended trans and queer workshops and conferences before and during my PhD to ensure that I had current knowledge, which informed the design of the research. For example, I used open-ended spaces to write gender and pronouns and I also recognised non-binary as heterogeneous, making this explicit in the recruitment poster to be inclusive of the diversity within the umbrella term.

The thesis is personally important to me as a queer person and it has had a personal impact shifting how I understand my gender, which I discuss further in [my reflexivity section](#). The thesis is also politically important to me as I work directly with queer young people through my role as a therapist and indirectly as a lecturer educating future practitioners in child and adolescent mental health.

## 1.4 Chapter Outlines

**Chapter 1** – In [the introduction](#), I situate the thesis by discussing the current climate, in the U.K., emphasising how ongoing trans moral panic and “TERF wars” impacts non-binary youth (Pearce et al., 2020). I provide a rationale to justify the focus of the research on non-binary youth, arguing that little attention has been given to non-binary genders, generally, and that youth are often missed in the literature, in favour of child and adult-centred research (Paechter et al., 2021). I also define some main terms used throughout the thesis before providing an overview of the chapters.

**Chapter 2** – In [the literature review](#), I draw upon non-binary scholarship, as well as transgender theories (Monro, 2005; Nagoshi et al., 2014; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010) to provide an overview of the field, as the identities are often combined in research. I highlight how trans theories centre both socially- and self-constructed aspects of gender identities to reflect the embodied fluidity that non-binary and trans people experience. Therefore, purely discursive conceptualisations present in poststructuralist and queer theories “miss” the importance of the lived and embodied aspects of gender (Nagoshi et al., 2014). I critically consider the category of “youth”, arguing that it is socially constructed and transitionally positioned. I also argue that normative “milestones” reflect cisheteronormative development and therefore, non-binary youth face additional and unique forms of regulation. I introduce borderland theory (Anzaldúa, 1987) as a theoretical framework of selfhood to understand non-binary genders as identities that exist in-between hegemonic categories. Finally, having provided an overview of the literature, I state the research questions which stem from the identified gaps in the field.

**Chapter 3** – In [my methodology chapter](#), I provide an overview of the philosophical assumptions that I draw on for the research and outline the methods and analysis used. Firstly, I present a brief outline of epistemological and ontological understandings of gender, discussing the linguistic turn away from essentialism to discourse. Trans theories argue that social constructionism and poststructuralism struggle to capture the socially- and self-constructed aspects of gender, as they focus on discursive and linguistic constructions and neglect material aspects of lived experience and embodiment (Monro, 2005; Nagoshi et al., 2014). Therefore, I present my use of an agential realist ontoepistemology (Barad, 2007, 2015), which recognises how the material and discursive are inherently co-constituted – that humans and their experiences cannot be disconnected from the “reality” of the world. I continue to provide details of the methods used, including how the participants were recruited and the process of interviewing. I draw on guidance for ethical trans research (Vincent, 2018), showing how my thesis has been informed by such recommendations and I engage reflexively with my positionalities and how they have inherently shaped my approach and analysis of the data. Lastly, I present an argument for using feminist relational discourse analysis

(FRDA) (Thompson et al., 2018) as an analytical framework to capture both the material and discursive aspects of gender, to produce a personal-political account. I provide an overview of the analytical steps, including a worked example from the data.

**Chapter 4** – The analysis chapters are presented in a dualistic way in line with the two phases of FRDA: 1. poststructural discourse analysis and 2. analysing emergent voices in relation to the discourses (Thompson et al., 2018). Therefore, chapters [four](#), [five](#), and [six](#) represent phase one of the analysis, with each focusing on a discursive realm. [Chapter seven](#) represents phase two of the analysis and focuses on the construction of I poems, to trace the participants' voices through the discursive realms.

The first of the analysis and discussion chapters focuses on the discursive realm of legitimacy. [In this chapter](#), the participants spoke of how they are often positioned as too young to know themselves and are therefore disbelieved about their gender identities, highlighting the first b/ordering process of the research. The positioning of the participants drew on discourses of childhood, whereby young people lack the mental capacity to know themselves and frame any legitimate claims as a “phase” e.g., not credible. In contrast, I note how cisgender young people do not face the same b/ordering processes as they are implicitly believed and assumed to be a boy or a girl. The constant questioning of non-binary youths' legitimacy paradoxically required them to become identity educators to prove their identities, which entailed an additional b/ordering process of emotional work. The chapter ends by noting how the participants managed the emotional work by being selective with whom they engaged with, as they noted the constant task of being required to educate others. Therefore, the participants differentiated and identified people who were worth engaging with and those who are not, to protect and preserve their energies.

**Chapter 5** – [The second analysis chapter](#) focuses on the dominant discourses, metaphors, and understandings of youth as transitional (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014). I argue that transitional discourses reflect cisheteronormative development e.g., achieving a stable and enduring binary gender identity in childhood and pursuing romantic/sexual relationships in adolescence. Therefore, dominant discourses function to reinforce certain developmental trajectories and milestones, which construct non-binary youth as “other”. The participants drew on discourses of youth as transitional, but in nuanced ways, which highlighted how they navigated b/ordering processes, such as legitimacy and educator positionings, as discussed in [chapter four](#). For example, moving away from the family home (often to university) was a significant transition for the participants' gender development as it provided both physical and “brain space” from the constant requirement to prove themselves and allowed them to engage with and process thoughts about gender.



However, transitional discourses only captured parts of the participants' experiences, missing the relational aspects that were significant in their journeys. Discourses of belonging enhanced the analysis, showing the significance of a queer community for identity development and as a way of managing the minority stress and microaggressions of their subject positions. In addition to acting as a buffer, belonging to a queer community provided enhanced discussions and understandings of gender (and sexuality). The participants became b/order reinforcers in this chapter by fostering queer belonging and distinguishing subjects who were generationally and temporality "different". Therefore, queer belonging mitigated the requirement to engage with (de)legitimacy, childhood, and transitional discourses as there was a communal understanding of gender as non-binary, partly socially constructed, and intersecting with other aspects of identity.

**Chapter 6 – [The third analysis chapter](#)** engages with discourses of personal growth and shows how the participants understood their gender development in ways that challenge dominant narratives. The participants challenged modernist and essentialist understandings of gender and identity as biologically determined and stable by drawing on the significance of context, which was integral for people to understand their genders. By framing their genders contextually, the participants disrupted dominant child/adult developmental discourses by positioning themselves as continually becoming.

The importance of context for understanding non-binary genders provided "freedom" from binary pressures, as the borderlands were less restrictive spaces and therefore opened up gendered possibilities for the participants. However, I use the concept of a "discursive duel" to illustrate how in their resistance to modernist understandings of identity and development, the participants became regulated by individualistic discourses. There was a sense of individual responsibility for identity development that decontextualised gender by neglecting the significance of belonging and the environment, as identified in [chapter five](#). Finally, I discuss how familial and religious messages of trans- and homophobia became internalised by the participants during their development, which reinforced "normative" ways of being and caused some participants to self-censor.

**Chapter 7 – [The final analysis chapter](#)** introduces the second phase of FRDA which analyses voices in relation to discourses through constructing I poems, to put the personal in the political. The second phase draws on the Listening Guide (Gilligan et al., 2012) to hear the contrapuntal voices within the participants' accounts and show the multiple functions in each of their discursive positions. By tracing the participants' personal "I" statements through the discursive realms I discuss how they work to deconstruct how they are positioned and (re)locate themselves.

In the discursive realm of legitimacy, the participants' subjectivities were constructed as children and educators, which delegitimised their genders and required them to engage in

emotional work to educate others. The participants used voices of vulnerability and confusion, to articulate their experiences of loss and sense of not belonging in navigating the discursive realm. Participants spoke of how the emotional work of educating was individually exhausting, but they relocated themselves by drawing on collective voices to preserve their energies.

Within the transitional discursive realm traditional “milestones”, such as moving away from home/to university provided “brain space” and participants voiced experiences of freedom and contentment from the discursive pressures to explain themselves. Youth transitions also had relational impacts as the participants found new friendship groups and were exposed to increased queer communities, articulated through voices of growth and belonging.

Finally, in the personal growth discursive realm, I focus on the voices of shame, which had profound regulatory impacts on the participants, functioning to maintain cultural unintelligibility. As a result, some participants became self-censoring, limiting aspects of their genders, However, there was also multivocality in the voice of desire to challenge these forms of regulation and be more congruent with themselves.

**Chapter 8 – [The final chapter](#)** concludes the thesis by providing a summary of the findings, emphasising the b/ordering processes of legitimacy, transitions, and growth for non-binary youth. I highlight the significance of relationality for navigating the above b/ordering processes which the participants found in belonging and connection with others and contextual ways of understanding gender. I then discuss the various implications of the research, highlighting contributions to theory, such as the unique and nuanced ways that non-binary youth navigate transitional positionings and developmental binaries, the significance of queer community and belonging, and the resilience and euphoria that are possible in the borderlands. Methodological contributions include the use of FRDA for analysing and producing a personal-political account of non-binary regulation, which captures both discourse and personal experience. I suggest that FRDA is a useful and affirming framework for trans-research as it can account for the material-discursive aspects of gender. Finally, practical contributions are significant for education and health professionals and environments, highlighting the need for explicit non-binary visibility and awareness to mitigate psy-legacies of pathologisation.

## Chapter 2 – Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will present an overview of the literature on non-binary genders, youth, and borderland theory. Despite the current interest in non-binary genders, there is a lack of literature that focuses on these genders, as they have historically been encompassed within wider trans and/or LGBTQ+ literature (Bradford et al., 2019). Combining non-binary genders within broader umbrella categories, such as trans and LGBTQ+, risks homogenising experiences and understandings (Formby, 2017). Therefore, specific attention should be given to non-binary genders, due to the gap in the research, to explore the nuances of navigating a society where the discourses of the gender binary are dominant.

Understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality as both separate and interconnected will be discussed, arguing that the terms are often conflated and reinforce essentialist and cisgenderist discourses (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). Theories of identity development will also be discussed, considering the implications of essentialist and cisgenderist discourses on dominant understandings of developmental trajectories. Concluding that identity theories are structured around cisheteronormative ideas of development, queer and trans theories will be considered that propose alternative understandings of gender as performative (Butler, 1999), relational (Shotwell & Sangrey, 2009) and becoming (Linstead & Pullen, 2006).

Finally, considerations around the categorical thinking and the creation of separation that is prevalent in psychological literature will be presented. Categorical thinking furthers binary conceptualisations within and outside of gender (Wood & Petriglieri, 2005) e.g., binary/non-binary, child/adult, becoming/being, and restricts the recognition of intersectional and complex relations. Borderland theory (Anzaldúa, 1987) is used as a theory of selfhood to explore the complexity of gender for non-binary youth. Borderland theory provides a useful framework as it focuses on the “in-between” spaces that may not neatly be categorised or binarized, considering how these borderlands both resist normative regulation whilst creating new spaces of possibility. Additionally, borderland theory helps to give attention to the nature of identity borders – how they may function as barriers to not be crossed, or as a pathway to new subjectivities, which supports the research aim of exploring non-binary regulation (Callis, 2014).

The aims of the research, which were developed from reviewing the literature, and the questions that guided the research are stated. The chapter concludes by reflecting on what discursive understandings of gender open up and close down, arguing personal experiences risk being lost within purely discursive understandings.

## 2.2 Gender / Sex / Sexuality

The terms gender, sex, and sexuality are often used interchangeably in public discourse, academic literature, and policies, creating confusion in people's understandings (Richardson, 2007). Additionally, non-binary genders have been encompassed within trans (and wider LGBTQ+ literature, often without recognising the unique and nuanced experiences that are specific to challenging the binary (Bradford et al., 2019; Richards et al., 2017; Worthen, 2021). Therefore, it is important to address the current and historical understandings of these areas and how they have been used, to situate the present research. The first section will discuss understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality categories, considering whether they exist as purely discreet and separate identities, or whether there is some connection between these, and what it might be like for youth to navigate these identities. The pathologisation of gender non-conformity will be explored and problems around medical discourses will be discussed. Lastly, issues that may be specific to youth will be focused on, considering how gender, sex, and sexuality intersect for youth.

Although gender, sex, and sexuality are often conflated in public discourse, within academic research, there is often an attempt to clearly distinguish and define the differences between them (Hyde, 2005; Mizock & Hopwood, 2016). Gender is currently understood to be "a social and psychological construct used to describe one aspect of how we experience ourselves in a world where the category of 'gender' is made to matter" (Ellis et al., 2020, p. 291). Gender is considered as an identity category, which reflects a sense of who you are, internally, in response to cultural norms. Sex is associated with the biological features that a body might have – for example, chromosomes, hormones, and genitals, to determine whether a person is male, female, or intersex (Fausto-Sterling, 2012). Finally, sexuality describes "a complex set of thoughts and emotions as well as physiological responses. May involve seeking pleasure or reproduction" (Richards & Barker, 2013, p. 230). Although these identity categories are currently considered separate in the U.K., other cultures and historical times have viewed them as more interrelated (Vincent & Manzano, 2017). The evidence of different understandings throughout time and across cultures shows the artificiality of the gender binary and that knowledge of gender (sex and sexuality) do not align with positivist paradigms (Ellis et al., 2020; Foucault, 1978). Therefore, gender has been considered as socially constructed, since understandings have and are constantly changing. However, it is important to note the "reality" of gender and how socially constructed norms and practices have a material and embodied impact on people (Monro, 2005). Understandings of people's genders must be understood in their cultural, historical, social, and political contexts, recognising that the structural and discursive aspects cannot be separated from the individual, lived, and material.

In the global north, such as the U.K. and the U.S.A., the dominant expression of gender is binary (Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). Recent reports suggest that larger numbers of youth are now identifying in diverse ways, including identities that are non-binary (Bower-Brown et al., 2021). When a child is born, they are usually – but not always – considered to be “biologically female” or “male”, as determined by a medical professional through a dominant social practice of “gendering” or “sexing” the child (Ellis et al., 2020b). Sex and gender are terms often used interchangeably in the U.K., even though they are understood to mean different, but intersecting things (Fausto-Sterling, 2012; van Anders, 2015). The assignment of sex and gender is based upon the presence and identification of certain genitalia and often no other criteria are considered (such as chromosomes, hormones, or secondary sex characteristics).

Once assigned a particular sex, a young person is often socialised in ways that “fit” with their assignment, i.e., female sex = girl, male sex = boy, through various gendered practices, such as clothing, play, and socialisation with other same-gender children (Graham et al., 2017). Butler (1988) famously states that: “Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts* [emphasis original]” (p. 519). Therefore, Butler challenges essentialist discourses and instead emphasises the importance of social practices for understanding gender, such as being assigned a sex at birth and associated expectations to behave in either masculine or feminine ways throughout their lives (Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). The use of gendered language binds together how people are socially expected to express their gender in relation to their biology. For example, a girl is socially expected to express and present as feminine, because she was assigned female at birth, regardless of how she might identify, and that she will remain a female throughout her life. A cisheteronormative structuring of gender expectations restricts the opportunities for exploration of one’s identities, along with perpetuating the restriction of social understandings of gender (Newman, 2002). There is also an assumption and social expectation of gender permanence throughout one’s life based on their assignment at birth, which reflects an essentialist and modernist epistemology (Ruble et al., 2007; Vincent, 2016). An essentialist narrative leaves no room for any kind of questioning and fluidity and positions anyone who experiences or identifies in fluid or diverse/non-conforming ways as different and “other” (Richards et al., 2016).

Butler’s (1999) heterosexual matrix shows how essentialist understandings are also restrictive when sexual identities are included. The heterosexual matrix provides a framework for understanding how gender and sexuality configurations are connected (and limited) through heteronormative assumptions i.e., that females will be attracted to males, and vice versa. Heterosexual configurations of gender and sexuality illustrate the dominance of cisgenderism – an

ideology that reinforces essentialist understandings of gender determination based on physical attributes and invalidates and/or pathologises self-identification (Ellis et al., 2020c; Riggs, 2019). Cisgenderism has also been described as “a form of ‘othering’ that takes people categorised as ‘transgender’ as ‘the effect to be explained’” (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012, p. 5) whereby people are assumed to be cisgender and identify as binary male or female. The concept of cisgenderism highlights some difficulties in researching gender identities, as it exposes a range of assumptions present in much psychological literature on gender, e.g., that gender is binary and based on physical body attributes, and that all people experience the world as cisgender (Pearce, 2018). By challenging cisgenderism in research, the artificiality of the gender binary and essentialist claims are rendered visible, showing the complex and multiple ways that gender, sex, and sexuality are experienced, expressed, and embodied by all people (Ansara & Hegarty, 2014). Therefore, focusing on non-binary people helps to (re)orientate understandings of gender, by “stepping outside” of cisheteronormative categories and configurations (Ansara, 2015).

The confusion and conflation between gender and sex, particularly for non-binary and trans people, are often reinforced by medical discourses of needing medical intervention and/or reassignment surgery, thereby creating an association of gender non-conformity with medical models (Vincent, 2020). A purely medical understanding creates a sense of gender being biologically essentialist, pathologising any gender diversity, such as non-binary and trans people, as needing medical intervention to “correct” their identities, which is deeply problematic yet also reinforced by current legal policies and media representations (Eckstrand & Potter, 2017; Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). Since gender is a social construct, any gender expression that challenges or is different from the “norm” is often seen as pathological and diagnosable, which, in turn, reinforces the dominance of the gender binary (Newman, 2002).

In the U.K. there are fewer legal rights for non-binary youth, compared with other countries, such as New Zealand (Richards et al., 2016) or Germany (Frohard-Dourlent et al., 2017), restricting how they are legally identified and impacting how they can be recognised by others. Medical options such as puberty blockers and hormone treatment become more sensitive and magnified for non-binary and trans youth, given the positions of power of adults and professionals (Wagner et al., 2019). Adolescence and early adulthood are constructed as transitional and therefore youth is considered as a pivotal period to negotiate (O’Dell, 2014). During youth, access to various medical support becomes available, alongside the ability to change legal identification markers to reflect their gender is now possible (female or male), which are additional youth transitions that non-binary youth negotiate, compared to binary youth (Kennedy, 2020). Through centring gender diversity, rather than the gender binary, it is possible to explore how dominant developmental trajectories

reflect cisheteronormativity. For example, non-binary youth may “come out” multiple times as different genders and/or sexualities, which is not accounted for or acknowledged in dominant developmental discourses/theories (Ward & Callaghan, in press). Non-binary youth may also express a fluid sense of their genders, which does not fit modernist expectations of achieving a stable and enduring gender identity (Monro, 2007). Other “normative” transitions that are common for youth include changes in education, pursuing a career, gap years, and change in home circumstances, which impact gender and sexual minority youth in unique ways e.g., reports of bullying in school due to being LGBTQ+ impacts youths’ plans for future education (Bradlow et al., 2017).

Even within queer communities, non-binary youth may experience unique kinds of discrimination, such as erasure due to non-legal recognition and difficulties around cultural intelligibility (Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018). Similarities can be seen in the literature on non-binary sexualities, such as bisexuality, whereby bi people are often excluded from straight spaces for being too queer, and from queer spaces for not being queer enough (Barker et al., 2012). Therefore, supportive people and spaces are important for non-binary youth’s well-being (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). Where support from healthcare is concerned, it is important to recognise that historically psychologists and other professionals used approaches that were pathologising and invalidating of gender diverse youth’s identities (Eckstrand & Potter, 2017; Parlee, 1996). Some of these issues prevail, including erasure for non-binary and trans young people, as well as the use of pathologising and slandering language towards their genders in more recent times (Namaste, 2000; Serano, 2016; Winters, 2008). Psychological research has been critiqued for failing to be respectful of youth’s gender identities, such as using incorrect pronouns (Winters, 2008), and there are suggestions that the literature omits the lived experiences of queer youth (Namaste, 2000). For youth with binary genders, most societies have dominant social scripts and rules for how these youth should self-identify (Davis, 2007; Vasey & Bartlett, 2007). However, the experiences of non-binary youth and their process of self-identification are largely unknown (Bower-Brown et al., 2021). The small literature available suggests that mental health professionals working with minority groups have traditionally viewed children with identities differing from their assigned at birth gender as having a mental disorder (Bryant, 2008; Hill et al., 2006; Vasey & Bartlett, 2007). Given these omissions from academic literature and the problematic accounts of how some professionals work with these youth, there is a need to explore how non-binary youth negotiate these transitional positionings and how b/ordering processes might impact wellbeing.

In conclusion, gender, sex, and sexuality are often defined and considered as separate and distinct identity categories within the U.K., which is maintained through a cisgenderist ideology. When engaging with non-binary, trans, and LGBTQ+ narratives and discourses, distinctions between

gender, sex, and sexuality can become less tangible and less clearly demarcated, leading to confusion and conflation of such identity labels (Baker, 2018). Certain gender and sexual configurations are privileged and more culturally intelligible due to cisgenderism and the heterosexual matrix, positioning non-binary and other gender-diverse identities as “other”, and rendering them less visible in society (McQueen, 2015; Vincent, 2020). Therefore, challenges from cisgenderist and heteronormative discourses emphasise that non-binary youth face additional social and developmental “milestones” to navigate during their lifespan. Non-binary experiences have received little attention in current research, due to their grouping with binary trans and wider LGBTQ+ samples (Bower-Brown et al., 2021). Additionally, non-binary youth have been overlooked, despite their unique positioning between childhood and adulthood and how they negotiate multiple transitional positionings.

### **2.3 Transitional Positionings**

Age will now be focused on, considering how it intersects with the earlier discussions around gender for non-binary youth. The section begins with exploring the positioning of children and how they are not considered to have the capacity to know themselves, e.g., their gender. The binaries of permanence/transience and becoming/being are introduced to make sense of the power dynamics between younger and older people and to critique the assumptions of young people lacking the capacity to know themselves (Vincent, 2020). Young people are discursively constructed as developmentally “becoming”, whilst notions of stability and permanence are located within the stability of “being” in adulthood, which is privileged over the transience of adolescence (Prout, 2011). Furthermore, cisgender youth are considered more able to know themselves, compared to non-binary youth as they align closer with discourses of gender and development (e.g., binary identities and linear development) (Lennon & Mistler, 2014). Finally, the implications of “becoming”, transience, and cisgenderism are considered for health and wellbeing, using minority stress theory to understand discrimination and navigating visibility in a binary society.

Travers (2018) focuses on the intersections of gender and age in their research on trans youth and draws on critical youth studies to suggest that the intersection is “a troubled one” (p. 41) due to dominant discourses of young people’s capacities. Children and young people are not considered to have the capacity to authenticate, be confident about, or know their genders, due to dominance of the permanence/transience binary (Vincent, 2020). Young people are considered as “becoming” as part of the permanence/transience binary, they are not yet “fully human”, and therefore their knowledge claims about themselves i.e., having an awareness of and knowing their genders, are delegitimised – particularly if they are not cisgender (Lennon & Mistler, 2014). Critical youth and developmental psychology research highlight how young people are considered and



positioned as having less/limited agency, compared with adults, professionals, and expert voices (Burman, 2016; O'Dell et al., 2017; Travers, 2018).

Discourses of childhood agency and capacity are complicated further when considering gender as an intersection with age, for example, there are disparities between the perceptions of young cisgender and transgender peoples' capacities to know themselves (Worthen, 2021). Cisgender young people are inherently considered to have the capacity to know if they are a boy or a girl due to the dominance of cisgenderism, which reinforces assumptions that gender is binary and that being cisgender is the norm (Riggs, 2019). Whereas, for young people who do not articulate a cisgender identity, their capacities are questioned, highlighting the privileging of certain identities and knowledge (Travers, 2018).

The line between childhood and adulthood is further blurred because children's dependence is largely imposed on them and because many of those who are no longer legally minors still lack meaningful autonomy/agency. Given that only adults are recognized as politically capable, a transgender child is by definition disempowered and more precarious. (Travers, 2018, p. 41)

Critical childhood studies also consider age as a precarious category, as young people are situated in power relations with adults, such as caregivers, teachers, and other professionals, where they are always subjected to subordination (Travers, 2018). As childhoods are transitional, young people will outgrow their transitional positioning and subsequent subordination, however, other marginalised intersections, such as gender diversity, will impact their social positions as adults.

Research on the everyday experiences of trans young people shows that resources to support them are unevenly distributed, further marginalising trans youth of colour, poor youth, and youth with disabilities, thus highlighting the precarity of trans experiences (Travers, 2018). Non-binary youth experience unique forms of precarity and distribution of resources primarily because their gender identities challenge the gender binary, which is a fundamental and ingrained discourse in the global north (Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). Areas such as school, healthcare, and family are impacted by the dominance of the gender binary, consequently affecting non-binary youth through a lack of societal education of gender diversity, affirming healthcare, and parental support (Travers, 2018; Vincent, 2018). Reports of mental health are worse for non-binary youth, particularly in areas of stress, self-harm, and substance use, compared with binary trans people (Veale et al., 2017). Rates of discrimination such as harassment, physical assault, and being refused medical care are also reported to be higher for non-binary people, highlighting multiple areas of precarity (Harrison et al., 2012).

Although I have presented distinctions between non-binary and trans experiences, such as mental health and discrimination, it is not my intention to propose a more/less suffering/difficulties binary, or to create a comparison between non-binary and binary trans experiences. Rather, I aim to tease out and highlight the nuances and unique ways that non-binary youth may navigate discourses and experience the world, since there is a lack of non-binary research and because their gender identities challenge the pervasiveness of current understandings, which are based on the gender binary.

Research focusing on non-binary people shows that there are tensions about using a transgender label as they may not feel “trans enough” or that their experiences are markedly different from binary trans experiences (Darwin, 2020b). Additionally, non-binary people may use strategy in their gendered presentations, often “reverting” to being perceived as binary gendered due to the constant emotional work of maintaining their identities including “mitigating emotional costs, seeking social pleasures, securing material resources, and using binarily designated spaces (e.g., bathrooms)” (Barbee & Schrock, 2019, p. 585). Research shows the diversity of gender identities within the non-binary umbrella and that such diversity cannot be flattened into a further binary conceptualisation of cisgender/transgender, and thus requires a framework of multiplicity, such as borderland theory ([which is introduced later in this chapter](#)) (Darwin, 2020b).

Living as a non-binary person in a society that is structured around the gender binary is emotionally exhausting and can be understood as a form of microaggression and minority stress (Budge et al., 2020; Nadal & Nadal, 2013; Rood et al., 2016). “Microaggressions are subtle forms of discrimination that occur daily and can manifest as behavioral, verbal, or environmental slights” (Galupo et al., 2014, p. 461). Research on college students has shown that navigating campus climates can also contribute to minority stress for non-binary youth through feeling both highly visible and vulnerable in their difference, whilst also being invisible as non-binary genders are often unintelligible to others, impacting their sense of belonging (Budge et al., 2020; Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018). Several strategies have been identified that non-binary and trans young people use to cope with binary and normative gender regulation, such as microaggressions. These strategies included: “invisibility, trying to make the assigned category work, living a double life, engaging in self-harm, gender and/or sexual nonconformity, socially and/or medically transitioning, branching out beyond the binary, and engaging in education and activism to bring about social change” (Travers, 2018, p. 18). The strategy of invisibility is recognised in other research on non-binary people, such as Barbee and Schrock (2019), where they found that being perceived as binary gendered provided an emotional break for their participants, as well as affording some safety from threats of violence or harassment. Accessing gendered spaces is an issue for non-binary people, e.g.,

clothing stores and sports (Barras et al., 2021; Travers, 2018), leading to increased social avoidance (Ellis et al., 2014). Therefore, invisibility, through adhering to binary gender norms, reinforces the gender binary.

The concept of cultural intelligibility is a useful way to make sense of why non-binary people experience emotional exhaustion from inhabiting a binary society. Butler (1999) suggests that frameworks of intelligibility regulate what genders are socially acceptable and possible for people to perform, therefore, regulating what genders are “readable” to others and which are rendered invisible/culturally unintelligible. Frameworks of intelligibility centre around the gender binary and therefore naturalise and essentialise binary genders, making them seem fixed and stable, and reinforcing them as the only socially acceptable options.

To conclude, the lifespan period of youth is considered as a transitional time and positioned between dominant developmental binaries of becoming and being – not child, but not yet adult. Stability in one’s identity is considered more legitimate due to associations with “being” and adulthood, which is problematic for non-binary youth as they must navigate visibility and recognition in a society where only binary genders are culturally intelligible. Therefore, concerns of capacity position non-binary youth as unable to know their genders and as less legitimate. Theories of discrimination, such as minority stress, showed the implications of less legitimate positionings, impacting youths’ mental health, access to services, and the precarity of multiple marginalised identities. Youth utilised strategy to navigate such precarity by managing their visibility, often assimilating to what is perceived as a binary gender. Recognition as having a binary gender provides cultural intelligibility and associated stability of identity and therefore is a useful safety strategy for non-binary youth. However, lived experiences of non-binary youth often illustrate the complexity and transient nature of both age and gender development.

#### **2.4 Identities as Fixed and Stable**

The previous section considered the transitional positioning of youth and how cisgenderism imposes certain normative expectations on youth, delegitimising non-binary genders. Traditional identity theories and developmental psychology reinforce notions of linear development towards “reaching” a stable sense of self. This section will critically consider how pervasive modernist understandings of identity as singular, stable, and enduring impact understandings of identity and how these are problematic for gender diversity.

During childhood, young people begin to develop an internal sense of self, including gender identity, suggesting that, from an early age, children have a sense and awareness of their genders (Renold, 2004). Such research challenges misconceptions that young people are often too young to know about their genders, which is a particular area of tension concerning non-binary and trans

youth (Hill & Menvielle, 2009). There are often few or no concerns around cisgender children knowing their genders, which highlights the inherent cisnormativity and transphobia in current climates (Riggs, 2019). In contrast, when young people express gender diversity, they are often not believed or pathologised, showing how cisgender identities are privileged and knowledge claims that complement and support cisgenderism are favoured (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). Research suggests that although young people's gender identities begin to develop from around the age of 2-3 years old, a sense of gender constancy does not develop until 6-7 years old (Renold, 2004). Gender constancy is explained as an understanding that one's gender does not change throughout life and is tied to notions of sex, therefore essentialising gender to the body to theorise its permanence and also medicalise notions of gender (Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). Such research shows how gender and sex are conflated to support essentialism, and how gender identities are encompassed within discourses of development since gender constancy maps onto a stable adult subjectivity. Understandings of the self and identities, such as gender, as being "stable" or "stabilising" reflect modernist perspectives, which consider the self as boundaried as unified (Richardson, 2007).

Egan & Perry (2001) developed measures for preadolescent youth, to research their gender identities and concluded that by mid-childhood, youth develop a relatively stable concept of their own gender identity, a connectedness with their gender assigned at birth, and an awareness as to whether they feel free to explore genderqueer identities. Research suggests that societal pressure for gender conformity is most harmful to youth, rather than the perception of oneself as gender non-conforming (Egan & Perry, 2001; Richards & Barker, 2013). The pressure to conform is challenging for non-binary youth, rather than the gender itself, showing how social environments impact non-binary youth and locate difficulties and distress structurally and politically (Budge et al., 2020). Therefore, youth's gender identities are fostered when they feel secure in their sense of self and when they also feel free to explore other gender options.

Additionally, the development of a stable identity is influenced by modernist understandings of the self as singular, which develops in a straight line from childhood (where one is "becoming"), to adulthood (where one is "being" and has achieved a stable and unified sense of self). In addition to conceptualising selfhood as boundaried and unified, modernism also reinforces dualistic thinking, illustrated through the separation of childhood and adulthood (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Broader literature on transitions challenges the concept of modernist dualisms and linear development, arguing that simplistic, universal, and dominant discourses are privileged over complex, flexible, and contradictory narratives (Crafter et al., 2019; Prout, 2011). Therefore, it is useful to consider transitions as processes, which are influenced by sociocultural factors, rather than as existing between a beginning and an endpoint (Prokopiou et al., 2012; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). For example,

mental health research shows that families move between “hanging on” and “being stable” in supporting a relative’s health, illustrating a non-linear trajectory (Hendry & Kloep, 2002). Relational literature highlights a variety of transitions relating to youth developing and dissolving romantic relationships, and how the development of closeness in blended families fluctuates (Braithwaite et al., 2018; Rauer et al., 2013). Finally, youth research shows how a normative transition of education to work is not a direct experience for many, and often encompasses movements forwards and backwards (Harris & Rainey, 2009).

Where developmental theories do provide “space” for youth to explore their genders, they often implicitly assume fixedness of identity “in the end”, feeding into mainstream psychological accounts whereby a person will “settle” on an identity as part of their developmental process, e.g., Cass (1979), Erikson (1994), and Troiden (1989) (O’Dell et al., 2017; Ruble et al., 2007; Schwartz, et al., 2011). Theories of “coming out” illustrate identity development as a linear process through discourses of “closeted” to “out” and assumptions that “out” equals healthy psychosocial development (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Cass, 1979; Klein et al., 2015; Troiden, 1989). Furthermore, space to explore gender is located within childhood discourses of being unsure, a phase, and of not truly knowing oneself, feeding into sequential models of child development – that youth is a time of transition and of becoming, and adulthood is not. Within a transitional positioning, some exploration of gender is normalised and may even be encouraged for some youth, as gender diversity is seen as something that young people will grow out of in their process of becoming adults (Rickett et al., 2021). Therefore, youth are caught between the becoming/being binary, where they are simultaneously positioned as not yet adult, and thus, unable to be sure of their genders, as well as no longer being a child, thus, fluidity is not as readily accepted.

Non-binary youth, often emphasise the importance of flexibility and fluidity for their well-being and navigating gender identities during their transitional positioning (Ward & Callaghan, in press). Therefore, parents and professionals are encouraged to allow youth the freedom to explore other genders, if they wish, but to also respect their need to feel typical and adequate members of their own gender (Davy & Cordoba, 2019; Hill & Menvielle, 2009). Through considering psychological developmental discourses that construct youth as transitional and expect articulation of stability, the concept of identity borders surface, positing how flexibility and transitional positionings are enabled and how they might be restricted.

Non-binary people trouble implicit understandings of gender (e.g., the binary gender discourse) and identity development (e.g., discourses of being/becoming) by showing how artificial categories of separation are. However, Stewart (2017) notes the importance of recognising the material impact of navigating a world where discrimination towards gender diversity exists.

Therefore, although it is widely recognised that gender is, in part, socially constructed, inequalities, such as no legal recognition and lack of affirming healthcare, impact the everyday lived experiences of non-binary people (Ehrensaft, 2017). Despite queer theory providing important understandings for non-binary genders, e.g., through deconstructing the heterosexual matrix and moving away from essentialist epistemologies, its theory is abstract and fails to account for daily and lived experiences (Stewart, 2017). Trans theory emerged from the concerns of queer theory not attending to material aspects of gender, e.g., embodiment (Nagoshi et al., 2014).

For non-binary identities, it is helpful to expose and reflect on the academic understandings of gender in its broadest sense as suitably messy and contradictory. Non-binary gender identities trouble normative ideas of sex and gender, but they also reveal the ways in which meanings of sex and gender are conceptualised. (Stewart, 2017, p. 67)

The “messiness” of gender has been theorised by considering gender as a process, rather than an innate/internal aspect that people already have, which is shown through the move away from modernist to poststructuralist epistemologies (Linstead & Pullen, 2006; Shotwell & Sangrey, 2009). Shifting gender paradigms from essentialist to process challenges additional, broader binaries, such as permanence and transience, whereby permanence is privileged, as it signifies stability and “achievement”, and transience is less stable and ongoing (Vincent, 2020). Hegemonic discourses consider gender as fixed and enduring across the lifespan, privilege cisgender identities, and question “movement” or “instability” of gender, such as non-binary and other gender diversities (Richardson, 2007). The permanence/transience binary has wider implications for the present research, e.g., trans(gender) (Vincent, 2020), mental health (Barker & Iantaffi, 2019), and age (Burman, 2016). The privileging of stability can be seen in the processes for medical transition and legal recognition, whereby authenticity (a real and valid gender identity) is seen as a permanent change of role and is a requirement for obtaining a Gender Recognition Certificate (Government Equalities Office, 2004).

Pearce (2018) notes two dominant transgender discourses: condition and movement. Trans as condition draws on medical understandings and constructs trans as fixable through interventions and surgeries, whereas “discourses of trans as movement recognise the potentiality and actuality of changes to theory, subjectivity, embodiment, space and time taking place through continual creation, fluidity and world-building.” (Pearce, 2018, p. 9). Discourses of trans as movement complement the transience aspect of development discussed earlier, which shows how the areas of (trans)gender and youth are intersectional and require alternatives to medical, essentialist, and modernist understandings.

In conclusion, dominant discourses of identity development fail to account for non-binary identities. Modernist epistemology positions gender as an identity that becomes “fixed” in adulthood if that stability has not been “found” within youthhood. Therefore, the present research argues that permanence and stability represent assumptions that can be seen across discourses of gender (Vincent, 2020), health (Pearce, 2018), and development (Crafter et al., 2019; O’Dell, 2014). Conformity (in the sense of stability) is privileged, and transgression/non-conformity is located within instability and considered less (mentally) healthy, pathological (e.g., gender dysphoria), and infantile (Tosh, 2016). Tensions surrounding binary conceptualisations of gender and age frame my research aim of critically considering the positioning of youth as a transitional period, where gender identities are expected to be(come) “fixed” and “stable”. Expectations of gender identity achievement and identity stability more generally (Kohlberg, 1966), may become problematic for non-binary youth resulting from discourses of trans as condition and linear models of identity development. Therefore, alternative models of understanding are required to explore how non-binary youth “do” their genders and navigate transitional positionings, and how these possibilities may be regulated.

## **2.5 Performativity and Discourse**

Following the discussion of identities as fixed and stable, where non-binary identities challenge this notion, Butler's (1999) theory of performativity will now be considered, highlighting the performance of cultural conventions and how it disrupts seemingly stable and binary identity categories. The importance of positions of power within this theory will then be considered, focusing on normative structural and cultural systems of meaning, and how these reflect cisnormative ideals. Finally, discourses of trans as condition will be discussed, highlighting the regulating role of medical institutions for non-binary and trans people and considering what this enables and restricts for their genders.

In Butler's (1999) theory, individuals do not express a core sense of self or identity, as Butler does not believe that gender is something that individuals have. Rather, Butler (1999) suggests that gender identities are the effect of a continual process of performance of various cultural conventions. From a performative understanding, it follows that gender is not biologically determined or essentialist, and instead is understood as socially constructed and culturally influenced. Considering Butler's view that there is no innate template of gender, the historical socio-cultural world is foregrounded as significant. Therefore, individuals create gender identities through their performances, by expressing expectations of what gender identities should be and look like (Valocchi, 2005). A performative theory echoes sociological discussions about the social self and identity borders, where the (un)conscious following of cultural norms of gender simultaneously

brings an individual into being, regarding the performance of that person's gender, and also restricts their identity performance, in terms of what is expected and regulated (Butler, 1993).

The seemingly stable gender identity categories, such as man and woman, have become denaturalised in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as younger generations and non-binary and trans people challenge the binary constraints as the basis for identity politics (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). Butler's (1999) performative theory disrupts the seemingly stable and separate categories of gender, sex, and sexuality, how they are understood and how they correlate with people's bodies. Therefore, people who identify outside of binary restrictions perform genders (and sexualities) that can be disruptive of discreet understandings of gender and sex (Fausto-Sterling, 2012). Advances in biological research show that gender and sex are more integrated than dominant discourses suggest, troubling the cultural and biological distinctions that are often made (van Anders, 2015). Non-binary identities can also challenge how identities are related to bodies, in ways of subverting dominant medical understandings of what a masculine/feminine identity might mean for a body, and binary notions of sex (Fausto-Sterling, 2012).

Butler (1999) also considers positions of power suggesting that individuals are established within the various normative structures and cultural meaning systems that are present within society, and that power is formed within the self. The norms that are created and reinforced through discourses of gender as "normal" and "fixed" are argued to be internalised by individuals as they are made visible and upheld by various dominant social institutions. It is the process of internalisation that Foucault (1980) calls technologies of the self, which makes individuals become their own self-regulating subjects. For example, the separation of children's clothing sections in stores is a norm that is reinforced by dominant social institutions and is internalised by individuals as boys and girls are often dressed differently.

In addition to Butler's stance on power, Gagné et al. (1997) note that "gender [and] gender identity is learned and achieved at the interactional level, reified at the cultural level, and institutionally enforced via the family law, religion, politics, economy, medicine and the media" (p. 479). Foucault's (1980) theory of sexual discourse, highlights the discursive constraints on what is considered (un)acceptable which become a bio-political practice, regulated by medical and "objective" parameters, and can be seen within the medicalisation of gender diversity through discourses of trans as condition (Pearce, 2018). The DSM's (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) disorder of gender dysphoria reinforces assumptions about what the experience of gender should be like (from a cisheteronormative perspective), i.e., not causing dysphoria, thus pathologising gender diversity. Social institutions, such as the media, reinforce a medical regulation of non-binary and trans identities by sensationalising celebrities who medically transition, dramatising young people



who identify as trans, and by portraying being transgender as synonymous with having “complete” gender reassignment surgery (Pearce et al., 2020). Bio-political discourses perpetuate an association of trans identities with medical interventions and position those who do not conform as inauthentic (Pearce, 2018). A medical understanding takes power away from the individual, for the medical institutions to uphold, regulating the requirements for who can(‘t) legally change their gender (by having received a diagnosis of gender dysphoria), and access to gender-affirming treatments, such as hormones (Vincent, 2020). Therefore, notions of trans as a condition tie together biological understandings of sex and gender which become internalised by society and associated with trans and gender non-conforming people (Pearce, 2018).

Poststructuralist considerations of gender as performative shift the conceptualisation of gender away from dominant ideas of gender being essentialised by challenging notions of an innate core and foregrounding cultural meaning systems. Performativity also shows the importance of considering and recognising the relationality of power dynamics, which are informed and enforced through the cultural norms that are (un)available. However, poststructuralist theories and discursive constructions do not account for the materiality of gender, as they argue against this, which is problematic for recognising the lived experiences of trans people. Therefore, there is an importance of balancing the discursive and political structures regarding gender, as well as the personal and embodied experiences for non-binary people.

## **2.6 Transgender Theories**

Following poststructuralist ideas about gender, trans studies gained academic interest and have become a developed area of study. Theories of gender that are specifically inclusive of trans identities will be presented, considering how they differ from queer and feminist understandings by including lived and embodied aspects of gender.

Poststructuralism, including its focus on performativity, provided important ways of challenging essentialist and modernist assumptions which research shows are restrictive and harmful for non-binary people (Monro, 2005). Whilst poststructuralist theories centre the transgression and deconstruction of the gender binary “they also refer back to, and potentially reinscribe, binary systems of categorisation” (Monro, 2007, p. 90) and miss the lived experiences, the importance of the body, and interests of trans people (Hines, 2006). Theories, such as performativity, argue for the social construction of both gender and sex, thus challenging notions of a core sense of self and considering gender as an outcome of linguistic and social performances (Linstead & Pullen, 2006). However, trans theorists, such as Monro (2007) and Nagoshi and Bruzuzy (2010) note how, for some trans people, a core sense of gendered self may be integral to their identity, and that to deny people’s lived experiences is deeply problematic.

The questioning of lived experience is also a concern for feminists, as this may serve to (re)produce hegemonic discourses and further oppress marginalised groups (Thompson et al., 2018). “Questioning and destabilizing all social identities disintegrates the individual’s sense of core self within a socially oppressed group, even though such an identity can be the basis for personal empowerment and empowerment to oppose social oppression” (Nagoshi et al., 2014, p. 1). For example, Green (2002) shares concerns over the widespread application of queer theory as a way of challenging discourses and suggests that radical deconstructionism under-theorises how identities are institutionally and socially embodied. Therefore, contexts where marginalised subjects are socialised, are obscured and miss the complexity and relationality of how dominant binaries are disrupted and subverted (Browne, 2006).

To address the concerns raised, poststructural trans researchers sought to account for the lack of lived, embodied, and self-constructed aspects of gender for trans people by recognising the importance of materiality as well as language (Hines, 2007; Monro, 2007; Nagoshi et al., 2014; Pearce, 2018). By centring lived experience to understand the fluidity and embodiment of identities, trans theories can account for the diversity and plurality within identity categories, rather than reproducing dominant discourses i.e., born in the wrong body (Monro, 2007; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). As Monro (2007) argues: “Theoretically, gender pluralism allows for the inclusion of both essentialist and constructionist approaches to gender and sexuality - and it moves gender theory beyond the binary system and cultural relativism” (p. 100). The relationality of gender and selfhood has also been recognised by Shotwell & Sangrey (2009) as a useful way of acknowledging “the complexity of trans lives, oppression, and gender formation” (p. 58). Their feminist relational model argues that the production of the self and other is a simultaneous process, rather than separating individual and relational aspects. Therefore, the gendered self is both autonomous and socially dependent, which recognises the self-constructed aspects from trans theory, whilst maintaining that people exist relationally and in social environments, which play a significant role in how we understand ourselves, illustrating socially-constructed aspects of gender (Shotwell & Sangrey, 2009).

Furthermore, research has shown the importance of social recognition and how it can shape people’s sense of self, arguing that gender is a fundamental way that people are recognised (McQueen, 2015). The importance of gender, for how we understand and relate to each other, can be seen in the various ways that society is structured and regulated through various gendered practices (toys, uniforms, toilets). The importance placed on gender is problematic for non-binary and trans people as it reflects cisgenderist ideas and imposes associated expectations around appearance, behaviours, and actions (McQueen, 2015; Riggs, 2019; Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). Trans people’s self-narratives include a sense of self in relation to their embodied gender, which

broadens understanding from purely social constructions to include embodied aspects (McQueen, 2015). Therefore, gender is both personal and political, as people have a sense of self that exists within social, cultural, and historical environments, which cannot be teased apart.

More recent literature on trans identities highlights the self-constructed aspects of lived experience across the lifespan, recognising the intersectionality of direct, interactive, and societal influences on gender with other aspects of identity, e.g., sexuality. (Lindley et al., 2020). Such research also highlights the relationality of gender i.e., how it is (in part) constituted and influenced by social factors, such as environment (both space and people) (Shotwell & Sangrey, 2009). Through considering trans theories and research on the relationality of gender, identity development should be recognised as a non-linear process that is unique to the individual and “actively shaped by societal interactions and can be constantly evolving” (Lindley et al., 2020, p. 14).

The framing of gender as a process of constant becoming complements earlier discussions of discourses of trans as movement as they both recognise the fluidity and potential for change in gender development (Linstead & Pullen, 2006; Pearce, 2018). Linear models of identity development privilege notions of hierarchy and normality, creating separation between (non)normative development, as mentioned in the [transitional positioning section](#) (Burman, 2016; O’Dell et al., 2017). Where people cross boundaries/borders of (in)stability and (im)permanence e.g., genders beyond the binary, discursive pressures function to reinforce stability through positioning gender diversity as a phase (Worthen, 2020). Such discursive pressures impact gender diverse youth as they may feel unable to explore gender diversity and that they must conform to narratives of permanence, binary-conformity, and “full transition” “as if one has finally ended up where one belongs in a linear and binary-based gender-identity highway” (Travers, 2018, p. 30).

A further concern with models emphasising linear development is that they obscure relational aspects that have been argued to be significant for non-binary and trans people and the negotiation of cisgenderism (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014; Linstead & Pullen, 2006). Research on non-binary youth shows that multiple transitions are a common experience, which illustrates the “trans as movement” discourse and can be considered as a “gender journey” (Pearce, 2018; Travers, 2018; Ward & Callaghan, in press). Gender “movement” for non-binary people has also been considered as a “stepping stone” towards or from binary trans identities e.g., transwomen to non-binary and vice versa (Vincent, 2020). It is important to acknowledge that where multiple transitions in a gender journey occur, non-binary people often do not invalidate their previous identities, as a linear “stepping stone” metaphor would imply. Rather, previous gender identities are spoken of as being authentic and valid at that moment, suggesting that there is a contextual aspect of gender (Vincent, 2020; Ward & Callaghan, in press). A “becoming” understanding is significant as it further troubles

the privileging of stability in discourses of gender as well as challenging linear and progressive models of gender development, where a current gender identity is held above any previous identities, thus invalidating them. Linstead and Pullen (2006) note that a constant becoming means there is no beginning or end, and therefore, consider people to exist in the middle, which is a space of movement and action, where “gender identity, is never still, always relational, always to come, always to connect” (p. 1307).

To conclude, trans theories build on poststructuralist foundations of de-essentialising gender and sex and movement away from binary categorisation. However, poststructuralist theories, such as performativity have been criticised for their purely social construction approach, which does not account for the sense of self that some non-binary and trans people have about their genders. Trans theories, therefore, emphasise the self-constructed aspects of gender identity, which recognise the importance of embodiment and lived experience to account for fluidity and diversity within the trans umbrella. The emphasis of socially- and self-constructed aspects of gender illustrate a personal-political understanding, whereby the self cannot be separated from the environment, and thus requires methodologies that can account for both the discursive and material. Theories that argue for plural, relational, and becoming understandings of gender and selfhood have been presented which help to move understandings of gender towards a more dynamic conceptualisation, which resists linear, binary, and modernist discourses. Borderland theory will now be presented as a theoretical framework that will be used in the present research for understanding non-binary genders, as it embraces non-linear, multiple, and fluid qualities of identity.

## **2.7 Creation of Separation – Borderland Theory**

The final section will focus on the concept of borders as spaces of separation which create in-between spaces, and introduce a theoretical framework of selfhood for understanding non-binary genders as borderland identities. Anzaldúa's (1987) borderland theory will be discussed in relation to trans theory to show how it can resist modernist understandings of stability by accounting for the multiplicity and complexity of identity. More recent border literature will be discussed, exploring the current recommendations for research to justify the present focus on b/ordering processes. Applications of borderland theory to related research (non-binary sexualities) will be drawn on as a foundation for the present research.

During the 2010's decade, the field of border studies has shifted its focus away from the physical demarcation of geographical areas to b/ordering processes (Newman, 2006). In the present research, borders are considered as dynamic social and cultural processes, rather than pre-existing and fixed or unchangeable (Paasi, 2005). The use of b/ordering processes acknowledges the movement and potential for change for boundaries and how identities are separated. Historical

discourses of gender show how understandings have changed and vary culturally, illustrating the process aspect of how the present research theorises borders (Vincent & Manzano, 2017).

Therefore, the present research uses b/order(ing) processes, to recognise the historical, political, social, and relational construction and maintenance of borders (Sendhardt, 2013).

There has also been a noticeable change in the qualities of borders, originally considered as hard and fixed, current understandings reflect a more flexible position on borders, given the rise of the Internet and the kinds of virtual and non-physical borders that exist within those areas (Newman, 2003). Part of the transformation that has occurred within border studies has been the recognition of borders as institutions, that they do not simply exist as lines and markers on maps, but have their own internal processing, rules, and regulations that govern the behaviour both inside and outside of that borderland (Paasi, 1998). Many of these internal processes become self-perpetuating and resistant to change: “border institutions govern the extent of inclusion and exclusion, the degree of permeability and the laws governing trans-boundary movement - exit from one side of the border and entry into the other side” (Newman, 2003, p. 14). Considering borders as institutions suggests internal power structure(s) within the borderlands, given that they can be resistant to change and regulate their own hegemonic practices (Paasi, 2005). Therefore, what power structures exist within the borderlands for non-binary youth and how do these regulate gender identities?

The borderland theory used in the present research is based on Anzaldúa's (1987) writing on cultural identities. Anzaldúa's (1987) work focused on the people who lived on and crossed what is now the U.S./Mexico border, based on her personal experiences of growing up on the border, which she described as “una herida abierta”, which translates to “an open wound”. The spaces of contact between U.S. and Mexican cultures were considered as a borderland and *nepantla* (in-between) space where different identities, cultures, ideologies are brought together (Blake & Ábrego, 1995). For Anzaldúa (1987), the theorisation of the borderlands was a way to resist binary regulations and categorisations and to transform such concepts into spaces of possibility, where multiplicity and fluidity were embraced. Borderlands are a “productive space to understand identities that are complex, multiple, and existing both within and outside of a binary system” (Callis, 2014, p. 69). The borderlands provide space to resist modernist conceptualisations in favour of new ways of being, new ideologies and ways of capturing the experiences of those who exist on the borders and are marginalised. Therefore, Anzaldúa's (1987) theory is sensitive and affirming to diverse experiences, which may challenge dominant discourses, suggesting that such experiences open up possibilities, rather than simplifying complexity, pathologising difference, and imposing a cisgenderist ideology.

Sensitivity to diverse experiences is shown in how the people who live in/on the borders are described as having plural personalities and a unique insider/outsider perspective, referring to the multiple and shifting ways that people outside of the norm experience, embody, and perform their identities (Blake & Ábrego, 1995; Callis, 2014). Although Anzaldúa (1987) was writing about a specific, geographic borderland, she says that psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands are not specific to the southwest U.S./Mexican area, recognising how the concept of borderlands can be applied to ideological and psychological borders. Non-binary genders fall outside of the current Western cultural norms and therefore would exist in these borderlands. Research has used borderland theory to explore non-binary sexual identities to consider identity boundaries and how people navigate hegemonic discourses (Callis, 2014).

Non-binary identities provide a critical space for considering how identity is both constructed as well as de/reconstructed, arguing that although the sexual binary is shifting and becoming less hegemonic, it is still a dominant and pervasive way of categorising sexuality (Callis, 2014). Due to the widespread sexual binary, Callis (2014) suggests that non-binary identities are best understood as a sexual borderland having “sprung up” from the “cracks” within the dominance of binary understandings, rather than forming separately from the sexual dichotomy. Inhabiting the in-between spaces of borderlands provides a space of gender and sexual fluidity where identities can change, be multiple and/or dissolve (Anzaldúa, 1987). Fluid conceptualisation can also be applied to ways of thinking about non-binary genders since there are similarities and intersectional connections between gender and sexuality (Galupo et al., 2016; Hereth et al., 2020).

The idea of borderlands was also used by anthropologist Rosaldo (1993), who felt that anthropologists historically ignored cultural borders and cultural change and that these borderlands should be seen as sites of creative cultural production, and should be studied. Recent border literature has shared similar thoughts about the possibility of the borderlands, arguing that identity borders reinforce “a divided and pluralistic way of viewing both the world and oneself” and “this [sexual] borderland was viewed as a place of cultural productivity and possible revolutionary potential, as individuals who inhabited it created their own versions of culture while standing against hegemonic understandings of race and gender.” (Callis, 2014, p. 77). Rosaldo (1993) also noted that borderlands do not only exist at boundaries of officially recognised cultural units, rather that they are also present at less “formal” intersections, such as gender, age, status, etc. Vila (2000) furthered considerations by Anzaldúa (1987) and Rosaldo (1993), as he felt that they did not consider the more complex processes of identity construction, arguing that border identities should be considered as heterogeneous, rather than seeing them as a singular, homogenous identity (Vila, 2000). He noted

that researchers engaging with borderland theory should also discuss “border reinforcers” and the multiplicities of identities that are performed on the border (Vila, 2000).

Borderland theory provides a useful theoretical framework for incorporating contextual and temporal elements, as it argues that the borderlands are spaces where identities can exist, multiply and be fluid, where identities can dissolve and transform (Callis, 2014). Borderland theory conceptualises identity as a process, and that the modernist idea of a stable identity is false, it is performative through repetitions that make one appear legitimate (Savi, 2015). Therefore, Anzaldúa's (1987) borderland theory shares epistemological similarities with Butler's (1999) theory of performativity, both challenging the modernist concept of selfhood as encompassing a stable and innate (gender) identity. Furthermore, Anzaldúa (1987) also recognises the situated and relational aspects of identities as she “understands that there is no one pure identity after all: there is no one pure object (be it a subject, an idea, an identity, a representation, even matter) unaffected by its surroundings” (Savi, 2015, p. 182). Therefore, inhabitants of borderlands expose the artificiality of social categories, showing how borders that separate are contextual and permeable processes, and can shift over time. Whilst the project of queer theory also focuses on the disruption and deconstruction of categories (McCann & Monaghan, 2019), borderland theory explores how identities, “outside” of cultural norms, such as non-binary, resist dominant ideologies, such as the gender binary, and develop/maintain identity borders and their own social and cultural practices (Callis, 2014).

Anzaldúa (1987) attempts to break down subject-object duality in her theory of borders and separation, arguing for the recognition of relationality in how people are affected by and dependant on each other. As discussed in the [trans theory section](#), gender is relational, and so borders are important to the people who exist on either side, as well as the non-binary people within/at the border (McQueen, 2015; Shotwell & Sangrey, 2009). Therefore, the identity borders that create separation impact everyone, not just non-binary people e.g., restrictive ideas of gender are challenging for cisgender people, too (Richards & Barker, 2013). Furthermore, since the borderlands emerge within the current gender and sexuality binary structures, they have a relational impact on people of all gender and sexual identities (Callis, 2014). Metaphors of “lines in the sand” have been used by other border theorists to acknowledge the complex, transient, and intangible nature of border processes which challenge the dominant logic of demarcation:

The juxtaposing of binary oppositions which borders legitimise posits, that is to say, the ground on which we can ‘know’ anything. This is the epistemological seduction of the idea of a border: a craving for the distinctions of borders, for the sense of certainty, comfort and security that they offer. (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009, p. 584)

The dominance of Western thinking about borders has obscured relational complexity and indeterminacy, in favour of insider/outsider spatial and temporal understandings (Savi, 2015). Therefore, conceptualising gender as contextual may trouble the binary/non-binary binary, where the borders of these gender identities may overlap. “The boundaries between the ovals should not be considered as fixed borders, but more equivalent to moving into/out of a patch of mist” (Vincent, 2020, p. 110). Borderland theory provides a way to understand the troubling of the binary/non-binary binary, as it provides space for liminal, multiple, and fluid understandings of gender, accounting for the complexities of experience, rather than reducing gender to further binary understandings (Anzaldúa, 1987; Callis, 2014).

Categories attempt to contain, imprison, limit, keep us from growing. We have to constantly disrupt those categories and invent new ones [...] To me these concepts are very much in transition; they're impermanent; they're fluid, not fixed. That's also how I look at identity, at culture and nationalisms. All are subject to change. (Blake & Ábrego, 1995, p. 15)

To conclude, through using a borderland theoretical framework, non-binary genders become a space of potential and possibility, supporting trans as a movement discourse, rather than trans as a condition (Anzaldúa, 1987; Callis, 2014; Pearce et al., 2019). The present research draws on recommendations from border literature to explore the processes of b/ordering on individual experiences and the impact on daily life (Newman, 2006). It is important to note that the focus should not be on the limits of non-binary, as a means of policing who is “non-binary enough” and the present research advocates for self-identification. By focusing on b/ordering processes, the present research will explore how non-binary people are regulated, given their “in-between” positioning, which challenges binary and categorical understandings of gender and development (O'Dell et al., 2017). Furthermore, as trans theories (Monro, 2007; Nagoshi et al., 2014) argue for an embodied yet fluid understanding of gender, how do non-binary youth navigate such transitional and liminal positionings, and in what ways are such discourses of “movement” and “becoming” regulated?

## **2.8 Research Aims**

Throughout the literature review, I have shown how psychological research has not centred non-binary genders, reproducing modernist understandings and essentialist discourses. Furthermore, psy-disciplines have contributed to problematic understandings of non-binary genders through the legacies that have pathologised gender diversity, reinforced the gender binary, and produced discourses of trans as condition. Consequently, gender development has been theorised as linear, stable, and enduring, which does not account for the experiences of non-binary people. Additionally, I have shown how despite youth's precarious transitional positioning within



developmental discourses, little attention has been given to understanding the forms of gendered regulation during this time.

Therefore, informed by the identified gaps in the literature and using borderland theory as a theoretical framework of selfhood, I aim to explore how non-binary youth constitute their gender identities, as they navigate a transitional positioning, in the U.K. The research aim will be guided by the following research questions:

- How does the transitional positioning of youth intersect with non-binary gender identities?
- What additional forms of regulation do non-binary youth face, given their increasing cultural recognition but the dominance of the gender binary?
- How are the identity borders of non-binary genders regulated for youth?

## **2.9 Conclusion**

To summarise, the literature on non-binary genders is small and is often encompassed within wider samples including binary trans and/or LGBTQ+ people (Worthen, 2021). There is increasing attention towards scholarship on non-binary genders, recognising and giving attention to the nuances of such identities (Cosgrove, 2021; Monro, 2019; Richards et al., 2017; Vincent, 2020). However, due to psychological legacies constructing gender diversity as pathological and/or erasing non-binary lived experiences, further critical psychological, affirming, and feminist research is needed to challenge cisgenderism (Vincent, 2018; Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). Coloniality has reinforced limited and binary understandings of gender, erasing historical, and cultural concepts of gender that often embraced multiplicity, fluidity, and intersectionality (Iantaffi, 2020). Psychological research attempted to identify and define normality, resulting in the categorisation of bodies, identities, and experiences that did not conform to essentialist ideologies. Through constructing (ab)normality, simplistic and categorical concepts continued to be privileged (e.g., that there are only two possible genders), flattening the complexity and intersectionality of gender, which created strong distinctions (borders) between normal/abnormal, female/male, femininity/masculinity. Therefore, research focusing specifically on non-binary genders will help to increase understanding of the nuances in navigating the binary borders of gender and transitional positionings.

Through discussing Butler's (1999) concept of intelligibility and interrogating the dominance of cisgenderism in the global north, the invisibility and cultural unintelligibility of non-binary genders can be seen. Butler (1999) also provides a useful way of understanding how areas of gender, sex, and sexuality are "configured" through the heterosexual matrix, to reinforce normative and expected ways of being, e.g., that gender maps onto sex in unproblematic ways. Since non-binary people challenge cisheteronormative "configurations" and are rendered culturally unintelligible, how do they navigate the world?

In addition to the concerns raised above, discourses of development and growth impact non-binary youth, as they reinforce normative (i.e., binary and cisgender) trajectories. Young people have been the focus of much debate in trans research and public discourse, centring on the capacities of young people to “know themselves”, fuelling fear for parents, professionals, and the public around access to affirming services (Pearce et al., 2020). Critical youth studies challenge modernist assumptions about age-based categories being fixed and essentialist, recognising instead the socially constructed nature of age (Crafter et al., 2019; O’Dell et al., 2017). Furthermore, youth are caught between developmental binaries, such as becoming/being, whereby they are considered not child, but not yet adult. Discourses of permanence and transience impact multiple areas, as discussed for gender, age, and mental health, which intersect to highlight how non-binary youth may be regulated due to their “transient” genders and transitional positioning between childhood and adulthood. Dominant psychological theories of psychosocial development propose linear and progressive accounts for “achieving” a stable and enduring gender identity. However, non-binary and trans literature suggests that gender development is not linear and critical psychologists have challenged such dominant theories for failing to account for diverse childhoods and development (Burman, 2016; Crafter et al., 2019; O’Dell et al., 2017).

Trans theories provide a useful critique of dominant understandings of gender development, highlighting plurality, relationality, and lifespan “becoming” (Linstead & Pullen, 2006; Monro, 2005; Nagoshi et al., 2014; Shotwell & Sangrey, 2009). Where poststructuralist theories, such as performativity, centre discourse and language in de-essentialising gender, trans-poststructuralism recognises the material-discursive, that is, the socially- and self-constructed aspects of gender. By adopting a material-discursive approach, trans theories can account for the fluidity of embodiment. Therefore, the literature suggests that non-binary research should recognise the diversity of gendered experiences, which are unlikely to fit into existing linear, stable, and categorical developmental trajectories (Beemyn, 2015). Furthermore, both material (lived and embodied) and discursive (constructed and political) must be considered to explore the regulation of non-binary genders and how this is experienced (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010).

Borderland theory is used as a theoretical framework to unsettle modernist understandings of the self as unified and stable by conceptualising non-binary genders in ways that multiple and fluid (Anzaldúa, 1987). The concept of borderlands as in-between spaces, occupied by marginalised groups, provides a useful ideological space to consider youths’ non-binary genders in an affirming way, through centring multiplicity, fluidity, and transience (Callis, 2014).

Overall, I have shown how discourses of gender (re)produces categorical thinking and unhelpful binaries of gender, youth development, and identity borders. Deconstructions of the

gender binary and categorical thinking in poststructuralism open up possibilities for exploring the social construction of identity borders, however, the personal lived experiences are missed. The present research seeks to gain an understanding of non-binary gender identities for youth, given the transitional positioning of this population using borderland theory alongside critical, feminist, and trans epistemological frameworks to challenge dominant cisgenderism, categorical thinking, and modernist, stable identity politics. Given the lack of specific attention to non-binary genders, the present research was cautious of (re)producing discursive constructions at the expense of lived and personal experiences of gender regulation. Borderland theory allows for conceptualisations that welcome fluidity and multiplicity, as the borderlands are the in-between spaces that resist hegemonic ideology and develop their own community cultures. Recommendations from current border theorists suggest focusing on borders as complex social and cultural processes (b/ordering process(es)), to capture identity boundaries and understanding regulation within borderland spaces.

## Chapter 3 – Methodology

In this chapter, I present and consider the methodological aspects of the research, such as my philosophical assumptions about knowledge and how I designed the research to explore the b/ordering processes for non-binary youth. I first discuss ontological and epistemological approaches, considering their assumptions about gender, and state the use of agential realism for this research (Barad, 2007, 2015). I then discuss and justify the approach that I took for the research, expanding on the use of qualitative interviews and feminist-informed methodology. Following the research approach and design, I provide an overview of the recruitment process, criteria for participating and demographics of the participants, as well as discussing the process of constructing the interview schedule. Ethical considerations are explained in detail, showing how I used psychological and trans-informed ethical principles and guidelines to conduct sensitive research in this area. I justify using feminist relational discourse analysis (FRDA) and outline the two analytical phases using an example from the data to contextualise the process. Finally, I share some reflections on my positionalities and how these may have impacted the research process. I draw on feminist scholars and theories, such as situated knowledge, and the concept of working the hyphens to address “Othering”, power, and issues of representation (Fine, 1994; Harding, 2004). I also track the relational impact of doing this research on my own gender identity.

### 3.1 Epistemology/Ontology

Social constructionism was developed as an epistemology that considers knowledge as constructed through social interactions with people, places, and objects, and that language is a central aspect of how humans make sense of and develop social identities (Ellis et al., 2020c).

Social constructionism draws attention to the fact that human experience, including perception, is mediated historically, culturally and linguistically. That is, what we perceive and experience is never a direct reflection of environmental conditions but must be understood as a specific reading of these conditions (Willig, 2008, p. 7)

In epistemological paradigms, social constructionism exists in opposition to essentialist and positivist paradigms, as it considers knowledge to be socially located and therefore suggests there are multiple possible versions of knowledge and realities about the world (Willig, 2008). Thus, social constructionism rejects claims of absolute truths regarding the self, meaning that gender is conceptualised as socially, historically, and culturally located and those different understandings of gender are made possible through the available social, historical, and cultural discourses (Ellis et al., 2020c). Therefore, early scholars, such as Derrida (2016) and Gergen (1985), placed a lot of emphasis on the importance of language for understanding the world as it provides a way for people to talk about and describe particular phenomena in multiple ways. Therefore, how people use language to

speak about the world gives rise to multiple meanings and knowledge that is characteristic of social constructionism (Gergen, 1985; Wiggins & Potter, 2008).

In the 1990s postmodernists and poststructuralists attempted to shift understandings of gender away from essentialist and modernist paradigms that located gender as biologically determined, binary, and fixed, towards gender diversity, and a more socially based understanding (Gannon & Davies, 2014). The focus on construction in postmodernism and poststructuralism illustrates the linguistic turn in psychology, emphasising how the language that people use, and therefore the discourses that are drawn on, construct reality (Willig, 2008). Discourse provides an understanding of the construction of identities suggesting that, for example, gender is something that we do, rather than what we are, in other words, identities are socially constructed, rather than biologically determined (Parker, 1998). Poststructural theories of gender that highlight discursive understandings of gender, such as performativity, cultural intelligibility, and the heterosexual matrix are discussed in the [literature review](#).

As discussed in [the literature review](#), non-binary people often articulate experiences and understandings of their genders that are outside of dominant discourses (Cosgrove, 2021). Therefore, the above theories are significant for my thesis as they help to challenge and move beyond restrictive understandings i.e., that gender is binary, innate, and fixed within people, and maps onto a heterosexual script. Butler (1999) also rejects biological essentialist understandings of gender to propose her theory of performativity thus challenging the notion that gender is essentialised and determined by our biology/body:

The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self ... significantly if gender is instituted through acts ... then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief (p. 140)

Butler (1999) also suggests that since gender is performative and based on social interactions and practices, that certain genders become culturally intelligible, i.e., socially recognisable and that others may be rendered culturally unintelligible. Dominant discourses and social practices regulate the intelligibility of various identities, for gender, this means that binary gender options are more intelligible and therefore those who challenge hegemonic gender practices, such as non-binary people are rendered unintelligible. Due to the dominance of the gender binary and being rendered culturally unintelligible, non-binary people often face challenges of recognition, as there is no/a lack of social scripts for gender possibilities beyond the gender binary (Goldberg &

Kuvalanka, 2018; McQueen, 2015). Finally, Butler (1999) also suggests that ideas of sex, gender, and sexuality are constructed by the heterosexual matrix, that is that people assigned a female sex at birth are assumed to identify as a woman and be attracted to men. The heterosexual matrix (re)produces normative ideas of sex, gender, and sexuality that reinforce essentialist, cisgenderist, and heteronormative discourses.

Queer theory provides another poststructuralist approach, also heavily influenced by Butler (1999), which sought to challenge normative constructions of gender, sex, and sexuality, as highlighted by the heterosexual matrix. Queer theory particularly focuses on destabilising taken-for-granted assumptions perpetuated by discourses of gender and sexuality, such as essentialism, cisgenderism, and heteronormativity, as discussed in [the literature review](#) (McCann & Monaghan, 2019). Feminism also critiques an essentialist understanding of gender, as not to reduce women to biological aspects. However, there is currently ongoing contention within mainstream feminism about understandings of gender, which is evident in the division of trans-inclusive feminists and trans-exclusionary feminists (Hines, 2019; Pearce et al., 2020). Trans theorists have critiqued queer and feminist accounts for failing to account for embodied, self-constructed, and lived experiences of gender: “there was thus a need for a theory of gender identity that incorporated both a fluid self-embodiment and a self-construction of identity that dynamically inter-acts with this embodiment in the context of social expectations and lived experiences” (Nagoshi et al., 2014, p. 77). Therefore, the linguistic turn and social constructionist/poststructural epistemologies encompassed in queer and feminist theories consider gender as socially constructed through discourses but overlook the significance of lived and embodied experiences.

Whilst the focus on discourse was foregrounded in the linguistic turn, materiality became lost (Duineveld et al., 2017). However, during the renewed focus on (new) materialism, the material and discursive were considered as in relation, rather than existing separately (Fox & Alldred, 2017; Thrift, 2007). New materialism was an important shift for feminists, as it helped to dissolve the dualistic separation of minds and bodies from the sociocultural world (Braidotti, 2012). Agential realism recognises the inherent interconnection between the discursive and the material, subjects and objects, rejecting the issues of dualistic thinking to show how material acts are discourse as they are embedded in, and therefore shaped by, the social world (Barad, 2007).

The argument for theories that include lived and embodied (material) aspects of gender are also made by other (trans)gender scholars i.e., Monro (2005). The inclusion of embodiment, lived experience, and sociocultural aspects can be “framed” as biopsychosocial, which is useful to show how multiple aspects e.g., biological, psychological, and social are interconnected and co-construct individuals’ genders (Iantaffi & Barker, 2018). Whilst trans theory, such as Monro (2005), Nagoshi et

al. (2014), and Shotwell and Sangrey (2009), argue for the inclusion of self-constructed, embodied, and lived experiences in theories of (trans)gender, they do not deny or try to erase the importance of socially constructed aspects. Rather, to understand the embodied fluidity that some trans people articulate, trans theorists suggest that both material (lived and embodied) and discursive (constructed) aspects of experiences must be considered together (Monro, 2007; Nagoshi et al., 2014). Advancements by trans scholars and the emergence of trans theory as distinct from queer and/or feminist theory in their emphasis on lived and embodied aspects, calls for different philosophical ways of understanding (Monro, 2005; Nagoshi et al., 2014).

Psychologists have responded to debates around the disconnect of discourse analysis with the material world, including Parker (1992, 1998) who has argued for a critical realist ontology in an attempt to address these concerns. Parker suggests that knowledge about the world is constructed through language and therefore when people speak about versions of the world they are constructing various realities and knowledges. However, he also recognises the material world by suggesting that there are structures and mechanisms in the world which create phenomena that people speak of in multiple ways. “This means that discursive constructions of reality are not free-floating but that they are grounded in social and material structures, such as institutions and their practices” (Willig, 2008, p. 130).

Informed by current trans theory, debates on social constructionism and discourse analysis, and to compliment personal beliefs about the nature of gender, the current thesis contributes to the responses of discursive/material concerns through using an agential realist onto-epistemology, to recognise and explore how these areas are always interconnected. Agential realism, a form of critical realism:

is to do with re-situating ourselves—as spontaneously responsive, moving, embodied living beings—within a reality of continuously intermingling, flowing lines or strands of unfolding, agential activity, in which nothing (no thing) exists in separation from anything else, a reality within which we are immersed both as participant agencies and to which we also owe significant aspects of our own natures” (Shotter, 2014, p. 306)

Thus, agential realism takes a position “between” objectivist and constructionist paradigms to argue that ourselves and our surroundings are not separate – subjects and objects, discursive and material are not distinct, rather, they are co-constituted, and therefore both need considering (Barad, 2007, 2015). An agential ontology can be argued as a non-binary philosophy by using a both/and approach to explore discourse and material aspects of gender, which helped to capture the complexity of the participants’ experiences in ways that were not restricted by binary ways of thinking. Therefore, I argue that an agential realist approach enabled me to capture multiple aspects

of non-binary genders and present a more comprehensive analysis and discussion, rather than focusing on discursive or material aspects.

### **3.2 Research Approach**

The current research focused on the regulation of identity borders for youth with non-binary gender identities. A feminist-informed qualitative methodology was used to answer the research questions to help challenge dominant research paradigms that construct knowledge as objective and reproduce normative understandings (Vincent, 2018). Additionally, feminist approaches are sensitive to marginalised groups and understandings of experience that are situated, rather than conceptualising knowledge as objective, allowing power dynamics to be addressed (Thompson et al., 2018).

The research draws on Anzaldúa's (1987) borderland theory, which theorises marginalised identities as existing between hegemonic ideologies as places of change that are not so regulated by dominant understandings and discourses. Anzaldúa (1987) developed her theory considering the geographical border between Mexico and the U.S. and her personal experiences of growing up on this border and identifying as Chicana (a chosen identity for Mexican Americans). Anzaldúa (1987) recognises the existence of the borderlands beyond geographical locations as she also references psychological borderlands as spaces where identities can be multiple, fluid, and dissolve. The recognition of psychological borderlands shows how the theory can be applied to exploring identities, such as gender.

I use borderland theory as a theoretical framework to understand how non-binary genders are regulated and what might be “opened up” when they exist outside of and/or challenges dominant psychological binaries e.g., essentialist and constructionist binaries. Borderland theory (Anzaldúa, 1987) provides a framework to explore and understand how identity borders are constructed, maintained, and challenged by marginalised groups who exist in the borderlands e.g., beyond binary gender borders and between child/adult positionings. Anzaldúa's (1987) theory has been applied to non-binary sexualities (Callis, 2014) which showed that “individuals of all sexualities react to the sexual borderlands, by crossing them, inhabiting them, fortifying against them, or denying them” (Callis, 2014, p. 77). Therefore, identity borders can be(come) regulated by subjects within and outside of the borderlands. Using borderland theory highlighted processes of identity formation for those who are “between” hetero- and homosexuality, showing how the presence of dichotomous identity borders rendered non-binary sexualities as both visible and invisible (Callis, 2014). Therefore, the negotiation of a “partial” visibility was a continuous process as it impacted the legitimacy of non-binary sexualities.



Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of borderland identities as encompassing multiplicity and fluidity complements feminist theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), where central understandings highlight the complexity of identities and how people embody multiple identities. Based on my philosophical assumptions of identities encompassing multiplicity and fluidity, I used a feminist-informed and pluralist approach, designed to “hear” the complexity and multiplicity of voice within discursive realms (Thompson et al., 2018).

### **3.3 Participants and Recruitment**

Participants were recruited primarily through snowball sampling using social media (e.g., Twitter). I chose social media as a primary way to recruit participants, as it had the potential to reach participants throughout the U.K., rather than being geographically limiting. I also contacted local LGBTQ+ youth groups (purposive sampling), as an additional form of recruitment as this would directly reach queer young people, compared with Twitter recruitment, which would reach wider, but more general (i.e., not queer) people. I chose both local and online forms of recruitment as I did not want the participant group to be geographically bound, and because research suggests that non-binary people are often part of online communities, due to limited physical and inclusive spaces (Ellis et al., 2020c; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). Therefore, online recruitment was an appropriate way to recruit participants.

The inclusion criteria consisted of being between 16 and 21 years old, a current non-binary gender identity and, at the time of the research, living in the U.K. The University of Stirling's General University Ethics Panel asked me to include the following exclusion criteria – to not recruit participants from the University of Stirling or the University of Northampton – to address potential concerns around a conflict of interest due to my roles at those institutions (PhD student and lecturer, respectively). As there is no current legal recognition of non-binary genders, in the U.K., it was important that participants were able to make their own judgements about fitting the gender criteria. Therefore, the definition of non-binary that was used within this research was based on current and widely accepted research in the field – an identification that is not exclusively male or female (Richards et al., 2017; Vincent, 2020). Participants were able to decide if the definition fit with their sense of gender identity. As non-binary is an umbrella term, I was aware that participants may use more specific identity labels (such as genderqueer, genderfluid, agender etc.), which I included in my recruitment poster ([Appendix E](#)).

I tagged a range of accounts in my “call for participants” Tweets that included faith LGBTQ+ groups, disabled queer groups and groups specifically for queer youth of colour in an attempt to recruit a diverse sample and not centre normative demographics i.e., white and able-bodied. I also used multiple forms of recruitment to reach participants who may not be part of youth and/or

LGBTQ+ groups, to capture a diverse sample (Savin-Williams, 2001) and to allow for more intersectional recruitment and analysis, in line with the most current recommendations for trans research (Vincent, 2018).

Participants who showed interested in the research (by contacting me via the email address on the recruitment poster ([Appendix E](#)) were provided with an information sheet ([Appendix A](#)), which provided a detailed overview of the research process. Interviews were selected as they allow for focused attention on the individual participant and provide the opportunity for gaining a detailed understanding of their experiences (Willig, 2008). For the online interviews, informed consent was gained electronically via a digital signature on the consent form ([Appendix B](#)). For the one in-person interview, initial consent was indicated via confirming they had read the information sheet and agreeing on a time and place for the interview, with the consent form being signed on the day, before the interview. The interviews mostly took place online, via Skype, and one in-person at a café in London, which lasted between 58 minutes to 1 hour 50 minutes, with an average of 1 hour 20.8 minutes.

The analytical framework used (FRDA) (Thompson et al., 2018) does not provide guidance for sample size, therefore, I drew on recommendations from discourse analysis (the first phase in the framework) and The Listening Guide (the second phase), to inform my recruitment. A review of sample sizes in qualitative PhD research found that discourse analysis averaged at 25 participants (Mason, 2010). The Listening Guide is a narrative approach, with recommendations for small sample sizes between 4 and 8, and has been used in previous research with 10 participants (McBride et al., 2017; Riessman, 2007). Therefore, I aimed to recruit 10-20 participants as a “middle-ground” between the recommendations of the phases. I noted how the recommendations were for a single analytical approach, whereas FRDA is a combination of the approaches and thus requires two levels of analysis. Prescriptive sample sizes in qualitative research is a contested issue, e.g., concepts of saturation impose quantitative perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2021), and therefore, the decision of sample size and when to end recruitment, was discussed and agreed upon in supervision. Recommendations from the literature on sample size and practical reasons e.g., progression with the research, were taken into consideration.

Recruitment for participants began in March 2019 and lasted until June 2020. 10 participants took part in the research, with an additional 11 people emailing to show interest, but they did not translate to an interview. The participants were given a £10 gift voucher to reflect the living wage and to thank them for their time. Providing a monetary incentive to participate allows youth to participate who may otherwise not be able to give their time freely.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Demographics*

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Pronouns</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>Sexuality</u>	<u>Ability</u>
RW	20	They/Them	Non-binary	White	Bisexual	Partially sighted, autism, depression, anxiety
Noah Faith	16	They/Them	Non-binary	White English	Asexual Lesbian	-
Phoenix	19	They/Them	Non-binary/genderqueer	White British	Gay/Queer	-
Han	21	They/Them	Queer	White British	Queer	-
Kai	21	They/Them	Agender (non-binary also works)	White British	Asexual demisexual	-
Ren	20	They/Them	Non-binary	Mixed Korean English	Demisexual	Suspected depression and ADHD, but not formally diagnosed
G	21	They/Them	Non-binary	Malaysian-Chinese	Queer	None
Em	19	They/Them	Non-binary	White British	Gay	N/A
Cornelius	21	They/He	Transmasculine non-binary	White	Pansexual/Queer	Autism Spectrum Disorder, Depression and Anxiety
Niv	21	They/Them	Genderfluid	Asian Indian	Asexual	None

The terms used in the demographic table reflects the direct language of the participants, which I obtained via email when sending the consent form. Open spaces were provided for the participants, rather than including limited options, e.g., “pronouns: \_\_\_\_\_, ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_” to be as inclusive as possible. Additionally, “none” and “N/A” in the “ability” column reflect the participants’ language, while a dash (-) indicates the section was left blank. The participants spanned the age-range inclusion criteria of 16-21 years old, with an average age of 19.9. Most of the participants were towards the older end of the age range, and some of the participants commented on the age criteria suggesting that it may be too low, as they had only recently identified and/or come out as non-binary. All the participants were asked to choose a pseudonym for the research and which pronouns they would like to be used to refer to them in the thesis. I did not ask participants for their assigned at birth (AAB) gender, as I did not feel this was significant for the focus of the research question and may have been experienced as an invasive question. Rather, I

felt that the semi-structured nature of the interviews would provide the participants with space to answer the questions in ways that felt important, allowing the participants the option to discuss their AAB gender which many did at some point in their interviews.

### **3.4 Interview and Schedule**

Before recruiting participants, I created a semi-structured interview schedule ([Appendix C](#)), based on non-binary literature and the theoretical framework of borderland theory, which guided me to design questions specifically about the boundaries between identities, such as: “non-binary genders are generally considered to fall within the trans umbrella. How do you consider non-binary as within this umbrella, and part of the wider LGBTQ+ community?” and how identities are multiple: “how do you feel your other identities, such as your ethnicity, sexuality, ability, etc. interact with you being a young, non-binary person?”. The use of borderland theory for understanding non-binary genders as existing within ambiguous, complex, and contradictory spaces required speaking to individuals about their own understanding of their multiple identities, how they may shift, and how enforced borders are experienced (Garcia & Ramirez, 2021). Using individual interviews as a form of data collection was informed by borderland theory as it recognises that an individual’s location within the borderlands (and the borders themselves) can move throughout time and therefore requires one-to-one conversations with a person to understand their experiences.

The interview schedule centred around three broad concepts of gender, age, and identity which I used to explore definitions of non-binary and salient aspects of this identity, transitional positionings of youth, gender borders, and binary ways of thinking. The questions were designed to be open-ended to provide the participants with areas of focus, where they could guide the interview in directions that highlighted areas that were important for them. I used Smith et al.'s (2009) template to include a range of question types to facilitate a rich and detailed exploration and to allow the participants to think of and articulate their responses in different ways. The schedule used a funnelling structure, starting with broad and open questions, such as, “could you tell me what it means for you to identify as having a non-binary gender” to more specific and focused questions towards the end “what are your thoughts about the binary/non-binary reproduction of a further binary way of thinking about gender”.

Participants were given the option to receive a copy of the interview schedule in advance of the interview. Although the interview was not designed to be triggering or difficult, it was important to give the participants the option to see the interview schedule so that they could see the types of questions that I would be asking – allowing them to indicate continued consent. Additionally, before starting the recording of the interviews, I made the participants aware that my primary aim was to

hear what was important for them about their positions as non-binary youth in the U.K., thus de-centring any narratives of right and wrong answers to the questions.

An important aspect of the interviews was to allow participants to take part in ways that felt comfortable for them. Given the trans moral panic of recent years and the subsequent increase in hate crime towards transgender people, it felt it was important to provide the participants with both in-person and online ways of taking part in the research. I was conscious of asking young non-binary people to travel to a space to be interviewed, which may have been stressful and potentially dangerous for them. In Han's interview (the only participant who was interviewed in person), they mentioned being aware of who was around them while they were being interviewed (in a quiet café space). This justified my earlier decision when designing the research to be flexible and not require the interviews to be in-person.

Also, the final three interviews took place during 2020, when social distancing restrictions were in place, due to COVID-19, meaning that options for those participants were limited to only online interviews. On reflection, I did not feel that there was any difference in quality between the in-person and online interviews and consider the online option to have been beneficial to the research, as it allowed people to take part who would not have been able to do so in-person (e.g., geographical location, COVID-19 restrictions, and privacy concerns for participants, such as Kai, who was not "out"). Additionally, before social distancing restrictions, the majority of the participants chose the online option, suggesting a preference for online interviews over in-person. A review of qualitative method(ologies) notes how online platforms can provide researchers with increased options for controlling the accessibility of the research environment, which may appeal to participants who would not feel comfortable/able to participate in "traditional" in-person research designs (Clarke & Braun, 2019). Therefore, I do not feel that the impact of COVID-19 was a disadvantage for the participants' interviews.

Where the interviews took place online, via Skype, I always instant messaged the participants using the chat feature on Skype before beginning the call to ask if they would prefer a video or audio call, ensuring them that only the audio would be recorded, as outlined in their signed consent forms ([Appendix B](#)). All the participants agreed to video calls, which enabled me to see body language and forms of non-verbal communication, such as smiling, eye contact, and hand gestures.

### **3.5 Recording and Transcription**

I audio recorded the interviews using a Dictaphone and began transcribing whilst completing the remaining interviews. I transcribed the interviews verbatim but where the participants mentioned identifiable information, e.g., naming where they lived, square brackets were used describing what was said, for example [name of hometown], to preserve what was communicated

whilst anonymising the data. Forms of expression, such as laughter and long pauses were included in the transcriptions in brackets, e.g., (long pause), as a way of including non-verbal communication.

The transcripts were stored in the university's secure X drive and participants had the option to receive a copy of their transcribed interviews, as indicated on their consent forms, which were emailed to them using the contact details provided. The choice to receive their transcript provided participants with an opportunity to check their transcripts and suggest any amendments whilst protecting their confidentiality and anonymity. Only one participant chose to not receive their transcript, and none of the participants contacted me with comments, although four did email thanking me for sending over their transcript and how they were looking forward to reading it.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

The research was approved by the General University Ethics Panel at the University of Stirling ([Appendix D](#)) and was guided by the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (British Psychological Society, 2014). I drew on the BPS' ethical principles such as respect for autonomy, privacy, and dignity by respecting the knowledge and experiences of the participants, as they were considered the best people in understanding their gender identities and associated experiences. Participants were informed about the nature of the research, the aims, and objectives, to avoid any unfair or discriminatory practice. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw before and throughout the interview, which they were made aware of before consenting and the limits of when they could withdraw their data (until 1 month after their interview) were stated. The privacy of participants was protected by anonymising identifiable information, to respect their confidentiality.

Given the current "moral panic" around transgender identities and the BPS' ethical principle of social responsibility, there was a clear need for sensitivity when doing psychological research with non-binary youth. The BPS guidelines suggest that research should contribute towards the "common good" which this research did by exploring an area that is currently under-researched and by challenging normative frameworks around gender that many young non-binary people report as problematic (Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). Furthermore, much of the historical psychological research on transgender and non-conforming gender identities have been highly pathologising and voyeuristic, particularly within clinical areas of research (Baril & Trevenen, 2014; Eckstrand & Potter, 2017; Ellis et al., 2020c; Iantaffi, 2020). Therefore, in addition to considering The BPS' Code of Ethics and their specific guidelines for working with gender diversity (British Psychological Society, 2014; Richards et al., 2019), I drew heavily on Vincent's (2018) paper to ensure that my research was ethically rigorous and sensitive for my focus on non-binary youth. In their paper, Vincent highlights the following six categories, which I will briefly discuss to show how my research followed their

guidance: know your history; be transparent; study language carefully; consider feminist methodological contributions; address intersectionality and be respectful of spaces.

### *3.6.1 Know Your History*

Before starting my PhD, I completed an MSc dissertation also focusing on non-binary youth, from which I carried over several years of engagement with research on non-binary, trans, and LGBTQ+ issues. Additionally, I have attended multiple trans awareness training by trans organisations and clinicians to continually develop my knowledge of non-binary and trans histories.

### *3.6.2 Be Transparent*

Vincent (2018) suggests that co-production of research questions may benefit the research, rather than the researcher imposing a focus that may not be important to the participants. Although this research was not co-produced, the focus and research questions stemmed from my Masters' research which explored young people's experiences of their non-binary genders. My Masters' research was broad and allowed the young people to speak of experiences that were significant to them, therefore, I consider the current research to be informed by young non-binary people.

Participants received a gift card for taking part in the research to thank and compensate them for giving their time. I used my institutional power as a researcher to support non-binary communities by making it more possible for all people to participate e.g., youth who cannot participate for free.

As I recruited primarily through Twitter, my personal account was visible to any potential participants (including my pronouns and queer identity), meaning that they could see my history of Tweets supporting gender and sexual diversity and trans-inclusive feminism. Using my personal account showed participants my political positioning on trans and young people's rights, providing them with the ability to make an informed decision about participating. My pronouns were also included in all emails and the recruitment poster. Some people responded to my Tweet questioning my identity and motivations for doing the research. At this point in the recruitment process, I no longer felt completely cisgender/binary male, and responded transparently, stating my genderqueerness and how the research was informed by previous focus groups with young people. Pre- and post-interviews, I gave participants the chance to ask any questions they might have before starting/ending. Many of the participants asked some more about my background (which was detailed in the information sheet ([Appendix A](#)), and my gender identity. Throughout the research, I aimed to be as transparent as possible about my gender questioning with the participants, which I felt facilitated rapport building and a dynamic whereby they felt comfortable through my transparency. I discuss the negotiation of my gender identity throughout the research further in the [reflexivity section](#).

### *3.6.3 Study Language Carefully*

I was conscious of assuming that all non-binary also identified as trans, as highlighted in recent non-binary literature (Darwin, 2020b). I recognised that this was a contentious issue within non-binary and transgender communities, through my online engagement in queer spaces and following researchers who discuss the “most appropriate” categorisation. I chose to reference non-binary as distinct from trans (e.g., non-binary and trans, rather than non-binary trans) to highlight the focus on youth who do not identify with gender binaries or a transgender label. Given that research has conflated and encompassed non-binary, trans and LGBTQ+ identities, being explicit about my focus felt important in the design of the research, recruitment, and analysis to ensure that I was making sense of non-binary genders throughout and not assimilating experiences (Cosgrove, 2021; Formby, 2017).

Where possible, I asked for and used the participants’ language relating to their identities. For example, when asking for demographic information from the participants, I left blank spaces for them to use their own language, rather than providing options that may be limiting and less inclusive. I also asked participants what pronouns they would like to be used in the research, to ensure that I could refer to them correctly.

### *3.6.4 Consider Feminist Methodological Contributions*

Feminist methodological and epistemological contributions can help to make research more sensitive to transgender “issues” (Vincent, 2018). Feminist methodologies consider power dynamics between the researcher and the participants, making power relations visible and addressing this as an important part of the research process. My analytical framework of FRDA (Thompson et al., 2018) is explicitly feminist and engaged with power dynamics and relations within the “listening” part of the analysis. In the second phase of analysis, where the I poems are constructed, I am explicitly brought into the research as a listener as Gilligan et al. (2012) states that voices depend on being heard, which appeals to relational psychologies. Therefore, feminist methodologies challenge dominant research paradigms of objective knowledge production, as the role and positionality of the researcher are brought into the analysis process as a central aspect. This required me to be reflexive of my assumptions and interpretations of the participants’ accounts, working with the hyphens, which I will discuss in further detail in the [reflexivity section](#).

### *3.6.5 Address Intersectionality*

The nature of the research is intersectional as I focused on age and gender identity to explore how non-binary youth’s genders are regulated. I engaged with critical psychology in my conceptualisations of youth and gender (e.g., Burman (2016) and O’Dell et al. (2017)), to explore the intersections of age and gender, whilst recognising that identities do not exist in isolation and are



also informed by a persons' multiple positionings. I also used a feminist analytical framework which was developed to recognise the complexity and multiplicity of personal-political interactions and can therefore address Vincent's (2018) recommendation of not reproducing gender-based inequalities.

### *3.6.6 Be Respectful of Spaces*

I was conscious of trans research fatigue and therefore chose not to recruit solely through a particular youth group as they may have been approached previously. Instead, I chose multiple recruitment methods, including posting on Twitter, which meant that I was not encroaching on trans-only spaces to recruit participants.

### **3.7 Developing the Analytical Framework**

To analyse the interviews, I used Thompson et al.'s (2018) feminist relational discourse analysis (FRDA) to explore the discursive regulatory forces for non-binary youth and to track the personal experiences of the participants through the discursive realms. The relationship between the theoretical approach of borderland theory and the analytical approach of FRDA is that they both recognise how people are located within multiple power relations and therefore approach identities as complex and shifting. Borderland theory considers the impact of coloniality and hegemonic power structures that oppress and further marginalise certain subjects (Delgado Shorter, 2020). The Chicana feminist underpinnings of borderland theory "question notion of objectivity and universal knowledge foundations when conducting research with minoritized populations" (Garcia & Ramirez, 2021, p. 241). FRDA complements the Chicana feminist theory in borderland theory by exploring how hegemonic discourses support certain forms of knowledge and power relations and silences others (Dolores, 1998). Furthermore, FRDA recognises that the political discursive realm is always personal and therefore the analysis centres the experiences of non-binary youth in this thesis, showing the complexity of navigating hegemonic identity borders that are assumed to be "objective" and "universal" (Thompson et al., 2018).

FRDA is a two-phase approach, consisting of (1) poststructural discourse analysis to identify the discourses that the participants negotiated in their accounts and (2) the construction of I poems, using Gilligan et al.'s. (2012) Listening Guide, to trace the participants' voices, and how they (re)located themselves, through the discursive realms, which is detailed further, below. The I poem phase of FRDA supports decolonial efforts of challenging restrictive and oppressive ways of knowing e.g., the gender binary, by recognising how subjects can embody complexity and contradictions regarding their identities, such as their genders, by recognising how voiced accounts contain multiple I positions (Gilligan et al., 2012). The recognition and attention of such complexity challenges the colonial understanding of gender as binary shows how FRDA is a useful framework to use with borderland theory's decolonial perspective. Therefore, FRDA's disruption of dominant

discourses and focus on personal voiced accounts can be applied to other political struggles, such as race and sexuality, to support social justice research (Thompson et al., 2018).

In the decision to use FRDA as my analytical framework I was also conscious of the focus in trans theories (Monro, 2005, 2007; Nagoshi et al., 2014) on materiality e.g., embodiment as an important aspect of transgender people's gender identities. Therefore it was important for me to use an approach to analysis that did not obscure experiential, embodied, and lived aspects of gender. Thompson et al. (2018) argue that whilst discourse analysis engages with political and structural regulations of non-binary genders, it risks losing personal aspects within the discursive realms, obscuring lived experiences. Therefore, a purely discursive analysis was not appropriate for this research, leading to the use of FRDA as a framework that tracks the personal through discursive patterns to produce a personal-political account of the data.

Using FRDA I explored regulation in ways that considered institutional and social power structures whilst also acknowledging personal and lived experiences through focusing on and considering voice as a central site of meaning. FRDA provides an analysis of discourses and how they impact individuals in terms of how subjects position/locate themselves within such discourses, whilst also allowing for personal experiences to be heard within those discourses – i.e., how are those discourses experienced for someone who exists in the material world. The consideration of both personal and discursive aspects within the analytical framework complements trans theory (Monro, 2005; Nagoshi et al., 2014), which advocates for the recognition of socially constructed and self-constructed aspects of gender.

As discussed in the epistemology/ontology section, there are concerns with a purely discursive approach, particularly for research on gender diversity, as voices of the participants, including their lived and psychological experiences are often lost in discursive representations (Monro, 2005). An FRDA framework focuses on both experience and discourse simultaneously, where the voices of the participants are tracked through discursive realms to provide a personal-political account. FRDA is informed by feminist theory as it aims to address concerns of the researcher's interpretations of marginalisation and structural oppression over the participants' voices and lived experiences. Given the lack of academic attention to non-binary genders, it was important to me to consider the approach that I used for my thesis. I was conscious of the concerns that Thompson et al. (2018) and Saukko (2000) raise around the act of discourse analysis (re)producing discourses which feminist researchers argue privilege normative and dominant subjectivities and therefore may further obscure marginalised voices. Therefore, I wanted to address these feminist concerns to ensure that I did not further marginalise and/or reproduce problematic discourses around gender diversity through my interpretations.

The analysis process consists of two phases: a poststructural discourse analysis and an analysis of voices in relation to the identified discourses, which I will discuss step-by-step, providing examples from the data to contextualise the process. Examples of the initial stages of analysis can be found in [Appendix F](#).

### *3.7.1 Phase One – Poststructural Discourse Analysis*

The first phase of the analysis consisted of a poststructuralist discourse analysis, which was informed by Foucauldian principles. Phase one of the analysis focused on the identification of discursive patterns within the data, that people actively negotiated and navigated in their accounts, following Willott & Griffin's (1997) method. I also drew on Alldred et al's. (2019) steps for discourse analysis, which is also poststructuralist and feminist-informed, to help tease out nuances in the analytical steps. For example, one of Willott & Griffin's (1997) steps is to “identify the different ways in which this theme is talked about” (p. 112), whereas I found Alldred et al's. (2019) steps, such as “identify the different subject positions within the text and elaborate the rights and responsibilities that accompany each. Consider what can be said from each position and how this might function.” (p. 13) useful to engage with the data in more depth. Using Alldred et al's. (2019) steps was recommended in supervision to help when I was struggling with this phase of the analysis. Phase one of FRDA consisted of the following seven steps: 1) reading and listening to the talk, 2) “chunking” the talk into sections, 3) labelling chunks of talk with descriptive codes, 4) identifying recurring codes, or in-vivo themes, 5) identifying discourses, 6) identifying discursive patterns and 7) theoretical accounting: identifying discursive realms.

**3.7.1.1 Reading and Listening to The Talk.** The first analytical step consisted of multiple listenings and readings of the data to build familiarity with the stories being told and to make notes of any emerging themes, voices, or plots. For each interview, I kept a note of my initial thoughts and reflections immediately after the interview and during the multiple listenings and readings. Noting my reflections also helped me to be reflexive and to situate myself relationally, allowing me to be aware of my interpretations and positionality. Across the interviews, I started to hear stories and plots of recognition and visibility, which were spoken about in multiple ways by different participants, e.g., for some participants being visibly non-binary was connected with non-conformity and as an important political act. Whereas, for other participants, recognition and visibility were spoken about as difficult and not currently possible due to varying levels of “outness”. Thompson et al. (2018) suggest that the first step is the beginning of connecting the personal with the structural.

**3.7.1.2 “Chunking” The Talk into Sections.** I then moved on to identifying patterns of meaning in the transcripts by “chunking” the data. “Chunking” refers to a selection of text of a particular topic that is distinct from the text that comes before and after the chunk. Thompson et al.

(2018) also note that “chunking” can also be due to a change of speaker, however, as the interviews were individual, the interviews were chunked by references to topics. Therefore, this step provided a way to divide the transcripts into sections about different topics.

**3.7.1.3 Labelling Chunks of Talk with Descriptive Codes.** As the interviews were now “chunked” into topics, the third step was to “assign a descriptive code to each chunk of talk” (Thompson et al., 2018, p. 104). The codes used were reflective of the topic of the chunk and Willott and Griffin (1997) suggest that in-vivo labels should be used for the chunks of text, to capture the words and phrases that are repeatedly used by the participants. Examples of labels that were used, included “odd one out”, “growing up” and “ideal world”. At the end of this stage, all the interviews were chunked and assigned a descriptive, in-vivo label.

**3.7.1.4 Identifying Recurring Codes, or In-Vivo Themes.** I then sifted through the interviews to identify chunks of text that I had assigned similar labels to (e.g., the authenticity label was assigned across multiple interviews), which I then sorted into piles. Through collating the chunks that had similar labels, I was able to identify patterns of meaning that recurred within and across the participants’ interviews and assign an overarching title for the theme, for example, I had piles that referenced topics of “authenticity” and “capacity”, which I titled legitimacy. I found that the grouping of chunks into themes changed as I worked through more of the data, impacting the titles assigned. Thompson et al. (2018) note this as a part of the process, saying that similar themes should be compared and collapsed, signifying revision as part of the process of the analysis.

**3.7.1.5 Identifying Discourses.** The fifth step focused on identifying how each of the themes is constructed through the different ways that the participants spoke of that theme – highlighting the discourses at play. I will use the theme of legitimacy to illustrate an example of how I identified and grouped discourses. Discourse has been identified as “a system of statements which construct an object” (Parker, 1992, p. 5) such as a type of person or phenomenon. I constructed the legitimacy discourse by combining the statements that referred to this topic e.g., non-binary people as less legitimate and concerns of young peoples’ capacities to know themselves. Both statements spoke about legitimacy in similar ways as they identified aspects of a person that make them less credible in their claims of having self-awareness. Non-binary people were constructed as less legitimate because of their genders, and young people were similarly called into question due to their age, reproducing hierarchies of knowledge favouring cisgender adults. Through the discourse of legitimacy, I have shown how assumptions of a legitimate person were multiple (based on age and gender) but also “hung together” to illustrate a coherent narrative.

**3.7.1.6 Identifying Discursive Patterns.** Having identified various discourses, step six focuses on identifying the patterns across these discourses to tell overarching stories of the data. I identified

discursive patterns of navigating and constructing legitimate gender identities for non-binary youth, which included discourses of childhood capacities, cisgenderism, and emotional work. Across these discourses I identified patterns that reproduced understandings of gender which supported essentialism and the gender binary, privileging binary over non-binary genders. Additionally, youth were positioned and constructed as too young to know they were non-binary/non-binary subjectivities were constructed as being unavailable for youth – as too complex, as they lacked the capacities to know this about themselves.

**3.7.1.7 Theoretical Accounting: Identifying Discursive Realms.** Phase one concludes with considering relevant theory and research to interpret and make sense of the discursive patterns identified. Non-binary youth were constructed as educators about gender diversities that do not conform to the gender binary, despite the legitimacy of their identities being questioned. I interpreted the discursive patterns as showing how educator positionings encompassed the emotional work of “proving” the legitimacy of subject positions. Research showing how other minority groups are also positioned as educators (Cameron, 2020) and power dynamics between children/adults impacted the discursive realm helped make sense of the data (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). However, Thompson et al. (2018) argue that broad discursive readings, such as above miss the experiences of non-binary youth from being positioned as educators whilst being (de)legitimised and how they might (re)position/(re)locate themselves within discourses of legitimacy. This argument justifies the beginning of phase two, a turn to voice, in FRDA “to trace voices of those they define and confine” (Thompson et al., 2018, p. 106).

### ***3.7.2 Phase Two – Analysing Emergent Voices in Relation to Discourses***

Following from identifying the discursive patterns, Thompson et al. (2018) detail a second phase of the analysis to capture the personal part of the personal-political, which consists of the following four steps: 1) multiple listenings, 2) generating I poems, 3) listening for contrapuntal voices, and 4) putting the personal in the political. Within the second phase, the voices of the participants are analysed and interpreted in relation to the discursive patterns identified in the previous phase by constructing I poems. FRDA uses the Listening Guide for the following steps (Gilligan et al., 2012), which “is a method of psychological analysis that draws on voice, resonance, and relationship as ports of entry into the human psyche” (p. 2). The below stages detail listening for the participants’ multiple and contrapuntal (not monolithic) voices, highlighting how individuals (re)locate themselves within the discursive realms.

**3.7.2.1 Multiple Listenings.** The Listening Guide recommends multiple listenings for plots within the participants’ first-person accounts to identify themes within their accounts and for the researcher to reflect on the process so far (Gilligan et al., 2012). Due to the first stage of FRDA

involving multiple listenings and readings for themes, plots and voices, Thompson et al. (2018) suggest this first step has been covered and move to the second step.

**3.7.2.2 Generating I Poems.** Taking each discursive realm individually, I separated the chunks back into individual participants to listen to each participant separately. I then created a Word document for each discursive realm and copied the participants' quotes into separate pages ensuring that their quotes were in sequential order. I then identified each "I" statement and any accompanying verbs, starting a new line with each "I" statement to resemble lines of a poem and deleted the rest of the extract. Gilligan et al. (2012) suggest the process of constructing I poems focuses the researcher on the first-person voices of the participants and how they speak about themselves. Below is a short example of an I poem from Han's interview, showing how the poems are presented in the analysis:

I'd just moved into a new house  
I was just chuffed with where I was living  
I had new housemates and stuff  
I just thought you really understand how I'm feeling  
I was like you're so right  
[Having the brain space as well] I guess  
I didn't feel like I had to have any answers  
I had all the space to think that was good (Han)

**3.7.2.3 Listening for Contrapuntal Voices.** Having created the I poems, I was then able to listen for the multiple voices within individual participants' stories. Gilligan et al. (2012) use metaphors of music and melody to suggest that, like music, people use multiple voices and therefore there are layers to a person's experiences. In listening for contrapuntal voices it is important to note that the multiple voices do not have to be in opposition to each other, they could also be complimentary. Thompson et al. (2018) suggest that it is this step that captures the personal in relation to the political:

While discourse analysts would seek to capture the multiple and competing discursive subject positions occupied by a single person within an account, feminist relational discourse analysts would seek to capture the competing personal functions of each of these discursive subject positions (p. 108).

For example, in the discursive realm of legitimacy, I identified discourses of emotional work, childhood capacity, and cisgenderism, which positioned non-binary youth as responsible for providing education about gender diversity whilst questioning their capacities to know themselves, therefore constructing non-binary youth as less legitimate. Through focusing on the personal in the

participants' I poems, I heard complementary voices of confusion and vulnerability from RW, suggesting a sense of feeling lost and scared through being delegitimised due to age and gender, as they felt they did not belong. Em spoke of emotional work using contradictory voices of struggle as they wanted to make progress with an understanding of non-binary genders but also experienced this as incredibly demanding and exhausting. I also heard a collective voice, illustrating multivocality, where they drew on community for strength to remain politically engaged. Therefore, FRDA considers the self as mediated by both discourse and experience by emphasising first-person voice as the central site of meaning. Through this approach, multi-layered voices and experiences can be heard whilst acknowledging the discursive realms within which they are situated.

**3.7.2.4 Putting the Personal in the Political.** The final step of the analytical process was to construct a theoretical account to address the research questions. This involved bringing together both "the personal and political functions of discursive negotiations" (Thompson et al., 2018, p. 108) to produce a personal-political narrative where the participants' voices were central to the analysis, therefore, prioritising their lived experiences in the theoretical account. Concluding the example presented, the main research question for this research was what b/ordering processes do youth with non-binary genders face? Discourses of cisgenderism and expert voices from professionals constructed non-binary youth as unable to know themselves due to deviation from the gender binary, which left youth, such as RW, feeling confused, vulnerable, and lost. Therefore, challenging the gender binary is precarious and impacts the youth's sense of belonging. Paradoxically, youth were also positioned as educators, requiring them to do the emotional work of increasing awareness and education of gender diversity. Voices of struggle highlighted how youth felt both compelled to be responsible for advancing knowledge and how they struggled to constantly navigate legitimacy discourses. Collective voices provided some strength to resist discourses of legitimacy and to challenge expert voices. Therefore, a main b/ordering process that I heard from the participants was the emotional work of existing in the borderlands. The participants' genders were challenged as less legitimate and as something that they could not know, whilst requiring them to prove themselves within a society that renders non-binary genders culturally unintelligible.

### **3.8 Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is a key aspect of ensuring quality in qualitative research, as it shows that the researcher has considered their positionalities throughout the research process and how these will inevitably have shaped the research (Yardley, 2015). Qualitative research also considers the researcher as part of the analysis, where the researcher is an "analytical tool" in interpreting and making sense of their data (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). My analytical framework emphasises the relationality of analysis, as voice requires being heard and coming into a relationship with the

participants in ways that make the researcher's interpretations explicit (Gilligan et al., 2012; Thompson et al., 2018). Therefore, in this section, I will consider how my various positionalities e.g., as a researcher and queer person, impacted the research to evidence transparency.

To be intellectually rigorous and progressive in qualitative research, difference should be articulated and situated to make visible the bias of the researcher. Harding (2004) suggests that for researchers to situate their knowledge claims in a socially progressive way, they must consider the social, spatial, political, and historical situation and the limitations of their knowledge must become integral to the research. The concept of situated knowledge is recognised as integral within feminist research to address issues of power and representation and to avoid "Othering" through acknowledging both the researcher's and participants' positions (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1996). Often (more privileged) researchers talk about the "Other" which functions to silence and erase marginalised voices (Fine, 1994). There is often exclusion of transgender and non-binary researchers in gender scholarship, meaning that cisgender people are telling their stories. I reflected on this feminist concern and my positionalities as a researcher – a queer, white, previously binary male in my research focusing on non-binary youth. Fine (1994) calls this point "the hyphen" and suggests that the self and other are relationally entangled and that all qualitative researchers are implicated at the hyphen. By opting out of this relation, researchers simply write about those who have been "Othered", fuelling the discourse of individualism and decontextualisation. Conversely, by engaging with the hyphen, researchers work with the social struggles of those who have been exploited and subjected to reveal more about the structures of "Othering". I worked with the hyphen in my research to address these issues of power and representation by considering how I was in relation to non-binary genders and queer communities, with the understanding that there will always be multiple and changing relations. By researching in this way, Fine (1994) suggests that it will limit what researchers feel able to say, and it will create a space for the researcher and participants to discuss what is (and is not) happening both within and between the relations and interpretations of what is (and is not) being told. This allowed me to think and reflect in a way without such dominant binary restrictions. Jordan (1989) warns of the dangers of thinking in terms of dualities – such as male vs female, heterosexual vs homosexual, as though people are fixed in binary locations and can only speak from these dualistic positions, which is an essential issue for my research since young people are not fixed in binary locations, by the very nature of their non-binary gender identities. The use of borderland theory to conceptualise gender and identities allows for multiplicity and fluidity (Anzaldúa, 1987).

To explore my positionalities in working with the hyphen I found it useful to draw on Treharne and Riggs' (2015) writing on insider/outsider positions. In the research literature, there are



debates around whether a researcher is an insider of the community being researched, i.e., they would share a characteristic with the participants, such as their gender or a lived experience. Alternatively, a researcher may be outside of the community being researched, i.e., they do not share any identities or experiences with the participants being researched. There are strengths and weaknesses of both positions e.g., being an insider may benefit recruitment as the researcher may be “in” or have access to the communities being researched, however, Treharne and Riggs (2015) suggest that an insider/outsider concept is simplistic as it only focuses on one aspect of the researcher and the participants. Therefore, a researcher may be of the same gender as the participants, but differ in terms of other aspects of identity, e.g., ability, ethnicity, sexuality, as well as lived experience.

The insider/outsider reflection point was useful in my PhD journey as I questioned my positionality concerning gender throughout the process, discussing it in supervision. Additionally, I also saw narratives online by trans people saying that trans research should only be done by trans people, which furthered my concerns about how I was situated with the research I was doing. Critiquing the binary of insider/outsider helped me to understand that focusing on one aspect of myself (my gender) in relation to the participants was a simplistic way of reflecting on my role as a researcher and the associated power dynamics (Collins, 1999). Furthermore, the logical conclusion of the above arguments would mean a lack of research as only researchers who share a primary characteristic with their participants (i.e., same gender, ethnicity, ability) should research that area, reducing both researcher and participants to one aspect of their multiplicitous self (Oakley, 1981). Feminists have recognised how shared (as well as differing) characteristics do not guarantee a better understanding of the “other” (Doucet & Mauthner, 2012; Riessman, 1987), therefore, I will consider how I occupied both insider and outsider positions simultaneously and the implications for my research.

As my research focused on non-binary genders, it is important to consider how the assumption of an insider positionality based on the LGBTQ+ community may be problematic. Formby (2017) argues that LGBTQ+ people do not form a singular community, rather that gender and sexual diversities should be understood as heterogenous – as communities. Similarly, non-binary is considered as an umbrella term and thus the same argument can be applied to highlight the diversities of those with non-binary genders. Therefore, although I identify with the LGBTQ+ acronym, as a queer person, I acknowledge the multiple communities that exist and that I am not an insider within all of those. I identified as a queer, binary, and cisgender male, at the start of my PhD through to interviewing some of the participants, although I was personally questioning the gender binary. When conducting the literature review, I noticed that some other researchers had

experienced a shift in their identities, moving from a binary gender to non-binary (Cayley, 2016; Vincent, 2016). Given the small amount of research specifically on non-binary genders, finding two PhD theses reflecting on a change in gender identity felt significant to me. On reflection, at the time, this resonated with me because I was already experiencing changes in my identity from personal deconstructions of the gender binary. Nelson (2020) also reflected on their change in identity throughout their PhD and says that “being/doing LGBT+ population research can result in a significant degree of introspection for the researcher. This introspection can result in a range of emotions and outcomes including retraumatisation, euphoria, querying oneself and a change of researcher identity.” (p. 2).

I understood the researchers’ accounts of shifts in identities as highlighting the relationality of gender (Shotwell & Sangrey, 2009) – that doing research with people who challenge dominant discourses and narratives, such as, the gender binary, is likely to have an impact on the researcher, as we attempt to hear and make sense of their accounts. Researchers must continually reflect throughout the research, for me, reflecting on the falsity of the gender binary was profound and it changed my ways of thinking about gender and identity, thus having a relational and personal impact. I do not mean to imply that anybody researching non-binary genders would inherently “become” non-binary, rather that critically engaging with people who are different from you and hearing their stories has a relational impact. To be able to hear them, make sense of and interpret their accounts, requires researchers to be “in a relationship” with them. Additionally, engaging with research in a meaningful way is likely to have an impact on the researcher, as they have invested a large amount of their time and energy to engage with, be able to hear, and make sense of their participants’ accounts. Therefore, I believe there is inevitably some shift within researchers by doing their research, such as being challenged and gaining new understandings.

In addition to self-reflection, it is also important to consider the current cultural landscape. In [the introduction](#), I presented the cultural landscape of the U.K. regarding gender diversity and discussed how non-binary and trans people are facing ongoing discrimination and victimisation. At the start of my PhD, in 2017, Barker (2017) wrote about the trans moral panic, suggesting that attitudes were aligning with extremist right-wing politics, situating trans rights precariously. Through the recent years, until the time of writing (2021), “gender critical” and TERF movements have sought to question the legitimacy of non-binary and trans identities, arguing for concerns around safety for cis women and thus positioning non-binary and trans people as dangerous (Hines, 2019; Pearce et al., 2020).

Given the current climate of the present research (2017-2021), it was important for me to be sensitive to such issues and conduct trans-affirming research. I purposefully followed Vincent's

(2018) ethical guidelines to ensure the research was informed by guidelines that were explicitly trans-focused, e.g., by compensating participants for their time, and by using feminist-informed theory and methodology. I rejected essentialist and anti-trans ideologies proposed by TERF movements by using trans and feminist theories (Monro, 2007; Nagoshi et al., 2014), which highlighted the importance of considering socially constructed and self-constructed (i.e., lived experience and embodied) aspects of gender. Before a deeper level of engagement with trans theory and attending trans professional development training, my philosophical assumptions aligned with purely social constructionist paradigms. Therefore, how I developed my research was informed by trans-affirming approaches and understandings.

Finally, I was aware from previous training, conferences and youth work with queer young people of the importance of language for non-binary people. I use the participants' language through their chosen pronouns and pseudonyms to affirm their self-identification and to reduce cisgenderist assumptions in my research (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012, 2014).

### **3.9 Conclusion**

In this chapter I stated my philosophical assumptions for the research that were informed by trans theory (Monro, 2005; Nagoshi et al., 2014), I drew on an agential realist onto-epistemological position to acknowledge the socially constructed and lived/embodied/psychological aspects of gender as interconnected, rather than mutually exclusive (Barad, 2007; Shotter, 2014). I continued to discuss the qualitative and feminist-informed research design, stating how the interview schedule was constructed and how participants were recruited. I also detailed how I used a range of ethical guidance from psychological bodies and trans-specific recommendations to ensure that the research was ethically rigorous and sensitive to trans participants.

My analytical framework of FRDA was presented and justified to explore discourses of regulation and to track the participants' experiences through the discursive realms (Thompson et al., 2018). The research was also relational as it required the researcher to be active in listening to the voices of the participants and interpreting their multiple speaking positions, thereby coming into a relationship with their stories (Gilligan et al., 2012). Voice was considered as a central site of meaning within the research, through which discursive constructions could be explored and personal experiences could be heard. Therefore, language produced and constructed understandings of experiences based on the subject positions and the voices used to articulate such experiences. I outlined the procedures of the research and provided a worked example to illustrate the analytical steps of FRDA.

I engaged with my positionalities, genderqueerness, and the complexity of insider/outsider researcher positions in the reflexivity section. Through this reflexivity, I acknowledged how I worked

with the hyphens to design the research and interview, analyse, and discuss the personal-political accounts of the participants. I used qualitative research methods and semi-structured interviews to produce a personal and political account of non-binary regulation for youth, to answer the research questions.

## Chapter 4 – Legitimacy

### 4.1 Introduction

The first analysis chapter focuses on the research question “what additional forms of regulation do non-binary youth face” by exploring how the participants navigated attempts to become “legitimate” non-binary subjects. The use of borderland theory helps to show how subjects who are situated within the borderlands face multiple forms of regulation from border reinforcers, e.g., who is legitimate and who is not, and what aspects are considered in these decisions. The chapter begins by discussing how the discursive realm of legitimacy was an intersectional enquiry, whereby the participants’ gendered subjectivities were called into question due to their age and mental health. Interactions with professionals in healthcare and educational environments were overwhelmingly negative, as they used their expert voices to delegitimise the participants’ claims to know themselves. The chapter continues by presenting examples of affirmative interactions that were legitimising, to illustrate the diversity within professional and practitioner subjects, and to show the potential for ways of supporting non-binary youth. The impact of navigating the discursive realm of legitimacy is then presented, focusing on the fight and education for recognition as non-binary and how this positioned the youth as responsible for being identity educators. Therefore, the fight for legitimacy placed the responsibility of educating onto the participants which was deeply exhausting as professionals and other adult figures continued to challenge their claims to know themselves.

### 4.2 Legitimacy as an Intersectional Enquiry

The current section focuses on how the discursive realm of legitimacy was an intersectional enquiry for the participants. In their attempts to claim self-knowledge about their genders, and identities more broadly, the participants experienced multiple forms of b/ordering processes, which sought to resist their claims to know their genders and question their mental capacities. Two main intersectional b/ordering processes that the participants spoke of were age and mental health, which form the focus of the following sub-sections.

#### 4.2.1 Age

When participants were asked about forms of regulation that young non-binary youth might experience, they spoke of similar ways in which youth are positioned. Firstly, the participants stated that they are often misbelieved about their genders “people who don’t believe that it’s a real thing” (Noah). Many of the participants spoke of non-binary genders being positioned as unreal, made up, and fictional. Secondly, subjects appealed to the age of the participants to render them as less reliable sources: “you’re too young you don’t understand” (Noah), “might not be recognised that actually younger people have know themselves” (Phoenix).

With younger people they say that you're too young you don't understand you'll grow out of it [gender identity] and I think that we all [non-binary people] just sort of get similar sort of responses to people who disagree... or even people who don't believe that it's a real thing (Noah – 374-376)

I think younger people I don't know we don't always tend to there's a tendency to think that younger people it's a phase or whatever so might not be recognised that actually younger people have know themselves quite a lot or that this is correct for them at the moment (Phoenix – 373-376)

The positioning of the participants as unknowledgeable sought to remove the possibility for non-binary youth to be able to know themselves as gendered subjects. For example, “others” drew on discourses of childhoods and capacity, where children are constructed as unknowledgeable, non-expert (unable to know themselves), and reliant on adult subjects who know better (Burman, 2016). For example, Noah showed how gender diversity, such as non-binary identities are constructed as too complicated for young people to understand. The construction of non-binary genders as complicated implies that young people cannot understand concepts beyond the binary and that such understandings are reserved for adulthood. Within the discursive realm of legitimacy, adult subject positions are reinforced as expert and knowledgeable, stabilising power age-based power dynamics – young people are too young to understand, therefore understanding is located within adulthood.

Discourses of childhoods intersected with an appeal to discourses of cisgenderism which privileges cisgender subjectivities above all others and considers them as the default illustrated through the construction of non-binary genders as a “phase” (Lennon & Mistler, 2014). Cisgenderism functions to deny other gendered subjectivities that do not align with an assignment at birth and heteronormative gender norms (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). The dismissal of non-binary genders shares similarities with the literature on non-normative sexual identities, such as bisexuality, which is also often positioned as “a phase” (Bowes-Catton & Hayfield, 2015). The questioning that non-binary youth face regarding their genders does not apply to cisgender youth as it is implied that they know themselves and their genders are not a phase because of the presence of cisgenderism (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). For example, sociocultural assumptions around gender and sexuality mean that cisgender and heterosexual young people do not have to “come out”.

As discussed in the [introduction](#), recognition of non-binary genders is currently a contentious issue within the U.K., with the government's recent consultation on the Reform of the Gender Recognition Act (Government Equality Office, 2018), and the potential for non-binary people to be legally recognised. There is also a general lack of understanding and awareness of non-binary genders specifically, as they are often spoken about within broader terms, such as transgender,

queer, and LGBTQ+. The lack of cultural intelligibility of non-binary genders within society impacts the ability of non-binary youth to be active in their speaking positions.

When you try and explain to people what being non-binary means and then they tell you that it's all made up or whatever that's quite hard and that doesn't make it fun and that can sometimes make me not want to explain to people so I think that's the hardest bit when people don't believe you that your identity's real... that's the worst bit (Phoenix – 134-137)

Phoenix's quote provides an example of the impact of discursive regulation and how they negotiated their positioning as a non-binary youth. There is a shift in power dynamics through the negotiation of "explaining to people what non-binary means" where Phoenix is positioned as passive and consequently silenced. Literature suggests that references to "ordinary people" tend to be referred to as a group and/or category, which can be seen in Phoenix's quote where they do not identify specific subjects, instead they only mention "people" (Van Leeuwen, 2008). The reference to "people" suggests that Phoenix faced regulation from a variety of others, rather than specific subjects, of not being believed and consequently not wanting to explain their gender. Being challenged on the reality of your gender is an example of a microaggression that can be seen in Phoenix's quote, which can function as a deterrent from youth engaging in future discussions (Anzani et al., 2019; Nadal & Nadal, 2013; Sue, 2010). For example, Phoenix describes the response to their disclosure as "the hardest bit" and "that's the worst bit" which makes them not want to explain their gender. Therefore, age-based delegitimacy was deeply impactful for some participants and functioned to discursively silence them.

When non-binary youth speak about their gender subjectivities by taking on an active subject position within the text, they are often met with resistance from others who try to delegitimise their genders in a variety of ways, such as, appealing to their age. Consequently, non-binary youth are rendered passive and not wanting to engage in explaining themselves to people in the future. Phoenix illustrated the difficulty of explaining themselves by saying that not being believed about their identity by others was "the hardest bit", suggesting that being actively delegitimised by "people", through the questioning of the "reality" of their gender, is an effective way to render non-binary youth passive.

Through articulating their non-binary subjectivities, the participants challenged discourses of childhood, where children are constructed as being passive and as having less agency. Therefore, the "people" that Phoenix refers to can be considered as "adults" through the dichotomy of child = passive, less agency; adult = active, more agency. There are similarities between the participants' negotiations of the legitimacy discursive realm with the broader struggles of the child/adult

dichotomy (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). For example, historically, young people taking on active speaking positions has been framed negatively, e.g., children being seen and not heard, students being quiet in class, not speaking up/back to people (Burman, 2016). In Foucauldian terms, Phoenix's quote provides an example of regulation and discipline as to when they spoke about themselves, they were met with resistance that sought to "disprove" and question the "realness/reality" of their identity (Foucault, 1977). It became emotional work (Ahmed, 2014) for Phoenix to have conversations and articulate a sense of self, therefore, youth may be silenced through not wanting to explain their identities illustrating the pervasiveness of legitimacy b/ordering processes. The implications of silencing for the participants and the subsequent self-censoring will be discussed further in [chapter six](#), which explores discourses of personal growth and how non-binary identity development is impacted by disciplinary forces.

#### **4.2.2 Subject Positions**

Discourses of legitimacy were echoed across many other of the participants, who spoke of a range of ways in which "others" positioned them in attempts to delegitimise their genders. This section explores the professional subjects who decide the "positioning" of the participants – whether they belonged or deserved help. How the participants were positioned, e.g., as a kid, pushed away, and told they did not belong, impacted their ability to be active in their speaking positions, which will also be explored.

When I was a kid it was a lot of you know you don't know where you are right now you know you don't know what you're going through right now when I started to talk about gender and even into even into uni the first time I spoke about gender with the uni GP I was pushed away I was told that I didn't belong there and that was basically the case for trying to talk to authority figures in school I spent a lot of time with the well-being people at school as well talking to them about gender was a lot of you're a kid you don't know where you are and yet I was a kid and I didn't know where I was but the fact that I didn't know where I was in regards to gender was scary (RW – 428-435)

RW refers to themselves as a "kid" in this quote and shows similarities to Phoenix, as their subject position is also rendered passive through the quote. They say that they were positioned as not knowing both where they were and what they were going through. Because this positioning is located within the subject of "kid", it suggests that non-binary youth are not considered to have the capacity to know themselves (their gender) because of their age. When RW does start to talk about



their gender, taking an active subject position, they experience forms of regulation that function to disqualify this active agency.

RW describes how they were “pushed away” and made to feel like they “didn’t belong there” when discussing their gender with their uni GP. It is important to consider that the subjects that RW speaks to were situated within medical and health institutions, e.g., “GP”, and “well-being people”, which have legacies of transphobia, pathologisation, and discrimination towards gender diversity (Eckstrand & Potter, 2017). For example, both categories of “youth” and of “gender minorities” are positioned by authority figures and their expert voices as immature and unknowledgeable (Burman, 2016; Richards et al., 2017; Richards & Barker, 2013). Medical discourses also use a binary understanding of gender, thus non-binary people often face a range of unique barriers when accessing medical institutions as they are not “set up” for gender diversity (Vincent, 2018).

RW is actively pushed away by the uni GP on their first attempt at speaking about their gender, which illustrates how the power dynamics between the “kid” and “uni GP” subjects can shift. Also, a discourse of belonging is used by the uni GP illustrating an example of a b/ordering process to demarcate a boundary of access to medical help: “I was told that I didn’t belong there”. The uni GP qualifies who belongs and who does not within the institution of healthcare through the use of their subjection position as a professional who can make expert claims. Such claims determine who can access health services, whether somebody needs medical support and is also able to make decisions and recommendations about the kinds of treatment that are provided. For RW, who is told that they do not belong there, there is a suggestion that non-binary subjects are not deserving of medical support – you will be “pushed away”. The reference to not belonging “there” is vague (implied meaning of a GP surgery), but it does provide information showing that the GP wasn’t necessarily calling into question the “reality” of non-binary genders, rather that they were locating this outside of medical discourses. Therefore, gender distress is positioned as not something medical, which is in contrast to the normative associations between the medicalisation of transgender subjectivities and essentialism between genders and bodies (Nagoshi et al., 2014).

The authority figure subjects in RW’s account are both located within caring professions, where youth would often be signposted for support and if they were in distress. Rather, RW was reminded that medical services were not for affirming genders outside of the binary and that support within schools was also not a space where they would be taken seriously. Therefore, the discursive realm of legitimacy shows how RW’s needs were not being met by the professionals, which undermines and devalues young people’s rights, wellbeing, and entitlement to health and social care (Hill, 1999).

Similar subject relations are described between RW and the well-being people at school. When RW takes on an active subject position to share their gender experiences they are told by the well-being people that “you’re a kid you don’t know where you are”. Here, the similarities between RW, Noah, and Phoenix’s accounts can be seen, when the non-binary youth take on active positions to articulate their genders, “others” will attempt to locate them within discourses traditionally lacking agency, such as childhoods, or will use their agency to determine who belongs, such as with the GP. The pattern of taking on an agency, to then be rendered passive by “others” is threaded throughout the participants’ interviews.

Within youth literature, there is a common theme of authority figures and associated power dynamics between young people and adults which the participants in the current research echoed (Holt & Holloway, 2006; Mayall, 2006; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). In the interviews “authority figures” were constructed as a group of subject positions that included: a uni GP, well-being people, CAMH practitioner, gender specialist, and counsellors. These subjects represent a range of professionals who occupy positions of authority as the participants came into contact with these subjects in their professional institutions. The authority figures did not construct a singular pattern of navigating agency/passivity, which illustrates the diversity within the b/ordering processes for non-binary youth. For some, the authority figures used their professional positioning to impose agency on the participants and as a way of delegitimising their genders – e.g., positioning them as children and therefore lacking the capacity to know themselves or determining their belongingness. Other authority figures were able to navigate power dynamics without delegitimising the participants by providing affirming support.

It is important to not simplify the navigation of power dynamics to a binary – being more or less agentic, active or passive, as this fails to recognise the variety of discourses that are also operating. Foucault (1977) argues that power relations are complex and fluid and embedded within a range of systems and suggests that it is impossible to isolate individual discourses. By considering a subject as active or passive, it obscures the discursive webbing that informs how youth navigate the power relations in question. Additionally, flattening the complexity of the participants’ accounts to binary ways of thinking limits the possibility to explore the nuances of how power is negotiated in these b/ordering processes (Barker & Iantaffi, 2019).

To conclude, the participants spoke about how they were positioned by professionals and “others” as lacking the mental capacity to know themselves (i.e., their genders). The professionals drew on discourses of childhoods to reinforce the dominant child/adult dichotomy and power relations to maintain their expert voices. Consequently, the participants were delegitimised which regulated their access to health and social care and began to silence their claims to self-knowledge.

### 4.2.3 Mental Health

In their interviews, the participants spoke of a range of ways in which people sought to not accept the legitimacy of their subjectivities. One of these was mental health, where participants' capacities to know themselves was constructed in multiple ways. This sub-section focuses on Noah and their mental health diagnosis of personality disorder.

Noah's quotes show how a medicalist discourse was threaded throughout their account of legitimacy. Difficulties, such as mental health issues, are located within the subject and mapped onto aspects of the body (e.g., too much/little of [X] neurotransmitter, predisposing genes from family members, etc.) (Lafrance & McKenzie-Mohr, 2013). Consequently, wider systemic and structural understandings of distress, and the role of power, for example, questioning/discomfort/transition of gender, often go unrecognised (Lindley et al., 2020). Noah explained that:

I'm not sure if it technically counts as an identity but having a personality disorder means that a lot more people question whether or not it's genuine like to identify as non-binary I guess because I suppose they see as I have a mental disorder I must be making this thing that they very rarely hear of up and it doesn't make sense as being a genuine thing (Noah – 405-408)

There's been like a few times of like at doctor's appointments for it I didn't know what it I just refer to it as a CAMHS appointment I don't know what it actually is but I guess they just sort of question whether the gender identity is a part of the mental disorder and whether the mental disorder sorted influenced the identity (Noah – 412-415)

Noah situated their experience of being delegitimised within the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) – a common pathway for where young people would be referred to if experiencing mental health difficulties (Rickett et al., 2021). However, the authority subject(s) here is not specified and remains backgrounded in the account: “they see as I have a mental disorder...”, “they just sort of question”. Despite the lack of identifiable subject, “they” have an active position within the quotes as they are questioning Noah's genuineness and the role of the mental health diagnosis and position Noah as “making it up”. Noah is left very passive within the quote and almost invisible. In the first quote, Noah is constructed through the professional's eyes: “I suppose they see as” which shows how their subject positioning within their account is heavily shaped by authority figures. The professionals question the legitimacy of Noah's gender and its relation with their personality disorder, however, there is no reference to a conversation with Noah, they are absent in

the process. Therefore, Noah is discursively silenced while the professionals question if their non-binary subjectivity is “genuine”.

For Noah, their personality disorder meant that professionals questioned the “genuineness” of their gender subjectivity. Richards et al. (2017), notes that there are few small cases where differentials (such as mental health) may provide another reason for a non-binary subjectivity and that “the non-binary person should only be considered not to be non-binary as a last resort” (p. 160). The participants, however, presented a contrasting account, where the questioning of their genders is constructed as normative and is anticipated, rather than being accepted as non-binary and only questioned in rare circumstances. Furthermore, the concern around being “too young” is often based around concerns of making permanent bodily changes, which clinicians and medical professionals must take into consideration (Richards et al., 2017). However, the extent of this concern must be contextualised with the knowledge that many non-binary people do not make physical alterations to their bodies (Vincent, 2020), thus the concern of too young to make permanent changes is unsubstantiated.

#### *4.2.4 Legitimacy*

I have discussed how the participants’ capacities to know themselves was questioned by authority figures and expert voices within healthcare and medical institutions, thereby delegitimising their non-binary genders. I will now consider how within the discourse of legitimacy, alternative accounts of interactions with adult figures provided affirming and supportive care for some participants, such as Phoenix, thus legitimising their genders. It is important to recognise that the subject group “professionals” is not monolithic or homogenous, rather, they are varied and may draw on multiple discourses when working with non-binary youth (Richards et al., 2014). In contrast to the previous section, accounts of legitimacy were located within educational spaces, with the participants mentioning school counsellors, teachers, and peers, illustrating the diversity of professional subjects. Phoenix’s quote illustrates the impact of supportive adults and peers, and how this was beneficial for them e.g., their schooling was a positive experience, they were able to talk through their confusion, and others were able to make them feel comfortable.

I was in sixth form and my school was brilliant because they offered me counselling which was really helpful but it was more of a space to try and voice what I was feeling and try and talk through the confusion so that was kind of and then yeah so it wasn't the best time really [...] Oh my counsellor was wonderful she was the first one I was given assigned to or whatever and she was great yeah just really open to be talking and she didn't try and like shut me down or anything about my gender

identity or everything else and she was really good so I had a really positive experience with that so yeah (Phoenix – 149-161)

Phoenix's quote shows a different perspective on how professionals/authority figures treat non-binary youth, as RW was "pushed away" by their GP, but Phoenix received "a space to try and voice what I was feeling" by their counsellor. Rather than questioning the reality of their genders in ways that seek to delegitimise, the counsellor allowed Phoenix to be an active subject and to speak about their gender. Dominant discourses of counsellors construct them as inherently non-judgmental and accepting, as these are a fundamental aspect of their subjectivity (Robson & Pattison, 2018). Although the professionals discussed earlier (GP, wellbeing people, CAMH practitioners) are also expected to provide "accepting care", there are differences between health and medical professionals and counsellors/therapists, as they operate in different organisational and institutional contexts which regulate their speaking positions. For example, CAMH practitioners are embedded within medical institutions which enable space (and preference) for diagnosis, treatment, and pathologisation, as part of the wider medical discourse. Consequently, understanding genders and identities that do not follow dominant psychological pathways e.g., linear identity development (Schwartz et al., 2011), the gender binary (Wiseman & Davidson, 2012) and a modernist unified sense of self (Monro, 2005), risk being pathologised by medical discourses.

The role of a counsellor is to listen to the client and to allow them to speak, while a GP or a CAMH practitioner role is also to diagnose, suggest treatment plans, etc. Therefore, "making space" to listen is not as fundamental for health care professionals as it is in counselling. However, I argue that the analysis showed how "making space" was an aspect that professionals should consider when working with non-binary youth, to improve their practice. The positioning of (caring) professionals constructs them as providing unconditional positive regard and are thus considered to not discriminate against anybody and to provide support for the people they see (Feltham et al., 2017). The inclusion of gender diversity within medical and healthcare training is lacking in the U.K., meaning that the discourse of the gender binary and essentialist concepts of gender and "biological sex" are heavily reinforced (Vincent, 2018). Non-binary people are discursively silenced through such practices, which can be seen through a lack of language and resources for gender diversity (Cosgrove, 2021). Therefore, constructing Phoenix's counsellor as inherently unconditionally accepting minimises their agency and flattens the complexity of how they negotiated providing affirmative care (Richards et al., 2014).

When youth can share their experiences with a professional who hears them and provides non-judgmental responses, they can become more active in their speaking positions. Professionals must therefore use their subject status to facilitate an open and affirming space where youth would

not be “shut down”. Rather than a binary active/passive perspective, where the counsellor becomes passive to allow Phoenix more agency, the dynamic could be considered relationally whereby the counsellor uses their agency to create a space where youth are affirmed and therefore empowered in their sense of self. An affirming approach allowed Phoenix to voice their feelings and to talk through their confusion about their gender.

Phoenix felt heard and had space to speak with their counsellor, which is a fundamental quality in counselling work. Whereas the participants were delegitimised when speaking about their genders in the earlier sub-section, here, Phoenix could speak about their gender in a way that resulted in them describing the experience as “she was really good so I had a really positive experience”. Therefore, if there is a held space for youth to speak about themselves, it can be a positive experience. However, questioning and dismissing youths’ attempts to articulate their subjectivities functions to delegitimise. Therefore, the analysis shows how it is the interactions with professionals/others that causes difficulty, rather than difficulty being inherent within a non-binary subjectivity. Non-binary genders are often positioned by others as being problematic, however, this was not a discourse that the participants presented in their interviews. Rather, the difficulties arose when interacting with people and spaces that were not accommodating, e.g., professionals as dismissive. The authority of an expert voice afforded to professionals enabled them to regulate spaces for non-binary youth to speak (or not) about their genders.

Phoenix also mentioned talking “through the confusion” in their quote, showing that there was some difficulty with their gender. However, rather than positioning confusion in individualistic and neoliberal terms (locating the distress within the individual and their gender), it is important to acknowledge that navigating gender norms, expectations, and stereotypes can be challenging for youth of all genders (Richards & Barker, 2013). Therefore, wider social, cultural, and historical ideologies should be interrogated to uncover how cisheteronormative assumptions function to position gender diversity as problematic. It is also useful to consider that adolescence and early adulthood can provide new difficulties for youth as they navigate a “transitional positioning” from childhood to adulthood (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014).

#### **4.3 Fighting and Education for Legitimacy:**

##### **“I don’t have the energy or the mental capacity to educate them I don’t feel like it’s my job”**

The analysis so far has shown how non-binary youth are considered to not know about themselves and are not taken seriously, particularly by adults and professionals, therefore, non-binary youth are positioned as needing to be educators about their genders to the rest of society. Previous research on non-binary people has reported similar findings of being required to educate about their genders (Goldberg & Kvalanka, 2018; Riggs, 2019), however, through the remaining

analysis chapters, the participants in the current research illustrated a broader sense of educating that included identity work beyond gender, such as [the self as contextual and becoming](#). Being positioned as needing to prove themselves whilst also carrying the childhood discourses of being too young to know illustrates the contradictory discourses that non-binary youth are expected to navigate.

Being delegitimised meant that non-binary youth must engage in emotional work when disclosing their gender. It was “work” for the participants to have conversations with people about their genders when their subjectivities were called into question. Han’s quote provides context for the positioning of youth as educators – that speaking about yourself as non-binary and as a youth is met with resistance from others and requires emotional work.

I do constantly feel like I have to justify and like educate people on like sometimes just like why I identify as I do but also like why I'm asking them to use certain pronouns that is like a daily thing so that's like a really hard aspect of it yeah yeah but the education part can be positive depending on how receptive people are but it's always draining regardless (Han – 49-53)

Han constructed being required to take on an educator role, as a minority youth, as “constant” and “a daily thing”, which shows that this is not a subject position they could easily move away from, as the expectation was pervasive. Therapeutic literature has shown how other minority groups, such as people of colour, and disabled people, have also been required to take on educator roles (Cameron, 2020). Part of the educator role for the participants was a result of attempts to make themselves more visible/intelligible within society, for example, Han spoke about how asking people to use particular pronouns (they/them) was a daily practice that required both justifications for the use of those pronouns and also the education of non-binary genders. Making yourself intelligible as non-binary is currently a process that requires further “work” to prove legitimacy by educating others due to the prevalence of the gender binary discourse (Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). Although Han acknowledged that the positioning as an identity educator can be positive since they get to help educate others and spread awareness of non-binary genders: “it’s always draining regardless”. Therefore, even the potential benefits of being positioned as an identity educator still operate within regulatory frameworks that seek to maintain the gender binary through exhausting non-binary youth.

An identity educator positioning was constructed by most of the participants as intensely demanding on their subjectivities. The requirements to constantly justify their genders and educate others about non-binary subjectivities left the participants exhausted and tired. In contrast to Han, who spoke of the educator positioning as being somewhat unavoidable, given that it is a daily

practice, another of the participants, G, took an active stance against this positioning of youth as educators and rejected this role:

I actively stay away from people who aren't familiar with queerness because at this point in my life I don't have the energy or the mental capacity to educate them I don't feel like it's my job to educate them as well so like that actively doing that has helped me feel more comfortable in my gender identity just being like moving away from like more I want to say ignorant but I don't know if that's too bad ignorant people and like surround myself with like the most queer the most wholesome the most positive and encouraging people (G – 553-558)

There has been a number of like people where you can tell that they just don't know anything so with people like that I just automatically distance myself and try not to communicate with them as much as possible for my mental health sake (G – 565-568)

G's active resistance was shown through them staying away, distancing, and not educating, which were all actions to not engage in the b/ordering process of youth as an identity educator. The positioning of youth as identity educators is an example of a b/ordering process as it functions to construct and maintain separation between binary and non-binary genders by requiring youth to explain themselves. So far, I have shown how the participants were positioned as disbelieved by professionals and others and were required to prove themselves through doing emotional work of educating. However, G was resistant to an educator positioning and drew on their lack of "energy" and "mental capacity" "at this point in my life" as reasons for their resistance.

For some youth, it was possible to distance themselves from the daily work of being an educator through being extremely mindful of whom they surrounded themselves with – mainly queer people and those who were "positive", "wholesome", and "encouraging". The process of being purposeful with whom G surrounded themselves with functioned as an additional layer of resistance against the b/ordering process of youth as educators. G implies that connecting with queer and "encouraging" people daily reduces the need for them to take on this role, as they are more likely to understand non-binary genders and not seek to question or delegitimise. Therefore, the move away from "ignorant" people and fostering of supportive connections was how G was able to navigate the b/ordering process of an identity educator positioning, where they were no longer responsible for proving the legitimacy of their subjectivity which enabled them to feel more comfortable with their gender.



Actively not engaging in discursive positionings was a strategy that the participants used as a form of resistance. To relate this to a binary concept of active/passive positionings, moving away, distancing, and not engaging could be considered as passive, given that the participants are not visibly challenging power relations. However, examples such as G's (above) show how this choice of not engaging is a strong form of active resistance against their positionings. Using an and/both way of thinking (Barker & Iantaffi, 2019), the participants can disengage from explaining and be active in this resistance, rather than seeing the disengagement as a result of being rendered passive by authority figures.

It is important to reflect on the implicit assumption that youth can move away from an educator positioning. The historical and cultural prevalence of discourses such as the gender binary and the power dynamics between young people and professionals/adults explored above, mean it is an oversimplification to suggest that youth can simply move away from and avoid problematic people. Research on LGBTQ+ marginalisation shows how experiences of discrimination are pervasive with multiple daily encounters (Galupo et al., 2014; Nadal & Nadal, 2013). Furthermore, researchers have also acknowledged how the primacy of gender (McQueen, 2015) and the wider discourse of the gender binary, impacts almost every aspect of life (Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). Therefore, being able to choose to not engage with certain people and to distance oneself from people who are suspected to be problematic is a privileged position to occupy. For many of the participants, there were instances, such as living with family and working, which made maintaining distance from less accepting others not as possible. I discuss the implications of having to engage with subjects that the participants would choose not to further in chapters [five](#) and [six](#), showing how the identified discursive realms are interconnected.

Many of the participants did speak about distancing themselves from the emotional work and constructed the positioning of youth as identity educators in multiple ways. For example, G was explicit in rejecting that it was their job to educate others about non-binary genders. They rejected a positioning of youth needing to do the work themselves, suggesting that the responsibility for non-binary education and awareness resides with those who attempt to assign the emotional work to youth, for example, a GP should be researching and educating themselves about non-binary genders. The rejection of an educator positioning (re)locates the work from an individualised perspective, where marginalised youth are responsible for educating professionals, to a more systemic consideration. Therefore, in their resistance, G challenges expert subjects who have more power and institutions to take on roles of self-educating.

The b/ordering process of youth as educators draws parallels with other subject positions that are expected to do similar kinds of "work" that often goes unnoticed and unrecognised but is

inherently demanding of personal resources. Examples of such responsibilities can be seen in the emotional work placed upon women, how they often occupy caring roles and professions (e.g., counselling, early years, education) (Koster, 2011). Considering the intersection of age within the research – the participants were between the ages of 16-21 years old – adds an additional layer when reflecting on who is being required to do the emotional work. The participants are marginalised because of their genders, where they are not believed, whilst also being expected to manage the unrecognised work of educating professionals and expert voices. This shifts any responsibility from adults and professionals (“others”) from self-educating on these issues, by requiring it of the youth themselves. The educator b/ordering process can also be seen in the wider LGBTQ+ communities, for example, where individuals are expected to educate mental health professionals on their identities, rather than the professionals using their more privileged status to “take” on some of the emotional work (Richards & Barker, 2013). When asked about what aspects of their genders impacted their lives the most, the participants spoke of how pervasive the need to educate was, and reflected on how they navigated this social positioning:

Obviously like queer people like can you know should reserve the right to be like I'm tired I don't want to explain like thousands of years of queer history to you but like yeah at the same time like there needs it shouldn't be in such a hostile way like you know I've seen this happen a lot online and like if someone is like sort of they're like no I just can't do it today but they'll be like but here are some sources I can't (Em – 795-799)

I'd say people are generally receptive but I think that's representative of like the people I choose to put energy into because there is certainly times where you know where you like know it's not going to make any difference you don't need to justify yourself all the time so there's a lot of times where I just think it's not worth it (Han – 74-77)

Em suggested that non-binary youth should reserve the right to not engage with the position of educator or have to justify themselves all the time so that they do not become exhausted. Both Em and Han's accounts share similarities to G's position of distancing themselves as a form of self-preservation. Furthermore, they construct a position whereby youth should not be positioned as educators 100% of the time, which is an important consideration, as the following quotes show how the participants also constructed the need for some engagement. Therefore, some participants negotiated the educator b/ordering process through selective engagement.

In both Em's and Han's quotes above, they are active subjects in their accounts – Em talks about: “I just can't do it [explain about queer history] today” and Han says: “I think that's representative of like the people I choose to put energy into”. In these examples, the participants made decisions about whether to engage or not and whom they want to invest their energies in. Therefore, although the participants may be positioned by others as needing to be educators, they spoke of being able to be active and decide how they would engage. Alongside considering their capacities to engage with the emotional work of educating others about non-binary genders, the efforts of the other person were also considered.

Definitely like there's a huge difference between someone who's like who doesn't have the fundamental who genuinely doesn't understand and like is ignorant but wants to be educated and wants to educate themselves and someone who is like genuinely bigoted there is a huge difference if someone says something like clearly inappropriate but you know that they're coming from like a space or place of being like I don't know if I'm using the right words and I don't know like how to talk about this but I want to learn I'm willing to learn and be told you said the wrong thing and here's what you should have said you can tell so yeah when people sort of shutdown like that it's very like it's like oh don't you think we should be educating as well you know that person wasn't bigoted or whatever they just didn't know (Em – 778-787)

If I feel like someone has genuinely thought about like I don't know like the differences between certain genders or like you know thought about gender expression of thought about gender as a social construct like if I genuinely feel like it's impacting someone that they might start to rethink gender and what that means then that to me is like really worth it but a lot of the times people you know a lot of people it takes a lot more than one conversation for them to even trigger that kind of like oh maybe I should think about this so it just depends (Han – 62-67)

Here, the participants echoed the discourse of (de)legitimacy saying if they felt that the person was not truly interested in listening (i.e., that they were instead questioning the reality of non-binary genders), they would be less likely to take up their positioning as educators. Both Han and Em agreed that people who are willing to learn and have given some genuine thought about issues that the youth may be facing should be engaged with and “educated” by non-binary people. For Han, a reason for engaging in an educator positioning was “if I genuinely feel like it's impacting someone that they might start to rethink gender”. For Han, the investment was worth it if the

“result” was that the person began questioning the gender binary. Whereas, for Em, the reason for engaging was more focused on helping people to use more appropriate language and talking through how to be more sensitive in these discussions: “I don't know like how to talk about this but I want to learn I'm willing to learn and be told you said the wrong thing and here's what you should have said”.

The overall justification for using time and energy to engage with people who are less informed on non-binary issues centred around the opportunity to help reframe people's thinking – presumably from binary and essentialist understandings, given these are pervasive in the U.K. Through this process, those who become informed are potentially more likely to do the work of further educating others and becoming meaningful allies, which releases the participants from pervasive delegitimisation. Han notes that the b/ordering process of educating others takes more than one conversation which is a further example of how being delegitimised and positioned as needing to “prove yourself” is an ongoing process. Similar to how “coming out” is often constructed as a singular event (Klein et al., 2015), “proving yourself” as non-binary is implicitly singular, which minimises the lifelong process for queer people of “coming out” and justifying their subjectivities. Recognising the complexity of “proving yourself” highlights the hidden aspects of emotional work – that the work involved is often much more than it appears to be (Koster, 2011).

I guess a lot of like trans and non-binary and just queer identity comes from having to explain yourself to people I mean coming out is a whole it's just all about having to explain yourself and like obviously we just get to a certain point where it's like I don't want to do this anymore but it's also like but there needs to be it needs to happen as frustrating as much as I wish like you could just telepathically communicate everything to someone to be like they're both on the same wavelength it just doesn't work like that and like if we want to see change we need to be able to have these conversations and to like educate people and like in a welcoming inclusive way or how are we ever going to reach make any progress if we're just yelling at each other all of the time (Em – 758-766)

Em continues the discussion of being positioned as an educator and constructs this in similar ways to Han through mentioning the emotional work entailed. They note how non-binary youth should “protect” their autonomy:

I do think it is problematic but at the same time just the fact that people are trying to talk about it and trying to have conversations and trying to form this vocabulary like in order to have more academic work on it for example is really important I

think like yeah everything can't happen at once I think maybe we need to first figure out how to talk about being non-binary in a way that's not like it could be problematic we need to be able to have these conversations in the first place to then be able to move on from that and then like from there deconstruct the like new second binary if you will but also I have no idea if that would even yeah I also don't know whether that would cause more problems than it would solve so yeah it's a bit of a weird one (Em – 675-683)

In Em's quote, the emotional work again is placed on the individual, illustrating how the participants were obliged to engage in conversations with others that sought to delegitimise their subjectivities, despite the emotional work that entailed. Additionally, Em comments how "it could be problematic" or "cause more problems than it solves" showing an unease with their positioning. Therefore, the participants were accountable for educating and proving themselves, rather than considering how institutions could be more affirming, less pathologising, and less reliant on the gender binary. Systemic and institutional responsibility for inclusivity and acceptance of non-binary genders is masked through the process of positioning non-binary youth as identity educators.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

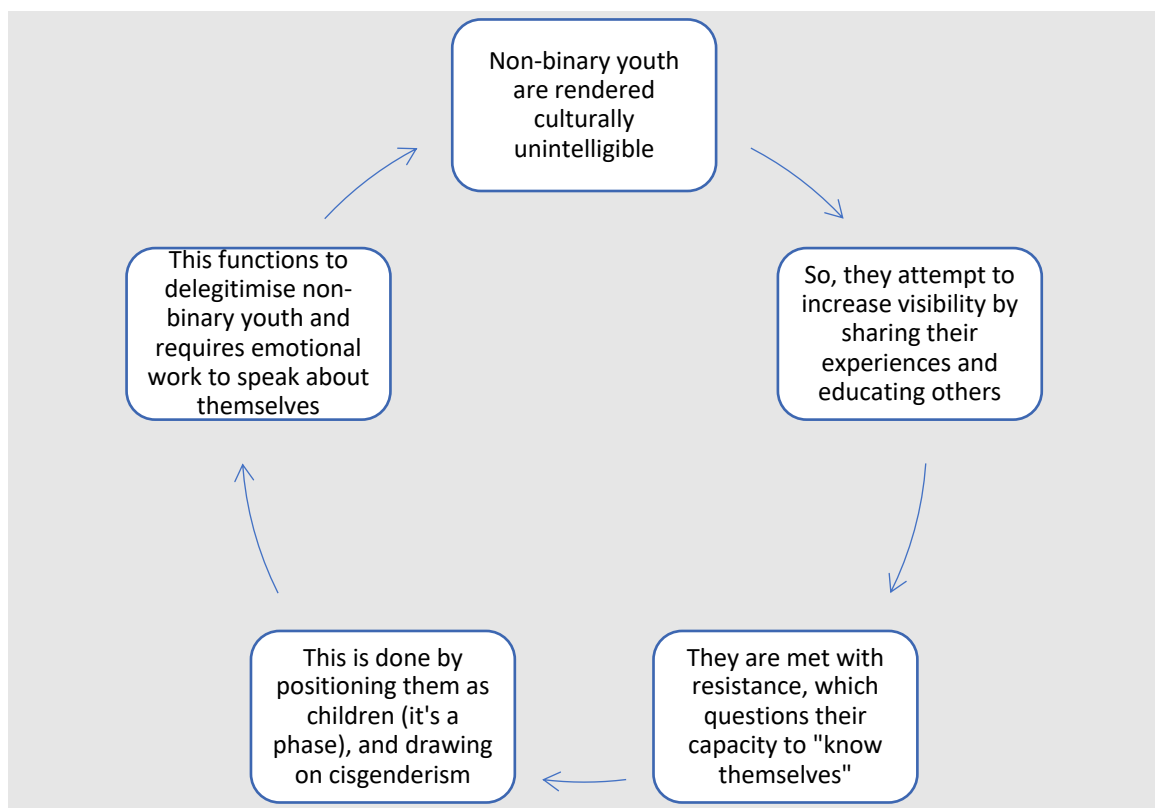
The current chapter has shown how the processes of the participants being active in their speaking positions enabled them to attempt to explain their genders and make themselves more culturally intelligible. However, such active positions also challenge power dynamics between "others" (in particular, professionals), who call into question the participants' mental capacities to know their gender by drawing on discourses of childhoods and cisgenderism to delegitimise their gender subjectivities. Furthermore, the professionals located the participants' capacity for knowing their genders within the individual, through appealing to their age (you are not old enough) and diagnoses (you're not non-binary, you're mentally unwell). This functioned to maintain the marginalisation of non-binary youth as they were exposed to constant delegitimation whilst positioned as needing to prove their legitimacy. Therefore, the current chapter answers the research question of "what additional forms of regulation do non-binary youth face" by showing how other aspects of their identities, such as age and mental health, were drawn on to challenge their legitimacy.

Through the discourse analysis, I explored how the power relations between the professionals and the participants functioned to maintain oppression. The expert voices of professionals discursively silenced the participants' attempts to become culturally intelligible subjects. The quotes presented illustrated how the participants were constructed as passive subjects in how they spoke about their interactions with professionals and healthcare institutions. They were

often spoken to and were subjected to actions by others – e.g., their genders were questioned, and they were disbelieved. Conversely, the authority figures presented, which consisted of medical and health professionals, utilised their positions as adults with expert voices to delegitimise the participants on their capacity to know themselves as non-binary. Therefore, because non-binary youth are rendered unintelligible in the U.K., they are positioned as needing to use their speaking positions to articulate their experiences and educate others to “prove themselves” as legitimate subjects, but through such speaking positions their existence/reality is called into questions by those others. The participants were therefore simultaneously constructed as not being able to know themselves, as they were too young, whilst also being positioned as educators about non-binary genders.

**Figure 1**

*A Visual Cycle to Show How Non-Binary Youth are Delegitimised*



The process of navigating legitimacy became less linear when the participants resisted being delegitimising in multiple ways for example, being selective with and/or refusing to engage with other subjects. The participants show the complexities and pluralities of navigating identity borders within the discourses of legitimacy, capacity, and emotional work. An either/or analysis of the participants’ accounts would “flatten” the layering and nuances of speaking positions that the

participants engaged with and resisted throughout their accounts. Therefore, the borderland theory of selfhood (Anzaldúa, 1987) was useful for the analysis as helped challenge the modernist concept of a unified self and essential truths, through focusing on the plurality, multiplicity, and complexity of subjectivities (Monro, 2005; Tisdall & Punch, 2012).

In conclusion, adolescence and youth are constructed as “becoming” and therefore, adulthood is constructed as “being” (Punch, 2003; Talburt, 2004; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Adults and professionals use their positioning of “being” to delegitimise other ways of understanding the self – e.g., as changing or fluid, by locating youth in childhood discourses and therefore reinforce a stable and enduring modernist sense of self (Prout, 2011). For non-binary youth, the stability of adulthood allows for the arguments of youth as too young to know their genders, and as something that they will grow out of. Whereas, considering youth relationally, where belonging is centred, shifts the focus from “a transitional period” perspective to recognising the social relationships and processes important to youth (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014).

## Chapter 5 – Youth as Transitional and Belonging

### 5.1 Introduction

The second analysis chapter builds on the previous, which discussed how non-binary youth are delegitimised, and the associated emotional work, by drawing on spatial and relational metaphors to explore how the participants gained energy to resist regulation through physical spaces and community belonging. Dominant discourses conceptualise youth as a transitional time which I argue reinforces modernist and normative developmental trajectories based on cisheteronormative assumptions. Such assumptions include a binary, stable, and enduring gender identity, (hetero)sexual exploration, and the development of romantic relationships; all of which are challenged by the participants in their interviews. Therefore, the current analysis chapter addresses the research question “how does a transitional positioning intersect with non-binary genders”? FRDA provided an analytical framework to deconstruct and challenge the dominant discourses of developmental psychology and showed how such discourses reflect normative ideals of cis- and heteronormativity. By focusing on transitional positionings, the participants reflected on normative transitional experiences as occurring later when compared to cisgender and heterosexual peers, which I argue is a result of discrimination, marginalisation, and the pathologisation of gender diversity. Transitioning gender, experiences of gender dysphoria, and navigating a world where non-binary genders are rendered culturally unintelligible are additional experiences that non-binary youth may have to negotiate, therefore impacting their experiences of normative transitions.

Many of the participants drew on transitional experiences as central to their self-discovery and understanding of themselves as non-binary. This was often in the form of a need for a new, less restrictive space to engage with thoughts about their genders. A physical move to a new house and/or to university enabled less restriction and more freedom for many of the participants, supporting literature on LGBT+ housing (Matthews & Poyner, 2019). Difficulties accessing less restrictive spaces limited gender expression, while a physical move provided youth with new spaces to socially transition where there was less external regulatory pressure. Presenting themselves as non-binary “from the beginning” was an aspect that the participants favoured. Although a transitional metaphor for understanding youth was articulated by the participants, I argue that a purely transitional positioning minimises youths’ attempts to foster a sense of belonging through connections with important people, places, and times by focusing on transitional markers and not the spaces between them. Transitional positionings mark non-binary youths’ developmental trajectories against cisheteronormative expectations and do not allow for diversity in gender experiences – e.g., that non-binary young people have to (re)negotiate binary and linear gender expectations (Ward & Callaghan, in press).



FRDA's critique of dominant regulatory discourses on non-binary youth was complemented by borderland theory, which helped to theorise how subjects within the borderlands "protect" themselves from power structures and borders that oppress. The participants also drew heavily on the discourses of community and belonging in their accounts, focusing on the importance of connecting with other queer people and communities, as discussed in [chapter five](#). This was the main way that the participants resisted being delegitimised.

Friendships with queer people were important for the participants, as it provided them with an alternative to being positioned within childhood and identity educator discourses and enabled them to be(come) culturally intelligible. Many of the participants spoke of having exclusively queer friendship circles or being surrounded by many queer friends. A sense of belonging with a queer community became visible in the use of the label "queer" often instead of "non-binary" for some of the participants. Therefore, focus on youth as relational, through a belonging metaphor, helped to show how the participants navigated b/ordering processes that determine belonging, whilst acknowledging the importance of connecting with people and communities for non-binary youth (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014).

These connections, alongside spatial transitions, enabled the participants to discover and process their non-binary subjectivities, thus highlighting the importance of holding both transitional and relational conceptualisations of youth. In discussing belonging, Antonsich (2010) argues that personal belonging is always tied with discourses and practices of both inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, the boundary discourses that create and separate communities of belonging will also be explored through whom the participants created separation from. The participants were border reinforcers as they identified subjects who were not worth engaging with by drawing on generational discourses to highlight how older people were often less accepting and aware of non-binary genders. The participants also drew on temporal discourses to distinguish between people who were temporary in their lives and thereby prioritising enduring relations i.e., belonging to a community. Generational and temporal "othering" made queer belonging an important aspect for the participants and shows how identification with always creates disidentification. I argue that an understanding of youth as both spatial and relational – transitional and belonging – is needed to understand the nuances of the participants' non-binary gender identities. Dominant conceptualisations of youth must be deconstructed from purely transitional discourses, as they reinforce cisheteronormative and essentialist foundations, and restrict diversity in gender development.

## 5.2 Youth as Transitional – Transitions as Important for Understanding Gender

Within this section, a spatial metaphor will be considered, which conceptualises youth as transitional to consider how the participants navigated aspects that the youth period “opened up”. A transitional understanding focuses on young people’s progression from one developmental marker to another, e.g., moving from primary school to secondary school. Transitional metaphors are useful for youth, as this age range in the U.K. typically encompasses a range of developmental, social, and political transitions (Roberts, 2011). Throughout childhood, adolescence, and into youth, chronological age enables progression and access to new opportunities, for example, turning 16 allows young people to get married and turning 18 allows additional rights and responsibilities, such as being able to vote (UK Parliament, n.d.).

Transitional expectations are heavily cisgenderist and heteronormative as they reinforce particular developmental trajectories at certain times, which may not be the experience of people who are marginalised, e.g., young carers and/or disabled youth may live in the parental home for longer, lower-income youth, and families may not be able to afford university tuition fees or accommodation (Crafter et al., 2019). Similarly, cisgenderist and heteronormative expectations regulate transitional experiences, which impact people of all genders, as they often perpetuate unrealistic rules of gender and relationships (Barker, 2018). For non-binary youth, diversity in gender experiences complicates seemingly linear transitions as they challenge modernist and psychological understandings of gender (and often sexual) development and personal growth ([discussed further in chapter six](#)) (Johnson, 2017). Concerning gender, young people under 16 years old are not considered competent to give informed consent for accessing certain support, such as puberty blockers (National Health Service, 2020), additionally, to legally change one’s gender marker on their birth certificate, they must be over 18 years old. Examples of gender-based markers (e.g., accessing gender-affirming interventions and legal recognition of self-identified gender) show that there are additional transitional regulations for non-binary and transgender youth that are not recognised in normative transitional discourses (Cosgrove, 2021; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012).

Whilst a transitional understanding of youth highlights developmental trajectories taken by subjects and provided by institutions, (e.g., schools and workplaces) it also reinforces markers of progress and when these occur (Burman, 2016; Hall et al., 2009). Markers of progress become naturalised as they are reinforced by wider discourses of normative psychosocial development, favouring privileged subjectivities (e.g., white, cisgender, heterosexual, able, middle-class) and subsequently marginalising deviation from expected transitional markers (Burman, 2016). Naturalised psychosocial trajectories construct developmental transitions as normative and “smooth”, reinforcing an understanding that developmental “progression” is unproblematic (Cuervo

& Wyn, 2014). The assumption that youth transitions are unproblematic and naturalised allows for the identification of subjects who do not fit the normative developmental mould (e.g., non-binary youth), and provides opportunities to regulate such deviation.

### 5.2.1 Need For a “Big Change”:

*“I’m kind of apprehensive about making a bigger change but that probably needs to happen”*

Participants spoke of a need for a physical/spatial transition, which was often in the form of moving to university, encompassing a move away from home and family to a new area. A physical transition, e.g., moving away from home, provided the participants with a new environment that was less restrictive, which functioned as a space to socially transition e.g., to present and express themselves differently. For the participants, socially transitioning included a change of name, pronouns, and presentation. The transitions mentioned by the participants functioned to enable a reinvention of themselves, where they were able to present themselves as non-binary for the first time.

I’d just moved into a new house and it was just this really nice house and I was just chuffed with where I was living in [city] I had new housemates and stuff and she [housemate] came to visit and was like well you’re in the perfect space to have these thoughts and to be exploring it and I just thought you really understand how I’m feeling because that was just like really perfect for me at that point I was like you’re so right [...] you know when you move somewhere new you do have that space to present something different if you want stuff like that (Han – 161-174)

Han talks about being in the “perfect space” for their thoughts and exploration of their gender identity, which was the culmination of several transitional experiences: a new house, a new city, and new housemates providing Han with space to “present something different”. Therefore, a move to a new physical space helped facilitate a social transition for Han, as they were around new people who were less likely to know them as a previous gender. A social transition is a common narrative within transgender discourses often involving a change in gender presentation/expression (Richards & Barker, 2013).

Han implies that the ability to “present something different” is not as readily available without a transition to a new space. Transitioning and exploring gender through changing presentation are not experiences that are congruent with dominant cultural understandings of gender development and identity. Rather, dominant understandings are based on modernist theories of selfhood that construct identity (including gender identity) as a linear developmental process, resulting in a stable and enduring sense of self (Monro, 2005). Transitioning gender,

particularly to genders outside of the gender binary, challenge modernist discourses, as non-binary gender development is often a non-linear and more fluid process (Vincent, 2020; Ward & Callaghan, in press). Therefore, transitioning and/or exploring gender presentation in spaces where a different gender identity was previously known is likely to be difficult for non-binary youth, as they are challenging understandings of gender being binary and essentialist ideas of cisgenderism. Conversely, the impact of a desire to socially transition without a physical move can be seen in Kai's quote where they speak of the difficulties around transitioning:

I imagine moving to a different city or something and just like I want to I would like love to like be able to gradually be able to slope into like being more comfortable with who I am from a gender point of view but also from a social point of view as well and I don't know if that will happen without some bigger change and I'm kind of apprehensive about making a bigger change but that probably needs to happen I suppose (Kai – 386-390)

At the time of interviewing, Kai was not out as non-binary to anyone except for a couple of close friends. In this quote, Kai identifies the need for a “bigger change” to be able to feel more comfortable with their gender but the apprehension of making such a change. Kai lived at home with their parents and spoke a lot about being unable to express themselves in non-stereotypical/non-conforming ways. The comparison between Kai and Han's quotes illustrates the diversity of how much the participants were regulated and how this impacted their navigation of transitional discourses. Kai felt unable to present their gender in ways that felt comfortable whilst living in their hometown, while Han's transition to a new city provided a “perfect” and less restrictive space to “present something different”.

Kai also mentioned how they had not experienced “typical” youth transitions, such as moving out, going to university and being in a relationship: “I didn't go to university and I didn't get into a relationship” (Kai – 391-392), “it kind of became more apparent as time went on that I wasn't necessarily like other people you know everyone else seemed to be in/pursuing relationships etc etc I didn't really” (Kai – 195-197). Kai mentions the pressure of normative transitional discourses as they had “missed” various transitional markers, such as moving away from home, further education, and sexual/romantic relationships. For example, moving to a new house, being employed, and romantic and sexual relationships are changes that are expected of youth, so much so that if a youth does not meet these transitional expectations by a certain time, they may experience pressure to conform (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014). Since Kai had not experienced these expected transitions, they felt restricted in their ability to explore and present their non-binary gender.

### 5.2.2 “Brain Space” to Think

The physical/spatial transitions mentioned above impacted participants’ “brain space” to be able to think about gender and process thoughts and feelings that they had previously been unable to engage with. A move to a less restricted space reduced external pressures for Niv and Han and provided them with “space to think”, allowing them to feel more comfortable in their gender identities.

When I was living alone so I could kind of pace around the room think about this out loud repeatedly not really have any external comments coming in of like oh you should do this you should do that and I wasn't with my family I wasn't with my partner they were long distance so it was mostly just me alone with my thoughts and I was like okay this is the conclusion I kind of came to yeah I'm okay with both with being feminine I'm okay with being masculine (Niv – 157-162)

Yeah and also having the brain space as well I guess because like especially just like not living at home there's just a lot less pressure I didn't feel like I had to have any answers because I had all the space to think that was good (Han – 178-180)

Both Niv and Han reference “home” in their quotes and that a move away from home enabled a move away from pressures and external comments that previously reinforced normative expectations: “you should do this you should do that” (Niv). Han also mentions that the pressures from home consisted of expectations of Han having answers about their gender exploration. Social and cultural expectations from others of certainty and definitiveness for the participants’ genders illustrates the regulation that non-binary youth face from modernist psy(chological) discourses to have a definite sense of self (Prout, 2011). The expectancy functions as a b/ordering process for non-binary youth, supporting a modernist concept of gender identity which does not allow for gender exploration, questioning, or conscious categorical resistance (Ellis et al., 2020c). Expectations of gender constancy are based upon assumptions that gender remains constant from an assignment at birth and endures throughout one’s life, whereas some non-binary subjects experience a less linear and enduring sense of gender identity and therefore unsettle modernist expectations of a stable and unified self (Ward & Callaghan, in press).

Transitional discourses regulate normative expectations around transitions for youth, which favour cisheteronormativity and the gender binary, therefore, positioning any deviation from these expectations as “other”. Niv and Han show how “othered” subject positions, such as non-binary, are constructed as not following expected developmental and social trajectories and face implications of needing to justify this deviation through having answers. [Chapter four](#) discussed how expectations

to justify oneself were placed onto the participants and functioned to delegitimise non-binary genders. According to transitional discourses, non-binary subjects should have answers about their gender diversity and be able to articulate this to others. Expectations to have answers and to justify transitional diversity highlight relations of knowledge hierarchy within the discourse, as diversity ought to be explained and justified, whereas, conformity and normative transitional trajectories are assumed e.g., a cisgender subjectivity, evidencing cisgenderism (Riggs, 2019).

Both restrictive spaces and normative developmental expectations mean that non-binary youth must navigate additional transitional positionings, such as cisnormativity, linear, and binary trajectory expectations. These additional positionings mean that non-binary youth often experience childhood/adolescent experiences later and/or at different times, as their subjectivities are heavily regulated. It is important to not analyse non-binary subjectivities against (cis)normative examples, as this reinforces the assumption that cisgender subjectivities are the norm, which all other genders should be judged against. It is not my intention to consider the participants' accounts against a cisnormative understanding, although, the quote from Ren (below) shows how non-binary youth make sense of their subject positions in ways that do draw on comparisons with (cis)normative subjectivities.

Everyone is forced to go through certain transitions like moving school or leaving their house not even that anymore really but there are certain transitions that you're forced to go through I know that being female forced to grow up very early I'm also the eldest daughter so forced to grow up incredibly fast so that I can help out my younger sister there are those transitions that I feel occur earlier but then there are other ones that occur later so being demi the transitions of having my first kiss having my first partner having my first whatever those still haven't happened yet for most people those happen when they were 14 so certain transitions or life experiences I don't know how essential they are they've definitely not made a big impact on me I don't think but those are later on because relationships with other people because being non-binary or being queer is such a social aspect [...] being non-binary effects transitions and I think changes when they occur and might change whether or not some of them ever happen but it also greatly depends on your environment and the people you're surrounded with and there's a social aspect because they sort of force when certain transitions happen and how you approach them (Ren – 489-506)

Ren shows how their gender and sexual subjectivities affected a wider range of their experiences, e.g., how they were positioned as the eldest daughter increased caring and parental

responsibilities and being demisexual delayed sexual and partner relationships. Concerning non-binary specifically, they mention that non-binary subjectivities change when transitions occur and whether they occur at all. Ren notes that both the “environment” (spatial) and the “people you’re surrounded with” (relational) impact experiences of transitions in youth, which highlights the importance of both spatial and relational metaphors for theorising youth.

Research has shown how gender and sexual subjectivities are interrelated and how a change and/or flexibility with one’s gender identity may also mean a change in their sexuality (Hereth et al., 2020; Mizock & Hopwood, 2016). All the participants in this research identified with a queer sexuality (i.e., not heterosexual), including bisexual, asexual lesbian, gay, queer, demisexual, and pansexual. People with queer genders and/or sexualities often experience “coming out” multiple times as they (re)negotiate their subjectivities, highlighting the non-linear and continued process of gender development and how this intersects with sexuality (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; D’Augelli, 1994; Hereth et al., 2020; Lindley et al., 2020).

Therefore, a both/and approach to youth metaphors shows the need for space to engage with thoughts/feelings around gender, which may require a physical move to less restrictive spaces (e.g., away from home, to university) as well as the need for belonging. Minority communities, such as non-binary, often experience minority stress and microaggressions (Meyer, 2003, 2015; Nadal & Nadal, 2013), making the importance of connecting with others who understand and will not discriminate of particular significance. Furthermore, many theories of identity development, including dominant stage-based theories, such as Cass (1979), to more recent theories of transgender development e.g. Bilodeau and Renn (2005), Lindley et al. (2020) and Schwartz et al. (2011), highlight the significance of connection and belonging for identity development.

### **5.3 Youth as Belonging – Fostering a Sense of Community**

Whilst a transitional metaphor provides insight into when developmental markers are expected to occur for youth, it does not “reveal the relational elements that bring these trajectories into being, sustain them or throw them off course” (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014, p. 905). Focusing on the process of transition can construct the identification of normative and non-normative subjects and obscure the space between identified markers (Hall et al., 2009). The previous section showed how non-binary youth’s subjectivities are destabilised through dominant discourses (e.g., the expectancy of a normative developmental trajectory), where the participants felt the need for a “big change” to engage with their gender identities. Furthermore, as I have argued that identified markers reproduce cisheteronormative trajectories, for non-binary youth, it is important to shift the focus from expected markers to transitional borderlands. Therefore, I will now consider the use of a relational metaphor for conceptualising youth, which highlights the importance of belonging and

community between youth and the worlds around them (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014). Using a relational metaphor, it is possible to identify the significance of belonging in a particular social context for non-binary youth, which may be missed when focusing solely on youth as transitional (Shotwell & Sangrey, 2009).

In this section, the participants spoke of establishing a sense of belonging with other queer people. Many of the participants' friendship circles were mostly (if not exclusively) queer, which was important to the participants, as it provided them with connections to others who shared similar views on gender and identity, as well as the distance from the emotional work discussed in [chapter four](#). Through applying a relational metaphor to the participants' accounts, I explore how they work to establish connections to stabilise a sense of self through community belonging. The creation of a community based on shared experience inevitably demarcates otherness; therefore, I will also focus on how the youth reinforced community boundaries of belonging.

### *5.3.1 Importance of Connecting with Queer People:*

*“That's the great thing about having a friendship group which is exclusively queer is that we understand the problem”*

Dominant developmental and social trajectories regulate expectations for youth based on cisheteronormative expectations of gender, sexuality, identities, and relationships. Non-binary youth often do not “fit” these expectations due to non-linear identity development and resisting essentialist ideas of gender (Cosgrove, 2021; Tatum et al., 2020). Therefore, normative transitions destabilise non-binary subjectivities as they reinforce expectations that favour dominant subjectivities (i.e., cisgender and binary) and marginalise others (i.e., non-binary). Normative transitions also regulate diversity from expected development through discourses of legitimacy, childhoods, and capacity. Therefore, the identification with queer communities and experiences was important to the participants as it enabled connection with similar subjects and provided recognition of their genders. Through belonging and community with other queer subjects, the participants were able to recognise “queer transitions” by identifying commonalities across queer communities and their own experiences. Recognising shared experiences of development that aligned more with queer and non-binary subjectivities helped to affirm a sense of self that was previously challenged through restrictive normative transitional expectations. The participants spoke of feeling validated and understood which helped to construct a shared experience, knowledge, and positioning – that understanding “the problem” is shared across the queer communities.

Queer and non-conforming I feel like queer feels even broader like because it encompasses sexuality as well so like I feel like that's so broad it encompasses everything and also it has this freedom to be like I'm not cishet so I'm just gonna



say queer because it means I don't have to explain it to you or just say that and I don't have to delve further into it it addresses it but it doesn't talk about it too much (Cornelius – 284-288)

Well I identify very strongly as queer and like I would use queer to represent my gender and my sexuality so I would actually use that more than I would non-binary (Han – 119-120)

When I say queer it puts a lot of things into flux and it just mark not marks me as different but marks it as an experience and a way of understanding things that I am not the same I'm experiencing something different and have thoughts and options that you may just dismiss immediately (Ren – 226-229)

It bothers me sometimes when historically especially in like academia people use LGBT but actually there's nothing to do with trans issues so that's my main frustration against it is just like don't put it in if you're not going to do it justice so that's that's the main reason yeah (Han – 213-216)

The participants preferred the use of “queer” as an identity label as this both encompassed their non-binary genders and extended further to suggest queerness of sexuality i.e., that they were not heterosexual, whilst also being ambiguous in that it did not specify gender and sexuality in a dominant categorical format. The use of “queer” provided the participants with a sense of belonging within a broader community of gender and sexual diversity. Although LGBTQ+ also refers to broader communities and collective identities, the participants did not prefer or identify with the acronym primarily for reasons around inclusivity, for example, preferring LGBTQIA+ and disliking the use of LGBTQ+ when there was no trans-inclusion. Preference of labels is echoed in research with non-binary youth who spoke of how trans is included within LGBTQ+ spaces in a tokenistic way, and that this is often about binary trans, excluding non-binary subjects (Beemyn, 2015). Students with non-binary sexualities often used labels that were more “well-known”, such as bisexual when coming out, as they anticipated that others would not understand identity labels that were more nuanced (e.g., pansexual) (Beemyn, 2015). This was similar to the participants for the current research, who often used “queer” as a label for themselves, rather than “non-binary” e.g., Han’s quote. Although queer has a difficult history for some, due to being used in derogatory ways, the term is more widely known than non-binary – which is still considered to be a “new” gender identity (Vincent, 2018). The existence of queer within popular discourse explains why non-binary youth may adopt this term as a way to achieve more recognition and visibility – both of which are identified as areas of concern for non-binary youth in the literature (Budge et al., 2020; Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018; Vincent, 2020).

The use of and preference for queer shows the struggle of becoming/being culturally intelligible in a society where non-binary genders are rendered unintelligible. Furthermore, the purposeful vagueness of “queer” as a subjectivity provides a way for the participants to resist pressure to fit into a third gender category.

Whilst the use of specific identity labels allows for recognition by others, it also provided access to communities. Research shows the importance of communities for LGBTQ+, trans, and queer identity development and resilience (Eckstrand & Potter, 2017; Scroggs & Vennum, 2020). Therefore, the use of queer by the participants also functioned as a sense of community belonging:

It is really great to communicate with someone who at least understands the problem that there are problems and it's good to complain with people it's very validating to say hey these are these are things that happened and they are awful and again that's the great thing about having a friendship group which is exclusively queer is that we understand the problem and yeah obviously again best friends at the uni are non-binary people so you know we can we understand the same issues (RW – 282-288)

I think this is another one of those things where it's like it's so much easier to have these conversations with other queer people than it is to have with like in the public discourse which is annoying because we want to have these conversations in the public discourse so that the discourse can shift but you face so much like aggression in response that it's so impossible and even obviously there's like intracommunity stuff going on with like trans medicalists and everything that's like why are we fighting why does it all have to be like this kind of thing (Em – 729-735)

So that's also like another positive aspect like I'm able to explore and have like discussions about gender and sexuality and all of that with a bunch of amazing people but also queer-identifying yeah and like the validation the constant validation of it as well my friendship group has grown drastically and like you can tell it's very it's a very different mix of people with a certain level of... intellectual stimulation I want to say so yeah it seems to come hand in hand like being queer and being very critical of everything especially political things I suppose that makes sense and so like when my friendship group moved into the queer sphere that political side of things being critical of everything comes with it and that gives me like good intellectual stimulation that I never received so that was also like another positive thing (G – 98-107)

Queer subjects were constructed by the participants as helping to improve a range of areas that were previous struggles, including a shared understanding of problems, being validated and more intellectual conversations. Em states that trying to have conversations around gender with non-queer people/in the public discourse is met with aggression and resistance, making it “impossible”. Therefore, connection with other queer people enabled conversations about gender and identity that non-binary youth are unlikely to have without “queer belonging”. For Em and G, critical considerations of gender were not possible in non-queer spaces, for example, G spoke about how they gained a level of intellectual stimulation when their “friendship group moved into the queer sphere”. A binary and cisheteronormative dominance within global society means that non-queer subjects do not have to critically engage with essentialist and binary gender discourses in the same way that non-binary people do, as their subjectivities “fit” within binary and cisgender frameworks (Riggs, 2019). Therefore, the participants identified a sense of belonging through a queer subjectivity, as queerness enabled resistance against normative transitional expectations. RW illustrates how “queer belonging” functioned for them, as it helped them to feel understood “we understand the same issues”, “we understand the problem”, thus validating their subjectivity that was questioned and delegitimised by dominant discourses.

However, a sense of queer belonging (including shared issues, understandings, and knowledge) must be broad e.g., based on experiences of microaggressions, minority stress and discrimination, to avoid assuming a homogenous queer community (Budge et al., 2020; Formby, 2017; Meyer, 2003; Sue, 2010). Research has shown how a homogenous understanding of LGBTQ+/queer communities as “a community” is problematic as it neglects and reduces nuances within and between the various subjectivities e.g., a cis gay man’s sense of community and experiences are different from a trans woman’s (Formby, 2017). A homogenous understanding also undermines the unique experiences of navigating cisnormativity as a non-binary subject, which is different for LGBTQ+ people with binary genders (Richards et al., 2017). Therefore, I interpret the participants’ accounts as drawing on a solidarity discourse within this section to make sense of their shared experiences across queer communities.

There was diversity across the participants when discussing wider communities e.g., LGBTQ+ and trans. “Queer” provided comfort through community and its ambiguity. The participants used the word/identity “queer” to make themselves identifiable as not cisgender, binary or heterosexual, without specifying more specific genders and sexualities. Similarly, there was a sense of belonging with transgender communities, with all the participants discussing a positive connection to the transgender community, label, or identity. Within the discussions of non-binary subjectivities being

part of the transgender communities, some participants drew on disidentification of cisgender, which functioned to construct belonging to trans communities, as illustrated by Cornelius:

I know a lot of people I know that there are people that are non-binary they wouldn't identify as trans but for me trans just means not cis and non-binary comes within that because you can't be cis and non-binary these are not the same so for many non-binary just becomes a subsection within trans that you can there's trans and within trans there's binary and there's non-binary and yeah for me that's inherently linked so I have a big pull towards like I identify as trans as well as non-binary but I know there are some people that don't but for me it's a case of it feels inherent it's inherently trans because it isn't cis (Cornelius – 329-336)

Last week was trans week there was a parade in [city] and I brought my genderqueer flag my friend bought their non-binary flag and we saw a bunch of other gender non-conforming flags as well on top of trans flags I suppose that everyone like the non-cis people just come together and just like decide not decide but feel comfortable to share the umbrella because we're just not cis (G – 270-274)

Cornelius draws on a cisgender/transgender binary discourse to make sense of non-binary positionality. Although they recognise that some non-binary people do not identify as trans, they emphasise the duality and distinctness of cisgender and transgender subjectivities, where non-binary is “inherently trans because it isn't cis”. For Cornelius, transgender is defined as a disidentification – it is not cisgender – rather than specifying what transgender is. Similarly, G also draws on disidentification to distinguish themselves from cisgender, which creates a belonging to the trans communities. For both Cornelius and G, the disidentification, which created separation from cisgender identification also functioned to create a sense of belonging and community with transgender subjectivities. Regardless of the “specific” identity, the participants illustrate how belonging across trans, queer, and LGBTQ+ communities is developed and maintained through disidentification and the creation of separation from cisgender, binary, and heterosexual subjectivities.

Darwin (2020) explored the cisgender/transgender binary and how non-binary people navigate transgender positionings. Negotiating the binary was found to depend on the individual's understanding of their gender and which model of trans legitimacy they favoured, either the binarized medical model or the umbrella model (Darwin, 2020b). Subsequently, there were large

amounts of diversity and ambivalence around trans identification, and experiences of resistance when claiming a trans label (Sumerau & Mathers, 2019). Therefore, Darwin (2020) concludes that there is no single way to express or define non-binary and/or trans identities.

Other researchers and activists have also challenged the cis/transgender binary by questioning how gender for all people is perhaps not as static as dominant modernist discourses portray (Iantaffi & Barker, 2018). Therefore, the boundaries of cisgender, transgender, and non-binary are not clearly demarcated or impermeable. The participants illustrate how they have a sense of belonging to both non-binary and transgender borderlands, while others do not feel connected to the transgender label. Research focusing on non-binary genders shows how encompassing non-binary and binary trans identities dilutes and flattens the complexity of gender diversity as transnormative narratives become dominant (Darwin, 2020b). Therefore, there is a need to be critical of always positioning non-binary subjects within the transgender umbrella, as this risks assimilating their experiences within broader binary trans narratives. Furthermore, research focusing specifically on non-binary subjects highlights how many do not identify with the transgender label and navigate a non-binary positioning in ways that are oversimplified by locating all non-binary subjects with the trans umbrella (Darwin, 2020b).

### *5.3.2 Creation of Separation – Who Did Not Belong*

I now turn to consider how identifying belonging and community with other subjects creates “otherness” and demarcates who is included within various communities and who is excluded. As discussed, the participants created separation from other subjects by being selective with whom they engaged with, which was a result of being positioned as delegitimate and as needing to do the emotional work of educating others. For example, both Em and G, referenced people they interacted with as being “ignorant” and “bigoted”. Han also referenced “genuine thought” as a way of articulating who may be worth explaining themselves to, as well as drawing on age to note how older people are less likely to be receptive and educated about non-binary genders. Through such references, the participants reinforce b/ordering processes of separation and otherness by identifying subjects whom they felt were unreceptive and not genuine and therefore were not worth engaging with in discussions about their genders.

Three areas of separation were identified as significant by the participants, which will be presented in this section. Firstly, the participants distinguished between non-binary and binary transgender subjectivities primarily through drawing on discourses of transitioning and noting how non-binary genders required different “frames of reference”. Secondly, the participants drew on generational discourses, where older subjects were positioned as less likely to understand non-binary genders and therefore, creating separation from older people. Finally, the participants

referenced temporality as an aspect they considered when engaging with others e.g., whether a subject had a significant role in their life, or not.

The quotes below show how although the participants connected with a broader transgender identity label, they also distinguished between non-binary and binary trans experiences. Both Noah and Han reference transitioning as an aspect that separates non-binary subjectivities, where binary trans subjects are constructed as “fully transitioning”.

I feel like having the distinction between trans and non-binary is important because transgender although people who are transgender can also be non-binary there's a big difference between transitioning completely and being transgender and just identifying as non-binary and I feel like the difference sort of needs to be more pronounced (Noah – 222-226)

So I was like in a kind of binary mindset so I thought that I wanted to like well I didn't think I wanted to but I was considering if I was like binary trans and like wanted to fully transition and stuff like that which was like a terrifying thought which is kind of how I knew that wasn't what I wanted (Han – 97-100)

Recently I met this person who is trans and also non-binary and that was very interesting to me so like from my conversation with from what I understood being trans to them was very more sort of a physical thing and then the non-binary aspect of it is more like the gender identity so that was an interesting take on it (G – 275-278)

The references to “fully transitioning” draws on medical discourses of gender reassignment, where an “authentic” transition requires medical intervention (Pearce, 2018). Through separating non-binary from medical discourses, G perpetuates medical discourses for transgender subjects and constructs new subject positions for themselves and how they navigate dominant transitional positionings of youth. Borderland theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding how marginalised groups may draw on different epistemologies, such as multiplicity and fluidity, to create and maintain their (new) subjectivities whilst resisting dominant ideologies (Anzaldúa, 1987; Callis, 2014). For example, Ren introduces examples of separation between non-binary and binary trans subjects as well as subjects who are unlikely to have considered frames of reference that include gender diversity:

When you're binary trans that flip in thinking but because of the binary existing it's not too difficult for people to just switch pronouns or switch their frame of

reference because it's a frame of reference that they're still used to but for non-binary people going to using they/them pronouns is like I was talking to a friend and they just went they/them for me is plural so thinking of you in a plural sense of really weird and it's a mental shift that's quite different and just those elements of bathrooms of sir/madam approaches of you go into a store you've got the women's section and the men's section I shop in both should we get rid of both of them concepts of a genderless future those sort of ideas are messing with frames of reference that I think non-binary people are more likely to face for me that's part one of the of the reasons that talking about it and telling people that I'm non-binary is exhausting is because it's changing all of these ways alongside them and constantly I feel like helping them along to help them create a frame of reference that they've never really considered before (Ren – 364-376)

Through Ren's quote, they create separation between binary trans and non-binary subjects in their concept of "frames of reference". Ren suggests that binary trans people can be recognised and understood within the current binary gender discourse, while non-binary subjects require a "mental shift" from this. Whereas a binary framework enables people to "switch" pronouns and frames of reference (female-to-male and male-to-female), Ren illustrates how non-binary subjects challenge current understandings that gender is binary and how new frames of reference are required. Suggestions that non-binary subjects require a new frame of reference begins to identify non-binary subjects as markedly different from binary trans subjects. For example, non-binary subjects may present ambiguously/androgynously and they may resist normative expectations around transitioning – such as micro-dosing of hormones and combining surgery options (top but not bottom), as well as the use of more gender-neutral names and pronouns (Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018). It is important to note that as with all genders (binary, cis, non-binary, trans), there is no one pathway of "doing" gender and although many non-binary youth use gender-neutral pronouns, such as they/them, not all non-binary youth do (Richards et al., 2017). However, by challenging the gender binary discourse in multiple ways through non-binary subjectivities, gender/sex distinctions, and moving away from essentialism, the participants require the "listener" to change multiple frames of reference. Challenging dominant discourses of gender requires some emotional work from the "other" to be able to hear non-binary youth and to be able to understand their subjectivities.

Ren references they/them pronouns to note how their friend struggled with the current binary gender discourse: "they/them for me is plural so thinking of you in a plural sense of really weird and it's a mental shift that's quite different". Ren's friend had to challenge their current frames of reference around gender and identity to recognise Ren as non-binary, illustrating a

common b/ordering process for non-binary people – that recognising the existence of gender identities beyond, in-between, and outside of the gender binary challenges others' dominant understandings of gender and identity (Shotwell & Sangrey, 2009). The use of they/them pronouns is often associated with a plurality, referring to multiple people, and so it follows that using they/them pronouns for non-binary people carries this plurality. Barker (2018) writes about considering the self as plural and relates this to gender to suggest ways of thinking that may be "opened up" from this reframing. The concept of the self as plural has also been used within psychotherapy literature and theories, such as internal family systems theory (Fisher, 2017) and also within feminist theory, such as borderland theory (Anzaldúa, 1987), to consider the self as intersectional and multiple. Applying these theories developmentally, adolescence is a time where young people begin to learn which aspects of their selves are more approved and those that are disapproved of by others. This leads young people to repress/disown aspects of themselves that are considered "unacceptable" by others, which will be discussed further in [chapter six](#).

By demarcating queer subjects as a way of fostering a sense of personal belonging and community, the participants reinforced boundaries between other subjects. When defining a group of subjects, a community, or a place of belonging, there is always identification of who does not belong (Antonsich, 2010). Using borderland theory and a relational metaphor for youth illustrates how the personal aspect of self-identification and belonging to a community is always political, as the process of identification constructs the "other" and regulates boundaries of who does(n't) belong (Jones & Krzyzanowski, 2011).

The participants also drew on a generational discourse to expand on their identification of who can form a new frame of reference and therefore understand non-binary subjectivities. In the quotes below Han and Ren share a perspective that younger generations are more able to grasp concepts of gender diversity beyond the binary.

There's a huge difference like the main difference is how old people are as to how receptive they are and so younger people generally are just more aware are of even just like have heard of non-binary genders whereas a lot of older people just like you're really having to start from the basics and I think it's yeah I found that those people a lot harder to try to get them to think differently (Han – 81-85)

Yeah I mean the next generation I feel has an advantage of sorts where people are more willing to approach things with a different frame of reference (Ren – 390-391)



Han positions younger people as being “more aware” and more likely to have heard of non-binary genders, which makes them more receptive to non-binary youth. In comparison, older people are positioned as being less receptive and less aware of non-binary genders, meaning that youth must “start from the basics”. In the above quotes, the participants make sweeping generalisations about older people lacking the awareness and frames of reference to understand non-binary genders. In [chapter four](#), the professionals and older subjects were constructed as challenging the participants’ capacities to be able to know themselves, however, in the current chapter, the participants “respond” by constructing the older subjects as lacking the frames of reference to understand their gender diversity. Therefore, underlying the b/ordering process of separation from older people is an attempt by the participants to renegotiate power dynamics from being delegitimised. Consequently, older people become the delegitimised subjects and therefore, are not given a chance to “prove themselves”.

The focus of the current sub-section centres on a relational metaphor for youth, focusing on how the participants fostered a sense of community. In the quotes presented, the participants drew on generational discourses to reinforce b/ordering processes of creating separation from older subjects. Older people were described in terms of their capacity for receptiveness, positioning them as passive, particularly as Han suggests they lacked “the basics” in their knowledge of gender. Whereas younger people were described as aware and hearing, suggesting they are more active subjects. An active subject position for non-binary youth in this discourse is further supported as the participants spoke of selecting subjects they would and would not engage with, depending on how receptive they are to gender diversity. By drawing on generational discourses to highlight differences in age-based understanding and awareness of non-binary subjectivities, a sense of belonging for non-binary youth is more likely to be found and fostered with subjects who are younger.

Participants also drew on temporality as a way of deciding whose opinions mattered. Subjects who had a non-significant position in the youths' lives were described as of less concern. The participants felt that they should not worry about these subjects and their opinions because they would not be key figures in their lives. Considering the temporality of subjects illustrates how the participants made sense of who was important in their lives i.e., were they likely to be a significant figure or more temporary.

It was very like freeing to finally give up on what people thought of me because going through life being scared that everyone thinks that you're bad well not bad but going through your life thinking like oh what if I look a bit like a boy today or what if I look a bit gay today it doesn't really matter in the long run what people

that you're only going to see for a few years and then never gonna see again think about you (Noah – 139-143)

I walk into a shop and I go where am I supposed to go I go where am I supposed to go what does it look like I'm looking at what do these people think of me and I know that's like I shouldn't care there's some people I'm never going to see again they're just people in a shop (Kai – 436-440)

It was through prioritising whose opinions and thoughts mattered that enabled Noah to shift from the preoccupation with how everyone else perceived them. Noah did this by drawing on temporality: “people that you're only going to see for a few years and then never gonna see again” no longer mattered to Noah as they were not going to be a significant part of their life. Both Noah and Kai refer to the future as: “it doesn't really matter in the long run”, “never gonna see again” (Noah) and “people I'm never going to see again” (Kai), which situates infrequent interactions with subjects as unimportant. By considering the future, the participants draw on temporality as a way of determining significant others in their lives that helped them to manage difficult interactions in the present. For example, non-binary youth may navigate cisgenderist discourses by positioning daily interactions with people as temporary and cultivating communities and chosen families with people who will have more significant roles in their lives. The participants suggest that, for non-binary youth, there is an importance of recognising who is important, meaning youth must be selective with whom they engage with, particularly concerning their gender identities. A relational metaphor for youth highlights the importance of recognising and investing in subjects who are like-minded i.e., are queer and share similar experiences, and shows that queer subjects are likely to have significant roles in the lives of non-binary youth.

Therefore, through identifying belonging with queer subjects, the participants also identified “outsiders” whom the participants felt were not worth engaging with or being concerned about their opinions, as they were often uneducated about gender diversity and held strongly to cisgenderist discourses. Another aspect of subjects the participants choose not to engage with were those who were likely to be temporarily involved in their lives – as temporary as somebody they might pass in a shop. Research has suggested that such temporary and occasional interactions with other subjects, for example, in public spaces, can be understood as “weak ties” (Antonsich, 2010). Such “weak ties” and daily encounters with people are not sufficient for developing a sense of connectedness and belonging. Rather, for a sense of belonging, relations must be long-lasting, significant and include frequent interaction (Antonsich, 2010). Therefore, for the participants, the infrequent and temporary interactions and concerns with subjects in public spaces became less of a concern, enabling them to shift from a preoccupation with temporary subjects, as they recognised

these interactions as “weak ties”. For the participants, a prioritising and investment in longevity connections over “weak ties” provides some justification for the demarcation of subjects as temporary and not belonging, which helped determine whom the participants engage with. Furthermore, this demarcation also creates a sense of belonging with whom the participants did invest in, feel connected to, and where they shared a sense of belonging – with queer people and spaces. Therefore, it was important for the participants to be around people who understood them and shared similar experiences, to avoid being positioned as identity educators and the associated requirement of emotional work. Subjects that were part of the participants’ sense of belonging and communities were almost exclusively queer, suggesting that subjects who have more permanent and significant roles in the participants’ lives were likely to represent concepts of “chosen family” often associated with LGBTQ+ people, which reflect shared understanding and support (Ellis et al., 2020c).

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

The current chapter has argued for the importance of considering youth as both transitional and relational, rather than as purely transitional, which is the current dominant discourse. Focusing on transitional discourses for non-binary youth is important, as it allows for critical engagement with normative transitional expectations, which I have argued favour privileged subjectivities, particularly cisgender and heterosexuality. Without considering and interrogating normative transitional markers, non-binary youth would be considered against cisheteronormative expected trajectories, which position non-binary youth as “other”, and risks pathologising gender diversity. By exploring the research question “how does a transitional positioning intersect with non-binary genders” the participants spoke of how transitions were an important aspect of being able to understand and feel comfortable in their genders, which centred around the need for a physical move, often away from home and to university/another city. Living with family and in hometowns was constructed as restrictive and the participants struggled against normative developmental expectations, as transitional and modernist discourses do not allow space for exploring and/or transitioning genders in youth. The participants vocalised alternative accounts of understanding gender and identity more broadly, challenging a modernist understanding of the self. Therefore, moving to a less restrictive space (e.g., university), functioned to provide the participants with “brain space” to engage with thoughts and feelings about gender that had previously been inaccessible due to challenging restrictions.

The theoretical framework of borderland and identity borders was significant for the current chapter in recognising the unique ways that non-binary youth negotiate oppressive borders. The participants drew on a relational metaphor to articulate how they found belonging and community among other queer people and also began to define and reinforce the separation between non-

binary and “other” subjectivities, becoming border reinforcers. This b/ordering process was significant to the participants as it enabled important inclusion through connection to like-minded others and exclusion of others who were likely to question the legitimacy of their genders. A discourse of queer belonging reinforces and makes diverse gender subjectivities, transitions, and development culturally intelligible, which were questioned by those who do not belong i.e., non-queer people. I argue that this belonging and community functioned to provide the participants with freedom from the emotional work of being positioned as educators whilst simultaneously being delegitimised (as discussed in [chapter four](#)). Throughout the interviews, the constructions of difference through maintaining b/ordering processes were highlighted between non-binary youth and other subjects: a queer/non-queer distinction, and differences in age, temporality, and receptiveness. In [chapter four](#), the older/professional subjects constructed positionings of non-binary youth as lacking mental capacity to self-identify their genders, whereas in the current chapter the participants constructed older subjects as lacking the ability to think in non-binary ways, stating they are often “unreceptive”, “bigoted”, and “ignorant”. The links between the analysis chapters, such as how the participants renegotiated power dynamics of being delegitimised, by reinforcing b/ordering processes of separation, shows how the discursive realms are connected.

In conclusion, the participants highlighted specific non-binary transitions, showing the prevalence of cisheteronormativity in dominant spatial metaphors of youth. A relational metaphor provided insight into the “spaces” between transitional markers, showing the importance of belonging and community with other queer people for gender development. Queer belonging allowed the participants to establish a sense of self, which they were unable to do in restricted spaces and without queer community, as dominant discourses of youth as transitional destabilise developmental and social diversity, such as non-binary subjectivities.

## Chapter 6 – Personal Growth

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the discursive realm of personal growth and how the participants understood their gender identity development. Traditionally, identity development is conceptualised as linear, working towards an endpoint, and therefore, “growth” is considered in the work towards achieving the stability of being an adult (Schwartz, et al., 2011). However, the participants drew on lifespan discourses, whereby development was understood as an ongoing process, troubling modernist notions of “achieving” a stable identity (Linstead & Pullen, 2006). In particular, the participants highlighted the significance of context to understand their identities, including recognising previous genders and the “journey” to where they are now. The final research question “how are the identity borders of non-binary genders regulated for youth” is addressed in the current chapter, showing how identity borders were understood as contextual, which was freeing, but they also contained the potential to reinforce individualistic ideals. Using FRDA as an analytical framework helped to interpret the “freedom” provided by context, showing how regulatory pressures are inescapable and how individualistic discourses reinforce discipline.

I engage with the discursive concept of docile bodies, whereby a subject is “read” to understand how disciplinary power has shaped their subjectivity, to explore how the participants resisted pressures that attempted to regulate their personal growth (Foucault, 1977). The participants used contextual and “becoming” understandings to trouble notions of easily reading subjects’ bodies and genders for a coherent sense of self and for how they have been shaped by discursive forces. Contextual and continued becoming was freeing for the participants as it provided freedom from binary pressures. The sense of contextual and continued becoming illustrated a borderland concept of selfhood (Anzaldúa, 1987), recognising the multiplicity and fluidity of identities outside of hegemonic ideologies, which provided the “freedom” from binary pressures. Therefore, the borderlands allowed the participants to space to grow without the restrictions of the gender binary – which links with [chapter five’s](#) discussions of the significance of transitions in providing physical and “brain space”, and the role of community in buffering against regulation.

However, whilst contextual understandings of “becoming” enabled the participants to challenge developmental discourses, the disciplinary pressure to identify and articulate a definite and stable sense of self created pressure to conform to dominant binary and cisheteronormative subjectivities, deterring the exploration of gender diversity (Richards & Barker, 2013). Therefore, the participants were situated in a discursive duel of navigating disciplinary power for their understandings of personal growth. Additionally, restrictive messages from conservative families and religious institutions impacted personal growth discourses by limiting aspects of the

participants' genders and identities (Darwin, 2020a), for example, their "outness" and their engagement in activities and queer spaces. The participants problematised notions of "healthy" gender development equalling "outness", highlighting how challenging this is for identities that are not culturally intelligible. Furthermore, given that non-binary people often experience multiple "coming outs" as part of their gender development, there are unique challenges in being recognised as their current gender and not being "branded" as a previous identity. Idealised notions of being "out" were contradicted through regulatory messages to self-censor gender diversity and the internalisation of trans and homophobia, which created negative experiences of "coming out". Therefore, whilst personal growth discourses contained the potential for alternative understandings of lifespan becoming and resisting binary pressures, the internalisation of restrictive messages and concerns of safety and familial rejection resulted in participants self-censoring themselves.

## **6.2 Making Sense of Gender as Contextual – A Lifespan Process:**

### **"There is no permanent state of self like show me a permanent state of self like you can't"**

Traditional models of development focus on achieving an end identity, of reaching a fixed point of stability, which is recognisable to others (Schwartz et al., 2011). Models that use a linear concept of growth often minimise the "progress" and favour stable subject positions. Stability is associated with adulthood, as adulthood is conceptualised as "being", while childhood and youth are understood as "becoming", therefore, a clearly identified and stable subjectivity is privileged, as it is compatible with cultural markers of adulthood (Prout, 2011; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Several of the participants spoke of understanding their subjectivities as contextual and as a continual process of development. The participants' experiences of growth challenged expert discourses, such as modernist ways of understanding the self, which suggest a singular, stable, and enduring subjectivity, as well as dominant developmental understandings of identity – that young people reach certain developmental milestones (O'Dell, 2014; O'Dell et al., 2017). Instead, the participants articulated poststructural and social constructionist accounts of the self as "gender on-going", "no permanence", "being seen in the moment" and "accepting no endpoint", moving away from modernist and dominant psychological understandings of the self. Conceptualising their identification of being non-binary and growth as a process fits with their broader articulations of continuous "becoming", rather than working towards achieving "being" (Linstead & Pullen, 2006).

I realised that my understanding of the identity was sort of both but neither so that I understand having some sort of female aspects and male aspects but not fully either and for me this is sort of the way that I feel about a lot of different parts of me [...] so I have those female understandings but not 100% because I grew up sort of tomboy-ish then queer then gender non-conforming so not 100%

female I didn't grow up male but I understand or I have some of those feelings so sort of that both but neither which is kind of contradictory but both also true (Ren – 14-29)

Ren engaged with the dominant binary logic of genders, where available subject positions are constructed as dichotomous – female or male, with no discursive space between or outside of these positionings. However, as Ren notes, they understood their identity as “both but neither”, adopting an epistemology of multiplicity which challenges disciplinary power that restricts gendered experiences to dichotomous and binary logic. In the realisation of their identity as non-binary, Ren gains a more active subject position, resisting notions of a docile body that can easily be read and subjected to regulatory forces. A docile body is an object which is created and maintained through disciplinary force, which Foucault (1977) argued can be “read” to understand the forms of disciplinary power that have organised and shaped them. In resisting the notion of docile bodies through highlighting contradictory understandings, Ren troubles the reading of their bodies and gender and resists dominant binary gender discourses, which function to regulate youth to articulate a coherent sense of self. Both/neither understandings of gender destabilise binary gender discourses, allowing Ren to renegotiate their subject positionings outside of expected normative growth discourses e.g., “tomboy-ish then queer than gender non-conforming”.

Other participants, such as Em, also challenged the becoming/being discourses of youth and the need to achieve stability by deconstructing the assumed permanence of subject positions:

Yeah I guess like at pretty much every stage like I'm sure I've been in some ways happy with whatever identity I've kind of settled on at the time because like I mean you know there is no permanent state of self like show me a permanent state of self like you can't so I guess in like a lot of ways each like time I sort of not reinvented myself but kind of reinvented like the language like the way that I viewed myself the language I used to talk about myself in some ways like that was my authentic self at the time because I with happy and content with it and like this just so happens to be there like this is my final form it might not be I don't know maybe in 10 years' time I'll yeah maybe I'll be using different pronouns or a different name I don't know but I guess like I guess in some ways accepting that and accepting that like I think at the beginning I sort of thought well I need something I need an end I need to find a word and that's me forever and like pin down myself I think that that at the beginning that's how I thought about it but now I've kind of been able to accept that like well that's not how it works (Em – 562-574)

Em states how they were happy with their previous identities at the time, despite now identifying as something different (non-binary). By legitimising their past gender identities Em challenges discourses of growth that are dismissive of “becoming” (since they reflect on being happy with their previous genders) and conceptualisations of “being” as permanent (given that there is no permanent state of self). Therefore, by legitimising previous identities and locating their subjectivity contextually, Em provides a different perspective from transnormative narratives, which largely speak of previously being unhappy and incongruent, and transitioning leading to authenticity (Bradford & Syed, 2019). Em also challenges the notion of reading docile bodies to understand the organisation of power – if there is no permanent state of self, there is no reference point against which one can be read, which shows how the participants gain agency from contextual discourses.

Previous research on non-binary young people highlights how they renegotiate expectations of linear gender development through their “gender journeys” (Ward & Callaghan, in press). When non-binary youth articulate narratives of their previous genders and their journeys to their current gender, they emphasise the importance of context in understanding themselves (Ward & Callaghan, in press). Em mentions a “final form” in reference to their current gender but also acknowledges how this might change and the need to accept the impermanence of a perceived endpoint. Through the construct of a “final form”, Em shows how despite their understanding of the self as impermanent, non-binary youth are still subject to regulatory disciplinary forces that attempt to maintain a growth discourse of becoming to being. Disciplinary pressures are also mentioned later when Em discusses: “at the beginning I sort of thought I need something I need an end I need to find a word that’s me forever and pin myself down”. Their quote illustrates how non-binary youth internalise regulatory messages of growth and development, to feel pressured to find their endpoint. Therefore, while a non-binary subjectivity provides an understanding that deconstructs false notions of subject permanence, youth are still subject to disciplinary forces, illustrating the complexity of navigating discursive realms of growth.

Conceptualising power and knowledge as monolithic is universalising and one-dimensional, which does not capture the struggles of negotiating discursive realms (Bevir, 2010). Rather, the negotiation of discursive power is complex and can be considered as a duel which “emphasises the potential agency of actors within regimes of governance to construct their own frames of meaning and act creatively” (Flint, 2018, p. 20). Whilst contextual understandings of “becoming” enabled the participants to challenge developmental discourses, the disciplinary pressure to identify and articulate a definite and stable sense of self pressured them to conform to dominant binary and cisheteronormative subjectivities, deterring the exploration of gender diversity (Richards & Barker, 2013). The disciplinary forces that require/expect participants to conform to modernist discourses of



stable and enduring identity development is an example of a b/ordering process to shape docile bodies. The quotes presented in the current chapter illustrate “the duel” (Flint, 2018) of intersections and webbing between the discourses and throughout the analysis, which are simultaneously freeing and restricting (Ahmed, 2013; Foucault, 1977). Combined with discourses of legitimacy and how non-binary youth are positioned as lacking the capacity to (confidently) know themselves ([chapter four](#)), the process of articulating knowledge of the self positions non-binary youth in the double bind of a discursive duel. There is a disciplinary pressure for youth to articulate a stable subjectivity to be believed about their gender identities and not be delegitimised, however, this not congruent with the participants’ understandings of themselves as contextual and becoming.

So far, I have discussed how the participants challenged discourses of personal growth that perpetuate stability and permanence and the duel of navigating disciplinary power. I will now focus on how context was also important for the participants and how others understood them.

Let's just say if you need to know what that let's just say genderqueer but to be aware of the fact that that's very contextual and like in a month's time you know I might not be that I might not want you to see me as that so yeah yeah if I wanted someone to see me as like my real authentic self I feel they need to understand that about me and like you know take everything with a pinch of salt like everything is contextual everything is changing all the time (Han – 533-538)

Han draws on a situated knowledge paradigm in their quote, as they suggest that “everything is contextual”. Therefore, for Han, there is a need to be seen in context, which included the possibility of a change of gender. Firstly, a situated knowledge perspective challenges the concept of a fixed identity, since Han is open about the possibility of their gender changing “in a month’s time”. Alongside Ren and Han, Em supports a discourse of personal growth that acknowledges the possibility of change throughout the lifespan, rather than ascribing to an essentialist discourse of psychosocial development (Lindley et al., 2020). Secondly, Han’s “authentic self” is located within a contextual understanding of growth, as they state that for somebody to see them authentically, they should understand Han as able to change and therefore, see them in the present context. Therefore, resistance against considering the context of gender means that Han would not be understood by others in the same way that they understand and make sense of their subjectivity. Contextual understandings are often less privileged as ways of understanding, as scientific discourses promote positivist and objective knowledge, however, feminist theories of situated knowledge emphasise the importance of contextual factors in knowledge production (Haraway, 1988). Situated understandings of personal growth for non-binary youth decentres dominant discursive regulation, for example understanding the development of genders

psychologically, as individualistic and modernist, and (re)locates the power to know and understand someone's gender relationally and contextually. The importance of contextual and situated understandings was noted in [chapter five](#), where I discussed the importance of a relational metaphor of youth, and how it highlighted the significance of people, places, and times for the participants.

For Han, there was also a significance of being seen contextually in the present: "see me in this moment" which requires others to not see Han as before or as after. Being in a state of constant becoming draws on temporal references about development that are different from dominant discourses. Rather than Han's personal growth being based on time, it is more socially and culturally located in the context, providing a liminal understanding of growth (Barras et al., 2021). A liminal understanding functions to move away from chronological and linear temporal references to more cultural and social situated references. Liminal understandings build on [chapter five](#), which discussed how linear and time-based transition discourses were restrictive for the participants' growth. Queer communities were significant for the participants' identity development as they provided affirming spaces for "alternative" development.

The participants articulated growth as a lifespan and contextual process, which challenges the essentialist view that children and young people are "becoming", whereas adults are seen as "being" (Linstead & Pullen, 2006; Talburt, 2004). Essentialism assumes that adults are "fully developed" and have reached a fixed/final state of self. Lifespan understandings of development consider development as a continual process throughout childhood and into adulthood, challenging power dynamics and expert voices that are created through the positioning of adults as "being" (Crafter et al., 2019).

### **6.2.2 Freedom from Binary Pressures:**

*"There is this kind of secret third option and that kind of encompasses so many options within it"*

For some participants, a non-binary gender was enabling as it allowed them to be more themselves and find and access spaces with others who identify in similar ways, increasing self-confidence. The aspects that were "enabled" were often the result of a sense of freedom that a non-binary subjectivity provided, which buffered the participants from binary stereotypes. Participants constructed non-binary as "individual", "contextual" and "no one way to be non-binary" which provided the participants with a sense of freedom from regulatory pressures that they discussed about binary genders. For example, the participants could present themselves in less restricted ways because of their non-binary subjectivity. Therefore, the participants functioned as border reinforcers, to maintain non-binary borderlands as free from (binary) gendered stereotypes and disciplinary forces.

Conceptualising the self as a process of always becoming, rather than achieving being helped to provide a sense of freedom in the borderlands to “do” gender in more diverse ways. Before identifying as non-binary, the participants spoke of being restricted by binary gender norms and stereotypes that limited their ability to be themselves. Therefore, a non-binary subjectivity functioned to create distance from binary genders that were assigned to the participants at birth.

So for me identifying as non-binary means that I well first of all I don't really feel a connection with either male or female and I think the word non-binary sort of allows me to feel that like allows me to recognise that that's ok to feel that and really it's just more about me being allowed allowing myself to feel to be me and not feel pressured into fitting sort of male or female stereotypes or being feeling like I need to connect feel connected with being female so really that's sort of what it feel what it means to me but really it's just about allowing myself to be me (Phoenix, 6-12)

A non-binary subjectivity also gave permission and validated subject positions that were outside of the gender binary, as Phoenix says “[non-binary] allows me to recognise that that’s ok to feel that”. Therefore, a non-binary gender provided a way to challenge the disciplinary forces, the essentialist discourses of gender, that produce docile bodies (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). By not determining or limiting gender to bodily characteristics, Phoenix emphasised being understood as contextual, thus relieving pressure to connect with a gender assigned at birth. Despite the dominant essentialist and gender binary discourses, non-binary as a borderland identity provided space for agency and resistance towards disciplinary power dynamics, and therefore, bodies were less regulated.

For Phoenix, the discursive forces of adhering to female or male gender stereotypes were restrictive and did not allow them to be comfortable in themselves, therefore binary gender constructions within a personal growth discourse regulate non-binary youths’ abilities to be congruent (Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). Dominant feminine and masculine stereotypes are constructed as polarities, whereby feminine traits, for example, are not accessible, or considered desirable, to men (Iantaffi & Barker, 2018). For Phoenix, who mentions that they were assigned female at birth (AFAB), identification as something not exclusively female (non-binary) enabled distance between connections with femininity, providing a space for agency. Expectations of gender performance based on the body that a person has, e.g., being assigned female, enforces “shoulds” of traditional feminine expectations that are situated within patriarchal histories (Hines & Sanger, 2010). A non-binary counter-discourse challenges the stringent regulation of (heterosexual) gender

norms and their dichotomous positioning, which is illustrated through Phoenix's quote, and their freedom from pressures to connect with their assigned gender and binary gender stereotypes.

For RW, coming out as non-binary helped them to realise that they could resist the surveillance of people's expectations and discursive forces through their non-binary subjectivity:

When I came out as non-binary when I found out I was non-binary it was the it was that explosion of I don't have to be who people want me to be anymore and I think that speaks to a lot of the trans experience as well is like it's an understanding of I am not who I was prescribed to be (RW – 29-32)

RW's quote suggests that before identifying/finding out that they were non-binary, they were regulated by people's expectations and prescriptions of whom they were supposed to be. In the references to the past, RW's subject position was passive because of such prescriptions where they had to conform to the dominant discourses of gender. Therefore, discursive governance trains youths' bodies to be docile and to conform to the gender binary, rendering non-binary possibilities as culturally unintelligible. However, realising they were non-binary and "coming out" enabled them to take a more active subject position through resisting these regulations to conform and therefore allowed them to start their journey of becoming.

Discursive space within a subjectivity was also important to Cornelius, as it provided them with an identity that felt comfortable without the rigid restrictions associated with binary genders:

It's nice because I like that I don't have to kind of conform to one or the other that there is this kind of secret third option and that kind of encompasses so many options within it there's like freedom within identifying as non-binary especially as I feel like my gender kind of it definitely has a tendency to change on like a day to day basis but like yeah I feel so much more comfortable with and it doesn't feel as rigid as like man woman sort of thing and like the freedom and the yeah yeah that's probably the main reason the main thing (Cornelius – 6-12)

Cornelius spoke of a "secret third option" where there is "freedom within identifying as non-binary", which suggests that the comfort from rigid gender categories is hidden by personal growth discourses and not something that all people know about. Therefore, gender development for non-binary youth is obscured by hegemonic understandings of growth and requires being found. Borderland theory (Anzaldúa, 1987) provides a theoretical way of conceptualising the accounts of freedom, such as Cornelius', as non-binary identities exist outside and/or in-between the dominant cultural practices/scripts which function to govern and maintain the gender binary (Callis, 2014). Less disciplinary restriction on bodies enabled the non-binary borderlands to embrace fluid,

contradictory, and contextual subjectivities. Therefore, the borderlands encompass the diversity of non-binary genders that the participants spoke of, understanding the self as always in transition and as a continual process of becoming.

In the participants' accounts, there was a sense of continued becoming, a resistance to becoming too "fixed". In [chapter five](#), I argued that using a relational metaphor, the participants functioned to foster a sense of belonging as a way of stabilising non-binary identity borders against cisheteronormative transitional discourses. However, within the constructions of personal growth discourses, the participants resist "too much" subjective stability through their accounts of non-binary being multiple, contextual, and resisting a singular narrative.

The quotes presented show the participants' understanding of the self that is both contextual and contradictory, and that also highlights the significance of being seen in the present moment. The participants shared accounts of their genders changing and the impermanence of identity, thereby implying the potential for future change. Thus, there is a requirement from the participants to other subjects to see them in the present, not as a previous gender, or to assume that the current gender is a phase, rather to situate their understanding of the subject in that moment. Additionally, non-binary borderlands provided the participants with "freedom" from dominant gender regulations and stereotypes that produce docile bodies, allowing them more agency to be more congruent. However, within the "freedom" of the borderlands from hegemonic disciplinary forces, Foucault notes that power dynamics and discursive regulation cannot be completely escaped. Governing practices require subjects "to judge and condemn themselves" (Foucault, 1977, p. 38), therefore, I will now consider how discourses of personal growth were limiting for the participants.

### **6.3 Individualistic Growth:**

**"You've got to find the acceptance in yourself that you can be who you are without forcing yourself to conform"**

A non-binary subjectivity provided the participants with a sense of "freedom" from the pressures of the gender binary e.g., they did not feel restricted by gender stereotypes or presentation. Borderland theory allows for theorising about how marginalised subjectivities, such as non-binary genders, may provide this sense of "freedom" by suggesting that "borderlands simultaneously develop their own cultures while challenging hegemonic ideology" (Callis, 2014, p. 68). Therefore, the accounts of the participants can be made sense of using borderland theory to suggest that the participants resist hegemonic ideologies of the gender binary and personal growth through constructing their subjectivities outside of dominant cultural norms i.e., that gender is a contextual and ongoing process.

The participants gained agency through community belonging ([chapter five](#)) and being selective of whom they engaged with when positioned as identity educators ([chapter four](#)), to create their own b/ordering processes and resist disciplinary forces that regulate docile bodies. In resisting hegemonic regulation and constructing their own identity borders, the participants became “caught” in individualistic discourses, which attempt to regulate the borderlands by detaching personal growth from social and cultural factors around the subject. The concept of situated knowledge was significant to the participants in their understandings of themselves as growing in context – their development was contextual. Whereas individualistic discourses of personal growth separate development from external factors, such as the environment, and the significance of community, and reinforce practices of self-governance.

Several participants illustrated individualistic discourses by locating development within the self and reinforcing messages that individuals should resist pressures to conform:

I think it's finding it's not copying everything you see online you've got to make your own identity and accept that you're not going to look like everyone you see online you've got to find the acceptance in yourself that you can be who you are without forcing yourself to conform to any sort of ideals of being non-binary even though perhaps that didn't make sense (Noah – 474-478)

I think you know a lot of being non-binary in the current political moment has to be it's in some way non-conformist to have an effect and also what being being non-binary means like what it would it authentically non-binary means to me is presenting myself in a way with people are confused when they look at me as to where I fit (RW – 635-638)

I think that links to not feeling non-binary enough not feeling like non-binary enough or whatever because you're just not fitting I mean the whole idea is that we don't fit within a binary system and then you're trying to put yourself in boxes which doesn't work (Phoenix – 364-366)

I think it's... more of a societal thing as in there are certain feeling that they need to look a certain way to be non-binary which is incorrect you don't there is no way to be there is no non-binary look so I think that's quite a key thing like just or feeling odd that you aren't like you're just trying to be special or whatever so you just need to suck it up and get on with whatever (Phoenix – 341-345)

The expectations of individual development also included resistance to conforming to expectations and further categorisation, e.g., Phoenix spoke of resisting a further a non-binary category. Additionally, the participants suggested that non-binary subjects must “be non-conformist to have an effect” (RW) whilst not copying others, illustrating an extreme sense of individuality, which functions as another form of regulation to self-censor. The expectations of a non-binary subject being resistant, non-conformist, and completely individual limit youth by “stabilising” what non-binary is – something that all the participants spoke against: “there is no way to be there is no non-binary look” (Phoenix). Individualistic disciplinary forces provide an example of attempts to regulate the non-binary borderlands, re-regulate the body, maintain docility, and governance/surveillance over the subjects, which the participants had worked hard to resist. Discourses of individualism dislocated the participants from the community and belonging, e.g., “you’ve got to find the acceptance in yourself” (Noah), which was discussed in [chapter five](#), as a difficult process without queer friendships.

Discussions of non-binary presentation and recognition were present across all the interviews, and there was a unanimous consensus from the participants that there is no one way to be non-binary and that attempts to regulate presentation (e.g., as androgynous) were not supported. For example, Noah says how there is a need to accept that you will not look like everyone else. However, the individualistic discourses identified within the current section illustrate the complexities and challenges of navigating non-binary growth and attempts to become culturally intelligible, whilst resisting firm and regulating boundaries. Disciplinary power cannot be escaped, therefore, where one discourse may provide “freedom” for a subject, they are regulated in other ways, as discussed earlier e.g., the dual and docile bodies (Foucault, 1978; 1977). For the participants, a contextual and lifespan discourse of personal growth provided “freedom” from the gender binary, whilst individualistic discourses constrained forms of expression through regulating expectations of personal growth.

Therefore, whilst the non-binary borderlands provided “freedom” to resist hegemonic ideologies of the gender binary the participants became resubjected to disciplinary power and began to self-regulate. Individualism within governing practices was illustrated through their active positions, such as, you must accept yourself without conforming (Noah), you must be non-conformist and politically engaged (RW) and you must not try to categorise yourself (Phoenix). Without cultural intelligibility, such messages make the recognition of non-binary genders difficult, as they resist categorisation to construct non-binary genders outside of hegemonic ideology. Although the participants try to make space for diversity within the borderlands, they begin to reproduce individualistic discourses of growth through centring the self and minimising the

importance of belonging for gender development. The analysis shows the impossibility of how the participants navigate the borderlands as spaces of “freedom” from binary and modernist pressures, whilst being recognisable as non-binary within normative culture.

### 6.3.1 Self-Censoring:

*“I’m just like filtering I’m just automatically like filtering filtering filtering”*

The discursive realm of personal growth was challenging for the participants to navigate, as it reinforced certain kinds of growth i.e., linear, and progressive gender development, which the participants resisted, as discussed [earlier in the chapter](#). Many of the participants spoke of how aspects of their genders were limited by growth discourses, such as how they presented themselves and what activities they would engage with, causing the participants to become self-regulating subjects. The level of “outness” for participants, such as Kai and RW, was impacted by restrictive messages from a conservative family and religious institutions, where gender diversity was “othered” and constructed as undesirable. Therefore, despite having always known “back of my mind”, about their non-binary genders, the participants began to self-regulate which led them to limit aspects of themselves. Self-censoring mostly centred around concerns of safety, e.g., “didn’t feel comfortable” (Kai), “dress in the way that you’re not going to get bullied” (Noah), “I would rather be safe or not put myself in a tricky situation” (Phoenix). Safety concerns were the main form of regulation impacting the participants’ gender development, including disapproval and rejection from family and religious communities. Disapproval from important people around the participants had the potential to position non-binary youth as vulnerable, as they spoke earlier in [chapter five](#), of the importance of finding belonging for their gender development.

Implicit within the discursive realm of personal growth was the assumption that being “out” about one’s gender identity was considered healthy, which reinforces idealised notions of growth as being “out”. However, being “out” was a difficult negotiation for the participants, given contradictory regulative messages to self-censor any gender diversity. Therefore, “healthy outness” appears directed towards forms of “normative” diversity, i.e., identities that do not challenge the gender binary in multiple and complex ways (Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018). Kai spoke of the struggles of “coming out” and the impact a hidden identity had on them:

I mean unfortunately I can’t well I don’t feel comfortable sort of being open about it you know I’m fairly comfortable in myself but I’m not open about it yeah the negative sides are feeling like I have to sort of curate or limit the way that I am or the things that I do or the way that I look so I don’t draw too much attention basically which is you know something that I don’t particularly enjoy (Kai – 69-73)



Although Kai stated they feel comfortable in themselves, they were not open about being non-binary with others, which had implications for their growth. Kai's quote implied that when non-binary youth are not open about their genders i.e., they are not "out" to others, their subjectivities become regulated in how they can present themselves and what they can access. Therefore, Kai suggests that a subject who is "out" would not have to curate or limit themselves, how they look or the things that they do, implying that being "out" equates to a healthier concept of growth. However, it was difficult for some participants to be "out" as non-binary youth, as disciplinary forces attempted to regulate them and maintain their cultural unintelligibility, for example, normative transitional discourses reinforced cisheteronormativity ([chapter five](#)) and delegitimised gender diversity ([chapter four](#)). In addition to the contradictory discursive messages of being "out" equalling a healthy identity, but the need to self-censor diversity, the individualistic pressures to navigate such regulation independently positions youth precariously with little discursive space to resist disciplinary power.

Discourses of "out" equalling a healthy identity can be seen in dominant and historical sexuality-based identity models e.g., Cass (1979) and Troiden (1989), where a subject works towards an integrated self, through acceptance, pride and synthesis, which are facilitated through a socially "out" sexuality and connection with community (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Even in more recent models of identity development, which reflect lifespan approaches and are inclusive of gender diversity, such as D'Augelli's (1994), being publicly "out" remains the "endpoint" of development, but it is considered as a process throughout life.

However, an idealised growth discourse as "out" for non-binary youth is especially challenging given the current lack of legal and contested social recognition of non-binary genders in the U.K. (Pearce et al., 2020; Vincent, 2020). As previously stated, there is no legal recognition of non-binary genders currently in the U.K., therefore, non-binary subjects are rendered invisible/culturally unintelligible by the state (Butler, 1999). Additionally, the trans moral panic of recent years has shown how trans people have been the subject of increased hate crimes, physical assault, and murder, therefore, making visibility and recognition of gender diversity a safety concern for many (Pearce et al., 2020). Furthermore, a growth discourse supposes that being "out" is a positive experience, which then enables identity development. However, research suggests that the ongoing process of "coming out" is often challenging and that once "out" subjects may struggle to be seen as something other than their gender and/or sexuality (Klein et al., 2015). "Coming out" discourses also assume one gender and/or sexuality, while research on non-binary youth suggests that there may be multiple gender transitions (Ward & Callaghan, in press). Although "coming out" can enable connection and belonging with queer communities (as discussed in [chapter five](#)), the

assumption that “out” equals a healthier LGBTQ+ subjectivity is problematic as it minimises multiple, fluid, and culturally unintelligible identities and the potential of negative experiences. Therefore, within the discursive realm of growth, disciplinary power, such as expectations to “come out”, functioned as a b/ordering process maintaining difficulties for the participants’ negotiation of identity development.

Han highlights the impact of navigating growth discourses as a non-binary youth, where assumptions of a singular “coming out” functioned as a b/ordering process, which regulated their gender, as they were “branded” as gay: “I came out young I was very much branded as gay and that was just a big part of who I was” (Han – 379-380).

Well the difficult thing is because so I came out as gay when I was like 13 or 14 so my whole like teenage years were consumed by that like that whole experience and so which is why I think it was only when I was 18 19 that I started thinking about gender because that whole time like my whole brain was just filled dealing with all the sexuality stuff [...] I also did try quite hard as a teenager just to like live my life and not to try and like overthink it or and like put labels on myself including with sexuality but because I came out so young people very much like to like impose labels on you at that time I'm it was just a rough time it didn't go very well basically so so and I think once that's settled down after a few years when I was maybe like 16 until things were ok with my sexuality but I think I was probably scared from then too even let thoughts about gender be thought about because I was so worried that the same thing would happen again and you know people wouldn't be accepting and all that kind of thing that I definitely like kept it down longer until I had the space when I was at uni (Han, 257-273)

A negative experience of “coming out” as gay and being labelled during their youth felt inescapable for Han. Their gay identity became all-encompassing due to the forces from others that functioned to constantly label and reinforce expected behaviours associated with being gay, regulating Han to be a docile body that could be easily read. Theories of minority stress and microaggressions help to understand experiences of labelling for people who occupy various minority positions (Meyer, 1995, 2003, 2015; Sue, 2010). The labelling of “minority subjects” enables others to recognise particular genders and other identities, which they can then associate with various stereotypes and assumptions (McQueen, 2015). However, the inability to recognise a person’s subjectivities can cause difficulty for others, as there is a block to understanding their gender. Therefore, the function of labelling, particularly for Han, seemed to favour the comfort of others in being able to recognise and associate gender and/or sexual diversity, rather than comfort

for the young person (Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018; McQueen, 2015). Others were able to draw on discourses of gay youth to understand Han and consequently imposed governing practices “branding” Han through disciplinary forces. For Han, the impact of this was that they felt unable to engage with thoughts about their gender during most of their youth as there was a preoccupation with managing responses to their sexuality and fear/concern around them coming out again. Therefore, labelling functioned as a disciplinary practice for some participants, where there was pressure to be “out”, whilst being “out” included exposure to forms of regulation associated with that identity, e.g., “coming out” subjected Han to the b/ordering processes of being branded gay.

Negative experiences of “coming out” often stemmed from reactions from people close to the participants, such as family and friends. The participants spoke of how early ideological messages from family and the church became internalised, which compounded struggles of gender development and personal growth. Kai mentioned how institutions such as family and the church were the main regulatory forces in their self-censoring. Families are regulated by discourses that perpetuate normative constructions, e.g., a heterosexual, nuclear family, with traditional gender roles, which intersect with religion to produce orthodox rules (Ellis et al., 2020c).

I mean I guess it comes down to well it it's sort of even before I knew the words I felt that I had to behave in a certain way because of who I'm supposed to be and that's like my whole life so it's kind of but that's kind of a given to me now almost that's kind of the way that I live my life so even in you know even socially I tend to sort of hold back or not necessarily share my feelings about something because I kind of like I'm just like filtering I'm just automatically like filtering filtering filtering so you know I like I'm trying my absolute best to be reasonably authentic here because I think that's important but you know and day-to-day I just might not say something or I might not do something or I might like I might shy away from an activity that I would otherwise be interested in because I feel like I'm not supposed to take an interest in that or I'm not supposed to do this or I'm not supposed to be this way and that's that feels like a shame that that's the case (Kai – 406-416)

Here, Kai talks about pressures to conform to binary gender roles from an early age “even before I knew the words I felt I had to behave in a certain way because of who I'm supposed to be”. The gender expectations led Kai to censor themselves in multiple ways throughout their life, to the time of the interview. For example, Kai spoke of holding back and not sharing their feelings, which limited their speaking positions, therefore they could not take an active subject position with their gender due to discursive regulations of personal growth. Kai lacked reference to another subject position in their quote as they speak of having to filter, hold back, not say something, not do

something, and not take an interest. Therefore, the discursive realm of personal growth was extremely difficult for Kai to negotiate as disciplinary messages from both family and religion were so pervasive that they became internalised, restricting their agency so much that they could not access any other subject positions.

Foucault (1977) builds on Bentham's (2010) metaphor of the panopticon which can be applied to family and religion to consider how disciplinary power operates in such institutions to create self-regulating subjects which construct and maintain discourses of personal growth. Since all people in the panopticon are always visible to the power of authority, this creates a perpetual possibility of surveillance. Foucault (1977) suggests that this potential for surveillance leads subjects to become self-regulating and becomes part of their normal routine. Phoenix, Ren, RW, and Kai all mentioned the conservative political views of their families and/or communities which were not sensitive to gender and sexual diversity. Conservative practices then become interpreted and assumed as natural, which regulated the participants to curate, limit, and censor themselves to conform to cisnormative gender ideals, creating a dominant discourse that regulates personal growth. The consequence of conservative assumptions meant that anyone who challenged gender norms was positioned as unnatural, giving space to question the participants' legitimacy.

Yeah understanding like harassment will happen and it does happen and that it's ok to have experienced that I guess because I experienced it a lot I watched a lot of my family being homophobic I watched a lot of my family being transphobic you know laughing at men in dresses on TV shows watching you know laughing at making transphobic jokes that people who didn't quite look quite like the ideal man the ideal woman or you know the ideal anything and growing up a lot of that was you know understanding these things happen these things do happen to people and we should probably stop them that was important to me was like not refusing to turn a blind eye to the sort of homophobic and transphobic because it happened to me now you are the subject I mean I've always been the subject but now you know you're the subject (RW, 126-137)

Discipline was enforced through conservative family values, where RW learned that harassment and discrimination were a natural part of the world and that LGBTQ+ people deserve to be discriminated against. The messages of discrimination were reinforced through constructing normative ways of being, such as looking "like the ideal man the ideal woman". Constructions of "ideal people" were used as a way of making RW aware that gay and trans people do not fit in this construct, instead, they are to be ridiculed – e.g., laughed at, they are the joke, reinforcing that they should not be taken seriously as gendered subjects. Later, when RW identified as non-binary, it

became important to them to take on, and position themselves in an activist role, rejecting a docile positioning by “refusing to turn a blind eye” to the homo- and transphobia that they experienced growing up.

Families can also reinforce religious values, and when subjectivity is located in conflicting discourses – such as gender non-conformity and also Christian values, a subject is placed under pressure to self-censor aspects of itself to appease disciplinary forces. Some Christian values reinforce naturalness in terms of right and wrong ways of being, which are referenced in Kai’s quote, where non-binary is positioned as wrong. Therefore, these religious/Christian values regulate non-binary youth through perpetuating essentialist logic to determine right and wrong. Additionally, Kai references “possession” and “the devil” concerning their grandparents’ reaction if they came out. Possession draws on impurity, further solidifying the “wrongness” of non-binary genders.

If my for example if my grandparents found out they would probably think I was possessed by the devil that’s not really something I want to risk not because I feel like I would be unsafe because of that but because of the impact it would have on the rest of my family because it would probably be quite torn between you know what’s right and what’s wrong and you know that’s challenging (Kai, 269-274)

Alternative accounts, where non-binary youth resist restrictive political, religious, and normative messages position youth precariously and foreground concerns of safety given the high rates of homo- and transphobic attacks (Ellis et al., 2020a), homeless LGBTQ+ youth (Matthews et al., 2019), and conversion therapies, which are still currently legal in the U.K. (UK Council for Psychotherapy, 2019). The participants shared concerns around safety which functioned as an additional layer of self-regulation, where the participants managed their gender presentations in certain places to protect themselves.

I think with like dress with outfits... in some places you’ve got to dress in the way that you’re not going to get you know like bullied or I guess not bullied but like looked at in a strange way and finding something in between what they want me to look like and what I want to look like can be very difficult (Noah – 493-296)

I don’t know it just depends on the environment you’re in sort of with the people in the room it can be quite hard to... like depends on how safe or comfortable I feel in a particular space can make it harder or easier to... like come out be myself or maybe correct somebody on like my pronouns (Phoenix, 525-528)

Noah and Phoenix illustrate how non-binary youth utilise strategy to manage their identities publicly. The main reason for this kind of management was due to safety concerns, e.g., accepting spaces, being free from discrimination and feelings of belonging. Phoenix drew on the concept of safety to talk about their experiences and decision-making around “coming out”. The environment was an important aspect for their “outness” as non-binary as Phoenix mentions how the feelings of safety are in part determined by both the environment that they are in and the people within that space. Therefore, public spaces, where there will be unknown and transient people, function as a bordering process for non-binary youth (as discussed in [chapter five](#)), as it is hard for the participants to know how accepting strangers are of gender diversity. The current findings support the small literature on non-binary genders (Barbee & Schrock, 2019) as well as wider LGBTQ+ studies which show that people with minority genders and sexualities often “manage” their identities for safety (Friley & Venetis, 2021; Namaste, 1996; Reddy-Best & Olson, 2020). The use of strategy by the participants in managing their gendered subjectivities problematises Foucauldian concepts of regulation of the self, whereby subjects are docile and passive to disciplinary forces and “panoptic models of surveillance” (Flint, 2018, p. 24). The participants negotiated spaces for safety, to avoid harm, and to resist restrictive power dynamics, rather than accepting limiting discourses of growth.

Current research shows that although there is a cultural shift towards visibility and understanding of non-binary genders that these subjects are more likely to experience harassment and a lower sense of belonging compared with cisgender and heterosexual students (Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018). Environments such as home, school, and communities can be uncomfortable and hostile for non-binary youth, resulting in youth managing their visibility and “outness” as a way of navigating these difficulties (Davy & Cordoba, 2019; Hill & Menvielle, 2009). “In turn, they [non-binary youth] spoke to perceived pressure to express their gender in binary ways: that is, as either clearly cross-gender, or in adherence with their assigned gender—and to use binary pronouns as well” (Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018, p.119). As discussed in [chapter five](#), there is a difference in “frames of reference” between non-binary and binary trans genders, where the former challenge the current essentialist and binary discourse. Therefore, non-binary identities are best understood as borderland identities (Callis, 2014), meaning that whilst the understanding of non-binary genders exists within the binary system, they instead form in the in-between spaces and the cracks in the system, which enable more fluidity and potential for identity change (Callis, 2014).

A way of navigating the difficulties and discomforts for non-binary youth is to avoid being “out” or managing their level of “outness”, e.g., being selective with whom they engage with, as discussed in [chapter four](#) (Hill & Menvielle, 2009). For example, if parents are likely to be transphobic or if “coming out” is likely to be unsafe for a young person, they may “manage” their

gender by being selectively out. Youth may be “out” to close friends, but not to family members, or to select family members and not others, or they may manage their presentation and expression to be more conforming – for example, adhering to binary gender practices and regulations (Barbee & Schrock, 2019; Reddy-Best & Olson, 2020). The examples illustrate how non-binary youth utilise strategies to manage their identities publicly. The main reason self-censoring centred around concerns for safety included aspects such as accepting spaces in educational institutions, being free from discrimination, and feelings of belonging.

I don't know it just depends on the environment you're in sort of with the people in the room it can be quite hard to... like depends on how safe or comfortable I feel in a particular space can make it harder or easier to... like come out be myself or maybe correct somebody on like my pronouns or whatever or say please use these ones instead of just brushing over or just ignoring the fact when people use the wrong ones or whatever (Phoenix – 479-484)

Power relations in Phoenix's quote centre around personal safety and the ability to adopt a speaking position (to be able to “come out”). If a sense of personal safety were fostered, Phoenix would have the power to make their identity known within that environment, this would be through negotiating relations of power with the others in the room, to correct them about incorrect pronouns. However, feelings of safety are context-dependent and multi-layered, as Phoenix referenced both the location and the people as sources of power within this quote. Therefore, Phoenix suggests that it is a combination of both the material space of the environment itself as well as who occupies and takes up space within that context. Feelings of discomfort discourage “coming out” and taking up space, thus functioning to keep non-binary youth silenced and invisible. Therefore, power can be used by environments and those control of them to make non-binary youth feel uncomfortable and therefore more submissive, i.e., they are less likely to be vocal about their gender identity, and less likely to speak up and correct people about their pronouns. Therefore, the pervasive binary understandings and acceptance around gender are reinforced by making non-binary youth less visible and less heard, and the environments as unsafe. Phoenix is explicit in how they talk about their voice being structured in a way that they would not speak to correct somebody about their pronouns in certain spaces. The lack of an active speaking position illustrates how discourses of personal safety/safe spaces are structured to maintain the silence of non-binary youth.

Self-censoring illustrates how many of the participants navigated the discourse of personal growth by articulating the struggle of being a self-regulating subject. Participants such as Kai, RW, Phoenix, and Noah deeply wanted to resist normative expectations from families and religious communities by presenting themselves in authentic ways/ways that are less restrictive – both of

these are examples of challenging heteronormative and binary gender expectations (Woolley, 2017). However, the disciplinary power from family and religious institutions restricted the participants' abilities to present in ways that felt comfortable for them and to engage with thoughts about their genders that challenged conservative discourses. Therefore, the participants often limited their visibility and "outness" as non-binary due to a range of external concerns, such as safety, acceptance from family and the wider community, and previous negative experiences of "coming out" being restrictive.

#### **6.4 Conclusion**

The discursive realm of personal growth highlighted "the duel" the participants negotiated in gaining recognition and becoming culturally intelligible, which involved resisting simplistic categorisation which did not capture the complexity, diversity, or fluidity of non-binary experiences. The concept of the discursive duel also showed the impossibility of the position that the participants found themselves in, when striving for cultural intelligibility, legitimacy, and readability, and how this often resulted in conformity to individualistic discourses. For example, being recognised in an individualist, capitalist, and modernist culture, such as the U.K., requires the subject to stabilise their sense of self.

The participants attempted to resist modernist pressures to stabilise the self, arguing that there was no permanent sense of self and that people are always "becoming", which draws on situated, contextual, and relational frameworks. Here, the participants disrupt temporal understandings in favour of liminality, such as "see me in the present moment", which provided a way to embody the complexity and contradictions of being non-binary. For example, the blurring of identity borders, as the participants used and identified multiple labels, e.g., non-binary, trans, and queer. Drawing on alternative frameworks of selfhood informed by borderland theory, such as "becoming" problematised the organisation of (objective) power as the participants troubled the reading of bodies and how they are discursively formed. For example, to understand their genders, the participants required being seen in context and the recognition that this is likely to change, as there is no permanence, only a constant becoming. Therefore, the participants were active in resisting restrictive disciplinary power and the surveillance that create docile bodies, as there was no fixed point from which they could be read – they existed in the borderlands.

However, in the resistance to "being read" in binary and modernist ways, the participants struggled relationally, to receiving support and community connection. These aspects were discussed in [chapter four](#), where the participants were delegitimised when seeking support, and [chapter five](#), which highlighted the significance of queer belonging. Additionally, the desire for recognition resulted in some participants (re)producing individualistic discourses of selfhood, such as



needing to “find yourself”, be unique, and to do this by yourself. Restrictive conservative and religious messages further complicated the negotiation of growth and recognition, whereby some participants became self-regulating subjects by internalising binary gender norms, which restricted their expression and behaviours. Appealing to individualistic discursive pressures required the stabilising of genders and identities that the participants voiced as contextual, fluid, and becoming. Therefore, the strive for cultural intelligibility of a subjectivity that resists modernist understandings of the self reflected the understanding of non-binary genders as borderland identities and therefore entailed an impossible position for non-binary youth of existing “between”.

## Chapter 7 – I Poems

### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will introduce the second phase of the analysis – I poems – and justify why a focus on voice and the personal, integrated with a more discursive analysis, is important for research on non-binary youth. I draw on the theoretical framework of borderlands to complement the I poem phase of the analysis to highlight the complexity and fluidity of non-binary identities. In doing so, restrictive and hegemonic understandings are critiqued, which often serve to categorise and therefore privilege normative identities. Instead, the analysis affirms self-understandings that challenge colonial and modernist ideas by embracing the multiple voices that people use to speak about themselves and their experiences.

I structure the remainder of the chapter based on the three discursive realms identified in the first phase of the analysis: (de)legitimacy, youth as transitional, and personal growth. By structuring the chapter based on the discursive realms, I will identify and present the voices within each discourse, linking the I poems to the broader narratives of the participants “considering the personal and political functions of discursive negotiations” (Thompson et al., 2018, p. 108).

The focus on both the discursive and experiential was an important analytical and methodological rationale for this research on the regulation of non-binary youth, based on recommendations from trans theories (Monro, 2005; Nagoshi et al., 2014). Phase one of the analysis, which consisted of the poststructuralist discourse analysis, helped to identify the discursive regulatory forces for non-binary youth. Discourse analysis allowed for exploration into which discursive forces were present and how they shaped the transitional positioning of youth for the participants. However, the voiced experiences of the participants can become obscured through the process of analysing participants’ accounts for their discursive meanings and theorising these findings, which is a feminist concern. Given that non-binary youth are a marginalised group in society and that there is little research focusing specifically on non-binary genders, a purely discursive analysis could risk obscuring the participants’ voices about their genders through an absence of their experiences within discursive accounts (Thompson et al., 2018). Therefore, the process of centring voice helps make sense of how subjectivity is constituted discursively through “taking up” and resisting dominant discursive constructions.

Voice has been conceptualised as a key site of power distribution, which has often served to narrate dominant and normative accounts (e.g., white, cisgender, heterosexual, able, etc.), thus, within psychological research, marginalised voices have often been silenced through exclusion (Saukko, 2008; Wilkinson, 1991). The concept of “voice” has been critiqued due to epistemological tensions between social constructionist and phenomenological paradigms. Social constructionists

argue against a sense of “inward mentality” as “that there is no “authentic” experience that occurs within people, without the action of language, and, therefore, discourse” (Thompson et al., 2018, p. 98). Rather, mentality is constructed through the use of language and discourse. From a social constructionist perspective, research focusing on purely subjective experiences would neglect the significant role and function of language (Gergen, 1985; Wiggins & Potter, 2008). However, there is concern that focusing solely on the political aspects of discursive work risks silencing voices, especially of those who are already marginalised (Saukko, 2008). Conversely, phenomenological approaches are argued to favour realist accounts of voice as containing “truths” to be discovered, which detach the socio-cultural aspects and produce unreflective and uncritical interpretations which would be antithetical to a discursive notion of self (Thompson et al., 2018). Therefore, the concepts of individual voice and discourse are positioned as incompatible due to psychological concerns of spoken and/or written accounts reflecting “authenticity” (Van Leeuwen, 2001).

Modernist perspectives consider the use of voice and language as a direct representation of a person’s inner states – an authentic account (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004). Whereas, postmodernism argues that people’s experiences are based upon their understandings of the world, suggesting that voice expresses how individuals construct and establish meaning, rather than being a direct representation of their internal world (Thompson et al., 2018). Empiricist pressures for singular approaches produce theoretical borders of experience and discourse as restricting “complex and contextualized understandings of language-based identity negotiation” (Thompson et al., 2018, p. 98). Feminist research has struggled with and challenged empiricist pressures of enquiry that advocate for singular approaches, for obscuring marginalised groups (Gavey, 2011; Wilkinson, 1986). I have argued that historically non-binary genders have been encompassed within wider LGBTQ+, and more recently, transgender research, without much specific focus on non-binary genders specifically (Cosgrove, 2021; Matsuno & Budge, 2017). Additionally, youth are often a silenced group compared with adults, whereby their voices are not considered credible because of their age (O’Dell, 2014). Therefore, the voices of non-binary youth have been silenced through dominant “psy” research. Therefore, there is a need to recognise how experiences are interconnected within an individual’s culture, and how discourses can show “the cultural conditions of possibility for ways of being in the world” (Gavey, 2011, p. 186). FRDA considers how voices are representative of experiences, but also recognises how these representations are also always mediated by discourses, providing different representations of subjectivities.

The second phase of the analysis focuses on analysing the voices of the participants in relation to the identified discourses to highlight their experiences. To identify the participants’ voiced experiences within the discursive realms, I constructed I poems by collating the quoted data

from the previous analysis chapters and extracting the “I” statements, as detailed in [the methodology chapter](#). I chose to use the same quoted data across the discourse analysis and I poem phases of analysis, rather than presenting new data, to illustrate the continuity in developing a theoretical personal-political account. Gillian et al.’s Listening Guide (2012) was used as a method to identify the voices of the participants. The Listening Guide (2012) method required several listenings of the data to identify the varying experiences and multiple voices the participants used to speak about their first-hand experiences. The Listening Guide (2012) allowed for an analysis whereby the multiplicity of personal experience was highlighted through identifying the contrapuntal voices that the participants’ used, considering how they were complementary and/or contradictory. The identification of the participants’ contrapuntal voices show how voice does not simply communicate a singular and “authentic” account of experience, rather there are multiple voices used to articulate the experiences of navigating discursive realms.

FRDA (2018) and The Listening Guide’s (2012) recognition of complex, multiple, and contradictory voices supports this thesis’ theoretical framework of borderland theory (Anzaldúa, 1987) which conceptualises the borderlands as spaces where marginalised identities can be understood as being multiple, fluid, and changing. Therefore, an analysis that combines methods e.g., through using discourse analysis and The Listening Guide, such as FRDA, allows the reader to hear how participants articulate their experiences through various voices (Anzaldúa, 1987; Callis, 2014; Thompson et al., 2018). Thompson (2018) states that “in the case of FRDA, a voice-centered analysis informed by the Listening Guide allows us to identify how voice features in relation to the discourses identified in phase 1” (p. 106). Through combining discourse analysis with the Listening Guide, the analysis becomes a personal-political and voice-centred account of experience and discourse.

## **7.2 Legitimacy**

Within the discourse of legitimacy, the participants’ capacities to know their genders were called into question by professionals and other adults in their lives. A discourse of cisgenderism was implicit within such questioning, as the participants were assumed to not have the capacity to know themselves because their genders did not conform to normative understandings. However, cisgender and binary young people were implicitly positioned as having unquestionable knowledge about their genders. Linking back to the discursive formulations previously discussed (in [chapter four](#)), I will now put the personal into the political by presenting some of the participants’ I poems within the discourse of legitimacy to track their accounts and experiences of the delegitimation of their genders.

I was a kid it was a lot of you know you don't know where you are right now

When I started to talk about gender  
I spoke about gender with the uni GP  
I was pushed away  
I was told that I didn't belong there  
I spent a lot of time with the well-being people  
I was a kid  
I didn't know where I was  
[the fact that] I didn't know where I was in regards to gender was scary (RW)

In RW's I poem, I identified voices of confusion and vulnerability relating to their experience of becoming aware of their gender diversity as a kid: "I was a kid", "I didn't know where I was in regards to gender was scary". RW highlighted an age aspect within their I poem: "I was a kid it was a lot of you don't know where you are" and the rejection they experienced as a young person: "I was pushed away", "I was told that I didn't belong". RW drew on a developmental discourse of identity confusion which shifted to be positioned as a social construction by their GP, as they were told they did not belong due to their identity confusion. Therefore, RW's I poem shows how they navigated and (re)located themselves in the intersecting discourses of legitimacy and identity development by seeking help for their "confusion", which was rejected, and through voicing their vulnerability of being "scared".

RW described the confusion as scary for which they sought help and reassurance from others but were "pushed away" and told they "didn't belong there", suggesting a sense of being lost and not belonging. As there was a lack of people for RW to trust and who would take them seriously (i.e., believe them about their gender) being told that you do not belong may contribute further to a sense of being lost and vulnerable. At the time, RW did not know they were non-binary and in the interview, they spoke of "gender confusion" as a way of describing their childhood and that the "gender confusion" is not something that "normal kids" – meaning cisgender – go through "for years of life" (RW, 439). RW locates "gender confusion" within non-binary developmental narratives, and consequently argues that cisgender gender development is relatively not confusing because dominant discourses of gender are cisgenderist. However, through positioning cisgender subjects as not experiencing gender confusion, RW overlooks the stringent regulation of binary and cisgender identities that are pervasive and limiting throughout the lifespan and how such regulation might produce and construct forms of "gender confusion" for "normal kids" (Iantaffi, 2020; Iantaffi & Barker, 2018; Richards & Barker, 2013).

After identifying voices of confusion and vulnerability in RW's I Poem, I then considered how these voices were contrapuntal – how they told different stories of RW's experiences (Gilligan et al.,

2012). The contrapuntal voices identified within RW's I poem of lost and belonging, vulnerability and confusion were not in opposition, rather they are complimentary and produced a sense of being "out of place". RW's voice of confusion about their gender identity created a sense of being lost and of not belonging, which was compounded by the rejection from others, such as their GP, leaving them feeling vulnerable. Through the above voices, RW articulated an experience of loss, as they were rejected from spaces where they felt they could belong. Concerning the research question exploring what b/ordering processes youth with non-binary genders face, RW's I poem and the focus on their personal experiences highlight how a discourse of legitimacy that positions non-binary youth as unable to know themselves perpetuate feelings of confusion. Therefore, when youth, such as RW are delegitimised they may feel vulnerable and experience a sense of loss of their place in the world as they feel and are told, that they do not belong, leading to experiences and voices of confusion.

Where RW's I poem highlighted their voices of confusion, vulnerability, and loss, with being delegitimised, I now turn to another aspect of the legitimacy discourse – the emotional work involved in their social positionings as "identity educators". Since the participants often described that they were not believed about their genders, to be taken seriously they were required to become identity educators and take on the emotional work of educating others to prove the legitimacy of their genders. I created an I poem for Em, as they spoke heavily of an educator positioning in their interview:

I do think it is problematic

I think like yeah everything can't happen at once

I think maybe we need to first figure out how to talk about being non-binary

We need to be able to have these conversations

I have no idea if that would even yeah

I also don't know whether that would cause more problems than it would solve

I guess a lot of like trans and non-binary and just queer identity comes from having to explain yourself to people

I mean coming out is a whole it's just all about having to explain yourself

We just get to a certain point where it's like

I don't want to do this anymore

I wish like you could just telepathically communicate everything to someone

If we want to see change

We need to be able to have these conversations

Or how are we ever going to reach make any progress

If we're just yelling at each other all of the time

Don't you think we should be educating as well

I've seen this happen a lot online (Em)

A commonality between RW and Em's poems was the importance of readability and recognition from others. For RW negotiating legitimacy entailed recognition of their gender confusion from their GP, which they navigated vulnerably. While, for Em, negotiating legitimacy required articulating their experiences of being non-binary to explain themselves into being: "we need to first figure out how to talk about being non-binary" and "I guess a lot of like trans and non-binary and just queer identity comes from having to explain yourself to people". The articulation of a non-binary subjectivity was a struggle for Em which impacted how they were able to bring themselves into being. The pervasiveness of cisgender and binary discourses suffocate non-normative subjectivities and the available language for youth, such as Em, impacting both the discursive space for and articulation of non-binary genders.

Through a voice of struggle, Em suggests that it is not easy to speak with others about their experiences, and they relate this to the experiences of "coming out" for non-binary, trans, and queer people. Em mentions how the process of "coming out" perpetuates an experience of a constant need to explain (and justify) themselves because of the importance of being read and identified appropriately. Therefore, being "recognised" is considered as a key social experience for identity construction, which was uniquely challenging for the participants as non-binary are rendered culturally unintelligible in the U.K.

The negotiation of non-binary recognition was prominent through Em's voice of struggle and the pressure to explain their identity within a restrictive sociocultural understanding of gender as stable and enduring. The expectation to explain non-binary genders highlights the relationality of a legitimate subjectivity, and how legitimacy is dependent on recognition and readability. Therefore, the discursive realm of legitimacy demands a certain stability to recognise subjects, but non-binary identities challenge this requirement through their borderland "qualities" of fluidity and multiplicity, which do not support the stable foundations for recognition. Non-binary people face particular challenges around recognition, feeling both highly visible in that they may be noticed/read as different, and also invisible through feeling misunderstood, since genders that do not conform to binary and cisgender norms are rendered culturally unintelligible in the U.K. (Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018; Vincent, 2020). A lack of cultural intelligibility impacted the participants primarily as they were still required/facing demands from others to explain themselves. However, "others" often lacked frames of reference to hear and understand non-binary possibilities for gender identities. Em's I

poem illustrates a pressure to “explain themselves” through engaging in conversations with others in a calm way to make progress. The sense of the individual, modernist subject as authentic, stable, and recognisable to others is challenged by Em's identity as they sit “outside” of the immediately recognisable. Thus, a discursive tension is produced around an understanding of gender, and more broadly around identity construction itself. Therefore, not only is the U.K.'s understanding of gender troubled but also how gender as a concept is tied to the immutable subject that is the “modern self” (Henriques et al., 1998).

When Em used “I”, they referenced words such as “problematic”, “no idea”, “don't know”, “explain yourself”, and “telepathically communicate” to voice their experiences of struggle within the discursive realm of legitimacy. The questioning of their legitimacy and the positioning as an identity educator were problematic for Em to navigate as they were unsure about a way forward – “I do think it is problematic”, “I also don't know whether that would cause more problems than it would solve”, and “I don't want to do this anymore”. Em's voices of “don't know” and “no idea”, illustrate the difficulty of negotiating the disciplinary forces of explaining themselves (being delegitimised) and the exhaustion of not being understood (lack of cultural intelligibility). Therefore, Em's exhaustion was compounded by a lack of words to express their feelings, which made me reflect on the less articulated and less speakable voices in their poem.

Given the Listening Guide's focus on contrapuntal voices, part of the analysis is to also listen for silences and voices that are less spoken (Gilligan et al., 2012). The disciplinary forces located in the discursive realm of legitimacy made voices of gender euphoria less speakable for the participants. Gender euphoria encompasses the “powerfully positive experiences of gender” and therefore recognises the strengths and possibilities that non-binary people may experience (Beischel et al., 2021, p. 1). The lack of available language for non-binary youth to speak about gender euphoria was shown through the participants' I poems, as struggles and difficulties were spoken about more than ease and euphoria, illustrating how positive experiences relating to their genders were less speakable.

Stemming from the lack of available language and the difficulty of voicing experiences, there was a desire to resist expectations of explaining themselves, in favour of an unspoken form of communication that is implicitly understood by others, evidenced in Em's reference to being able to “telepathically communicate”. At first, I heard the desire for telepathy as an unrealistic solution, however, in reviewing Em's I poem, I began to hear another voice within that section highlighting the cisgenderist and binary assumptions that are dominant and implicit within society (Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). The assumption that people are by default cisgender and have a binary gender identity is so implicit that it functions as a form of telepathic communication – it is unspoken yet



assumed (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). The theory of cultural hegemony explains how the above assumption and other forms of normativity (e.g., hegemonic masculinity) are regulated through legitimising certain ideologies over others, and consequently, privileging some groups in the maintenance of power (Lears, 1985).

Therefore, by highlighting a desire for an unspoken form of communication, Em drew attention to the experiences of non-binary people who must explain themselves and communicate their difference (difference in the sense of not the norm). There was uncertainty within this voice, as Em states that “everything can’t happen at once” and that “I also don’t know whether that [talking about being non-binary] would cause more problems than it would solve”. It is unclear what problems Em thought might arise from articulating a non-binary experience, however, I interpreted Em’s “I” statements as voicing a desire to shift expectations that are placed on non-binary (and trans and queer) people to explain themselves towards a more universal knowledge of gender diversity. Em’s desire would mean uncoupling individuality from gender and would trouble gender as a primary identifier. Therefore, the desire for unspoken communication and universal knowledge around gender diversity becomes a bigger project than educating others, as it challenges the sense of what it means to be a person e.g., that people come in two genders. I discussed earlier how the participants were positioned as “identity” educators, rather than just “gender” educators, which illustrates the above argument of how gaining recognition and visibility as a “legitimate” subject was a difficult and complex process for the participants to navigate.

Alongside Em’s voice of struggle was their collective voice, where the “we” statements in Em’s I poem referred to various needs: “we need to first figure out how to talk about being non-binary”, “we need to be able to have these conversations”, “how are we going to make any progress”, and “we should be educating”. I understood the “we” as referring to both themselves and non-binary communities. Individually, Em voiced uncertainty, whereas when using a collective voice, Em took a more confident speaking position within their interview. Using a collective voice, Em identified the next steps to be taken to address the issues of legitimacy and educator positionings that were discussed earlier. Em’s collective voice spoke of “change”, “progress”, and “educating”, which contrasts with the “I” voices of being unsure of how to deal with the problems of explaining non-binary experiences. There was a sense of responsibility within the collective voice to make progress, “if we want to see change, we need to...”. Therefore, despite the individual uncertainty within Em’s voice, there was a recognition of a need for change that was strengthened through a collective voice.

There was also an activist tone in the collective voice, through the references to educating others and making progress by having difficult conversations, which formed a separate stanza in the

overall poem. Em switched from a voice of struggle to explain themselves to an activist voice. Em's activist voice spoke of the need to overlook their struggles and exhaustion in preference for moving knowledge and understanding of non-binary genders forward, suggesting that collectiveness can bring about change regarding the lack of available language for individuals. How Em spoke through their activist voice situated them as (partly) responsible for the awareness of non-binary genders: "we need to be able to have these conversations", and "we should be educating". There is a shift beyond responsibility to compulsion in Em's quote, e.g., "need" and "should", which is made compulsory through the constant delegitimisation of non-binary genders. For the participants to gain legitimacy they were required to become identity educators, which produced a "need" to educate. However, Em's "I" voice spoke of struggle and exhaustion from the relentless requirements to render non-binary genders culturally intelligible, therefore, they drew on a collective voice of responsibility in an attempt to make progress.

As a listener and interviewer, I resonated with Em's collective voice, as it drew me into "the collective" – as a queer person, and as someone who had communicated with Em my personal struggles with the gender binary. As queer people, we (myself and the participants) are all struggling and exhausted from the relentless requirements to legitimise and render our identities culturally intelligible in the current climate of increased queerphobia (Barsigian et al., 2020). My resonance with Em's voice meant that I was "primed" to hear the struggle when constructing the I poems. It felt important to me to centralise the struggles of non-binary youth as I have direct experiences of the impact on young people through my work at the youth group and my clinical practice. Drawing on reflexivity, and the first steps of the Listening Guide (Gilligan et al., 2012), my presence in the interview shaped how Em expressed themselves through "I" and "we" voices as we entered a more casual conversation towards the end of the interview (which is where the I poem was located).

Through using my own "I" positions in the interview, I voiced my vulnerability to Em:

I've kind of done some thinking about this and asked a few people because I'm like oh I want to be really conscious about using the right language and terms and it's impossible but I want to come at this in the best possible way (Luke in Em's interview – 700-702).

On reflection, I noticed the tension between my attempt to use the "right" language and how this may function to stabilise an identity that the participants were resisting. Therefore, whilst "correct" language use is deeply important for non-binary people e.g., pronoun use and misgendering (Wentling, 2015), there is complexity within the drive for the recognition of borderland identities that unsettle modernist understandings of the stable self. By acknowledging my position as a researcher and queer person who may get things wrong, e.g., recognising the difficulties of inclusive language, the power dynamics of participant/researcher that reinforce the

borders of the interview space and relationship became more permeable. The less boundaried interview space allowed me to connect more with Em's references to "we", i.e., I felt brought into the conversation, rather than being positioned by Em as an outsider. Therefore, I interpreted Em's collective voice as providing both belonging and legitimacy that were identified as struggles, as identified in the discourse analysis chapters ([four](#) and [five](#)). Consequently, the voice of struggle discussed earlier became more speakable through a collective voice and gave a sense of purpose to the personal struggle.

Although the reference to "we" provided strength to Em by drawing on a collective, the vulnerability of the "I" began to be silenced, making the uncertainty within Em's voices less speakable. For example, Em's collective voice speaks of a need for difficult conversations to make change and progress: "If we want to see change [...] we need to be able to have these conversations [...] or how are we ever going to reach make any progress". Whereas, when using their individual voice, the uncertainty and struggle of the "collective" becomes more spoken: "I have no idea if that would even yeah [...] I also don't know whether that would cause more problems than it would solve". Therefore, the I poems evidence the multivocality of Em's voices to show how they (re)locate themselves within the discursive realms, for example, there is a lack of available language and recognition that creates struggle, which Em navigated through a collective voice. Furthermore, despite the pressures to engage with dominant discourses and explain gender diversity, Em spoke of times when they used their voice to not engage with such pressures, e.g., "we get to a point where it's like I don't want to do this anymore". The discursive positioning of non-binary youth as identity educators alongside delegitimising youth's capacity to know and be sure of their genders left Em voicing the pressures to articulate their experiences, which did not fit within cisheteronormative or binary gender frameworks. The pressures to both make oneself visible, knowable, and intelligible, within a society that renders such visibility unintelligible and delegitimises youth's attempts to articulate knowledge of the self resulted in a desire to resist through non-engagement.

The focus on I Poems in the second phase of FRDA showed how Em's personal experiences could be tracked through the discursive realm. Within the discourse of legitimacy, the capacity of children and young people to have a legitimate sense of self highlighted how cisgender identities are privileged over non-binary and other gender diversities since non-binary youth were not considered to have this capacity. Em's voice highlighted the struggle and resistance within this discourse, as they felt the pressure to make themselves known, despite the inevitable questioning of any attempts. Em drew on a collective voice within this resistance as they switched from the use of an "I" pronoun to "we": "we just get to a certain point where it's like I don't want to do this anymore".

Within the discourse of legitimacy, where the participants' subjectivities were brought into question by professionals and expert voices, they were expected to explain themselves, positioning the participants as needing to do the emotional work of educating. The participants were positioned as identity educators and expected to teach others about non-binary genders despite their capacity to know themselves being questioned. By creating I poems for the participants, it was possible to hear how they used multiple voices to represent their experiences, but also recognise how they were mediated by discourses (Thompson et al., 2018). Experiences of struggle left the participants deeply exhausted from a continued expectation of needing to explain and justify their genders to others and feelings of vulnerability from being constantly questioned about their genders. The participants also used a collective voice as a source of strength, as individually, legitimacy discourses were exhausting and left them feeling vulnerable. This produced a sense of a collective voice that spoke of making change and educating others, to increase recognition and cultural intelligibility. Therefore, the participants used their voices collectively to resist expert voices and discourses that sought to question the legitimacy of their genders.

### **7.3 Youth as Transitional**

In the second analysis chapter, I drew on metaphors of youth to highlight the need for both transitional and relational understandings of youth. I discussed how transitional discourses were regulating for the participants and function to reinforce certain "markers" of youth, and therefore, certain kinds of development, e.g., leaving the family home, pursuing further education, engaging in romantic and sexual relationships. I argued that transitional discourses favour normative trajectories (heterosexual, binary, and cisgender), and therefore do not account for non-binary subjectivities. The nuances that non-binary youth may face are not considered within dominant discourses of transition, for example, moving away from the family home provided a space for some participants to explore their genders. Therefore, a normative transition of moving away from home is often framed as gaining independence, whereas this has a different/additional meaning for the participants, as it allowed them to "come out"/transition/develop a sense of self as non-binary. Han's I poem will be used to consider the transition aspect of [chapter five](#), by drawing on their personal experiences and "I" positions, highlighting their multiple voices and experiences of transition discourses.

[Chapter 5](#) also considered another metaphor for youth that was relational and focused on the concept of belonging. A relational metaphor enhanced my interpretations of the participants' transitions by looking beyond purely spatial aspects which often overlook the significance of other people. In the belonging section, the participants spoke of the queer community and began to

create separation between queer people and others. Belonging allowed the participants to develop a sense of self as non-binary, which was free from binary gender stereotypes and regulations.

Han was a university student who had previous difficult experiences related to coming out at an early age as gay and being “branded” with this label. They expressed difficulty in being able to move away from a gay label when they identified differently. A transitional move to university and a new house provided distance from the historical “branding” and was significant in feeling content with themselves and having the “brain space” to engage with their thoughts/feelings about gender. Han’s “plot” suggests apprehension in engaging with and using another identity label, as they spoke of feeling scared and worried about the reaction of others, because of their earlier experiences being “branded” gay.

I think it's yeah

I found that those people [older people] a lot harder to try to get them to think differently

I was like in a kind of binary mindset

I thought that

I wanted to like well

I didn't think

I wanted to but

I was considering if

I was like binary trans and like wanted to fully transition

[How] I knew that wasn't what I wanted

I identify very strongly as queer

I would use queer to represent my gender and my sexuality

I would actually use that more than I would non-binary

I'd just moved into a new house

I was just chuffed with where I was living

I had new housemates and stuff

I just thought you really understand how I'm feeling

I was like you're so right

[Having the brain space as well] I guess

I didn't feel like I had to have any answers

I had all the space to think that was good (Han)

Han used a voice of contentment, such as “I was just chuffed” and “I had all the space to think” within the discourses of transition, as their move to a new university house (discourse of

transition) also meant a new housemate (discourse of belonging) who Han felt understood what they were feeling. There was a contrapuntal voice of freedom within the poem, which was complementary to the voice of contentment, whilst still showing how Han spoke from multiple voices. The multivocality of Han's voices were complimentary as previously, they had not been content due to their "branding" as gay, discussed earlier, which had been restricting. However, there was a strong shift in the poem as the house move and new housemate functioned as epiphanic, and produced readability and comprehensibility, as their self was acknowledged and understood. Consequently, there was a profound sense of relief for Han in the shift as (in part) the emotional work became less, meaning they did not have to work so hard, as mentioned in their first stanza. Therefore, a voice of freedom regarding their gender was facilitated by contentment in their physical and mental space. Han felt understood by their housemate, as they did not police Han or reinforce messages that they should have reached a stable and definitive gender identity, as dominant psychological discourses suggest (Johnson, 2017).

Through a transition to a less restrictive space, Han felt content in their physical space, relationally with their housemate, and psychologically, as they did not feel pressured to have answers about their gender. Being content enabled Han to have some brain space to think and realise that they did not need to have any answers/to be accountable to others or to prove to others that they knew who they were. Freedom from discursive pressures around identity development (i.e., achieving a stable sense of self) enabled Han to be ok with trusting themselves and the constant becoming of gender ([chapter six](#)). Therefore, less restrictive spaces were hugely important as they provided the participants with the "brain space" to feel content with themselves. A less restrictive space for the participants was often spoken about in a move away from home to university. I discussed in [chapter six](#) how restrictive family messages can be difficult for non-binary youth, as trans and homophobic messages can become internalised and impact a person's sense of self during their development, leading to shame.

Within Han's voice of contentment, they mentioned feeling "chuffed" with both the spatial aspects of moving and of being in a new environment and relationally as they were with new people and felt "understood". Historically, Han has not felt understood, and therefore, the transitional experience of moving provided them with a "new beginning". The "new beginning" was a positive and affirming experience for Han, which I heard by focusing on Han's voice of contentment. The new beginning also enabled Han to present themselves as non-binary and explore their gender without the history of how they were assigned at birth. Therefore, within the discursive realm of transitions, Han's experiences were positive as the transitions enabled a new temporal reference, which was significant for presenting themselves/identifying as non-binary. Additionally, in [chapter five](#), I

discussed how Han's quotes drew on discourses of socially transitioning and how moving to a new space, such as moving to university, provided the participants with a space to present/reinvent themselves "from the beginning" as non-binary. For example, their assigned at birth history where people knew them as a different gender before transitioning was not present in new spaces because they had been able to introduce, present, and express themselves as non-binary from the start.

There was also a voice of freedom within the talk of temporality and transitions, such as, "I just thought you really understand how I'm feeling" and "I didn't feel like I had to have any answers". The new temporal reference/new beginning that I interpreted from Han's poem was possible because of the transition to a new house (spatial), but also because Han did not feel the pressure to have answers to gender questioning. I consider the lack of pressure to be relational, as Han previously felt pressure to articulate their gender in a clear and definitive sense in other places that they lived, such as their family home. Whereas their current housemates provided a different experience as they did not regulate or expect Han to define themselves, instead they provided a space to explore, which Han spoke of in their voice of freedom. Having the brain space to explore thoughts and feelings about gender is a significant aspect of gender development and affirming care for gender diverse youth (Ehrensaft, 2017; Hill & Menvielle, 2009). Some young non-binary people may not have family, friends, or communities that provide less restrictive space to explore their genders, and would likely be regulated by dominant discourses such as the gender binary and cisgenderism (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). For example, Kai had not "progressed" through expected developmental transitions e.g., moving away from home, and in their interview, they spoke of the difficulty of feeling able to engage with their gender identity and present/discuss this with the people around them (their family and religious communities they were connected to).

Therefore, a significant b/ordering process that non-binary youth may experience is a lack of space to explore their genders within dominant discourses such as the gender binary. Since the borderlands are spaces of multiplicity and fluidity, where marginalised groups create their own cultural scripts, they do not reproduce essentialist and cisgenderist forms of gender regulation (Anzaldúa, 1987; Callis, 2014; Savi, 2015). For Han, space to explore was freeing, and was both transitional and relational, as it was facilitated by a physical move to a new house and also being around new housemates that did not pressure them to have answers about themselves. Applying a borderland theory to Han's I poem shows how less restrictive identity borders provide youth with a sense of freedom from restrictive regulations around gender.

Both spatial and ideological freedom from normative gender discourses impacted the participants' sense of self, as they were able to engage with their gender identities. The participants also spoke of relational impacts, such as increased connection with other (queer) people, which

facilitated the (re)location of their subjectivities in the discursive constructions of readability and exhaustion. For example, the participants' queer connections opened up critical thinking, intellectual stimulation, and questioning of other institutional systems, which is in contrast to the earlier accounts of the emotional work of educating others and the fight for readable and legitimate subjectivity.

G was an international student, who had been living in the U.K. for a couple of years, studying at university. Their overall experience of the U.K. in relation to their gender identity was positive, as they spoke of how the U.K. was more accepting and inclusive of gender diversity than their home country of Malaysia. Their role as a daughter was heavily reinforced in Malaysia, therefore the U.K. provided G with a sense of freedom. Their experiences of belonging needs to be considered within their personal story. For example, there was increased comfort being in the U.K. and therefore their experiences of increased friendship groups and intellectual stimulation are shaped by their international transition and of experiencing a different cultural attitude towards gender.

I'm able to explore and have like discussions about gender and sexuality

My friendship group has grown drastically

certain level of... intellectual stimulation I want to say

I suppose that makes sense

When my friendship group moved into the queer sphere

Intellectual stimulation that I never received so that was also like another positive thing

I brought my genderqueer flag

My friend bought their non-binary flag

We saw a bunch of other gender non-conforming flags

I suppose that everyone like the non-cis people just come together

We're just not cis

I met this person who is trans and also non-binary

Very interesting to me

From my conversation

What I understood being trans to them was very more sort of a physical thing and then the non-binary aspect of it is more like the gender identity (G)

The first section of G's I poem contains a voice of growth, e.g., "I'm able to explore", "my friendship group has grown" and "intellectual stimulation that I never received", as they spoke of experiences that were enabled through connection with other queer people. Within the discourse of



belonging, a voice of growth shows how a connection with other queer people was a positive experience for participants such as G (other participants also shared this positive experience, such as RW). Finding connection and establishing belonging, specifically with other queer people, was significant to the participants, as it provided a sense of intellectual stimulation, in contrast to the exhaustion and explanation discussed in the legitimacy section. Connection with queer people also enabled the participants to create separation from cisgender people, for example, Em mentioned how it was easier to have conversations with queer people: “it's so much easier to have these conversations with other queer people than it is to have with like in the public discourse” (Em – 730-731). RW also spoke of how an all-queer friendship group provided a shared understanding: “that's the great thing about having a friendship group which is exclusively queer is that we we understand the problem” (RW – 285-286).

Establishing difference from others, often cisgender people, was significant as it enabled the identification of people who were more and less likely to be draining on personal resources, e.g., “brain space”. G spoke of queer people as having a shared experience with themselves and therefore they were more understanding of cisgenderism and the gender binary. Through G's voice of growth, it is possible to see how within this discourse of belonging, feelings of connection were euphoric and enabled increased self-understanding through intellectual conversations and shared and understandings. G spoke a lot about the positive impact of queer connections (a relational aspect), such as increased friendship groups and intellectual stimulation, and how these developed through both a spatial move from Malaysia to the U.K. G's voice of growth spoke of how a sense of belonging enabled them to explore their gender and have discussions about aspects of themselves that were not possible before: “I'm able to explore and have like discussions about gender and sexuality” and “intellectual stimulation that I never received”.

Therefore, from G's I poem and their voice of growth I heard how transitional and relational metaphors of youth were central to connecting with other queer people. Queer belonging opened up aspects of personal development, e.g., greater understandings of their identities (G mentions both gender and sexuality) in ways that had not previously been available. In [chapter five](#) I argued how discourses that construct youth as transitional reinforce cisheteronormative developmental and social trajectories. The participants' voices in the transitional discourses, spoke of how a connection with other queer people was central to resisting normative transitional trajectories. The participants' voices also spoke to the importance of identity borders between non-binary and cisgender for enabling growth, as they allowed increased connection with other non-binary, trans, and queer youth (fostering belonging). Reinforcing b/ordering processes between non-binary and cisgender identities also provided the participants with access to knowledge and shared understandings of

gender and identities that were not regulated by hegemonic discourses of the gender binary and essentialism. Therefore, the I poems in the current section show how b/ordering processes and the creation of separation is not always a negative experience for non-binary youth and is likely to be productive in navigating transitional positionings. Furthermore, the strengths of separation support the overall argument of the thesis of a borderland (both/and) approach of resisting simplistic categorisation and embracing multiplicity and complexity.

Since the research theorises non-binary genders as borderland identities that are multiple and fluid, it is important to consider the multiplicity of belonging, to capture the complexity and experiences that the participants spoke of in their interviews (Anzaldúa, 1987; Gaither, 2018). By focusing on the personal through creating I poems from their interviews, I heard the contrapuntal voices of the participants' multiple positionings and connections with others. The participants' contrapuntal voices spoke of the multiplicity of belonging, where identities may intersect and overlap within and between different communities (Gaither, 2018). Through an understanding of multiplicity, binary options of belonging or not belonging are considered as reproducing simplistic insider/outsider positionings which do not reflect the experiences of the participants (Jones & Krzyzanowski, 2011). For example, in Han's I poem, they mentioned their strong connection with a queer identity, as it captures both their gender and sexuality. They said that they would use queer more than non-binary as it expresses the multiplicity of belonging by bringing both their gender and sexuality into the conversation. Therefore, Han identified a sense of belonging and identification with multiple identity labels, such as, non-binary and queer, which was prevalent across many of the participants' interviews. The participants often drew on connection with a queer identity which provided a sense of community belonging, that perhaps was not so present for purely non-binary communities due to their lack of cultural intelligibility (Barsigian et al., 2020).

Discursively, the analysis showed how relational metaphors for conceptualising youth are important as they highlight significant connections that youth make to people and/or places. It also showed how through fostering connections with others, the participants constructed and maintained identity borders of belonging, where they identified connection with (queer people) and against (older people and professionals). Understanding belonging as multiple allowed for voices of growth within Han and G's I poems to be centralised, which enriched aspects of their lives through increasing friendships and intellectual stimulation.

In the second half of G's I poem, they spoke about attending a transgender parade with a friend and the collective coming together of transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer people, which provided cultural intelligibility and readability. Through coming together under the trans umbrella, G and their friend were able to make themselves known as not cis (creating separation)

whilst also connecting with the trans communities (establishing belonging). There was a sense of multiple belongings within G's I poem, as they spoke of various queer communities coming together through their gender diversities, which I understood as referencing how belonging may intersect and overlap with multiple communities for non-binary youth. People may also connect with the wider LGBTQ+ and/or queer identity labels and communities, therefore, providing additional layers of belonging, which can be seen in the participants' demographics e.g., non-binary asexual lesbian (Noah) or transmasculine non-binary pansexual (Cornelius). Research on non-binary youth has shown that there are nuanced difficulties for non-binary youth and belonging, as they may feel both highly visible and vulnerable yet also misunderstood and unintelligible (Bower-Brown et al., 2021; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). Therefore, G's talk of multiple belongings functioned to resist the simplistic and binary categorisation of identities and the separation of gender and sexuality as distinct aspects of oneself. Whilst literature notes the nuances within LGBTQ+ communities (Formby, 2017), the participants drew on non-binary, trans, and queer, to voice their attempts to find belonging in a society and culture that renders their genders unintelligible and questions their legitimacy.

The construction of I poems for the discourse of youth as transitional showed how the participants developed their non-binary borderlands through multiple belongings. In [chapter five](#), identity borders were not fixed and/or impermeable, rather, the participants spoke of being both non-binary and trans, or non-binary and queer, suggesting a permeability and/or fluidity of identity borders. Therefore, the borders were able to be crossed and/or shared overlap with other identities i.e., trans and queer, suggesting that borderlands can encompass the complexity and multiplicity of non-binary genders. Through articulating multiple belongings and conceptualising identity borders as permeable, the participants challenged dichotomous and categorical ideologies, e.g., that being non-binary separates you from other queer identities. The literature on border theory notes how borders are often not permanently fixed and that different borders have different qualities, such as hard and soft, which are less/more porous, respectively (Newman, 2003; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009). Critical border studies argue for "illuminating the changing reality of borders" (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009, p. 583) which this thesis contributes to, as the participants highlighted the complexity and fluidity of identity borders.

Through the discussions and interpretations of belonging, the participants challenge dominant border epistemologies, which construct and maintain binary positionings – of being on one side of the border, or the other. The participants drew on multiple belongings, which crossed the non-binary borderlands as well as understanding themselves as constantly becoming, thus challenging the child/adult dichotomy, where adults are considered to have achieved "being". Parker

and Vaughan-Williams (2009) argue that binary border epistemologies appeal to the human desire for categorisation and distinguishing between people, places, and ideologies, creating “the sense of certainty, comfort and security that they [borders] offer” (p. 584). Through challenging the oppositional, binary, and dual positionings that “othering” constructs, the participants support Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of borderlands where new possibilities and ways of thinking may be created, and where there is fluidity for change and constant becoming.

#### **7.4 Personal Growth**

In [chapter six](#), I argued that participants made sense of their growth as a constant and ongoing process that disrupts the child/adult paradigm and discourses of becoming/being. The participants also understood themselves as contextual, where they stressed the importance of being seen in the moment, which disrupted temporal references and favoured liminal understandings, whereby they could occupy contradictory positionings. As previously mentioned, borderland theory can accommodate for liminal understandings of the self, as the borderlands are conceptualised as encompassing multiplicity and fluidity. Therefore, borderland theory draws on alternative ontologies of knowledge, which are not restricted by binary logic e.g., insider or outsider positionings, rather, non-binary borderlands have more permeable qualities, where youth embrace the multiplicity of belonging.

The personal growth discourse was also restrictive, presenting another challenge of binary arguments, as the non-binary borderlands were at risk of becoming regulated by individualistic discourses that the participants internalised. The participants spoke of a variety of ways of being non-binary in an attempt to not regulate their own communities, however, there was a presence of individuality within their accounts and unrealistic expectations of resisting conformity, but not having to be non-conforming, of finding our own way but having to be an individual. Individualistic discourses formed b/ordering processes as they began to construct “rules” of being non-binary. Following this, I explored participants’ accounts of self-regulation, whereby messages from their childhoods and adolescence became internalised and subsequently resulted in the participants self-censoring themselves.

Kai was a primary example of self-censoring identified within the personal growth discourse. They spoke of messages from their family and expectations from religious communities that meant they did not feel comfortable coming out. At the time of interviewing, Kai was not “out” as non-binary to anyone except for a close friend, and during the interview, they were living through the self-censoring and regulation that they spoke of. Therefore, although other participants also voiced experiences of regulation, as discussed throughout, Kai’s voices spoke of a present-ness – they were currently being restricted by family and religious discursive pressures. The emotional content

resonated with me, I heard and felt the current lived struggle, and I heard their voice(s) that were unheard by anybody else, as they were not “out”. Therefore, it felt important for me, and to the feminist position of the research, to centre the otherwise unheard voices of Kai through their I poem.

Religious messages were pervasive in Kai’s interview as they spoke of struggling to reconcile an incongruence in gender identity and their embodiment, with religious beliefs of being made in god’s image. Examples of the religious messages can be seen in Kai’s I poem where they say their grandparents would think they were possessed by the devil. There were discourses of natural/unnatural, right/wrong ways of being in Kai’s interview that stemmed from religious beliefs. Therefore, Kai’s self-censoring is partly a product of religious institutions, which perpetuate certain ways of being e.g., congruent, stable, and not fluid, which are informed by modernist, binary, and cisheteronormative norms. Therefore, the religious messages functioned as b/ordering processes to maintain separation between a modernist sense of the self as right and natural, and how the borderland identities that unsettle stability are unnatural and wrong.

In Kai’s I poem, there was a prominent voice of shame as they felt conflicted between how they experienced themselves and their desires to be, act, and access things that were congruent with their gender with religious and family ideologies. Kai felt that if they were to embody/perform in ways that were more comfortable to them, they would “risk” confusion between what is right and wrong for their family, which would force them to make decisions about their child’s gender based on their religious views. Kai says they felt comfortable in themselves, but not comfortable being open about it and not wanting to draw attention, but also not enjoying censoring themselves. Therefore, regulatory messages from religious communities and family have limited Kai’s personal growth and identity development by making their gender diversity feel inaccessible for them. The literature on shame shows that shame is perpetuated by not being spoken about, which is evident in Kai’s self-censoring (Brown, 2006).

I draw on psychological and therapeutic literature which understands shame as pervasive and as linked to a person’s self-concept, it is about who they are, rather than something they have done (Brown, 2006). Therefore, LGBTQ+ people may experience shame because of their gender and/or sexual identities and internalise this shame creating difficulties with their sense of self, as who they are is rejected by others (Longhofer, 2013). Shame contributes to a sense of belonging, as being shamed identifies ways of being that are not culturally and socially accepted/dominant and pressures the individual to modify their behaviours to fit in (Van Vliet, 2008). Thus, shame is understood as a relational emotion, as it functions to draw individuals back into social bonding,

enabling individuals to remain socially connected with others by perpetuating normative ways of being.

I mean unfortunately  
I can't well  
I don't feel comfortable sort of being open about it  
I'm fairly comfortable in myself  
I'm not open about it  
feeling like I have to sort of curate or limit  
the way that I am or  
the things that I do or  
the way that I look  
so I don't draw too much attention  
[something that] I don't particularly enjoy  
if my grandparents found out  
think I was possessed by the devil  
not really something I want to risk  
not because I feel like I would be unsafe  
I mean  
I guess it comes down to  
even before I knew the words  
I felt that I had to behave in a certain way  
because of who I'm supposed to be  
that's like my whole life  
the way that I live my life  
I tend to sort of hold back  
I kind of like  
I'm just like filtering  
I'm just automatically like filtering filtering filtering  
I like I'm trying my absolute best to be reasonably authentic here  
I think that's important  
day-to-day I just might not say something  
I might not do something  
I might like  
I might shy away from an activity that

I would otherwise be interested in because  
I feel like  
I'm not supposed to take an interest in that or  
I'm not supposed to do this or  
I'm not supposed to be this way (Kai)

In Kai's I poem, by identifying their first-person statements, it is possible to see how their voice of shame about who they are as a non-binary person affected their personal growth: "I have to sort of curate or limit the way that I am", "I felt I had to behave in a certain way because of who I'm supposed to be". Whilst the discourse analysis showed how growth was impacted by self-censoring, the voiced experience of shame became apparent through the exploration of Kai's "I" statements. Kai's poem illustrates the functions of shame to regulate certain ways of being to belong, as Kai felt pressure for whom they were supposed to be, which was different from their sense of self. Therefore, Kai curated and limited themselves, becoming a self-censoring subject, which enabled them to stay within the family home and belong to the religious communities. However, maintaining a sense of belonging, based on messages of shame impacted Kai's personal growth and gender development, as they could not be themselves and Kai did not feel able to be "out" about being non-binary with anyone. Through using FRDA, I could track Kai's voice of shame through the discourse of personal growth to hear how early regulatory messages may shame youth and impact their personal growth by feeling unable to be and express themselves and/or be out about their non-binary genders. Therefore, the personal growth of non-binary youth who experience shame related to their genders may be stifled as there is a threat of rejection for people who are "different". Consequently, non-binary youth may work hard to censor themselves to make themselves less visible and to maintain (familial) belonging, which was identified as an important aspect for the participants in [chapter five](#).

Therefore, discourses of personal growth favour normative trajectories e.g., linear and towards an endpoint (Crafter et al., 2019; O'Dell, 2014) and pressure non-binary youth who deviate from normative expectations, such as the gender binary, essentialism, and cisgenderism, to self-censor (Allen et al., 2020; Barbee & Schrock, 2019; Bower-Brown et al., 2021). Minority stress theory helps to explain the challenges that members of marginalised groups may face by theorising that maintaining an identity that deviates from social norms can cause stress for the individual due to the presence of stigma and discrimination towards gender diversity (Meyer, 2003, 2015). In addition to a voice of shame within Kai's account, experiences of stress in maintaining a concealed gender identity were present. Thus, Kai's negotiation of discourses of growth was stressful since regulatory messages from family and religious institutions conflicted with their sense of self, which supports

findings from the literature on gender ideology and religion (Darwin, 2020a). The conflict between an internal sense of self and dominant messages about gender caused internalised shame for other participants such as RW, Cornelius, and G.

Kai's I poem also shows a contrapuntal voice of desire and longing, which spoke of how desperate they were to be more congruent with themselves, e.g., "I might shy away from an activity that I would otherwise be interested in", and "I tend to hold back". Kai's poem also shows the desire to do something different and motivation for an alternative way of being, but a pressure to resist this, which I interpreted as the voice of shame and self-regulation. I also reflected on how Kai's response to the call for participants showed their voice of desire as they wanted to participate and they wanted their voice to be heard, despite their concerns around whether their voice would be useful. There were several emails between myself and Kai where they shared concerns about whether their voice would be useful for the research, as they had only ever spoken to another person about being non-binary and were not "out". Kai struggled to see the value in their voice thinking that it was potentially not relevant to the research, whilst also pursuing the call for participants as a space to use their voice.

Kai's participation in the research provides an explicit example of their contrapuntal voices of shame and desire. Kai's participation also shows how voice may not necessarily reflect a concrete and unchanging account of experience, rather, the articulation of voices can change over time and across different contexts, constructing multi-layered, complex, and contradictory experiences. For example, Kai's voices of shame and desire were in opposition, highlighting multivocality as their voice of shame restricted their voice of desire from being heard. Kai was so deeply concerned with the impact of their gender on their family and their religious beliefs and community, that their voice of desire became minimised and they did not feel able to use this voice when speaking with others. The restrictive voice of shame, however, did not reflect a singular experience which was evident in Kai's participation in the research and their communication throughout the interview, where they reflected on their desires to make changes, "come out", and connect with more non-binary people. Therefore, Kai supports previous research and shows how borderland theory is useful for understanding non-binary identities (Callis, 2014), as their negotiation of the discursive realms was complex, and their voiced experiences in their I poem was multivocal, illustrating how the navigation b/ordering processes are best understood as both/and.

Discourses of personal growth were severely limiting for Kai by familial and religious conservative messages that caused Kai to feel shame(ful) about their gender. As shame functions relationally to "pull" people to belong through identifying certain forms of difference as undesirable, non-binary youth risk losing a sense of belonging by being congruent to their non-binary genders, or



they must perform a more acceptable gender identity, governed by cisgenderism. I chose to only present Kai for the I poem phase of the analysis as their personal experiences within the discursive realm of growth highlighted the severe impact of regulation on their gender. Kai felt unable to speak, act, and embody a sense of self that felt comfortable and congruent for them due to cisgenderist and essentialist understandings of gender, which were reinforced by their family and their religious beliefs and communities.

## 7.5 Conclusion

Overall, by tracking the personal accounts and experiences of the participants through the discourses of legitimacy, transition, and growth, I was able to hear how non-binary youth seek to belong. [Chapter 5](#) focused on a relational metaphor for conceptualising youth, which argued that research should focus on how youth work to belong to people, places, and times (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014). The participants reinforced identity borders within the transitional/belonging discourse to identify who did and did not belong within the borderlands. A sense of queer belonging was significant to the participants, as they felt understood and validated by others with marginalised identities. Subsequently, the process of identifying belonging created separation from others, who were described as older, professional, and not queer. [Chapter 4](#) centred around the discourse of legitimacy and youths' capacities to be able to know themselves. Subjects that sought to delegitimise non-binary youth shared characteristics with the descriptions of others from [chapter five](#) – older and not queer. Therefore, the participants identified certain subjects as not taking non-binary genders seriously and not believing that youth have the capacity to self-identify and understand their identities.

The participants constructed separation from the subjects that questioned their legitimacy in [chapter five](#) through discourses of belonging, to enable the borderlands to be spaces of freedom, safety, and protection. In [chapter six](#), a voice of shame functioned to keep non-binary genders culturally unintelligible to maintain belonging with family and religious communities. Other participants worked to create their own non-binary borderland “culture” as a space of freedom from binary restrictions and cisgenderism, where they understood gender as a process of contextual and ongoing becoming, rather than progressing to “being”, which is a perspective that normative transitional positionings of youth perpetuate. Voices of growth and freedom showed how the participants spoke of contextual, liminal, and temporal understandings of gender. However, transitional positionings are dominant and reinforce cisnormative developmental and social trajectories, which render non-binary genders culturally unintelligible.

Regulatory messages of growth from institutions such as family and religion were often conservative and based on essentialist and binary understandings of gender. Such messages

functioned to shame non-binary youth for their gender diversity to regulate youth to assimilate into cisnormativity (i.e., make their gender diversity invisible), to belong – that is, to be part of a family, a religious community, etc. Ongoing messages of shame and delegitimacy resulted in youth becoming self-censoring by limiting and curating themselves. The participants also showed resistance against regulatory messages by refusing to engage with and/or educate others who attempted to question their genders. The participants experienced both transitional and identity educator positionings as exhausting and non-engagement was a personal-political form of resistance to preserve their energies. Connection and belonging with other queer people were significant for the participants in enabling them to feel more confident in themselves, providing a space for exploration outside of binary, cisgenderist, and modernist constraints. Additionally, queer connection provided a sense of collective strength for the participants to educate others and change frames of reference if they wanted to.

## Chapter 8 – Conclusion

### 8.1 Introduction

In the final chapter, I will summarise the main findings of the research, focusing on how they answer my research questions about b/ordering processes:

- How does the transitional positioning of youth intersect with non-binary gender identities?
- What additional forms of regulation do non-binary youth face, given their increasing cultural recognition but the dominance of the gender binary?
- How are the identity borders of non-binary genders regulated for youth?

The findings show the participants navigated b/ordering processes by drawing on contextual and relational understandings of gender, embracing multiplicity and fluidity, and protecting a sense of community belonging with other queer people. The research does not intend to generalise the findings to all non-binary youth – a main argument throughout the thesis is that gender development and the negotiation of identity borders is contextual and relational. Therefore, this research provides an insight into 10 non-binary youth's lives, during 2019 and 2020 in the U.K., acknowledging that their understandings of themselves are constantly evolving and becoming, just as the language of gender is too.

I then address the significance of the findings by considering their theoretical, methodological, and practical implications, and how the knowledge will be disseminated. Although the implications of the research are presented in three sections, I acknowledge the blurring of contributions across theoretical, methodological, and practical lines, particularly in emphasising how theory informs practice and vice versa. The limitations of the thesis will be discussed and I then make some recommendations for future research in the field. Finally, I end the thesis with a concluding statement about the research overall.

### 8.2 Summary of The Findings

The current research explored the personal-political forms of b/ordering processes for non-binary youth and how they navigated transitional positionings. Previous research has largely failed to focus on non-binary youth, by encompassing their identities with binary trans and/or wider LGBTQ+ samples (Worthen, 2021). Furthermore, critical perspectives on youth are lacking, as attention has focused on gender non-conformity in younger people, or adults (Allen et al., 2020; Budge et al., 2020). The participants challenged dominant linear developmental trajectories, which position youth as transitional and working towards achieving a stable and enduring gender identity. "Alternative" developmental narratives are present within critical developmental and LGBTQ+ literature, however, the nuances of non-binary experiences are missing (Crafter et al., 2019; Johnson, 2017). I draw on the concept of the borderlands to frame my research as it provides a way to understand

marginalised identities and the multiplicity and complexity of existing “outside” of normative culture, without pathologising such difference (Anzaldúa, 1987; Callis, 2014). I also draw on a pluralist concept of both/and, stemming from transgender theories, to understand gender as both socially and self-constructed (Monro, 2005; Nagoshi et al., 2014). My analytical framework of FRDA (Thompson et al., 2018) continues the pluralist concept by outlining an approach to capture discourse and experience to produce a personal-political account.

In the [first analysis chapter](#), the participants showed how not conforming to hegemonic developmental discourses delegitimised and rendered their subject positions culturally unintelligible. Navigating a society structured around the gender binary, whilst non-binary genders are rendered culturally unintelligible, was compounded due to intersections of age and associated childhood discourses, where youths’ capacities to know themselves were also called into question by expert voices. Despite being delegitimised, the participants were positioned as identity educators, which required them to advocate for gender diversity, alongside more fluid understandings of identity. Negotiating the b/ordering processes of unintelligibility, delegitimacy, and childhood and educator positionings was emotional work that left the participants deeply exhausted and reluctant to engage with expert and transitional subjects, such as professionals and people who were not a big part of their lives.

Discourses of legitimacy showed how expert voices were used to question the participants’ capacities to know themselves and the authenticity of their genders that were experienced by participants, such as RW, as rejection. Through centring voice in the I poems, stories of loss, confusion, and vulnerability, destabilised a sense of belonging, showing how discourses can “hit” and “bruise” the personal (Ahmed, 2017; Thompson et al., 2018). Additionally, discourses of legitimacy also positioned non-binary youth as educators, requiring them to provide education about their genders, as a way to gain legitimacy. Em, voiced their struggle in articulating non-binary experiences and the pressure to explain themselves, which left them personally exhausted. In response, Em drew on the strength of a collective and more confident “we” voice to resist expert voices and educator positionings, whilst working to increase recognition and cultural intelligibility for non-binary youth. Therefore, the I poems showed how the discursive realm of legitimacy had profound personal impacts on the participants’ emotional resources and sense of place in the world.

In the [second analysis chapter](#), I argued that transitional positionings of youth reflect normative development e.g., heterosexual, binary, and cisgender, and therefore function as a b/ordering process for non-binary youth, constructing their experiences as “other”. However, the participants drew on discourses of transition in nuanced ways, whereby finding both physical and mental space away from the emotional work of educator positionings to explore gender was

significant and often encompassed “normative” milestones. For example, moving away from home/to university, provided space for gender exploration and increased connection with queer communities. The participants drew on developmental discourses which construct youth as transitional, by recognising the importance of transitions for their gender development. However, the participants also drew on relational discourses which centred aspects of belonging and the importance of accepting communities and friendships with other queer people to explore their genders and resist delegitimacy. Therefore, a both/and approach is important for understanding how non-binary youth navigate b/ordering processes.

Discourses of transition provide an insight into how “typical” milestones, such as moving away from home, provides a new starting point for youth to explore their genders, transition, and present themselves as non-binary for the first time (e.g., the use of new pronouns and names, presentation, etc.). However, the above transitions were integrated with the relational aspects of connecting with queer communities and developing a sense of belonging. Therefore, both relational and spatial discourses were significant for exploring how the participants navigated the b/ordering processes of youth and the personal implications were able to be explored through the participants’ I poems. For example, Han spoke of the contentment and freedom that transitions provided, as they did not have to explain themselves as much or in clear, definitive ways, as they did at home. G illustrated the complexity of belonging and the permeability of identity borders through using multiple gender labels (e.g., non-binary, trans, queer), which troubled categorical distinctions. Therefore, the relationality within youth’s discursive transitional positioning deconstructs linear and dichotomous borders e.g., non-binary/binary and child/adult, favouring fluidity and seeing identity as a process.

Finally, the [third analysis chapter](#) was concerned with personal growth, where the youth drew on discourses of development as a constant process of becoming, troubling the dominant narratives of child/adult and becoming/being. Additionally, the participants challenged a modernist sense of a stable self and emphasised the need for contextual understandings of their genders. Consequently, there was a need to be seen in the present, which disrupts temporal references in favour of liminality, whereby the participants could embody complexity and contradictions, providing freedom from the gender binary.

Whilst “becoming” and contextual understandings were “freeing”, the participants articulated negotiating a “discursive duel” in rendering their borderland subjectivities culturally intelligible whilst resisting the pressures to conform to stable and unified modernist notions of the self. Attempts to be(come) recognised fed into individualistic discourses of navigating the struggle of the gender binary and cisgenderism “by yourself”. Additionally, restrictive messages from family and

religious communities reinforced modernist demands for identity stability, which disciplined the participants to internalise trans- and homophobic messages and self-censor forms of diversity. Therefore, the participants were positioned in an impossible situation in gaining recognition as non-binary due to demands for stability and widespread, enduring queerphobic messages.

I have argued throughout the thesis for the importance of relational understandings of non-binary youths' genders and the significance of belonging and connection. Kai's I poem within the discursive realm of growth showed how disconnection from communities and the internalisation of gender norms individualises the self and restricts behaviours, presentation, and identification. Kai's voice of shame spoke to the self-censoring resulting from restrictive messages about gender, but did it not mask their participation in the research and their desire to resist such regulation.

Overall, the participants articulated voices of freedom, contentment, and growth that liminal, temporal, and contextual understandings of gender afforded them in navigating b/ordering processes. However, whilst the non-binary borderlands provide the potential for new ways of understanding and doing gender, they are permeable and fluid, and therefore, can be influenced by dominant discourses e.g., individualism. Furthermore, queer belonging was central to the participants' accounts of identity development in resisting and navigating b/ordering processes and therefore, a lack of connection made identity borders more difficult to traverse.

### **8.3 Theoretical Contributions**

The present research makes several theoretical contributions to knowledge, showing how intersections of age and gender for non-binary youth produce unique challenges of navigating transitional positionings and categorical thinking. The research also shows how non-binary youth are resilient and experience gender euphoria and possibility in their borderlands. The importance of belonging to a queer community is highlighted as a source of support for navigating restrictive b/ordering processes, therefore challenging dominant discourses of youth as spatial transitional (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014). Additionally, developmental binaries of becoming/being, which construct childhood, adolescence, and youth as a phase, and adulthood as achieved stability were challenged (Burman, 2016). Instead, the participants articulated contextual and relational understandings of their genders, which trouble modernist notions of the self as linear and categorical, and binary discourses of development.

The use of borderland theory (Anzaldúa, 1987) as a theoretical framework allowed for the complexity and nuances of non-binary experiences to be recognised through a both/and approach to embracing fluidity and multiplicity – as suggested in trans theory (Monro, 2007; Nagoshi et al., 2014). Consequently, experiences of personal growth, gender euphoria, and resilience to discursive pressures could be recognised, which were located within the complexity. For example, a contextual

and relational understanding of gender was important to the participants to understand their genders and journeys to get to their current location (e.g., previous identities). It was within a contextual and relational understanding of themselves that the youth voiced their contentment and a sense of freedom from binary restrictions. Therefore, the current research shows how the use of borderland theory contributes theoretically but also how there are methodological nuances, as methods for non-binary research must be able to account for complexity in an affirming way.

Through reconsidering how youth may develop their identities across the lifespan and renegotiate their genders relationally and contextually, the importance of belonging was highlighted. Connection with queer communities was significant for the youth as they provided a sense of belonging that was crucial to their gender development, which supports previous LGBTQ+ research on the importance of community connection, as recognised in models of identity development, e.g., Cass (1979) and Troiden (1989) (Formby, 2017). However, the present research contributes to this scholarship in multiple ways. Firstly, historical models of identity development are linear and progressive, which I argue do not account for non-binary experiences. Secondly, research on the role of community for non-binary youth specifically is small, of which the present research contributes to (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). The connection and belonging to queer communities provided multiple sources of support, which addressed several areas in which they experienced regulation. The queer communities provided education to the participants, introducing them to new identity labels, and expanded their concepts of gender and sexuality beyond simplistic binary conceptualisations. For many of the participants, they learned/heard about non-binary genders relationally through other people, which also has practical implications illustrating how theory links to practice. For example, the lack of education and visibility of non-binary genders impacted how the participants learnt about their genders, such as, through other queer people, rather than formal education, family, or professionals. Therefore, the above theoretical contribution highlights a policy issue for the funding for LGBTQ+ youth organisations, given the significant role that connection with other queer people had for the participants' identity development in the current research (Colgan et al., 2014; Matthews, 2020).

Furthermore, community belonging acted as a buffer against the microaggressions and minority stress that were prevalent throughout their accounts, e.g., delegitimacy, transitional and childhood positionings. The participants used "queer" as an identity label strategically to navigate situations where people did not know non-binary and/or provide them with more visibility in spaces where non-binary genders were culturally unintelligible. How the participants used connections with queer people to negotiate discursive positionings is an important theoretical contribution as it shows the unique experiences of how age and gender intersect for non-binary youth to produce

forms of regulation. It also highlights how cultural awareness and acceptance of “queer” has shifted in younger generations given that its use over non-binary was often helpful to describe aspects of their genders and sexualities in conversations.

The present research also illustrates how restrictive categorical and binary thinking can be for non-binary youth, as it reinforces modernist and normative ways of being. For example, developmental discourses of “becoming” adult constructed youth as unable to articulate their sense of self due to lacking mental capacity and perpetuates problematic discourses of “phased” identities. The maintenance of adult/child power dynamics locates gender (and other forms of) diversity as “childish”, undermining young people as active and able to know themselves. The implications of childhood discourses have lasting effects and extend throughout adolescence into youth, as some participants reflected on their internalised transphobia and how they had become self-regulating/self-censoring due to early childhood messages of gender diversity. Additionally, “phase” identity discourses undermine transient and fluid identities, which may change over time, through reinforcing and privileging the need for stability. The participants showed how a modernist, stable sense of gender identity is unhelpful for understanding non-binary experiences, rather, they favoured consideration of contextual and relational understandings which constructed gender development as a lifespan process of becoming, completing a borderland theory of self (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Overall, the findings support previous research on non-binary genders, non-normative development, and categorical thinking. For example, Vincent, (2020) has discussed discourses of legitimacy in their work on non-binary genders. Critical psychologists, such as O’Dell et al. (2017) have explored how normative developmental trajectories are limiting not inclusive for a range of youth. And Barker (2018) provides a critique of binary and categorical thinking for gender – and life more broadly (Barker & Iantaffi, 2019). Additionally, the findings told stories that I had heard from my practitioner and youth work background, and therefore, the findings were largely as expected. The surprising findings were in the nuances of how the participants navigated restrictive b/ordering processes and (mostly) found the “cracks in the pavement” that Callis (2014) discussed, of ways to be comfortable in themselves and the world. For example, how the participants found and fostered the energy to be resilient and be themselves, despite being delegitimised, through the strength of community.

#### **8.4 Methodological Contributions**

The present research makes methodological contributions in its use of borderlands as a theory of selfhood, and FRDA (Thompson et al., 2018) for exploring non-binary genders, to provide a personal-political account of the regulation of identity borders. The present research is the first to



use FRDA for analysing gender diversity and the implications of using this analytical approach will be discussed.

Using the borderlands as a theory of selfhood was a useful way to conceptualise non-binary genders, as it resists modernist pressures to frame gender, and the self, in simplistic ways e.g., stable and unified (Prout, 2011). Rather, the borderlands recognise and affirm the multiplicity, fluidity, and complexity of genders and the borders between identities, recognising how they may be productive, which supports previous literature in this area (Monro, 2007; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Vincent, 2020). The following quote illustrates how borderland theory was useful in recognising the complexity of gender:

I realised that my understanding of the identity was sort of both but neither so that I understand having some sort of female aspects and male aspects but not fully either and for me this is sort of the way that I feel about a lot of different parts of me (Ren)

In the analysis, I noted how Ren references the gender binary (female and male aspects), and modernist thinking, where gender is expected to be one or the other, but how this is not how they experience themselves. Rather, Ren's understanding of themselves as "both but neither", which cannot be accounted for in an affirming way using a modernist theory's attempt to boundary and unify the self. Whereas borderland theory recognises that identities at the intersections of dominant categories e.g., the gender binary, are less boundaried and permeable, and therefore are complex and contradictory. Therefore, the current research contributes methodologically by building on previous applications of borderland theory, e.g., (Callis, 2014), and showing how the concept of the borderlands is useful for exploring non-binary genders.

The thesis also contributes methodologically by providing an example of how feminist and trans-informed research can simultaneously explore the material (personal) and discursive (political) aspects of gender identity. FRDA was a useful method for the current research as it provided a framework to further trans recommendations of the importance of using feminist methodologies (Vincent, 2018) and disrupt discursive narratives of gender, identity, and development. The discursive practice of discourse analysis is a feminist concern, as power dynamics become obscured, and personal experiences of the participants become lost, further silencing already-marginalised people (Saukko, 2000; Thompson et al., 2018). FRDA was a useful way of centralising voice, whilst not losing the discursive contexts from which participants spoke. Methodologies that centralise voice are needed for non-binary research as their voices are often discursively silenced by modernist understandings and/or encompassed within wider transgender and LGBTQ+ narratives (Bradford et al., 2019; Worthen, 2021).

FRDA's attention to voice, using I poems, was useful for the current research as it enabled me to recognise and centralise the participants' voices whilst critically exploring how they are regulated by and actively relocate themselves within the discursive realms. For example, the discourses of capacity and cisgenderism that were explored in the discursive realm of legitimacy showed how the participants were required to negotiate b/ordering processes of emotional work to "claim" recognition of a legitimate gendered subject. However, "working" to legitimise non-binary subjectivities was exhausting and the participants became vulnerable from the constant questioning of their genders. Therefore, attempts to be(come) legitimate and gain cultural intelligibility was risky for the participants and required personal strength. The use of I poems showed how the participants drew on collective voices for strength, e.g., switching between "I" and "we" to resist being delegitimised.

### **8.5 Practical Contributions**

The research also contributed practical knowledge, especially for professionals in healthcare and education, highlighting the significance of visibility and awareness of non-binary genders. The main way that the participants experienced delegitimacy was through interactions with professionals and practitioners. Whilst there were few positive experiences, the majority of the participants spoke of difficult interactions, where they had been rejected, dismissed, and where their gender identities had been delegitimised. The findings support previous research and clinical guidance suggesting that practitioners should be mindful of their gendered assumptions, respect lived experience and self-identification, and be aware of the historical pathologisation of gender, sexual, and relationship diversity (Barker, 2017; Eckstrand & Potter, 2017; Richards & Barker, 2013). However, the present research contributes additionally to show how youth navigate b/ordering processes, such as delegitimacy, when they are positioned precariously, particularly in healthcare, and how professionals may draw on intersections such as mental health, to challenge youth when they articulate non-binary genders. Therefore, professionals should embrace youths' understandings of themselves, recognising their agency, rather than appealing to discourses that position youth as a phase and therefore delegitimise their knowledge claims.

Additionally, practitioners should be mindful that non-binary youth often anticipate a lack of awareness about gender diversity and experience microaggressions, such as the privileging of binary identities, even within specialist gender services, leaving them exhausted and vulnerable. Therefore, professionals should ensure that they make visible their non-binary awareness and ensure that all staff have appropriate trans-affirming training. The youth spoke of how positive experiences with professionals e.g., Phoenix's relationship with their counsellor, provides much-needed support during times where school environments often feel very difficult. Phoenix's example illustrates the

significance of just one affirming adult/professional figure in providing support for non-binary youth, especially in educational settings, where the participants often lacked visibility. Where the participants did not experience/receive affirming support, their gender exploration and ability to feel comfortable in themselves was hindered in profound ways. For example, Kai did not feel able to come out to any family or friends, and through their I poem, I heard their internalised shame.

A lack of visibility and support from professionals showing that institutions are “trans-aware” makes navigating education and healthcare challenging. The participants felt unable to be themselves due to explicit forms of rejection and discrimination and therefore unable to reach out to adults/professionals. Consequently, the participants sought out spaces where they feel able to belong, which was primarily through queer friendships and communities. Positive experiences became available for most participants in the move to college and university. Therefore, the thesis contributes practically by showing how significant spaces of connection and belonging to other queer people are for non-binary youth.

Transitional milestones, such as leaving school and moving to university were points at which the participants started to engage more with their genders due to space to process. Through increasing visibility, schools could provide spaces where youth feel able to/that they have the “brain space” to think about gender. Therefore, educational spaces should be explicitly visible in their inclusivity to help non-binary youth feel “seen”. As argued in the literature review, non-binary genders can be lost within both LGBTQ+ acronym and attempts to be “trans-aware” that only recognise binary trans identities (Budge et al., 2020; Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018). Therefore, whilst the participants found belonging and community in general LGBTQ+ groups, professionals and educational spaces must be explicit in understanding that gender can be non-binary and visibly communicate their awareness.

### *8.5.1 Dissemination of Findings*

As a practitioner, it is important to me that the knowledge produced through the thesis is “fed back” into practice so that it has practical significance for non-binary youth. Whereas academic standards of impact traditionally centre institutional metrics, such as journal calibre, for practitioners, accessibility of findings and integration into practice is important (Fox et al., 2007). So far, I have disseminated findings from the research in both academic and clinical settings. I presented an early analysis of the data at the Psychology of Women and Equalities conference (2019). I have also developed training on “supporting LGBTQ+ young people” for a psychotherapy organisation, using insights from my analysis. I also include analysis from my thesis in lectures on gender and identities at my institution for undergraduate and masters level programmes. The

Masters students are on practitioner courses and therefore, the inclusion of my findings in lectures informs the students' future practice in terms of theoretical and methodological contributions.

Additionally, I have made an infographic of the analysis ([Appendix G](#)), which has been sent to the participants who indicated on their consent forms that they would like to receive this. The aim of creating an infographic was to present the findings in an accessible way for participants and as a tool to be used outside of academia. The decision to produce an infographic was made before recruitment, however, the decision has gained increased importance post-analysis after hearing the significance of visibility and awareness from the youth. Therefore, I plan to reach out to local youth groups and services to discuss how my findings can be communicated to their staff to inform practice. Finally, I plan to disseminate the findings academically by publishing papers on the use of borderland theory and FRDA for exploring youths' non-binary genders and presenting my findings at future conferences.

### **8.6 Limitations of The Research**

Having considered the various implications of the research, I now turn to discuss limitations, focusing on the difficulties of recruitment and the need for participatory approaches. A practical and methodological limitation of the research was the process of recruitment and the lack of community involvement. I chose a multiple-recruitment method, of targeting local youth organisations and advertising the call for participants online. In my [methodology chapter](#), I briefly reflected on the challenges of recruitment, mentioning how despite a lot of online attention to my posts, the adverts did not seem to easily/effectively reach non-binary youth. A lot of the attention was from other academics sharing my posts, which seemed to boundary the reach of the adverts within academic circles. Therefore, I consider the approach to recruitment a limitation of the research. Furthermore, despite efforts made to recruit a diverse sample of non-binary youth, which was done through approaching specific groups e.g., faith, disability, and people of colour, I am conscious that the majority of the participants were white, able-bodied, and lived in England, therefore, the overall research reflects a somewhat privileged account of non-binary regulation.

Additionally, the ages of recruitment was a discussion point in the interview with G, who mentioned that they thought the ages were too low since non-binary people often experience a social "delay". On reflection, across the participants, social and developmental "milestones", such as pursuing (a)romantic and or/(a)sexual relationships were discussed as occurring later than their (assumed cis and binary) peers. Therefore, whilst I purposefully used "traditional" age markers for capturing youth's transitional positioning, a limitation of the research was that a 16-21 age bracket may not be inclusive of non-binary youth experiences.

It is also important to reflect on my binary identification during the beginning of the recruitment process. Throughout the research, I have been conscious of my positioning (as discussed in the [reflexivity section](#)), and discourses of only trans people doing trans research. I feel that my binary gender may have been a reason for youth deciding to not participate and therefore a more community-focused involvement e.g., being involved in youth groups, may have helped address this concern. Guidance for trans and youth research favours participatory and co-construction approaches, which I feel would have helped both community-focused involvement and subsequently the recruitment of participants (Lawson et al., 2015; Wagaman, 2015). Although the focus of the present research stems from my MSc thesis on non-binary young people's experiences (Ward & Callaghan, in press), the lack of co-construction in areas such as, deciding on research questions, developing the interview schedule, and reviewing the analysis, was a limitation of the thesis.

### **8.7 Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the analysis of the data and the implications discussed above, I will now make several recommendations for future research focusing on embracing complexity and contradictions within research and participant samples that call for further attention. A main recommendation from the thesis is to embrace and use both/and approaches theoretically and methodologically to capture the complexity and nuances of non-binary genders. Throughout the thesis, I have shown how binary frameworks are limiting for non-binary youth, as they construct limited possibilities for gender and growth through transitional positionings and linear developmental trajectories (Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). Theoretically, non-binary genders challenge many binary and categorical structures, a both/and approach will help to ensure that the foundations of the literature base represent the diversity of non-binary experiences, rather than (re)produce an additional gender category and identity borders. Methodologically, looking beyond purely discursive or material ontological and epistemological paradigms, such as agential realism (Barad, 2015), as recommended by trans literature, will help ensure that the personal-political aspects of gender for non-binary people is captured. Therefore, future psychological research should be informed by trans-theory and be specifically affirming of non-binary genders.

As the present research identified that connection with queer communities was a significant buffer for multiple areas of discrimination, oppression, and erasure, a recommendation for future research is to explore reaching non-binary youth who are less "out" about their genders. For example, youth who live in rural locations, where a queer community may be lacking, to explore how these youth navigate the b/ordering processes identified within the present research.

Finally, future research should continue to acknowledge the possibilities and euphoria of gender for non-binary people. Although it is important to recognise the various mental health

implications of a marginalised identity, the non-binary youth in the thesis showed resilience and the unique ways that they navigate the world to experience the strengths and joy of their genders. Therefore, I recommend that researchers are mindful of hearing for the positive and strengths, as well as the challenges of being non-binary.

### **8.8 Concluding Statement**

To conclude, the present research identified a gap in gender and psychological literature on how non-binary youth navigate identity borders and transitional positionings. There was a timely need for the present research, given increasing public, political, and academic attention towards non-binary visibility and intersections of age, particularly concerning younger people (Pearce et al., 2020). Additionally, much developmental psychological research fails to consider non-binary identities in theories of identity development and (re)produces binary categories and ways of thinking (O'Dell, 2014). Therefore, the present research was needed to explore the unique experiences of non-binary youth and the complexities of navigating and negotiating the dominance of the gender binary, cisgenderism, and transitional positionings.

The main consideration of the research was to resist further modernist, categorical, and binary conceptualisations of non-binary genders, which has been argued to obscure the multiplicity, fluidity, and complexity of lived experiences (Lorber, 2006). Therefore, borderland theory (Anzaldúa, 1987) was used as a theoretical framework of selfhood to understand non-binary genders as “outside” of the hegemonic binary, exploring how youth constructed their own cultures (Callis, 2014). Informed by trans theory (Monro, 2005; Nagoshi et al., 2014), the methodological and analytical approaches of the research used an agential realist ontoepistemology (Barad, 2007, 2015) to recognise the importance of both the discursive and the material, i.e., socially- and self-constructed aspects of gender.

In the thesis I have explored identity borders and processes of regulation for non-binary youth, producing a personal-political account of discursive positionings and lived experience. There is a small, but growing literature base focusing on non-binary genders, of which little attention is given to youth. My findings offer a significant contribution by resisting the (re)production of simplistic binary and categorical conceptualisations of gender, identities, youth, and development through using borderland theory as a theoretical framework (Anzaldúa, 1987) and agential realism for my ontoepistemology (Barad, 2007, 2015). Using FRDA (Thompson et al., 2018) as an analytical framework, discourses of cisgenderism and childhoods constructed the “becoming” of youth in problematic ways, calling into question their capacities to know themselves, and by delegitimising non-conformity, which were theorised as b/order processes. The participants resisted the above forms of regulation through fostering and protecting community and belonging with other queer

people, which provided them with the energy to resist being delegitimised and to understand their genders in more contextual and relational ways. Overall, the discursive realms of legitimacy, transitions, and growth were identified, through which the personal and first-hand experiences of the participants were traced. The construction of I poems centred the participants' voices highlighting the complexity and multiplicity within the discursive realms "and how we story and re-story them in relation to our embodied experiences" (Thompson et al., 2018, p. 102). The participants used voices of struggle, exhaustion, and vulnerability when they spoke of being delegitimised. Collective voices were used for resistance to discursive positionings, speaking to multiple belongings and how the borderlands provided contentment and freedom. Finally, when the participants had no collective voice to draw on, there was a desire for connection and belonging, to mitigate the experiences of shame and self-censorship stemming from restrictive messages.

In conclusion, the present research highlighted the complex, multiple, and contextual ways that the participants experienced their genders and navigated discursive positionings that sought to delegitimise, censor, and regulate their identities. Several original contributions to theory, methods, and practice were made, recognising the need for increased and explicit recognition of non-binary genders in education and healthcare. Both/and approaches should be used in future research to capture the complexity and multiplicity of experience and voices and to ensure that the euphoria of non-binary youth is represented.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A – Participant Information Sheet

#### 1. Research Project Title

Exploring the bordering processes for youth with non-binary gender identities.

#### 2. Background, aims of project

I would like to invite you to take part in this research on non-binary genders, which is part of my PhD studies. I (Luke Ward) am a PhD student at the University of Stirling. I am also a lecturer in psychology at the University of Northampton and a registered child and young person therapist with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. My teaching and research interests are around genders, sexualities, and identities – particularly LGBTQ+ and queer ones.

The aim of this research is to explore how non-binary gender identities are managed and controlled for youth, in the U.K. Given that non-binary identities are gaining more visibility in society, it is important that there is research to help inform understandings about these identities. Currently, there is a lack of research, and therefore, understandings about being non-binary within the wider culture (professionals, teachers, general public) is often misinformed and incorrect.

I am specifically focusing on the 'borders' of identities within this research. This means that I am interested in the distinctions between being non-binary and other identities, how do people know this and how is managed both individually and socially - for example:

- What is the point where an identity is no longer binary, or cisgender?
- I'm also interested in the non-binary community and what is happening within this space - such as, is this separate from the wider LGBTQ+ and/or queer communities?
- How does the non-binary community experience the lack of legal recognition, presenting as non-binary (is this possible, what might it look like?).

#### 3. Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part in this research because:

- You are between the ages of 16-21
- You identify as having a non-binary gender identity
- You currently live within the U.K.

#### 4. Do I have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part.

If you do decide to take part, you can withdraw your participation at any time without needing to explain and without penalty by advising the researcher (Luke Ward) of this decision. You can also withdraw your data up until 1 month after your interview.

You will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign and complete a consent form to show you understand and agree to participate in the research.

#### **5. What will happen if I take part?**

We will arrange a time to have an interview, which may be in person, or online, where I will ask you questions around genders, identities, and borders. I will endeavour to travel to a main city/town near you, to meet in person, however this may be restricted due to public transport and practicality of travelling. This will be discussed with you, and an arrangement that works for us both will be decided – this may be an online interview.

You will be given a copy of the interview schedule before the interview, so that you are familiar with the types of areas that will be asked about.

The interview should last for around 1 hour, however, this is largely dependent on your answers. Because I'm interested in hearing what you have to say, the interview may last longer, but I will bring the interview to a close if we reach 2 hours.

You will be asked if you would like to take part in any follow-up interviews that may happen in response to this initial part of the research. After your interview you will be asked if you would like a summary of the findings, once the analysis is complete. This will be emailed to you using the contact email address you provide in the consent form. Any follow-up interviews would only be with me, I will not pass on your information to any other researchers.

The interviews will take place in a space that is convenient and appropriate for us to talk without being interrupted (this may be online) and will be decided if you consent to taking part. This will likely be a public space, such as a library room. If the interview is conducted online, I am happy to do either a video or just audio call – whatever feels more comfortable for you. Note that **only** the audio will be recorded.

#### **6. Are there any potential risks in taking part?**

The following risks are involved in taking part:

- Talking about your identity may be an emotional experience for you and could cause you to feel distressed.

To help prevent these risks the researcher will identify support services for LGBTQ+ youth that you can contact, and more general counselling services, if you wish to speak to somebody. If things are feeling difficult, we can take a break, avoid particularly difficult areas and finish the interview early if you do not wish to continue.

#### **7. Are there any benefits in taking part?**

The benefits of taking part are:

- An opportunity to talk about an aspect of yourself, some experiences and feelings in a safe and accepting space.
- You will be helping inform academic research on non-binary identities, which is currently lacking.

You will receive a £10 gift voucher for taking part, to reflect the national living wage for the time you give to this research.

#### **8. Legal basis for processing personal data**

As part of the project I will be recording personal data relating to you. This will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Under GDPR the legal basis for processing your personal data will be public interest.

I will also be processing your sensitive/special categories of personal information relating to your sexuality, ethnicity, any disabilities, for research purposes in the public interest.

#### **9. What happens to the data I provide?**

The research data will be kept anonymous using pseudonyms and any other identifiable details will be anonymised when referring to you in the research.

Personal/confidential information will be stored securely, and transcripts of the interviews will be anonymised by using the pseudonym that you provide. The transcript and consent or contact information will be stored separately.

Your personal data will be kept for until the completion of the researcher's PhD and then will be securely destroyed. It is anticipated that the research will be completed or be in the final stages by 2021.

In the consent form, you will be asked for your permission to use direct quotes from your interview in the write-up of this research. In the consent form, you also have the option to select if you would like to receive a copy of your transcript, to review. This will be emailed to you and will give you an opportunity to ensure that the transcription reflects your responses. At this point, you can discuss with the researcher if you feel any responses need to be amended.

Due to the nature of the research, it may not be possible to safeguard the confidentiality of the data. In the U.K. law, circumstances where it would be necessary to break confidentiality would be: obligations to disclose child protection offences, the physical abuse of vulnerable adults, money laundering and crimes covered by the prevention of terrorism legislation.

It may also be that through some of the information and experiences you share during your interview, this makes you more identifiable. Wherever you mention specific names of locations or people, these will be anonymised, to make the interview less identifiable.

#### **10. Recorded media**

The interview that you will take part in will be audio recorded. This will be used to allow the researcher to transcribe and analyse the interview, as part of the research. The audio recording of the interview will only be used for transcription purposes and the audio file will be securely destroyed after the PhD examination process is complete (anticipated 2021).

**11. Will the research be published?**

The research may be published in academic journals and be presented at academic conferences. You will not be identifiable in any publication.

The University of Stirling is committed to making the outputs of research publicly accessible and supports this commitment through our online open access repository STORRE. Unless funder/publisher requirements prevent us, this research will be publicly disseminated through our open access repository.

**12. Who has reviewed this research project?**

This project has been ethically approved via The University of Stirling General University Ethics Panel.

**13. Your rights**

You have the right to request to see a copy of the information we hold about you and to request corrections or deletions of the information that is no longer required.

You have the right to withdraw from this project at any time without giving reasons and without consequences to you, up until 1 month after the interview. You also have the right to object to us processing relevant personal data however, please note that once the data are being analysed and/or results published it may not be possible to remove your data from the study.

**14. Who do I contact if I have concerns about this study or I wish to complain?**

If you would like to discuss the research with someone, please use the following contact details:

Luke Ward – researcher – [l.a.ward@stir.ac.uk](mailto:l.a.ward@stir.ac.uk)

Professor Jane Callaghan – supervisor – [jane.callaghan@stir.ac.uk](mailto:jane.callaghan@stir.ac.uk)

Dr Sian Lucas – supervisor – [s.e.lucas@stir.ac.uk](mailto:s.e.lucas@stir.ac.uk)

Professor Alison Bowes – Dean of Social Sciences – [a.m.bowes@stir.ac.uk](mailto:a.m.bowes@stir.ac.uk)

You have the right to lodge a complaint against the University regarding data protection issues with the Information Commissioner's Office (<https://ico.org.uk/concerns/>).

The University's Data Protection Officer is Joanna Morrow, Deputy Secretary. If you have any questions relating to data protection these can be addressed to [data.protection@stir.ac.uk](mailto:data.protection@stir.ac.uk) in the first instance.

You will be given a copy of this information sheet to keep.

**Thank you for your participation.**

## Appendix B – Consent Form

**Research Project Title:** Exploring the bordering processes for youth with non-binary gender identities.

	Please initial box
I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated _____ explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during the study and withdraw my data within 1 month after my interview without giving a reason, and without any penalty by contacting the researcher (Luke Ward) on the email address below. I understand that after 1 month it may not be possible to remove my data from the study.	
I understand that my responses will be kept anonymous and that the audio-recorded interview will be transcribed word for word, with all identifying details (like names and places) removed from the final write-up. Quotes from your recording may be used in the thesis and other publications, and the thesis may be published, but these will be fully anonymised.	
I consent to the interview being audio recorded and understand that only the researcher (Luke Ward) and his supervisors (Jane Callaghan and Sian Lucas) will be able to listen to the recorded interview, and it will be securely stored, and password protected. The recorded files will be destroyed after the PhD examination (anticipated 2021).	
I agree for my personal data to be kept in a secure database until the end of the researcher's PhD (anticipated 2021), so I can be contacted about potential follow-up studies.	
I understand that I can contact the researcher (Luke Ward) or his supervisors (Jane Callaghan or Sian Lucas) if I have any queries, and that I have the contact details to do this.	
I agree to take part in this study.	

I would like to receive a copy of my transcribed interview and I am aware of my rights to suggest amendments and withdraw at this stage. Please provide your contact email below.	
I would like to be contacted, after the analysis is complete, with the main findings from this study. This will be in the form of an infographic which will be sent to all participants who wish to receive it. Please provide your contact email below.	

**Name of Participant:**

**Signature:**

**Pronouns:**

**Date:** [Click here to enter a date](#)

**Contact email address:**

**Name of Researcher:** Luke Ward

**Signature:**

**Pronouns:** He/They

**Date:** [Click here to enter a date](#)

**Contact email address:** l.a.ward@stir.ac.uk

## **Appendix C – Interview Schedule**

### **Section 1 – understanding non-binary**

**Purpose:** to understand what identifying as non-binary means for the interviewee, what are some of the important aspects of self that are captured within their gender identity and general information about themselves/their life to help situate their future responses.

1. To start with, I'd really like to build up a picture of what life is like for you, to help me understand of some of your answers. Could you tell me what it means for you to identify as having a non-binary gender?
  - a. Thinking about all of your experiences with your gender, what are some of the more important aspects of identifying as non-binary?
  - b. What aspects of identifying as non-binary impact your life the most (these can be positive or negative things) – and how do they impact your life?
2. If you can think back to when you first identified as non-binary, or as close as you can remember, could you describe what that time was like for you?
  - a. If a close friend or family member was here, and I asked them what they noticed around that time, what do you think they would say?
  - b. What do you value in how your close friends/family see you as a non-binary person?
3. When you think about non-binary as an identity, what makes it different from other queer and/or non-conforming gender identities?
  - a. Non-binary genders are generally considered to fall within the trans umbrella. How do you consider non-binary as within this umbrella, and part of the wider LGBTQ+ community?

### **Section 2 – positioning of youth**

**Purpose:** to consider the demographic of youth and how this might create some unique experiences for people who identify as non-binary. To also consider how a person's multiple identities and aspects of self, other than age, interact to tease out some diversities within non-binary youth.

4. We've talked a little about your gender identity specifically, I'd really like to hear about how you'd describe your youth/adolescence/childhood.
  - a. What kinds of people were/are close to you – are any of them non-binary/queer/LGBTQ+?
5. A lot of research on transgender young people focuses on medical aspects, what kinds of experiences would you say that people who are your age and non-binary face?
  - a. How do you think this might be similar or different to younger and older non-binary people?

6. In psychology, there's a focus on considering the multiple identities that a person has to help understand an aspect of themselves, such as being a white, queer, man – how do you feel your other identities, such as your ethnicity, sexuality, ability etc. interact with being a young, non-binary person?
7. Research on youth suggests that it is a time of transition – how does this relate to your experiences of your youth?
  - a. How does this relate specifically to your gender?

### Section 3 – identity borders

**Purpose:** to consider some of the personal, social and cultural boundaries and barriers around non-binary identities. Unpacking what an 'authentic' gender identity means and what functions to regulate this ideal. To engage with the surfacing issue of the binary/non-binary binary.

8. In the media there's a lot of talk about being 'authentically me', for LGBTQ+ people. What does authenticity mean to you?
  - a. What does it mean for you to be authentically non-binary?
9. If there are any, what kinds of things make it easier and difficult for you to be the self you were just describing?
  - a. What times did these difficulties feel more/less challenging for you – e.g. have these tensions changed over time?
10. Currently, the U.K.'s understanding of gender is binary (male, female) with increasing visibility and knowledge of non-binary identities. What are your thoughts about the binary/non-binary reproduction of a further binary way of thinking about gender?
  - a. Where do you imagine the boundaries of 'binary' and 'non-binary' exist?
11. That's all the questions that I wanted to ask. Is there anything that we didn't mention that you'd like to discuss? Do you have any questions for me?

<u>Question</u>	<u>Purpose</u>
1. Could you tell me what it means for you to identify as having a non-binary gender?	A broad, opening question. Starting to build to a picture about how they conceptualise non-binary as an identity.
a. What are some of the more important aspects of identifying as non-binary?	Teasing out what is salient for them about their gender identity (is it political, personal, about being visible).
b. What aspects of identifying as non-binary impact your life the most (these	Starting to get them to think about where they might feel some of the tensions around



can be positive or negative things) – and how do they impact your life?	identifying as non-binary. Is family particularly impacted, for example.  It will give a general feel for whether the experience is more positive or negative.
2. If you can think back to when you first identified as non-binary, could you describe what that time was like for you?	Providing further context around their identity, how they navigated those early experiences and feelings.  Will potentially highlight sources of support.
a. If a close friend or family member was here, and I asked them what they noticed around that time, what do you think they would say?	A circular question to allow the participant to think about how they might have been perceived at that time.
b. What do you value in how your close friends/family see you as a non-binary person?	Teasing out what kinds of perceptions of being non-binary are important to the person.
3. When you think about non-binary as an identity, what makes it different from other queer and/or non-conforming gender identities?	Bringing in some border theory - asking them to reflect on the 'uniqueness' of non-binary, and also whether and where there are overlaps between other kinds of queer gender identities. Are these hard or soft borders.
a. Non-binary genders are generally considered to fall within the trans umbrella. How do you consider non-binary as within this umbrella, and part of the wider LGBTQ+ community?	Understanding how the participants position their gender identity within wider queer communities – teasing out boundaries between themselves and other queer identities.
4. We've talked a little about your gender identity specifically, I'd really like to hear about how you'd describe your youth/adolescence/childhood.	A broad question to open up some discussions about what their youth was like, generally – what aspects of their youth do they choose to talk about – what role did their gender play?
a. What kinds of people were/are close to you – are any of them non-binary/queer/LGBTQ+?	Understanding what kinds of people they were around growing up – do they have friendships with other non-binary people – were they supportive?

<p>5. What kinds of experiences do you think that people who are your age and non-binary might face?</p>	<p>Trying to establish some potential commonalities that non-binary youth might be experiencing, given the lack of specific focus in research to non-binary youth.</p>
<p>a. How do you think this might be similar or different to younger and older non-binary people?</p>	<p>Comparative question about the uniqueness of non-binary youth's experiences.</p>
<p>6. How do you feel your other identities, such as your ethnicity, sexuality, ability etc. interact with being a young, non-binary person?</p>	<p>Introducing some intersectionality theory. Asking the interviewee to consider their multiple identities and how their 'fits' and is navigated alongside these. (Hoping this will tease out some diversity considerations).</p>
<p>7. Research on youth suggests that it is a time of transition – how does this relate to your experiences of your youth?</p>	<p>Engaging interviewee with the position, in the literature, of youth as transitional.</p>
<p>a. How does this relate specifically to your gender?</p>	<p>Ask specifically whether their non-binary identity was an 'important' factor in any transitional times that might have been experienced.</p>
<p>8. In the media there's a lot of talk about being 'authentically me', for LGBTQ+ people. What does authenticity mean to you?</p>	<p>Introducing the concept of authenticity and exploring what this means for the participant.</p>
<p>a. What does it mean for you to be authentically non-binary?</p>	<p>Trying to understand what kinds of regulations do non-binary youth face – what must they do to be considered as authentic?</p>
<p>9. If there are any, what kinds of things make it easier and difficult for you to be the self you were just describing?</p>	<p>Understanding what kinds of policing around non-binary genders youth are facing.</p>
<p>a. What times did these difficulties feel more/less challenging for you – e.g.</p>	<p>Exploring whether these issues around being 'authentic' have changed over time/as they've gotten older.</p>

have these tensions changed over time?	
10. What are your thoughts about the binary/non-binary reproduction of a further binary way of thinking about gender?	What do non-binary youth think about the reproduction of a further binary from binary/non-binary distinctions?
a. Where do you imagine the boundaries of 'binary' and 'non-binary' exist?	Attempting to understand the boundaries of non-binary identities.

## Appendix D – Evidence of Ethical Approval



Luke Ward  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Stirling  
FK9 4LA

**General University Ethics Panel (GUEP)**  
University of Stirling  
Stirling  
FK9 4LA  
Scotland UK

**E:** [GUEP@stir.ac.uk](mailto:GUEP@stir.ac.uk)

21 February 2019

Dear Luke

**Re: Ethics Application: Exploring the bordering processes for youth with non-binary gender identities – GUEP583**

Thank you for making the requested revisions to your submission of the above to the General University Ethics Panel. The ethical approaches of this project have now been approved by GUEP.

Please note that should any of your proposal change, a further submission (amendment) to GUEP will be necessary.

Please ensure that your research complies with the University of Stirling policy on storage of research data which is available at:

<https://www.stir.ac.uk/about/faculties-and-services/information-services-and-library/current-students-and-staff/researchers/research-data/plan-and-design/our-policy/>

If you have not already done so, I would also strongly encourage you to complete the Research Integrity training which is available at: <https://canvas.stir.ac.uk/enroll/CJ43KW>

If you have any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact the Committee by email to [guep@stir.ac.uk](mailto:guep@stir.ac.uk).

Good luck with your research.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "R. Beaton".

p.p. On behalf of GUEP  
Professor William Munro  
**Deputy Chair of GUEP**

**Who can take part?** Anybody who identifies as non-binary – something other than exclusively male or female. This is inclusive of other terms, such as genderqueer, agender, etc. People who are between the ages of **16-21 years old**. You must currently **live in the U.K.** and **not attend the University of Northampton or University of Stirling**.

This study is looking to recruit participants between **July and December 2019** for **individual interviews** that will last around **1 hour in person or online**. You will receive £10 gift voucher for taking part in this research, to reflect the national living wage.

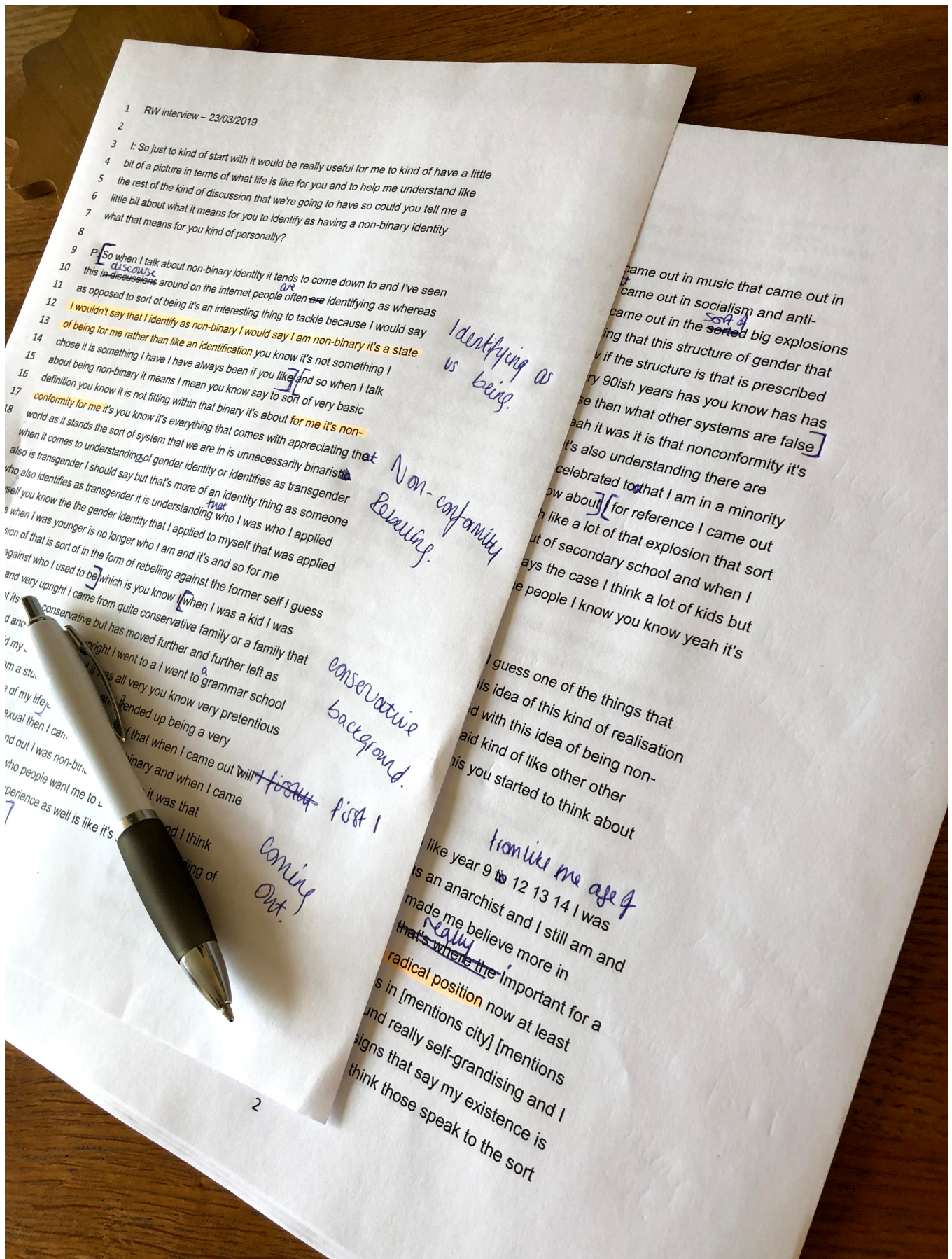
**Are you interested in taking part, or do you have any questions?**  
Please email **Luke Ward** (researcher, he/they) – [l.a.ward@stir.ac.uk](mailto:l.a.ward@stir.ac.uk)

This project has been ethically approved through the University of Stirling General University Ethics Panel. Ethics Approval Reference: GUEP583. Supervised by Professor Jane Callaghan [jane.callaghan@stir.ac.uk](mailto:jane.callaghan@stir.ac.uk) & Dr Siân Lucas [s.e.lucas@stir.ac.uk](mailto:s.e.lucas@stir.ac.uk)

## Exploring the bordering processes for youth with non-binary gender identities.

Are you interested in contributing to a better understanding of non-binary genders? This research is focusing on what it is like to be non-binary, in the U.K., and what kinds of regulation non-binary youth experience.

Appendix F – Examples of Early Analysis



1 RW interview – 23/03/2019  
2

3 I: So just to kind of start with it would be really useful for me to kind of have a little  
4 bit of a picture in terms of what life is like for you and to help me understand like  
5 the rest of the kind of discussion that we're going to have so could you tell me a  
6 little bit about what it means for you to identify as having a non-binary identity  
7 what that means for you kind of personally?  
8

9 P: So when I talk about non-binary identity it tends to come down to and I've seen  
10 this <sup>discourse</sup> ~~in discussions~~ around on the internet people often <sup>are</sup> identifying as whereas  
11 as opposed to sort of being it's an interesting thing to tackle because I would say

12 I wouldn't say that I identify as non-binary I would say I am non-binary it's a state  
13 of being for me rather than like an identification you know it's not something I  
14 chose it is something I have I have always been if you like and so when I talk  
15 about being non-binary it means I mean you know say to sort of very basic  
16 definition you know it is not fitting within that binary it's about for me it's non-

17 conformity for me it's you know it's everything that comes with appreciating that  
18 world as it stands the sort of system that we are in is unnecessarily binaristic  
when it comes to understanding of gender identity or identifies as transgender  
also is transgender I should say but that's more of an identity thing as someone  
who also identifies as transgender it is understanding who I was who I applied  
self you know the the gender identity that I applied to myself that was applied  
when I was younger is no longer who I am and it's and so for me

19 of that is sort of in the form of rebelling against the former self I guess  
against who I used to be which is you know when I was a kid I was  
and very upright I came from quite conservative family or a family that  
at its conservative but has moved further and further left as  
d and I went to a I went to grammar school  
d my. I was all very you know very pretentious  
m a stu. I ended up being a very  
of my life. I ended up being a very  
sexual then I can. I ended up being a very  
nd out I was non-binary and when I came  
who people want me to. I was that  
ference as well is like it's and I think

Identifying as  
is being.

Non-conformity  
Rebelling.

conservative  
background.

first I  
coming  
out.

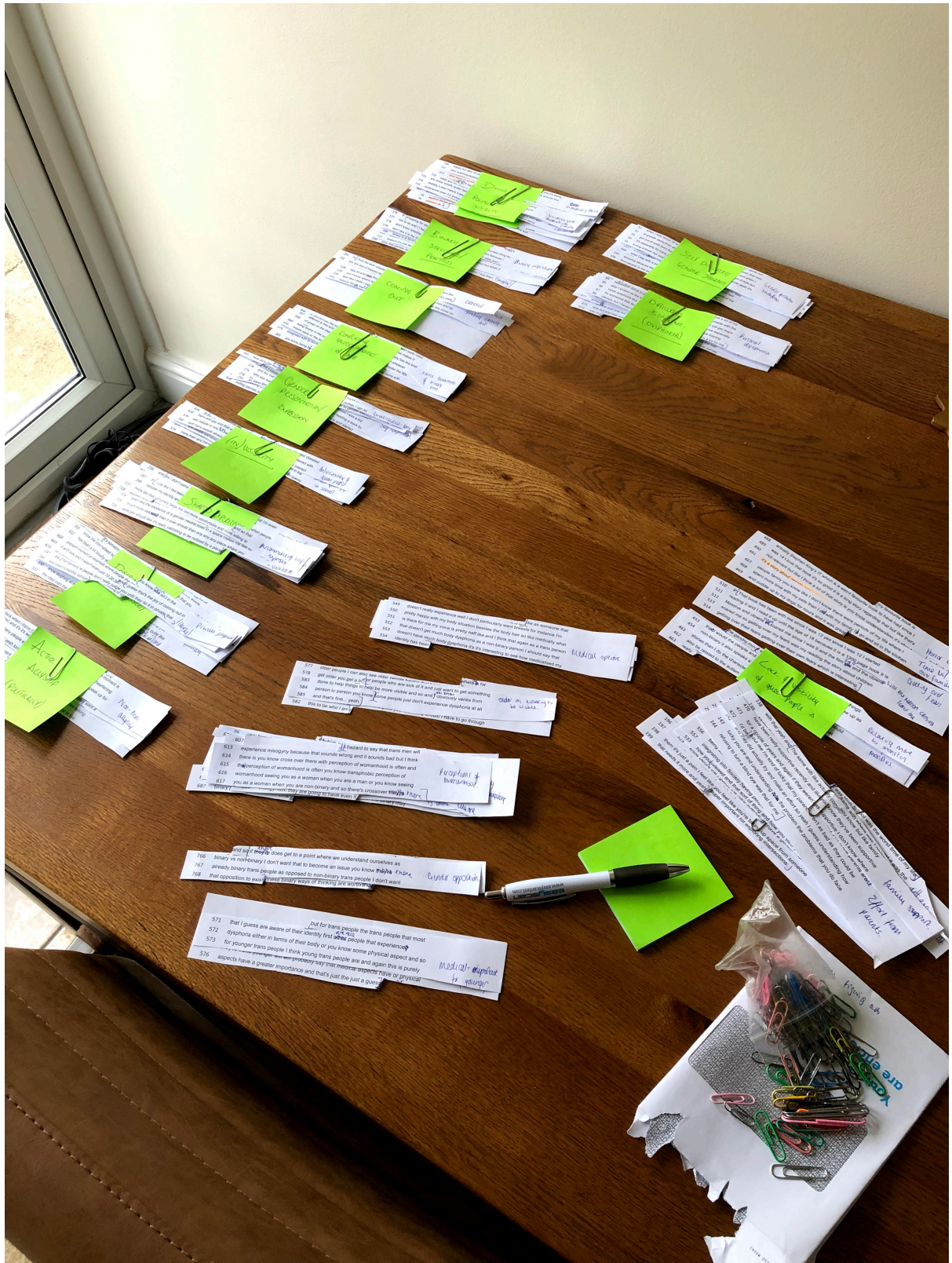
came out in music that came out in  
it came out in socialism and anti-  
came out in the <sup>sort of</sup> ~~sort of~~ big explosions

ing that this structure of gender that  
if the structure is that is prescribed  
ry 90ish years has you know has has  
se then what other systems are false

eah it was it is that nonconformity it's  
it's also understanding there are  
celebrated too that I am in a minority  
ow about [for reference I came out  
n like a lot of that explosion that sort  
ut of secondary school and when I  
ays the case I think a lot of kids but  
e people I know you know yeah it's

I guess one of the things that  
is idea of this kind of realisation  
aid with this idea of being non-  
aid kind of like other other  
his you started to think about

from like me age 7  
like year 9 to 12 13 14 I was  
is an anarchist and I still am and  
made me believe more in  
that's where the important for a  
radical position now at least  
s in [mentions city] [mentions  
and really self-grandising and I  
signs that say my existence is  
think those speak to the sort



CODES

- Nodes
  - Cornelius - P9
  - Em - P8
  - G - P7
  - Han - P4
  - Kai - P5
  - Nivryz - P10
  - Noah Faith - ...
  - Phoenix - P3
  - Ren - P6
  - RW - P1
- CASES
  - Cases
  - Case Classifica...
- NOTES
  - Memos
  - Annotations
  - Memo Links
- SEARCH
  - Queries

Name

- > Accommodate for non-bi...
- All-boys school
- Ally
- authenticity
- Basic definition
- Bathrooms
- Best friend
- Binary trans
- Childhood
- Closeted
- Clothes shops
- Coming out
- Complaining
- Conservative family
- Definitionally different
- discovery
- Dysphoria
- Education
- False systems
- family
- Feelings are invalid
- feminism misogyny
- Former self
- Friendship group

RW - P1

DISCOURSE ABOUT THE **MICHELLE PEOPLE** ARE WHICH IDENTIFYING AS **WHILEAS AS OPPOSED TO SUIT OF**

being it's an interesting thing to tackle because **I would say I wouldn't say I identify as non-binary I would say I am non-binary** it's a state of being for me rather than like an **identification** you know it's not something I chose it is something I have I have always been if you like **you know say to**

sort of very basic **about for me it's**

non-conformity **ating that the**

world as it stands **binarist when it**

comes to unders **o is transgender**

**I should say but** **ies as**

transgender it is **ow the the**

**gender identity** **is younger is no**

longer who I am **orm of rebelling**

against the **former self** I guess **rebeling again** **st who I used to be** which is you know I **family** or a family that likes to present itself as conservative but has moved further and further left as I've grown up and so **I was very upright** I went to a **I went to a grammar school** and I you know **I did my suit buttons** and it was all very you know very pretentious and very you know **I am a student of science** and it ended up being a very awkward and bad phase of my life and so **I grew out of that when I came out** first I came out as bisexual then I came out as non-binary and when **I came out** as non-binary when **I found out** I was non-binary it was that was that **explosion of I don't have to be who people want me to be anymore** and **I think that speaks** to a lot of the trans experience as well is like it's an understanding of **I am not who I was prescribed to be.**

By: LW

Created: 12 Jun 2020

Being conservative was awkward/bad for me.

Personal growth - I grew out of that when I came out.

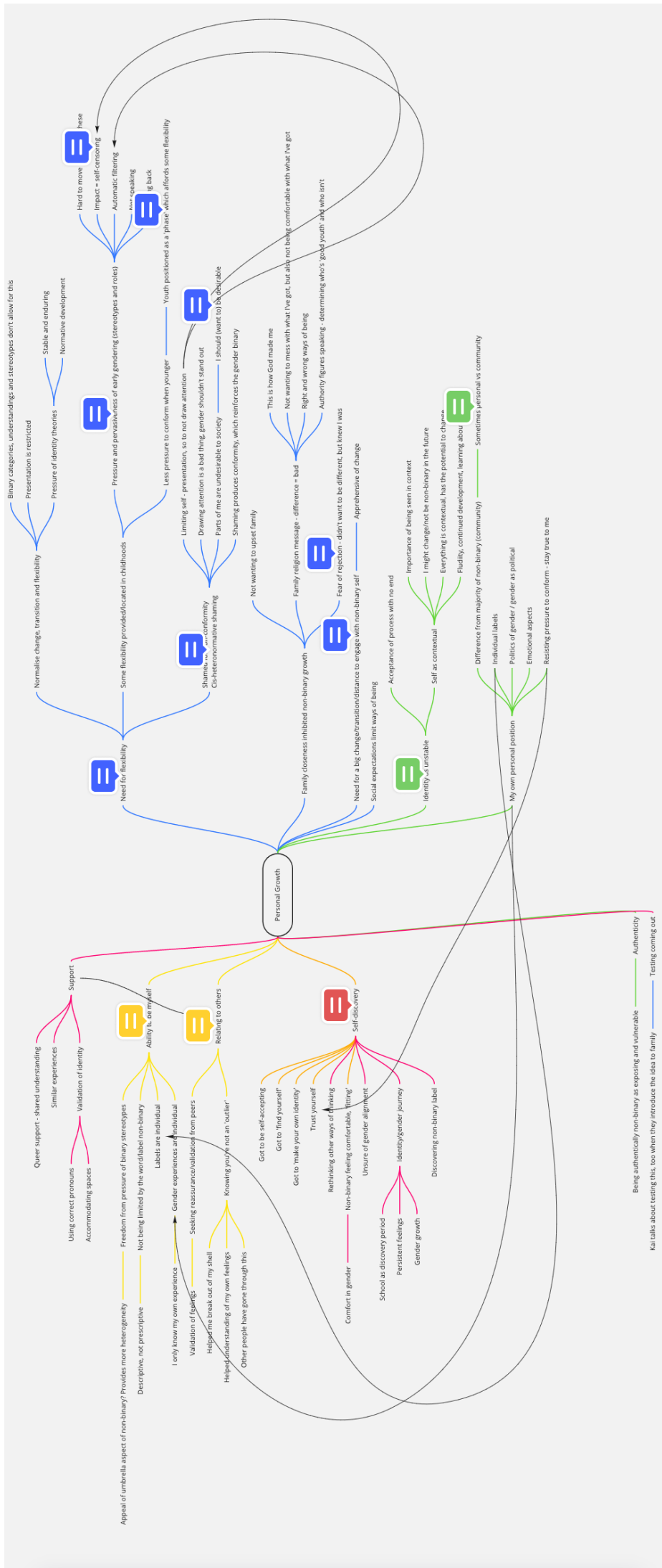
Coming out = growth process....

Delete

I: Uh-huh yeah

P: And so for me it's you know for me that came out in **music** that came out in **punk rock** that came out in... **fuck the system** it came out in **socialism** and **anti-capitalism** and eventually **anarchism** and it came out in these sort of **big explosions** of you know **personal**





**EXPLORING  
THE B/ORDERING  
PROCESSES FOR**

# NON-BINARY YOUTH

**NOT A PHASE**

## LEGITIMACY

Non-binary youth were questioned about their genders, by professionals and adults, e.g., “it’s a phase”, “you’ll grow out of it”. They were expected to “prove” their genders which was exhausting.

Constant questioning made the youth feel lost and vulnerable and they drew on community strength to recharge their energies.

**LGBTQAI**

## TRANSITIONS & BELONGING

A physical move away from home to a new space, such as university was freeing as it provided distance from the constant questioning and gave the youth headspace to think about their genders.

Transitions also provided more opportunities to connect with other queer people and feel a sense of belonging. Youth were part of multiple communities (non-binary, queer, trans) and used multiple identity labels.

**YES / YEAH**

## PERSONAL GROWTH

Growth was understood as an on-going and lifelong process, meaning identities could always change. Therefore, it was important to be understood in that moment, which relieved pressure from the gender binary. However, pressures to “be yourself” and “not conform” was difficult as cultural messages tell youth to limit diversity.

**LUKE WARD (HE/THEY)  
PHD RESEARCH – UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING  
2021**