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Transgender Conceptualisations of Family: An Interpretive  
Phenomenological Analysis.

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## i. Declaration of Intellectual Property and Publications

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## ii. Acknowledgements

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### iii. Abstract

This study explored the experiences of transgender individuals that they felt impacted their conceptualisations of family. It aimed to discover how these individuals defined family and to what extent, and in what manner, they felt their gender impacted these views. This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyse the semi-structured interviews conducted. This study consisted of six transgender participants (transwomen = 2, nonbinary = 4), each of whom were interviewed twice regarding their experiences with and beliefs surrounding family. The results found that participants discussed unconditional love as the main defining attribute of family, valuing both biolegal and chosen family. However, these views were somewhat influenced by societal biases that view biolegal family as the 'default'. Gender was seen to impact these views in two main ways: personal rejection and societal transphobia. There was nuance to these impacts such as the expectation of rejection regardless of past experiences of acceptance, and the impact of gender roles on nonbinary individuals. This study found that gender was believed to be an important factor in shaping participants' conceptualisations of family and was, generally, seen to be more impactful than non-gender-related experiences. However, the influence of society on participants' conceptualisations was seen to have an important impact, mostly through societal biases surrounding familial structures and gender norms. Differences between nonbinary and binary transgender individuals were also discussed, particularly in regard to gender roles, demonstrating the ways in which specific gender identities may have different conceptualisations of family.

## iv. Glossary of Terms

This glossary aims to provide the most common and general definitions of LGBTQ+ terms. LGBTQ+ sources, rather than dictionaries, have been used to provide the most widely accepted and up to date definitions.

N.B. Identity is personal to an individual and may not completely align with the definition provided.

- Agender – when an individual identifies as having no gender (Fenway Institute, 2020).
- Androgyne – when an individual identifies as being both masculine and feminine or as in-between masculine and feminine (LGBTQIA Resource Center, 2020).
- AFAB – an acronym meaning assigned female at birth. Used to encompass all individuals born with female genitalia and reproductive systems. Becomes an adjective once acronymised – e.g. AFAB individuals.
- AMAB – an acronym meaning assigned male at birth. Used to encompass all individuals born with male genitalia and reproductive systems. Becomes an adjective once acronymised – e.g. AMAB individuals.
- Bisexual\* - sexual attraction towards more than one gender (Stonewall, 2017a). Often shortened to bi.
- Cisgender – when an individual’s gender is the same as the gender they were assigned at birth (Stonewall, 2017a). Coming from the Latin prefix cis meaning ‘on the same side’. Often shortened to cis.
- Come out – when an individual informs others of their sexuality and/or gender identity (Stonewall, 2017a).

- Out – an adjective for someone who is open about their sexuality and/or gender identity. Also a verb; meaning to expose someone’s sexuality and/or gender identity without their consent.
- Deadname – the name, usually their birth name, that a transgender individual no longer uses (Stonewall, 2017a). Also a verb; meaning to refer to someone by their deadname.
- Demigender – when an individual identifies as a gender other than ‘man’ or ‘woman’ but identifies most closely with ‘masculine’/’feminine’ aspects of gender. Demiboy for ‘masculine’, demigirl for ‘feminine’. (Gender Wiki, 2021)
- Detransition – when an individual stops identifying as transgender and ‘returns’ to identifying as cisgender, often including stopping medical intervention. Also called ‘desisting’ when purely social (i.e. no medical intervention needs to be stopped). (Detrans Voices, n.d.)
- Genderqueer – when one’s gender identity falls outside the societal norm of binary genders and/or assigned sex to varying degrees (LGBTQIA Resource Center, 2020).
- Genderfluid – when one’s gender identity or expression shifts, whether inside or outside of society’s gender expectations (LGBTQIA Resource Center, 2020).
- Heteronormative - the belief that gender is binary and that conventional heterosexual standards are the “norm” of society, suggesting anything that is outside this expectation is; therefore, abnormal (LGBTQIA Resource Center, 2020)
- Heterosexual\* - sexual attraction towards a gender that is different to one’s own (LGBTQIA Resource Center, 2020). Also referred to as straight.
- Homosexual\* - sexual attraction towards those of the same gender (Stonewall, 2017a). Also referred to as gay.

- Lesbian - specifically, the sexual attraction of women towards other women.  
However, genderqueer people may also identify with this term (Stonewall, 2017a).
- Misgender – when an individual attributes an incorrect gender to another individual.  
This can be done through the use of pronouns (referring to someone as ‘he’ when they use they/them pronouns) or through gendered language (using phrases such as “hello, ladies” when an individual does not identify as a lady). This can be accidental or malicious. (LGBTQIA Resource Center, 2020)
- Nonbinary – when an individual identifies as a gender other than ‘man’ or ‘woman’ (Stonewall, 2017a). Used both as an umbrella term and a specific identity label. Also written as non-binary and sometimes shortened to NB or enby.
- Pansexual\* - sexual attraction towards others that is not limited by sex or gender (Stonewall, 2017a). Often shortened to pan.
- Polyamorous - considered a relationship orientation wherein one consents to being in multiple loving relationships at the same time (LGBTQIA Resource Center, 2020). Often shorted to poly.
- Queer – a reclaimed slur used to mean not cisgender, heterosexual, heteroromantic. (Stonewall, 2017a). Used both as a specific label and an umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community. Some individuals do still see this term as a slur; however, it is generally considered to be reclaimed.
- Transgender – when an individual’s gender is different to the gender they were assigned at birth (Stonewall, 2017a). Coming from the Latin prefix trans meaning ‘across’ or ‘on the other side’. Often shortened to trans.
- Transphobia – dislike of an individual because they are trans. Can include active discrimination or refusal to accept/acknowledge an individual’s gender (Stonewall, 2017a).

- Internalised transphobia – often referring to refusal to accept/acknowledge one’s own gender or gender-related self-hatred experienced by transgender individuals due to societal transphobia.

\*all sexual orientations can also use the suffix -romantic (i.e. biromantic) to reflect one’s romantic attraction to others rather than their sexual attraction. It should not be assumed that all individuals who identify with a sexual orientation also identify with the corresponding romantic orientation or vice versa.



## Table of Contents

<i>i. Declaration of Intellectual Property and Publications</i> .....	<b>2</b>
<i>ii. Acknowledgements</i> .....	<b>3</b>
<i>iii. Abstract</i> .....	<b>4</b>
<i>iv. Glossary of Terms</i> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>1. Introduction and literature review</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>1.1. Background</b> .....	<b>11</b>
1.1.1. Definitions .....	11
1.1.2. Societal definitions of family .....	13
1.1.3. Societal discrimination.....	14
<b>1.2. Gender’s impact on conceptualisations of family</b> .....	<b>17</b>
1.2.1. Importance of chosen family.....	18
1.2.2. Acceptance and rejection .....	20
<b>1.3. Current limitations and the current study</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>2. Methodology</b> .....	<b>25</b>
<b>2.1. Philosophical approach</b> .....	<b>25</b>
<b>2.2. Analytical approaches</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>2.3. Method</b> .....	<b>29</b>
2.3.1. Study design.....	29
2.3.2. Participants .....	31
2.3.3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria .....	32
2.3.4. Procedure .....	33
2.3.5. Analysis .....	36
<b>2.4. Reflexivity considerations</b> .....	<b>37</b>
<b>3. Results and discussion</b> .....	<b>39</b>
<b>3.1. Unconditional love: “Regardless of who you are and what you do”</b> .....	<b>40</b>
3.1.1. What is unconditional love?.....	40
3.1.2. Values stay the same.....	42
<b>3.2. Rejection: “It can be very conditional”</b> .....	<b>45</b>
3.2.1. Lack of acceptance.....	45
3.2.2. Expectation of rejection .....	47
3.2.3. Rejection as the transgender experience .....	51
<b>3.3. Biologal as the default: “That’s ties of blood”</b> .....	<b>55</b>
3.3.1. Chosen family as ‘plan B’ .....	55
3.3.2. Chosen family following ‘traditional’ structures .....	60
<b>3.4. Societal influences: “If the world becomes more accepting”</b> .....	<b>62</b>
3.4.1. Current impacts of society .....	62
3.4.2. Potential societal impacts.....	68
<b>4. Conclusions</b> .....	<b>73</b>
<b>4.1. Results conclusions</b> .....	<b>73</b>
4.1.1. What is family?.....	73
4.1.2. The impact of gender .....	74
<b>4.2. Further Reflexivity</b> .....	<b>77</b>

4.3. Limitations of this study .....	78
4.4. Opportunities for future study.....	80
4.5. Impacts.....	81
4.6. Final thoughts .....	82
<b>5. References .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>6. Appendices .....</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Appendix A.....</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Appendix B.....</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Appendix C.....</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Appendix D.....</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Appendix E.....</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>Appendix F.....</b>	<b>95</b>
Appendix F1.....	95
Appendix F2.....	96
Appendix F3.....	96
Appendix F4.....	97
Appendix F5.....	97
Table 1. Participants .....	31
Figure 1. Final Thematic Map .....	39
Table 1. Participants .....	31

# 1. Introduction and literature review

This research explores transgender conceptualisations of family, through the conducting of qualitative interviews with members of the transgender community in which they discussed their beliefs surrounding the concept of family. It is important to note that family is subject to cultural and subcultural nuance and that individual differences such as gender can have an impact on the way the notion of family is conceptualised (Fish & Russell, 2018; Galvin, 2006; Gavriel-Fried & Shilo, 2017; Kavanagh et al., 1997). As a result, there are a number of variables that may impact an individual's conceptualisation of family. This research is discussing the role of gender, and specifically being transgender, on conceptualisations of family. Therefore, whilst there may be other influences, such as culture, the current literature review will be focussing on the role of gender in the most depth. In order to fully understand family within the context of being transgender and how they interact with each other, one must first understand how each of those concepts are defined. This section will explore the definitions used within this research as well as the surrounding literature that underpins this research. The reviewed literature discusses general conceptualisations of what family is by transgender individuals and the experiences that influence these conceptualisations.

## 1.1. Background

### 1.1.1. Definitions

There are many different definitions of gender that have evolved over the years due to society's constantly growing understanding of gender. For example, Cambridge Dictionary (2021b) defines gender as "the physical and/or social condition of being male or female".

This suggests that sex – the physical condition – and gender – the social condition – can be used interchangeably. However, the World Health Organisation (2022) define it as referring to "the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed",

highlighting the importance of the social aspect and removing the physical aspect. Unlike the dictionary definition, the World Health Organisation (2022) differentiates between sex and gender. This demonstrates the ways in which social and scientific definitions can differ and, therefore, the growing understanding of sex and gender. This differentiation between gender and sex came about in the 1990s as those studying queer theory began deconstructing understandings of gender as society became increasingly aware of transgender individuals and their experiences (Morland & Wilcox, 2005). This research is based in queer theory and, therefore, works under the knowledge that sex and gender are different (Morland & Wilcox, 2005) and acknowledges that, due to this differentiation, gender goes beyond the binary of ‘man’ and ‘woman’. For the purpose of this research, sex is defined as chromosomal combinations and resultant biological features (Fathallah & Pyakurel, 2020) and gender as “a person’s inner sense of being a girl/woman/female, boy/man/male, something else, or having no gender” (Fenway Institute, 2020, p. 5). This research acknowledges that an individual’s gender is decided via their own psychological recognition and can, therefore, differ from their sex. Further, transgender is defined as an individual’s gender being different to that which they were assigned at birth (Stonewall, 2017a), including those who identify as genders outside the binary of ‘man’ and ‘woman’. Individuals whose gender is the same as what they were assigned at birth are referred to as cisgender (Stonewall, 2017a).

Further, family is defined using Galvin (2006) understanding that it is how an individual communicates with others, both inside and outside of what they consider their family unit, that is what dictates an individual’s definition of family. This definition leaves the term family open to interpretation in the case of interviewing participants, allowing for the most authentic representation of their personal conceptualisation of what family is. For the purposes of clarity, family will be broken down into two main subgroups: biolegal, individuals to whom one is biologically or legally related; and chosen, individuals that are

considered family regardless of biolegal ties (Hull & Ortyl, 2019). These subgroups appear to be the most common among family research into the LGBTQ+ community (Hull & Ortyl, 2019). Further, in this study, the word ‘gender’ will always be used to refer to the current gender identity of the individual and when discussing the gender or sex assigned at birth of an individual it will be referred to as such. Finally, the term ‘queer’ will be referring to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+) community, including both gender and sexual minorities.

#### 1.1.2. Societal definitions of family

It should be noted that while, to many individuals, family is not restricted to those to whom one is biolegally related (Galvin, 2006; Weston, 1991), the widespread definition does not follow this knowledge. For example, the word family is most commonly defined as “a group of people who are related to each other” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021a). Whilst there is an alternate definition denoting family as “a group of people who care about each other because they have a close relationship or shared interests” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021a), this is less commonly used and is sometimes not included at all. For example, if one were to search for a definition of the term family on a search engine such as Google, only definitions pertaining to biolegal family would be provided (See Appendix A.), suggesting a societal leaning towards the view that family relates strictly to individuals to whom one is biolegally related. This demonstrates a potential bias towards the notion that when one refers to family, they are referring solely to one’s biolegal family and not those who may fall into the category of ‘chosen’ family. Further, research suggests that individuals, including those within the LGBTQ+ community, view the ‘traditional’, heteronormative definition of family – two parents of the opposite sex and their children – as being the ‘benchmark’ off which other family dynamics are based (Gavriel-Fried & Shilo, 2017). This was seen regardless of other dynamics an individual considered to be family. This highlights the apparent societal impact

on the definition of family, as even individuals who do not strictly believe in the ‘traditional’ definition of family view it as being the ‘default’ due to broader societal beliefs. Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that there is a disparity between who people define as family, and what they define as family (Hull & Ortyl, 2019), in that individuals often describe their family to be made up of those to whom they are biologically related despite stating that they feel that emotional ties are more important than biological ones within their own personal conceptualisations of family (Hull & Ortyl, 2019). This further highlights the influence of societal beliefs on an individual’s conceptualisation of family as it, again, suggests that biological family is considered one’s ‘default’ family. Despite society’s general leaning towards the biological definition of family, the word family has origins more akin with chosen family than biological. For example, despite one definition of family explicitly including a parental unit and their children (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021a), the word family originates from the Latin “familia”, meaning “servants in a household” and also “members of a household, including relatives and servants”; the root of this being famulus: “servant”, which also provides the root of the Latin “familiaritas”, meaning close friendship (Etymonline, 2021). Notably, it does not originate from the Latin “domus”, meaning “parents with their children” (Etymonline, 2021). This could suggest a historical fluidity to the term family that may still exist today within the differing conceptualisations of family among members of the transgender community and those outside the community.

### 1.1.3. Societal discrimination

It is important that research into transgender individuals acknowledges the discrimination they face and is mindful of this. Transgender individuals are more likely than their cisgender peers to experience negative mental health – such as mental illness or suicidal ideation – as well as being more at risk of substance abuse (Rimes et al., 2017). Additionally,

41% of transgender men and women<sup>1</sup> reported experiencing a hate crime in relation to their gender identity within the 12 months prior to being surveyed (Government Equalities Office, 2018). Further, many transgender individuals who had attempted suicide reported gender-specific discrimination and victimisation as a factor (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006). This highlights the explicit link between the increased risk of negative mental health impacts and one's identity as transgender. Furthermore, it is important to note that transgender individuals may experience different levels or forms of discrimination depending on their gender and/or stage of transition. For example, nonbinary genders are not protected under the 2010 Equality Act (Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2010) and, therefore, may face discrimination against which binary transgender individuals are protected. This is said to be due to the fact that nonbinary individuals are not seen to experience "any specific detriment" (Valentine, 2015, p. 7) due to their gender identity as well as the fact that "a very small number of people consider themselves to be of neither gender" (Valentine, 2015, p. 7). However, nonbinary identities are not recognised under the 2004 Gender Recognition Act (Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2004) and one can only receive a gender recognition certificate to 'become'<sup>2</sup> either male or female. This shows that the government does not recognise nonbinary genders at all, which could be seen as a form of discrimination. Further, it is estimated that approximately 0.4% of the UK population do not identify as a binary gender (McNeil, Bailey, Ellis, Morton, & Regan, 2012). This number is likely to be out of date and the actual figure may be higher than suggested by older data. This is due to the suggestion that as acceptance increases, an identity becomes seemingly more present (Flores, 2019). This is believed to be due to identity concealment as a coping mechanism for stigma and

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<sup>1</sup> Since the Government Equalities office does not recognise nonbinary genders as a protected characteristic and, seemingly, use 'trans men and women' and 'trans people' interchangeably, it is unclear as to whether these statistics include nonbinary individuals.

<sup>2</sup> 'Become' is the language used by the Gender Recognitions Panel; however, is generally considered incorrect when discussing someone's gender as one does not 'become' a gender they simply discover what their gender has always been.

oppression (Flores, 2019). Research does suggest that attitudes towards transgender individuals has improved over recent years (Flores, 2019), suggesting the possibility for an increase in individuals being open about their gender identity. Therefore, evidence suggests that more recent data is likely to show a larger percentage of people identifying as transgender than in previous years. Further, previous Censuses did not ask questions relating to an individual's gender identity, so all current figures are from the generalisation of studies to the wider population, meaning they may be inaccurate. It is important to note that evidence suggests that the way in which questions surrounding gender are phrased can lead to different levels of apparent prevalence (Eisenberg et al., 2017), with more limited language leading to significantly lower prevalence and more open language leading to higher prevalence of individuals identifying as transgender. It is not possible to get more accurate data until more recent Census information is released. However, since the 2021 Census used the recommended method of gender identity data collection (Office for National Statistics, 2021; Reisner et al., 2014), it is likely that any results provided will have a high degree of accuracy. It is important to note that an increase in individuals openly labelling as transgender is not the equivalent of an increase in individuals being transgender, as one's gender is not influenced by their decision to use certain labels openly. This information demonstrates the importance of acknowledging the potential differences in experiences depending on an individual's gender.

The above examples of discrimination are a likely cause of the increased mental distress of transgender individuals (Rimes et al., 2017), a phenomenon known as minority stress (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Minority stress dictates that individuals who are part of a minority group experience specific and unique stressors that can result in negative impacts on their own mental health (Meyer, 2003). Whilst originally designed for sexual minorities (Meyer, 2003) the theory has, more recently, been updated to include gender minorities, both



binary and nonbinary (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Lefevor et al., 2019; McLemore, 2018; Testa et al., 2015). The updated minority stress theory includes stressors unique to transgender individuals, such as misgendering, gender-specific discrimination, and internalised transphobia (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Lefevor et al., 2019; McLemore, 2018; Testa et al., 2015). This theory explains how the discrimination discussed above is likely a reason for the increased risk of negative mental health impacts among transgender individuals compared to their cisgender peers.

This representation of societal discrimination and subsequent negative mental health impacts demonstrates one of the ways in which transgender experiences differ from those of cisgender individuals. Since conceptualisations of family can be affected by personal experiences (Kavanagh et al., 1997), these experiences with discrimination may impact transgender individuals' conceptualisations of family, leading them to differ to those of cisgender individuals. Moreover, as will be discussed below, there appears to be an intersection between family experiences and mental health for transgender individuals. Therefore, one should be aware of the mental health impacts many transgender individuals experience.

## 1.2. Gender's impact on conceptualisations of family

Studies suggest that sex and gender are integral to how one interacts within relationships – familial or otherwise – and that a change in how an individual expresses their gender often results in a change in interaction (Norwood, 2012). Since transgender individuals often alter their gender expression away from the gender they were assigned at birth and towards their true gender, this would suggest that familial interactions would also change alongside their gender expression. This change in interaction could, potentially, impact how an individual feels about where and how certain individuals fit into their definition of family (Norwood, 2012). However, to date, there is little research into what

shapes the conceptualisation of family among transgender individuals, meaning more speculative conclusions are currently having to be made.

Most research into transgender familial relationships focusses on their impact on mental health; however, there is some evidence to suggest that the conceptualisation of family is different among transgender and cisgender individuals. For example, Bhattacharya et al. (2020) found that many transgender youths have a bi-directional relationship with their caregivers, meaning that they feel equally as responsible for the well-being of their caregiver as the caregiver feels for the well-being of the youth. This indicates that there may exist a family dynamic for transgender individuals, this bi-directional feeling of responsibility, that does not exist in the same way for cisgender individuals. Further, research suggests that discovering one's gender identity and being open about it is a transactional process wherein the experiences of each family member – the transgender individuals and their cisgender relatives – impacts the other (Katz-Wise et al., 2017). This transactional process highlights another way in which transgender individuals' experiences of family may differ to those of cisgender individuals. These differences in family experiences between transgender and cisgender individuals, could impact how transgender individuals define what family means to them.

#### 1.2.1. Importance of chosen family

Particularly in a medical setting, transgender individuals appear to rely on members of their chosen family – friends, partners, other members of the community – for support and care during periods of illness (Jackson Levin et al., 2020). The importance of chosen family among the transgender community is further emphasised, particularly among the Latinx immigrant population who often have strong community ties that lead to the entire community being seen as part of one's family (Abreu et al., 2021; Hwahng et al., 2019). It is important to note that Latinx cultures are generally more collectivistic (Hofstede Insitute,

2021) and will, therefore, be more likely to put higher levels of emphasis on the importance of the community than more individualistic countries such as the UK or USA. However, the individuals in these studies put more emphasis on chosen family than their cisgender Latinx peers. Therefore, whilst the results of these studies are naturally skewed towards a higher level of community importance than one would expect from a white British participant pool, they still demonstrate that transgender individuals are more likely than their cisgender peers to value the importance of their chosen family. Further, the importance of chosen family among transgender individuals is such that community support is often suggested as an alternative and/or supplement to conventional therapy when regarding gender-specific issues (Richards, 2017). This highlights a way in which transgender conceptualisations of family, in general, may differ from those of their cisgender peers.

Evidence also suggests that transgender individuals, particularly transgender youths, seek out community support via social media (Selkie et al., 2020). Selkie et al. (2020) found that transgender youths would seek out transgender-specific communities on social media platforms for both emotional – care, empathy, and validation – and informational – aid in decision-making and education – support. This online social support is shown to be a protective factor against the mental health disparities faced by transgender individuals, and that social support from other transgender individuals, specifically, provides more effective protection than general social support due to their shared experiences (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Selkie et al., 2020). This is reported to be especially due to the affirmational support they received, as well as the sense of hope gained from positive narratives of the transgender experience (Selkie et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of the transgender community, specifically in an online context, for the mental health of transgender individuals. This, therefore, suggests one reason why transgender individuals might see their community as family. Social media, specifically, is seen to be an important resource for the transgender

community as it allows individuals to maintain anonymity (Krueger & Young, 2015), something that particularly benefits individuals who are either not 'out' to or not supported by others in their life, who were shown to benefit most from online social support (Selkie et al., 2020). Whilst there are risks to seeking social support online, such as social isolation from others in one's life and cyberbullying (Best et al., 2014), the above research demonstrates why transgender individuals may seek out social support from online sources, adding further dimension to the notion of chosen family.

It is important to note, however, that studies have found that members of the LGBTQ+ community as a whole also place this higher level of importance upon their chosen family (Blair & Pukall, 2015; Knauer, 2016). These studies not only included transgender participants, but also cisgender members of the LGBTQ+ community. In these studies, transgender individuals were not seen to have a noticeably different view on family to their cisgender LGBTQ+ peers; however, there were, comparatively, very few transgender participants in these studies. This means it may have been difficult to find any trends among specifically transgender participants. These studies do demonstrate a potential for a uniquely, but generally, queer conceptualisation of family that is not dependent on one's specific sexuality or gender, but simply their existence as part of the LGBTQ+ community. However, Worthen (2013) highlights the importance of researching members of the LGBTQ+ community separately to fully understand their experiences in isolation, as well as part of the community as a whole, which this research aims to do.

### 1.2.2. Acceptance and rejection

Whilst transgender individuals may generally put more emphasis on their chosen family than cisgender and, seemingly, heterosexual individuals, their biolegal family still often have high levels of importance in terms of family. This importance is particularly noticeable in regard to biolegal acceptance. Acceptance from one's biolegal family leads to

more positive mental health compared to those who do not receive this acceptance (Katz-Wise et al., 2018) and positively benefits the psychosocial adjustment of transgender youths (Pariseau et al., 2019). Further, the use of an individual's correct chosen name significantly reduces levels of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behaviour in transgender youths (Russell et al., 2018). This demonstrates the ways in which biolegal acceptance positively benefits the mental health of transgender individuals. Pariseau et al. (2019) also found that specific types of biolegal acceptance protect against different negative health impacts. For example, higher levels of caregiver acceptance protect against depressive symptoms, whereas higher levels of sibling acceptance led to lower instances of suicidal ideation. This differentiation in protection suggests that there is likely to also be a differentiation in relationships within one's biolegal family as their acceptance of the individual's gender appears to be valued differently. This demonstrates that the conceptualisation of family in the transgender community is more nuanced than merely biolegal and chosen family and warrants further study.

Whilst biolegal acceptance can protect against many negative mental health impacts, not all transgender individuals experience this acceptance. It is also important to note that acceptance from one's biolegal family is not a one-time experience, but something that is needed at multiple points throughout an individual's transition – which is an ongoing process – if not in a consistent and ongoing fashion. Approximately 14% of transgender individuals are not open to anyone in their family, compared to 6% who are not open to any of their friends, and 42% of those who wish to medically transition have not yet done so due to fear of potential familial consequences (Stonewall, 2018). This demonstrates the high rates of concern regarding rejection from one's biolegal family among the transgender community. Of those who are out to their family, 11% report not being supported by anyone in their family, and only 26% report being supported by all family members who know their gender

(Stonewall, 2018), showing the high rates of actual biolegal rejection of transgender individuals. Further, Johnson et al. (2020) found that the majority of participants discussed experiencing some form of rejection behaviour from one or both of their parents, leading them to report negative mental health consequences. There is also evidence that finds that transgender individuals report experiencing less parental support than their cisgender peers (Eisenberg et al., 2017). This could explain why transgender individuals may be more likely to rely on their chosen family than their cisgender peers might. Since they are more likely to be lacking support from their biolegal family, they feel the need to go elsewhere to find a support network particularly as an attempt to mitigate the negative mental health effects of biolegal rejection. This is further supported by Muzzey et al. (2021) who found that even when an individual's biolegal family is supportive in the use of their chosen name, participants felt as though there was an obligation to educate their biolegal family, which was described as a 'burden' that they did not report feeling with their chosen family (Muzzey et al., 2021). Individuals also reported that their chosen family were more likely to 'readily' give support than their biolegal family whose support they felt they had to earn (Muzzey et al., 2021). This suggests that chosen family members are generally seen to be more accepting than one's biolegal family members, which provides explanation as to why those rejected by their biolegal family may seek out chosen family instead. This aligns with the roots of the term 'chosen family' coined in the 1980s during the AIDS crisis in the USA, wherein LGBTQ+ individuals would often have to seek out end-of-life care from friends and community members after being rejected by their biolegal family (Weston, 1991). Whilst information from this era has a focus on gay men in particular, as they were the main victims of the AIDS crisis, more recent studies find that this emphasis on the importance of chosen family remains among both sexual and gender minorities (Blair & Pukall, 2015; Knauer, 2016). Since the notion of chosen family was born out of rejection it makes sense, with the

high levels of biolegal rejection – both perceived and actual – that exist, that this emphasis on chosen family would continue into the modern day among the transgender community. In order to best protect their mental health, transgender individuals must balance satisfaction of both their need to be accepted by their family and their need to live as their authentic self (Catalpa & McGuire, 2018). This attempt at balance can be seen both in the number of transgender individuals delaying medical transition (Stonewall, 2018), in order to fulfil the need for familial acceptance, and the seeking out of supportive family members – biolegal or chosen – (Jackson Levin et al., 2020; Katz-Wise et al., 2018; Pariseau et al., 2019) in order to live as their authentic self. This balancing act is likely to add another dimension of how transgender individuals would conceptualise family in a way that would likely cause it to differ from cisgender individuals' conceptualisations.

It is important to note that when discussing parental support of transgender individuals, that support may have different definitions for different individuals, and this will be what affects their mental health. For example, Andrzejewski et al. (2021) found that the majority of participants reported experiencing general support from their parents, in terms of expressions of love, housing, and advice; however, far fewer reported experiencing support in relation to their gender, such as using correct pronouns and names. This suggests that there is an added element of support required – explicitly relating to their gender – for transgender individuals to feel truly supported by their biolegal family that does not exist for their cisgender peers. This could lead to conceptualisations of familial support, and therefore family in general, being different among the transgender community. Further, there is evidence to suggest that there are differences in support levels among individuals within the transgender community depending on their sex assigned at birth (Eisenberg et al., 2017) in that individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB) generally reported higher levels of harassment and lower levels of support than those assigned male at birth (AMAB). This

suggests that not only is there likely to be a difference between conceptualisations of family among transgender and cisgender individuals, but there is also a potential for conceptualisations to differ within the community based, specifically, on an individual's gender.

### 1.3. Current limitations and the current study

The following study aims to fill the gaps in the current literature into family and the transgender community. Whilst many of the studies above report the experiences transgender individuals may face within family – both chosen and biolegal – there is little concrete evidence into how these experiences are believed to shape their understanding of what family is. Although some studies discuss whether transgender individuals place more importance on biolegal or chosen family, very few go into the reasons for this apparent preference. Further, many studies into conceptualisations of family specifically have researched the LGBTQ+ community as a whole and whilst these are useful, there is a lack of research into transgender-specific experiences and how they relate to the conceptualisation of family. It is important to note that, as stated above, transgender individuals have many unique experiences that cannot be experienced by cisgender LGBTQ+ individuals and warrant further study. For these reasons, this study will focus on answering the following research questions: how do transgender individuals conceptualise family; and how do they feel their gender-related experiences inform this conceptualisation.



## 2. Methodology

This chapter will discuss the methodology that informed this study and the methods used to carry out the research. First, it will explain the philosophical position of the researcher and the rationale for the use of the qualitative approach, specifically the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Further, it will discuss the methods of participant recruitment, data collection and analysis, as well as the ethical considerations of the study.

### 2.1. Philosophical approach

When conducting research, it is important that a researcher is aware of their philosophical position regarding ontology and epistemology and makes that clear, as these views not only inform how the data is analysed but also how the study is constructed as a whole. The acknowledgement of these views makes it clear how the results were understood and why conclusions were drawn in the way that they were. In relation to this study, the researcher takes a relativistic approach, which follows the notion that there are many individual realities rather than one strict, universal reality. This is believed to be because how an individual interacts with the world, particularly in terms of their personal experiences and social factors such as culture, can impact the way in which they perceive it. As a result, their understanding of reality is different to those around them (Willig, 2008). Further, this approach holds the belief that many aspects of ‘reality’ are socially constructed. In this context, the concept of gender and what is considered to be the ‘traditional’ conceptualisation of family are understood to be social constructs. Due to the unique experiences of transgender people outlined in the previous chapter, it is, therefore, believed that the experiences of transgender individuals will result in them interacting with their surroundings differently to the way in which cisgender people do, leading to them perceiving the world differently.

Furthermore, the researcher takes a phenomenological approach to research with an emphasis on studying an individual's lived experiences in context of their social and historical backgrounds, rather than attempting to find a generalisable, universal 'truth' (Gadamer et al., 2004). The philosophical basis for this approach is based on the notion that reality is simply how an individual perceives the world around them (Dilthey, 1954). Dilthey (1954) states that, when studying humans, it is important to recognise that one is not studying what is objectively real, but how the individual perceives this reality. This is because the individual differences in lived experience have too much influence on an individual's perception of reality to be able to study an objective and universal reality (Dilthey, 1954). This is important in terms of this study as it is not researching one specific gender identity, but rather all identities under the umbrella of being transgender. There is unlikely to be a single, universal 'transgender experience', especially when regarding a multitude of individual identities. Therefore, it is important to understand the experiences of the participants in the context of the individual. Additionally, the researcher is aware that there are experiences, other than one's gender, that may affect their conceptualisation of family. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that this research could result in a universal transgender conceptualisation of family. This lack of a 'universal truth' is further emphasised by the notion that there is, also, not simply one 'true self' for an individual but many 'selves' that change in the context of with whom and individual is communicating (Gergen, 1991). Therefore, one cannot even gain an entire single 'truth' for an individual, but simply the truth of their experiences as who they are at the time. In the context of this study, it should be noted that participants will likely present a certain 'self' due to the context of the interview. For example, their presentation may be informed by the fact that the interviewer is a person with whom they have not communicated before. It may also be informed by the fact that the interviewer is openly nonbinary, and this was brought up in conversation with the majority of participants. This

may lead to participants presenting a different ‘self’ to what they may present when discussing these topics with a friend or cisgender individual. This further highlights the inability to gauge a universal ‘truth’ from this study. As a result of this clear lack of generalisability, a phenomenological approach to research was seen to be the most appropriate due to its focus on specific context. These are the beliefs that constructed the way in which this research was conducted.

This research follows the practice of hermeneutics in qualitative research which highlights the importance of understanding that any interpretation of a text comes from a specific perspective and position in history and culture, which will, in some way, impact the interpretation (McLeod, 2001). Further, it is the acknowledgement of this bias that allows for the most authentic analysis to take place (Dilthey & Jameson, 1972). As a result, the researcher acknowledges that any interpretation comes from their own perspective as a young, nonbinary individual living in the UK in the 2020s and that interpretations from different perspectives – for example, an older cisgender individual – may lead to differences in the interpretation. Further, hermeneutics highlights the importance of being sensitive to the use of language within the text that is being interpreted (McLeod, 2001). The researcher will ensure sensitivity to language, particularly within the language analysis required by IPA. However, it is important to note that use of language also differs depending on an individual. Since the researcher does not have an effective baseline for each participant of their general use of language beyond the interviews themselves, language analysis will be considered with the understanding that the interpretation is coming from the researcher’s own perspective of language use. Further, an important aspect of hermeneutics is the act of moving back and forth between a single part and the text as a whole (McLeod, 2001). In the context of this research, this will be done in multiple ways: between a single part of a single transcript and the transcript as a whole; between both transcripts for a single participant; and between the

collection of all transcripts. This allows for the most in depth hermeneutic analysis of the texts. A single researcher cannot force their research to be hermeneutically interpreted as true hermeneutics relies on a community analysing and building upon previous interpretations (McLeod, 2001). However, this research is informed by the hermeneutic approach in the ways outlined above.

## 2.2. Analytical approaches

The use of the qualitative approach was chosen simply because the aim of the research is to fully and deeply understand the experiences and opinions of transgender individuals in regard to family. Since qualitative analysis focusses on the depth of information, it was clear that this was the more fitting analysis style for this research. Further, this study uses IPA to analyse the data, following the guidelines of Smith (2004). This was chosen as IPA focusses on the context of personal experience as well as an individual's identity that may inform one's answers more than other analytical approaches. Since it is believed that being transgender will lead to different personal experiences to those of cisgender individuals and participants were asked about their experiences of family in relation to their specific gender identity, IPA was seen as the preferred method due to its emphasis on these personal experiences. Further, the philosophical beliefs of this study and the philosophical basis of IPA, wherein reality cannot be removed from the experiences that inform it as experiences are what makes up one's reality (Willig, 2013), align. This alignment means that IPA is the most fitting approach to analyse the data from this study.

This research follows the guidance of queer methodology, which aims to study phenomena with an understanding that what has often been considered "the norm" is skewed through a cisgender, heterosexual, heteroromantic lens and that these norms may not be as such within the LGBTQ+ community (Fish & Russell, 2018). Queer theory not only aims to be mindful of these biases but actively aims to challenge and deconstruct them (Morland &

Wilcox, 2005). Queer theory developed from postmodernist theory around the time of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, starting with the notion that sexuality in and of itself is socially constructed and there is no ‘true’ way to be queer (Morland & Wilcox, 2005). As time went on and transgender people gained more visibility in the 1990s, queer theory also began deconstructing notions of gender by considering the differentiation between one’s ‘biological gender’ – sex assigned at birth – and one’s ‘social gender’ – their gender identity and expression (Morland & Wilcox, 2005). It is with this basis in the understanding that academia is skewed in favour of cisgender, heterosexual, heteroromantic experiences as well as the understanding that ‘queerness’ as a concept is in a constant state of evolution due to its social construction that one is able to truly conduct inclusive and meaningful research into the queer community. In the context of family, the use of queer methodology aims to allow us to “ask different questions about *all* families” (emphasis original) (Few-Demo et al., 2016, p. 77). This is thought to provide a truer reflection of the psychological norms for a population. Due to the fact that this research focusses explicitly on transgender conceptualisations of family, it is important that the research is open to the possibility that familial norms among transgender individuals may be different from those that are considered ‘the societal norm’ which is often viewed with a focus on cisgender, heterosexual, heteroromantic experiences. This use of queer methodology, as well as a desire to encapsulate all possible conceptualisations of family, is the reason for questions surrounding family being left intentionally vague. This allows the participant to truly provide their thoughts on the people whom and the feelings that construct family.

## 2.3. Method

### 2.3.1. Study design

This study underwent ethical approval by the School of Social and Health Sciences Ethics Committee of the university prior to the commencement of the research and follows

the ethical guidelines and requirements of the committee (see Appendix B for ethical approval letter). This study consisted of two semi-structured interviews with each participant, resulting in approximately six hours of data. Read (2018) suggests that when a topic is complex and ill-defined, serial interviews should be conducted to allow for a deeper understanding of a participant's own definition by providing ample time to discuss. Since the subject of family was left vague and undefined to allow participants to use their own definitions, the topic of the interview benefited from multiple interviews. The use of multiple interviews was also to avoid a single interview becoming excessively long and causing fatigue in both the participant and interviewer, which could have the potential to lead to later questions being answered in less depth (Read, 2018). Additionally, there was a clear change in themes that allowed the interviews to be evenly split to discuss a main theme each: experiences with family and hopes for the future respectively. The use of a second interview also provided prolonged engagement which allowed participants to reflect on their responses in the first interview and have the opportunity to elaborate on topics they feel were not discussed in full. This also allowed the researcher to reflect on the interview and prepare any questions surrounding topics they may wish to discuss further. This prolonged engagement provided methodological credibility and rigor, improving the validity of the study (Byrne, 2001; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

The use of semi-structured interviews was seen as the most appropriate form of qualitative interview as it allows the researcher to ask further questions related to answers the participant has provided, allowing for more depth of knowledge around certain topics, whilst simultaneously ensuring the main research questions were answered (Dearnley, 2005). For example, some participants may feel that some of their experiences are specific to their exact label and, therefore, other members of the transgender community, who identify as different labels, do not share these experiences. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the

researcher to tailor questions depending on the specific identity and transition stage of each participant. This allowed for a more in depth focus on the participant’s personal experiences of their specific relationship with gender and family, such is the aim of IPA.

### 2.3.2. Participants

The study consisted of 6 participants (2 transwomen, 4 nonbinary) with a mean age of 28.5 (range = 29, SD = 10.14). See Table 1 for further breakdown of participants’ genders and ages. There was an equal mix of gender assigned at birth among participants<sup>3</sup> (3 assigned male at birth, 3 assigned female at birth). See Appendix D for participant biographies that discuss their relationship with gender and their broad view of the impact their gender had on their family experiences in further depth. It should be noted that whilst race and ethnicity were not demographic questions that were asked, it did appear that all participants were white British<sup>4</sup>. Whilst participants were only recruited from British sources, as discussed further later in this chapter, race was not an exclusion criterion. There is the potential that this, in fact, reduced the likelihood of cultural differences surrounding family playing a role in variance between participants; therefore, removing a potential confounding variable. However, it should, therefore, be noted that the results of this study may not be representative of transgender people of colour and non-British transgender people, not only due to potential cultural differences, but also due to different experiences regarding racism and the intersection between racism and gender (Chang & Singh, 2016).

Table 1. Participants

Name	Gender	Pronouns	Age
Indigo	Trans woman	She/her	21

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of not misgendering any participants, gender assigned at birth will not be shown next to specific participants.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that no concrete conclusions can be drawn regarding the race and ethnicity of participants as they were not explicitly asked. However, the context of the interviews suggest all participants were white British.

Tris	Woman	She/her	26
Jay	Nonbinary androgyne	They/them	49
Kestrel	Nonbinary	They/them	33
Seahorse	Nonbinary	She/they*	20
River	Nonbinary	They/them	22

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\*Due to the participant using multiple pronouns and not denoting a preference, both she/her and they/them pronouns will be used when referencing this participant.

### 2.3.3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

In order to take part in the study, participants were required to identify as transgender but could identify as any label within that umbrella and be at any point in their transition, including having no wish to medically or cosmetically transition. Included participants were over the age of 18 in order to provide informed consent; however, could be any age above 18. Due to the fact that transgender individuals make up an estimated 1% of the UK population (Stonewall, 2017b) it was important that the possible population for this study was not needlessly limited. Not implementing an upper age limit allowed for the widest possible pool of participants and, therefore, a greater breadth of knowledge surrounding the experiences of transgender individuals regardless of their age, stage of transition, or specific gender identity. A further reason for not excluding participants based on identity or age is that it is important that the sample population does not suggest that any voice within the community is more or less important than other voices. Therefore, to avoid exclusion and discrimination, all adult members of the transgender community had the opportunity to participate. Only British participants were included to avoid any confounding variables caused by cultural differences in perceptions of family.



#### 2.3.4. Procedure

Participants were recruited via an online poster (see Appendix C.) shared by LGBTQ+- and gender-focussed organisations and via snowballing from other participants. Participants demonstrated their willingness to partake in the research by emailing the researcher who then discussed specifics of the interview and provided the participant the opportunity to ask further questions surrounding the research, either via email or video call.

Participants were asked to prepare a visual representation of family to bring to the interview, as visual aids are shown to facilitate the discussion of more abstract concepts (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015) that may arise when discussing family, such as the concept of support for example. The visual representation could be presented in any way the participant saw fit, such as a photograph, drawing, or object. Participants were not obligated to provide a visual representation as it was believed that a discussion surrounding the difficulty to portray family via a visual representation could also provide interesting information surrounding the participant's conceptualisation of family. Once again, the direction to visually represent family was left intentionally vague to allow participants to interpret it in the way they saw most appropriate, allowing them to demonstrate their own personal beliefs around family most effectively. Participants had the opportunity to modify their original visual representation in the second interview if, having reflected on the original, they found something else to be more appropriate.

As mentioned above, the use of the term family within questions was left intentionally vague in order to allow participants to feel they were able to describe family in their own personal context, rather than being restricted to more 'traditional' and limiting views of family. This allowed for the most accurate and in-depth discussion of the participants' personal conceptualisations of family. Participants were asked questions around their general experiences and opinions surrounding family before being asked questions that directly related to their gender in relation to family. This allowed for background context surrounding

their conceptualisations in order to better inform the analysis of how their gender impacted these conceptualisations. Participants were also asked questions surrounding their wishes for societal changes in regard to family and being transgender. Since, in the context of this study, family and gender are considered a social construct – in that they have no inherent value other than that which society has placed upon them – this demonstrated how participants felt current societal values impacted their conceptualisations and how this had room to change in the future following societal changes.

The interviews were held over Microsoft Teams using their video call function. This was seen as the most appropriate situation as it was the safest for both participant and interviewer as well as allowing for a wider geographic population. Participants were provided information regarding the privacy of the call. For example, it was made clear that the researcher would be in a private room and using headphones, so the interview would not be heard. Participants were also informed they may end the interview at any time in case of privacy concerns – for example, someone else walking into the room – and the researcher would ask discretely via email if and when they participant would be happy to continue the interview. Pseudonyms were used for the anonymisation of the data. Participants were offered the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym to ensure the participant was comfortable that the pseudonym aligned with their gender identity. Additionally, allowing participants to choose their own pseudonyms eases the power balance between participant and researcher as it provides the participant with a sense of control within the study (Dearnley, 2005). It was made clear to the participants that their pseudonym could not be their chosen name or their birth name. Further, any potentially identifying information was redacted in the transcription. Video-call was preferred over telephone call as it allowed for both interviewer and participant to read social cues as well as allowing the participant to show their visual representation rather than being limited to describing it. However,

participants were not excluded if they did not wish to or had trouble using the video function and could take part in the interview with their camera off. One interview was conducted without the participant's camera due to technical difficulties; however, it was decided that it would be preferable to conduct the interview at that time without the visual recording than to postpone the interview in the hope of the technical issue being resolved. Once the interview was concluded, the audio-visual file was automatically uploaded to the researcher's university Microsoft Stream and stored securely on the Leeds Trinity University OneDrive, where it was then transcribed verbatim and promptly deleted after the transcript was reviewed for accuracy. The interview data was kept on the secure university ShareDrive and accessible only to the research team. It will then be deleted after 10 years of storage in compliance with current GDPR guidelines (Information Commissioner's Office, 2018).

Once participants confirmed their interest in taking part in the study, they were provided with a copy of the planned questions for the interview including a caveat that, due to the nature of semi-structured interviews, other questions may be asked relating to what they have already discussed. This was to aid the participants in feeling prepared and able to fully answer questions during the interview, allowing for the most in depth responses possible. Sending the interview questions in advance allowed participants to provide more fully informed consent, as they were aware of the nature of the information they would be consenting to share. Additionally, participants could then prepare their responses, meaning they were able to ensure they did not discuss topics they did not wish to discuss. This also allowed for richer data as time had already been spent considering responses to the questions, avoiding the potential to not include important information due to the pressure of responding to the question with no prior knowledge.

### 2.3.5. Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher in order to allow for a full appreciation of the complexities and nuances behind the responses given by participants. This appreciation is crucial for a thorough and effective analysis using the qualitative approach (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Further, language analysis, a core stage of IPA which benefits from verbatim transcription, was used with caution as true language analysis requires a baseline of a participant's usual speech patterns and the language is analysed according to a deviation from that baseline (Bloom et al., 2001). Due to the time constraints of the study, it was not possible to gather a baseline of the language use of participants. Therefore, the choice of words was analysed, rather than more nonverbal communication such as fillers and pauses, to avoid potentially misattributing patterns which may be part of a participant's baseline.

Once transcribed, interviews underwent several stages of analysis as per the methods of IPA (Smith, 2004). First, the transcripts were read through individually and notes were made on interesting points that were made and any thoughts from the researcher that were sparked by this readthrough. There was no construction of themes initially beside basic notes that certain use of language appeared multiple times. Once all interviews had been analysed in this manner, the researcher then went through multiple stages of constructing themes in individual transcripts, narrowing down and collating themes where appropriate with each subsequent readthrough. Individual interviews were then compared to their counterpart within participants, before being compared to the group as a whole. From there, the final themes were decided upon and used as the main points of analysis. This use of persistent observation through the consistent rereading of transcripts should add to the accuracy and credibility of the analysis (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

#### 2.4. Reflexivity considerations

Reflexivity is defined as “thoughtful, conscious self-awareness” (Finlay, 2002, p. 532) on behalf of the researcher. Reflexivity is considered a crucial aspect of qualitative research to allow the researcher to account for their potential implicit biases that may impact the analysis of data. Thomas & Thomas (1928) suggested that when an idea is conceived, the biases and actions of a researcher will affect the research from that point forward. Therefore, it is important that a researcher is as aware of their potential biases as possible so that they may make a concerted effort to ensure that these biases do not impact their analysis of the data. In order to appropriately conduct qualitative research for this study, the researcher has identified the biases that they believe, if left unchecked, have the potential to impact analysis. For example, the researcher has addressed that they are, themselves, transgender so may, therefore, have experiences similar to those discussed in the interviews. As a result, the researcher has disregarded their personal experiences as much as possible in order to focus solely on the experiences of the participants. Additionally, the researcher is aware that they will have their own conceptualisations of family that may or may not align with those expressed during the interview. However, again, the researcher made a conscious effort to disregard their own views in order to allow for proper analysis of the data. The researcher may also have had opinions on how participants ‘should’ respond to the interview questions due to their review of the literature prior to the interviews and an understanding of the general trends within the surrounding research. The awareness of this potential bias allowed the researcher to avoid any impact of said bias on the analysis as much as possible. Furthermore, similarly to how it was noted that the participants do not represent the transgender community as a whole, the researcher also notes that their own preconceptions will not be representative of the entire transgender community and are, therefore, unlikely to disproportionately impact the results of the research. It is important to note that the participants were likely to know that the researcher is transgender due to pre-interview

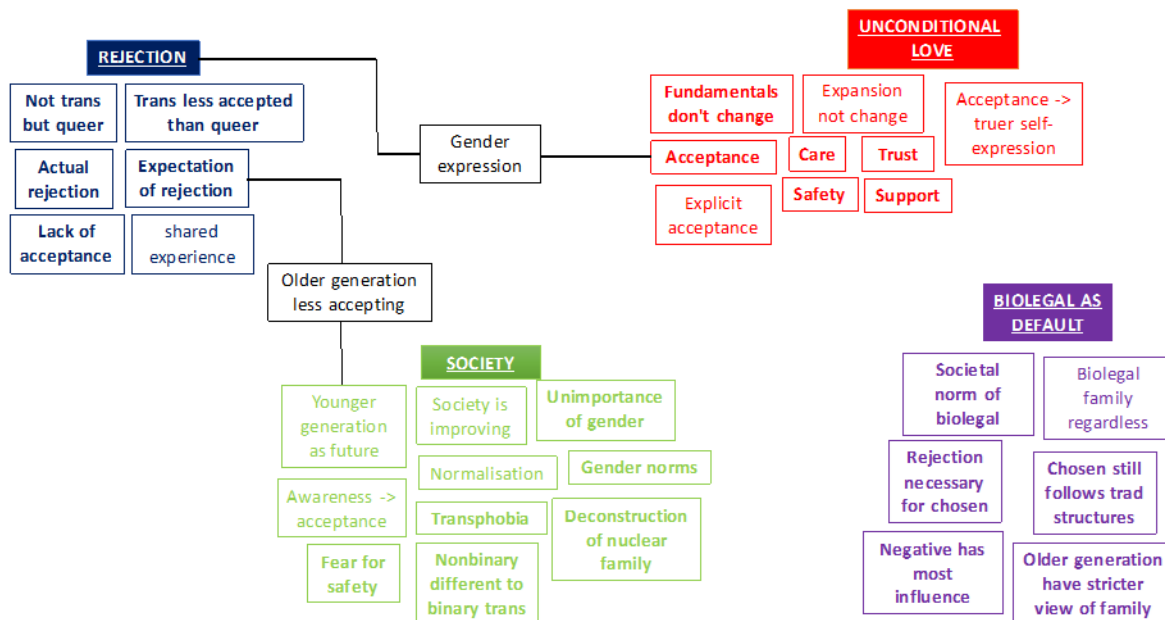
correspondence, and this may have caused their answers to be slightly different than if the researcher was cisgender, as they may assume that they have a shared experience with the researcher. As a result of these reflexive considerations, it is the expectation that the analysis that follows is as balanced, transparent, and critical as possible whilst maintaining the understanding that human bias is an unavoidable part of qualitative research (Rabidge, 2017).

To conclude, through the adoption of queer theory, this research understands that many societal 'norms' are based in cisgender, heterosexual, heteroromantic realities that may not reflect the transgender community. Therefore, it is the responsibility of this research not only to question these biases, but actively deconstruct them through the conduction of this study. It should also be noted that this research is a product of its time and the researcher who is conducting it. This research will use a qualitative approach, specifically analysing the data using IPA, focussing on individual experiences and how those experiences construct the reality of family for participants. Further, questions around family will be left intentionally vague to allow for the focus on individual understandings of family and the experiences that led to said understandings. The results of this IPA will be discussed in the following chapter.

### 3. Results and discussion

This chapter will discuss the outcome of the IPA conducted on the transcripts of interviews (See Appendix E.). The analysis aimed to explore, through the experiences of the transgender individuals interviewed, how transgender individuals conceptualise family and how they feel their gender has impacted on that conceptualisation. Four main themes were constructed: unconditional love, rejection, biolegal as the ‘default’, and societal influence (See Figure 1 below and Appendix F for chronology of theme construction). This chapter will discuss these themes and how they relate to existing research. Where quotes from participants are edited for clarity, edits will be clearly marked. All interjections from the interviewer, such as “yeah”s and “okay”s, will be omitted for clarity. Please note that some quotes may contain language, such as swear words and slurs, and discuss topics, such as familial rejection and transphobia, that some may find upsetting. These quotes have not been edited as they were deemed important to the participant’s narrative.

Figure 1. Final Thematic Map



### 3.1. Unconditional love: “Regardless of who you are and what you do”

One of the main ideas discussed by participants in regard to what constituted family was the notion of what is most simply referred to as ‘unconditional love’. This was discussed in two main ways: what constitutes unconditional love and values staying the same.

#### 3.1.1. What is unconditional love?

There are many elements that influence whether or not an individual is considered ‘family’ to another individual, including care, support, trust, and acceptance. Participants discussed each of these aspects as well as others. However, there was one unifying factor of these emotional elements that were seen to make up family; that they were unconditional. For example, Kestrel described family as “people who you can rely on for care and support, no matter what the circumstances” (Kestrel, Interview 1, lines 73-74). The use of the phrase “no matter what the circumstances” highlights the importance of this unconditional aspect of the elements of care and support. They suggest that care and support alone is not what makes a family, rather that said care and support will be offered regardless of the situation. This was further supported by Jay, who made a similar point about the importance of love being unconditional within family:

A group of people that should, in principle, show you something as close to unconditional positive regard, regardless of who you are and ... the things you do ... family is about forgiveness and acceptance, um, and respect. (Jay, Interview 1, lines 469-472).

This demonstrates that the emotional aspects participants described may differ; in this case care and support compared to forgiveness, acceptance, and respect. However, the defining factor of these elements is that they are unconditional. It was apparent that for the transgender individuals in this study, that regardless of the specific emotion described, it was the



unconditional nature of that emotion that was the defining factor in whether or not an individual could be considered as family. Whilst there is research into the importance of acceptance and support, most often its effect on mental health, among transgender individuals, the research does not discuss the importance of the belief that this support comes unconditionally (Muzzey et al., 2021; Pariseau et al., 2019; Russell et al., 2018). This provides the potential opportunity for further research into the importance of unconditional love in the transgender community.

Further, one participant mentioned that receiving this unconditional acceptance from their family allowed them to feel more comfortable in their gender expression:

I remember speaking to my family and saying “listen, the way I dress is going to change ... [because] I’ve now got permission from you and from myself to wear those colours and those things that don’t conform with this notion of masculinity that I’ve wanted to reject forever” (Jay, Interview 1, lines 842-846)

This demonstrates the way in which unconditional acceptance is important to this participant, specifically in terms of their gender identity, as it was by receiving this unconditional acceptance from their family that they felt they were truly able to express their gender in the way they felt most comfortable. This is supported by research that found that individuals who were supported by their family – both biolegal and chosen – found the journey of self-acceptance easier than those who lacked that acceptance (King et al., 2020).

There is much research into the importance of acceptance among transgender individuals, especially in terms of biolegal acceptance. This acceptance can protect against a number of negative mental health effects, such as depression, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse (Pariseau et al., 2019; Russell et al., 2018). Whilst there is little research into acceptance in terms of how an individual conceptualises family, this effect of acceptance on mental health demonstrates the importance of acceptance from family for transgender

individuals. It is difficult to say with certainty that this acceptance was required to be unconditional in order to provide these benefits. However, it is reasonable to assume that since higher levels of acceptance lead to more positive mental health impacts (Katz-Wise et al., 2018), unconditional acceptance would have the most beneficial impact on a transgender individual's mental health. This further highlights the importance of unconditional love for transgender individuals.

### 3.1.2. Values stay the same

Many participants discussed this notion of unconditional love as an important aspect of what they consider family. Furthermore, they discussed their confidence in the fact that it will remain an important aspect of their definition. This was primarily discussed in the context of how they see their family in the future. Unconditional love was often described as their 'core' or 'fundamental' belief in what family is:

the more that ... I develop, the more that my life, relationships develop, I'm sure that will change. But I don't think the fundamental, kind of, core that I have of family ... I don't think that will change too much (Seahorse, Interview 2, lines 48-52)

This demonstrates the importance of this belief for this individual as they acknowledge that while the relationships they have may change and those who are considered family may grow or change, their belief in what constitutes family, this unconditional love, will remain the same. This is further highlighted by the use of words such as 'core' and 'fundamental' as it demonstrates, explicitly, that unconditional love is the most important aspect of their definition of family. River also mentioned a similar belief of unconditional love continuing to make up their fundamental understanding of family:

I'll still always have the understanding that family is, like, those who love and support you and vice versa (River, Interview 2, lines 20-22)

This notion of unconditional love being an important aspect of what family is among these participants is further supported by the fact that many participants discussed how their views surrounding family have previously changed; however, they believe strongly that their current views will remain. This is supported by evidence that suggests that the more strongly an individual believes in an opinion or value, the less likely it is that it will change (Zhang, 2019). When discussing how their beliefs had changed in the past, many participants reference certain events that triggered this change and find it unlikely that any such events would happen in the future:

[I] view myself and my family in different ways now that I'm out and the big conversations and the worries and all that is behind me. (Jay, Interview 2, lines 47-49)

This demonstrates the way in which Jay felt that coming out to their family and, in their case, the subsequent acceptance they received was the main catalyst for that change in view. Since they are confident that they will not come out to their family again, it cannot cause any further changes. This suggests the participants believe that a major life event is the catalyst for changing experiences, and without this event – which is seen to be unlikely to occur – they do not believe that their views will change. It should be noted that whilst Jay does not believe they will come out again, research suggests that individuals who are accepted after their initial coming out still receive acceptance if they come out again – either due to a decision to detransition or identifying as a different label under the transgender umbrella (Olson et al., 2022). This suggests that even if one were to come out again, it is unlikely that it would have any impact on their conceptualisation of family, as their family is likely to have a similar reaction to that initially expressed, especially if said initial reaction was positive. Coming out

was generally seen as the major life event that triggered the change in a participant's conceptualisation of family, as shown by Jay above. However, some participants also referenced other major life events, such as the loss of a relative, that, in combination with their coming out, led to changes in their conceptualisation of family. This demonstrates the need for a major life event to change one's conceptualisation of family and will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter. One participant believed so strongly in her current understanding that the idea that something could change it was borderline absurd:

You're now making me consider, like, robots and aliens, but unless they happen, no (Indigo, Interview 2, lines 32-33)

This demonstrates that she believes that there would need to be an incredibly drastic change in her life, one that she believes is highly unlikely, in order to change her current views around the importance of unconditional love in family. This is in line with the evidence that discusses the difficulty of changing one's strongly-held beliefs (Zhang, 2019). This further demonstrates the importance of unconditional love as a marker of what family is among the transgender individuals interviewed.

The above results demonstrate the way in which unconditional love is perceived as a long-lasting, fundamental building block of family among these participants. The participants suggested that it does not matter how that love is demonstrated, whether it be through care, support, acceptance, or a different emotion, but simply that that love is shown to be unconditional. This was viewed as a belief that could only be changed by a major life event, such as coming out, which was generally considered unlikely to happen. This shows that these participants believe unconditional love to be the defining factor for who is considered family.

### 3.2. Rejection: “It can be very conditional”

Whilst the importance of unconditional love was highlighted above, there appears to be an unfortunate obverse to that in regard to transgender individuals. Rejection, specifically from biological family members, was mentioned multiple times throughout the interviews. For the purpose of clarity, this section will be split into three subordinate themes: lack of acceptance, expectation of rejection, and rejection as the transgender experience.

#### 3.2.1. Lack of acceptance

Rejection can be interpreted in many different ways; however, a common theme amongst participants was a lack of acceptance of their gender identity. Many participants expressed experiences wherein people in their lives would misgender or deadname them, despite being aware of their gender identity. Indigo, a transwoman, described taking a ‘one-step-at-a-time’ approach with her family’s acceptance of her gender identity:

my family, in regards to me being trans, isn’t the best because they’re still messing up [her pronouns] and we haven’t even got onto the name thing

(Indigo, Interview 1, lines 288-290)

This demonstrates a way in which she does not receive acceptance from her family in regard to her pronouns as well as suggesting that she must compromise parts of her gender expression – being referred to as her chosen name – as if to ease her family into accepting her transition. Seahorse made a similar point in regard to her younger brother, saying, “you kind of wanna ease ... younger people into this” (Seahorse, Interview 2, lines 189-190). This highlights the sentiment of them needing to compromise aspects of their gender expression in order to ‘ease’ family members into their transition in order to avoid rejection. This suggests that coming out is more nuanced than simply expressing one’s gender and being either accepted or rejected, but rather an ongoing process in which transgender individuals must

make compromises regarding their gender identity in order to ‘ease’ their family into the transition and receive acceptance. This is in-line with research that finds that many transgender individuals are likely to delay medical transitioning in order to avoid negative familial consequences (Stonewall, 2018). This also supports research that found a transactional relationship between the transgender individual and their caregiver in relation to their gender, in that their identity development and, subsequently, their coming out is influenced by the – perceived or actual – actions of their caregiver as a result (Katz-Wise et al., 2017). This demonstrates the sacrifices transgender individuals must make in order to not be rejected by their family, highlighting rejection’s impact on one’s family experiences, and, therefore, one’s conceptualisations of family.

River, who is nonbinary, mentioned that their parents are not aware of their gender identity due to lack of acceptance:

my parents don’t know that I’m nonbinary and they have some, like, negative views on nonbinary people (River, Interview 1, lines 49-50)

This demonstrates that observation of lack of acceptance towards other individuals can also inform an individual’s own choice as to whether or not they are open about their gender identity. This form of lack of acceptance can be detrimental as not being open about one’s identity, or remaining ‘in the closet’, can have negative mental health impacts such as low self-esteem (Ash & Mackereth, 2013). This highlights the importance of acceptance of an individual’s gender identity. This decision to not be open about their gender also suggests a fear of rejection in some transgender individuals.

Further, Kestrel discussed experiencing a lack of acceptance from their parents which led to them changing who they considered family and excluding their parents:

in the end, my mother’s response was that I was turning my back on my family  
... Essentially, what I was desperately hoping would be a “oh ... we’re so

pleased that you felt like you could be honest with us” kind of moment turned into a “oh, I’m a terrible person and you’re really letting me down” and all that kind of stuff ... and I haven’t spoken to them since (Kestrel, Interview 1, lines 132-133 & 135-140)

This demonstrates the impact that a lack of acceptance can have on an individual’s conceptualisation of family as it was this experience of rejection that led to Kestrel redefining their family without the inclusion of their parents. This highlights the fact that rejection from biolegal family can lead to a change in conceptualisation, generally towards a higher valuing of chosen family. This is in line with the roots of the term ‘chosen family’ which was developed due to a lack of acceptance from individuals’ biolegal families (Weston, 1991). This further demonstrates the impact that rejection can have on conceptualisations of family among transgender individuals.

### 3.2.2. Expectation of rejection

Many participants discussed concern regarding being rejected from their family; however, this appeared to go beyond simple worry and towards a sense that rejection would definitely be the outcome of coming out to their biolegal family as transgender. Jay discussed their experience of delaying their coming out to their family and, in their opinion, hurting their relationship with their family to the extent they felt they had ‘lost’ their family as a result:

I self-sabotaged because I didn’t think they would be able to be cool with it  
(Jay, Interview 1, lines 603-604)

This demonstrates their belief that rejection is an inevitable response to coming out as transgender to one’s biolegal family. They felt that they had to take steps to continue to hide their identity from their family to avoid the expected rejection and, in doing so, negatively

impacted their relationship with members of their family. This demonstrates one of the ways in which rejection, even the expectation of it alone, can influence an individual's conceptualisation of family. This is particularly highlighted by Jay explaining that it was at this point in their life when they most highly valued their chosen family due to the concerns that they had surrounding their biolegal family's reaction to their gender. This is further supported by Kestrel's experience with their biolegal family, who delayed coming out to their parents due to an uncertainty surrounding their reaction:

it's not even just the fact that, like, I came out to my parents and it didn't go well, it's the fact that I was scared to do so in the first place (Kestrel, Interview 1, lines 187-188)

This was listed as one of the reasons as to why they no longer consider their parents as part of their family. This demonstrates the ways in which an expectation of rejection can negatively impact an individual's relationship with others. Research suggests that expecting rejection can cause feelings of being rejected (Rood et al., 2016), suggesting that expecting rejection and receiving rejection can have similar effects on relationships. Research has also found that expecting rejection can lead to psychological distress (Timmins et al., 2017), further highlighting that the expectation of rejection can have similar results to actively being rejected. Since active rejection was seen to have an impact on transgender individuals' conceptualisations of family, as shown above, this suggests that the expectation of rejection could lead to a similar result.

Whilst Jay and Kestrel had similar experiences with expecting rejection in response to coming out, they had opposite experiences once they did come out to their biolegal family: Jay received acceptance and Kestrel was rejected. Both participants also noted that the reaction they received was 'in-line' with their family's previous behaviours; Jay noting that their family are generally accepting people and Kestrel describing previous experiences of



receiving rejection from their biolegal family. This suggests that an expectation for rejection can manifest regardless of the reality of one's past experiences as both negative and positive experiences with family still led to this expectation of rejection. Further evidence for this is Seahorse, who described a continuing concern that they may be rejected by their biolegal family, despite having come out to them and being accepted:

at least I'll have that kind of, you know, people to rely on rather than just feel kind of isolated the moment, like, all of the family turns on me (Seahorse, Interview 2, lines 108-109)

This demonstrates that, for some, even receiving acceptance from their biolegal family is not enough to quell the fear and expectation of future rejection. They state this as a reason for seeking out chosen family; as a support network for when they, seemingly inevitably, experience rejection from their biolegal family. The use of the phrase "the moment all of the family turns on me" highlights the belief that rejection is an inevitability since there is no use of conditional terms such as 'if' or 'could'. This suggests that Seahorse is expecting her family to reject her at some point or another. This further supports the high rate of anticipating rejection among these participants.

Some participants also discussed an apparent generational difference in the expectations of rejection. Many participants referenced that they felt that the older generation were generally less accepting than the younger generation:

I think a lot of people are not accepting of trans people because of a lack of education and understanding of what that actually means ... especially a lot of, like, older people who might just, like, not even know what it is (River, Interview 2, lines 70-71 & 74-75)

This demonstrates a belief that the older generation are less accepting due to a lack of education about transgender experiences and issues. River also implies here, by highlighting

that the older generation has less knowledge on transgender individuals, that younger generations are becoming more educated and, therefore, more accepting. This suggests that it is believed to be ignorance rather than malice that drives the lack of acceptance from older individuals. Indigo made a similar point surrounding a lack of understanding, but demonstrated a belief that there would be more aggressive rejection from older generations:

if you look at people younger than us, like my niece and her boyfriend, her boyfriend is kinder to me in regards to gendering me than my family. And I feel like my mum, who is sixty, barely grasps the idea of what being trans is. Go to someone older than her like my nan or older, they'd probably just either call me a tranny, give me abuse, or just completely not understand (Indigo, Interview 2, lines 196-201)

This not only demonstrates that they feel older individuals are more likely to reject them, and seemingly aggressively so, but also that they feel society is becoming increasingly accepting as each younger generation is seen to be more accepting than the last. This is similar to what River expressed with their belief that increasing education surrounding transgender individuals is leading to higher acceptance among younger generations. This, again, suggests increasing levels of acceptance from younger individuals. There is evidence to suggest that higher levels of exposure to certain individuals and/or identities does lead to higher levels of acceptance (McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017). This could, therefore, explain this perceived generational difference as younger generations become more exposed to, and, therefore, more accepting of, transgender individuals. The generational difference, in Indigo's experiences, is highlighted by the fact that whilst she feels that her mother does not truly understand her gender, she feels that an older generation would be aggressively transphobic towards her. This suggests a nuance in expectations of rejection depending on the age of those in an individuals' life. For example, it appears that Indigo is more willing to be open about her

gender with her niece and her niece's boyfriend and those of that generation. However, she is decreasingly comfortable around older generations. It should be noted, however, that Indigo also stated that she does not communicate with her grandparent's and they are not aware of her gender. This is, therefore, speculation of their response to her gender, rather than an actual experience she had. This suggests that, whilst expecting rejection appears to be a common experience, it has nuance depending on the age of those to whom they are being open about their gender. This provides the opportunity for further research into this generational nuance of rejection. This also highlights a potential societal influence that will be discussed further at a later point in this chapter.

### 3.2.3. Rejection as the transgender experience

It is evident that there is some expectation of rejection from biological family members among transgender individuals. This could be explained by rejection being seen as a common experience for those in the transgender community. This was referenced in a way that could suggest that rejection is an inevitable part of the transgender experience. Many participants expressed a belief that this was the case. For example, Jay explicitly noted that the reason they expected rejection from their family was because of this seemingly common experience:

a lot of those fears [about rejection] that I had were basically ... a projection of ... the characteristics as was seen in other people onto my family (Jay, Interview 2, lines 123-125)

This demonstrates the belief that rejection is a common experience for transgender individuals. It appears it was this belief that influenced their feelings around how their family may react to them coming out. This concern is not unfounded as only 26% of transgender individuals reported being accepted by all family members who knew their gender identity (Stonewall, 2018). Further, research does show that transgender youths report feeling less

supported by their parents than their cisgender peers (Eisenberg et al., 2017). This suggests that rejection from biolegal family is a common experience for transgender individuals. This could provide an explanation for the expectation of rejection discussed above.

Multiple participants also discussed that they feel that their conceptualisation of family is similar to other members of the transgender community because of the rejection they experienced:

[their conceptualisation of family]'s more similar to a lot of people I know who are members of the trans community ... I think there's a lot of us who've had issues, sort of, coming out to, to blood relations and who, kind of, on the route of "oh, well, I'll just choose my own instead" (Kestrel, Interview 1, lines 205-208)

This further demonstrates the belief that being rejected as a result of coming out is a common transgender experience and is a large contributing factor in conceptualisations of family among transgender individuals. This appears to be especially true for emphasising the value of chosen family over biolegal family. Tris, whose family is made up of individuals she chose, did not experience rejection from her biolegal family because of her gender as she had ceased communication with them before discovering her gender. She did not wish to discuss the experiences that led to this cease in communication in further detail. Therefore, discussion surrounding this aspect of her personal experiences cannot be had. However, she also believed that her conceptualisation of family is similar to other members of the transgender community because of the rejection she believes they are likely to have experienced:

a lot of trans people would feel the same way because of a similar experience.  
(Tris, Interview 1, lines 117-118)

This highlights that, even if an individual does not actively face gender-based rejection themselves, there is still a belief that members of the transgender community value chosen family more than cisgender individuals because of the common experience of rejection. There is evidence to suggest that this rejection could be an important factor in transgender conceptualisations of family, especially their high valuing of chosen family (Blair & Pukall, 2015; Knauer, 2016). This supports the above claims that rejection being common among the transgender community is what leads to more emphasis on chosen family within the community.

Despite the belief that rejection is a common experience for transgender individuals, some participants stated that they believed it was not necessarily a uniquely transgender experience:

I don't know whether it's uniquely transgender but I think it's certainly uniquely queer (Kestrel, Interview 1, lines 230-231)

This demonstrates the belief that there are shared experiences, specifically being rejected by one's biological family, between the transgender community and the wider LGBTQ+ community. Evidence does suggest that cisgender members of the LGBTQ+ community do value chosen family in a similar way to transgender individuals (Blair & Pukall, 2015; Knauer, 2016). It should be noted that the majority, if not all, of the participants did identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community in a way other than their gender, in that they were not heterosexual. This could suggest that some of their conceptualisations of family is, in part, due to their sexuality as well as their gender. However, the participants did, explicitly mention that their experiences with rejection were a direct result of their gender identity. Further, participants showed a belief that being a cisgender member of the LGBTQ+ community, particularly being gay or a lesbian, is more widely accepted in society than being transgender:

it would be great if, in the way that gay and lesbian culture seems to have been quite normalised now [transgender culture could also be normalised] (Jay, Interview 2, lines 453-454)

This demonstrates the way in which some participants believe that gay individuals are more accepted than transgender individuals and can even be used as a benchmark for how society should become more accepting of the transgender community. Research suggests that cisgender LGBTQ+ individuals are becoming more accepted within society (Flores, 2019). Whilst it is not definitively clear that acceptance of transgender individuals is less than that of gay individuals, the fact that the study did not begin asking questions about participants' opinions on the transgender community until the later years of the study could act as evidence for a lack of acceptance in and of itself (Flores, 2019). Kestrel, who stated that they did not believe that rejection was a uniquely transgender but rather a uniquely queer experience, later went on to discuss the perceived wider acceptance of the gay community compared to transgender individuals and its effect on current beliefs around family structures.

Just like, I guess, the way that, um, the wider acceptance of ... gay people has had that effect (Kestrel, Interview 2, lines 82-83)

They went on to discuss how this acceptance of gay individuals led to the wider acceptance of 'non-traditional' families, such as those with same-sex parents. They used this example to demonstrate how societal views surrounding family and transgender individuals could change in a similar way. They also discussed how they felt that the sexuality aspect of their coming out "wasn't ever really a big deal" (Kestrel, Interview 2, line 102). This suggests that rejection is increasingly becoming a uniquely transgender experience despite still being considered a common experience for the LGBTQ+ community as a whole.

The above evidence demonstrates the ways in which rejection was believed to influence the participants' conceptualisations of family and to what extent they believed their

gender was a factor in their experiences with rejection. The results suggest that gender-related rejection from biolegal family is believed to be a common experience for transgender individuals, leading to an expectation of rejection when coming out as transgender. This rejection was believed to be an important factor in participants' current conceptualisations of family. Despite multiple participants mentioning that they experienced a lack of acceptance from their biolegal family, only one participant described this as a reason for no longer considering the people who refused to accept them as family. This suggests a sentiment that one's biolegal family is seen as family regardless of their actions, despite the majority of participants listing some form of unconditional love as the foundation for their family.

### 3.3. Biolegal as the default: "That's ties of blood"

Despite all participants referencing the existence of chosen family in their lives, there was a common sentiment that biolegal family acted as some form of 'default'. This manifested in explicit statements, such as from Indigo who defined one aspect of family as "literal family: the family that you're, like, born with" (Indigo, Interview 1, 15-16). This use of the word literal suggests that biolegal family has a sense of being more 'real' to this participant and that chosen family cannot fall into the category of "literal family". This suggests a differentiation between biolegal and chosen family wherein biolegal is held to a standard of being the 'default'. Notions of biolegal family being the 'default' were also expressed implicitly in two main ways: chosen family as a 'plan B' and chosen family following 'traditional' structures.

#### 3.3.1. Chosen family as 'plan B'

Every participant referenced having a chosen family; however, many also mentioned that the reason for the existence of their chosen family was because of troubles with their

biolegal family. Some participants appeared to believe that trouble with one's biolegal family is necessary for an individual to have chosen family:

if I, as a trans person, was born into a family that, like, totally accepted me ... then I wouldn't be, like, rejecting my family and going off with my friends. I'd be like, "fuck the friends, I have the family that loves me" (Indigo, Interview 2, lines 63-66)

This demonstrates Indigo's belief that she would not consider her friends as family if she had not experienced rejection from her biolegal family. This supports the notion that biolegal is considered the 'default' and that chosen family acts as a 'plan B' for when the 'default' is not what was desired. Research does suggest that rejection from biolegal family is a large influence for chosen family among the LGBTQ+ community (Blair & Pukall, 2015; Knauer, 2016; Weston, 1991) providing some support for this belief. Seahorse also discussed that their experiences with a lack of acceptance when first coming out influenced their understanding of family:

it made me realise that, you know, the people that you would normally consider family, your blood relatives, they may not always support you a hundred percent ... it gave me a realistic view of like, "oh, I can actually pick and choose who I want, I don't have to just keep all the blood relatives" (Seahorse, Interview 1, lines 183-186)

This further supports the notion that chosen family is common among the transgender community because of the gender-based rejection they face. This association of chosen family and experiences of rejection highlights the notion that chosen family is seen as a deviation from the 'default' of biolegal family and is considered a 'plan B' type of family. Further, Seahorse's use of the phrase "people that you would normally consider family" highlights the notion that biolegal family is viewed as the 'default' as it is seen to be 'normal'. This belief



appears to exist independently of the individual's personal definition of family, as many of the participants who showed this bias towards biolegal family also listed the importance of unconditional love, regardless of from whom it is provided, in their definition of family. This could suggest that this bias comes from a societal influence rather than a personal belief. Evidence does suggest that, due to acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals increasing, attitudes within the community are beginning to move further from the emphasis on chosen family and back towards a more 'traditional' family structure (Hull & Ortyl, 2019). This suggests that rejection could be an important factor in transgender individuals' emphasis on the importance of chosen family and that, if and when society becomes more accepting of the transgender community, their attitudes will shift back towards the 'traditional' family structure as with the wider LGBTQ+ community (Hull & Ortyl, 2019). Further, it suggests that chosen family is, perhaps unconsciously, considered lesser than biolegal family as it is seen mostly as serving the purpose of making up for where one's 'real' family lacks.

Many participants also discussed that they believed there were generational differences in this view of biolegal as 'default', with older generations being thought to be more likely to have strict views surrounding what constitutes family:

I've sort of found that people ... [in the] next age bracket up like in their forties and onwards tend to have a much, sort of, stricter view of what family is  
(Kestrel, Interview 1, lines 215-218)

This demonstrates the notion that there may be generational differences in regard to beliefs surrounding chosen family and that older generations are more likely to view biolegal family as being the 'default'. There is evidence to support the notion that younger generations are valuing the 'traditional' structures of family to a lessening extent compared to older generations (Scott, 2006). This highlights the potential that biolegal family as the 'default' is a societal belief that is slowly becoming decreasingly influential. However, it does still

appear to hold a degree of influence in younger generations as demonstrated by the evidence above.

Kestrel also made a statement with the sentiment that the reason an individual would have chosen family is because of troubles with their biolegal family. However, they noted that people outside the transgender community have chosen family. Despite this, they still emphasise biolegal trouble as the reason for chosen family:

I do know some people who aren't trans but who still, sort of, have gone for that kind of chosen family, kind of model because, for whatever reason, they don't necessarily get on with the people that they grew up with (Kestrel, Interview 1, 305-307)

This further demonstrates the notion that, even if one is not a member of the transgender community, there is an assumption that one must have some form of trouble with their biolegal family in order to warrant chosen family. Further, Seahorse discussed the fact that their mother chose individuals to be in their life due to her own lack of siblings:

my mum doesn't have any siblings. So, um, she chose some honorary aunts and uncles for me to have (Seahorse, Interview 1, lines 44-45)

This further shows that chosen family is not seen as something that is uniquely transgender, as their mother appears to be cisgender. However, chosen family is seen as making up where biolegal family lacks; Seahorse's mother chose individuals to fill a role that was deemed missing due to her lack of biolegal family in that role. This supports the notion that chosen family is seen as a 'plan B' for when biolegal family is considered to have failed or be lacking.

One reason for why this may be a common assumption is that many participants referenced negative experiences with their family as a reason for their conceptualisation changing. This is demonstrated by the rejection discussed above. However, when non-gender-

related experiences altered their views, every experience was explained to be negative. For example, Jay referenced that while their gender did have a large impact on their conceptualisation of family, the negative experience of being abandoned by their biological mother also had a large influence that could not be ignored:

my conception of family has definitely been changed by my experiences with being ... a sexual and gender minority ... it's affected what I wanted from family; it's affected ... the decisions that I've made in terms of things like do I want children? ... but, to be honest, a lot of that stuff's probably more to do with ... the fact that I didn't have a biological mother (Jay, Interview 2, lines 182-185 & 188-189)

This demonstrates the impact that negative experiences, in this case their history with their biological mother, can have on certain aspects of their conceptualisation of family. This could explain why negative experiences are seen as a necessary requisite to having a chosen family. Kestrel also referenced negative experiences as a large factor in their current conceptualisation of family:

my brother died ... that kind of prompted me to re-evaluate a lot of my life and start, sort of, thinking about things differently (Kestrel, Interview 1, lines 111-113)

This further highlights the influence of negative experiences on an individual's conceptualisation of family. Both Kestrel and Jay reference significant negative experiences – the loss of a relative – as a reason for their changes in conceptualisation of family. This appeared to be the only non-gender-related experience that had any impact on their conceptualisation. This could explain why negative experiences with biolegal family are seen as necessary for the seeking out of chosen family as their own experiences suggest that only negative experiences can lead to a dramatic change in conceptualisation of family.

River provided a potential explanation as to why an individual's views, particularly on family, may be more influenced by negative experiences than positive ones:

positive ones, you, sort of, expect with family, I guess, like, you're supposed to be, like, happy families and stuff, and then negative ones, sort of, take you away from that (River, Interview 1, 44-46)

This provides some explanation as to why participants felt influenced by their negative experiences to the extent that they did. Evidence does suggest that negative experiences with others is more influential than positive ones (Graf et al., 2014). Further, this research suggests negative experiences are particularly influential on out-group behaviour, which may be the reason that negative experiences with one's biological family may lead to a preference for chosen family as the biological family members become perceived as the 'out-group' as a result of the negative experiences (Graf et al., 2014). This may also explain why rejection was such an influential experience for the majority of participants, particularly in terms of highlighting their value of chosen family. This emphasis on the influence of negative experiences could explain why they believe that chosen family must be a 'plan B'.

### 3.3.2. Chosen family following 'traditional' structures

When discussing their chosen family, some participants mentioned ways in which they follow the 'traditional' structure of a biological family. This further demonstrates the belief that biological family is seen as the 'default' as chosen families must follow the structures set out by the 'default' family in order to be considered family:

I seem to be seeing just, like, a lot of people posting about, like, families that they've chosen and ... who they consider in, in, like, what roles (Kestrel, Interview 2, lines 11-13)

This suggests that it is common to consider chosen family in the terms of biolegal family structures with certain individuals in specific ‘roles’ such as parental figures, siblings, and aunts and uncles. Seahorse described this with her ‘honorary aunts and uncles’ to the extent where she believed they were biolegally related to her:

because my family referred to them as my uncles and my aunts, I grew up thinking, like, “oh, we are blood related” (Seahorse, Interview 2, lines 34-35)

This demonstrates that chosen family appears to follow biolegal structures to the point where an individual may genuinely assume that they are biolegal family. This further supports the notion that biolegal is seen as the ‘default’ family as there was the assumption that since these individuals were treated like family, they must be biolegally related. Seahorse went on to discuss how they discovered that these individuals were their mother’s chosen family rather than biolegal:

it wasn’t until that I was kind of like, “wait, why are you calling them honorary uncles and aunts, like ... are they not related to me?” (Seahorse, Interview 2, lines 35-37)

This further demonstrates their assumption towards biolegal family. However, it also raises that, despite following ‘traditional’ structures, chosen family is kept separate and distinct from biolegal family. This is suggested by the use of qualifiers such as ‘honorary’, highlighting that they are not their ‘real’ family, they are chosen. This apparent need to separate the two types of family further supports the notion that biolegal family is seen as the ‘default’ family structure. This belief is supported by research that suggests that many individuals, including those in the LGBTQ+ community, view the ‘traditional’ structure of family – two opposite-sex parents and their children – as a ‘benchmark’ off which to base other family structures (Gavriel-Fried & Shilo, 2017).

These views around biolegal family being the ‘default’ were shown regardless of the participant’s own definition of family. This is in line with research that suggests who an individual classifies as family and what they define as family are often incongruent (Hull & Ortyl, 2019). This suggests that it may be societal beliefs influencing the views of these individuals as, despite their own definitions of family not being ‘traditional’, they still hold biases as a result of wider societal beliefs, such as that biolegal family is the ‘default’ family and chosen family is different and, in some ways, lesser.

### 3.4. Societal influences: “If the world becomes more accepting”

The role society plays in one’s conceptualisation of family should not be understated. Societal biases are likely the reasoning for the consideration of biolegal family as the ‘default’ discussed above (Gavriel-Fried & Shilo, 2017). All participants discussed the role of society on conceptualisations of family, either their own current one or those others may have in the future, highlighting the perceived impact of society on family in the transgender community. This impact of society will be broken down into two main subordinate themes: current impacts of society and potential future impacts of society.

#### 3.4.1. Current impacts of society

Society was deemed to impact participant’s views of family in two main ways: societal transphobia and gender norms. Societal transphobia was mentioned by multiple participants who discussed how it impacted their lives. The danger of societal transphobia was not understated by participants, as many indicated a fear for their own safety due to transphobia:

someone who’s really, really angry about all of this is gonna see me as a target, so that kinda shit worries me (Jay, Interview 2, lines 215-216)

This was discussed in relation to their gender expression and being, what they feel is, very proudly and obviously queer. This highlights the concerns that transgender individuals face due to their gender expression in a transphobic society. These concerns are not unfounded as transgender-related hate crimes are common (Government Equalities Office, 2018) and many transgender individuals cite victimisation as a reason for suicide attempts (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006). This demonstrates the ways in which transphobia has a significant impact on the lives of transgender individuals. Further, if the fear described does cause them to alter their gender expression in order to protect themselves, which is a common coping mechanism for societal transphobia (Flores, 2019), this could influence their conceptualisation of family as changes in gender expression can impact familial relationships (Norwood, 2012).

Kestrel also discussed the impact of transphobia and its impact on individuals and societal change:

we are making progress and that is scaring the bigots, essentially. Which makes them shout louder. Um, you know, it's always been the case for everything.

Um, and it [increase in bigotry] does make things, for the time being, more dangerous and more hard work (Kestrel, Interview 2, lines 300-303)

This, again, acknowledges the danger societal transphobia poses to transgender individuals. Further, this was discussed in relation to changing attitudes. Whilst it does demonstrate a belief that progress is being made, it also highlights the difficulty that transphobia poses to changing societal attitudes towards the transgender community. This belief in the difficulty in changing attitudes is demonstrated by the use of the phrase 'more hard work'. This, combined with the emphasis that increasing transphobia makes life 'more dangerous' for transgender individuals, suggests a sense of personal labour brought about by societal transphobia that, ultimately, endangers them. Evidence does suggest that there has been a rise in transphobic hate crimes in recent years (Home Office, 2020), suggesting that this is a valid observation

and concern. The sense of labour suggested by Kestrel is also supported by minority stress theory which highlights the unique stressors experienced by transgender individuals due to their minority status (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). There is also research suggesting that this rise in transphobia could be backlash to increasing acceptance for transgender identities (Zanghellini, 2020) which is in-line with Kestrel's belief. This demonstrates the impacts of transphobia, not only on a personal level, but also on a wider societal level regarding acceptance of transgender individuals.

Much like with rejection, there are many ways that societal transphobia can manifest. One of these ways is misgendering, either intentionally, due to explicit transphobia, or unintentionally, due to implicit societal biases. Jay, a nonbinary person, described that they encounter a lack of acceptance even among those who did not know them before their transition:

even people who've only ever known me as ... my name now, still sometimes get my gender identity wrong ... some people just won't acknowledge it, I've got colleagues that I've met that just cannot cope with the idea that I am a they  
(Jay, Interview 1, lines 570-574)

They also went on to mention that they feel that they can understand the difference between those who are struggling to understand their gender identity but are trying to and those who refuse to accept their gender. Research does show that there is a difference between malicious misgendering and mistakenly misgendering an individual (Shelton & Dodd, 2021); therefore, it is not unreasonable to believe that an individual who experiences regular misgendering could differentiate between the two instances. Further, Jay's above description suggests a belief that it may be more difficult for those who knew an individual before coming out to adjust to the 'change' of their gender, making them more likely to make mistakes. However, for individuals who did not know them before their transition, misgendering appears more



malicious. This demonstrates a potential difference in experience for binary and nonbinary transgender individuals as binary transgender individuals may be perceived as their true gender by those who did not know them before their transition. However, nonbinary individuals are almost always going to be assumed to be either a man or a woman due to society's biases towards a binary gender system. This leads to a likelihood that nonbinary people are more likely to get misgendered than binary transgender individuals (Goldberg et al., 2019). This suggests a way in which there may be differences in experiences of societal transphobia among binary and nonbinary transgender individuals, especially unintentional misgendering from strangers.

Indigo also discussed the ways in which current transphobia affects her feelings around her family in the future:

you're not really a mother because you were born with a penis and you were assigned male at birth; therefore, you're not really a mother (Indigo, Interview 2, lines 40-42)

This was mentioned as though other people may say this to her, suggesting a concern that, if she were to have children in the future as she desires, she would not be considered a 'real' mother by many due to her gender assigned at birth. This concern is based in the essentialisation of gender roles to the point where certain roles are considered to be tied to biological sex even if sex plays no meaningful role (Averett, 2021). This demonstrates the ways in which societal transphobia and a belief that one's parental status is based on their gender assigned at birth impacts transgender individuals.

It would not be unreasonable to consider cisgender biases a form of unconscious transphobia and some participants did discuss the ways in which societal gender norms have negatively impacted them:

you are still constantly being [bom]barded with transphobic and cisgender bias and perceptions (Jay, Interview 2, lines 67-68)

This highlights the ways in which some participants felt that gender norms are a form of transphobia as well as the difficulty of not adhering to society's expectations. This was only discussed by nonbinary participants who viewed gender norms as a reason for why they felt their conceptualisation of family may differ to that of binary transgender people:

if you're a trans man or a trans woman there's kind of, like, this, this expectation of what that means, like, in terms of just there being expectations in society as a whole of what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman. Whereas nonbinaryness, there isn't ... a blueprint for that (Kestrel, Interview 1, lines 275-279)

This demonstrates the ways in which nonbinary individuals feel that their experiences differ to binary transgender people due to the gender roles society puts upon individuals. For Kestrel, this was seen as both a positive and a negative as, on the one hand, they saw this lack of 'gender blueprint' as part of 'the point' of identifying as nonbinary. However, they also saw it as negative due to society's biases such as the inability to be legally recognised as neither a man nor a woman (Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2004). River discussed this notion further in terms of family:

especially the difference between nonbinary people and binary trans people. Um, because there's still that, like, gender roles, gender norms things in families, and then nonbinary people don't fit, don't necessarily fit into that (River, Interview 2, lines 48-51)

This demonstrates how River believes that society's gender norms impact the ways in which differently identifying transgender individuals may conceptualise family. This could be related to the previously discussed notion of biolegal family structures being the 'default'.

This structure is based off gendered parental figures – a mother and a father – categories into which many nonbinary individuals cannot, or do not want to, fall:

if I was to want to [have children] ... what is then my status? ... I'm a parent, I'm not a mother or father ... there's not words in English for, like, that position ... 'cause even though I could technically carry a child, I wouldn't be a mother (Kestrel, Interview 1, lines 265-269)

This demonstrates the ways in which nonbinary individuals feel they cannot, or do not want to, fulfil certain family roles – or at least use those titles – because of the gender norms society has put in place. As a result, they feel their conceptualisations of family are likely to be different to those of binary transgender individuals who they feel are more able to fulfil these roles and use those titles. Evidence does suggest that nonbinary individuals do have significantly different experiences compared to their binary transgender peers (Reisner & Hughto, 2019). Since definitions of family can be influenced by one's experiences (Kavanagh et al., 1997), it could be argued that nonbinary and binary transgender individuals are likely to have different conceptualisations of family. This provides the opportunity for further study into these potential differences.

Additionally, Seahorse discussed the ways in which they felt that societal gender norms impacted their conceptualisation of family as they grew up and their desires for the future:

society's ... pressure for, you know, female assigned people to have families probably adds to the fact that I want to have, you know, kids and everything (Seahorse, Interview 2, lines 93-95).

Whilst they later went on to mention how they were certain that their desire for children was a genuine desire, they acknowledged that the influence of society's expectations of individuals who were assigned female at birth (AFAB) to have children cannot be ignored.

Research does suggest that AFAB individuals do have different attitudes towards family, specifically in regard to having children, than individuals assigned male at birth (AMAB) (Fleming & Agnew-Brune, 2015). AFAB individuals describe feeling as though they have less power in family planning-related decision-making than AMAB individuals due to gender norms (Fleming & Agnew-Brune, 2015). This demonstrates the ways in which societal gender norms associated with their gender assigned at birth can impact the conceptualisation of family of transgender individuals. This provides the opportunity for further research into specific gender identities to see how they feel society has influenced them. This also provides further support for the influence societal biases have on participants' conceptualisations of family.

#### 3.4.2. Potential societal impacts

Participants also discussed the ways in which they felt society may impact their own, or others', conceptualisations of family in the future. This was discussed in two main ways: increasing societal acceptance – which was both a desire and a belief – and the unimportance of gender. Increasing societal acceptance was brought up to a degree by every participant; whether this was a desire for it, a belief that it was happening, or its potential to impact conceptualisations of family:

I know a lot of people, sort of, they have family lives that are sort of like mine, so, they might edit as we become ... more, sort of, accepted within society and, sort of, more commonplace as well (Tris, Interview 2, lines 37-39)

This demonstrates the belief that as transgender identities become more accepted within society, conceptualisations of family may change as well. This was believed to be in the sense that 'traditional' views of family that are set in gender norms may change as individuals who do not fit those gender roles become more accepted. Whilst Hull and Ortyl

(2019) found that as LGBTQ+ identities become more accepted, individuals are more likely to return to valuing biological more than chosen family, there is evidence to suggest that society as a whole is moving away from the 'traditional' notion of a nuclear family (Scott, 2006). As research deconstructing the myth of the nuclear family becomes more prevalent (Sear, 2021) and gender roles and norms ease as transgender identities become more accepted (Akdemir, 2018), it could be anticipated that society's beliefs around 'traditional' family will change further. River also discussed this belief that increased societal acceptance may lead to wider societal changes in regard to family:

the typical view of family is, like, this nuclear family, like, man and wife and their kids and very set in, like, gender norms and everything. So, more acceptance of transgender identities, um, will, sort of, challenge that and people will have a more open view of what family is. (River, Interview 2, lines 30-34)

This highlights the belief that gender norms impact the conceptualisation of family in society and that, as those gender norms are challenged by the acceptance of transgender individuals, there is the potential for a dramatic shift in what is considered a 'traditional' family. There is evidence to suggest that gender roles are being deconstructed within Western society (Akdemir, 2018). However, since this is a relatively recent change, it is not yet known if this has or will impact society's views on family. Jay provides some insight into how they believe this change will come about:

we're being given a voice, people are acknowledging it, professional organisations are changing their policies and legislation, so that kind of message is going to trickle down into family units (Jay, Interview 2, lines 243-245)

They believe that as organisations make changes to accommodate transgender individuals and the deconstruction of gender norms, these changes will begin to impact people on a personal level as they become more aware of the experiences of transgender individuals. It is then believed that such awareness may lead to changes in their own beliefs about gender norms and their place in the family. Evidence does show that as people become more exposed to certain individuals or ways of life, they become more accepting of those individuals (McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017). Further, as demonstrated above, gender norms do impact family relationships and structures (Fleming & Agnew-Brune, 2015). Therefore, it could be argued that as individuals do change their beliefs surrounding gender norms, this will impact their conceptualisations of family.

As mentioned previously when discussing rejection, some participants did provide evidence of this change in attitudes towards transgender identities. This was due to the perceived generational differences in acceptance. This was especially demonstrated by Indigo who mentioned that, in her experience, generations were becoming increasingly accepting of transgender identities with her youngest relatives being the most accepting and believing that her oldest relatives would be the least accepting. This provides some evidence that society is becoming more accepting of transgender identities, at least anecdotally, due to this perceived generational difference in acceptance.

Beyond this impact of increasing societal acceptance of transgender identities, many participants also expressed a desire for gender to become completely unimportant to society.

I am a proper gender critical, not like the transphobes, because I believe gender and everything, we just need to, sort of, wipe it ... everything we, sort of, genderise nowadays, sort of, scrap (Tris, Interview 2, 181-183 & 190-191)

She continued by discussing examples such as the assigning of genders to colours and clothing. This takes the desire for acceptance and the deconstruction of gender norms a step

further by asking for their removal from society altogether. Since changes to gender expression and gender roles can influence familial relationships (Fleming & Agnew-Brune, 2015; Norwood, 2012), the complete removal of gender norms from society is likely to have an impact on conceptualisations of family. It is important to note Tris' differentiation of her own belief from those of transphobic 'gender critics' who believe that biological sex is more important than an individual's gender identity and use this belief to discriminate against transgender individuals (Zanghellini, 2020). It is clear that she wishes to highlight that being critical of the social construction of gender is not inherently transphobic; however, realises that it is generally a term used by transphobic individuals. This further highlights the permeation of transphobia through society as being critical of gender is generally considered transphobic. Tris was not alone in this hope for the future as Indigo also demonstrated a desire to remove the importance of gender from society in a similar way to Tris.

we should recognise that there are two different sexes but abolish everything to do with gender ... yes, one body has a penis, the other has a vagina ... but, like, that shouldn't get in the way of somebody's success or future (Indigo, Interview 2, 153-157)

This highlights a similar point to Tris; Indigo is taking a gender critical stance without the transphobia usually associated with the term. This further demonstrates the desire of some participants to remove the concept of gender from society. One could argue that this abolition of gender as described by these participants is the only 'true' way to deconstruct gender norms and trigger the societal change discussed above.

The discussions above highlight the ways in which it is believed that society influences an individual's conceptualisation of family. It also shows how societal changes in regard to gender, specifically transgender identities, could result in changes to individual and/or collective conceptualisations of family. This was mostly seen to be due to reduction in

societal transphobia and the hoped-for eventual abolition of gender in society as high levels of transphobia and high importance on gender norms were seen to be the main influences on conceptualisations of family.

These results reviewed the main topics of discussion brought up by participants that explain their conceptualisation of family and the extent to which they feel their gender impacts upon these views. The evidence suggested that family was generally conceptualised in terms of unconditional love. However, it was somewhat influenced by societal biases that led to a belief that biological family was a form of 'default'. Further, gender was seen to influence participants' conceptualisation of family mainly in terms of gender-based rejection. Both actual experiences of rejection and the expectation of rejection were seen to have influence, to the extent where rejection was almost considered a fundamental part of the transgender experience. The influence of society was not limited to its emphasis on biological family over chosen family but was also seen to have gender-related influence. This was mostly discussed through the topics of societal transphobia and gender norms and their influence on participants' conceptualisations of family, but also their influence on wider societal conceptualisation of family. These were then compared with current literature into similar topics to support the analysis of the interviews. Opportunities for potential research were highlighted and will be discussed further in the following chapter.



## 4. Conclusions

This chapter will further discuss the results from the previous chapter to review the implications of the results. It will also discuss the limitations of the current study.

Additionally, opportunities for future study with regard to this research will also be discussed.

### 4.1. Results conclusions

This study aimed to answer two main questions: how transgender individuals conceptualise family and to what extent they feel their gender influenced those conceptualisations. For clarity, this conclusion will be divided into those two research questions.

#### 4.1.1. What is family?

It is clear from the results that the main conceptualisation of family among participants was that it was based on feelings of unconditional love as opposed to strictly biological ties. All participants mentioned, to some degree, relationships with their biological family as well as their chosen family. This shows the way in which one's experiences with an individual and the emotions they feel are what dictates the familial bond. However, it is clear that there were some lingering societal pressures that caused individuals to view chosen family as lesser than biological, which was seen as a form of 'default'. This supports previous research that found there is often a disconnect between who an individual defines as family and what they believe to be the definition of family (Hull & Ortyl, 2019). This belief of biological family as the 'default' was demonstrated through believing an individual must have a degree of trouble with their biological family in order to want to form a chosen family,

suggesting chosen family was seen as a type of ‘plan B’ family. Further, chosen family was seen to still follow structures of ‘traditional family’, with individuals being given ‘honorary’ biolegal titles such as aunt or uncle. This was seen to be due to many individuals seeing the ‘traditional’ family unit – two opposite-sex parents and their children – as a ‘benchmark’ off which other family units are based (Gavriel-Fried & Shilo, 2017). This demonstrates that societal influence and one’s own beliefs and values combine to make up an individual’s conceptualisation of family.

Participants were also very confident that their views surrounding family would remain the same. This was seen to be due to the fact that it was a major life event that caused their initial change of conceptualisation and they believed it was unlikely that a similar event would occur again. For the majority of participants, this major life event was viewed to be either their coming out or the discovery of their gender. This highlights the impact of an individual’s gender on their conceptualisation of family. In many cases, however, it was this combined with other major life events such as the loss of a relative. These experiences were always described as negative, and it was believed that negative experiences with family have more impact than positive ones on an individual’s conceptualisation of family. This is in line with research which suggests that negative experiences do, generally, have more impact on an individual than positive ones (Graf et al., 2014). This demonstrates the ways in which an individual’s gender interacts with their other life experiences to inform their conceptualisation of family.

#### 4.1.2. The impact of gender

As mentioned above, gender- and non-gender-related experiences were seen to influence the participants’ conceptualisations of family. However, non-gender-related experiences were discussed to a lesser extent than gender-related ones in relation to their

impact on their conceptualisations of family. This suggests that participants felt that, while non-gender-related experiences were important, it was their gender that had the most influence on their conceptualisations of family. Most notably, negative experiences were discussed as having the most impact. Gender-related negative experiences were discussed at length, most specifically rejection and societal transphobia. All participants mentioned rejection, whether it was the rejection they experienced, or the belief that rejection was a common experience for transgender individuals. Rejection was viewed almost as though it were an unavoidable part of the transgender experience, leading to an expectation of rejection for the majority of participants. Since research suggests that the expectation of rejection leads to similar outcomes to experiencing active rejection (Rood et al., 2016; Timmins et al., 2017), this expectation of rejection could be viewed as having the same impact on conceptualisations of family as active rejection which has been shown to have a significant effect (Blair & Pukall, 2015; Knauer, 2016). For many participants, they felt as though this were the case; the breakdown or change of relationships was often due to this expectation of rejection. Further, it is important to note that there appeared to be nothing that could protect against this expectation. Participants with generally supportive families expressed this concern as well as those with less supportive families. Moreover, even participants who experienced acceptance in response to their gender still held this expectation that, eventually, they would be rejected. This demonstrates the extent to which rejection, whether feared or received, impacts the conceptualisations of family among transgender individuals. There was nuance to the expectation of rejection, however, generally, participants appeared more confident that younger generations are more accepting than older generations. This, for some participants, informed from whom they expected rejection: viewing it to be more likely from older relatives than younger ones. This suggests that, whilst the expectation of rejection was a

common experience, there is nuance as to from whom transgender individuals may expect this rejection.

Personal rejection was not the only factor, however. Societal transphobia was also regarded as having a large impact on participants' conceptualisations of family. Explicit transphobia was generally discussed in terms of concerns for safety; however, implicit transphobia through gender norms was viewed to have a large impact on conceptualisations of family, especially for nonbinary participants. This was largely due to their feeling that they could not fulfil certain roles within the family due to those roles being heavily gendered towards either men or women, with no gender-neutral options. This links to the views of biological family being seen as the 'default' as they feel somewhat othered by the fact that they are unable to fit into the gendered roles of the 'default' family. This was mostly due to their discomfort with using titles such as 'mother' which has become essentialised to be a completely sex-based role (Averett, 2021) and the lack of gender-neutral titles within 'traditional' family structures. This led them to feeling 'forced' into potentially using titles that do not align with their gender identity. It should be noted that none of the participants had children, so it was unclear how they would deal with this struggle as the situation arises.

Finally, participants expressed a feeling that conceptualisations of family may differ according to an individual's specific gender identity. This was seen mostly in relation to experiences with gender roles as discussed above. This demonstrates that whilst views surrounding family within the transgender community may be similar, there is no one universal transgender experience as it has the potential to differ according to gender identity. Further, it suggests that the impact of gender on conceptualisations of family is due to more than simply whether or not an individual is transgender but due to the specific experiences associated with certain gender identities. This further demonstrates the high impact of gender on transgender conceptualisations of family.

## 4.2. Further Reflexivity

It is important to note that while all possible efforts were made to reduce bias in this research, it would be impossible to fully eliminate it. The researcher acknowledges that the content of the interviews was likely to be impacted by elements for which one cannot control. For example, as discussed previously, the researcher is openly nonbinary which likely impacted the way some participants interacted with them. This is demonstrated by some participants using phrases such as “as you probably know” (Jay, Interview 2, line 17), suggesting an assumption towards a shared experience with the interviewer. This suggests that there may be an unavoidable bias where participants assumed a shared experience with the researcher and, therefore, felt they could discuss aspects of their lives in a way in which they may not have done had the researcher been cisgender.

It is important to consider the researcher’s own experiences of family in relation to their identity when considering reflexivity. Due to the personal nature of the following section, it will be written in the first person. Whilst I am ‘out’ to my biolegal family as nonbinary, the expectation of rejection mentioned by participants is a sentiment I also experienced prior to coming out and something I still experience in regard to non-immediate biolegal family members to whom I am not yet ‘out’. Further, I too experience the impacts of societal transphobia, particularly those resultant of biases towards a binary view of gender, such as those mentioned by participants.

However, it should also be noted that there are elements of the results to which I, personally, do not relate. For example, whilst I, naturally, feel the impact of societal biases towards biolegal family as a ‘default’, it is not a bias I feel that I hold. This is mostly as a result of previous research into conceptualisations of family that has made me aware of this bias and allowed me to deconstruct it. In terms of the belief surrounding unconditional love, I would define family in a similar manner to the participants; however, I believe there is more

nuance surrounding the notion of ‘unconditionality’ than is suggested in the transcripts. My personal beliefs around family are nuanced in a way that allows me to both relate to and not relate to the four main themes of this research. These are the main biases I am likely to have brought into the interviews and analysis. However, as discussed previously, these biases have been acknowledged and controlled for to the greatest extent they can be.

Further, it should be acknowledged that, naturally, only certain quotes were selected to demonstrate themes in the previous results chapter. These quotes were believed by the researcher to be the clearest demonstrations of each theme. However, there is potential for this to suggest some unintentional bias. To counteract this, and to properly follow the practice of hermeneutics, the full transcripts – both coded and uncoded – are available through contacting the researcher.

Other areas of bias, such as those listed in previous chapters, were controlled to the best of the researcher’s ability and are not believed to have significantly impacted the results of this study.

#### 4.3. Limitations of this study

Whilst this study provides insight into the experiences of transgender individuals and their views surrounding family, it is important to note that these results and conclusions are drawn, specifically, from the experience of the participants interviewed and should not be considered generalisable to the entire transgender community. Further, this study may have benefitted from more extensive credibility strategies such as member checking or investigator triangulation. However, the restriction of a short time frame and a single researcher made this impractical.

Most notably, the participant pool of this study consists only of transwomen and nonbinary individuals. Despite not aiming to be generalisable, since this study was aiming to

explore the experiences of the transgender community with no gender restrictions, it would have benefitted from a wider gender-spectrum including transmen and other genders such as genderfluid or agender individuals. This would have provided the broader view of the community that was the initial aim of this research.

Additionally, as discussed in a previous chapter, all participants appeared to be white British. This means that the results of this study may not be representative of the conceptualisations of family of transgender people of colour and/or non-British transgender people. Whilst the homogenous ethnicity and race of participants limited the likelihood of cultural differences in conceptualisations of family, it is important that one does not ignore the experiences of transgender people of colour. Therefore, more diversity in race may have provided important and interesting insight into the intersection between race and gender.

Further, despite the varied age range, there were no participants who had begun forming parent-child families, despite many participants referencing that they wish to do so in the future. More diversity in family dynamics among participants may have provided interesting insight into the struggles with navigating a heavily gender family system discussed above. However, given the nature of volunteer recruitment strategies, it is not possible to ensure the type of scope described above.

Finally, whilst participants discussed their gender-related experiences in more detail and at further length than their non-gender-related experiences, this could be due to demand characteristics. Since this study was explicitly exploring transgender experiences, participants may have felt as though they were 'supposed' to discuss their gender-related experiences more than their non-gender-related ones. Additionally, many, if not all, of the participants were otherwise part of the LGBTQ+ community – in that they were not heterosexual. Since cisgender members of the LGBTQ+ community have similar views surrounding family to transgender individuals (Blair & Pukall, 2015; Knauer, 2016), it is possible that these beliefs

around family could also be influenced by their sexuality. That said, the majority of participants did explicitly mention that they felt that their gender played a very important role in their current conceptualisations of family. Therefore, the conclusion that gender has a large impact on transgender conceptualisations of family should not be disregarded.

These limitations provide opportunity for this topic to be researched further and provide insight where this study was unable to do so.

#### 4.4. Opportunities for future study

Beyond the possibility for future studies to improve upon this study by targeting its current limitations, topics raised during the analysis also provide the opportunity for further research to be conducted.

For example, there is little to no research surrounding the importance of feelings of being unconditionally loved by family members in the transgender community. This sentiment of unconditional love was seen as the cornerstone of participants' definitions of family and, therefore, warrants further study. There is also the opportunity to conduct further research into the perceived generational differences regarding rejection of transgender individuals and the nuance it appears to create when expecting rejection. Further, due to the differing experiences of nonbinary and binary transgender participants, there is the opportunity for studies to be conducted into these differences and how that may impact individuals. This would be particularly beneficial in terms of the impact of gender roles on individuals who identify outside the binary system society uses to administer gender roles. Finally, whilst there does exist research into the differing impacts of negative and positive experiences, there is little to no research into these effects in regard to family. As many participants felt that negative experiences had more impact on their conceptualisation of



family than positive ones, further research into the reasons for this belief would be encouraged.

#### 4.5. Impacts

The results and conclusions of this study have the potential to inform aspects of society in the future. It is clear that societal biases influence the ways in which transgender individuals conceptualise family, in that biolegal family is seen as a ‘default’ even if they otherwise do not place a high level of importance of biolegal ties in their conceptualisation. Further, many participants, specifically those who were nonbinary, discussed the impact of gender roles within the family and the difficulty of not feeling comfortable with the current language surrounding family due to it being heavily gendered. Therefore, the results of this demonstrate a need to alter the way society uses language when discussing family and gender and the intersection between the two.

Legally, many terms surrounding family are not gendered. Current legal precedent defines that ‘mother’ “arises from the role that a person has undertaken in the biological process of conception, pregnancy and birth” (Royal Courts of Justice, 2019, p. 60) and is “not necessarily gender specific” (ibid.). However, participants still described a discomfort with identifying as mother due to the social implications of it being a gender-specific role. This demonstrates that societal changes are needed in order for nonbinary individuals to be included in family roles. This research does not make any claims as to what those changes should be – whether the legal gender neutrality of terms such as mother should be emphasised in social contexts, or new language should be formed. However, it emphasises the importance of including transgender individuals in discussions around family and being mindful of cis- and heteronormative biases surrounding familial terms.

To conclude, the results of this study highlight a need for societal and linguistic change when discussing family in order to deconstruct the cis- and heteronormative that currently lead to transgender individuals feeling excluded from familial roles.

#### 4.6. Final thoughts

To conclude, this study found that the transgender individuals interviewed conceptualised family mostly in terms of feelings of unconditional love regardless of biolegal ties. However, societal impacts led to a residual sentiment of biolegal family being the ‘default’ and seeing chosen family as lesser to some extent. Further, it found that individuals believed that their gender identity – even more so than simply being transgender – impacted their conceptualisations of family heavily. Finally, it was implied that, generally, gender-related experiences had more of an impact than non-gender-related experiences, and most of all, negative experiences were more impactful than positive experiences on conceptualisations of family.

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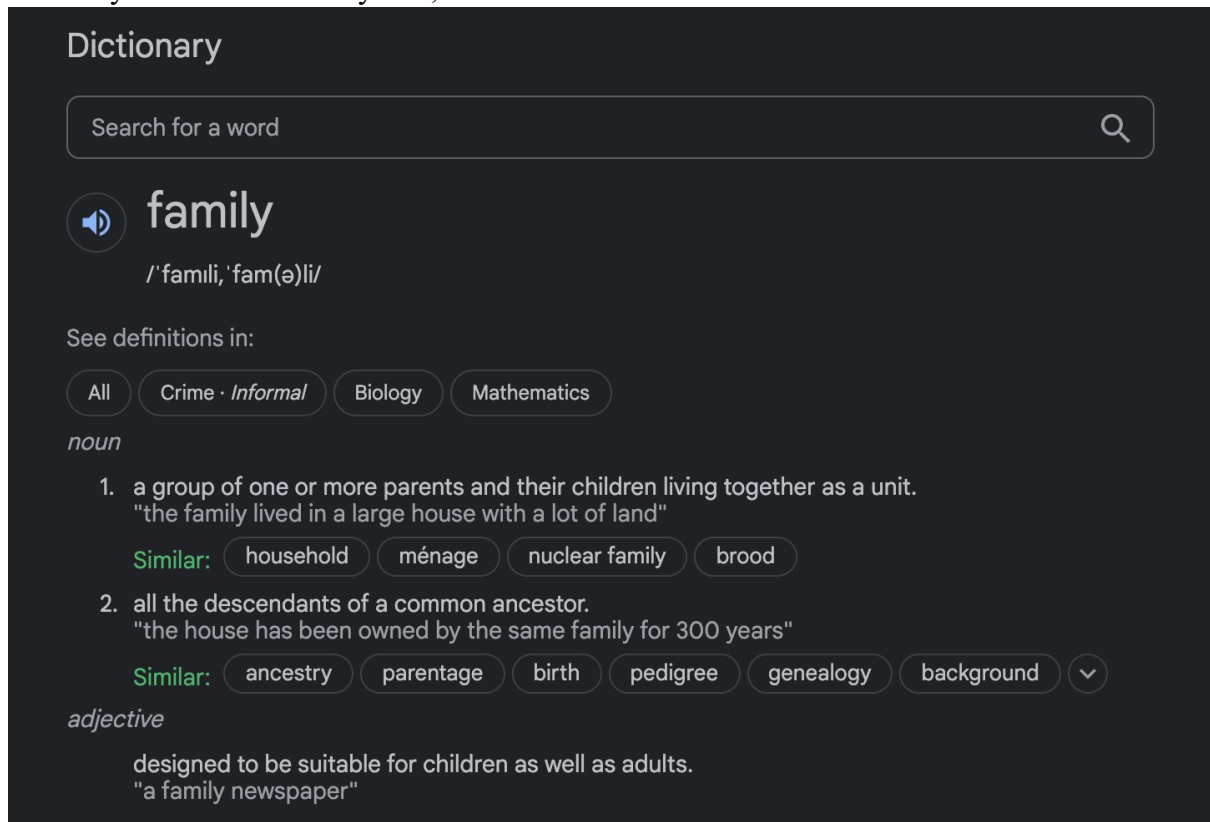
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## 6. Appendices

### Appendix A.


Screenshot of the automatic definition provided by Google when one searches for a definition of family. Retrieved January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022.



The screenshot shows the Google Dictionary interface for the word "family". At the top, there is a search bar with the text "Search for a word" and a magnifying glass icon. Below the search bar, the word "family" is displayed in a large font, accompanied by a speaker icon for audio playback. The phonetic transcription "/ˈfæmɪli, ˈfæm(ə)li/" is shown below the word. Underneath, it says "See definitions in:" followed by four category buttons: "All", "Crime · Informal", "Biology", and "Mathematics". The word is identified as a "noun". There are two numbered definitions. Definition 1: "a group of one or more parents and their children living together as a unit." with the example "the family lived in a large house with a lot of land". Below this definition are four "Similar" buttons: "household", "ménage", "nuclear family", and "brood". Definition 2: "all the descendants of a common ancestor." with the example "the house has been owned by the same family for 300 years". Below this definition are six "Similar" buttons: "ancestry", "parentage", "birth", "pedigree", "genealogy", and "background", followed by a downward arrow icon. The word is also identified as an "adjective" with the definition "designed to be suitable for children as well as adults." and the example "a family newspaper".

Dictionary

Search for a word

 **family**

/ˈfæmɪli, ˈfæm(ə)li/

See definitions in:

All Crime · Informal Biology Mathematics

*noun*

1. a group of one or more parents and their children living together as a unit.  
"the family lived in a large house with a lot of land"

Similar: household ménage nuclear family brood

2. all the descendants of a common ancestor.  
"the house has been owned by the same family for 300 years"

Similar: ancestry parentage birth pedigree genealogy background

*adjective*

designed to be suitable for children as well as adults.  
"a family newspaper"

Appendix B.  
Letter of ethical approval.



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**PRIVATE & CONFIDENTIAL**

**Dr Lisa Webster**

Chair of SSHS Ethics Committee

Tel: 0113 283 7100

E-mail: [l.webster@leedstrinity.ac.uk](mailto:l.webster@leedstrinity.ac.uk)

Date: 22/06/21

Dear Phoebe

**Re: SSHS\2021\06 Transgender conceptualisations of family: An interpretative phenomenological analysis**

Thank you for your recent application for ethical approval for the above named project.

After reviewing the application and amendments it has been resolved that the research project is granted ethical approval.

I wish you well in your study,

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Lisa Webster".

Dr. Lisa Webster  
Chair of School of Social and Health Sciences Ethics Committee

Appendix C.

Advertising Poster. This was posted online by various gender- and LGBTQ+-related accounts to recruit participants.

**JOIN OUR STUDY TO HELP EXPLORE HOW  
TRANSGENDER INDIVIDUALS  
CONCEPTUALISE FAMILY**

**18+ ONLY. ANY GENDER IDENTITY. ANY EXPERIENCE. ANY OPINION.**

**TWO INTERVIEWS TO DISCUSS YOUR THOUGHTS  
AND OPINIONS ON THE IDEA OF FAMILY AND GENDER**

**Contact Phoebe Murphy - [p.murphy@leedstrinity.ac.uk](mailto:p.murphy@leedstrinity.ac.uk)  
Psychology Masters Research**

**Dr. Chris Rowley - Supervisor | Phoebe Murphy - Researcher | Dr. Alison Torn - Supervisor**

This study has been approved by the Leeds Trinity University School of Social and Health Sciences Ethic Committee  
Ethics application number: SSHS/2021106



## Appendix D.

Participant biographies, describing the participants in more detail than the method section provides.

Indigo is a 21-year-old trans woman who uses mainly she/her pronouns. When asked her gender identity, while she said she identifies as a trans woman, she also said that she believes she is beyond gender, highlighted by the fact that she stated she mostly uses she/her pronouns but is happy with any pronouns other than he/him. She is currently a university student and making music, much of which focusses on her own life experiences. Whilst she did not explicitly state her sexuality, it was clear that she is not heterosexual as she expressed the possibility of having either a male or female partner in the future. She described her experiences with family being affected both by her gender identity and other experiences.

Tris is 26-year-old woman who uses she/her pronouns. She seemed confident and comfortable with her label as a woman. She works in security, which often leads to her working later hours. This did mean that she was tired in the first interview, which she admitted may have slightly impacted her responses. She did not express her sexuality but it was clear that she is highly involved in the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. She described her experiences with family as being mostly affected by non-gender-related experiences, but did mention being trans and part of the LGBTQ+ community as having some bearing on other people's experiences.

Jay is a 49-year-old nonbinary androgyne who uses they/them pronouns. When later asked about preferences on a definition of androgyne in relation to their own identity, they explained that they feel gender is entirely a social construct and that they feel without gender due to the fact that it doesn't truly exist. They are a university lecturer and a bereavement counsellor. They also identify as pansexual. They described their experiences with family as being impacted by both their gender identity, their sexual identity, and other experiences.

Kestrel is a 33-year-old nonbinary person who uses they/them pronouns. When asked about their gender identity, they explained that they considered that they may be agender, however, decided it was easier for them to identify as nonbinary as reflecting too much on their own gender became too complex. They work for the council. They also identify as bisexual. They described their experiences of family being mostly affected by their gender identity and coming out.

Seahorse is a 20-year-old nonbinary person who uses she/they pronouns. When discussing their past experiences, they explained that they had previously thought themselves to be a transgender man, but later came to the conclusion that that was not the correct label for them and decided on nonbinary. She is currently a university student. They also identify as pansexual. She described that her family experiences were affected by her gender identity as well as the gender she was assigned at birth, and other experiences.

River is a 22-year-old nonbinary person who uses they/them pronouns. They seemed confident and comfortable with their label as nonbinary. They are currently a university student. They did not explicitly state their sexuality and did not reference any strong involvement in the LGBTQ+ community. They described their experiences with family being affected both by their gender identity and other experiences.

## Appendix E.

For coded transcripts, please contact the researcher at p.murphy@leedstrinity.ac.uk

## Appendix F.

Thematic breakdown and map

## Appendix F1.

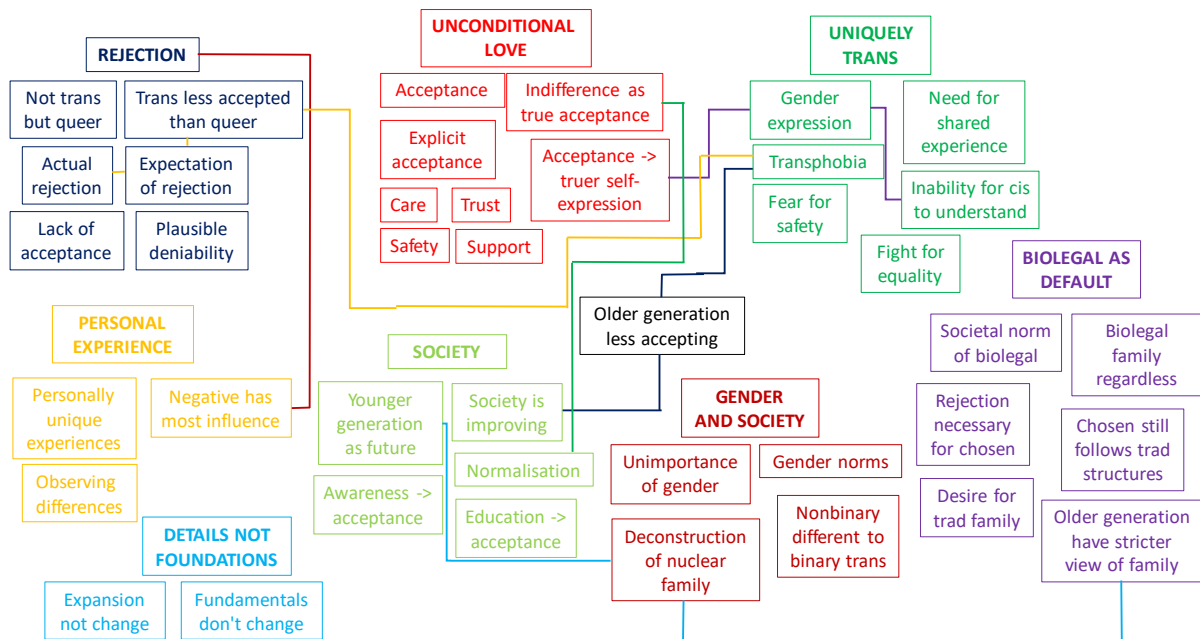
Original descriptive themes and subsequent collation (Contact researcher for alt text)

DATE	DATE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 - acceptance</li> <li>2 - different types of family</li> <li>3 - community</li> <li>4 - blood family as "normal"/"default"</li> <li>5 - chosen family as "back up"</li> <li>6 - help discovering gender</li> <li>7 - fear of rejection</li> <li>8 - gender expression: affirmation</li> <li>9 - their views are different to other's</li> <li>10 - "lucky" to be accepted/not discriminated</li> <li>11 - care/support/love</li> <li>12 - safety/trust/</li> <li>13 - shared experiences.</li> <li>14 - communal living situation</li> <li>15 - experiences shaping views               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>↳ 16 - emphasis on negative</li> </ul> </li> <li>17 - observation shaping views (others' exp)</li> <li>18 - generational differences</li> <li>19 - difficulties being trans</li> <li>20 - unchanging views</li> <li>21 - shared labiq + understanding/experiences</li> <li>22 - desire for traditional family</li> <li>23 - keep family they have - expansion not change</li> <li>24 - gender as truly unimportant</li> <li>25 - education/awareness</li> <li>26 - mutuality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 - frequent contact/physical proximity</li> <li>2 - fluidity of family</li> <li>3 - societal/systemic changes</li> <li>4 - love is central</li> <li>5 - benefits/beauty of being trans</li> <li>6 - lack of true support for bigotry</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 - unconditional (1)</li> <li>2 - biological as standard (1)</li> <li>3 - rejection (feared vs actual) (2) (1)</li> <li>4 - details change but foundations don't (1)</li> <li>5 - society/hope for future* (1) (2)</li> <li>6 - the trans experience (2)</li> <li>7 - the non-trans experience (2)</li> </ul> <p>Unconditional main theme for family but others as well - contact, proximity, community</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) How do trans ppl concept- family</li> <li>2) How does gender influence</li> </ol> <p>+ bit of gen diff in here?</p>

## Appendix F2.

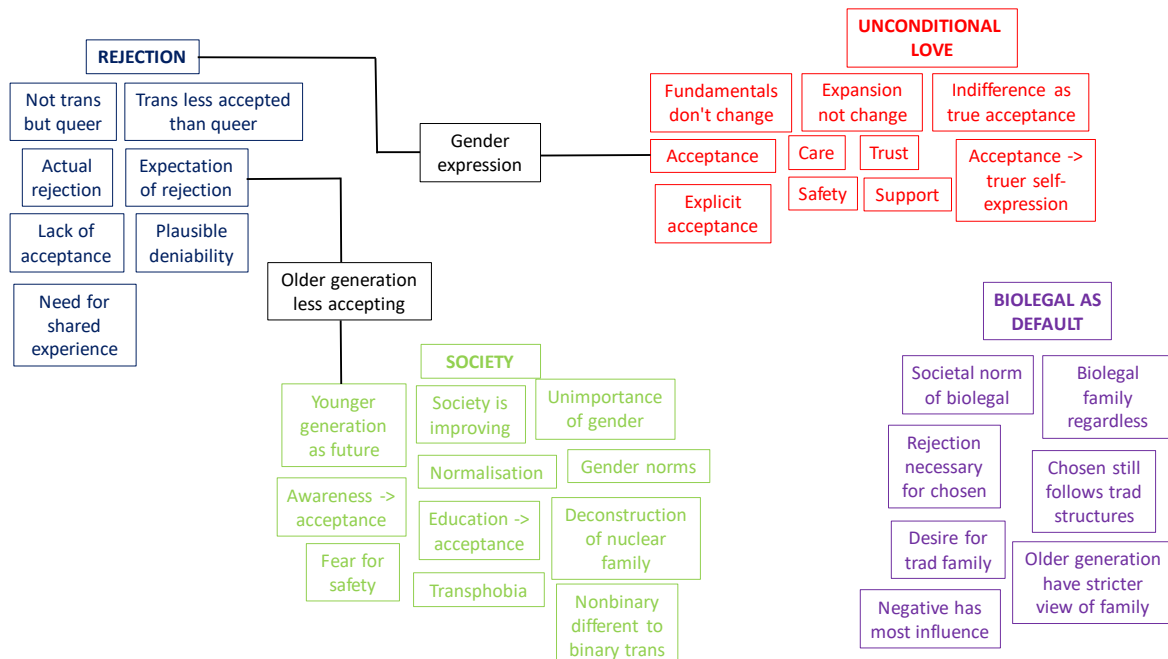
First thematic map (Contact researcher for alt text)

N.B. Line colours are unrelated to theme categories and are solely for differentiation. Lines of the same colour are connecting the same idea.



## Appendix F3.

Second thematic map (Contact researcher for alt text)

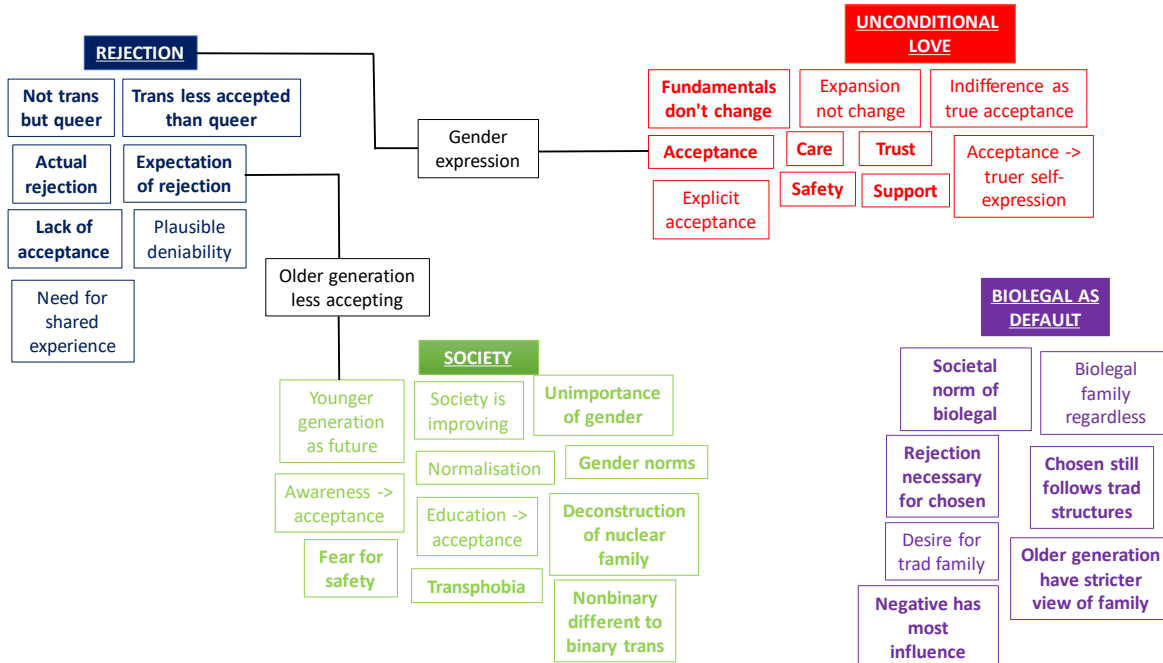




### Appendix F4.

Third thematic map (Contact researcher for alt text)

Text in bold was seen to be the main points of discussion for each topic. Standard text was seen as less integral to the results



### Appendix F5.

Final thematic map (Contact researcher for alt text)

Text in bold were considered the main discussion points for each theme. Standard textboxes were considered relevant but were not able to become full discussion points.

