

**The power in transitioning together: A reflective thematic analysis
on how the gender transition process affects cisgender partners.**

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Abstract

There is a growing amount of literature on trans identity and experience. However, what appears to be lacking in the field of psychological research is the experience of those who are in relationships with trans individuals, especially when the trans identity is disclosed during the course of a long-term romantic relationship with a cisgender partner. This study centres on the experience of the cisgender partners and the analysis is underpinned by Butler's theory of gender performativity and further developed through Halberstam's conceptualisation of gender fluidity and experiences beyond the gender binary.

This qualitative research project used semi-structured interviews with six participants of varying ages and was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Four significant themes were generated from the data. (1) The love that dare not speak its name, (2) The renegotiation of the self within an intimate relationship, (3) The emotional gains and the emotional cost, (4) A new identity and a place in society. The limitations of the current study are also discussed, and suggestions for future research are provided.

Dedications

Firstly, to all the tutors past and present at London Metropolitan University, I wanted to thank you for all your guidance and support over the past four years.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

1.1 Overview

The UK is a Western country that, despite being classed as a more 'liberal' nation (The World Values Survey, 2023), is built upon and centred around patriarchal principles and heteronormative ideals (Martino, 2000). Despite this, today, there are more members of the LGBTQ+ community than ever before (Kelley & De Santos, 2022) in the UK, with the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (2024) reporting a significant increase in trans identification among children and young people. It has been argued that this rise in LGBTQ+ identification could be due to the nature of the socio-political climate, making sexualities that deviate from the heterosexual norm more acceptable. However, juxtaposed against this argument is that identities or bodies that steer away from the gender norm are subject to immense scrutiny, attack, and ridicule with less acceptance from society, including less acceptance within the LGBT community (Weiss, 2004). Despite this, there are now more notable transgender and non-binary individuals in popular culture, bringing transgender and non-binary identities into the forefront of societal and social discourse.

Due to several complex elements, including how transgender and non-binary individuals are portrayed by the media, are seen in society, and the potential difficulties surrounding gender dysphoria, Atkinson & Russel (2015) emphasise the importance of external support from others for people who identify as trans or non-binary. Grossman et al. (2005) argue that families are important when providing emotional support and contribute to a greater acceptance of the transgender identity, both by the transgender individual and society. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all families are supportive or

accepting of members of their families who identify as transgender or non-binary.

Consequently, Galupo et al. (2014) highlight the central importance of support from friends for trans and non-binary individuals. However, it is Bockting et al. (2013) who identify romantic partners as being the *most* significant support system for individuals embarking on a gender transition process.

1.2 Defining terms

Vincent (2018) describes the term 'Transgender' as an individual who does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Conversely, being cisgender is defined as aligning oneself with the gender assigned at birth, corresponding with biological sex (Hakeem, 2019). However, it is important to acknowledge that this definition of transgender may not fit with everyone's individual identity. Lohman and Pearce (2020) highlight a selective list of other terminology, such as "queens, fairies, drag kings, butch" (p. 73).

They go on to suggest that 'transgender' or 'trans' is used as an umbrella term within a non-binary complex and divergent paradigm that encompasses a plethora of individual identities. This aligns with the more pluralistic nature of the counselling psychology profession and the importance of seeing individuals as just that, in their complex contexts and intersecting identities. The terms 'tans', 'transgender' and 'non-binary' are the terms that participants and their partners used, and I have therefore used them in this research project.

Non-binary is described by Twist et al. (2020) as a term that encompasses all identities that exist beyond the binary of being exclusively male or female.¹

Terms such as 'transsexual' and 'sex change' are used throughout the literature. However, it is important to highlight that they are problematic terms for many trans people since the focus is on sex and not gender.

The terms used in this study reflect the socio-political climate at the time of these publications. Due to the rapid development of research in this area, terms to describe transgender and non-binary identities are changing rapidly. Transgender issues are currently at the forefront of not only politics but also mainstream popular culture, meaning that language can quickly be deemed as discriminatory and offensive. The use of the terms in this study reflects those used by participants who took part in this study, and I therefore acknowledge that the terms used in this research project will potentially be out of date relatively quickly.

Partners of trans identified individuals are at the centre of this research, and the term partner is defined by Rodriguez et al. (2015) as an individual who corresponds with personal expectations and desires and provides a "complementary fit to another" (p. 132) in a variety of ways. Many papers use the term 'intimate partner' (Twist et al., 2017); however, this isn't accurate for some of the participants due to the nature of how the transition affected all forms of intimacy. Therefore, the term 'partner' is used to ensure all participants are included.²

¹ Twist et al. (2020) also emphasise that this is an umbrella term that is UK/European centric.

² Partner was also deemed the most appropriate term to be inclusive of aromantic and asexual individuals, being inclusive as possible.

1.3 Focus for the Research

Research Question: *How do people in the UK experience their partner's transition to a different gender during the relationship?*

This research project identifies the experience of being in a relationship with someone who transitions to a different gender once the relationship has been established. This study aims to provide an insight into how this phenomenon is experienced and identify any unique challenges, difficulties and rewarding elements of this unique experience.

1.4 Research aims

Below are listed the aims of the current research project:

1. To explore the lived experience of individuals in relationships where one partner transitions to a different gender after the relationship has been established.
2. To examine the psychological impact of a partner's gender transition on the non-transitioning partner.
3. To contribute to counselling psychology by deepening understanding of relationship diversity and promoting client-centred, socially just therapeutic practice.
4. To inform the development of professional guidelines, training, and policy in counselling psychology for supporting couples navigating gender transition, thereby improving therapeutic provision.

1.5 Outline of research project

Chapter 2 outlines my approach to reflexivity and its importance and prevalence throughout this study. Chapter 3 explores the theoretical framework underpinning this research, focusing on the work of Butler and Halberstam. It examines Butler's theory of gender performativity and Halberstam's conceptualisation of gender fluidity to explore how gender is understood and how these conceptualisations shape couples' relational experiences. Chapter 4 explores the theoretical context and positionality that underpins my research with a particular focus on Judith Butler's work on gender performativity. Chapter 4 sets out to explore the existing literature that has examined the psychological experiences of individuals whose partner transitions to a different gender during the relationship and explores, summarises, and critiques these findings. The research aims and the research question are also explored in this chapter, along with an exploration of why this study is of relevance to counselling psychology. Chapter 5 introduces the research methodology used and explores my own ontological and epistemological standpoint, exploring how these have impacted on and provide a context to this research study. Chapter 6 explores the analysis in detail, outlining the process and the different elements of the analysis that took place. Chapter 7 examines the four main themes and subsequent sub-themes that were generated from this study. Chapter 8 explores the findings in relation to the existing literature, the theoretical context of this study, and explores the implications of these findings for theory and practice. The limitations of the research project and suggestions for future research that build upon the findings generated in this study are outlined.

CHAPTER TWO: Reflexivity

“The capacity to reflect on action to engage in a process of continuous learning” (Shon, 1983, p. 11)

Reflexivity will be discussed throughout all sections of this research project as it is a pivotal part of the study. However, due to its importance, it felt necessary to also dedicate a chapter to it and position it at the beginning of my thesis.

I set out to explore the experience of partners of individuals who transition to a different gender.³ During the relationship, due to an experience I had with a client in my first year of training during our sessions, my client’s partner had disclosed that they were trans and began the gender transition process, which for them involved physical changes. I embarked on a journey to self-educate and look for tools to best support my client, but encountered difficulties as there seemed to be a lack of information and guidelines to support partners of transgender individuals. I quickly discovered that partners were overlooked in the research field. This ignited my interest in the subject and inspired me to focus on this phenomenon for my own doctoral thesis. This encouraged me to embark on a process of self-reflection about my own experiences and perceptions of gender identity and romantic intimate relationships.

It has been important to consider my own gender identity when embarking on this research, especially when gender is at the forefront of this study. Staples (2017) argues that

³ By different gender this means different to the gender that they were assigned at birth.

it is impossible to exist outside of cultural and societal practices and that these inevitably influence one's identity (including an individual's values and perceptions of the world and others). Concerning this reality, I understand that my own gender identity inevitably had an impact on the current research project. It is therefore important to be transparent here about what my own experiences have been (or something like this).

I must acknowledge that as a cisgender woman, I have not questioned my gender identity and until my counselling psychology training or even actively reflected on it. This highlights my cisgender privilege and naivety around sex and gender constructs. Webb (2020) states that this is essential in the psychological and therapeutic professions to reflect on one's gender due to the influence it has on the way we see and make sense of the world around us. Webb (2020) continues by identifying that a lack of knowledge of one's gender could therefore influence how we practice. I have, however, as a feminist, been outraged at the double standards growing up and the way I was expected to look and behave, not only from wider society but also the family system I found myself born into. Being labelled a 'tomboy' for playing football and being talented at sport, and facing criticism for not behaving in a way that was deemed consistent with my gender. However, these responses to me remain firmly in the gender binary and gender beyond this wasn't in my consciousness until later into my early adulthood, I am humbled to admit. I therefore have limited personal experience of what it is like not to align with or '*fit into*' societal gender norms and expectations, holding the assumption that being non-binary or transgender would be wildly different to my experiences of labelling and attempts at behaviour modification as a cisgender female. With this in mind, I asked myself the three questions suggested by Webb (2020) (see Appendix 1).

The socio-political context in UK society is one of cisnormativity, meaning that anyone who exists outside of the gender binary system is deviating from the norm. This triggers a sense of othering and, in so doing, creates marginalised groups. The discourse around trans people more recently appears to have been that of disrespect, fear-mongering and violence. This has ignited feelings of anger within me, tapping into the social justice element of my counselling psychology identity and has contributed to considering myself a trans ally. By becoming involved in pro-trans movements and groups, especially through the world of football, where trans and non-binary inclusivity are at its core. I had to be aware that when constructing my interview schedule and interpreting the data that I wasn't looking for evidence to rewrite this harmful social narrative around trans people. It is not that I am suggesting that participants were 'wronged' by their partners due to their trans identity or that there is anything wrong with changing one's gender. I am attempting to draw attention to the current political and social climate. I also needed to remain focused on the partners' experience and not that of the trans individual, which I found myself doing due to my emotions. I kept referring back to my research question when exploring the literature and choosing what to include in the literature review to keep my research focused.

During the write-up process, I revisited sections of the research project numerous times and rewrote parts of it, as the language around trans issues and terminology is changing rapidly, and I acknowledge that by the time of publication, some of the language used in this report could be out of date. This was reflected in the participants' experiences, as one

participant contacted me to reword some of her responses to the interview questions⁴. It is imperative to reflect on the terminology used in the study and ensure that this is clear.

Sexuality and gender identity are different entities. However, it is important to acknowledge the personal journey I have been on throughout the research process. I have been able to confront and accept my own sexuality as a bisexual woman, a part of myself I have kept hidden for so long. Moving through a barrage of complex, at times conflicting emotions, including shame, confusion, joy, and acceptance. This could explain why I was drawn to this research topic as a way of being able to acknowledge, express and accept my own LGBTQ+ identity. Patterson in Clarke et al. (2016) describes that engaging in LGBTQ+ psychological research enables us to declare our own sexual identity and, by proxy, helps us understand our own lives. Something I believe this research project has allowed me to do. It is important to reflect on how this process has influenced many aspects of the research process. For example, this could have influenced the type of literature I chose to include in the review and the way in which I critiqued it. Delbosc (2022) connotes that research cannot be completely impartial. As a counselling psychologist, I have to learn to accept this (which admittedly has been an ongoing process) and ensure that this is acknowledged and is transparent to the reader, but also that I employ tools within my research and practice to address this.

To combat the assumptions that I hold and the way I approach the different aspect of the study due to my context and identity I have employed reflection -in -action (Schon, 1991) throughout the research process. I have kept a reflexive diary, which has helped me consider

⁴ This didn't change the data but does emphasise the importance and power and importance of language.

my biases. Identifying how and when my assumptions and political standpoint as a feminist, a trans ally and my views of gender being a social construct may be affecting how I can engage. Seeing my bias in a concrete form has aided me in critiquing the literature through a counselling psychology lens (Orlans & Van Socyoc, 2009) and enabled me to bracket these biases and personal opinions more easily (Casement, 2014). This has translated throughout the research process with numerous discussions with my supervisors and my peers. Due to fractions of 'feminism', such as the trans exclusionary radical feminists, I need to clarify my feminist position. I believe that TERF is an exclusionary and dangerous movement. I regard myself as an inclusive feminist, meaning "none of us are free until we are all free" (Harmer, 1971). No particular group should be more or less important with more or less rights than the other; however, acknowledging these disparities and trying to change them is important to me. In this study, this has resulted in my continuing development into a trans affirmative therapist and, therefore, a trans affirmative researcher.

CHAPTER THREE: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding Relationship Dynamics in Trans–Cisgender Partnerships

Understanding the experiences of cisgender individuals in relationships with a trans partner requires a theoretical framework capable of capturing the complexity of gender, identity and intimate relationships. Given the multidimensional nature of gender transition, no single theoretical perspective adequately explains the relational experiences of trans–cis couples. Instead, an integrated theoretical framework is required that considers the interaction between social constructions of gender, interpersonal relationship processes, structural inequalities and individual psychological adaptation.

This chapter argues that Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a helpful overarching conceptual foundation for understanding trans–cis relationship dynamics because it fundamentally challenges the assumption that gender is biologically determined. Rather than viewing transition as movement between two fixed categories of male and female⁵, Butler conceptualises gender as an ongoing social process that is continually constituted through repeated performances and cultural expectations (Butler, 1993). Butler's work is extended through Halberstam's conceptualisation of gender plurality before being integrated with interactionist, sociological and psychological perspectives in subsequent sections. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for interpreting the relational experiences of cisgender individuals whose partners undergo the gender transition process.

⁵ It is understood that not all trans persons will agree with concepts of gender fluidity.

3.1 Gender Performativity

Among contemporary theories of gender, Butler's concept of gender performativity has arguably had a significant influence on challenging essentialist understandings of sex and gender. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) rejected the assumption that biological sex naturally determines gender identity or expression, arguing instead that gender is socially constructed through repeated actions that become culturally recognised as 'masculine' or 'feminine'. Gender therefore appears natural not because it reflects an innate essence but because repeated behaviours, language, appearance and social practices create the impression of stability over time. Consequently, Butler states that gender should be understood not as something individuals *are*, but as something they continually *do* within social contexts.

A common misconception is that Butler conceptualises gender as conscious performance or deliberate role-play. However, Butler (1993) explicitly distinguishes performativity from theatrical performance. Rather than freely choosing gender, individuals are born into social systems in which norms concerning masculinity and femininity already exist. These norms shape which forms of gender expression become socially acceptable whilst simultaneously regulating and marginalising those that fall outside dominant expectations. Performativity therefore refers to the continual repetition of socially sanctioned practices through which gender identities become recognised and reproduced. Through the repeated enactment of these norms, they become inscribed onto the body, shaping not only how individuals behave but in a number of ways including but not exclusively; how they move, speak, dress, and present themselves. As a result, the body comes to symbolise culturally intelligible forms of masculinity and femininity, making gender appear natural and self-evident rather than socially produced. Importantly, Butler (1993) extends this argument beyond gender to challenge the

presumed biological neutrality of sex itself. Whereas traditional distinctions separate biological sex from socially constructed gender, Butler argues that sex is never encountered outside of cultural interpretation. The categories of 'male' and 'female' are themselves produced through social, linguistic, and institutional discourses that assign meaning to bodily differences. Consequently, sex does not exist as a purely objective biological foundation upon which gender is built; rather, both sex and gender are constituted through normative processes that determine which bodies are recognised as intelligible and legitimate within society. This challenges the assumption that gender simply expresses an underlying biological reality, instead positioning both sex and gender as effects of performative norms.

This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant to trans–cis relationships because it reframes gender transition as revealing the socially constructed nature of gender itself. Rather than conceptualising transition as a deviation from a stable biological reality, Butler (1993) argues that trans experiences expose the instability of the binary categories through which gender has historically been understood. In doing so, transition challenges assumptions concerning identity, sexuality, and relational roles that many couples may previously have regarded as fixed or self-evident.

Central to Butler's argument is the concept of the heterosexual matrix, the cultural framework through which biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and heterosexual desire are assumed to align in coherent and mutually reinforcing ways. Within this matrix, individuals assigned male at birth are expected to identify as men, express masculinity, and desire women, while those assigned female at birth are expected to identify as women, express femininity, and desire men. These assumptions underpin heteronormativity, the dominant social belief that heterosexuality and binary

gender are natural, normal, and desirable, as well as cisnormativity, which assumes that all individuals identify with the sex assigned to them at birth and positions cisgender identities as the unquestioned social norm.

Gender transition disrupts the heterosexual matrix by demonstrating that the presumed alignment between biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality is neither fixed nor inevitable (Butler, 1990). There is an argument, therefore, that the cis partners also undergo a transition of sorts. For example, the gender transition process may alter how a relationship is socially categorised, challenge previously held understandings of sexual orientation, and require both partners to renegotiate established assumptions about masculinity, femininity, intimacy, and relational roles (Butler, 1990, 2004; Twist et al., 2017). Rather than simply changing one individual's gender identity, transition can expose the contingent nature of the social norms that organise relationships, illustrating that gender and sexuality are actively constituted through cultural expectations rather than determined by biology (Butler, 1990). Consequently, trans–cis relationships often become sites in which dominant assumptions surrounding heteronormativity and cisnormativity are disrupted, questioned, negotiated and, in some cases, resisted (Butler, 2004; Halberstam, 2005), highlighting the fluidity and complexity of identity within intimate relationships (Halberstam, 2005).

For cisgender individuals whose partners transition to a different gender during the relationship, research claims that there are challenges that occur that frequently extend beyond their partner's changing gender identity. For example these tend to encompass the cisgender individuals own understandings of sexuality, attraction and relationship identity. Research exploring the experiences of cisgender partners demonstrates that many individuals

question previously held identity labels following transition, describing uncertainty regarding categories such as heterosexual, lesbian or bisexual (Pfeffer, 2017; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). Butler's rejection of fixed identity categories provides an important conceptual lens through which these experiences can be understood. Rather than interpreting changing identities as evidence of confusion or instability, gender performativity suggests that both gender and sexuality are continually negotiated and renegotiated within social and cultural contexts, in essence depathologising changes in gender.

A further contribution of Butler's work concerns the concept of recognition. In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler argues that identities become socially meaningful only when they are recognised within dominant cultural frameworks. Individuals whose identities fall outside of dominant societal norms frequently experience marginalisation because they are not deemed as socially acceptable. Recognition therefore becomes not merely a symbolic process but one with profound implications for belonging, legitimacy and psychological wellbeing. Within trans–cisgender relationships, recognition extends beyond the trans individual to encompass the relationship itself. Couples may encounter questions concerning the legitimacy of their partnership, assumptions regarding sexual orientation or pressure to conform to traditional gender roles (Gamarel et al. 2014). Butler's framework enables these experiences to be understood as consequences of regulatory, binary gender norms rather than indicators of relationship dysfunction.

Despite its considerable influence, Butler's theory has attracted criticism. It has been argued that Butler centres discourse and language whilst neglecting the embodied realities of trans lives, including healthcare access, legal recognition, violence and economic inequality (Namaste, 2000). Others suggest that the emphasis on the fluidity of identity may overlook

the importance of relatively stable identity categories (Hines, 2007). Whilst Butler convincingly demonstrates that categories such as "man" and "woman" are socially constructed, many trans individuals continue to rely upon these categories in order to secure legal rights, community belonging and access to gender-affirming care Spade (2011). Consequently, Butler's critique of identity categories may not always reflect the practical realities of trans lives and the lived embodied experience of being trans.

These limitations do not diminish Butler's contribution but instead indicate the need for complementary theoretical perspectives. It is here that the work of Halberstam provides an important extension by moving beyond the deconstruction of gender binaries towards a more explicit recognition of gender diversity and plurality.

3.2 Extending Performativity: Halberstam and Gender Diversity

Whilst Butler provides the theoretical foundation for understanding gender as being socially constructed, Halberstam (2005) extends this perspective by demonstrating that gender diversity should not be labelled as an exception to normative gender but as evidence of a broader spectrum of gender expression. Through the concept of *female masculinity*, Halberstam argues that characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity are not inherently tied to cisgender male bodies⁶. Masculinity should instead be understood as a

⁶ In this instance male bodies refers to those bodies that are ascribed a male sex due to anatomy and the sex and gender binary

social practice that can be embodied by women, trans individuals and gender-diverse people, thereby challenging assumptions that masculinity naturally belongs to biological males⁷.

Halberstam's work represents an important development within gender theory because it shifts attention towards exploring the diverse ways in which gender is actively lived and experienced. Rather than conceptualising gender transition as movement between two fixed identities, Halberstam (2005, 2018) argues that transition frequently reveals the fluidity and plurality that have always existed within gender itself. Through concepts such as *female masculinity* and the rejection of normative life trajectories, Halberstam demonstrates that gender has never been adequately captured by binary categories of masculinity and femininity.

This perspective resonates strongly with contemporary trans scholarship, which increasingly conceptualises gender as existing across a spectrum of identities and expressions rather than within a binary framework. For example, Stryker (2008) argues that transgender identities expose the limitations of binary understandings of sex and gender by illustrating the diversity of embodied gendered experience. Similarly, Prosser (1998), while foregrounding the importance of embodiment and transition, demonstrates that trans experiences cannot be reduced to simple movement between two stable gender categories. More recent scholarship has extended these arguments by recognising non-binary, genderqueer, and gender-fluid identities as legitimate expressions of gender diversity rather than exceptions to the binary model (Richards et al., 2016; Monro, 2019). Collectively, this body of work positions gender as dynamic, relational, and socially situated, emphasising

⁷ Again this refers to those assigned male at birth due to anatomy and the gender binary.

that identities emerge through lived experience rather than fixed biological or social categories.

Within trans–cisgender relationships, Halberstam's work provides a valuable framework for understanding how couples renegotiate intimacy, attraction and relational identity throughout transition. Rather than simply replacing one gendered identity with another, partners frequently reconstruct shared understandings of gender that transcend conventional binaries. Research indicates that many cisgender partners increasingly describe attraction as relational, emotional and person-centred rather than exclusively determined by gender categories (Pfeffer, 2017). Halberstam's perspective therefore complements Butler by illustrating how the destabilisation of binary gender categories may create opportunities for new forms of relational identity and intimacy.

It is important to note that Halberstam shares some of Butler's limitations. Although both scholars provide sophisticated critiques of binary gender systems, their work remains primarily concerned with the sociocultural production of gender rather than the interpersonal processes through which couples negotiate transition or the psychological consequences of discrimination and stigma. This fits with the epistemological positioning of the current thesis on how gender is socially constructed and renegotiated, it does not however fully explain *how* these constructions are negotiated within everyday relationships and the relational effect that may occur due to the gender transition process.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that understanding trans–cisgender relationship dynamics requires a theoretical framework that moves beyond essentialist understandings of gender and acknowledges the reciprocal influence of social structures, interpersonal relationships and psychological processes. Butler's theory of gender performativity provides the conceptual foundation by challenging binary assumptions and demonstrating that gender is socially constituted. Halberstam extends this perspective by recognising the diversity and plurality of gendered experience. This idea of plurality emphasises the dynamic process of relational change, highlighting how partners continuously negotiate a shared identity and reshape their relational patterns as a couple

Taken together, these perspectives from Butler and Halberstam provide a coherent theoretical framework through which the experiences of cis individuals partnered with a trans person can be understood.

3.2 Reflexive theoretic perspective

Following the previous section on theory, it was important to ensure that I stayed true to the methodology of the current research study and highlight how the above theoretic perspective relates to the research and explore my positionality regarding gender and thus the philosophical framework that underpins my research approach. In order to achieve this, I reflected on my personal stance on gender identity and how this has been influenced and impacted on my desire to pursue this research topic.⁸ I don't hold the natural

⁸ It is important to note that there are many writings in the area of gender studies as a discipline, and it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate all of these in considerable depth. Therefore, this chapter shows the chosen theoretical framework the study is placed in and explores the theorists that have influenced my positionality in relation to this research, aligning with the methodological approach of reflexive thematic analysis which is discussed later in the study.

attitude, reminding myself that my perception of the world is shaped by context, interpretation, and social influences rather than being purely objective. This way of thinking goes hand in hand with my rejection of gender essentialism. I don't believe that gender is something that is fixed or biologically determined, but as a fluid and socially constructed part of who we are. Adopting this perspective helps me question assumptions I might otherwise take for granted, both about how I experience the world and how I understand the identities of those around me.

Sho (2020) identifies that biological sex is determined by gametes alone. She identifies that there are only two, the sperm and egg, and therefore, there are only two sexes, male and female. Gender, according to Sho (2020), is not socially constructed but is an expression through physical appearance that is rooted in and driven by biological sex. For Sho (2020), both sex and gender are placed very firmly within the binary, and going further, she states that the presence of more than two genders is a "myth" (p. 67). This perspective is problematic as it neglects influences outside of biology and rejects outside influences such as society and familial influences, and expectations. Not only this, but it also ignores the power structures in society that favour cis and heteronormativity. In addition, Sho's (2020) stance on sex and gender also ignores those who are intersex and do not reside within this two-sex binary idea. It is important to be clear that I refute this binary assumption of two sexes and two genders, and the idea that gender is based on biological sex does not align with my personal stance on sex and gender.

In opposition to this two-sex model, Fausto-Sterling (1993), a leading American Sexologist, argues that there are five biological sexes. Fausto-Sterling (2012) continues to explain that she believes that gender is in part socially constructed, but as it is placed within the physical body, there is also a biological element. She acknowledges that biological arguments for

gender identity are too simplistic. Money (1972) stated that biological influences, including chromosomes and hormones, were not direct determinants of gender identity. Conversely, Sho (2020) believes that it is solely biological influences that determine gender identity. I have to refute this as it neglects that social world completely and rejects the concept of social and societal influence. Fausto-Sterling (1993) identifies that it is Western culture that prioritises the notion of two sexes and two genders, and that this isn't always the case in non-Western societies. I believe that gender is a socially constructed concept.

Ryan (2017) discusses that post-modern social theory is, by its nature, difficult to define and rejects labels. This is due to postmodernism deconstructing social expectations, normative practices and structures. This, in turn, relates to the current study and has informed my view on sexuality, queerness and gender identity, rejecting seeing gender and sexuality through a heteronormative and cis-normative lens.

The work on gender performativity by Judith Butler will form the basis of the theoretical framework that this study is contextualised in. This is due to the theory of gender performativity being situated within a social constructionist philosophy, which aligns with the current study's epistemological position of social constructionism and my personal view on gender identity.

Butler (1990) states that to be recognised as belonging to society, all individuals must 'do' gender. Salih (2007) agrees with this notion of performativity by explaining that "gender is not something that one is, it is something that one does" (p. 55). This challenges the idea that gender is not an inherent part of one's identity, but it is a pattern of repetitive

behaviours. Brady & Schirato (2011) argue that the way in which gender is performed is dictated by the “construction of bodies within the heteronormative matrix” (p. 45).

Suggesting that gender must be related to the concept of biological sex and falls within the gender binary of male or female. It is important to acknowledge that this, as a practice and as a theory of gender identity, is problematic.⁹ Salih (2007) connotes that there is no such thing as a “natural body” (p. 55); therefore, how can gender and the concept of biological sex be intertwined? Butler acknowledges that cis normativity is achieved through a cyclical process of discourse, expectations from wider society and the action of performativity.

Judith Butler develops her ideas on gender performativity by also looking at it alongside precarity and sexual politics. In relation to precarity, Butler identifies that if gender is not performed in accordance with societal parameters and expectations (within the heteronormative ideal), then this can affect the value society places on this individual. Butler continues to explain that gender is a series of repeated acts based very firmly within a strict binary framework, and therefore those who do not live in accordance with gender norms are at a heightened risk of harassment, persecution and even criminalisation. Regarding sexual politics, Butler emphasises that these acts of persecution, harassment and criminalisation in turn influence those whose rights are protected and those who are discriminated against¹⁰. Butler (2009) elaborates on this by identifying that those who reside outside of societal norms when it comes to gender identity are at risk of not being

⁹ This is problematic in a number of ways, the idea that biological sex determines gender and that there appears to be a misunderstanding of biology and the damaging sex binary. However, this is beyond the scope of this study to fully investigate.

¹⁰ such as gay marriage for example.

recognised as members of said society. This is something that is happening now as we see the reversal of gender recognition across the US, with trans individuals being forced to have their gender changed on their passports to those that were assigned at birth. In the UK, we are seeing trans individuals not being able to use toilets, and something that has influenced me greatly is trans women being banned by the FA from women's football.

Butler identifies that gender identity and sexuality are intertwined, and this concept has influenced the current research project. Butler states that how gender is performed in Western societies (that of cis normativity) in turn centres heteronormativity, rendering anything outside of this as other. It reaffirms the importance of heteronormativity, and 'alternative sexualities' are just that, as they are considered in comparison to the norms of heteronormative ideals.

Due to Butler's theories around gender, it is assumed that sexuality will be a prominent factor in the current research project, as this is highlighted in her work. This link between gender identity and sexuality has been important in the existing literature. It has highlighted the way that sexuality and gender identity are intertwined. Although I very much see these as separate entities, I can acknowledge how they may influence each other.

Butler (2004) identified that gender follows "concrete laws, rules and policies" (p. 49). This suggests that to be recognised as a certain gender, there must be a number of ways in which to perform, in order to be acknowledged as said gender. Insinuating that if these laws and rules are not adhered to, then the individual cannot be aligned with a specific gender. (i.e. if someone is female, they must be heterosexual)

From reading about gender norms, it places gender identity very much within the binary. This is something that does not align with my personal view on gender identity. The work of Jack Halberstam has influenced me further by exploring beyond the gender binary and looking at the concept of fluidity. Halberstam (2018) connotes that gender is not binary and highlights the importance of gender fluidity. Halberstam relates this to prominent public figures across popular culture, citing Prince and David Bowie as examples of gender fluid expression. Halberstam continues to state how gender is something that will shift, change and will continue to develop, highlighting its flexibility and versatility and rejecting the idea of the gender binary. Halberstam (2018) continues by stating “that the body is always under construction” (p135), again reaffirming the idea that gender is something that is not permanent and by its nature is designed to develop. When discussing gender affirming care and surgery, Halberstam discusses the physical body in terms of something we orchestrate like an architect rather than something we are given that remains constant. Halberstam discusses the concept of gender ambiguity that exceeds the division between trans and cis and gives access to the multifaceted nature and complexity of gender identity.

Studying the above theorists has led me to agree with the problematic nature of centring cis and heteronormativity in UK society. As a queer woman myself, I have experienced the damaging rhetoric of heteronormativity. I agree with Judith Butler when she discusses gender as an action. Rather than something that we are as human beings, it is something that we do. I believe it is very much perpetuated by discourse and social expectations, which have been socially constructed as a pattern of behaviours that seems to be agreed upon by the masses. Existing outside of binary gendered behaviours and practices can leave those

who do, more likely to experience forms of discrimination and violence. I acknowledge that my views on gender performativity are informed by being a cis gender woman who has had the privilege of not questioning my own gender identity until engaging in this research process.

Butler and Halberstam have been instrumental in shaping how I have developed my views on gender identity and in placing the current study into a theoretical context. It has helped me think about my own gender identity and the way that I perform this as a fem cis woman. Alongside this, I was interested in cis partners' experience of the gender transition process to look at this notion of performativity and if this changed for both the trans and the cis partner.

Doing further research on theoretical perspectives and looking at the work of Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam has enabled me to develop my personal standpoint on gender identity. I have explained how theoretically my views on gender have been influenced it is also important to consider who has influenced me outside of academia. Being part of the women's and non-binary football community and having non-binary, queer and trans friends has enviably influenced my perspective on gender. I hope that my thoughts on gender will continue to grow and develop over time, the more I learn and the more wonderful people I am fortunate enough to meet.

Upon deeper reflection, I understand the importance of a doctoral thesis being placed in a theoretical framework. It has enabled me to address questions of how my ideas of gender have developed and who has been instrumental in that. It has placed the current research project in context and highlighted the importance of my research stance on the concept of gender identity.

CHAPTER FOUR: Review of the Literature

This chapter explores the existing literature on the experiences of couples and families where one partner is trans, and the other is cisgender. Before this is explored in detail, the current research project is put into a sociopolitical context by briefly looking at attitudes towards the trans community in the UK, by considering the debates around gender and the 'moral panic' that seems to have been created around trans identities. It then continues to look at the diagnosis of gender dysphoria and the role professionals play in gender affirming care, and the access to this. Following this, the political nature of gender affirming care is briefly examined, looking at therapy and counselling for trans couples and what is currently available for couples seeking psychological support. I will then explore the types of relational support that trans individuals may seek and the impact that the trans identity might have on the non-transitioning cisgender romantic partner.

Towards the latter stages of this chapter, it is considered how the current research study could impact clinical practice, explains the development of the research question, and identifies the relevance to the counselling psychology profession.

4.1 Social and political debates around gender

Currently in the UK, the discourse around trans identity appears polarising, with Montiel-McCann (2023) connoting the idea of categories of either 'conservative' or 'progressive' discourse around trans identities being prevalent in the mainstream media. Faye (2021) goes

further and describes the current ‘culture wars’ around trans identities in the UK, identifying “media hostility” (p. 18) towards trans individuals, trans youth and their parents. There appears to be a ‘moral panic’ surrounding trans, with inflammatory, disparaging, discriminatory and in some cases hateful messages from the media. This includes headlines such as “Tran and wife” (The Sun, 2018, p1), “Fifty kids a week sent to sex change clinic” (The Mirror, 2017, p1), “The skirt on the drag queen goes swish, swish, swish” (The Sun, 2018), “Trans row as men get access to women’s NHS ward” (Daily Telegraph, 2019, p1). Alongside this, individuals with a media presence and following, such as Piers Morgan, mock and seemingly dehumanise the trans community by asking questions such as “Well, can I identify as a cat then?” This subsequent othering of the trans community is contributing to the moral panic and the current discourse around trans. Alongside high-profile individuals, certain groups are perpetuating this moral panic, those who label themselves (or are labelled by others as) Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFS), claiming that cis women are put at risk by allowing trans women to access women-only spaces, including changing rooms and toilets. Individuals such as JK Rowling have been very vocal about the trans community erasing “the lived reality of women globally” (Rowling, 2020). These gender critical voices and the subsequent ‘moral panic’ that has been created perpetuate how society views trans and encourages inaccurate perceptions of trans individuals, often painting the trans identity ‘dangerous’ and ‘deviant’ (Greer, 1999). This is done through the guise of protecting women and girls against violence¹¹. However, it is argued by LGBTQ+ activists such as O’Sullivan (2020) that trans individuals do not pose a threat to women and are not predatory men as they have been demonised to be.

¹¹ It is important to see the correlations and similarities here between trans moral panic and that of ‘gay panic’ in the 1980s during the AIDS epidemic. It is beyond the scope of this research to explore this, but it is important to acknowledge.

Giammattei (2015) acknowledges that discourse around gender and trans identities remains in the gender binary, which they argue is too simplistic and limiting to all gender non-conforming and gender diverse people. Therefore, neglecting the nuances, intersectionality and complexity of identity. Gendering others is described as a process that is legitimised by the values society is built (Lorber, 1994). This highlights how much heteronormativity and cisnormativity are woven into the very fabric of society's foundations. It is no surprise, therefore, that these values, centring hetero and cis normativity, are difficult to challenge and are often met with backlash. Being aware of the current sociopolitical climate places this study into context and prioritises the counselling psychology value of social justice.

4.2 Gender identity, diagnosis and seeking treatments

Overwhelmingly, for many trans people, gender-affirming care is essential to their well-being (Poudrier et al., 2019; Van de Grift et al., 2018; Wernick et al., 2019), with access to surgery and hormone therapy being correlated with decreased distress and a significantly improved quality of life (Doyle et al., 2023)¹². However, there are numerous barriers to accessing gender affirming care. The number of those seeking gender affirming care in the UK has risen dramatically over the past few years (Hassan et al., 2023), with some trans individuals waiting for up to six years for an initial assessment (NHS, 2023). This lack of access to gender affirming care has left many trans individuals disproportionately

¹² This isn't true for **all** those who identify as trans or a different gender to the one they were assigned at birth.

vulnerable to depression and, therefore, at higher risk of suicide (Bhatt et al., 2022).

Suicide rates amongst the trans community are much higher than those of the general population, with 84% of trans adults reporting suicidal ideation in their lifetime (Jadva, 2023). However, there appear to be contradicting studies that argue that suicidal ideation remains high and, in some cases, increases after the gender transition process (Biggs, 2019). Gender GP (2021) found that long waitlists and the subsequent impact on trans individuals' mental health have “forced” trans people to leave the UK in search of gender affirming care. Along with accounts from trans people describing accessing gender affirming care in the UK as “impossible” (@hypatheticgirl, 2021).

Another barrier to accessing gender affirming care is that of gatekeeping by professionals.¹³ However, Saad et al. (2019) argue that this gatekeeping is a necessary responsibility when ensuring that there is a robust duty of care for service users and ensuring professionals engage in ethical practice. Bhatt et al. (2022) go further than this idea of gatekeeping and explain that trans people often face microaggressions and transphobia when accessing any form of healthcare, with this increasing amongst trans people of colour (Wesp et al., 2019). Transphobia and microaggressions from healthcare professionals act as an additional barrier for trans individuals receiving the care that they need.

Currently, in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-5), there is a diagnosis of “gender dysphoria” (5th ed.; DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association,

¹³ This seems epically prevalent where trans youth is concerned. However, this is beyond the scope of the current research project, but it is important to acknowledge.

2013, p. 452). Johnson (2015) identifies that the difference between the diagnoses in the different editions of the DSM shows there has been a shift from categorising trans identities as a mental illness and now describes them in terms of psychological distress. However, it could be argued that perceiving gender identity as a form of distress in this way is continuing to pathologise trans individuals by requiring them to adopt a narrative of distress to access care (Waszkiewicz, 2006). Johnson (2015) continues by arguing that the shift in diagnosis is largely symbolic and continues to place psychologists in the role of gatekeeping when it comes to gender affirming care (Montiel-McCann, 2023).

It is important to consider the political barriers to accessing gender affirming care in the UK. Under the previous conservative government, the former prime minister Rishi Sunak was seen in a number of speeches saying that “there are only two genders”. Now, under Labour, the current prime minister has come under criticism for being transphobic. However, the Labour government have suggested a potential reform to teaching about gender identities in schools. Under the conservative government, children were not taught about gender identity, with this concept being labelled as “highly contentious” (Gov UK, 2024). Under the new Labour government, it appears unclear whether this will change or remain the same. It is important to consider the impact this will have on trans rights, trans children and how attitudes are formed around the trans identity within our society.

There is a current ban on puberty blockers in the UK for trans youth (Mahase, 2023), with the British Medical Association calling for this ban to be lifted (British Medical Association, 2024). It appears that there is a lack of governmental investment in gender affirming care (leading to long waitlists and the subsequent difficulties described above).

Faye (2021) argues that to reduce waiting times and protect trans individuals from harm, money needs to be invested not only to provide the essential care for trans persons but also to fund vital training for professionals (Pipkin & Clarke, 2023). However, Kiely et al. (2024) highlight this as being unlikely due to the sociopolitical climate within the UK and the current harmful discourse around trans identities. Duggan (2023) believes that trans people are used as political pawns by different political parties to influence the public or to gain votes, rather than being seen as humans who need specialised care.

4.3 Counselling for trans couples

There appears to be a lack of guidelines on how to work with couples when one of the partners is trans and one of the partners is cis. The BPS (2019) acknowledges that gender diverse couples may undergo unique and complex experiences, affecting their mental well-being. Despite the presence of guidelines from the BPS on how to work with gender diverse individuals, Twist et al. (2017) connotes that many trans individuals and those in couples tend to take on the role of 'educator' with professionals. This, therefore, creates a considerable emotional burden that is placed on the service-users and incites a lack of trust in professional services (MacKinnon, 2020). Richards & Barker (2017) explain that couples may access therapy for other issues within the relationship, not solely related to gender identity and the process of gender transition. However, the lack of knowledge around the complexity of gender identity and the process of transition, assumptions of solely needing to discuss gender transition are often made by practitioners. Mousavian (2024) highlights that trainees in healthcare professions are not afforded the opportunities to work with gender

diversity in a clinical setting and are therefore lacking in essential skills in a highly specialised care environment.

It could be argued that the current support available for trans people and their partners needs to be reviewed and developed (British Medical Association, 2024). Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the impact of societal, cultural values within the UK, the current attitudes towards trans people and how this influences access to high quality gender affirming care. Faye (2021) argues that the issue is not only systemic failures and anti-trans attitudes but also the bigotry of individuals towards the trans community. This has a profound effect on the lives of trans individuals and those supporting them.

4.4 Relational support for trans people

Many studies have highlighted the importance of external support for those going through the gender transition process (Galupo et al., 2014; Dierckx et al., 2015; Bokting et al., 2013; Chester et al., 2017)¹⁴. Friends appear to be an important part of this support network described as a “family of choice” (Galupo et al., 2014). Some individuals reported feeling a sense of relief for their friend after they came out (Gaupo et al. (b), 2014), and this disclosure made their friendship stronger. Despite this, Whitley (2013) found that friends reported feelings of anger towards the trans person as they had been ‘lying’ about who they were, coupled with a sense of loss for who they used to be. Following this, Galupo et al.

¹⁴ It is important to note that this also includes disclosure of non-binary identities and all genders that do not align with the gender assigned at birth.

((a)2014) identify that trans people face microaggressions such as being misgendered, exoticisation and the promotion of gender normative culture by friends.

Family members are also deemed to be an important part of the trans individuals' support network. Dierckx et al. (2015) discuss that familial support enabled the transgender individual to feel more comfortable in expressing their 'true' gender. Conversely, Von Doussa et al. (2017) discussed that safeguarding family relationships can harm the trans individual, as they modify behaviours and decisions such as surgery or hormone therapy to maintain relationships with family members.

It is romantic partners, however, that appear to be the most important when supporting a trans person through their transition process (Bokting et al., 2013 & Chester et al., 2017). Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009) describe this relationship as crucial, and being the main protective factor against the trans individual experiencing mental health difficulties (Meier et al., 2013; Coppola et al., 2021), such as low self-esteem, suicidal ideation and depression (Couch et al., 2007; Dicky & Budge, 2020; Bischof et al., 2011). These factors make it imperative that support is provided for partners of trans individuals, so that they may better support their trans partners and for their own mental health and emotional wellbeing (Giammattei, 2015). It is important to acknowledge that there is a growing number of studies exploring intimate partner violence in trans relationships, many of these in the last few years (Scott et al., 2023; Neppl et al., 2024; Whitton et al., 2023; King, 2021). Murchinson et al. (2024) argue that this is due to the societal structure of cissexism and how this marginalises trans and non-binary individuals in favour of prioritising cisgenders. This is

demonstrated in the sociopolitical context of government policy making, LGBTQIA+ rights, and even media representation.

4.5 Impact of the transitioning process on cisgender partners

The disclosure of trans identity comes with many different implications and unique challenges for cisgender partners, especially when the individual transitions during the relationship (Chester et al., 2017). Chester et al. (2017) highlight that the gender transition of one partner has a significant impact on the non-transitioning partner. When reviewing the literature, there appeared to be a number of significant emergent themes regarding this impact on the non-transitioning partner, which will be discussed below.

4.5.1 Impact on gender roles

One of the several themes highlighted within the literature is the cisgender partners' sense of identity and how this has been changed or renegotiated when in a relationship with a trans person, when the trans identity has been disclosed after the relationship has already been established. Within this idea, there is a focus on how the gender transition impacted gender roles within the partnership for the trans and the cisgender partner. Smithee and Few-demo (2022) found that these gender roles often changed as a result of the gender transition process. This is echoed in the wider literature. Pfeffer (2010) found that when trans men are in relationships with cisgender women, roles became increasingly stereotypically gendered, including sexual practices (Chester et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2022). Smith et al. (2022) identified that there was an expressed "dislike" from the cis gender

partners regarding the gendered nature of sexual practices, and they argue that the gender transition process could reinforce heteronormativity and gender binary practices. Some partners felt obliged to adapt their behaviours to more traditional gender roles to reaffirm their partners' physical transition (Theron and Collier, 2013; Swift, 2020). This appears to highlight the socially constructed nature of the heteronormativity and gender identity. Conversely, Bischof et al. (2011) and Aramburu and Ballard-Reisch (2013) found that roles became more equal after their partner's transition. There was an absence of heteronormative gender roles, and all household chores were shared. However, it appears that this is the case when the partner transitions from male-to-female and the opposite is seen when transitioning from Female-to-Male. Chester et al. (2017) suggests that, due to their partner's gender transition, the vast majority of partners are confronted by their own gender and sexual identity labels and are compelled to re-examine these. They go on to say that participants who identified as lesbian would not see themselves as this anymore and questioned whether they were now heterosexual, with many identifying as 'queer'. This term could have been used as it seems to encompass many sexual minority identities rather than having to align with a more binary concept of sexual identity labels. Marshall et al. (2020) asserts that certain sexual identity labels appear to have certain rules, being partnered with someone going through a gender transition could violate these rules and therefore the label is no longer deemed 'correct'. It appears that the renegotiation of self-identity is prevalent for the partners of the trans individual when thinking about their own sexual identities and the use of labels to define these. Jung (1963) explains that where we see our own reflection in others, this shows us who we are, developed by Russ (2018) who connotes that "everyone is a mirror". This suggests that when the trans person changes this

could activate defensive mechanisms in the non-transitioning partner as the reflection has now changed causing the non- transitioning partner to question their own identity.

4.5.2 Impact on sexual identity

As well as partners considering their own gender identity and experiencing the renegotiation of this, in a non-heteronormative relationship, especially when their own identity was associated with their partner's gender, there also appears to be a sense of losing their sexual minority identity (Theron and Collier, 2013), resulting in great feelings of loss by the non-transitioning partner (Giammattei, 2015). This loss of self-identity then had an impact on how they were seen by others, including members of the LGBTQIA+ community, with some facing rejection from sexual minority communities, which were described as pivotal to their sense of self (Ellis et al. 2020). Some individuals were no longer welcomed into lesbian spaces due to their partner's transition, with even close friends withdrawing support (Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009). Additionally, Devris (2007) states that couples previously described as heterosexual would now be described as homosexual by others due to one partner's trans identity. Swift (2020) argues that mislabelling invalidates both the cisgender and the transgender partner and further complicates the process of sexual identity renegotiation, thus corroborating the notion that identity seems to be largely placed on the evaluations and feedback received from others (Crossley, 2000) and highlights the importance of social and political context (Theron and Collier, 2013).

Bischof et al. (2011) found that many individuals resisted sexual identity labels altogether. Seeing their relationship as unique and feeling that using labels to describe their

sexual identity could prevent couples from living a truly authentic life (Platt & Bolland, 2016). Twist et al. (2017) highlight that transitioning is a joint process within the relationship, and the renegotiation of one's identity is created together. This being said, Bischof (2011) described this process taking place at different rates for each individual and that some felt threatened by their trans partners' newfound femininity/masculinity, and what this meant for their own sexual identity.

This renegotiation of identity also appears to be closely linked to sexuality, both for the trans individual and the cisgender partner. Chester et al. (2017) argue that this had an impact on gender roles (discussed previously), which in turn influenced sexual intimacy. Sexual intimacy between partners can change dramatically, becoming less frequent and, in some cases, ceasing altogether (Brown, 2010). It is argued that this is due to the trans persons' discomfort and dissatisfaction with their bodies (Brown, 2010). Intimate touch could potentially serve as a reminder to the trans individual that their body does not align with the gender they identify with (Pfeffer, 2008). However, this dissatisfaction around the trans body was not explored from the cis partner's perspective, which makes it unclear as to how this affected the cis partner regarding their own identity.

According to Theron and Collier (2013), the relationship between identity and sexual orientation is complex, whereby being in a romantic relationship with a transitioning partner can profoundly complicate the cisgender partner's experience and understanding of their sexual orientation. Bischoff (2011) found that participants reported feelings of confusion. This appears to be especially prevalent if partners had undergone hormone therapy and surgery to align with their true gender identity. Chester et al. (2017) found that the trans

partner would smell differently, act differently, their interests would change, and their personality could appear to alter altogether.

It is argued that transgender individuals' choices of sexual partner, both during and after transition, can be unpredictable (Fein et al., 2017). Some argue that a trans person's sexual orientation is highly likely to change during the transition process (Maplas, 2012; Meier et al., 2013). However, Giammattei (2015) contradicts this notion of unpredictability, describing this sexual intimacy change and transitioning as a whole as a shared experience within the partnership. Furthermore, some couples reported feeling higher levels of sexual intimacy towards their partner than before, with more trust and understanding between them since the disclosure of their trans identity (Twist et al., 2017). Some of the literature shows no change whatsoever in the trans individual's sexual orientation (Chester, 2017), painting a very mixed picture of a complex and individualistic experience.

It appears that individuals who are attracted to one gender only - homosexual or heterosexual - face the most challenges when their partner begins to transition, rather than those who describe their sexuality as bisexual or pansexual (Theron & Collier, 2013). It could be that, for the latter, individual gender identity is less intertwined with sexuality, with some cisgender partners developing a more fluid understanding of their sexual orientation (Amburu-Alegria, 2013).

Some participants questioned their own sexual identity and became worried that they were now a lesbian or heterosexual. Belonging to certain groups, such as the lesbian community, for example, was important for some participants in Theron and Collier's study

(2013). They experienced feelings of loss regarding their sexual minority identity due to the assumptions of others. Most women experienced a change or shift in the way they viewed their sexual orientation. Understanding their partner's body as male was difficult for those participants who previously labelled themselves a lesbian. In Acker et al. (2023) study, they found that some participants reported a change of sexual orientation, using different sexual identity labels. They also found that on occasion, labels weren't important to the participants, and it was the attraction they had for their trans partner rather than in relation to gender identity.

4.5.3 Impact on gender identity

There appears to be very little literature that discusses the impact of the gender transition process on how the cisgender partner views their own gender identity. As described above, there is a focus on sexual identity labels and those of gender roles. It could be that cisgender partners don't reflect on their own gender identity when their partner is transitioning. Alternatively, researchers may not have identified it as a significant factor when experiencing the phenomenon of a partner embarking on the gender transition process.

4.6 Couples with children

Kuvalanka (2012) states that children of trans parents have varied experiences due to intersecting identities such as race, age, culture, and religion, for example, along with contrasting social factors. However, she connotes that an experience they do share is that of

their family being considered 'different' or 'less than' in comparison to others due to the emphasis on heteronormativity and cisnormativity (Oswald et al., 2005).

The concept of 'coming out' to children seems to apply when a child has become accustomed to their parents' sexuality or gender identity in a certain way, and a relationship has been established (Fitzgerald 2010). This coming out process is used when the gender identity or sexuality of the parent notably changes, whether this be the choice of partner or gender expression and physical changes. Goldberg (2010) suggests that these changes can negatively affect children, especially if they lead to parental relationship breakdown. They continue to discuss that adolescents may find the disclosure of the new identity more challenging as they have had longer to internalise cisnormativity and heteronormativity. Platt and Bolland (2016) mention that the trans partner may lose access to their children or face being disowned by them due to the disclosure of their trans identity.

4.7 Wider relationships and community

Additionally, family relationships are discussed by Theron and Collier (2013) and appear to be important to the participants as well as the wider community. They found that acceptance of their trans partner by family members was of the utmost importance. Many of the participants in this study found that the wider community were not accepting of their partner's trans identity. Although not mirrored by any of the other participants within the study, there was a threat of extreme violence against one participant from family members. This is something that does not seem to be as prevalent in the wider literature available in this field however, it is important to consider this factor moving forward and identifying the

significance of the socio-political context. Conversely, Acker et al. (2023) found that the wider social community including family and friends were largely positive about the disclosure of the trans identity which contradicts some previous studies (Platt & Bolland, 2018., Theron & Collier, 2013). Conversely Scott (2022) discovered that the participants faced difficult and somewhat negative reactions from friends and family concerning their trans partners identity and their relationship but did however receive support from the LGBTQ+ community. These findings highlight the different responses cis gender partners experience when their partner discloses their trans identity and the complexity of maintaining relationships outside of the couple.

It is vital to address the issues that some of the above literature has presented in relation to trans identity in terms of the gender of male-female and sexuality binary of gay-straight. It is important to emphasise that the term trans is an umbrella term for those who do not identify as cisgender and highlight that trans identity does not purely reside within the binary. Research that acknowledges this also encountered similar findings when looking at identity. For example, a study by Dickerson (2021) suggests that being in a relationship with a trans person prompts the cisgender partner to reflect on their own identity. However, Siboni et al. (2023) shows that this isn't always the case and that there are varying factors that influence this. The difference in findings highlights the complexity of the phenomenon, and the individual experience. It is important to acknowledge what Twist et al. (2020) describes gender as the 'gender spectrum'. Seeing gender outside of the binary ensures inclusivity of all minority genders furthermore this clarifies the use of the term 'trans' in this study.

It is clear that the limited literature on the phenomenon of being partnered with a trans person when the trans identity is disclosed, once the relationship has already been established, is a subject matter that is under-researched in the psychological field, with Smith et al. (2022) claiming that it has, in fact, been “neglected” (p. 728). It is of the utmost importance that more research of this nature is undertaken in the psychological field. Placing individuals into their context is pivotal to the counselling psychology profession, and all individuals are treated as such with the assumption that there will be varying experiences due to unique perspectives and influences (Hill & Cooper, 2016).

4.8 Mental health

Another recurring theme across the literature is that whilst clinical support for transgender individuals appears to be growing and evolving, the support for partners and their mental health appears non-existent. Gamarel et al. (2014) found that 47.6% of those partners studied reported clinical levels of depression. If partners are a fundamental form of support for transitioning individuals, their mental health must also be prioritised. The BPS has guidelines on working with gender, sexuality and relationship diversity (2019). However, it does not include specifics on working with partners of people transitioning. Malpas (2012) states that some couples may seek couples or family therapy. The BPS guidelines emphasise that gender, sexuality and relationship diverse individuals experience unique challenges in their relationships (British Psychological Society, 2019). Despite this complicity, the BPS does not provide specifics on how to work with this client group, and there is little training to support practitioners to develop competencies in this area.

Within the literature, there appears to be an emphasis on feelings of loss (Sanger, 2010; Maplas, 2012; Chase, 2011), with Ellis and Eriksen (2002) reporting that a bereavement-like grieving process is undertaken by the partners of the trans person. These feelings of loss are multifaceted, manifesting in loss of self-identity (discussed previously) (Twist et al., 2017), heterosexual privilege (Motter, 2017), loss of the queer community (Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009) and loss of their trans partner's previous identity (Norwood, 2012). However, it is important to challenge this perception of loss as the 'expected' response, as it reinforces the cisgender assumption that the norm is to persist in the gender assigned at birth (Ansara & Hegarty, 2014). It also seems to create a blanket experience, neglecting the idiosyncrasies of the cisgender partners and the subjectivity of their experience. Understanding the individual experience is an important counselling psychology value (Schmidt, 2005).

Smithee and Few-Demo (2022) describe the notion of negative multiple tensions. This is both within the self and between the cis and trans partners. Some individuals report feelings of guilt (Norwood, 2012). Chester et al. (2017) argue that this is due to adopting a supportive role in relation to the trans partner, both with their physical changes and their emotional needs, whilst also trying to make sense of and care for their own emotional needs. This is also corroborated by Smithee and Few-Demo's (2022) study, where the tension within the cisgender partner is that of trying to balance their trans partner's needs alongside their own, acknowledging that these may conflict with each other and the difficulty in navigating this conflict. Norwood (2012) found that there are feelings of guilt when the individual wants to end the relationship with the trans partner. Despite the determination to remain together seeming prevalent in the literature, this isn't always the case. Giammattei

(2015) and Zamboni (2006) identified that feelings of betrayal were a common experience of the non-transitioning partner; this was corroborated in Watts et al. (2017) study. However, it is important to note that betrayal is complex and multifaceted. The cisgender partner can feel that their trans partner has betrayed them by disclosing their trans identity; this is especially prevalent if the disclosure occurs many years after the relationship began (Gurvich, 1991). Theron & Collier (2013) discuss, some partners remaining in a relationship with a trans person have been accused by the lesbian community of ‘betraying’ the group. This suggests that both community and societal perceptions appear to influence the non-transitioning partner significantly.

It appears from the literature that due to the complexity of a partner’s gender transition and the disparate nature of individual experiences, it places what Theron and Collier (2013) describe as a huge emotional burden on the non-transitioning partner. Smithee and Few-demo (2022) identify the emotional labour performed by the cisgender partner when supporting their trans partner, but also trying to attend to their own emotional needs. In addition to the psychological effects of their partner’s gender transition, many individuals question how this change will affect their future and whether the relationship with their trans partner has longevity (Twist et al., 2017).

4.9 Future Emotional Landscape

Taking all of the latter factors into consideration raises the question ‘what next?’ It appears from the literature that the experience of being partnered with a trans person,

especially when they transition during the relationship, is extremely complex (Twist et al., 2017).

Twist et al. (2017) argue that trans people have often been told that the disclosure of their trans identity and the subsequent process will end their romantic relationships and emphasise that this is incorrect. Giammattei (2015) concludes that many couples do, in fact, stay together. Twist et al. (2017) found that the strongest narrative was that of the “quest to stay together”, showing how couples navigated this new phenomenon and expressed commitment to each other. Bischof et al. (2011) argue that the experience gives way to personal growth and that, as a result, some individuals live richer, more fulfilled lives. Watts et al. (2017) go further by identifying that the couples in the study were on the journey of transition together. Therefore, this highlights the importance of trust within a relationship and that the ability to be one’s true self is what being in a romantic relationship essentially entails. This challenges the notion that when one’s partner transitions, the relationship potentially ends. However, in the case of some couples, Chester et al. (2017) found that, due to their partner’s transition and use of hormone therapy, they became a different person altogether, showing a change in interests, likes and dislikes, and even personality traits. This appears to echo the multifaceted and idiosyncratic nature of the phenomenon.

4.10 Practice

It is important to identify how the complex and recurring themes discussed above affect and guide practice. Colman et al. (2011) state that clinicians will inevitably work with transgender and gender non-conforming individuals and their families within the psychological field. It is apparent from the literature that there is a lack of training for

professionals (Gurvich, 1991; Aramburu, 2013; Buxton, 20117). Twist et al. (2017) found that some individuals needed to take on an “educator” role with their therapist. This apparent lack of training was emphasised by the types of questions asked during therapy sessions, which were deemed as inappropriate and irrelevant. This lack of training and knowledge was highlighted by Watts et al. (2017), who found that many partners expressed a need for healthcare professionals to develop a hopeful and supportive environment where their relationship could be explored.

Malpas (2012) argues that trans people and their partners will seek psychological support for the challenges they face during the transition process. However, Richards & Barker (2013) highlight that it is important for clinicians to recognise that a couple might access therapy for reasons other than gender transition. It is argued that assumptions such as this can rupture the therapeutic relationship, an element of practice that is paramount to the counselling psychology profession (Gilbert & Leahy, 2007). The lack of training for clinicians is further emphasised by Giammattei (2015), who claims that clinicians have a heteronormative approach when working with couples and lack knowledge of the full fluidity of sexuality and gender (Fein et al., 2017). It is important to establish both partners' sexual orientation and not make assumptions. There needs to be more mandatory training and a cultural change within the profession.

It is important when looking at clinical practice to identify the support currently available for the partners of trans individuals. Twist et al. (2017) identify that there has been little or no support for the partners of transitioning individuals. Despite guidelines for working with trans individuals, there are no specific guidelines for working with their

partners. The proposed research could identify what is needed by hearing first-hand experiences from the participants themselves.

Twist et al. (2017) state that peer support groups are helpful to partners as they give the opportunity to connect with others, who are experiencing similar phenomena. It could be argued that clinicians engaging with community and peer support groups could find this beneficial to their own practice. However, Watts et al. (2017) found that the “right kind of support” (p7) needs to be offered from these groups in order to meet the needs of each individual cis partner¹⁵. They continue to discuss that the cis partner themselves is unsure of what support they need, and this can lead to them finding the wrong kind of support. For example, the participant in this study recounts contemplating suicide after accessing a support group they came across online.

Fein et al. (2018) emphasises the importance of transgender care to be culturally sensitive. It is crucial therefore to consider this intersectionality, to enable clinicians to support clients to the best of their ability. It appears that the main support available is peer support groups. Theron and Collier (2013) describe the importance of finding those in a similar situation not just for support but for information too.

Hudson-Sharp (2016) notes that individuals who experience LGTBQIA+ issues are also deemed less likely to seek peer support groups. However, this is beginning to change. This connotes that having a number of intersecting minority identities, makes gaining

¹⁵ This will be explored in the discussion section of the thesis with examples from the participants personal experiences.

appropriate clinical support a challenge. This suggests that peer support groups may not be accessible for all.

It is imperative to explore whether the issues and themes found in the literature are shared across races, religions and cultures, and identify what this cultural and racial impact might be. According to Fante-Coleman & Jackson-Best (2020), there are disparities in the experience of being a person of colour and trans and being white and trans. This, in turn, could be reflected in the experience of being partnered with a trans individual and being a person of colour. The BPS guidelines state that they will be sure to include culture, diversity and ethnic minority issues in the mainstream discourse (BPS, 2013). As counselling psychologists, we work pluralistically with clients (Cooper & McLeod, 2017); therefore, a better understanding of the complexities of this client group is important, ensuring that our practice and research are inclusive and non-discriminatory (McAteer, 2010).

The majority of the literature that has been reviewed is based in countries such as the United States, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. There is yet to be a study of this nature conducted in the United Kingdom, thus highlighting the importance of the proposed research to augment practice and policy development, with a view to providing more personal, contextualised support to reflect the unique experience of the individual.

4.11 Summary and Research Question

Undertaking this review of the literature has highlighted gaps in the existing knowledge base. There is yet to be a study that is based in the UK, on the experience of

being partnered with a trans person when the trans identity is disclosed during the relationship, using thematic analysis.

In the few papers that did explore the cisgender partners' experience, identity was a prevalent theme. For some, this social influence was of extreme importance. Re-examining gender identity was closely interwoven with sexuality, with many also questioning and renegotiating this (Ellis et al., 2020). This renegotiation of self-identity impacted mental health, eliciting feelings of guilt (Norwood, 2012), betrayal (Giammattei, 2015; Zamboni, 2006), loss (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002) and threats of violence, with Theron and Collier (2013) describing the phenomenon as a 'colossal emotional burden' on the cisgender partner. With 47.6% experiencing clinical levels of depression (Gamarel et al., 2014), it is concerning to discover that there are limited guidelines from the BPS on how to support this client group. It has been argued that belonging to multiple minority identities could intersect to present several inimitable challenges. The literature has shown that there is a lack of training for clinicians when it comes to working with sexual minority identities, with many clients taking on the role of educating the therapist (Twist et al., 2017). Counselling psychologists must gain further insight into this intersectionality to address these unique challenges and inform practice.

The above findings have led to the formulation of my research question:

How do people in the UK experience their partner's transition to a different gender during the relationship?

The proposal aims to explore the experience of this client group through semi-structured interviews to gain a better understanding of how cis gender individuals are affected by the gender transition process of their romantic partner. As such, the study would obtain valuable insight into these individuals' experiences, contributing to the existing psychological literature.

4.12 Research aims

Below are listed the aims of the current research project:

1. To explore the lived experience of individuals in relationships where one partner transitions to a different gender after the relationship has been established.
2. To examine the psychological impact of a partner's gender transition on the non-transitioning partner.
3. To contribute to counselling psychology by deepening understanding of relationship diversity and promoting client-centred, socially just therapeutic practice.
4. To inform the development of professional guidelines, training, and policy in counselling psychology for supporting couples navigating gender transition, thereby improving therapeutic provision.

4.13 Relevance to Counselling Psychology

In consideration of the evidence presented in the review and the subsequent proposed research, there are significant implications for counselling psychology

practitioners. As there are very few studies on the phenomenon of a partner transitioning to a different gender during the relationship, more examination of this experience must be undertaken. The proposed research will enable professionals to gain further insight into the experience of the phenomenon and how this affects the non-transitioning cisgender partner psychologically. This includes acknowledging the increased likelihood of mental health challenges that trans people face, including high suicide rates, discrimination and violence (Gherovici, 2017; Valentine & Shipheard, 2018). It is important to stress that there is a rich and diverse tapestry of relationship needs, and it is essential that this is reflected in counselling psychology's understanding of relationship work.

Maplas (2012) stresses that it is of the utmost importance to consider the multiple social identities of the individual, how these intersect and the impact they have. However, this has been neglected in psychological research. Due to this, the current research project will take into account the socio-political climate and place the subsequent findings into a social context. It will address how individuals of different generations and, therefore, social experiences and attitudes affect personal experiences. The proposed research will enable counselling psychologists to work in a client-centred way (Rogers, 1951), informing the formulation of the client as a whole and informing appropriate treatment, whilst staying true to the counselling psychology value of social justice (BPS, 2013).

This review has highlighted why advancing our understanding of how gender transition affects romantic partners is crucial. More individuals are identifying as trans than ever before, and there are no formal guidelines on how to support the 47.6% cisgender

partners experiencing clinical levels of depression (Gamarel et al., 2014), with many failing to access appropriate support and therefore relying on peer-run support groups.

The proposed research could enable improved psychological provision by informing policy, guidelines and mandatory training for counselling psychologists in the UK. With the intention to take the onus off the client in their current role as educator to the therapist, thereby enhancing the therapeutic relationship (Gilbert & Leahy, 2007). This will prove fundamental to the psychological well-being of the researched population and, by proxy, their transgender partner.

4.13.1 Wider Implications

This review and the subsequent proposed research could also have implications for a variety of healthcare professionals supporting trans individuals and their partners, as they often encounter different professionals during the gender transition process, especially when opting for hormone therapy or surgery (Chester et al., 2017). Therefore, including partners in the process has been described as imperative (Twist et al., 2017).

Finally, the BPS has written a policy to “encourage practice applicable research” (pp 3). This study will provide this by placing an under-researched topic into the forefront of psychological research. With a view to eventually enhancing provision and informing clinical practice for trans individuals and their partners.

4.14 Literature Review Reflectivity

It was extremely challenging at times to look at some of the literature, especially literature that is persecutory and derogatory toward the trans community. This ignited a feeling of anger and unfairness within me that I needed to manage. I did this through keeping a reflexive journal and discussions with my supervisor and colleagues. Despite these uncomfortable feelings I experienced, it is important to be aware of the current polarising discourse around trans identity and how trans rights are affected by this, to place my research into a sociopolitical context within the UK. Conversely, it was uplifting to engage with some of the literature that included accounts of allies, families, friends and partners and how they supported trans individuals in their lives who were thriving. My response to the literature mirrored the polarising nature of trans discourse and how it is viewed and discussed within our society.

It was especially challenging when writing about JK Rowling and other gender critical voices not to add my opinions and feelings towards them. I believe that, due to this 'moral panic' as a society, we are missing the prominence of violence against women and girls (VAWG) that is disproportionately committed by cisgender men, and by focusing on the trans community, the real issue of VAWG is being neglected. This feels that it is another patriarchal system to enable men to continue to perpetrate VAWG by directing a focus of fear onto the trans community. This is something I was very mindful of when writing this chapter. I took these feelings to therapy and discussed them with colleagues and my supervisor.

4.15 Development of the Research Question

It is also imperative to address the development of the research question. Initially, the research question for my study was: *How do people of colour living in the UK experience their partner's transition to a different gender during the relationship?*

This question emerged for me due to much of the psychological research being white Western-centric (Hong, 2023), and I therefore wanted to seek a variety of experiences and multiple intersecting identities. However, due to issues with recruitment, this wasn't possible. The research question then developed into: *How do people in the UK experience their partners' transition to a different gender during the relationship, and what effect does age have on this experience?*

However, due to the lack of literature and empirical evidence from the data, the age element of the research question proved to be irrelevant. This is why the research question has since developed into its final form: *How do people in the UK experience their partner's transition to a different gender during the relationship?*

CHAPTER FIVE: Methodology

“At the core of psychological research are questions about the nature of knowledge”

(Fletcher, 1996, p. 1).

5.1 Philosophical Underpinnings of Research

5.1.1 Ontology

As a researcher, it is imperative to consider one’s philosophical position as this guides the research methodology choice (McLeod, 1999). This section will consider several different ontological and epistemological standpoints to frame the current research. Ontology refers to existence and is a branch of philosophy that explores the nature of what we know and the nature of being (Williams, 2016), where Epistemology is the branch of philosophy exploring how we know (Maynard, 1994). Firstly, my ontological position as a researcher will be explored.

Realism is a doctrine that avers that there is a “theory of truth” (Putnam, 1975, p. 1) waiting to be discovered that can be objectively and universally presented, about the idea that events are real and not subject to our perspective or interpretation of them (Williams, 2016). This appears to neglect the individual’s experience of said reality and the processes of the internal world and sense-making, which inevitably will differ from that of others. It also fails to accept that the way reality is perceived can differ significantly depending on the

individual's context and intersecting identities: culture, race, religion, gender identity, sexuality and so on.

In contrast to realism is idealism; Raskin (2001) argues that idealism rejects objectivity and universalism, connoting that the 'real' world exists; however, we are incapable of perceiving it directly (Williams, 2016). Williams (2016) reinforces this, stating that our interpretation of an experience is key to our understanding of it. Thus, meaning that perspectives are always subjective, can form contrasting ideas and differing perceptions of reality. This connotes the idea that if we think something is real, then it must be real (Williams, 2016).

Whilst idealism prioritises the internal world and the individual experience, lending itself to interpretive methodologies and acknowledging that the way in which we perceive our own reality is a subjective experience, it appears to neglect the importance of the external reality and that there are physical realities that can be shared with others.

A constructivist ontology was also examined. Aminah and Asl (2015) note that constructivism is a theory that amalgamates cognitive and behavioural ideals. Cafarella and Merriam (1999) state that we construct meaning through learning, in an attempt to make sense of our experiences. Learning is based upon previously held knowledge, and how individuals interpret this is extremely personal. This research project focuses on the personal experience of the phenomenon and emphasises the importance of the socio-political context, along with the assumption that the gender transition process is an absolute truth of external reality. Therefore, a purely constructivist stance would not be appropriate.

In this study, there is the understanding that there is an external reality: that of the partner's gender transition. Conversely, the individual experience of this process is based on the assumption that it will differ between individuals, with several factors influencing this. Therefore, an idealist ontology would provide the subjective experience and an insight into the sense-making process; however, it would neglect the 'absolute' facts of the external reality and is therefore inappropriate here.

It is argued that individuals experience their internal and external worlds through personal interpretation of shared realities (Benton & Craib, 2001). In this research, what we know is that the partners of the participants are transitioning to a different gender. This is the external reality; however, it is important to note that how this phenomenon is experienced is completely dependent on the context and the internal sensemaking of the individual, and therefore, the research will be framed using a critical realist ontology. Madill et al. (2000) suggest that critical realism aligns itself with a more constructivist approach as it recognises that how knowledge is produced is subjective (Willig, 2013).

Critical realism was first developed by Bhaskar (1975) on the basis that there is knowledge independent of the self to be interpreted and explored in depth to move beyond the potentially misleading superficialities of phenomena. Benton and Craib (2001) advocate the importance of reflexivity when "theorising knowledge as a social process which involves variable means of representation" (p. 120). What is argued to be the most important element of critical realism and central to Benton and Craib's (2001) theory is the ongoing re-evaluation of current beliefs through research and discourse, appearing to place significant importance on the prevailing sociocultural context and political climate.

5.1.2 Epistemology

So far, this chapter has considered the ontological position of the research; what we know. It is also important to consider the epistemological position: how we know. Williams (2016) states that it is through interactions with others, social norms, shared realities, and experiences that understanding is found. One of the aims of this research is to gain an insight into how the phenomenon is experienced by the individual, with emphasis on their social context. This research will be framed in a social constructionist epistemology, examining how cultural norms and customs are co-constructed within a community and what influence this has on the subjective experience. Williams (2016) describes reality as a socially shared creation, with Willig (2013) stating that social constructionism highlights how history, culture and discourse mediate individual perception and experience. It is important to note that although this would align with a constructivist ontology as connoted above, it would neglect the idea of the reality of the gender transition process and therefore the ontology is one of critical realism.

Acknowledging the importance of the use of language, the research methodology's emphasis on discourse will give an insight into the relationship dynamics and how this is experienced both socially and psychologically (Van Dijk, 2008). In doing so, I hope to collate and analyse in depth, accurately, the participants' own stories. Ainsworth and Hardy (2004) suggest that identities are constructed through discourse, and as this research project centres on intersecting and changing identities, the use of language is important.

Other epistemological standpoints were considered, such as positivism. However, to align with my ontological position and belief that there can never be a single reality, due to the influence of discourse and the use of the self in sensemaking and co-constructed perceptions of reality (Burr, 1995), a positivist stance was inappropriate. Conversely, a relativist epistemology, which would focus on the subjective experience alone, would call the idea of moral judgments into question. How can these be made if everything is solely our perception of it? This appears to deny any form of realities such as discrimination and marginalisation, hence the critical realist ontology.

Social constructionism focuses on how reality is constructed rather than the idea that it is simply reflected. Multiple perspectives of the world “coexist in parallel” with no one being the indisputable truth. (Burr, 2015, p. 223). Corresponding with Willig’s (2013) idea that there is not one knowledge to be discovered but many. Burr (2015) argues that all social and psychological phenomena arise due to social interactions. These interactions are given content and structure by one’s historical and cultural context. Critical realism expands on this by denoting that there are certain realities that may be beyond the self and our perception of them, whilst still acknowledging both sensemaking and the perception of what can be observed by the individual (Gergen, 1994).

This research is grounded in a critical realist ontology, ensuring that there is an acceptance of the ‘real’ that is independent from the self, alongside multiple realities being constructed and co-constructed socially. This includes an investigation into the use of language and how this changes and evolves. Therefore, a critical realist ontology coupled

with a social constructionist epistemology fitted the research; by maintaining an acceptance of an external reality whilst focusing on the experience of the individual and the importance of the social, political, and cultural context.

5.2 Why a Qualitative Methodology?

Qualitative research aims to collect a comprehensive record of the participants' words and actions (Willig, 2013). According to Braun and Clarke (2013), qualitative research explores the complexity of an experience, reflecting the multifaceted and contradictory nature of the real world, thus allowing the researcher to make sense of patterns and find meaning within them. Conversely, quantitative research seeks to collect numerical data to explain a particular phenomenon (Cohen & Manion, 1980), as Willig (2013) connotes, accruing objective knowledge. Kim (2016) describes quantitative methods as often being "context free" (p. 11) whilst Williams (2016) argues that it is impossible to take individuals out of their context; if it is their reality, it *IS* reality. There are numerous variables pivotal to this research project that cannot be adequately understood by considering social positions independently from their social, political, and cultural context.

Quantitative methodology neglects the complexity of intersectionality and the nuances of multiple intersecting identities. This is due to using fixed essentialist categories, neglecting the nuance of individuality. Such methodology would require unrealistically large sample sizes to create meaningful numerical and statistical values.

One of the aims of this research was to explore each participant's subjective experience, meaning that a quantitative approach would not have been appropriate. Qualitative methods maintain both the richness and depth of data, whereas quantitative methods are employed to solely answer 'what' and 'how', neglecting *why* the phenomenon is experienced or constructed in a certain way. This research is grounded in the epistemological position that how individuals experience the same phenomena will be different. Reicher (2000) argues that qualitative research has diverging epistemologies, being both experiential and discursive in nature. Another argument against the use of quantitative methodology is this research's epistemological position of social constructionism and its focus on the wider social, political context of the participants in identifying how and why these have an effect on each participant's understanding of the phenomenon.

Qualitative researchers attempt to "interpret or make sense of a phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Kim, 2016, p4). This is something that is fundamental to understanding human reality (Hiles & Cermak, 2008) and something we do clinically as counselling psychologists. A qualitative design will facilitate greater emphasis on the context of the individual participant's backgrounds, allowing the researcher to explore these aspects throughout the interview process, including unanticipated avenues of enquiry. Employing an "interpretive and naturalistic approach to research phenomena" (Kim, 2016, p. 5) during data analysis, I identified repetition, patterns and overarching themes whilst acknowledging the complexity and nuances of participants' responses.

Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) identify that fundamentally, critical theorists hold a belief that experiences are situated within the social and historical context. This is then

mediated by these subsequent power dynamics. Kincheloe and McLauren (1994) expand on this by identifying that central to critical theory is the concept of equality and the liberation from these power dynamics. Therefore, adopting a critical ideological stance aligns with the counselling psychology identity and its emphasis on social justice.

5.3 What is Thematic Analysis?

Thematic analysis (TA hereafter) is identified as a type of qualitative methodology that describes and interprets numerous facets of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). It is not bound to a theoretical framework and consequently can be conducted in a variety of ways (Braun & Clarke, 2006), generating different types and approaches to TA, subsequently producing different types of knowledge. For example, Boyatzis (1998) applies TA within a positivist paradigm and argues the importance of coding reliability. Furthermore, King (2012) uses a codebook technique when employing TA, producing a predominantly deductive approach to data analysis. This can, on occasion, permit a mixed methods approach, which is explained by Roberts et al. (2019). Braun and Clarke (2017) define their approach to TA by describing an “organic approach to code and theme development” (p. 1) and emphasise the importance of the researcher. This highlights flexibility within TA and is recognised by Braun and Clarke (2022) as they identified a continuum of epistemological and ontological positions and discuss how TA can be used within this. Due to its flexibility, there have been disagreements within the research field as to the robustness of TA as a research method in its own right. However, Braun and Clarke (2017) argue that TA has a rigorous quality procedure that ensures analysis that is of a high quality.

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that TA is aligned with a qualitative philosophy, they go on to discuss that TA is identifying, analysing, and interpreting meaning within qualitative data. With Willig (2013) connoting that TA has an emphasis on distinguishing and categorising patterns within the content. This doctoral thesis will follow the Braun and Clarke (2022) approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis and from this point onwards I will refer to RTA hereafter.

5.4 Rationale for Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2022) identify that RTA differs from TA due to the importance and emphasis placed on the reflexive element of the analysis process. Engaging in rigorous reflexivity throughout the entirety of the research ensured that I remained aware of how all of my choices shape and affect the knowledge produced. The importance of reflexivity is highlighted by Richards (2015), who discusses guidance on working with marginalised groups. This is expanded upon later in this chapter.

Williams (2016) states that it is the philosophical underpinnings of social research that guide the methodology of choice. There are a number of key methodologies that lend themselves to a social constructionist epistemology. Braun and Clarke (2022) state that the philosophical underpinnings of RTA are rooted in those of qualitative research. This enabled me to place myself on the continuum described by Moon and Blackman (2014) (see Appendix 1). This facilitated a unique opportunity to carefully consider my personal philosophical stance as a researcher, critically evaluating this philosophical position to place my research into context. As described above, I am situated in a critical realist ontology with a social constructionist epistemology. RTA doesn't shy away from the social and political.

Due to transgender identities and issues being at the forefront of politics and social discourse, it reaffirms its suitability for this study.

The focus of this study is on the experiential, alongside acknowledging the importance of the social context; this aligns with a critical realist approach and therefore aligns with my ontological standpoint. One of the aims of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of being partnered with a trans person and the subsequent impact that this has. An important assumption that the subsequent analysis is based on is that the individual experience of the phenomenon will vary between participants. This research project also aims to further investigate an under-researched topic, adding to the literature and to give a voice to those who have been overlooked by previous research. RTA facilitated this by exploring participants' personal experiences, whilst also being able to identify patterns within the data collected.

There are criticisms of RTA as an analytical process. Hecker and Kalpokas (2024) suggest that without a standardised procedure, it is extremely difficult to ensure rigour when writing TA. However, Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that there is a balance between analytical protocol and interpretation, and I agree. Braun and Clarke (2021) have produced guidelines to follow when conducting thematic analysis, retaining the flexibility within and between these steps. They also emphasise the importance of reflexivity to ensure rigour in TA. Rigorous reflexivity aligns with my identity as a counselling psychologist, as the use of the self and rigorous reflexivity are imperative to clinical practice. This highlights the importance of the reflexive element of this type of TA, therefore, making RTA the most appropriate choice for analysis.

It was also important to consider other methodologies when embarking on the research process. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA hereafter) was one of these. This would have provided knowledge that is based on the experience of the phenomenon in an inductive manner, something the current research is investigating. However, it would not have aligned with a social constitutions framework that is fundamental to this research. Therefore, it would not, in my opinion, provide an understanding of individual realities that are shared by the social, political, and cultural context. IPA also focuses on individual phenomena. This study wanted to be able to identify patterns across the data set. Therefore, IPA would not have been an appropriate choice.

Due to the importance of language, discourse analysis was considered. It would have provided an insight into how the participants make sense of their experiences through language. This would place language into the social and political context, something that is pivotal to the study. However, Willig (2013) connotes that discourse analysis does not address research questions regarding subjectivity and is unable to provide insight into how each participant experienced the phenomenon. Discourse analysis would therefore neglect the complexity of the internal world. This is reiterated by Twist et al. (2020), who state that “language often fails us, and nuance and complexity can become lost” (p. 18)¹⁶.

Narrative analysis (NA hereafter) was also considered due to Leiblich et al.’s (1998) claim that NA “provides access to people’s identity” (p. 3), a theme that was prominent in the literature. This would encourage an inductive approach to the data analysis, which, due

¹⁶ It is acknowledged that there are different types of discourse analysis such as Foucauldian discourse analysis and discursive psychology. These nuances are not explored here as discourse analysis is not the methodology using the current study.

to this being novel research, would have been appropriate. However, NA focuses on the stories of individuals, and whilst it could be argued that this would align with how counselling psychologists work clinically, it would not have provided opportunities to make links. Additionally, identifying commonalities and spotting patterns within and across the data, which would have been too individually focused. There was a lack of guidelines available on how to perform the analysis process, with the researcher having had to develop their own analytic tools (Leiblich et al., 1998). This can lead to vast differences in the way the analysis is conducted, potentially calling into question the robustness of the method. Therefore, the philosophical flexibility of RTA enables it to align with my epistemological and ontological standpoint. The type of knowledge produced had a focus on the individual experience and the use of guidelines to ensure a robust analytic process. Subsequently, RTA proved to be the preferred method of choice.

5.5 Limitations of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Campbell et al. (2021) connoted that TA is not aligned with a specific epistemological or ontological philosophical position. Braun and Clarke (2017) address this by highlighting that it is the philosophical flexibility of the method that makes it applicable across disciplines. They also acknowledge, however, that this has resulted in some confusion around the use of RTA, and this has impacted the quality of research. I believe that this encouraged me to fully engage in philosophical thinking and to answer these questions, as to where I situate myself as a researcher, engaging in deep conceptual thinking. Lynch (2000) argues that qualitative methodologies such as TA centre the researcher, and therefore deem this to be self-absorbed (Patai 1994), unhelpful and potentially damaging to

the data. Conversely, Campbell et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of the researcher and describe this as a fundamental element of the analytic process. Consequently, reflexivity is crucial, and this informed my decision to use Reflexive TA. Finlay (2021) states that reflexivity is an extremely valuable resource when engaging in qualitative research, rejecting the idea that this compromises the method's credibility. She does continue, however, to explain that reflexivity should not be used for “narcissistic navel gazing or emoting” (Finlay, 2021, p114) and that engaging in reflexivity is to deepen the understanding and transparency of the analytic process. Thuraiajah (2019) argues that the power dynamic between researcher and participant is acknowledged through reflexivity, ensuring ethical conduct.

Care (2016) argues that there are several factors to consider when using thematic analysis. One of these is that it is too simplistic. I have addressed this claim by ensuring that a more sophisticated form of analysis is utilised, by contextualising the data in the wider social, political, and historical context. Positioning the study within the wider socio-political and historical context ensured that RTA was erudite and robust. I ensured that I went beyond just a description of the data and ensured an in-depth interpretation.

5.6 Design and Study Procedure

The focus of the research was to explore the participants' personal experience of being partnered with a transgender individual when the trans identity was disclosed after the relationship had already been established. The research question that therefore underpinned this research study was:

Research question: *How do people in the UK experience their partners' transition to a different gender during the relationship?*

5.7 Development of the Research Question

It is also imperative to address the development of the research question. Initially, the research question for my study was: *How do people of colour living in the UK experience their partner's transition to a different gender during the relationship?*

This question emerged for me due to much of the psychological research being white Western-centric (Hong, 2023), and I therefore wanted to seek a variety of experiences and multiple intersecting identities. However, due to issues with recruitment, this wasn't possible. The research question then developed into: *How do people in the UK experience their partners' transition to a different gender during the relationship, and what affect does age have on this experience?*

However, due to the lack of literature and empirical evidence from the data, the age element of the research question proved to be irrelevant. This is why the research question has since developed into its final form: *How do people in the UK experience their partner's transition to a different gender during the relationship?*

Research aims

Below are listed the aims of the current research project:

1. To explore the lived experience of individuals in relationships where one partner transitions to a different gender after the relationship has been established.

2. To examine the psychological impact of a partner's gender transition on the non-transitioning partner.
3. To contribute to counselling psychology by deepening understanding of relationship diversity and promoting client-centred, socially just therapeutic practice.
4. To inform the development of professional guidelines, training, and policy in counselling psychology for supporting couples navigating gender transition, thereby improving therapeutic provision.

5.6.1 Participants and Recruitment

The recruitment process for this research project began by contacting charities such as Mermaids and Stonewall. Appendix 5 shows a partial screenshot of the charities that were contacted. In addition, I posted on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. All of these posts contained contact information, along with a recruitment flyer (See Appendix 6), which contained my university email address. I was also able to use snowball sampling, meaning that I asked participants to recommend others who may be interested in partaking in a study of this nature and to pass on my details and the recruitment flyer.

Participants were required to have been with their partner for 6 months or more before the disclosure of a trans identity. This is what the majority of the literature has also used as part of their inclusion criteria (Twist et al., 2017; Chester et al., 2017). It appears that the rationale for this was to ensure that a romantic partnership was well established before

the disclosure of the trans identity. The exploration was to identify how this disclosure may have altered the relationship and the questions of identity it raised.

Participants were all UK citizens currently living in the UK. All participants needed to be living in a similar society; therefore, the social and political context could be taken into consideration. Being cisgender was a requirement of the study, meaning that participants aligned with the same gender that they were assigned at birth (Hakeem, 2019). Participants of any sexual orientation were welcome to be part of the study and there were no specific inclusion criteria for this. All participants were aged 18 or over to ensure consent criteria was met. The youngest being 27 and the oldest 70 years of age, resulting in a large age range within the participants mirrored in the previous literature. There are many debates around the appropriate sample size with Constantinou et al. (2017) stating that data saturation is required. However, Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest that stating a specific number of participants goes against the “values and assumptions” (p201) of RTA. They continue to discuss the importance of quality of data rather than reducing this to a specific quantity (Braun and Clarke, 2021) The current research project consisted of a sample of six individuals. More details about the participants are shown in the table below.

Table 2: Participant Information Table

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Time in a relationship	Time in the relationship before the trans identity was disclosed	Relationship status	Sexuality

Lily	27	White British	Cisgender woman	5 years	3 years	In a relationship with a trans partner	Pansexual
Gene	60	White British	Cisgender woman	40 years	20 years	In a relationship with a trans partner	Straight
Rebecca	75	White British	Cisgender woman	37 years	23 years	In a relationship with a trans partner	Straight
Agnes	30	White British	Cisgender woman	4 years	1 year	In a relationship with a trans partner	Queer/ Bi sexual
Scarlett	36	White British	Cisgender woman	12 years	7 years	In a relationship with a trans partner	Queer
Hannah	50	White British	Cisgender woman	35 years	31 years	In a relationship with a trans partner	Straight ¹⁷

As this area is under-researched, I wanted to ensure that the study was as inclusive as possible. It included participants whose partners had transitioned from male to female and had undergone gender reassignment surgery and were taking hormones. Participants also had partners who had transitioned to a non-binary identity. This included changing pronouns to 'they, them', taking hormonal treatment, and physically changing their appearance.¹⁸

As evident from the demographics presented in Table 2, all participants were cisgender women and the majority of their partners identified as trans women. Upon

¹⁷ Here the word 'straight' has been used instead of heterosexual. It has not been changed by myself as the researcher as I believe it is important to use the language the participants have chosen to use especially when it comes to self-identification.

¹⁸ It is important to reiterate that transition is extremely personal and individualised. However, for the purpose of transparency of the study it was important to make the partners trans identity clear.

reflection, several factors may have contributed to this sample composition. First, my own identity as a cisgender woman may have influenced participant recruitment, with cisgender women potentially feeling a greater sense of comfort and identification when discussing their experiences with a researcher of the same gender. In contrast, cisgender men may have been less inclined to participate in interviews exploring personal and relational experiences, particularly when these involve sensitive issues surrounding gender identity and transition.

The recruitment strategy may also have shaped the characteristics of the sample.

Participants were primarily recruited through charities, LGBTQ+ organisations, and trans+ support groups. While these spaces provided valuable access to potential participants, they may have been more likely to engage cisgender women than cisgender men. Scott (2020) suggests that cisgender men partnered with transgender women frequently experience minority stress, including stigma, secrecy, and social isolation. Rather than seeking support through formal support groups, these men often cope through limited or selective self-disclosure which may reduce their visibility within community support settings and consequently their likelihood of encountering or responding to research invitations distributed through these networks.

It is therefore possible that the combination of my positionality as a cisgender woman and the recruitment methods employed contributed to a sample comprising exclusively cisgender women partnered with transgender women. While this does not diminish the richness of the data collected, it does limit the transferability of the findings to cisgender male partners or partners of transgender men and non-binary individuals. Future research

would benefit from purposive recruitment strategies designed to include a broader range of relationship configurations and partner identities.

5.6.2 Data Collection and Research Instruments

Before the interview, it was important to build a rapport with the participants and make them feel as comfortable as possible. With this in mind, I conducted semi-structured interviews (See Appendix 7). Add a couple of sentences here with regard to the focus of the questions.

This allowed for specific questions to be asked of all participants to gain responses to the research question. Several prompts were given to guide the participants to encourage them to go into detail about their experiences, but also allowed space for deviations. This ensured that all participants had the opportunity to share their experiences and also enabled the interviewees to give additional information and, therefore, give their unique insight into the experience of their partner's gender transition. This, in turn, allowed me to ask additional questions and probe further into what the participants were bringing to the interview. Belina (2022) suggests that using semi-structured interviews would allow an insight into what would otherwise remain hidden. The current study aimed to gain insight into an under-researched topic, and therefore, semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate tool.

A Dictaphone was used to record the audio of the interviews. I ensured that this device is in plain sight of the interviewees, and that they are aware when the audio

recording had begun and that a letter of consent has been signed (See Appendix 8). These audio recordings were subsequently transcribed by me, two weeks after the interviews had taken place. The voice recordings were then deleted after the transcriptions had been completed. Before this, it had been stored on a password-protected computer in an encrypted file, which also required a password to ensure its security and confidentiality.

Westland (2015) discusses the importance of non-verbal cues when working with clients. This is why I used a pen and paper in addition to the audio recording and made notes of gestures and tones of voice used that seemed significant.

5.7 Ethical Considerations

5.7.1 Informed Consent

It was vital to get informed consent to partake in the study. This was done through an introductory email (See Appendix 9). If individuals were willing to partake in the consent form (see Appendix 8) would then be sent out. An information sheet was given to prospective participants (See Appendix 10) containing clear information on how the participants' data would be used and how their anonymity would be protected. Once they had consented, each participant was assigned a pseudonym; when they were referred to in the subsequent research, the pseudonyms were used, ensuring that their real names were not revealed. Appendix 8 shows a demographic sheet that participants also filled in.

5.7.2 Working with Minority Populations

As I identify as a cis gender woman and am not trans, or in an intimate relationship with a trans person, for this research project, I am in the position of an outsider researcher. It is imperative to consider my position as an outsider researcher and how this has influenced this research project.

Richards (2015) identifies that [some] researchers engage in trans research purely due to “a fascination with the subject” (p54), suggesting that researchers’ interest is voyeuristic in nature and could be contributing to the fetishisation of the trans community. This encouraged me to reflect on my own motives for engaging in research of this nature. I was inspired by a client that I worked with on a placement, who came to the service for support with low self-esteem. During the course of treatment (12 weeks), their partner had come out as trans and was going through a transition process that involved hormones and other physical changes. My client was expressing a lot of difficulties with this, and I soon realised very quickly that I was out of my depth and unsure how to support my client. As I looked for resources, and at the time I found very little, this made me see that there is a place for research on the subject of relationships between cis and trans individuals that would hopefully lead to practical guidance for clinicians and eventually specialised and high-quality support for this client group.

I was conscious that engaging in research of this nature could create suspicion for those wanting to participate. Due to the rife transphobia present in the UK currently, it was

important to be transparent about my intentions for the research project, but also my personal stance on gender and trans identities. This transparency with potential participants meant that they would understand why I wanted to conduct the research, but also that they were safe to share their experiences with me.

Rigorous reflexivity is at the heart of this research project, and as an outsider researcher, it is imperative to engage in this. However, Richards (2015) identifies that the idea of reflexivity comes with a number of challenges. She goes on to identify the importance of personal motivation when conducting a study that involves trans individuals or those who are trans adjacent. At the recruitment level, I was very clear with prospective participants about my personal motivations for undertaking the research and how the study came about. This was done through the introductory communication and by allowing participants to ask any questions before partaking in the research project. Beyond recruitment, I was conscious to ensure that I was using rigorous reflexivity in order to hold my outsider researcher identity at the forefront, enabling me to acknowledge how this potentially affected aspects of the research project. I did this through writing reflexively that corresponds to each chapter, and also engaging in open reflective discussions with my supervisor and in personal therapy. I also ensured that I chose a method that had reflexivity at its core (reflexive thematic analysis). Using this method reflected my desire to ensure I did not engage in 'othering'.

Richards (2015) identifies that it is imperative that working with minority populations is "ethically grounded throughout" (p54) and not purely going through the research ethics process provided by the university. One of these ethical issues that needs careful

consideration is that of what Richards (2015) describes as a power dynamic between participant and researcher, connoting that this is an inevitability. However, she does continue to highlight that the researcher must be sure not to underestimate the power the participants possess. It was important to mitigate against this by ensuring I wasn't 'othering' the participants. This was done through careful use of inclusive language, being conscious of my own implicit biases. I mirrored the language used by participants to ensure there were no unconscious microaggressions and to engage with my biases through extensive reflexivity in several formats, including journaling and consultations with my supervisor. My desire to be aware of the power dynamic between my participants and me as a researcher aligns with my identity as a counselling psychologist and my belief that the individuals are the experts on themselves and not us as clinicians. I hold, therefore, to the strong stance of the importance of learning from others and learning from their lived experiences (Casement, 2014).

Richards (2015) describes that another way that disparity in power dynamics can play out in the research process is through the researcher's need for findings to *prove or fit into* a particular theory, and those participating in research could therefore be portrayed in inaccurate ways. This was clear in the current research project due to academic discussions where the findings did not necessarily fit the current research question. I was aware that the power dynamic could come into play in my approaching this research topic. I acknowledged that I wanted to see the hope behind the participants' experiences in order to write in a trans positive manner. I needed to be aware of the space for the participants to express any potential struggles they might be experiencing in their relationship.

Many researchers undertake projects to give voice to those who may have been previously overlooked in the psychological field (Ashby, 2011). Richards (2015) explores the idea of 'giving voice' to marginalised populations and communities and identifies that this can be a problematic concept. It assumes that participants do not have the opportunity to have their voices heard in other domains outside of academia, which may be untrue. From these assumptions, the researcher could be perpetuating the marginalisation of certain groups. Richards (2015) also asks whose voice is being heard when it is through the researcher? Here, I was careful to ensure that the participants' stories were being told accurately by sharing the transcripts back with the participants to ensure that these reflected their experience.

As an outsider researcher, I needed to reflect on who would benefit from research of this nature. Richards (2015) emphasises the benefit needing to be that of the participants, not the researcher, which I agree with. This was clear from the feedback from participants, who all stated that more research and more support for them are needed when experiencing their partner's transition. However, it would be dishonest of me not to acknowledge the personal benefit of undertaking this research project in pursuit of being awarded a doctoral degree. I will also benefit from conducting this research project as it will further my own knowledge and enhance my skills as a clinician.

In partaking in this research, it was important to reflect on my own experience of being othered and how this relates to my study. Due to being neurodiverse, I have autism, ADHD and dyslexia. I would be labelled by others as difficult, strange, unintelligent, someone who doesn't listen, naughty, disruptive, uninterested and forming relationships with others

was extremely difficult. Masking played a part in being able to get through the day; however, the toll this took on my mental health was substantial, and this made forming a sense of identity very challenging and confusing. Also being queer, I have faced homophobia, a sense of not belonging both in society but also within the LGBTQIA+ community for not being queer enough. These experiences of being othered have ignited my sense of justice, which aligns with my identity as a counselling psychologist. I believe this is why I have felt compelled to undertake this research alongside my practice experience, detailed above.

5.7.3 Care for the Participants

It is of the utmost importance that no harm comes to the participant or the researcher; therefore, I followed the London Metropolitan University and the BPS guidelines (2021) on psychological research to ensure that the participants did not experience distress due to the interview. I reminded the participants that we could stop or take a break at any time and that a distress management protocol was to be followed (See Appendix 11). I ensured that participants were not in therapy at the time of the interview or suffering severely with their mental health by issuing a PHQ-9 (See Appendix 12) and a GAD-7 questionnaire (See Appendix 13). None of the participants scored 5 or above on the GAD-7 and on the PHQ-9 and were therefore able to take part in the study.

It was important to include a debrief after the interviews in case any part of the interview was, in some way, triggering or caused participants any emotional distress. At this point, participants were given a debrief document (See Appendix 14) containing several helplines and organisations that would be able to provide support. The form encouraged the

participants to reach out to those around them when they felt that they needed support. I also provided my contact details should participants have wished to seek follow-up support from me. I did not receive any contact from any of the participants for any form of emotional support. The participants had two weeks after the interview had been conducted to withdraw from the study. One participant contacted me wanting to change some of the language they had used in the initial interview. As this was within the two weeks, I was able to change the wording. After the two weeks had passed, the transcription of the interviews began, and therefore, it was too late to withdraw, and participants were made aware of this when giving consent. It is important to note that none of the participants have contacted me wishing to withdraw from the study.

There was no financial risk to participants; however, they were offered a £15 gift voucher for taking part in the study. Physical risk to the participants was minimised as interviews were conducted online via Zoom.

Due to the socio-political climate, it was important to consider the possible vulnerability of participants. It is argued that due to the transphobic nature of society within the UK, Lopez (2023) highlights that the current lived reality of being trans is difficult and dangerous (Flores et al. 2018). Experiencing forms of stigma, aggression, and discrimination at street level but also politically (White-Hughto et al. 2015). Recounting difficult experiences could have been distressing for participants, especially if they had witnessed transphobia towards their partner or been a victim of homophobic abuse themselves. It is also important to consider that they may not have felt safe to share their stories and questioned the motives of the researcher and the implications of the research. It was

imperative to be transparent about this with participants and ensure that they were able to ask questions and speak freely, though building a rapport and checking in regularly on how participants were feeling during the interviews. The interview questions were carefully considered to remain as open-ended as possible, using inclusive language¹⁹.

5.8 Methodological Reflexivity

The nature of RTA is to ensure that reflexivity is a core part of the process and is present throughout the entirety of the research process. There were a number of elements that I needed to consider and explore reflexively.

Recruitment was much more challenging than I had expected. Initially, the study focused on people of colour. After 4 months of recruitment, I was not able to interview any participants. I was in contact with individuals who were not people of colour but who wanted to share their stories. It seemed unethical not to allow them to be part of the study, especially due to the lack of research in this area. Consequently, the focus on race and culture was not a part of this research project as it had been intended. On reflection, I understand that this could be challenging for many; being a white person myself, I could have made participants reluctant to come forward or find it challenging to open up to me.

It was daunting at first, embarking on the scientific philosophical journey. At times, it was difficult to stop reading, and I found myself confused numerous times. I found myself changing my philosophical opinion when thinking about my own preconceptions of gender

¹⁹ The researcher used inclusive language at the time the interviews were administered and acknowledges that this could be out of date at the time of publication.

and how this is seen within society. However, using RTA allowed me to fully explore this without the feeling of having to adapt or 'fit' my personal research philosophy into a research methodology.

I received an email from a participant asking to change the wording of parts of their responses to the interview questions. On reflection, I believe that with subjects such as this, language is important, and participants are all too aware of this. It seemed that she wanted to ensure that she had expressed herself appropriately and accurately. This encouraged me to reflect on the language I had used in the interviews. If I were to conduct the study again or build upon this study, I would be more transparent on the term 'trans' when interviewing participants and also ask if there is any language they would prefer to use when referring to or describing their partners or the gender transition process.

Initially, I was not using incentives for participants for fear of this being fanatically exploitative. However, on reflection, I believe that marginalised communities should not be expected to give up their time for free, and therefore, a gift voucher of £15 was deemed appropriate.

CHAPTER SIX: Analysis

6.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis: A process

The following data analysis was based on the six semi-structured interviews that generated approximately seven hours of audio content. A reflexive thematic analysis was carried out based on Braun and Clarke's (2022) analytic framework, which comprised a six-phase approach. For this study, these phases were used as a guideline and were performed as follows.²⁰

Definitions of terms

Definition of terms

Code: A unit of analysis that identifies specific meaning within the data

Data set: All data collected from the participants.

Data extract: A specific section of a transcript.

Data item: Individual interview data collected from six participants.

Candidate theme: Ascertaining potential themes based on the relevant codes selected.

Theme: To acquire collective meaning organised around a central (anchoring) concept.

Subtheme: A key concept within the theme

(Braun & Clarke, 2021)

²⁰ I ensured that reflexivity was at the centre of the analysis and was an ongoing process used throughout all of the phases described.

6.1.1 Familiarisation with the Data

Phase one consisted of transcribing the interviews verbatim. This allowed me to immerse myself in the data, ensuring I was familiar with the breadth and depth of the content, something Braun and Clarke (2006) see as essential. Here, I read through the entire data set once and then re-read it multiple times to make some informal notes and highlight initial ideas relating to the data item and the wider data set as a whole. I made initial notes on any relevant meanings and emerging patterns within the were recorded on post-it notes documenting which transcript they belonged to, and some clustering of these initial codes and ideas began to develop.

Listening to the interview recordings multiple times, alongside transcription, I also added symbols based on (see Appendix 16) to show how the participants were communicating, aiming to get further insight into the experience of the phenomenon and beyond surface-level communication. This reflects how counselling psychologists work clinically, that there is meaning not only in *what* is being said, but *how* it is being said.

6.1.2 Generating Initial Codes

During phase two, I began to use initial codes. Systematically working through each data item and highlighting any sections that were of interest or that related to the research question. These codes consisted of short phrases capturing the essence of what was being communicated in the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that codes are not single words, as this doesn't capture the complexity and depth of the idea. This was a cyclical process and

was performed multiple times with codes developing, changing, merging, and some ceasing to be used altogether as I worked through the data. To avoid analytic foreclosure, I ensured that this process was rigorous and to the point of saturation, as purely engaging in superficial analysis of the data would yield themes that wouldn't attain their full potential (Braun and Clarke, 2022). I ensured to engage with the data set multiple times, as Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that "insight is developed through analytic engagement" (p. 55). I coded the data at different levels using semantic coding described by Braun and Clarke (2022) as surface level, communicating explicit meaning and latent codes which provide more implicit and conceptual denotation. Both were generated simultaneously as a means of ensuring continuous immersion in the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that at this stage of analysis, it is important to code for as many potential patterns as possible. Table 1 shows how the transcripts were initially coded line reads "I think that obviously things have changed now she has had facial feminisation surgery last year and that has kind of really changed her safety and has made moving around the world a lot easier for them" and has been coded as 'the importance of gender norms and the impact this has on safety'. This doesn't directly answer the research question, but could provide insight into the socio-political context of having a transgender identity and relate to an important pattern later in the analysis process. At this stage, coding for anything that might be relevant or seems important is essential.

It is important to note that analysis cannot occur in a vacuum (Chung, 2019). An inductive approach to coding was used; however, it would be difficult and foolish to ignore the existing literature. Therefore, it was important to be reflexive throughout this process, ensuring to acknowledge if any existing literature was influencing the analytic process.

Additionally, when coding the latter data items, I acknowledged that I might be coding through the lens of the earlier data, looking for similarities. I was able to combat this by taking regular breaks in between coding each data item to see them as separate. I also kept a reflexive diary throughout the process. It was also imperative to bracket perceptions I had regarding the experience of the phenomenon; the reflexive diary and regular peer supervision sessions aided me with this.

Finally, I collated the relevant segments of the data for each code label. To ensure I was ready to move on to the next phase, I looked at my individual codes and asked myself if they provided the essence of the diversity of meanings contained in the data set and if my analytic take on the data was clear. Braun and Clarke (2006) see codes as analytical 'building blocks' to generate larger ideas.

6.1.3 Generating Initial Themes

Throughout the third phase of RTA, I was beginning to analyse across the data set, identifying codes that encompassed a core idea or held shared meaning in an attempt to create candidate themes. These were collated by many rounds of physically cutting out sections of data, recording codes and corresponding transcript numbers on post-it notes, moving these around or removing them, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestion to "play around" (p19) with codes. The idea is to form a 'best fit' of potential themes and sub-themes to create an analytical narrative. For a theme to be considered, I referred to my research question, ensuring that an inductive approach to RTA was used, reflecting the fact that this is innovative research.

Considering the experience of the phenomenon, it was important to select the codes that I believed to be the most pertinent in accordance with the research question. I collated what I considered to be the most relevant codes and began to organise these into clusters. I noticed that many codes were similar and could be clustered together. This enabled me to produce a list of seventeen clusters that could be potential themes. These are listed below:

- *Need for education* (i.e., the lack of understanding when it comes to trans people)
- *Importance of the social context* (i.e., how society currently views sexuality, gender and trans people)
- *Societies' view of trans people* (i.e., the negativity that accompanies being trans)
- *Assumptions made by others about the relationship* (i.e., that the relationship will end due to their partner's transition)
- *Partner's authenticity*
- *Partner is happier in themselves* (i.e., the change in their partner's confidence)
- *Mixture of emotions*
- *Being brought closer together* (i.e., the experience of a deeper level of intimacy and emotional connection)
- *Need for emotional support*
- *The need for community and those who have similar experiences*
- *Judgement from others*
- *Exploring my sexual identity*
- *Relational changes*
- *Future uncertainty* (i.e., what other changes are to come in the relationship and how this will affect me)

- *Prioritising partner over themselves* (i.e., a strong sense of not wanting to make this process about them)
- *Knowing myself more due to my partner's transition*
- *Changes in personality*

Under each of these potential themes listed above, I added the relevant codes, ensuring to note the transcript that it came from and where to find the corresponding excerpt within the transcript.

As I have a diagnosis of dyslexia, writing and drawing ideas in a variety of ways is essential for me to see and enables me to process information more effectively. Appendix 17 shows how I moved through the different processes and saw the journey of RTA and ensured that my analysis encompassed a cohesive, complex and in-depth analytical narrative.

There were many codes relating to the participants' experiences of overall perceptions of trans coupledness, from those that are close to the couple but also the wider public, in relation to the socio-political context and the experience of this feedback. This included codes such as *male violence*, *safety concerns*, *us vs them narrative*, for example. These were clustered together under the potential theme of *responsibility for care and safety of the trans partner*. This also encompassed the potential themes from the above list, of *prioritising partners over themselves* and *the need for education*. At this stage of analysis, many initial ideas and potential themes were discarded, such as *judgment from others* and *partners' authenticity*. This decision was made when analysing the clustered codes and attempting to categorise these around a central organising concept. I noticed during this process that it

was difficult to decide how and when to let some potential themes go. Something that helped in the decision-making process was asking myself two key questions suggested by Braun and Clarke 2006:

- Is this reflective of the data set as a whole?
- Are my codes organised around a central concept?

This is a technique that I used throughout the analysis process.

Braun and Clark (2022) emphasise the importance and relevance of codes as not only being those that are regularly occurring, but also identifying codes that have shared meaning, ideas, and concepts. Subsequently, I was able to generate four initial themes:

1. Emotional complexity, encapsulated codes that related to the plethora of emotions experienced by the participants. Including processing on occasion contradictory emotions, such as *anger over transition, concern over transition, privileged to be part of the transition process and happiness at partners' confidence*.

2. Togetherness, denoted codes that showed the determination of the participants to remain in the relationship, including *working through the transition together, a drive to stay together* and an *us vs them narrative*. These codes showed that the transition process brought the couple closer together and that a new, deeper type of intimacy was experienced.

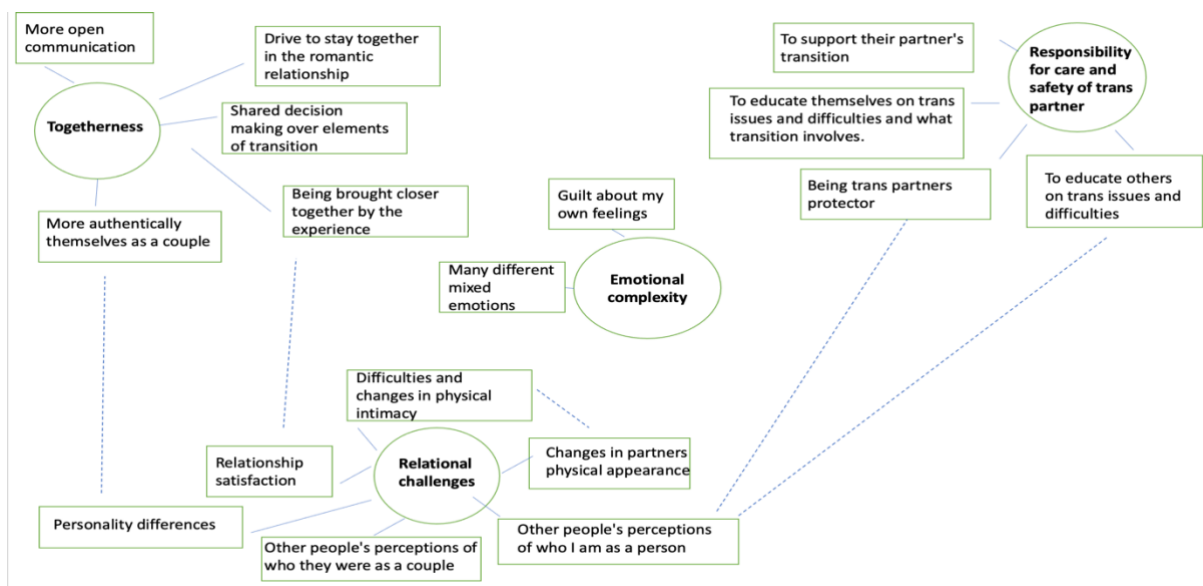
3. Responsibility for the care and safety of their trans partner, covered codes that highlighted how life had changed since their partner's transition, looking at new behaviours

participants felt were their duty to engage in, such as their *role as partner's protector* and *the need to educate others*.

4. **Relational changes**, referred to codes that encapsulated difficulties within the relationship, such as *changes in physical intimacy* and *personality differences*. Once accumulated, some of these codes were clustered together to create a sub-theme of *Relationship Satisfaction*.

Figure 1

Initial thematic map with emerging themes in bold



Braun and Clarke (2022) identify that it can be challenging to decide when to move on to the next phase of analysis. As the researcher, I concluded this phase by moving through several rounds of re-clustering codes into potential themes and generating a thematic map (see Fig.

1). According to Braun and Clarke (2022), this signals that I am ready to move on to the next phase of analysis²¹.

6.1.4 Developing and Reviewing Themes

Braun and Clarke (2006) discuss the importance of refining themes. On returning to the data set, in relation to my research question, I was able to think critically about the current themes and clustered codes. I rearranged the codes to form new clusters to develop a more coherent analytical narrative.

Emotional complexity was very important and was prevalent across the literature; however, this did not seem robust enough to be considered a valid theme. I was all too aware of falling into the trap of being summative rather than interpretive. Due to this, I revisited the codes and decided to merge the themes of *emotional complexity* and *togetherness*. With the name of the theme changing to *emotional processing* and *togetherness* being a subtheme within this, exploring the drive for couples to stay together and the new levels of intimacy transition facilitated. *Balancing conflicting emotions* was another subtheme exploring the complexity of the plethora of emotions experienced by participants. This showed more depth of analysis rather than being summative.

Upon reflection, *responsibility for care and safety of trans partners* seemed too ambiguous to be a theme within itself. Returning to the data and rearranging some of the codes, a theme of *becoming more than a partner* seemed more appropriate, encompassing

²¹ It is important to acknowledge that RTA is not a liner process and moving between the phases in all directions is to be expected.

subthemes of *partners as protectors* against types of violence experienced at street level, but also within wider society and social structure. This results in participants taking on the role of their trans *partner's advocate* and *prioritising their partner's needs* over their own.

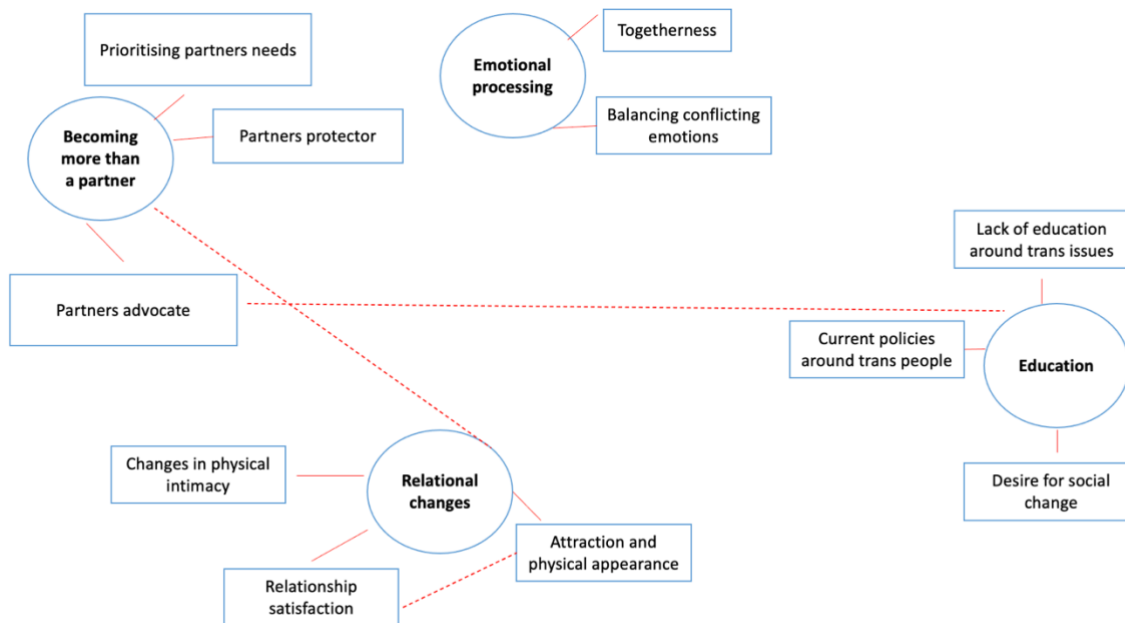
The previously generated themes neglected the idea of the lack of education around trans issues. As I returned to the data with my research question in mind, this was a larger area of concern that was prevalent across the data and a common experience that the participants encountered. On reflection, I decided that this needed to be promoted to a theme, titled *Education*. Exploring the subthemes of the *lack of education around trans issues* and the effect that this had on the participant's experience. Within the data, there appeared to be a strong *desire for social change*, and this became another subtheme along with *current policies around trans people*.

The theme of *relational changes* was kept as this was prevalent across the data, with sub-themes of *attraction and physical appearance*, *physical intimacy changes*, and *relationship satisfaction*.

The outcome of this stage of analysis is shown in the developed thematic map (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Developed thematic map



6.1.5 Defining Themes

As RTA is an ongoing and organic process and it is expected that recoding will continue throughout the analysis. The key element of this phase, however, is to refine and define themes further, ensuring that codes are clustered around a central organising concept with clear, identifiable boundaries, resulting in a coherent account of the data. Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest that this phase is concluded when a satisfactory thematic map has been produced shown below in Table 1.

Table 1

Main theme	Subthemes
The love that dare not speak its name	The importance of being together
	There's nowt queer as folk.
The renegotiation of the self within an intimate relationship	Now I'm thinking about gender
	Redefining sexuality
	A change in roles and relationship dynamics
The emotional gains and the emotional cost	Emotional experiences
	Emotional support
A new identity and place in society	The power of me
	The continuing journey of transition

It was evident that there were many links remaining between themes (shown by the dotted lines in Figure 2). This identified that I needed to return to the codes and ensure that there were clear boundaries between themes to produce themes and subthemes that resulted in a meaningful argument.

On re-examination, the theme titled *Relational changes* seemed to be too narrow, as there were more elements about change than those just being relational. Participants discussed changes within themselves, such as being able to explore their own sexuality and being more accepting of themselves. This resulted in the theme being renamed to *Adapting to and dealing with change*. This centred around the concept of the many changes that participants experienced during their partner's transition. Important elements of the theme

encompassed codes that related to *Transforming roles* and *Redefining sexual identity*, which became subthemes.

On reviewing the data, there were strong connections between education, the socio-political climate, and the view of trans people in the UK encompassing these ideas was this was *A new identity and a place in society*, consequently creating a new theme. This relates to how participants were seen by others in relation to their partner's transition, with sub-themes of *The effect on family dynamics*, *Chosen family* and *Me in my new context*.

Emotional processing remained a theme; it encompassed an important part of the experience of the phenomenon and was prevalent across the data set. This indicates that there is a variety of different emotional aspects to the experience. One aspect of this was *togetherness*. This idea was too vague to be a subtheme and didn't fully express the analysis in relation to my research question. However, it remained an important attribute of the participant's experience and was therefore re-classified as *The importance of being together*. This encompassed codes in relation to how couples had a drive to remain in the relationship and the new levels of intimacy they experienced. Another expression of emotional processing was a variety of *emotional experiences*. The need for *emotional support* was prevalent throughout the data set and highlighted the multifaceted nature and complexity of the phenomenon, and this, therefore, became the third subtheme.

This phase of analysis was concluded by the creation of the four themes with clear boundaries, ensuring that the analysis has interpretive depth. By producing a thematic map, I was satisfied with indicated I was ready to move onto the final phase.

6.1.6. The 'write up'

Part of the analytic process of RTA is producing the report. This phase will be explored in depth in the following chapter: Thematic Findings.

6.2 Quality Assurance

Braun and Clarke (2022) provide several tools and exercises to ensure that RTA is a vigorous and robust form of analysis. To ensure I engaged in quality RTA, I used the table provided by Braun and Clarke (2022) (see Appendix 18) as a form of checklist against my own analysis. Ensuring that the analysis is fit for purpose (with clear and coherent theoretical framework), themes are well developed around a central organising concept and that there is a clear relationship between the data and the analytic narrative.

I also looked at the companion website which has guidance for teachers when marking and evaluating RTA. This discussed the importance of clarity around the philosophical underpinnings of the research and what type of TA is being used, how it was used and why it was used (Bradbury – Jones et al., 2017) something that has been addressed in the previous chapter.

Engaging in the activities set out by Braun and Clarke (2022) provided opportunities to familiarise myself with the analytic process of RTA. I studied the worked examples presented by Braun and Clarke (2022) to deepen my understanding of the process before embarking on the RTA journey using the data I had collected. Braun and Clarke (2013)

describe a “built in” (p1) quality assurance process, by reviewing themes against both the generated codes and the data set as a whole.

Reflexivity is at the centre of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022), ensuring that this was a core part of the analytic process, and this therefore ensured a high-quality analysis.

Reflexivity is discussed in Chapter 1 and below on the analytical process.

6.3 Analytical Reflexivity

Engaging in RTA has been an interesting process. I have been able to fully explore my philosophical underpinnings as a researcher, something that at times has been daunting but also rewarding, enabling me to learn about myself on a deeper level and navigate who I am as a researcher.

Braun and Clarke (2006) state that RTA is not a protocol-driven process. However, due to dyslexia, there was comfort in having six steps to move between. I needed to bear in mind that this process is not linear, and it afforded me the freedom to move between the phases in any direction, ensuring an in-depth analysis. However, it was tempting at times to move through the steps in order and not revisit the different phases. I combated this temptation by looking at my results and potential themes and reviewing whether they were representative of the data set. Through several rounds of reading the data and re-coding to ensure that the analysis was of high quality.

Tuckett (2005) states that engaging with the literature enhances the analytic process, whilst Brooks and Hastens (2010) argue the importance of analysing void of bias. However, it is impossible not to engage with the literature and analyse objectively, especially when RTA places the researcher as central to the process. Braun and Clarke (2022) go further by identifying the inability to take emotion and personal perspectives out of the analytical process. To address this, I employed the use of bracketing (Casement, 2014), my personal assumptions and judgments by recording regularly in a reflective journal. Ensuring that this went deeper than surface level, reflecting on why I might have had a certain response, what ideas or values it relies on, and how I might have responded differently. Reflexivity is embedded in the analytical process of RTA and in my identity as a counselling psychologist. I am aware that I cannot fully bracket my assumptions and emotions, but engaging in academic convocations with my supervisor and being transparent about these within the research process is vital.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Thematic Findings

This section details the four themes and their corresponding subthemes, generated from the six participant semi-structured interviews included in this study. The data gathered was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, which sought to provide a response to the research question: How do people in the UK experience their partner's transition to a different gender during the relationship?

The first theme that will be discussed is '*The love that dare not speak its name*'. This theme identifies the significance placed on remaining in the romantic relationship despite challenges and pressures of personal and wider societal expectations. The second theme is titled '*The renegotiation of the self within an intimate relationship*'. This theme explores how participants perceived their sense of self, including their own gender identity, in relation to their partner's transition and their sexuality. Thirdly, the theme '*The emotional gains and the emotional cost*' is examined. It explores the complex emotions faced by the participants and how this impacted the experience of their partner's gender transition. The fourth and final theme is titled '*A new identity and place in society*'. This theme examines the idea of what the participants have learnt about themselves throughout the gender transition process, and emphasises that within an intimate relationship, it is pivotal to grow and change together under the impact of the sociopolitical climate. In this chapter how theory is related to each theme will also be acknowledged.

The table below shows the themes and subthemes that will be elaborated on within this chapter.

Table 3: Thematic findings table

Main Theme	Subtheme
The love that dare not speak its name	The importance of being together
	There's nowt queer as folk
The renegotiation of the self within an intimate relationship	Now I'm thinking about gender
	Redefining sexuality
	A change in roles and relationship dynamics
The emotional gains and the emotional costs	Emotional experiences
	Emotional support
A new identity and place in society	The power of me
	The continuing journey of transition

7.1 The love that dare not speak its name (Douglas, 1896)

The first theme that was generated from the data is categorised as 'The love that dare not speak its name'. This theme contains two subthemes. The first is '*The importance of*

being together'. This subtheme highlights how couples wanted to remain in the romantic relationship throughout the gender transition process. It examines what challenges they faced and how they are continuing to work through these together. The second sub-theme, titled *'There's nowt queer as folk'*, explores the experiences that couples encountered from other people in their lives. This includes incidents of violence and prejudice, demonstrating that despite the couple's drive to remain in the relationship, they faced challenges from those around them.

7.1.1 The importance of being together

All the participants who took part in the current study described a strong drive to remain in the relationship. This is shown by Agnes and Scarlett. Firstly, when Scarlet was asked, "Is there anything about your partner's transition that has stood out to you?" (Scarlett, P9:20). She replied with *"Of this experience? Yeah, I think something I haven't really mentioned is like I think the fear that comes with, with a fear of like this question of will you still be attracted to me if they transition? That has defiantly been like a big thing early in and I guess less so now its present in our conversations, and I think that again is part of me becoming more clear in my sexual preferences ... of course we're going to be together"* (Scarlett, P9:31). Secondly Agnes Echoes Scarlett's sentiment of wanting to remain in the relationship by stating *"Umm, I don't think so. I think {pause} I was quite like, I've been quite sure of who I am for quite a long time umm, and I think, I think that I dunno I think that {pause} I think we've both really complemented each other super well with the journey that she has been on and like it has been, I've been so happy to be a part of it {pause}..... There was never a question about us splitting up"* (Agnes, P5:10). This was in response to the question "you

talked about your sexual identity, I was wondering if that has changed as your partner transitioned?" (Agnes, P4:40). For both Scarlett and Agnes, remaining in a relationship with their partner was of the utmost importance, and they both mentioned that staying together was a priority. The fact that Scarlett and Agnes both mentioned this shows that there had been different expectations from others in their lives about whether they would remain in their subsequent relationships. Agnes reinforced this idea by communicating an 'us vs them' narrative, when asked "what has your partner's transition been like for you?" (Agnes, P2:1) she said that *"Umm, well, I think it has definitely been up and down but the downs have been how awful the world is that has been, that, the struggles have been experiencing the world very differentlyit's really awful how the world is, it's us together"* (P2:2). It was also important for participants to feel prepared for the reactions of others as when asked *"Has the transition process effected your relationship in any way?"* (Rebecca, P4:36) Rebecca stated, *"we were prepared for people not to be accepting"* (P5:4). Mirroring the concept of the reactions and expectations of others and the potential relationship breakdown was Hannah, who recounted an experience of attending a group for trans individuals and their partners when asked *"did counselling help you manage these changes?"* (Hannah, P4:8). In this group many of the attendees were trans themselves and she was the only partner. Members of this group were recounting experiences of their relationships breaking down and ending due to their trans identity and the subsequent gender transition process. *"I found it really depressing because here was maybe about ahh, 12 people there or something, and we all just sat around and it was like a general discussion. The other people who were talking when we were there were like well I told my wife about it and obviously we split up and like ya know everyone's relationship had failed because of this and I found it really hard because we are trying to make something work."* (P4:35). Hannah stressed the

word “*trying*” when recounting this experience, communicating her frustration around the narrative that when one person in a relationship transitioned to a different gender the relationship ends, something she did not want to happen. This also emphasised the drive Hannah had to remain in the relationship and the effort that this would take when navigating the gender transition process.

Gene acknowledged the many challenges that she had faced and stated that “*It’s been very hard at times, very hard but we’ve stuck together, we’ve stuck through it*” (P5:29) in response to the question “*do you think the transition process has effected your relationship in any way?*” (Gene, P5:27). Scarlett acknowledged her drive to remain in the relationship by stating that “*I hope we are together forever; [partners name] is my soulmate and I hope that we are together for as long as we can be*” (P9:30-32) showing that there was a deep connection that was on a more spiritual level, than purely being centred around the physical changes that can come with the gender transition process. Lily echoed this by saying “*I don’t really care what gender you identify as I love you for who you are*” (P6:3). She continued to explain how solid she felt her relationship was by discussing that “*anything can happen, and you know we will, we will do it.*” (P6:7) This was in response to the question “*Has your partners transition effected your relationship in any way I know you mentioned before about being closer. Is there any other impact relationally that you have noticed?*”. Lily gives the impression that if she and her partner could go through a gender transition process together and become closer as a result of this, then their relationship was strong enough to withstand anything. This was supported by Agnes who stated that “*I mean it’s strengthened our relationship*” (Agnes, P11:29). This was in response to the question “*So how if in any way would you say that {name’s} transition has had an impact on your relationship?*” (Agnes, P11:27). Agnes is affirming that the gender transition process is a complex one and comes

with many challenges but going through it together had made her relationship more robust and was a testament to the resilience of their partnership. The participants' partners changed the way they performed their gender, and in doing so, many participants described a strengthening of their relational bond. This finding aligns with Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which conceptualises gender as something that is enacted through repeated behaviours and practices rather than as a fixed or innate identity. As participants' partners adopted more authentic ways of expressing their gender, couples often renegotiated established gendered roles, patterns of interaction, and expectations within the relationship. This process of renegotiation appeared to foster greater authenticity, openness, and emotional intimacy, thereby strengthening the relational bond.

Along with a drive to remain in the relationship, participants also experienced feeling more connected to their trans partner, when asked *"has the transition process changed your relationship in any way?"* (Lily, P4:40 and Rebecca P5:5) Lily stated, *"Umm, yeah just so much closer umm ya know it's so much better now obviously and the foundation that it created the the trust and the umm, yeah the trust that it creates ya know"*. Rebecca mentioned that *"I definitely think it made us closer. Yes [pause] we share a lot more now, we are happily able to get on with our lives...I definitely think it made us closer"* (Rebecca, P5:7). This shows that the gender transition process was necessary for Lily's partner to be able to continue authentically in the relationship and that gender dysphoria is something that prevents individuals from living their lives. For Rebecca, being able to support her partner through this had made their relationship stronger. When asked *"how do you see your relationship now?"* (Rebecca, P5:30) Rebecca continued to explain that she saw the relationship with her partner as *"very positive now"* (P6:1) and that she was happy that they

are *“marching into old age together”* (P5: 49). Agnes went into more detail of what her and her partner’s newfound closeness looked like. In response to the question *“How do you see your relationship now?”* (Agnes, P8:13), Agnes discussed that *“We know each other so much better than before”* (P8:25). The development of ‘closeness’ within the participants’ subsequent relationships was expressed through different means and in a variety of ways. Agnes continued that *“developing these new things in common, it’s been really enjoyable”* (P8:37). The gender transition of Agnes’s partner had allowed them both to develop and grow together within the relationship, an opportunity Agnes may not have had without her partner’s gender transition.

Participants reported experiences of new levels of intimacy within the relationship, and Scarlett explained that after their partner discloses their trans identity, *“there isn’t anything we can’t talk about now”* (P8:4) when asked *“how do you see your relationship now?”*. For Scarlett, this was a change from before her partner’s transition, as before this, she described communication on occasions being *“challenging”* (Scarlett, P5:17), especially around gender identity²². When asked the prompt question of *“so it sounds like a mixture of emotions, would you say at the beginning there was grief and loss?”* (Lily, P2:44). Lily described that her partner’s gender transition process had strengthened their relationship and had made them feel more emotionally connected *“yeah I was definitely in a difficult space myself and yeah, it was really difficult.....[our relationship] is on a deeper level now ... [there is an] added level of honesty”* (P3:1). She concluded by stating that *“it’s a really special type of closeness”* (P3:10). This shows that gender transition is an individualised, complex, and multifaceted

²²This is unsurprising due to the high levels of distress that are synonymous with gender dysphoria (Hilton et al. 2022).

process. It results in the partners of the trans individuals being placed in a unique position, and this, in turn, has a lasting impact on the experiences within the relationship.

7.1.2 “There’s nowt queer as folk”

The participants discussed wider family members' reactions to their partner's gender identity. Participants experienced a lack of understanding from the people closest to them. This lack of understanding of the gender transition process caused participants to feel frustrated. When answering the question *“have you noticed any differences in the way other people perceive you as a couple?”* (Scarlett, P10:47) responded with *“ Umm, no I haven’t noticed anyone being any different but I actually just feel for [name] in that sense because I just think people, they’ve changed their use of pronouns and stuff and they try to use they umm but ahh yeah they haven’t really changed and also like fucking parents man, my mum is so bad at it, and I keep trying to explain but then I guess I just didn’t want to over explain but I think it’s one concept too much”* (P11:2). Scarlett is referring to the fact that her mum understands that she is “gay” and married to a woman, however during the relationship Scarlett’s partner then began to transition and this is where her mother struggles to use her partner’s pronouns, which Scarlett, and her partner both find upsetting. *“I don’t think I hope that’s not a transphobic thing to say but ya know my mum’s already accepted that she’s got a gay kid to then try and explain and I have tried to explain it without saying [name] is trans I’ve said they prefer the pronouns they ya know umm so I think that my mum keeps using it and it’s so annoying. I do correct her when [name] isn’t there”* (Scarlett, P11:14). This suggests that with Scarlett’s sexuality being outside of the heteronormative view of society,

it was a concept her mother accepts but needed to process. Currently, attempting to understand Scarlett's partner's gender transition is proving challenging for Scarlett's mother. This highlights that there is maybe a difference in how people perceive and understand gender transition and alludes to the fact that this is due to age and the experience of the fast-changing, socio-political climate. This is emphasised by Hannah who when prompted with *"it's more the worry of judgment and what people might think of you but not what you have experienced from others is that correct?"* (Hannah, P13:20) responded to this by talking about her children's response to their fathers²³ gender transition, she acknowledged that *"well, well you see its like, their [her children's] generation don't see it as a big deal, they're very accepting and so open, but for my generation it is a big deal still"* (P13:33). This insight (along with Scarlett's about her mother) highlights the importance of the socio-political climate and suggests that generational differences have a bearing on attitudes towards the gender transition process and trans people as a whole.

Gene discussed her difficulties with family members, when asked *"is there any way that the gender transition process has impacted your relationship?"* (Gene, P5: 31). She responded with *"Well, [partner's name] family have been difficult, very difficult. They just won't accept, won't accept it, which makes it very hard for me"* (P5:37). Gene goes on to describe being alienated from her own family due to her partner's gender transition. Participants show a desire for their partners to be accepted by family members, as Gene continues, *"you have to accept it for my sake"* (P7:23). It is clear that the significant effect this lack of acceptance has on participants when their partner's gender identity is not

²³ The word 'father' is used here as this is what Hannah and her trans partner agreed they would use when referring to her trans partner and her relationship to their children.

accepted is profound. When participants discussed family acceptance, this was pre-empted by difficulties. When prompted *“and how have friends and family been about your partners transition?”* (Agnes, P5:18) Agnes acknowledges *“I was shocked by her [Agnes’s mum’s] reaction, it was really awful, we didn’t talk for a while”* (P5:20). She continued *“she has done a lot of work now; I sent her a lot of studies to read and Instagram account to follow. She has educated herself and is now really supportive”* (P5:25-27). Although Agnes’s partner’s gender identity is now accepted by her mother, this shows the initial difficulties participants experienced, which is rooted in a lack of understanding and highlights the differences in attitudes between generations.

Being part of the LGBTQIA+ community, it is common that friends or colloquially named ‘chosen family’ are very important. Agnes discusses that being part of the LGBTQIA+ community herself and having a *“queer friendship group”* (P5:7) meant that the majority of her friends had been very supportive, *“They’ve been really fab and really great”*. This was in response to the question *“have you noticed any differences in the way others perceive you as a couple after your partner’s disclosure of their trans identity?”* (Agnes, P4:51). Having supportive friends was echoed by Scarlett *“, being part of a liberal friendship group, everyone is accepting, open and very supportive”* (P11:34-35). Lily goes further than describing her experience of being supported by friends, as she stated that *“our friends have definitely pedestaled us”* (P6:24). This is a new experience and something that has happened since her partner’s gender transition process. Being admired and looked up to in this way communicated to Lily that (according to friends) supporting a partner through the gender transition process is an admirable thing to do. This made Lily feel uncomfortable as she states that *“I’m like I don’t know how I feel about this. {laughs} like, like I dunno we are still*

just people and people get a lot of like wow you are absolutely amazing for doing that and I'm like I don't really see how this is like I don't really see like why that's so amazing" (Lily, P6:27). The expression of veneration from Lily's friends communicated that supporting a partner through the gender transition process is something to be admired. Suggesting that it is a difficult process, that Lily has had to cope with. Lily did not feel like it was necessarily something to be admired or something she was forced to 'cope' with and had a dislike for the potential negative connotations this concept has.

Conversely, when asked *"have you noticed any differences in the way others perceive you as a couple?"* (Hannah, P11:53) Hannah recounts that when she meets up with friends, she believes that they feel sorry for her *"I know when they say how are you? They are thinking oh poor her, and they feel sorry for me.... I see their eyes and that they're like aww I wonder how things are"* (P12:19). Although support from friends was valued by participants, there is a lack of transparency within the friendships. Friends of some of the participants were unsure how to act and Hannah noticed this. This reinforced the isolation that some of the participants experienced and the lack of understanding from others. This experience is echoed by Gene, she described that *"friends have distanced themselves from us now"* (P6:32). This was in response to the prompt *"has there been any changed with friends since [partners name] transition?"* (Gene, P6:29). This distancing was distressing for Gene as she felt that she needed support and instead experienced isolation. This experience also highlighted attitudes towards trans people. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Both Gene and Hannah described having a predominantly heteronormative friendship group. This was based around a number of heterosexual couples, whereas some of the younger participants seemed to have friends from different areas from their lives, which was

not based on couples. The different type of friendship structures described above indicates the differences in the experience of the gender transition process. Here is an example of where the heteronormative matrix described by Butler (1990) and the assumptions that go along with it have been disrupted. It seems that in more queer circles this is seen positively. However, for some disruption is seen more negatively and difficult to comprehend.

The different ways in which the gender transition process was perceived by those close to the couple varied. After discussing those who knew the participants and their trans partner, participants described their experiences of the reactions and attitudes of wider society and members of the general public.

When asked, *“Is there anything I haven’t asked you in this interview that you want to share?”* (Scarlett, P12:17), Scarlett mentioned that she would not discuss her partner in her workplace. *“I was at a big, horrible company with a toxic culture there was no way I was going to correct them”* (P12:33). Scarlett described how her partner's gender transition is something that she did not feel comfortable allowing her workplace to know. They would misgender her partner, and Scarlett was not comfortable with correcting them. This experience highlighted that the gender transition process affected cis partners in many different aspects of their lives.

When asked *“what has your partner's transition been like for you?”* (Agnes, P2:1), Agnes discusses the violence and persecution that she and her partner had experienced from being *“relentlessly cat called”* (P2:27) on the street to being *“physically attacked”* (P2:12) on public transport. This maltreatment was emulated by Scarlett’s previous experience of homophobic abuse, which made her apprehensive about the reaction her partner's transition might incite. She states that these reactions from the public were *“violent.... scary and horrible”*

(P13:24) when asked *“is there anything I haven’t asked you that you would like to share?”* (Scarlett, P12:33). Agnes reaffirms this concern over her trans partner’s safety when in public safety by saying *“I don’t want to be that person that tells her that she can’t stand up for herself, but we just don’t live in a world where that’s possible”* (P3:33). This was in response to the prompt *“what has your partners transition been like for you?”* (Agnes, P2:56). This experience of violence and the subsequent worry this created for Agnes and Scarlett highlights the dominant heteronormative ideology within UK society. Agnes asserted this as she continued, mentioning that after her partner had facial feminisation surgery, she can move around society in a much safer way *“it’s sad that it takes that to feel safe”* (P3:44). When asked *“is there anything in this interview I haven’t asked you that you want to share?”* (Scarlett, P13:15) Scarlett described that her partner’s gender presentation as *“a trans person who is maybe not going to try and fit into a cis looking role and they are going to use pronouns and other identifier symbols that for all intense and purposes [are] masculine but they don’t present like that”* (P13:17) she commented that its *“bold”* (P12:22) and *“brave”* (P12:33) of them to be themselves and physically present themselves the way that they do, knowing the potential negative and aggressive reactions due to the current socio-political climate.

Some of the participants did not describe experiencing incidents of violence at street level; instead, they described feeling judged by others. When asked, *“Has your partner’s transition affected the way you see yourself?”* (Rebecca, P3:27) Rebecca said that *“people do stare at us but then they remember their manners”* (P3:38). When asked the prompt *“You mentioned before about your partner’s mum. I was just wondering if you’d noticed a difference in the way others perceive you and her now in comparison to before her transition”* (Hannah, P12:2). Hannah mentioned that *“it shouldn’t matter at all, but I do*

wonder what people think when we are out... what they think our family group is, and they do look" (P12:35). Hannah then went onto admit that *"I do care about what people think"* (P13:20). This idea of being concerned with others' opinions did not seem to faze some of the participants unless it had the potential to result in threatening behaviour. It is apparent that appearance and image matter significantly to some of the participants. Halberstam (2011) argues that queer lives should not be understood by measuring them against heterosexual norms of relationships, family, and success. Hannah's concern about how others interpret her family group illustrates how these normative expectations continue to shape public perceptions, positioning families that do not conform to heterosexual ideals as open to scrutiny.

7.2 The renegotiation of the self within an intimate relationship

This theme embodies the idea of change and explores the inevitability that change has an impact on those who are closest to us. It investigates three important ideas: sexuality, gender and relationship dynamics. The idea of sexuality addresses how it has been explored and redefined due to the gender transition process. It is important to acknowledge that although gender and sexuality are very different entities in this study, for the participants, they are intertwined. This sub-theme of *'redefining sexuality'* and the complexities surrounding this was an important experience for the participants. This is preceded by the subtheme that explores relationship dynamics and the effect that the gender transition process had on these. All participants experienced relational changes of some kind due to

their partner's transition. This sub-theme is titled '*a change in roles and relationship dynamics*'.

Firstly, the theme of '*now I'm thinking about my gender*' will be discussed. This identifies how the gender transition process had prompted the cis gender participants to reflect on their own gender identities.

7.2.1 "Now I'm thinking about my gender" (P6:1)

During their partners' gender transition process, the participants were compelled to reflect on their own gender identities. For some of the participants, this acted to reaffirm their gender identity. In response to the follow up question "*You mentioned before about getting less feminine have you noticed if your partner's transition has changed who you are and how you feel about yourself?*" (Hannah, P10:50) Hannah described that "*it's not changed my personality I don't think it's changed me in that way but maybe in sort of trying to be more feminine myself at times...I wear more dresses than I used to, umm and it might be so I can prove that I'm still the female in the relationship*" (P11: 1). She continues to explain that "*On one of our first camping trips it was one of the first time [partners name] was out when we were camping so she wasn't out at home yet but, umm apart from our little family of five and so umm, she had painted her nails and so I painted my nails and I would never paint my nails before camping because they just get mucky very quickly because of all the camping stuff you are doing and so when they did get manky I was really cross with myself because I only did it to keep up:*" (P11: 21). Presenting more stereotypically feminine traits by wearing dresses and nail varnish, Hannah is showing others and herself that she is a

woman. This aligns with the theoretical framework of this study of Judith Butler's gender performativity. Butler (1990) states that to be recognised as belonging to society, all individuals must 'do' gender. In this instance, Hannah is performing her gender and therefore placing herself within the cis normativity by performing stereotypically feminine traits not only to fit into wider society as Butler (1990) suggests but also to fit into her own family dynamic. Hannah is performing her gender as a woman by presenting more stereotypically feminine, engaging in behaviours and expressions such as painting her nails. The idea of being able to 'keep up' and 'prove that she is the female in the relationship' shows that Hannah's partner's gender transition has threatened her own gender identity. To feel more secure within her gender identity, Hannah is attempting to present in a more feminine manner. This connotes the idea that if her partner becomes more feminine, she becomes less feminine, as her partner's gender identity has a direct effect on hers. It appears that these physical gendered stereotypes are important to the way Hannah sees herself and also the way she wants to be perceived by others. Gender stereotypical behaviour could be an important aspect of Hannah's identity. This could explain the difficulty some of the participants experience in being able to reflect on their gender identity, as it is a challenging and potentially daunting prospect.

Conversely, some of the participants had a different experience when reflecting on their gender identity. When answering *"Has your partner's transition changed the way that you see yourself?"* (Scarlett P6:1), Scarlett stated that *"Umm, it's made me think about my own gender identity definitely, and it's made me think about the fact that I don't feel comfortable being referred to as a woman. I had a chat with quite a few friends my age recently about this, and ya know, like they feel the same sometimes, just not very womanly. People come up to you and are like 'hey ladies can I get you a coffee?' and I'm like err."*

(P6:3). She is communicating a noise of disgust as she recounts this memory, it is clear that being referred to as a 'lady' in public is uncomfortable for Scarlett. She concludes with *"it's definitely made me think about my own identity and I don't identify as trans or non-binary or any of the other terms out there it's just made me feel more in touch with my masculine side or energy"* (P6:13). In contrast to Hannah, Scarlett embraces the opportunity to reflect on her gender identity. As her partner is transitioning to being more *"masculine presenting"* (Scarlett, P13:13) Scarlett is embracing exploring the masculine aspect of herself, and challenging gender stereotypes and labels in doing so.

7.2.2. Redefining sexuality

What became apparent when analysing the data was the idea of sexual identity and what the gender transition process meant for this. The participants identified sexuality as a significant experience when asked, *"What has the journey of your partner's gender transition been like for you?"* (Scarlett, P2:47). Scarlett responded with, *"I think I can categorise it probably into a few chapters in my head over the past 8 years. At first, I didn't know at all it was just like they were really female presenting..... at first I was challenged about what my sexuality actually is"* (P3:36). She acknowledged that confronting and reflecting on her own sexuality due to her partner's gender transition proved uncomfortable and trying. Scarlett identified as a lesbian before her partner's gender transition. She discussed growing up under Section 28 and some of the challenges she experienced due to this. For example, she discussed not being allowed to explore and express her sexuality as heterosexual teenagers were able to do. This showed that being a lesbian was an important

part of Scarlett's identity and that, due to her past experiences, having her sexuality challenged more recently was unsettling initially. This reaffirms that sexuality is an important aspect of one's identity.

Growing up under Section 28 also hindered sexual identity exploration as Scarlett said that *"I grew up thinking I was just part of the lesbian scene, because that was what was present at the time... back in the day when you go on gaydar and you were definitely talking to other lesbians, and that was it you were a lesbian"* (P5:17). This affirms that there were strict categories of sexuality that individuals had to 'fit into'. She went on to explain that there has been a development in language around sexuality more recently and acknowledged that now *"I've got to the point where I feel happy to use the word queer"* (P5:33). This was in response to the follow up prompt of *"you mentioned sexual identity labels there, that before your partner transitioned, they were different to what they are now and that now they don't seem to be impotent anymore?"* (Scarlett, P3:1). This suggests that previous quote from Scarlett is an acceptance of sexual identity fluidity and development. This reflects Halberstam's (1998) stance on fluidity and sexual identity and gender beyond the binary. Scarlett acknowledged that due to her partner's transition she was given *"the opportunity to explore my own sexuality"* (P5:12). Even though reflecting on her own sexuality was challenging for Scarlett at first it helped her reflect on the fact that *"it's weird because how I really think about it, like I don't think I would ever really describe myself as a lesbian and I'm not only attracted to women anyway. Like I'm probably more pansexual than I am gay and I even struggle now to use the words gay because I don't feel that that fully defines my sexuality"*. This is echoed by Lily who in answer to the follow up prompt; *"so you got to know yourself better, tell me about that"* (Lily, P2:11) discussed that *"Yeah, yeah I really go to know myself betterwithout it [my partner's tgender transition] I wouldn't have*

been able to explore my sexuality" (P2:21). She continued by saying that her *"sexual identity has changed, and I realised I was pansexual"* (P2:25). She continued by stating that her partners transition enabled her to *"Explore my own sexual identity and feel like I was allowed too as well"* (P2:32). Her partner's transition in effect permitted Lily to reflect on her own sexuality, an opportunity she would not have had without the gender transition process. This highlights how the idea of transitioning together as a couple and seeing the gender transition process as an opportunity for personal growth and exploration is for both parties in the relationship, rather than something that the trans person experiences alone.

Some participants described a sense of self-realisation and personal revelations in relation to their sexual identity. They were comfortable and able to embrace the idea of sexual fluidity and development, and there was an understanding that nothing is permanent. Lily argued that the idea of transition related to everyone, articulating that *"it would be sad if we didn't change"* (P5:20), emphasising the idea that change is a necessary and inevitable part of life; something that should be welcomed and celebrated.

Some participants found that the concept of redefining their sexuality was more challenging. In answer to the question *"has your partners transition made a difference in the way you see yourself?"* (Rebecca, P2:51) Rebecca states that *"we were seen as a heterosexual couple [prior to my partners gender transition]"* (P2:24). The way that Rebecca used the past tense here and emphasised the word *"were"* as she spoke, showed that this was no longer the case since her partner's transition. Rebecca went on to explain that she was *"concerned that people don't see me as [a] lesbian"* (P3:1). Rebecca found it difficult to explain why she felt this way. As Rebecca's partner now performs their gender differently than before, they disrupt previously established heteronormative assumptions about how

men and women *should* behave within intimate relationships that reside in the heteronormative matrix. This reflects Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which argues that gender is not an innate or fixed characteristic but is continually constituted through repeated acts, behaviours, and social practices. By performing their gender in ways that align more closely with their gender identity rather than societal expectations, Rebecca's partner challenges the assumption that gender expression is naturally determined by sex assigned at birth. Consequently, the couple renegotiates previously established gender roles and relational expectations, illustrating how changes in gender performance can reshape relationship dynamics. For Rebecca this reaffirms the idea that sexual identity labels are an important part of identity, and due to the transition process, this is something that Rebecca was no longer in control of. It highlights a disconnect with the way Rebecca sees herself and the way she believes others perceive her. Hannah also mentioned some challenges she faced regarding her sexuality and her partner's transition. In response to the question *"how do you feel towards [partner's name]?"* (Hannah, P6:49), she mentioned that *"I might have to try things I'm not comfortable with"* (P7:37). This was in relation to physical intimacy and what their sex life would now look like. Hannah expressed that physical intimacy in her relationship is an important aspect, but due to her partner's physical changes, she no longer feels comfortable with this, denoting a change in sexual attraction. In response to the question *"how do you see yourself now?"* (Gene, P4:2) Gene stated that *"through it all I'd describe myself as asexual now"* (P4:4). This showed that since her partner's gender transition, Gene now has an absence of sexual feeling towards them, which also applies to the way she feels about others. In effect, her sexuality has been redefined as a result of her partner's gender transition.

There is a distinguishing divide between the participants in the way that they experienced the redefining of their sexual identity. Some participants found this process not only to be a more positive experience, but also to have benefited from and enjoyed this process of self-discovery. Contrastingly, some participants were concerned about their sexuality being redefined with a suggestion that this was not a journey of self-discovery, but as something that was thrust upon them due to their partner's gender transition.

7.2.3 A change in roles and relationship dynamics

It was apparent during the analysis process that participants acknowledged a change in dynamics within their relationship due to the gender transition process. Hannah described that *"I think the fact that he has got a set role in my life and that role is to be a man and be my husband and umm, again like I never really would have thought I'd be saying this but to be the strong masculine one in the relationship. And so we've got three children... and like I was thinking if it was any of them I would absolutely support them so it's not just about the fact that it's someone close to me umm, but I think it is because I only have one husband and I only want to have one husband and he is meant to have a specific job. Like, umm, suddenly that's all changed as far as I'm concerned."* (P3:40). This was in response to the follow-up question of, *"and you said before that you, you would be supportive if it was anyone else, but what do you think made it different that it was your husband?"* (Hannah, P2:38). This highlighted that the label of 'husband' and the connotations of being 'masculine' and 'strong' show how Hannah used to describe her partner and that this description remains important to her. It seems that if she cannot use the word 'husband' anymore and describe

him as 'the masculine one', this changes the dynamic of the relationship. Due to the gender transition process, conventional understandings of masculinity are challenged, reflecting Halberstam's (1998) argument that masculinity is not exclusive to cisgender men but can be embodied and expressed in diverse ways. This also illustrates Butler's (1990) concept of the disruption of the heteronormative matrix. Prior to transitioning, Hannah's partner was expected to perform masculinity in accordance with the gender assigned at birth. However, following their transition, these heteronormative expectations are unsettled, demonstrating that masculinity is not a fixed or innate characteristic but a socially constructed and performative identity. Scarlett reaffirmed this as when asked the question *"is there anything in this interview that I haven't asked you that you want to share, or you think would be important to share?"* (Scarlett, P12:14) she stated that *"they [my partner] aren't my wife anymore and that makes me sad"* (P12:38). This suggests that the gender transition process has altered the dynamics in the relationship. Scarlett no longer has a *"wife"* (Scarlett, P12:38), and Hannah feels that there is now no *"masculine one"* (Hannah, P3:40) in her relationship. The fact that these dynamics have changed has caused the participants to question what this means for them in terms of who they are as a partner and the role they now play within the relationship. Agnes acknowledged this change by stating, *"roles have changed.... In that there is more space to worry about certain things. Not that I didn't care before but now I'm more like 'text me when you get home'"* (P7:46). This was in response to the prompt question *"you mentioned roles earlier like when you were saying [name] was experiencing violence and you would get in-between them and other people have you noticed that roles have changed from when they presented in a different way?"* (P7:29). Agnes acknowledges that moving through the world as a trans person puts her partner at

more risk of harm. Not only this, but moving through the world as a female (or more typically female-presenting) also heightens the risk of harassment and potential violence.

Participants were also considering themselves in the role of partner and what this meant. The question *“what has the journey of your partners transition been like for you?”* (Scarlett, P6:48) prompted Scarlett to question if she was being a good partner *“should I be thinking about it more?...Should I learn more?”* (P7:10). Having a trans partner afforded participants with an opportunity to evaluate what being a partner means and reflect on *how* to be a partner. Without the gender transition process, this might not have been a priority within the relationships. Taking the time to evaluate how to be a ‘better’ partner could enhance the relationship.

One major change that participants experienced was taking on the role of their trans partner’s protector. Agnes mentioned the change from moving through the world as a heterosexual presenting couple, stating, *“we had heterosexual privilege”* (P3:10) in response to the question *“so what has your partner's transition been like for you?”* (Agnes, P2:1). She then contrasts this to her experience now of being in a queer couple²⁴. She recounts incidents of violence from strangers. This violence was something that was not experienced when presenting as a straight couple. This disparity in her experience as a heterosexual couple, contested with a queer couple, highlights the current socio-political climate and negative attitudes towards those who reside outside of heteronormativity and the gender norm. When answering the question *“so what has your partner's transition been like for*

²⁴ The word queer is used to describe what does not class heterosexual or heteronormative. See table of terms for a definition.

you?" (Lily, P5:41), Lily states that *"I'm taking on the role of being the person that takes this brunt"* (Lily, 7:1). This shows a change in relationship dynamics. Previously, stepping in as the protector for their partners was not necessary. With the participants being cis gender women, it is them who have a lot more experience violence and aggression from strangers as Agnes addresses, *"well it's like being a woman [now] I'm like text me when you get home"* (P7:40) something that would not have felt necessary if her partner was a cis gender man.

The change in how Agnes's partner performs their gender has altered both how they are perceived by others and how they navigate everyday social interactions. This reflects Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which argues that gender is not an innate or fixed identity but is constituted through repeated social performances. As Agnes's partner's gender performance has changed, so too have others' perceptions and expectations, illustrating how gender is continually produced and recognised through social interaction.

Rebecca attempted to protect her trans partner by ensuring that everyone in their life knew about their transition before seeing her partner. When asked *"has your partners transition made a difference in the way you see yourself?"* (Rebecca, P2:41) Rebecca responded with *"I was quite concerned at first that people wouldn't see me as lesbian, but I'm not entirely sure why... so the twinning people [my partner is trans]. I knew who was coming to a particular wine tasting we were having so I went round to see them all beforehand and told them [about her partners trans identity] so that on the occasion of the wine tasting everybody knew {laughs}. But looking back on it, it was possibly I did that because it would save her from having to look at peoples amazed faces"* (P3:23). Similarly to the other participants, Rebecca was concerned about others judging her partner negatively and wanted to protect her from this, something she did not feel the need to do before the gender transition process.

Participants also took on the role of the educator and advocate for their trans partner. When asked *“Could you tell me about your relationship with your partner, and if you could try and start your story from when you first met?”* (Agnes, P1:1). Agnes responded *“Ok cool, umm yeah me and {name} met just as everything was closing at the beginning of lockdown... I guess it was quite an experience, people’s reaction to it was kind of strange and like dunno. I have definitely learnt a lot about how people see gender and like how, how people need to be more educated on it. And I hope that I have been able to educate people more in this process”* (P1:42-43). This is echoed by Scarlett who stated, *“I keep trying to explain to people but then I guess I just don’t over explain because I think it’s {pause} people need to be better”*. (P11:8) when referring to other people in her life who have little to no experience with trans and non-binary individuals. This was in response to the question *“have you noticed any differences in the way other people perceive you as a couple compared to before their transition and where they are at now?”* (Scarlett, P10:44). Scarlett highlighted the idea that education is important. It has encouraged the wider public to be socially and politically aware, ensuring no harm is done to the trans person, which is the aim of the cis gender partners. There is an acknowledgement that trans issues are a ‘hot topic’ at the moment and that *“there is a lot of wrong information out there”* (Agnes, P13:8). Partners saw themselves as responsible for ensuring others had accurate information around gender transition and in so doing taking the onus off the trans person themselves to have to explain and justify their existence. This is something that was prominent in the literature and was a barrier to psychological support. This will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Additionally, another new relationship dynamic emerged. Participants discussed their role as a mediator between the trans person and the trans person's family. Highlighting that for the trans person, their identity was a barrier to communication with wider family members, and it was cis partners who took on this role. When asked *"have you noticed any differences in the way other people perceive you as a couple compared to before their transition and where they are at now?"* (Scarlett, P10:44). Scarlett states that *"sometimes I'm like, why are you talking to me about them you should be talking to them?"* (P11:17). Although able to take on this role of mediator there is some frustration in it. Participants want their partners' families to be forthcoming about gender identity, and this highlights the importance of communication. Some of these familial relationships have become strained as Gene mentioned that *"they [the trans persons family] want nothing to do with her now and they still see me. I tell them they need to get on board as this is who she is now"* (P5:31). This was in response to the question *"In what way do you think your partners transition has impacted on your relationship, if you think there has been an impact?"* (Gene, 5P:20). Again, this highlights the frustration felt by participants and expresses a 'stuck in the middle' dynamic. Participants who took part in this research appeared to be happy to take on this role; however, it is challenging and is a notable change due to the gender transition process. The effect that this has on the romantic partner relationship could be one of emotional strain, due to the additional responsibility undertaken by participants. It could also create resentment and mistrust. Due to the communication being more open with the cis partners and the trans person's family, rather than the trans person and their family.

The participants noticed a change in who they became as a partner due to the gender transition process. There were new roles and responsibilities that they had to navigate.

Although all participants found the change in dynamics challenging, some participants had a more positive outlook. They acknowledged the challenges but also see their partner's transition as an opportunity for self-discovery and reflection. Conversely, some participants had a more negative experience. This theme demonstrates how the changes in gender identity and expression described by Butler (1990) and Halberstam (1998) can reshape relationship dynamics. Consistent with Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, changes in gender performance alter how partners understand themselves and are perceived by others, while Halberstam's (1998) work highlights how non-normative expressions of gender challenge conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity. Together, these perspectives illustrate the profound influence that gender performativity and gender expression can have on intimate relationships, requiring partners to renegotiate established roles, expectations, and patterns of interaction.

7.3. The emotional gains and the emotional cost

The third theme that was generated was 'The emotional gains and the emotional cost'. This theme explores the idea that being partnered with someone who transitions to a different gender during the relationship generates complex emotional responses. This theme consists of three subthemes. This first subtheme, named '*Emotional experiences*', explores the complex and undulating emotions that the participants reported during their partner's transition. Following this is the sub-theme '*Emotional support*' is explored. Participants reported that this was a key part of their experience. It details the way that they were supported and explores experiences of professional support.

7.3.1 Emotional experiences

It has become clear that the emotions that participants have experienced around their partner's transition are complex. Participants experienced positive emotions, with Lily describing *"I've experienced a lot of joy, seeing her grow and become happy"* (P2:29) in response to the question "tell me more about what your partner's transition has been like for you?". She continued to express the *"huge amount of happiness"* (P4:1) that this experience had presented for her. Agnes echoes this by discussing that her partner *"has been able to be herself in our relationship and that's made me so happy"* (P5:29). This was answering my follow up prompt of *"and how about friends and family because you mentioned friends earlier that there have been some people that didn't get it and that that's been challenging?"* (Agnes, P5:4) At this point in the interview Agnes began to cry, *"it's so wonderful to see"* (P5: 31) through her *"tears of joy"* (P5: 37) as she described them, and she continued to express that due to her partners transition she had become more authentically herself and that this had been *"really fantastic"* (P6:3). This account of positive emotional experiences continues across the data set, when asked *"is there anything that stood out the most to you when your partner was going through her transition? Did it change the way you felt towards her at all?"* (Rebecca, P4:45) Rebecca responded with *"It's been a benefit and has made me happy seeing someone [her partner] be authentically themselves... it's very positive"* (P5:17) in response to how she sees her relationship now. Gene echoes this concept of authenticity by stating that *"she is so much happier now, and that's been really nice for me to experience"* (P2:16).

Despite the fact that participants discussed positive emotional experiences, they also mentioned that they often felt challenged and, on occasion, experienced negative emotional responses. This was highlighted by Hannah who when asked the question *“Can you tell me about your relationship with your partner and try and start your story from when you met?”* (Hannah, P1:12). She began by telling me some background of her relationship *“Yeah, so we’ve been together 30 years which is quite a long time, umm and we always like had to kind of like the same sense of humour and principals”* (P1:14) and quickly went onto mention that her partner *“becoming more and more happy has made me more and more unhappy”* (P1:24). This disconnect between Hannah and her partner had been very difficult for her to manage. She continued to describe feeling *“confused and sad”* (P2:36) around her partner’s transition and the timeline in which this was happening. *“When asked how do you feel towards your partner?”* (Hannah, P6:52) she mentioned experiencing a lot of anger around her partner’s transition *“I remembers being really angry that our relationship had changed, and I had no say in it”* (P7:11). Gene expressed the toll that transition can take on a partner by saying that it had influenced her physical health *“with the stress of it all I’ve been quite ill because of it”* (P3:16). Rebecca acknowledged at times it had *“made the relationship difficult”* (P5:26) Gene also talks about the experience being *“very difficult”* (P3:18) when encouraged to elaborate Gene was reluctant to do so. It seemed that discussing her emotional experiences was challenging. Thus, showing how significant the experience of her partner’s gender transition had been for her. Soon after this, she began to cry, and we discussed taking a break or terminating the interview altogether, which she did not want to do. She mentions that she will *“take some deep breaths”* (P5:27) so she can continue the interview. Even though sharing her experience was triggering for Gene, she still wanted her voice to be heard. Emphasising the importance of this kind of research. Participants

continued to express that they had experienced challenging emotions. When asked, *“Have you noticed that roles have changed in any way?”* (Scarlett, P4:11), Scarlet shared that *“I just really worry... I want to make sure they are making the right decisions”* [around the different parts of the transition process] (P4:39-41). She continued to discuss how it’s *“heart-breaking [at times] seeing your partner experience gender dysphoria”* (P5:3). Lily emphasised feeling *“a lot of grief, a lot of grief”* (P2:32) in relation to her partner’s transition when she was prompted to *“tell me more about what your partner’s transition was like for you”* (Lily, P3:17). Additionally, Hannah mirrors this reaction in saying *“It... felt like a bereavement and the person that I’d married wasn’t there anymore”* (P3:27) reiterating this experience of loss in relation to the phenomenon of their partner’s transition.

It was prevalent that participants described that during the transition process, they experienced a wide range of emotions. Capturing the experience in the fluctuations of emotional reactions, when asked *“overall, how would you describe the experience of your partner’s transition?”* (Rebecca, P5:3), Rebecca stated that *“it’s just a roller-coaster of emotions”* (P5:36-37). This highlights the importance of acknowledging that the experience is not solely described in terms of positive and negative emotional experiences, but also alludes to a wider understanding of the complexity and nuance of it. It’s *“a mixture of emotions, every single emotion happened I think”* (Lily, P3:18). This was also reaffirmed by Gene; *“it’s been difficult, and it still is... we have great times but it’s certainly not a picnic.”* (P3:21) [my emotions are] *“all very mixed”* (P7:25). Hannah mirrored this experience by stating *“I’m quite muddled...again I’ve given you an answer that’s like yes but no but yes”* [laughs] (P5:35). This was in response to the question *“did you find counselling helped you manage these changes”* (Hannah, P6:7). The complexity and the contradictory nature of the experience was captured by Lilly’s description *“it’s painful, beautiful and magical”* (P2:17).

She continued, *"a mixture of emotions a lot of joy a lot of grief and a lot of frustration"* (P2:35). This was in response to the question *"what has your partner's transition been like for you?"* (Lily, P2:5)

During analysis, it became clear that participants had a drive to prioritise their trans partner's needs over their own, a pattern seen across the data set. When asked *"You mentioned that it's brought you closer. Were there any other emotions that you felt towards your partner or that came up during their transition?"* (Lily P3:20) Lily articulated that *"yes there were a lot of emotions....this is not your process; you have to sit in this"*, (P4:14) and the subsequent relief that she felt after her partner had come out as trans *"ahh [sigh] we can totally be ourselves now"* (P2:19). Scarlett experienced something similar by stating *"it's not at all my decision and I just want them to be happy"* (P4:42). This was in response to the question *"What has the journey of your partners transition been like for you?"* (Scarlett, P2:33). Scarlett expresses her concern that she wasn't doing enough for her trans partner *"do I need to learn more?... Am I being a supportive partner?"* (P3:32). Hannah described herself as a *"sort of a piece keeper and will go no, no it's ok I'll fit in with other people"* (P11:42). This was in response to the question *"Have you noticed if your partner's transition has changed who you are and how you feel about yourself?"* (Hannah, P10:35). Regardless of the difficulties she was experiencing and her need for emotional support she recalled that she *"didn't tell my parents because I didn't want them worrying about me or being mad at my husband"* (P5:29). She mentioned feeling conflicted about this by stating that *"it's not about me, but what about me?"* (P5:11) and her *"feeling guilty over [negative] feelings"* This was in response to the question *"have you noticed a difference in the way people perceive you as a couple?"* (Hannah, P5:3). Rebecca echoed this conflict by saying that *"I knew I*

wanted to support her, but it was hard work" (P2:33). This was in answer to the question *"What has the journey of your partners transition been like for you?"* (Rebecca, P2:1).

There were clear emotions of pride displayed with participants describing feeling fortunate and, in some instances, honoured to be part of their partner's transition. When answering the question *"would you say your partner's transition has impacted the relationship in any way?"* (Agnes, P10:22) Agnes described that *"it feels like a massive privilege to go through this with her"* (11:29). This is reiterated by Lily; *"it's special to be included in something like this"* (P2:43) illustrating that this is an intimate process that not all are privy to. Gene described *"keeping it a big secret"* (P6:17) for a while from the outside world when asked, *"Is there a difference in the way that people perceive you as a couple?"* (Gene, P6:5). This secret-keeping meant that some family members and close friends weren't aware of the trans person's true gender identity. This resulted in partners being cast in the role of the main support system.

Participants' expressions of privilege and honour demonstrate that supporting a partner through gender transition was not solely experienced as emotionally demanding but also as a meaningful relational experience. Consistent with Butler's (2004) emphasis on recognition and relationality, participants' accounts suggest that affirming a partner's authentic identity strengthened feelings of intimacy, commitment, and shared purpose within the relationship.

7.3.2 Emotional support

It was clear that the participants were the main emotional support system for their trans partner. Some of the participants appeared to take pride in this. When asked, *“Can you tell me about your relationship with your partner starting from when you first met up until now?”* (Agnes, P1:1). Agnes stated, *“I’m here, I’m here with you”* (P1:35). Her voice was very animated when she said this, out stretching her arms and smiling, communicating her enthusiasm. Conversely, other participants found being their partner’s emotional support system more challenging. Hannah mentions, *“It’s funny because if it were anybody else in the world, I would totally accept it without question, and I would use their new name and use their new pronouns, and absolutely, ya know, you have to if that’s who you are, that’s who you have to be. Umm but because it’s my husband I’ve found it so much harder and that’s brought up all sorts of issues as well about ya know how you can fell one way about everybody else in the entire world {laughs} and differently for my husband ...I’m trying really hard to support her”* (P4:15). Hannah emphasised the word *“really”* and sighed heavily as she said this, communicating that she was finding the experience difficult. This was in response to the follow up question of *“you said before that you would be supportive if it was anyone else but what do you think made it different that it was your husband?”* (Hannah, P2:38). Hannah’s account reflects Butler’s (1990) notion of gender performativity, illustrating how changes in one partner’s gender performance require the non-transitioning partner to renegotiate established relational roles and expectations. Supporting a partner through transition therefore involves not only adapting to a new gender identity but also reconstructing the meanings attached to the relationship itself. Participants taking on this

role of the main emotional support system for their trans partner were seen by some as their duty and part of what being a partner entails; however, they acknowledged that they also needed emotional support themselves. Rebecca acknowledged that *"I needed a lot of support"* (P2:18) during her partner's transition when answering the question *"what has the journey of your partner's transition been like for you?"* (Rebecca, P2:1). This sentiment was echoed by all of the participants. When asked the follow up question *"did you find that counselling helped manage the changes?"* (Hannah, P6:7) emphasised that *"I don't want to make it all about me but in a sense, it is about me too"* (P5:7). This stresses that the gender transition process has a profound effect on partners and therefore there was a need for emotional support. This quote from Hannah also highlighted that it was difficult to acknowledge the need for support, and that this somehow 'takes away' from the needs of the trans partner. Butler (2004) argues that identity is constituted relationally, with individuals becoming intelligible through their relationships with others. Hannah's hesitation to acknowledge her own emotional needs demonstrates the tension between supporting her partner's gender affirmation and recognising her own experience as equally legitimate, highlighting how gender transition reshapes the identities of both partners within the relationship. Participants seemed to have struggled with the idea that their need for support was somehow detrimental to their trans partner. Rebecca states that *"it became obvious to me that I needed some support besides having friends it wasn't fair on the friends because they were friends with both of us and I didn't want to upset her [my partner]"* (P2:29). This was in response to the question *"What has the journey of your partners transition been like for you?"* (Rebecca P2:1).

During gender transition, there is psychological support available for the individual going through the process. However, participants expressed that there was a lack of professional support for the non-transitioning partners. When asked *“what has the journey of your partner's transition been like for you?”* (Rebecca, P2:1), Rebecca emphasised the importance of professional support as she believed it to be *“unfair to keep relying on our friends”* (P2:33). Hannah talked about how angry her friends were with her partner. This, in turn, made it difficult for Hannah to express her feelings about her partner's gender transition, finding herself *“defining him and his decisions”* (P8:37) regardless of the emotional impact on her. This was in response to the question *“did you feel that you needed to change in any way?”* (Hannah, P7:28). Hannah found herself holding the emotions of others rather than being able to process her own. This emphasised the importance of professional support for partners, where there would be a space to process their experiences without the fear of judgement, influence, and expectations from others in their lives. This was echoed by Agnes, who stated that *“there is so much need for support, but it's just not out there”* (P13:18). This was in response to the question *“Is there anything that I haven't asked that you wanted to share about your experience?”*

When professional support was available, participants recounted a variety of experiences. When asked the follow up question of *“did you find that counselling has helped you manage those changes?”* (Hannah, P6:7). Hannah recounted that *“I went to a session for trans people and their partners, but I was the only partner”* (P6:30). She went onto describe how the discussion was very much centred around the needs of the trans person themselves. She felt this setting was not a space where she could voice her feelings as a partner, especially when these challenged and contradicted the feelings and experiences of

the trans individuals. Hannah continues *“they are all [the trans individuals in the support group] supporting each other and it was very much yes well you have to do what was right for you ya know you have to be happy and do what’s right for you and whilst I totally get that if you’re if you have no ties and no relationship ya know or no personal relationships and you have no children then absolutely do what’s right for you but if you are already married with a family, then it’s not all about you it can’t be anymore. Once you are a parent, nothing is all about you anymore. And so I found that hard and was thinking if I was in a room next door full of people who were partners of trans people, we would be having a very different discussion, wouldn’t we? And it wouldn’t be about oh yes it’s all about them, well what about us? So umm, I do find that groups quite hard but afterwards umm, we sat down having a drink for a bit longer and ya know it was all very nice and they said nice things about how it was good that I’d come along and umm but yeah it just, I just found it so hard because I wanted to say yeah but what about these partners that you have and what about your kids and ya know it’s more than just about you it has to be... It can be very lonely”*

(P7:1). As the above quote illustrates, it seems that there is pressure on participants to remain supportive regardless of the emotional impact on them, suggesting that supporting a partner through gender transition can be an isolating experience. There appears to be a need for community and to be with others experiencing a similar situation in order to relieve this isolation. This is echoed by Agnes *“I needed a space where I could just talk”* (P13:25) when she was asked *“is there anything that I haven’t asked that you wanted to share about your experience?”* (Agnes, P12:28). However, when asked *“did you partners transition impact your relationship in any way?”* (Agnes, P11:27) Agnes recounts an experience in a group for partners that she found to be *“really negative”* (P12:39). She explained that *“I was trying to find online groups and stuff like that and the only ones I could really find from what I could*

see were like basically married women whose long-term partners who had come out as trans and they hated it. It was all really horrible, and I was like - god, this isn't for me." (P12:32).

This was difficult for Agnes as she wanted to celebrate, support and reaffirm her partner's trans identity, discussing the positive experiences that she had. It highlights the need for a variety of specialised and individualised support where these different and complex experiences can be shared in a safe and supportive environment.

Scarlett recounted an experience with her therapist where she wanted to discuss her partner's transition. She found herself concerned about a response from her therapist, who commented on her partner's surgery decisions. Scarlett stated that *"I can't remember exactly what she said, but the nub of it was like we've got to work on ourselves and internal healing and all this kind of stuff, internal stuff going on and how difficult for them to feel like they have to get changes to do that. And I was like, oh god, is my therapist a TERF? And now I'm worried my therapist might have some opinions because you never know at the moment there are so many gender critical voices out there"* (P14:11). This was in response to the question *"And if there was any support or if you have accessed any support have you had any thing that has been helpful for you as a partner?"* Scarlett (p13:25). Scarlett continues by expressing that she felt concerned about her expirable with her therapist stating that *"support needs to come with a sticker saying I'm not trying to convert your thinking"* (P14:28). This highlighted the need for specialist support for partners. Gender transitioning is an emotional and complex process that needs skilled clinicians to ensure partners feel supported and can talk through their experiences in a safe and supportive environment. Scarlett's concern is reflective of the current socio-political climate and the difficulties facing trans individuals. Solidifying the argument for the need for this research and the potential training and changes within therapeutic practice. When asked, *"Is there anything that I*

haven't asked that you wanted to share about your experience?" (Hannah, P14:7), Hannah stated that *"I'm hopeful that more things like this* (meaning the current research project) *will lead to some support [for partners]"* (P14:29).

7.4 A new identity and a place in society

Interestingly, many participants initially expressed that they believed that the impact of their partner's transition on them in their social context was minimal. However, as the interviews progressed, this clearly was not the case. It became apparent that the impact was significant for the participants, and this theme explores the idea of perceptions of identity and the wider societal impact.

The first subtheme that will be discussed is *'the power of me'*, which identifies how participants saw themselves during the gender transition process, exploring the idea of how the juxtaposition between change and constancy interacted to impact their experience. Secondly, the idea of a new identity and a place in society is further explored by the second sub-theme of *'the continuing journey of transition'* and what this means for participants.

7.4.1 The power of me

The gender transition process is extremely complex. This study has highlighted the effect that this had on partners. Participants acknowledged that the gender transition process revealed elements of themselves that were surprising. One of these that is clear is that supporting a partner through the gender transition process requires a great deal of strength

and resilience. When asked the follow-up question, *“You mentioned your strength there, have you felt like you’ve needed a lot of strength during this process?”* (P4:24). Lily responded by saying *“before they transitioned if anybody asked me could you do this, I would have said no. Because it’s really hard to watch...with enough resilience I’ve been able to do it”* (P4:26). Lily is referring to the different elements of her partner’s transition process; namely the difficulty in supporting someone with gender dysphoria²⁵ and the emotional distress that her partner was experiencing due to this. Lily wanted to support her partner through their gender transition, but was unsure that she had the strength and emotional capacity to do so. The fact that she was able to do so, and that Lily and her partner remained in the relationship, highlighted to Lily that she had an enormous amount of emotional strength that she had previously been unaware that she possessed. This process of self-discovery reflects Butler’s (2004) argument that identity is not fixed but continually constituted through lived experience and social relationships. Supporting a partner through gender transition required participants to renegotiate their own identities, revealing strengths and capacities that had previously remained unrecognised. The inner strength that Lily described is echoed by Rebecca, who stated that *“you have to be brave”* (P4:39) when asked *“how would you describe the experience of supporting your partner through the gender transition process?”* (P4:35). This bravery Rebecca referred to is multifaceted. In one instance, it encapsulates the notion that due to a partner’s gender transition, as a couple, they would now reside outside of society’s heteronormative ideals. This meant being apprehensive of the unknown and what may come next, in terms of reactions from others. This idea of uncertainty is expanded upon later in the chapter. Rebecca was also referring to

²⁵This is a term that Lily used in her interview which is why it is being used here.

inner bravery, as supporting a partner through the process of transitioning presents many challenges and difficulties, both personally and relationally. Agnes continued this theme of the need for bravery, when she was asked *“what impact has the transition process had on you? Has it changed the way you see yourself anyway?”* (P9:1) she mentioned that she *“didn’t know that she could be that strong”* (P9:23), reaffirming the idea that the gender transition process had enabled the participants to access a certain strength that they did not know they possessed previously. This highlighted the complexity of the experience and the profound effect that it had on romantic partners. Here, all of the participants experienced the need for strength, resilience and bravery during the gender transition process.

The gender transition process had fundamentally changed parts of the participants' identities. Furthermore, it encouraged them to be more self-aware. When asked *“have you noticed if your partners transition has changed how you see yourself?”* (P11:34) Hannah mentioned that *“I’m usually a peacekeeper so will go no, no, it’s ok and fit in with everyone else... but I’m better in not doing that now”* (P12:2). Due to the gender transition process Hannah was able to identify aspects of herself and her behaviours that were not serving her anymore and that she wanted to, and was able to change. Scarlett also discussed having developed a deeper understanding of herself when she stated that *“most of our arguing has come from me being autistic about things”* (P9:30). This was in response to the question *“do you feel the transition process has effected your relationship in anyway?”* (Scarlett, P9:13). Scarlett continued to explain that this meant that it was a challenge for her to be able to communicate in certain ways. Scarlett went on to mention the importance of her acknowledgement of the positive impact that this had on her communication with her partner, as she had *“learnt to communicate better and that’s been really positive”* (P9:34).

Alongside these realisations of growth in emotional strength and self-awareness, the gender transition process also solidified pre-existing aspects of the participants' sense of self.

As Gene explained when asked *“how would you describe yourself now?”* (Gene, P3:6) She replied with *“I remain a typical Cancerian. I’m still sensitive and imaginative”* (P3:9). Hannah echoes this as she stated that *“it’s not changed my views”* (P11:7). In response to *“has the transition process effected the way you see yourself in any way?”* (P10:13). Regardless of the changes participants experienced, they identified important aspect of their identities that had remained constant. This pattern continues across the data set. When asked, *“has the transition process affected the way you see yourself in any way?”* (Agnes, P9:21). Agnes articulated that *“I’m quite a compassionate person and I’ve always really listened to people.... that’s always been my nature”* (P9:40). These personality traits that the participants had mentioned remained unchanged. This showed that a new identity had been formed by the amalgamation of the strengthening of participants' previously held traits and principles, coupled with the newfound strength, resilience and bravery and new aspects that they learned about themselves.

Participants acknowledged the importance of their own courage and resolve in the formation of a new identity. However, it is important to acknowledge that, as human beings, we do not exist in a social vacuum, and the next sub-theme explores the impact of this.

7.4.2 The continuing journey of transition

During the interview process, participants were clear that transition is not a one-time event. As Scarlett articulates, *“I’m not trying to debunk your question, but it’s always transitioning, so like it’s still going on”* (P3:1). This was in response to the question *“what has the journey of your partner’s transition been like for you?”* (P2:48). This was echoed across the data set. Participants' descriptions of transition as an ongoing rather than finite process resonate with Halberstam's (2005) concept of *queer time*, which challenges normative understandings of life as a series of fixed and predictable stages. Instead, gender transition is experienced as a continual process of becoming, where identities, relationships, and futures remain open to change rather than reaching a definitive endpoint.

What the future looks like for the participants and their partners is unclear. It was evident that for some participants, this presented ongoing questions on what might happen next. When asked *“has your partners transition effected the way you see yourself?”* (Hannah, P10:13). Hannah stated that *“I don’t know what else will change in the future”* (P11:2). She continued by stating that *“is that what I am going to have to do? Is that what is coming next?”* (P11:36). Here she referred to changing herself to *“keep the relationship”* (P11:39) and engage in a physical intimacy with her partner. There was a loudness and urgency to Hannah’s voice when she said this, which indicated that this was something that was distressing for her. Halberstam (2005) argues that queer lives frequently involve navigating uncertainty outside conventional life scripts. Hannah's account illustrates how gender transition disrupted previously anticipated futures, requiring her to negotiate an evolving relationship whose future could no longer be understood through familiar heteronormative expectations.

The idea of having to change was a difficult and daunting prospect for Hannah. By thinking about the future, she was confronted by the possibility that the relationship might end. These concerns about the future continue across the data set. These were described as 'embracing change' and 'moving through life together in a different context'. Some participants were much more at ease with the concept of the uncertainty that the gender transition process evokes. When asked, *"Have you noticed a difference in the way that people perceive you as a couple?"* (Lily, P6:8). Lily acknowledged that *"we might have different struggles than we did before"* (P6:40). This was due to previously presenting as a straight couple and the privileges that accompanied this. Due to the heteronormativity of Western society, there is more of a risk of harassment, homophobic and transphobic abuse. When asked the follow up question of *"you mentioned that it [transition process] brought you closer together. Were there any other emotions that you felt towards your partner?"* (Lily, P3:19). Lily was steadfast in her support for her partner, expressing *"whatever is coming next, I'm here and we'll do it together"* (P3:27). This showed that she was able to embrace the uncertainty of what the future would potentially be like with her partner, regardless of what this entailed. Rather than resisting uncertainty, Lily appeared to embrace it as part of the ongoing nature of her relationship. This reflects Halberstam's (2005) argument that queer lives are characterised by openness, adaptability, and futures that remain continually negotiated rather than predetermined.

When asked *"is there anything that stands out to you as being memorable from your partners transition?"* (Scarlett, P6:26) Scarlett questioned whether *"will they still be attracted to me if they do"* [continue to transition] (P6:30). The affect that taking hormones could potentially have on her partner *"if they take testosterone is their personality going to change? ... It's still something I have a little anxiety about"* (P8:39-42). She continued by

stating that *"I know hormones can be transformative"* (P8:45). Scarlett was concerned about fundamental changes to her partner that could affect who they were. This concern over attraction from the trans partner was echoed by Lily, who said that *"I initially thought that they didn't want to be with me anymore or weren't attracted to me anymore"* (P3:3-4). This highlights the participant's focus on the trans person's future and how this could potentially affect the relationship. In addition, when asked *"how do you see your relationship now?"* (Rebecca, P5: 36) Rebecca mentioned *"we are marching into old age together and everything that involves and as we get older, I hope we enjoy a long old age together"* (P6:2). Implying that due to age there were going to be other challenges to face within her relationship that were separate to the gender transition process.

There was a sense that even though there was uncertainty and worry, some participants were more accepting of these factors. This suggested that the gender transition process was perceived as less threatening to the relationship. However, some of the participants' experience of this 'uncertainty' was that it would be a threat to the success and longevity of the relationship.

The exploration of this sub-theme has shown that some participants, despite their concerns, were more embracing of the continuous journey of the gender transition process. This highlights that if the couples in a sense transitioned together, it meant that they both grew and changed together. Participants found that this idea of continual future uncertainty and changes contributed to their own personal development. This suggests, however, that for some participants, this continuing journey of gender transition is more challenging.

7.5 Thematic findings reflexivity

When writing my thematic findings chapter, I found myself writing the experiences and my interpretations for the younger participants first, as this appeared to come more naturally to me. This could be because these participants were of a similar age to me, and I found myself feeling more comfortable writing about their experiences. I mitigated against this by ensuring that when evidencing and expanding on the themes of the study, I included a variety of the participants' experiences, checking that they were of a variety of ages each time.

The existing literature on this subject matter, which is included in my critical literature review, was skewed towards negative experiences of the gender transition process for cis partners. I was concerned that I didn't want my analysis to be unduly influenced by this perspective. I was conscious to listen fully to each participant's lived experience of the gender transition process, whether that be positive, negative or neutral. The current study found that there were challenging and negative experiences of the gender transition process; however, there were also many positive experiences of self-discovery, the formation of a stranger bond within the relationship and a drive to stay together. A predominant message from this study is one of hope.

I believe that my emotional investment in the topic was to make sure I presented a well-rounded evaluation of each participant's experience. I also recognised I had a concern about the negative aspects of the transitioning process becoming the focus of this study, as highlighted in previous literature (Goldberg, 2010; Giammattei, 2015; Zamboni, 2006).

Conversely, in this study, I found there were many descriptions of joy and positivity from the participants. This emphasised that there were many positive experiences around the gender transition process, which was something that was absent in previous literature and therefore an identifiable gap in this research area.

I was also aware of the current socio-political climate where the existence and legitimacy of the trans community is continually debated, along with many negative messages. As a queer person myself, I take a pro trans inclusive stance and am deeply concerned by the treatment of the trans community.

To ensure that the potential biases described above, and my personal drive to create a more positive pro trans affirmative analysis of the data were the driving forces behind the analysis, I ensured that I constantly returned to the interview transcripts to confirm my interpretations were reflective. I ensured that I fully presented the participants' lived experiences of their relationships as evident in the data.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Discussion

The four overarching themes from the previous chapter are discussed in detail below. These are corresponded with existing literature to place the findings into an academic context. Additionally, this chapter explores the potential implications for future practice, reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of the study and makes suggestions for future research.

8.1 Discussion of main findings across themes.

It is impossible to place this research into context without the theoretical framework of social constructionism and Butler's theory of gender performativity. Therefore, looking at the current socio-political climate in the UK and the potential effect that this has had, namely the attitude towards trans people, will be important. Ballik et al. (2020) argue that there are negative attitudes towards the trans community, not only when it comes to the general public but also across healthcare professions.

This research project set out to identify the impact that the gender transition process had on the cis gender partners when the trans identity is disclosed once the relationship has already been established. It was clear from the data that being partnered with someone who transitions to a different gender during the relationship is complex and multifaceted. With this in mind, there were four themes generated from the data. The first being '*The love that dare not speak its name*' followed by '*The renegotiation of the self within an intermate*

relationship', *'The emotional gains and the emotional cost*', and finally *'A new identity and place in society*'. Each theme and its potential implications are discussed in more detail below.

8.1.1 The love that dare not speak its name (Douglas, 1896)

The first theme, *'The love that dare not speak its name*', is indicative of the challenges experienced in the face of the gender transition process. This includes personal challenges and challenges experienced from others outside of the relationship.

What was clear from the participants' experiences was the drive to remain in the relationship. Some of the previous literature identified that the gender transition process caused relationships to end (Norwood, 2012; Samos, 2009; Hager, 2019). However, this research project contradicts this, with a prominent drive for the couples to stay together, mirroring the findings in Watts et al. (2017) study. Theron and Collier (2013) note that the gender transition process puts an emotional strain on a relationship and the non-transitioning partner, making it more likely to break down. However, Sauve et al. (2018) refute this idea by arguing that facing adversity and difficulties can strengthen relationships. In the current study, this strength could have been experienced due to reported heightened levels of intimacy that participants experienced as a result of the gender transition process. In the current research project, many of the participants found that when their partners disclosed their trans identity, they were able to communicate more effectively with one another, something Comfort (2005) connotes as imperative in a loving, romantic

relationship. They continue to explain that higher levels of intimacy and ‘closeness’ relate to having a more successful and fulfilling relationship, which is fundamental to its longevity.

All participants identified a common experience of their trans partner being significantly more at ease and much happier within themselves after disclosure of their trans identity. Additionally, Bischof et al. (2011) emphasise the importance of living authentically in order to thrive. Participants reported that fundamentally, the personalities of the trans partner remained consistent; however, some of the literature contradicts this. Chester et al. (2017) found in their study that the trans persons' personality and interests changed, linking this to the effect of hormones used during the gender transition process. They continue to explain that this resulted in the trans partner changing into a completely different person. This included their personality traits and even the way they ‘smelt’ (Chester et al., 2017). However, it is important to note that in the current research project, all the participants reported that their trans partners' personalities and interests did not change, regardless of whether they had undergone hormonal treatment or not.

What was clear from all participants of all ages was a drive to remain in the relationship. This suggests that a partnership consists of more than just physical appearance, insinuating a deeper connection that transcends physical attraction. Markey and Markey (2007) described the connection between romantic partners as being based on compatibility of personality types, suggesting this goes beyond just physical attraction. This is corroborated by the participants in the current study, as they described their partner in terms of a “soulmate” (Scarlett, P9:30-32), for example.

Despite the participants in the current study facing their own challenges within the relationship, it was clear from the data that their partner's gender transition incited reactions from others outside of the relationship. One participant recounts an interaction with her mother, and she stated that her partner's gender transition was "one concept too much" (Scarlett: P11:5).

The difficulties experienced from the reaction of the family were contrasted by the reactions of some of the participants' friends. They stated that many of their friends were queer and liberal individuals, and they were therefore very supportive of their partner's gender transition. Smith (2020) corroborates this idea by stating that it is political ideology that is an important factor when informing attitudes towards trans people. One participant went further and recounted incidences of admiration from friends: "our friends have definitely pedestaled us" (Lily, P6:24). This was uncomfortable for her as the idea of being admired suggested that, as a couple, they had been through a challenging experience. Although this is the case, it made participants feel uneasy.

This acceptance from friends is contradicted, however, by some of the participants' experience of violence from strangers. Amery and Mondon (2024) identify that there has been a rise in incidences of transphobic and homophobic abuse at street level. They conclude that this is due to the heteronormative and cis-normative focus that society in the UK has and how the use of 'organised transphobia' has induced a 'moral panic'. This has reinforced an 'us vs them' narrative that seemed to form in some of the participants' accounts of the gender transition process and highlights the polarisation of society.

In contrast, some of the participants were older than others, meaning that they had experienced a different socio-political climate. Peterson et al. (2019) argue that the political

attitudes of individuals appear to remain unchanged over time; therefore, it was not surprising that the older participants had experienced different attitudes towards the gender transition process. There could be an argument for generational differences here in the way the gender transition process was experienced by participants. However, there isn't enough evidence in the data to fully support this notion.

Concerning friends, however, as discussed previously, some participants experienced acceptance and even admiration due to their partner's gender transition, from their peer group and friends. In contrast, other participants experienced friends they described as supportive; however, participants felt that they could not be open and honest about how they were feeling. Dunbar (2021) suggests that friends play an important role in one's life. They provide a safe space for the development of acceptance due to authenticity, which also has physical health benefits. When not being able to be transparent with friends, some of the cis partners experienced isolation, and one participant mentioned how their physical health had suffered as a result of the gender transition process. As mentioned before, some of the participants experienced transphobic abuse from strangers; however, this was not consistent across the data set. For some participants, there were no reports of harassment at the street level. This could be due to where they lived, with them describing their areas as "small" and "safe" where "everyone knows each other" (Rebecca, P3:37). This could potentially make it easier for the trans identity to be accepted, as the individual is already known (albeit as a different gender) to the community. Due to being part of a community, it could be that it is less likely that the trans partner will experience violence and abuse. Levine (2018) corroborates this notion, as they found that trans people are more likely to experience physical violence from strangers. However, Xavier (2007) connotes that those

known to the trans individual are more likely to be the perpetrators of violence and abuse, including within the LGBTQIA+ community itself (Bradley, 2020).

All participants had challenging experiences with their family members' acceptance of their partner's gender transition. Some overcame these difficulties, whereas others found this more challenging. Some of the participants described being abandoned by family members due to their partner's gender transition, showing a lack of acceptance of the 'new' gender identity, causing the cis partners to feel alienated and isolated. Scott (2020) found that the cis partners faced stigma from family members, with some leading to derogatory comments and even physical violence. Sansfacon et al. (2019) found that families of trans individuals (especially if the trans person is their child) find the gender transition process extremely challenging and can result in rejection. Conversely, the children that some participants had were extremely accepting of their trans parents' identity, with participants highlighting the difference in acceptance due to generational differences. One participant stated that "their generation don't see it as a big deal" (Hannah, P13:33-36). This could suggest that the gender transition process is perceived differently in different age groups. However, there isn't sufficient evidence to fully explore this viewpoint within the data.

The contradictory ways that individuals within the participants' lives reacted to their partner's gender transition highlight the complexity of the phenomenon. Additionally, the current socio-political climate and political orientations also appear to be a factor. Lemma and Savulescu (2021) found that there has been a visible rise in trans identities within Western societies over the last decade. However, Sitas et al. (2024) argue that trans people have always existed; it is only recently that they have been markedly prevalent in society and

at the forefront of popular culture and political debate. This spotlight on the trans community could further explain how the participants experienced their partner's gender transition process. Some of the participants discussed the difficulties they faced with those outside of the relationship due to living outside of the gender binary and the heteronormativity of UK society. Butler (2009) discusses being considered abject and living on the edges of society due to this binary notion of sexuality and gender. This shows that the relationship acts as a haven in a world that can be very anti trans, with experiences of violence and familial rejection.

Overall, these findings illustrate Butler's (1990; 2004) contention that gender and relationships are continually constituted through social interaction rather than existing as fixed entities. Participants' experiences demonstrate that gender transition prompted an ongoing renegotiation of relational identities while simultaneously challenging heteronormative assumptions about what constitutes a successful romantic relationship. Furthermore, Halberstam's (2005) concept of queer time provides a useful lens through which to understand these relationships as continually evolving rather than progressing towards a fixed endpoint.

Regarding clinical practice, clinicians need to be aware of the impact of staying together, not just reading literature centred around separation. This will be fully explored later in the chapter.

8.1.2 The renegotiation of the self within an intimate relationship

The second theme, *'The renegotiation of the self within an intimate relationship,'* explores the concept of the self. It identifies how gender, sexuality and dynamics within the relationship have been renegotiated due to the gender transition process. It also explores how the participants felt about this renegotiation and how they experienced it.

The gender transition process prompted the cis partners to think about their own gender identity. The data highlighted that some participants struggled with this concept, engaging in stereotypical gendered behaviours in ways they had not before their partner's gender transition. This concept of gender roles and behaviours coincides with the theoretical underpinnings of this study, that of Judith Butler (2009) and gender performativity. Butler states that to be considered legitimate (by society), one must perform one's gender within the constraints of gender norms and the gender binary. When these norms are deviated from being questioned anxiety is experienced. This is highlighted by one participant in particular, who goes into detail about how she performed her gender differently as a result of her partner's gender transition. "She [Hannah's partner] had painted her nails and so I painted my nails, and I would never paint my nails before camping because they just get mucky very quickly because of all the camping stuff you are doing and so when they did get manky I was really cross with myself because I only did it to keep up:" (P11: 21-32). This performance of gender raises the question of *why* these gender stereotypes were important. Bussy (2011) argues that gender is an important aspect of one's identity. It appears that to reaffirm their sense of self, some participants engaged in gender stereotypical behaviours. The need to do this suggests that, due to their partner's gender

transition, some of the cis partners felt that their gender identity was threatened. Hogg (2012) discusses that when one's identity is threatened, we engage in behaviours to reaffirm this to others and to ourselves. By engaging with gender stereotypical behaviours, some of the participants were able to feel more secure in their own gender identity and therefore within themselves as a whole. It could be argued that due to how the participants were socialised as women, there seems to be an importance placed on cisnormativity and how others around them perceived this. Webster and Rashotte (2010) argue that women are expected to conduct themselves in a certain way to be socially accepted. The need for this acceptance from others regarding gender identity is indicative of some of the participants' experiences of the gender transition process.

This experience of solidifying one's own gender was contradicted by some of the participants who reflected on their gender identity and did not feel it was under threat, allowing them to explore their gender identity. One participant felt uncomfortable with strangers identifying her as a "lady" (Scarlett, P6: 3- 10) even though she described herself as a cisgender. Some of the participants did not feel a need to 'prove' their gender identity to anyone, in contrast to other participants who changed their behaviours and even physical appearance to affirm their gender identity. This suggests that some of the participants did not feel that there was a particular way to 'do' gender (Landqvist et al., 2021). This could be indicative of the sociopolitical climate, as there is some evidence that younger generations are rejecting traditional gender labels (The Guardian, 2016). This could therefore influence how some of the participants in this study viewed gender in comparison to others.

However, it is important to note that there are enduring cisgender behavioural expectations firmly in place within Western society (Eisenclas, 2013). Not conforming to

some of these expectations is deemed unacceptable and can prove to be problematic if they are not adhered to (Neilson et al., 2020).

Better and Simula (2015) argue that one's partner's gender identity does not define one's sexuality. However, some of the participants' sexual identity transformed, and due to their partners' gender transition, their sexuality did in fact change. Scott (2020) found that the participants in his study also showed a development in their sexuality as they felt they had to 'come out' to those who were close to them. It is important to note in the current study that this development of sexuality was experienced through the lens of 'permission' to explore their sexuality, and that their partner's gender transition allowed them to contemplate and explore this aspect of their identities. It is important to note that this self-exploration and changes to sexual identity weren't experienced by all of the participants in the current study. This was mirrored by Van Acker et al. (2023), who found that those who already identified as sexually fluid, such as bisexual or pansexual, for example, didn't feel the need to change their sexual identity labels. However, some of these with more binary labels, if sexuality, such as straight or gay, did re-examine their sexual identity labels; some of these changed to include the trans partner; however, some of these did not. Cover (2018) identifies that there appears to be a 'freer and more liberal attitude' towards sexuality and the move away from strict sexuality labels. Smith (2020) reaffirms this by highlighting the importance of political orientation when it comes to forming opinions and attitudes towards gender and sexuality. This was emphasised by Kirsch (2020), who states that terms such as 'queer' are being used more to describe sexuality rather than 'gay' or 'bisexual', for

example²⁶. Most of the participants in the current research project were previously identified as 'lesbian' or 'heterosexual'. As their partner transitioned, their sexuality did too, with them now describing themselves as 'queer' or 'pansexual'.

It could be argued that there is more acceptance of sexual fluidity within Western society than ever before, and that previously sexuality was required to fit into predetermined categories, as Bailey et al. (2016) suggest that there is attraction to the opposite sex, same sex or both sexes.²⁷ Savin-Williams (2016) contradicts this view by describing sexuality as being on a continuum rather than in three binary categories. Ainsworth (2015) argues that gender identity is also on a spectrum. However, it seems that this concept of gender fluidity is still not widely accepted within Western society.

Conversely, the other half of the participants discussed that their sexuality had not changed. They did not want to be identified as anything other than heterosexual, and that this was something that they still identified as, regardless of their partner's gender identity. These participants struggled with the concept of how changes in their partner's gender identity would mean changes in how their sexuality was perceived by others outside of the relationship. They described this as a process that 'happened' to them rather than it being a collaborative process with their trans partner, with some of the participants stating that they were 'concerned' about their sexuality being misidentified and experiencing perceived judgment from others. Ellis et al. (2020) argue that sexual identity categorisation is an important part of ones' identity. Conclusively, the notion of the renegotiation of identity

²⁶ It is important to note that the term 'queer' has been previously used in a derogatory way. It could be argued that the use of the terms is reclaiming it, or that it wasn't used as a slur to some of the younger participants and therefore feels more comfortable to use now.

²⁷ This is problematic when it comes to gender identity suggesting that there are only two genders.

proved more challenging for some of the participants. This could be explained by Hogg (2012) who identified that when an identity had been assumed for a longer period of time it is more difficult to deviate from this. Sanger (2018) found that in some societies, sexuality is still identified as a fixed state. However, Stewart et al. (2020) emphasises that sexuality can in fact change and develop over time both of these concepts are shown in the current study with half the participants experiencing a shift in their sexual orientation and the other half not experiencing any kind of shift at all. As these participants recounted that as their sexuality remained heterosexual throughout the gender transition process, they consequently experienced difficulties with physical intimacy. This shows that there was a change in sexual attraction during the gender transition process.

When contrasting the experiences of the two groups of participants and their experience of sexuality, the idea of sexual fluidity needed to be examined. It could be argued that this is a fairly new concept that has more recently become increasingly widespread (Stewart et al., 2020). However, this is contradicted by Brotto and Yule (2017), who discuss that sexual fluidity has always been present in society; however, it is only now that it is deemed 'safe' to embrace this sexual fluidity, due to the changing socio-political climate.

Due to the gender transition process, all participants noticed changes within the roles they now undertook within the relationship. One of these was the role of 'mediator'. This role was assumed when interacting with the trans individuals' family members. Some of the participants mentioned that familial relationships had become strained due to their partner's gender transition. One participant mentioned that she was alienated from her family as they did not accept her partner's gender identity. Dierckx et al. (2015) state that the immediate family are significantly important to the success of the trans individual.

However, some studies found that it was difficult for family members to accept the trans persons 'new' identity (Israel, 2005; Kerry, 2018) and therefore offer adequate support. Israel (2005) and Kerry (2018) claim that this is because of strong emotional feelings of loss and a lack of understanding. These views are reflected in this research project, with participants recounting challenges in communication with family members surrounding the trans partner. Some of the participants identified that they believed that family members were worried that they would unintentionally upset the trans person by using the wrong or inappropriate language, for example.

Many of the participants accepted this role of mediator; however, they mentioned that it made them sad that the trans person's immediate family felt they were unable to talk about gender identity with the trans person themselves. Conversely, some of the participants mentioned that the gender transition process had negatively affected familial relationships, where some family members were not accepting of the trans person's identity. This disparity in experience could in part have been related to the participant's social networks. Some of the participants belonged to what they described as queer and liberal friendship groups, whereas the other participants' social circles were smaller and consisted mainly of heterosexual couples.

Another role the participants assumed was that of the educator and advocate, according to Smith et al. (2022); this was reflected in some of the existing literature.

In the current study, the need for the partners to take on these roles could be due to trans people often acting as educators themselves (Theron and Collier, 2013). Theron and Collier (2013) continue to explain that this is often a burden to trans individuals and acts as a barrier to receiving support. Smith et al. (2022) found that participants in their

study took a very active role in advocating for their trans partner, becoming activists themselves within the LGBTQ+ community. This is reflected in the current study, especially amongst some of the participants, who took on this role with pride. They mentioned that they were driven to educate more people about the trans experience and hoped that they had been successful in doing so. This ongoing act of educating others could be a means of demonstrating support for their trans partner's identity, which is important for the well-being of the trans individual (Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009).

It was extremely important for participants to ensure the accuracy of information being shared about trans people and trans issues. This appears to be due to the current sociopolitical climate, including the prevalence of attacks on trans people's freedoms and the risk of abuse (Bradley, 2020). This sharing of information could be the participants attempting to shield their trans partners from potential harm.

Across the data set, participants discussed how they had become their partners' protectors as a direct result of the gender transition process. Most of the participants recognised the loss of heterosexual privilege following their partner's transition. This reflects Butler's (1990) critique of the heteronormative matrix, whereby relationships that fall outside normative expectations become increasingly visible and vulnerable to social regulation. Similarly, Halberstam (2005) argues that queer lives frequently involve negotiating spaces not designed for gender diversity, helping to explain participants' heightened concerns regarding their partners' safety. This was corroborated by the findings in a study by Motter (2017). Participants mentioned wanting to shield their partner from negative reactions and judgements from others, something Brown (2011) connotes is common when a person transitions.

Some of the participants recounted experiences of violence and aggression from strangers. Bradley (2020) connotes that trans people are more likely to experience harassment and abuse at the street level. For those who had transitioned into being female or female presenting, this also brought challenges, as the World Health Organisation [WHO] (2024) states that women are more likely to experience harassment and aggression, stating that this is a 'world health problem'. This change in vulnerability arguably could be a result of the trans partner performing their gender in a more stereotypically 'female' or 'feminine' way. This meant that the participants in the current research project worried more about their partner's safety.

Despite all of the participants experiencing a number of changes within their relationship, some participants were more open to self-discovery and self-reflection, whereas others were not. This could be due to the socio-political climate and the generational divide. For example, more recently, there has been a societal cultural shift that encourages individuals to be self-reflective and invest in personal growth, something that Harrington and Loffredo (2010) argue is a desirable attribute that promotes wellbeing. It could be that some of the participants were raised in a very different socio-political climate where reflection and investment in oneself could have been considered as self-indulgent and were discouraged. It was also evident that some of the participants in the study were committed when it came to activism, involvement in the LGBTQIA+ community, and the promotion of trans rights.

8.1.3 The emotional gains and the emotional cost

The following theme that was generated was entitled '*The emotional gains and the emotional cost*'. This theme identifies the emotional experience of the phenomenon by exploring the complexity and often contradictory emotions that participants reported. It delves into these emotions, identifying the role and availability of emotional support and what the experiences of this support entailed.

Smithee and Few-demo (2022) discuss the idea of emotional tensions both within the individual when it comes to the gender transition process and between both partners relationally as a couple. Not only this, but they describe how these “emotional tensions ... ebbed and flowed across time” (P6,13). This is reflected in the current study as participants described different stages of the gender transition process and how this elicited different emotions.

The data in this study explicitly highlighted that supporting a partner through the gender transition process was highly complex. Identifying the complex emotional, social and psychological experiences which are highlighted in the existing literature (Theron & Collier, 2017; Giammattei, 2015; Twist et al., 2017). These emotional experiences paint a negative picture of the gender transition process. In this study, negative experiences were reported; however, there were also more affirmative accounts of the gender transition process, which elicited positive emotional experiences such as happiness and joy.

The discourse around trans identities and trans bodies is at the forefront of the current zeitgeist, with many arguing for trans inclusion (Restar & Reisner, 2017; Ortiz-Martínez & Ríos-González, 2017; Roffee, 2018). However, there are also many arguing for the exclusion of trans people, especially in sports and 'women only' spaces (Lawford-Smith, 2021; Gilligan, 2018; Rowling, 2020). The dichotomy around trans identities has inevitably affected the experience of the gender transition process for the cis partners in the current study. This is reflected in the complex and often contradictory emotional experiences of the cis partners. Some of the participants mentioned the gender transition process being a "roller-coaster of emotions" (Rebecca, P5:36) and that they "Loss, a lot of grief... happiness and joy" (Lily, P3:19). Butler (2004) argues that the social legitimacy of individuals' identities is shaped by prevailing cultural norms. Consequently, participants' emotional experiences were influenced not only by the transition itself but also by wider social debates surrounding the legitimacy of trans identities, creating additional emotional strain within their relationships.

The common experience of feeling mixed emotions was seen across the data set. Some participants discussed feelings of confusion, sadness and anger over loss of control of relationship changes. Additionally, there was an importance placed on the recognition that they wanted their partner to be happy and live authentically, causing them to feel conflicted due to their own emotional experiences.

Participants discussed the difficulty in supporting their partners through struggling with their gender identity. They mentioned frustration and sadness in witnessing this. They continued to discuss how 'draining, sad, magical and joyous' the gender transition process has been. All of the participants involved in the current study described 'mixed emotions' and a 'rollercoaster of emotions'. This was something that Watts et al. (2017) found in their

study. One participant mentioned feeling “*every emotion*” (Lily, P3:18) throughout the gender transition process. This highlights the complexity and often contradictory emotions experienced that accompany the gender transition process, and the subsequent profound emotional effect this has on the non-transitioning partner. The idea of prioritising their trans partners' mental health over their own was also seen across the data set. This reaffirms the need for high-quality specialised support for this client group.

Due to the plethora of emotional challenges described, it became clear that the participants needed access to individualised psychological and emotional support. Van Acker et al. (2023) found that emotional support was of the utmost importance, and being able to share the experience of their partner’s gender transition was imperative. This was reflected in the current study, as a result of being the trans partners' main source of support, participants were managing this and their own complex emotional responses to the gender transition process with minimal external support. Due to this, there was a clear need for connection with others who were experiencing something similar. Finney and Rishbeth (2006) argue that there is a strong need within marginalised communities to connect with others for support.

Across the data, there was a common experience of the lack of support for the non-transitioning partner. Many of the participants emphasised their need for support, but they could not access the specialised support they required in order to meet their emotional needs. Beckett-Warrington (2020) identifies that in their study, agencies, including healthcare professionals, showed a lack of engagement with partners of trans individuals. In some cases, they were responsible for the exclusion of the cis gender partner from the gender transition process. Beckett-Warrington (2020) argues that this proved harmful to

both the cis gender and the trans partner. This highlights that there is a need for further training for clinicians and a recognition of the demand for the provision of a wider and more specific specialised support for cis partners. Not all participants in the current study experienced their partner's gender transition in exactly the same way; therefore, a 'one size fits all' approach to support would be inadequate. This is emphasised by Van Acker et al. (2023), who found that cis partners needed a variety of support during the gender transition process to work on their own emotions and experiences, but also to work on challenges more relationally with their trans partner.

Furthermore, there is clear evidence of poor therapeutic support. In the study by Watts et al. (2017) a participant was left feeling depressed after accessing a support group they came across online. This is also reflected in the current research project. For example Hannah stated that *"I found it really depressing because here was maybe about ahh, 12 people there or something, and we all just sat around and it was like a general discussion. The other people who were talking when we were there were like well I told my wife about it and obviously we split up and like ya know everyone's relationship had failed because of this and I found it really hard because we are trying to make something work."* (P4:35). The participant in the Watts et al (2017) study expressed a feeling that the trans individuals were encouraged to disregard their cis partners and focus on their feelings and their transition journey. Again, Hannah from the current study reported a similar experience. She stated that: *what about us? So umm, I do find that groups quite hard but afterwards umm, we sat down having a drink for a bit longer and ya know it was all very nice and they said nice things about how it was good that I'd come along and umm but yeah it just, I just found it so hard because I wanted to say yeah but what about these partners that you have and what*

about your kids and ya know it's more than just about you it has to be... It can be very lonely" (P7:1). Furthermore, some participants mentioned feeling concerned by comments from their therapists. For example, *"It [therapists and therapy] needs to come with a sticker saying I'm not trying to change your thinking"* (Scarlett, P14:28). This concept of inadequate emotional and psychological support from professionals will be explored fully later in the chapter.

8.1.4 A new identity and place in society:

Finally, the theme of *'A new identity and a place in society'* was formed. This theme is characterised by the inner power and strength that the gender transition process has generated within the participants. This theme also encapsulated the idea that *'we are all transitioning'* and the importance of romantic partners transitioning together.

It was clear from the data that due to their partners' gender transition, the participants in the current study were able to discover more about themselves. One of these elements that was prevalent across the data set was resilience. Much of the existing literature doesn't identify this idea of resilience. For example, Theron and Collier (2013) note that there were feelings of grief and loss, which is reinforced by Ostrander (2025), who found that some of the participants in their study felt helpless and that their partner's gender transition process was something being done to them. Here, the current study has identified resilience as a unique experience from the participants who are supporting their partners through the gender transition process. This idea of resilience is something that clinicians working with

this client group need to be aware of to minimise assumptions around cis partners' experiences of the gender transition process.

Along with resilience, many of the participants also mentioned the need for bravery. It seems that many of the participants underestimated themselves as they were surprised by the bravery and resilience that they possessed. Majiba and Majiba (2020) argue that it is in adversity that we show our true strength of character. They expand on this by stating that the absence of challenges and adversity “minimises psychological growth” (p. 57). In the current study, participants showed their strength of character in relation to the challenges they faced due to their partner's gender transition process. It could be argued that without their partners' gender transition, the participants in the current study would not have been allowed to experience psychological growth and a sense of character development.

Some participants noticed that they developed more self-awareness, describing that they identified parts of themselves that they wanted to change and noticed that they had been able to do so. *“I’m kind of a piece keeper. So I will sort of go no, no it is ok and fit in with other people. Umm, and I think counselling made me more strong in not doing now”* (Hannah, P11:38). Due to their partner's gender transition, participants felt that they too could transition or change. This aligns closely with Halberstam's (2005) concept of *queer time*, whereby transition is understood not as a finite event belonging solely to one individual, but as an ongoing process of becoming that reshapes relationships and identities over time. This idea of transitioning together is emphasised by Twist et al. (2017), who contend that the discovery of a trans identity is a process shared by cisgender partners. This idea of transitioning together is emphasised by Twist et al. (2017), who connotes that the discovery of the trans identity was a process shared by the cis gender partners. Not only

this, but cis partners were also able to discuss how they were changing due to the gender transition process.

What was prevalent across the data was the concept of the transition process being ongoing. Hennekam and Ladge (2023) corroborate this by stating that the gender transition process is nonlinear and that there is an interchange between the need to be accepted by others and the need to express one's gender. There were also questions over what the future would hold, especially with the aforementioned ongoing nature of the gender transition process. Chester et al. (2017) discuss that many trans individuals had dramatically changed throughout the various stages of the gender transition process, including their personalities and, in some cases, their sexual orientation. Some of the participants in the current study were more comfortable with this future uncertainty and were excited to go through these changes together as a couple. However, some of the participants were questioning if their trans partner would still be attracted to them, the further they went into the journey of transition. Chester et al. (2017) argue that there is the possibility for this to change if the trans person takes hormones. However, other studies have contradicted this (Twist et al., 2017; Giammattei, 2015). They found that the trans individuals wanted to remain in their relationships with their cis partners, regardless of whether they had hormonal treatment or not.

Some of the participants in the current study showed more concern over the future. One participant discussed their worry about having to change themselves to keep the relationship. Rauer et al. (2014) argue that change in a romantic relationship is paramount to its success. Yet Andreescu (2020) disputes this by claiming that changes in our

environment can be detrimental to relationship longevity. It seems that accepting what it means for some of the participants to reside in a relationship that is outside of society's heteronormative ideals is challenging and appears to be something that some of the participants are continuing to work through. In contrast, some participants, although aware of the possible challenges, have embraced this. It appears that they view the gender transition process to be considerably less threatening to the longevity of the relationship. It could be argued from the discussion above that the gender transition process strengthened some of the relationships. This concept was emphasised by some of the participants in the study, mentioning a different kind of closeness that has developed due to the gender transition process.

It was important to examine the idea of a continuing journey of transition and what this meant for the cis partners in relation to the wider social community. Some of the participants found a loss of heteronormative privilege and a sense of being more at risk of homophobic abuse. Lawrence-Harper (2025) identifies that couples who present outside of the heteronormative expression are more likely to experience abuse and discrimination. Butler (1990) identifies that residing outside of the gender norm can result in rejection and othering from society.

8.2 Theoretical implications

There is limited research that includes the trans community, let alone their cis gender partners. The current research project contributes to the literature in a number of ways.

(i)Challenging dominant trans relationship narrative

This study challenges prevailing assumptions within the existing academic literature, particularly the view that relationships typically end once one partner discloses their transgender identity. In contrast, all participants in this research chose to remain with their partners, highlighting that couples can and do navigate the complexities that may emerge during a gender transition. These findings, therefore, contest the dominant discourse surrounding trans-related relationship dissolution and demonstrate that many couples can work through the difficulties associated with the transition process. This study highlights that couples do not always separate when one person in the relationship is transitioning as all of the couples in this study had remained in their relationships. One of the participants discussed that when she was in a support group, she *“found it really depressing because here was maybe about ahh, 12 people there or something, and we all just sat around and it was like a general discussion. The other people who were talking when we were there were like well I told my wife about it and obviously we split up and like ya know everyone’s relationship had failed because of this and I found it really hard because we are trying to make something work.”* (Hannah:P4:35). Hannah stressed the word *“trying”* when recounting this experience, communicating her frustration around the narrative that when one person in a relationship transitioned to a different gender the relationship ends, something she did not want to happen. This also emphasised the drive Hannah had to remain in the relationship and the effort that this would take when navigating the gender transition process.

Not only is there a clear drive to remain on the relationship shown by Hannah in the above statement but the couples in this study have been able to find new ways of being in relationships and many of them are thriving. The current study showed that due to the gender transformation process, participants were renegotiating their coupledness. They were brought closer together due to the gender transition process, and that, for many, had been an enjoyable experience, finding new things in common and being able to get to know each other more intimately.

(ii) Providing empirical evidence for gender and sexuality fluidity.

It is important to acknowledge that the dominant discourse in the relationship literature is that of heteronormativity (Bytheway & Stephens-Lewis, 2024). This study goes against this, focusing on gender and sexual fluidity. Halberstam (2018) discusses the physical body in terms of something we orchestrate like an architect rather than something we are given that remains constant. Halberstam discusses the concept of gender ambiguity that exceeds the division between trans and cis and gives access to the multifaceted nature and complexity of fluidity in gender identity. There is empirical evidence in this study that contradicts the idea that residing outside of the gender and sexual binary is purely a negative experience. Here, the participants of the current study showed a diversity of relationships that exist beyond the heteronormative script and show a rich tapestry of affirmative and flourishing relational experiences. The current study has shown that the cis partners have celebrated their trans partners' identity and have embraced the challenges and changes this has brought to them. This is a unique view on the gender transition process, as much of the current literature highlights a more negative experience for cis partners.

(iv) Acknowledging lived realities of living outside of the binary

This study showed that the cis gender partners reflected upon their gender identity as a result of the gender transition process. This promotes the idea that gender doesn't reside in the binary, something that Halberstam (2018) discusses. Sexuality was a key theme that was identified in the study. It highlighted that sexuality is fluid and can develop and change over time, reinforcing the idea that our identity is co-constructed in relation to others, depending on the relationships that we have. Many of the participants discussed that their sexuality had, in fact, changed due to the gender transition process. They also mentioned that their trans partner had afforded them the opportunity to explore more about their sexual identity, something they wouldn't have done without the gender transition process. This supports Butler's (1990) theory around the non-essential nature of gender and sexuality.

As trans identities seem to be on the rise according to Lemma and Savulescu (2021), this suggests that there will be a growing need for psychological support for those in relationships with trans persons. This includes access to professional support with an understanding of the complex emotional experiences. An understanding of the changes in the relationship due to the gender transformation process will be key and how the couple are now viewed within wider society. Importantly, the data from this study support an affirmative position on trans identities and the experience of the gender transition process. This study provides empirical data on an underreached population and identifies key parts of the experience of being partnered with someone who transitions to a different gender once the relationship has already been established for a significant period of time. This research

project has highlighted the need for further professional development within the field of counselling psychology and the development of further research in order to better support service users in the future. This research project has the potential to begin to promote societal change, starting with the psychological community and centring social justice, which Whitcombe (2024) identifies as a fundamental principle of counselling psychology. It will be imperative to share this research with the wider psychological community and not just within the LGBTQIA+ field.

8.3 Practical Implications

An important element of this research project is to consider the wider implications both within research and clinical practice. Firstly, the current study sheds light on the phenomenon of being partnered with a trans person when the trans identity is disclosed during the relationship. This has been an under-researched area within the psychological field, with limited research. However, beyond addressing the gap in the research literature, the findings from this study point to the following areas for counselling psychologists and other therapeutic practitioners working with trans partners to be aware of:

- (i) Therapists being aware of their own gender perspectives and being more transparent:**

From the data, it is clear that clinicians need to be more transparent around their own gender politics so that this client group can feel safe to unpack their experiences of the gender transition process in a safe and non-threatening environment. Unfortunately, for the participants, adequate therapeutic support wasn't always assessable. Zullo et al. (2021) connotes that this is not always available for members of the LGBTQIA+ community and, by proxy, those close to them. This was highlighted by those who participated in the current study. For example, one participant discussed her experience of therapy, stating that *"support needs to come with a sticker saying I'm not trying to convert your thinking"* (Scarlett, P14:28). As Scarlett was unaware of her therapist's stance on gender, she felt unsure about speaking freely about her trans partner. For participants in this study, there was a recognition of the importance of psychological support for partners transitioning, but a sense of the absence of any support for themselves. There is clearly a need for psychological support for partners; however, this was inadequate for some and, for others, extremely difficult to find.

(ii) **Awareness of experiences of gender transitioning for the individual can be positive and not only negative:**

Much of the previous literature on this subject has explored partners' experience of the gender transition process and has found that the majority of relationships do, in fact, break down and that the gender transition process is the reason for this breakdown. However, this research project contradicts this as it highlights a strong message of hope from the cis partners. Although supporting their partners through the gender transition process was complex and highlighted the need for professional psychological support, there was a drive from all participants to

remain in the relationship and for it to be a success. It is therefore important for clinicians not to make assumptions about the relationship, that it will break down due to the gender transition process and that couples might face challenges that are not related to the gender transition process.

“It’s [the relationship] never been in a place where we have been close to or thought about breaking up like that’s no question [name] is my soul mate. I hope that we’ll be together forever” (Scarlett, P9:24).

(iii) Awareness of the impact of support groups:

Many of the participants in this study sought out support from different support groups. When they were discussing their experiences, many of the participants noticed that they were centred around couples that were previously both cis gender and heterosexual. Some of the participants encountered negative accounts of the gender transition process from other members of these groups and felt that this didn’t align with their experience. Many of the participants discussed positive experiences of the gender transition process and didn’t feel able to express this. This highlights the need for more diverse support groups for people with a variety of sexualities and gender identities, where the positive experiences of the gender transition process are welcome to be discussed alongside the challenges. Having a more diverse approach to these support groups would also eradicate the assumptions of cis and heteronormativity. Therefore, therapeutic settings need to be more inclusive and provide a safe space to explore the experience of supporting a partner through the gender transition process, where all experiences feel welcomed, valid and important. This would

provide this client group with support and the sense of community that Kuvalanka et al. (2014) argue is of the utmost importance when experiencing the gender transition process.

(iv) Recognition of changes in gender and sexual identities for participants:

In this study, the data showed that there were struggles for some of the participants due to a potential change to their heterosexual identity. However, it is extremely important to acknowledge that some of the participants found joy and satisfaction in self-discovery of their sexual identity and learning that this had, in fact, changed. They felt that due to their partner's gender transition, they had been allowed to explore their sexual identity; without the gender transition process, this wouldn't have occurred. Again, this challenges the idea of assumed heteronormativity, and this is not only the assumed default but also the aspirational sexual identity. Clinicians need to recognise that exploring sexuality and queer identities is not a negative prospect for many and that it is seen as an opportunity for personal growth and self-exploration. Barker (2022) states that clinicians unknowingly reinforce heteronormativity due to the "hetero-patriarchy" (p. 65) and the messages about gender and sexuality that we are exposed to from birth. It will be imperative for clinicians to be aware of these internalised narratives to enable professionals to guide clients through their experiences without reinforcing harmful cis and heteronormativity.

(V) Emotional pressures experienced:

This study has clearly shown that there is a plethora of emotional experiences and pressures that the participants and their trans partner experience both individually and relationally. Clinicians need to be aware that these emotional experiences are often contradictory and experienced simultaneously. Many of the participants had positive emotional responses to their partner's gender transition and found that it made the bond between them, and therefore their relationship, stronger. Some of the challenges participants faced were being able to put their emotional needs first and make space for themselves. All of the participants in this study found themselves prioritising the needs of their trans partner over their own emotional needs. Clinicians will need to be aware of this when working with this client group and ensure that therapy prioritises space for cis partners to explore and express their emotions and explore their own needs.

(Vi) Recognition of living with society pressures

There must be an awareness amongst professionals of how residing outside of the gender and heterosexual norm is experienced. For most of the participants in this study, at the beginning of their relationships, they were in heterosexual presenting relationships. However, due to the gender transition process, this changed for some participants in this study and, therefore, could change for clients. Many were perceived differently, with some couples facing violence from homophobic and transphobic attacks from strangers. Other participants experienced being ostracised from family members and friends. Again, there are also positive sides to this change in societal perceptions. Some participants discussed that

they have found community and have cultivated closer friendships due to the gender transition process. Clinicians need to ensure that they do not make assumptions that the gender transition process will inevitably cause friction within relationships and within wider society, whilst simultaneously having an awareness of the transphobic rhetoric that is prevalent within UK society and the possibility of harassment and violence for gender and sexual minority groups. Some participants found that their partner's gender transition allowed them to reflect on their own gender identity. This is something that clinicians will need to consider when working with the cis partners and support the cis partner in exploring this.

(Vii) Recognition of change and transition taking place

Clinicians also need to be aware that if the trans partner is undergoing transition, it is likely that the cis partner is transitioning alongside them. This study has shown that many of the participants changed (sexuality, which has already been discussed) and discovered new aspects of themselves due to their partner's gender transition.

Many of the participants noticed a change in relationship dynamics. Some mentioned feeling more protective of their trans partner and worrying about their safety. Cis partners also took on the role of educator on behalf of their trans partners. This was due to changes in heteronormative presenting couples and the trans partners residing outside of the gender norm. It will be imperative for clinicians to be aware of these changes and support the cis partners in navigating these. All of the participants in this study mentioned that they had developed a new level of strength and resilience that they didn't realise would be possible. It

is important for clinicians not to assume that cis partners are fragile and unable to manage challenges that the gender transition process may provide, and support the cis partners in a way that acknowledges this strength and resilience.

(Viii) Need for therapeutic training:

“I’m hopeful that more things like this (meaning the current research project) will lead to some support [for partners]” (Hannah, P14:29).

This research project has shown that it is imperative that, for adequate therapeutic practice, clinicians need to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of being partnered with someone who transitions to a different gender during the relationship. This study highlights that there isn’t adequate training in this field, and it is important to ensure that clinicians are specifically trained in working with couples experiencing the gender transition process. The emotional experiences that accompany the gender transition process and the effect that this has on cis partners are multifaceted and complex. Having adequate training and awareness of the phenomenon would provide a safe space for this client group within the therapy room, which, as a counselling psychologist, is imperative to ethical practice (Shaw & Carrol, 2016). The BPS (2019) provides guidelines on working with gender and sexually diverse people. The document acknowledges that the well-being of gender diverse couples and individuals could be affected due to the unique experiences the gender transition process creates. These guidelines are useful when working with this client group; however, MacKinnon (2020) found that mistrust was cultivated between professionals and clients due to the healthcare professionals’ lack of knowledge about the complexity of being

partnered with someone who is undergoing the gender transition process. Many clients have been forced to take on the role of 'educator' with professionals (Twist et al., 2017), which has not only instilled mistrust as previously discussed but also placed a burden on the couples. For example, couples may access therapy for other issues within the relationship, not solely related to gender identity and the process of gender transition (Richards & Barker, 2013). Moreover, working with gender and sexual diversity is not currently mandatory in counselling psychology and other healthcare training programmes. Not only this, but there is a lack of opportunities within healthcare professions to train with gender diverse clients in clinical settings (Mousavian, 2024). This study has highlighted the need for training opportunities with gender diversity to enable professionals to develop essential skills and work inclusively.

8.4 Summary

In summary, the implications for this research project are significant for counselling psychologists and their clinical practice. Therapists need to have transparency and gender awareness. (You need to expand here) Reflecting on and openly communicating their own gender perspectives to create a safe, non-judgmental space. Many participants reported mistrust or hesitation due to therapists' unclear stances on gender. Clinicians need to be aware that cis partners have many positive experiences of the gender transition process, Contrary to dominant narratives, many cis partners in the study expressed commitment and emotional growth, showing that transitions can strengthen relationships. Clinicians should

not assume transitions lead to relationship breakdown. Support groups needing more diversity were shown to be important. Existing groups often centre on cis-heterosexual experiences and may alienate those with positive or non-normative stories. More inclusive, intersectional support groups are needed.

The complex emotional needs of the cis partners were prevalent in this study. Participants often suppressed their own emotional needs to support their partner. Therapists must ensure space for cis partners to process their emotions. Some participants experienced changes in their sexual and gender identity, describing this as a positive experience. Clinicians should support this exploration and avoid reinforcing heteronormative ideals. Participants discussed societal pressures, such as shifting from a heterosexual-presenting relationship to a queer-presenting one, that brought both community and conflict. Clinicians must understand these societal dynamics, including potential harassment or rejection. Cis partners described a parallel transition—emotionally, socially, and relationally. Many participants described feeling more protective of their trans partner; they also discussed taking on educational roles and developing unexpected resilience. Halberstam (2018) reiterates that “all bodies pass through some version of building and unbuilding.” Regardless of being cis or trans, we are all transitioning.

There is a significant lack of training on how to work with cis partners of trans individuals (include a reference here). Therapists often lack the knowledge to support these clients, leading to mistrust and an added emotional burden. Mandatory and inclusive training in gender and sexual diversity is urgently needed in clinical education.

8.5 Discussion reflexivity

Better and Simula (2015) state that the gender of a romantic partner does not define your sexuality. This is something that personally resonated with me as I am a cisgendered bisexual woman and in a relationship with a cisgendered heterosexual man (not sure if this is correct, but illustrating you need to expand here. This does not mean that I am any less bisexual for being in a heteronormative relationship. However, it was important to still critically evaluate this and acknowledge my feelings towards this idea. Due to this, I ensured that I thought critically about this concept and included a variety of literature within the discussion section, and not just that which aligned with my personal experiences. I managed this through discussions with my supervisor and keeping a reflexive journal.

Due to my dedication to social justice and how important this is to me as a counselling psychologist, I had to ensure that I was looking at the material critically and not purely adding in literature that supported my political standpoint on trans issues and my need to communicate an experience that highlighted hope.

This research project has enabled me to think about my own practice and my personal need for further training in order to support any clients who may experience this phenomenon. To ensure that I am able to provide high-quality and specialised support as I embark on my counselling psychology career.

CHAPTER NINE: Summary and Conclusions

9.1 Summary

Research question: How do people in the UK experience their partner's transition to a different gender during the relationship?

The current research project explored the experience of being in a relationship with a trans person when the trans identity is disclosed once the relationship has already been established.

It was clear from the data that being in a relationship with a trans partner when they are going through the gender transition process is a complex and, on occasion, contradictory experience. Participants spoke about how they experienced an array of emotional responses, including pride, joy, loss, fear, uncertainty and many more. Due to this, emotional support for the cisgender partners was crucial. Unfortunately, they described the support they received and discussed the shortcomings of this, centred around a lack of understanding from professionals as a potential cause of inadequate support.

How the cis gender partners negotiated their sense of self was also prominent in the data. They found themselves questioning their own gender identity, sexuality and role within the relationship and family unit. This renegotiation for some of the participants led to self-discovery and a deeper understanding of who they are, something many of them spoke positively about. However, for some of the other participants, this wasn't the case. They

found this renegotiation extremely challenging and threatening to their identity and would counteract this by performing their gender in more stereotypical ways.

The data showed that the gender transition process is not a linear one, and it appears to be a continuous journey. Participants reflected on what this means for them personally, within their romantic relationship, but also their relationship with family members, friends and the wider social community. Some of the participants were excited to continue to transition alongside their trans partner. They discussed looking forward to the future together and building upon the “new level of closeness” they had experienced since the disclosure of the trans identity. For some participants, family members had not been understanding of the gender transition process, and in some cases, family members had rejected the trans person's identity altogether. This left some of the participants feeling isolated. Many of the participants found that friends had been extremely supportive and, in some cases, their cis partners and found a whole new social community and network due to their partner's gender transition. However, some of the participants experienced homophobic and transphobic harassment. This highlights the current sociopolitical climate and the debate around trans identities.

Finally, all of the participants expressed a strong drive to remain in the relationship after the disclosure of their trans identity. This finding contradicts the dominant narrative that relationships break down as a result of the gender transition process.

9.2 Limitations

The current study has several limitations, one of which is that the political orientation of the participants was unknown. This knowledge could have been useful, as Smith (2020) stated that this is an important factor when forming attitudes towards the trans population. It would have given more social context, and if this influenced how they experienced their partner's gender transition.

Another useful piece of information could have been the educational background of the participants. This could have provided more of a contextual background to the participants and again could have provided a possible explanation of how their opinions of trans people were formed and affected their experiences.

All of the participants in the study were cisgender women who were white. This is reflective of the majority of the psychological literature on this subject. Therefore, attempting to recruit cisgender men would give a different perspective on the phenomenon of a cisgender individual supporting their trans partner through the gender transition process. Additionally, intersectionality was not fully addressed in the current study due to all of the participants being white and having UK heritage. This therefore suggests that the current study is not reflective of UK society as a whole. It perpetuates the lack of diversity within psychological research and highlights the need for more diversity within the field.

9.3 Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

What is clear from the current research project is the need for professional psychological support. As explored earlier in the study, many trainee clinicians are not allowed to work with gender diverse clients, and there is a small number of gender diverse clinicians within the psychological field. Therefore, it is no surprise that the participants in this study struggled to find professional support that met their complex needs. It is therefore essential that more research of this nature is conducted. This could lead to better practice and produce higher quality care and support for service users. It would remove the burden from those seeking support to educate practitioners on the gender transition process and the difficulties and challenges that they might encounter. This study could also help practitioners consider 'queering' their approach to therapy to be inclusive of all sexual and gender identifying clients.

There is more research needed in this field. When considering the above observations of the limitations and implications of this study, there are a number of suggestions for future research. One of these would be the original research project that I proposed. This was with a focus on the phenomenon, but looking at people of colour. This would highlight how different intersecting identities affect the phenomenon and could eventually lead to essential training for clinicians. It would be dismissive to believe that those from differing cultural and religious backgrounds would experience the phenomenon in the same way. A research project of this nature would explore an under-researched area, but also include those that are often absent from psychological research.

Another recondition for future research would be a study that focuses on cisgender men. Including the potential role that a patriarchal society and the presence of toxic masculinity might play in the experience of supporting a partner who is going through the gender transition process. This again would be more inclusive of UK society and could provide a different perspective on the type of professional support this client group might need.

9.4 Conclusion

It is clear from the data that more research of this nature is essential. All of those involved in the current study identified that at some stage of their partner's gender transition, they needed professional support. They also found that when they did seek support, it was often inadequate and ill-informed. The need for appropriate and specialised psychological support and the lack of access to this are clear from the findings in this study.

This study highlighted the importance of trans and gender non-conforming inclusive research, and how it should be at the forefront of the psychological field and not confined to LGBTQ+ publications and practices.

Finally, it is important to consider my motivations for undertaking research of this nature and placing it into context. I was inspired by a client that I worked with on a placement, who came to the service for support with low self-esteem. During the course of treatment (12 weeks), their partner had come out as trans and was going through a transition process that involved hormones and other physical changes. My client was

expressing a lot of difficulties with this, and I soon realised very quickly that I was out of my depth and unsure how to support my client. As I looked for resources, and at the time I found very little, this made me see that there is a place for research on the subject of relationships between cis and trans individuals. After interviewing the participants and analysing the data thoroughly there has been a number of key themes that has reframed my thinking around this topic. Many of the participants in this study are thriving outside of the binary and heteronormative matrix, contradicting much of the exiting literature. They are able to openly discuss the challenges such as future uncertainty along with their need for emotional support from professionals as well as hold joy, acceptance and excitement for the ongoing journey of transition and embarking on this together, however this might look.

This research project has also helped me consider my identity as a queer counselling psychologist and a proud trans ally. Engaging with trans scholarship has enabled me to hear a variety of trans voices and perspectives on gender identity, deepening my appreciation of the diversity of trans experiences. In keeping with Butler's (2004) emphasis on recognising lives that have historically been marginalised, this research has strengthened my commitment to affirming psychological practice and to understanding how broader cultural, political, and social contexts shape people's lived experiences. It has reinforced for me the counselling psychology values of social justice, relational understanding, and individually tailored care.

9.5 Final reflections

The participants of this study have deeply affected me, and their words will be circulating in my mind for many years to come. I have learnt so much from them and will be forever grateful for their time. Lily articulately states, “It would be sad if we didn’t change,” and I have to agree. The process of training to be a counselling psychologist has fundamentally changed me in so many ways. As I move through my career, I hope to hang onto Lily’s wise words and embrace change as much as I can and see it for the gift that it is.

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Appendix 1

1. How do you know what makes you, you?

- My actions and intentions.
- My interests.
- Who I am in relation to others such as family members, friends, colleagues etc and I believe that a lot of our existence and experience is in relation to others.
- My morals, standards opinions and politics. However, I understand that like certain personality traits these can be fluid and do evolve and change.
- My ability to learn listen and be empathetic. Looking at when I am wrong and accepting responsibility for my actions.

2. How do you know you are the gender you experience yourself to be?

- I take pride in the gender that that I experience. I advocate on behalf of women and girls, and I acknowledge my difficult experiences of being socialised as a girl and a woman and what this has meant for me in terms of developing my sense of self.
- I do not experience any difficulties in regard to my gender identity, nor do I feel any type of discomfort or distress.

- Until writing this thesis I have had the privilege of not needing to reflect on or explore my gender identity.

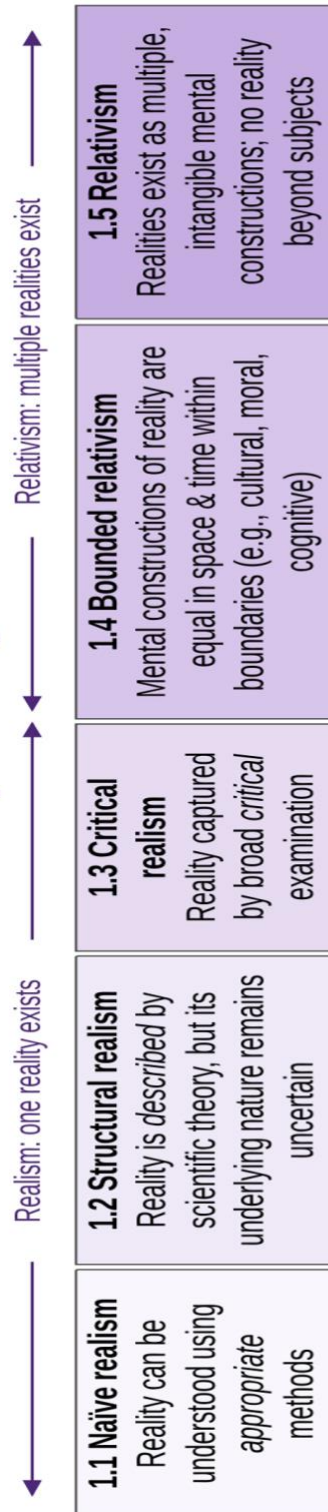
3. *If you do identify as male/female binary, reflect upon how you do that gender.*

- I do my female gender by aligning myself with other cis women and connecting over shared experiences of what it has been like to grow up and live currently as a cis woman. However, this term 'cis' was difficult to get used to and made me feel that I was creating different categories of 'woman'. I want to make it clear that this is not how I feel.
- I also look stereotypically 'fem' and perform my assigned gender in the way that I present.

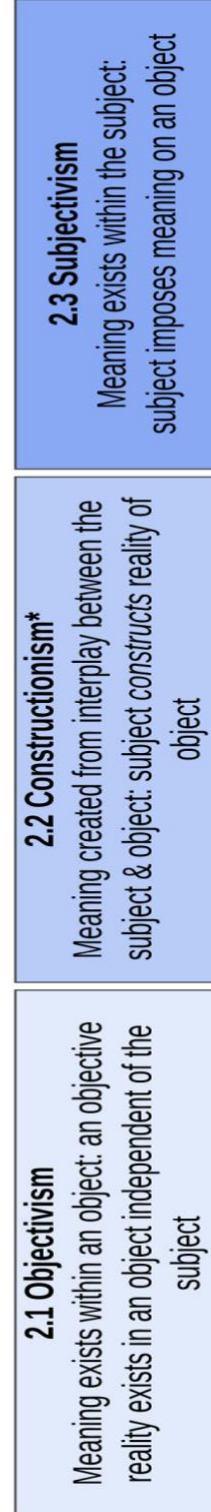
Webb (2020)

Appendix 2

1.0 ONTOLOGY: What exists in the human world that we can acquire knowledge about?



2.0 EPISTEMOLOGY: How do we create knowledge?



(Moon & Blackman, 2014, p1169)

Appendix 3



Partial screenshot of recruitment

Greater manchester pride network		Email sent	responded	11th May 24.12.22
Happy Valley		voicemail left and email sent	Follow up call and email if not responded	Monday 19.12.22
Hastings and rother rainbow alliance		Call ASAP		
Hastings pride		email sent	responded	
hereford pride				
Herne bay LGBT trust		Call ASAP		
hodayah		email sent	send follow up email if not responded	Monday 19.12.22
HomeLGBT community centre		email sent	send follow up for phone number if not responded	
homotopia		Called, message left and email sent	Follow up call and email if not responded	Monday 19.12.22
House of rainbow		replay sent and they will share on their social media.		
hull and est riding lgbt forum		Call ASAP		
humankind lgbt		called and emailed	Follow up call and email if not responded	Monday 19.12.22
inclusive bangladesh		email sent	follow up for phone number / send another email	
inkluder		Call ASAP		
intercharity LGBT		Call ASAP		
intercom trust		Call ASAP		
ishigaki		email sent	follow up email for number /email	
it gets better uk		email sent	follow up email for phone. Number/email	
its all about you wellbeing		phone call had and email sent	follow up call if not responded	28.12.22
joyful nature		Email sent	follow up for ophone number/ send email	
juice 1038		call asap		
kaleidoscope scotland		Email sent	responded	
kaleidoscope trust		voicemail left and email sent	Follow up call/email if not responded	Monday 19.12.22
kiki youth/proud north london		called message left and email sent	Follow up call and email if not responded	Monday 20.12.22
kingston LGBT forum		email sent	follow up email for phone number	Thursday 15.12.22
Lambeth links		email sent	follow up email for phone number	Thursday 15.12.22
Lancashire lgbt		voicemail left and email sent	Follow up call and email if not responded	Friday 15.12.22
lcr pride foundation		email sent	follow up email for phone number	Thursday 15.12.22
learnest		call- no answer so emailed	Follow up call and email if not responded	Friday 15.12.22
Leicester LGBT centre		left a message and emailed	Follow up email/ call if not responded	Friday 15.12.22
let voice be heard		email sent	follow up for phone number / send another email	
LGBT Brighton and hove network		message left		
BAME health forum		sharing in news letter and on socials		
Mind out		Intro email sent	Call and follow up email if not responded	Thursday 16th Feb

Recruitment Flyer



Collaboration Opportunity

My name is Bethan Islam, I am a queer counselling psychology trainee at London Metropolitan University working towards my doctorate

My research is titled 'How do people in the UK experience a partners transition to a different gender during the relationship?'

Do you have a partner of 6 months or longer that has or is transitioning to a different gender?

Are you willing to share your experience?

Why is it needed?

- To inform clinicians how to work with partners of transgender individuals without partners having to be in the role of the educator
- To add to the minimal literature
- To begin to develop high quality and specialised support

What is the Research?

The study will focus on the individual experience of being partnered with a transgender person, when the disclosure of *the transgender identity* happens during the relationship.

£15 amazon voucher for taking part

If you want to take part in the research or want more information please email bei0076@my.londonmet.ac.uk

Interview Schedule

1. Tell me about your relationship with your partner. Try and start your story from when you met.
 - a. How did you meet?
 - b. What were your impressions when you first met them?
 - c. How did your relationship grow and change over time?
2. How would you describe yourself as a person?
 - a. Personality
 - b. Positive/ Negative phrasings
 - c. What makes you say that?
3. Can you describe your partner? What kind of person are they?
 - a. What are they like?
 - b. Tell me about their personality
4. What has the journey of your partners transition been like for you?
5. Has your partners transition made a difference in the way you see yourself?
 - a. Sexual identity labels?
 - b. Who you are?
 - c. Do you feel you have changed in any way?
 - d. Changed who you are as a person?
6. Can you describe how you experienced your partners transition?
 - a. What was most memorable during this time?
 - b. How did it make you feel towards your partner?
 - c. How did it make you see yourself?
 - d. Did you feel that you needed to change in anyway?
7. If you feel that your partner has changed during your relationship, can you describe how?
 - a. Personality
 - b. Interests
 - c. Behaviour
8. Has your partners transition impacted on your relationship in anyway?
 - a. Positively – closer together, more trust

- b. Negatively – difficulties, changes, challenges
 - c. How did you manage the change?
9. Have you noticed any difference in the way that others perceive you and your partner in comparison to before their transition?
- a. Family
 - b. Friends
 - c. Wider social Community
 - d. Cultural community
10. Is there anything in this interview that I have haven't asked that you want to share?
11. Do you feel that you have told me your story?

Participant Consent Form

Please read the following information carefully. If you give your consent to each statement, please tick the corresponding box on the right-hand side. Once you have read through the document please write your full name, sign, and date the document.

I have been informed and I understand the purpose and nature of the study and I wish to participate.

☐

I have been informed of the debriefing process and understand that this is an additional opportunity to ask any further questions about the study.

☐

I am aware that the data collected in the study is confidential and any identifiable information such as names will not be used.

☐

I understand that my cultural and ethnic background will be identified as it is an important element of the study.

☐

I am aware that the audio recording will be transcribed verbatim and will then be deleted.

☐

I consent to the interview being recorded.

☐

I understand that the information I share will contribute to the findings of this study which will be seen by others.

☐

I understand that I will be able to withdraw from the study up to 14 days after the interview without having to provide a reason or face a penalty. However, after the 14 days analysis will have already begun on the data, it will be too late to withdraw.

☐

Participant

Print Name _____

Sign _____ Date _____

Researcher

Print Name_____

Sign_____ Date_____

Appendix 7:



Email of ethical approval:

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Angela Loulopoulou** <A.Loulopoulou@londonmet.ac.uk>

Date: Mon, 21 Mar 2022 at 11:32

Subject: **Ethics** Application form Approved- Please keep this email and attached form for your records

To: Bethan Islam <BEI0076@my.londonmet.ac.uk>

<mailto:BEI0076@my.londonmet.ac.uk>

Dear Bethan,

Please be informed that the Psychology reviewer and the Chair of **Ethics** for the School of Social Sciences and Professions have fully approved your **ethics** application form for your doctoral research. Because of the sensitivity of the topic it was reviewed by a third person as well, after the Chair of the School **Ethics** had approved it. Please find it attached.

Keep this email and the **ethics** application form with the approvals by Dr Loulopoulou (me) and Professor Chandler as evidence of ethical approval and to append to your submitted thesis in due course.

Kind Regards,

Angela

Dr Angela Ioanna Loulopoulou PhD: AFBPsS: FHEA (she/her) / HCPC Registered Practitioner Psychologist: EMDR Therapist

Email of conformation that ethics did not have to be resubmitted due to change of research question:



Samantha Banbury

To: ☐ Monika Hunter; ☒ BETHAN ISLAM

! High importance

Thank you both for your transparency

This will NOT need to be resubmitted to **ethics**

cheers sam

Appendix 8:



Introductory Email

Dear.....

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research.

The study will explore the subjective experience of what it is like to be partnered with someone who transitions to a different gender during the relationship. I am looking for People of Colour who live in the UK and have been with their partner for more than 6 months.

If the description above fits your personal situation and you would like to be involved, please contact me.

Thank you for your interest, I greatly appreciate you taking the time to help me with my research project.

Bethan Islam
Trainee Counselling Psychologist
London Metropolitan University

Appendix 9



Participant Information

Research Title: The power in transitioning together: A reflective thematic analysis on how the gender transition process effects cisgender partners.

The Study and the Researcher

I am a student studying at London Metropolitan University for a professional doctorate in Counselling Psychology. The research project is part of the qualification and will aim to explore the experiences of people in the UK who are partnered with a transgender individual. The purpose of this document is to invite you to take part in this research project. Please read the following information to ensure you understand why the study is being done and what it involves. If you would like further information about the research or if any clarification is needed, please ask and do take your time in deciding whether you would like to participate.

Purpose of the study

Although there has been a growing amount of research involving the transgender community, there are very few studies focusing on the experience of their partners. By carrying out this research I hope to gain a better understanding of the personal experience of being partnered with a transgender person and the effect this has on many aspects of everyday life, including within and outside of the relationship. This could inform the way clinicians work with transgender individuals and their partners providing knowledge to inform appropriate support.

Suitability for the study

In order to partake in the study, you will need to meet the following criteria;

- Be a cisgender person living in the UK
- Have been with your partner for more than 6 months
- Your partner told you about their transgender identity after the relationship had begun.
- To be at least 18 years of age

What the study involves

If you decide you would like to take part in the study, you are able to withdraw at any time up to 14 days after the interview has taken place. After this time, it will be too late to

withdraw as analysis will have already begun. If you do withdraw there will be no judgement, objection, or penalty for doing so.

At the beginning of the process, you will receive a consent form, which will need to be signed by yourself and will outline what the study involves and what will happen to your data. Once this has been signed and returned to me, we will then arrange a convenient time and place (this can be online) to conduct the interview. A copy of the consent form will be shown to my supervisor to ensure that I have gained your consent and you can take part in the research in line with ethical guidelines. The hard copy of the consent form will be stored in a secure place.

The interview should last between 60 and 90 minutes, this will include an introduction at the beginning of the interview to ensure that you are comfortable, still willing to partake and answer any questions that you might have. The interview will be recorded to enable me to transcribe your contributions accurately. I will ask you to share your experiences of being partnered with a transgender person. At the end of the interview there will be time for a debrief where you will be given information on what happens next and how the information you provided will be used. This will also be a time for you to ask any further questions or raise any concerns that you might have.

How your information will be used

As the researcher I will be the only person who will have access to the recording in line with the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2021). The interview will be stored securely on a password protected computer. Confidentiality will only be broken if there is an immediate risk to yourself or others.

The interview will be transcribed by myself only and any identifying information such as real names, ages and locations will not be included to ensure confidentiality. However, race, religion and cultural background will be used as it is a central element to the research. Once the interview has been transcribed the audio recording will be deleted. When the study has been completed you can request a summary of the research findings by contacting me on:

Bethan Islam

Bei0076@my.londonmet.ac.uk

Risk

Throughout the semi-structured interview, you will be asked to talk about your experiences of being partnered with someone who transitioned into a different gender during your relationship. Discussing highly personal experiences such as these can trigger distress in some people if for any reason you begin to feel upset or uncomfortable let me know and we can take a break from the interview, move onto the next question, or terminate the interview altogether.

Concerns or complaints

Below are the contact details of my supervisor in case you have any concerns or wish to make a complaint regarding any of our sessions together.

Dr Catherine Athanasiandou-Lewis
Email: c.athanasiadoulewis@londonmet.ac.uk
Phone: 020 7133 2669

Distress Protocol

The following protocol has been developed in order to address the possibility that some participants may experience distress due to sharing their experiences of their partner transitioning to a different gender during the relationship within the interview process.

The researcher is a trainee Counselling Psychologist and therefore has had training and experience in managing the distress of others. The below protocols are put in place as a precaution, and it isn't expected that participants will become distressed. This is due to participants being screened using the GAD-7 and PHQ-9. Participants will show a score of below 5 on both of these scales in order to participate. However, discussing their experiences could prove emotive for some participants therefore the following has been devised.

Mild Distress:

Symptoms:

- Tearfulness
- Agitation
- Cracking in the participant's voice
- Disengagement
- Difficulty articulating
- Restlessness

Actions:

- Ask the participant if they are ok
- Ask if they would like to take a short break
- Ask if they are ok to continue with the interview
- Remind the participant they can stop the interview at any time

Severe Distress:

Symptoms:

- Disassociation
- Panic - hyperventilation, shaking, extreme restlessness
- Uncontrollable crying

Actions:

- Researcher to terminate the interview
- Relaxation and grounding techniques to be employed
- Debrief will begin

- Validate the participants distress and give details of counselling services and other forms of support

Extreme Distress:*Symptoms*

- *Severe verbal/ physical aggression*
- *Psychotic episode*

Actions:

- To ensure the safety of the participant and the researcher
- Direct the participant to A&E
- Call the police if the participant refuses intervention or becomes physically violent.
This would be used only in an emergency.

Adapted from the Distress Protocol written by Sarah Callman London Metropolitan University 2020.

PHQ-9

Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been
bothered by any of the following problems?
(use "✓" to indicate your answer)

	Not at all	Several days	More than half the days	Nearly every day
1. Little interest or pleasure in doing things	0	1	2	3
2. Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless	0	1	2	3
3. Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much	0	1	2	3
4. Feeling tired or having little energy	0	1	2	3
5. Poor appetite or overeating	0	1	2	3
6. Feeling bad about yourself—or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down	0	1	2	3
7. Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television	0	1	2	3
8. Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed. Or the opposite — being so figety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual	0	1	2	3
9. Thoughts that you would be better off dead, or of hurting yourself	0	1	2	3

add columns + +

(Healthcare professional: For interpretation of TOTAL, TOTAL:
please refer to accompanying scoring card).

10. If you checked off <i>any problems</i> , how <i>difficult</i> have these problems made it for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?	Not difficult at all	
	Somewhat difficult	
	Very difficult	
	Extremely difficult	

Scoring: add up all checked boxes on PHQ-9

For every ✓ Not at all = 0; Several days = 1;
More than half the days = 2; Nearly every day = 3

Interpretation of Total Score

Total Score	Depression Severity
1-4	Minimal depression
5-9	Mild depression
10-14	Moderate depression
15-19	Moderately severe depression
20-27	Severe depression

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A2662B 10-04-2005

Appendix 13



GAD-7 Anxiety

Over the <u>last two weeks</u> , how often have you been bothered by the following problems?	Not at all	Several days	More than half the days	Nearly every day
1. Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge	0	1	2	3
2. Not being able to stop or control worrying	0	1	2	3
3. Worrying too much about different things	0	1	2	3
4. Trouble relaxing	0	1	2	3
5. Being so restless that it is hard to sit still	0	1	2	3
6. Becoming easily annoyed or irritable	0	1	2	3
7. Feeling afraid, as if something awful might happen	0	1	2	3

Column totals _____ + _____ + _____ + _____ =

Total score _____

If you checked any problems, how difficult have they made it for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?

Not difficult at all	Somewhat difficult	Very difficult	Extremely difficult
☐	☐	☐	☐

Source: Primary Care Evaluation of Mental Disorders Patient Health Questionnaire (PRIME-MD-PHQ). The PHQ was developed by Drs. Robert L. Spitzer, Janet B.W. Williams, Kurt Kroenke, and colleagues. For research information, contact Dr. Spitzer at ris8@columbia.edu. PRIME-MD® is a trademark of Pfizer Inc. Copyright© 1999 Pfizer Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission

Scoring GAD-7 Anxiety Severity

This is calculated by assigning scores of 0, 1, 2, and 3 to the response categories, respectively, of "not at all," "several days," "more than half the days," and "nearly every day." GAD-7 total score for the seven items ranges from 0 to 21.

0–4: minimal anxiety

5–9: mild anxiety

10–14: moderate anxiety

15–21: severe anxiety

Appendix 14

Debrief Information Sheet

A narrative analysis of how people of colour in the UK experience their partners transition to a different gender during their relationship.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for taking part in this research. The research that you have contributed to was to examine the experience of people of colour in the UK whose partner undergoes a gender transition or discloses their transgender identity after the relationship has begun. The focus will be on:

- Sharing your experience with your partner
- Discussing how you feel about your partner's transition
- How your partners transition has affected you and your sense of identity
- Considering how race, culture and religion impact your experience

The literature so far shows that when a partner transitions into a different gender the cisgender partner can experience a number of different emotions such as loss (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002), guilt (Norwood, 2012) and betrayal (Giammattei 2015; Zamboni, 2006) However it has also been shown that some couples remain together and that gender transition is a shared process between the transgender individual and the partner.

The literature has very limited studies containing people of colour. By partaking in this study, you will be adding a much-needed voice and individual experience to the field of psychology.

To recap, your anonymity and privacy is of the upmost importance. In the study the information used will be given under a false name and instead of your age being revealed there will be an age bracket 30-34 years for example. Your ethnic and cultural background will be identified as this is a very important element of the research. Our convocation will be stored securely, and you are able to withdraw from the study without providing a reason. This will be up until the data analysis has started (2 weeks after the interview). You can email me to request a summary of the research findings on the address written below.

If there is anything that you wish to discuss with me below are my contact details:

Bethan Islam
Email: bei0076@my.londonmet.ac.uk

My academic supervisor can also be contacted with any questions, concerns or complaints:

Dr Catherine Athanasiadou-Lewis
Email: c.athanasiadoulewis@londonmet.ac.uk
Phone: 020 7133 2669

I would like to reiterate my appreciation for your time and participation in this project.

Kindest Regards
Bethan Islam
Trainee Counselling Psychologist
London Metropolitan University

Sources of Support

It is possible that discussing this subject could prove to be distressing for some people. If there was anything that was triggering or proved upsetting in the interview today, please take time to reach out to friends, family, and your support network.

Below is a list of organisations should you feel, you would like to speak to someone for further support:

House of Rainbow

Provides a safe and supportive space for LGBT+ people of colour. Supporting the community with counselling, pastoral care and peer support.

Website: <https://www.houseofrainbow.org>

LGBT Foundation

Provides advice, support and information for the LGBT+ people on a plethora of issues effecting the community.

Phone: 03453 30 30 30

Website: <https://lgbt.foundation>

Switchboard LGBT+ Helpline

Offers emotional support for as long as you need it. All volunteers on the helpline are from the LGBT+ community. The website also has a live chat section where you can use instant messenger to gain support.

Phone: 0300 330 0630

Email: chris@switchboard.lgbt

Website: <https://switchboard.lgbt>

Samaritans

Provides a confidential 24hour helpline providing emotional support for those in distress or feeling low.

Phone: 116 123

Website: www.samaritans.org.uk

Post: Chris, Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA

Email: jo@samaritans.org

App: <https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/self-help/>

SANEline

Offers emotional support, information and signposting for those in distress, suffering from mental illness and also provides support for concerned friends and family members.

Phone: 0300 304700 OR 07984 967 708 (asked to leave a message and contact details to be called back)

Text: [http://www.sane.org.uk/what we do/support/textcare/](http://www.sane.org.uk/what_we_do/support/textcare/)

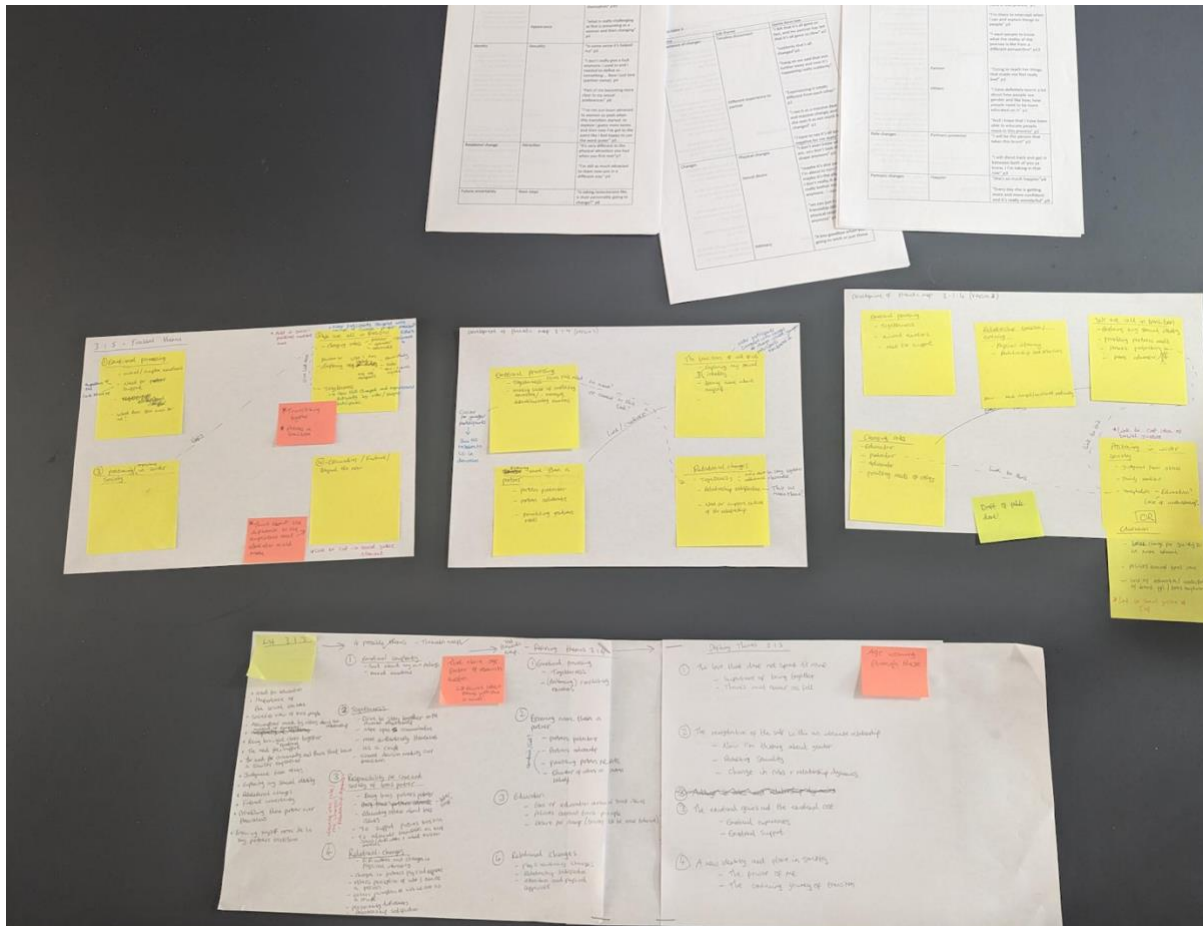
Website: www.sane.org.uk/support

Appendix 15:

Symbol	Definition and use	Key (s)
[yeah] [okay]	Overlapping talk	
=	End of one TCU and beginning of next begin with no gap/pause in between (sometimes a slight overlap if there is speaker change). Can also be used when TCU continues on new line in transcript	
(.)	Brief interval, usually between 0.08 and 0.2 seconds	
(1.4)	Time (in absolute seconds) between end of a word and beginning of next. Alternative method: "none-one-thousand-two-one-thousand...": 0.2, 0.5, 0.7, 1.0 seconds, etc.	
Word	Underlining indicates emphasis	
Wo:rd	Placement indicates which syllable(s) are emphasised	
wo::rd	Colon indicates prolonged vowel or consonant One or two colons common, three or more colons only in extreme cases.	
↑word ↓word	Marked shift in pitch, up (↑) or down (↓). Double arrows can be used with extreme pitch shifts.	↑ Wingdings 3 (104) ↓ Wingdings 3 (105) ↑ ALT+24 ↓ ALT+25
-r_¿?	Markers of final pitch direction at TCU boundary: Final falling intonation (.) Slight rising intonation (,) Level/flat intonation (_) Medium (falling-)rising intonation (¿) (a dip and a rise) Sharp rising intonation (?)	¿ ALT+168
WORD	Upper case indicates syllables or words louder than surrounding speech by the same speaker	
word	Degree sign indicate syllables or words distinctly quieter than surrounding speech by the same speaker	* ALT+248
<word	Pre-positioned left carat indicates a hurried start of a word, typically at TCU beginning	
word-	A dash indicates a cut-off. In phonetic terms this is typically a glottal stop	
>word<	Right/left carats indicate increased speaking rate (speeding up)	
<word>	Left/right carats indicate decreased speaking rate (slowing down)	
.hhh	Inbreath. Three letters indicate 'normal' duration. Longer or shorter inbreaths indicated with fewer or more letters.	
hhh	Outbreath. Three letters indicate 'normal' duration. Longer or shorter inbreaths indicated with fewer or more letters.	
whhord	Can also indicate aspiration/breathiness if within a word (not laughter)	
w(h)ord	Indicates abrupt spurts of breathiness, as in laughing while talking	
£wordf	Pound sign indicates smiley voice, or suppressed laughter	
#word#	Hash sign indicates creaky voice	
~word~	Tilde sign indicates shaky voice (as in crying)	
(word)	Parentheses indicate uncertain word; no plausible candidate if empty	
(())	Double parentheses contain analyst comments or descriptions	

(Manning, 2021)

Appendix 16:



Appendix 17:

Table 9.3 Our 15-point checklist for good *reflexive* TA – version 2022

No.	Process	Criteria
1	Transcription	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail; all transcripts have been checked against the original recordings for 'accuracy'.
2	Coding and theme development	Each data item has been given thorough and repeated attention in the coding process.
3		The coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive; themes have not been developed from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach).
4		All relevant extracts for each theme have been collated.
5		Candidate themes have been checked against coded data and back to the original dataset.
6		Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive; each theme contains a well-defined central organising concept; any subthemes share the central organising concept of the theme.
7	Analysis and interpretation – in the written report	Data have been <i>analysed</i> – interpreted, made sense of – rather than just summarised, described or paraphrased.
8		Analysis and data match each other – the extracts evidence the analytic claims.
9		Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic; analysis addresses the research question.
10		An appropriate balance between analytic narrative and data extracts is provided.
11	Overall	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase, or giving it a once-over-lightly (including returning to earlier phases or redoing the analysis if need be).
12	Written report	The specific approach to thematic analysis, and the particulars of the approach, including theoretical positions and assumptions, are clearly explicated.
13		There is a good fit between what was claimed, and what was done – i.e. the described method and reported analysis are consistent.
4		The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the ontological and epistemological positions of the analysis.
		The researcher is positioned as <i>active</i> in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.

(Braun & Clarke 2022)