Gender journeys: arts-based participatory action research with non-binary young adults

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Gender Journeys: Arts-Based Participatory Action Research
with Non-Binary Young Adults

by
Darren Cosgrove

A Dissertation
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Abstract

Increasing attention to the social and health disparities faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people has ushered in much needed attention to issues related to sexuality and gender diversity within social work literature. Among this burgeoning focus has been a particular emphasis on the experiences of transgender people. Such work is particularly relevant to social workers given the heightened rates of harassment and discrimination that transgender people face. Increased scholarly attention presents opportunities for new knowledge to inform social work policy and practice in service to transgender communities. While this expansion in literature addresses several significant needs, it overwhelmingly reflects the experiences of transgender men and women. Nearly absent in social work literature are the voices and perspectives of those whose gender falls outside the dichotomous male/female binary.

This dissertation reports on a participatory action research study that engaged nine non-binary young adults (ages 19-23) in an exploration of the ways in which their identities were supported and stigmatized. Utilizing an arts-based approach to research known as photovoice, study participants acted as co-researchers who documented their lived experiences through photography. Multiple phases of group-based and researcher-led analysis identify several findings that hold relevance for social work practitioners, researchers, and educators interested in promoting gender-affirming services and policies.

Additionally, this research explored the utilization of arts-based participatory action research with transgender and non-binary young people. This dissertation explores methodological considerations, strengths and limitations, and sheds light onto the applicability of photovoice in future research.
Acknowledgements

It is with heartfelt gratitude that I acknowledge the many individuals who have made this work possible and have supported me, not only through the research and writing that has contributed to this dissertation, but through my doctoral studies as a whole. First and foremost, I recognize that this work has only been possible through the willingness of those it engaged and who were willing to collaborate as they shared their personal stories, explored and made meaning of experiences, and participated in efforts to promote an increasingly gender-affirming community. For their generosity, wisdom and presence in these efforts, I offer my deepest thanks to Parker Reid and the members of the “Basement Kids.”

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-DC
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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Who was I now—woman or man? That question could never be answered as long as those were the only choices; it could never be answered if it had to be asked.” – Leslie Feinberg (1993, p. 404)

In 2015, researchers associated with The National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) collected data from transgender people across the country. NCTE reported that of the 27,715 individuals who participated in the study, over one-third identified as non-binary (James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet, & Anafmore, 2016). Despite this high percentage and growing scholarly attention to the experiences of transgender people, there is little focus paid specifically to non-binary people (Matsuno & Budge, 2017).

In the absence of such attention, non-binary people are erased. The richness of their experiences, the diversity of their identities, and the strengths and the needs that they carry become obscured by pervasive and hegemonic assumptions about gender. These assumptions perpetuate the false notion of an exclusively binary gender system, one that renders non-binary people a seeming impossibility. As social workers, those with a professional commitment to human dignity and social justice, we must recognize this erasure as an act of violence. Such erasure is not an isolated incident arising from a new phenomenon of non-binary identity. Quite the contrary, non-binary and binary transgender people have existed throughout history and across cultures (see Feinberg, 1996) and in many cases, violence against transgender people, gender rebels, and queers who defy social expectations, has been a readily used tool of social control and dominance.

It is upon this backdrop that I offer this dissertation. The pages that follow present a participatory action research study conducted with a group of non-binary young adults who gathered to explore, reflect upon, and share their experiences related to moving through the
world as non-binary people. The group paid particular attention to experiences of gender support and gender stigma. In brief, it is the intention of this dissertation to contextualize the gaps in literature, problematize the lack of attention paid to important subgroups of queer and transgender communities, and further an understanding of the lived-experiences of non-binary young adults.

First, the problem is contextualized and a case is made that the research topic is an appropriate target for social work scholarship. Relevant literature, the theoretical orientation adopted herein, and methodological decisions are reviewed. A methodology chapter includes the dissertation’s data collection and analysis processes focusing on the adoption of both arts-based participatory action research and interpretive phenomenological inquiry. The methodological framework is grounded in the findings obtained during an exploratory pilot study I conducted with non-binary young people. Concluding the methodology chapter is a discussion of confirmability and credibility, and ethical considerations.

Next, I present research findings in two distinct sections. The first findings section shares those that were developed collectively between myself, a research assistant, and a participatory action research group made up of non-binary young adults. The second section presents findings developed through my use of interpretive phenomenological analysis. A discussion of these findings is presented in chapter 6 and their relationship to prior literature and theory is noted. Reflections on this study’s findings shed light on their implications for social work practice, education and research. These implications and related recommendations are offered throughout chapter 8.

Throughout this dissertation, the first person is employed. Such practice within qualitative work in general, and critical and feminist inquiry specifically, is rooted in the idea
that writing is itself a political act and that such an approach is necessary to maintain epistemological integrity (Letherby, 2003; Webb, 1992). Transparently placing oneself within the research is a part of the process of reflexivity and recognition of social positionality. Furthermore, to refrain from such a practice perpetuates the myth of detached objectivity, in which science is ‘pure,’ emotionless, and independent of who people are as researchers. Webb (1992) suggests that referencing oneself as an anonymous third person, “…obliterates the social elements of the research process” making it deceptive (intentionally or not).

Statement of the Problem: Non-binary Invisibility in Social Work

As the field of social work develops an increasing focus on the strengths and needs of LGBTQ\(^1\) young people, it is necessary to explore the experiences and identities of non-binary young adults. Although such identities may be held throughout one’s life, they are often first understood and expressed during adolescence and young adulthood (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). For young people identifying as non-binary, gender is experienced as not only different from that which was assigned to them at birth, but outside of the dichotomous male/female binary altogether. Such individuals have been all but absent in current social work literature despite the field’s growing awareness and commitment to improving services to transgender (or trans) people. The engagement and inclusion of non-binary voices within social work research serves as a means to appreciate and value the realities of gender and sexual diversity, and ensures that

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\(^1\) Throughout this dissertation the initialisms LGB, LGBT, and LGBTQ will be used (to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people) depending on the populations being referenced. For a list of key gender and sexuality terms used in this dissertation please see appendix.
social work and related practice models develop in ways that honor and affirm a wide range of LGBTQ and queer identities, experiences and expressions.

Social work’s improved awareness of issues related to sexuality and gender is evidenced by the rising numbers of LGBTQ-related research publications (Erich, Hall, Gonzalez, Kanenberg, & My-Linh Truong, 2015) and the growing number of schools of social work that have course offerings and study programs related to working with LGBTQ populations (Foreman & Quinlan, 2008). Such trends in academia are echoed in social work practice. A simple online search yields numerous results reflecting service practitioners and agencies that report being LGBTQ inclusive or specializing in issues related to sexuality and gender. While greater attention has resulted in growing visibility for many people who are LGBTQ, some transgender and gender non-conforming people continue to experience a sense of invisibility that is tied to an identity countering mainstream social conceptualization of gender and sexuality. Such silencing occurs when researchers, educators, and their associated social work treatment models assume a monolithic approach to discussing LGBTQ related issues. Not only do such approaches fail to address the diversity (e.g. gender, sexuality, race, class, etc.) among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, but also they often conflate sexual orientation and gender identity (Bornstein, 1995; Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007). Through a systematic literature review, it seems that such approaches to research result in a dearth of work specifically addressing unique experiences of transgender people in general and non-binary people specifically.

2 The term “queer” is used throughout this dissertation as a linguistic reclamation of a pejorative epitaph used to identify persons or people who are not heterosexual and/or cisgender (Rand, 2014; Sullivan, 2003). The term is also used in reference to queer theory and the sociopolitical deconstruction of static identity labels (Sullivan, 2003).
Justification of Research

The topic of this dissertation, namely the representation of non-binary young people and their perceived experiences related to identity support, is well-suited and timely for the field of social work. In this section, I draw attention to the need for social work professionals (including those focusing on clinical work, policy, community activism, and social work education) to develop a deeper understanding of the gender diversity of transgender people and to critically examine the ways in which cissexism and binary assumptions are tacitly or explicitly espoused in service delivery and public policy. Such attention can promote increasingly queer-affirming practices that address the significant social and health disparities impacting people of transgender experience. Further, research regarding non-binary identity affirmation holds the potential to assist in the amelioration of the unique challenges reported by non-binary people in the face of social invisibility and erasure.

The emerging yet small body of literature available about non-binary identity development will be used to ground the research presented in this dissertation. Reviewing data from 3,500 surveys and 400 interviews with transgender people holding a wide range of gender identities (including non-binary ones), Rankin and Beemyn (2012), outline eight common identity development milestones. These milestones include:

1. feeling gender different from a young age;
2. seeking to present as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth;
3. repressing or hiding their identity in the face of hostility and/or isolation;
4. initially misidentifying their identity;
5. learning about and meeting other transgender people;
6. changing their outward appearance in order to look more like their self-image;
7. establishing new relationships with family, partners,
friends, and coworkers; and (8) developing a sense of wholeness within a gender normative society (p. 3).

The authors describe key experiences that were also identified by participants in my own pilot research (see page 38 for a description of this research and its findings), and are emphasized by the findings of this dissertation. For the non-binary young people I have worked with as a psychotherapist, community educator, and researcher, the relationship between personally understanding one’s gender identity (similar to milestone 1), and outwardly expressing a non-binary gender (milestone 2 & 6) is complex and influenced by the absence of available non-binary social representations, and for some, little awareness that such identity options exist. As discussed in this dissertation’s findings, such experiences and the challenges they raise was of paramount concern to those who participated in this study. Rankin and Beemyn (2012) reflect on the experience of participants misidentifying their own gender earlier in their life (milestone 4). The authors explain that when participants were younger, they did not fully understand their gender identity. Further they discuss the ways in which the lack of appropriate language to describe their experiences, left many participants confused (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012).

The relationship between identity development (or construction) and the navigation of one’s social worlds, while holding an emerging identity that is inconceivable to many, is well suited for qualitative research. Although not exclusively focused on people who are non-binary, Rankin and Beemyn (2012) have offered work to draw from in this pursuit. Other scholars like Harrison et al. (2012) and Saltzberg and Davis (2010) have helped bring attention to the diverse identities and experiences of non-binary people specifically. This body of work has offered significant contributions to scholarly knowledge, but a robust body of literature representing the lives of non-binary young people does not currently exist. Further, as will be discussed
throughout this dissertation, there is value in creatively exploring these issues with young people in ways that offer opportunities to address social injustice, marginalization, and underrepresentation.

There is a growing body of scholarly work focusing on the biopsychosocial health of transgender people at large. Works focusing on social and health disparities for transgender people (Kenagy, 2005), the absence of safe social environments for transgender youth (Johnson, Singh, & Gonzalez, 2014; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010), the risk of physical violence and suicide (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006), and the role of social work in addressing the needs of the population (Burdge, 2007; Lev, 2013; McPhail, 2004) illuminate the need for a more critical and inclusive approach to social work research and practice. Although this work offers guidance in terms of improving social work practice, the near exclusive focus on binary transgender identities (as opposed to those that are non-binary) is problematic.

In an effort to begin filling such gaps, this research aims to first explore non-binary young adult’s understanding and assigned meaning to their gender identity. Secondly, the study provides researchers, participants, and consumers of the research findings a deeper understanding of social and community-based facilitators and barriers to identity support. Like other YPAR projects that emphasize the importance of integrating positive youth development (PYD) into the research process, this study was designed to engage young people in an evolving study that was adaptive in its ability to look at specific issues or social problems that they themselves identified while participating in the study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In organizing and advocacy work there is frequently the use of what Spivak (1990) has called “strategic essentialism.” This approach utilizes the strength found in unifying groups of diverse people who have unique identities but share related experiences linked to oppression. While techniques that bring groups of people together under a broad umbrella is a powerful way to secure rights for oppressed people, these approaches run the risk of overlooking the unique needs and experiences of individual identity-based groups. For example, the life story and social work-related needs of an upper-class, white, cisgender, gay man may be significantly different than those of a working-class, black, transgender woman. Yet, in my 15 years working in direct service, it is not uncommon for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people to be referenced as a single “LGBTQ” group by professionals and advocates alike.

Similarly, academic research has frequently joined in the conflation of sex, gender, and sexual orientation (Franke, 1995). A systematic literature review currently being conducted by myself and an MSW student examines the actual population representations within social work publications related to transgender people. Such a review makes it evident that among the wide array of articles published with “transgender” as either a keyword or boldly encompassed within a “LGBTQ” title, very few actually represent the specific experiences of transgender individuals. Fewer still are those informed by data from non-binary young people. Matsuno and Budge (2017) critique the lack of non-binary representation within a growing body of trans related literature and advocate for the centering of non-binary identities in future works.
Understanding the Experiences of LGBTQ Young Adults

Considering the dearth of scholarly literature focusing specifically on non-binary people, an examination of broader LGBTQ literature offers a context relevant to situating this dissertation. Doing so also allows me to ground myself in research about others who face sexuality and gender-based marginalization.

A substantial amount of what is known about LGBTQ young people draws from data regarding school-based experiences. Research focusing on LGBTQ young people has drawn attention to the stark realities of discrimination and harassment within school environments and the disproportionate rates of victimization, decreased self-esteem and compromised academic performance. Responding to these realities, the national Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) frequently conducts a nation-wide school climate survey that reports the experiences of LGBTQ students. Years of findings (2001-2016) suggest that the experiences of bullying and harassment continue to be pervasive factors in young queer life today (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016).

While many assume college campuses to be progressive environments in which sexuality and gender can be explored and expressed with resoundingly positive reception, this is not the case for many LGBTQ students. Researchers have documented that, like high school, many LGBTQ people report homophobia, heterosexism, and transphobia on college campuses and throughout academic institutions (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004; Evans & Broido, 2002; Rankin, 2005; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). While sexuality and gender targeted harassment may take many forms in college environments, subtle rejections are most common (Rankin et al., 2010). These seemingly routine examples of marginalization
are frequently referred to as “microaggressions.” Microaggressions can be described as, “the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (Sue, 2010, p. 3, as cited in Woodford et al. 2014).

In addition to a focus on school settings, research has also extensively examined experiences within the family and among peers. The decision to disclose one’s non-heterosexual sexuality to family is a complex and at times a challenging process for many young people. Collecting data from 105 LGB youth, D’Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington (1998) report that adolescents frequently become aware of their sexual orientation around age 10 but do not disclose such identity to parents until around 16. For such youth, deciding to disclose to parents comes with it the often-realized fear of their rejection (D’Augelli et al., 1998) and is associated with depression, substance abuse, and suicidal behaviors (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Unfortunately, in their research D’Augelli et al. (1998) collapsed data from bisexual youth into gay or lesbian participants thereby preventing the opportunity to examine for example, the reactions parents have to disclosure of bisexuality as opposed to that of homosexuality. Collapsing data in this way perpetuates a binary understanding of sexuality in much the same way that exclusive reporting on transgender men and women erases non-binary people; at the same time, discrete gender categories are reinforced.

Peer support and connectedness can play significant roles in the lives of LGBTQ youth and young adults. Building on the momentum of organizations like GLSEN, many schools have developed clubs often known as gay-straight alliances (GSAs) that may range in their specific focus, but typically provide a forum for young people to convene in environments that are
intended to be free of homo- and transphobia. Clubs frequently offer peer support and engagement in community/school change initiatives (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004). For youth who otherwise experience high rates of social isolation, GSAs can play an important part in promoting connectedness and the reduction of many risky behaviors often associated with marginalization, stigma, and school-based harassment as well as increase one’s comfort with one’s sexual identity (Lee, 2002; Mayberry, 2006). The literature also suggests that the presence of peer-connectedness, or a sense of LGBTQ youth community, can be a strong protective factor helping young people develop a positive sense of their sexual and gender identities (Singh, 2013; Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011; Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2014).

Beyond reducing risks, GSAs hold the potential to promote a sense of community and social support as well as to enhance group members’ ability to individually take actions to assert control over their environment and improve their quality of life (Lee, 2002; Mayberry, 2006). This notion of empowerment is an important factor to consider in regards to the overall tenor of LGBTQ youth research. Wagaman (2015) offers a reflection on the tendency for LGBTQ youth research to utilize a risk framework and thus maintain a focus on response to hostile environments. Such approaches, while helpful in understanding the impact of stigma and harassment, focus heavily on adaptation to oppression (through a risk and resiliency framework) rather than examining the ways in which young people can influence and change their environments in positive ways (Wagaman, 2015). Shifting a research focus away from deficit and risk focused inquiry and towards an asset and strength-based perspective is not only warranted for work focused on LGBTQ young people, but is also consistent with PYD frameworks (Baber & Rainer, 2011; Kennedy, 2018; Lerner, 2005; Mirra et al., 2015).
Exploring Transgender-Specific Literature

Like LGB people, many transgender individuals navigate a world of strict sex and gender codes. In fact, some argue that the very foundation upon which heteronormativity, and thus heterosexism and homophobia, rests is that of a gender hierarchy that includes rigid sex roles and gender stereotypes (Pharr, 1997). This is emphasized in the finding that suicidality among LGB adolescents has been linked to parental efforts to discourage gender atypical behaviors (D’Augelli et al., 2005). Given the pervasive social pressures and the stigma attached to sexual and gender diversity, it is not surprising that transgender people, like LGB people, experience heightened rates of discrimination, victimization, and outcome disparities across numerous domains.

In 2011, The National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force conducted what was the largest quantitative study of transgender people to date. Anonymous online and paper survey responses were collected from 6,456 transgender and gender non-conforming people throughout the U.S. In a 2011 report titled Injustice at Every Turn (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, & Keisling, 2011), the pervasive experience of discrimination, high rates of violence, harassment, unemployment, compromised health outcomes, and poor access to appropriate medical and mental health services is delineated. NCTCE conducted a second national survey of 27,715 transgender people in 2015. Publishing these results in 2016 (James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet, & Anafmore, 2016), NCTE found that the previously identified disparities remained across nearly all domains. Five of these domains (harassment and violence; housing, employment and economic disparity; healthcare; mental health; and transition-related services) will be discussed here. Following a description of
findings from key literature in each of these domains, I offer a review of relevant non-binary literature.

**Harassment and violence.** Rejection of socially prescribed gender codes and expectations can have dire consequences when they are reinforced through harassment and violence. Transgender people report a high prevalence rate of gender-based harassment and violence in both regional and national studies (James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet, & Anafmore, 2016; Bradford, Reisner, Honnold, & Xavier, 2013 Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2002; Reback, Simon, Bemis, and Gatson 2001). Much of this same research also suggests that violence is experienced in numerous settings ranging from school and work to family systems. Furthermore, transgender people experience physical violence at the hands of intimate partners at a higher rate than that of the general population (James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet, & Anafmore, 2016), and report heightened rates of sexual assault (James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet, & Anafmore, 2016; Greenberg, 2012; Kenagy, 2005; Lombardi et al., 2002; Stotzer, 2009).

**Housing, employment and economic disparity.** In addition to harassment, employment instability and concerns regarding economic inequality are common findings throughout the literature. The National Transgender Survey found unemployment among transgender people to be three times that of the U.S. average and significantly prevalent among Middle Eastern, American Indian, multiracial, Latino/a, and Black transgender people who must navigate both transphobia and racism (James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet & Anafi, 2016).

Job insecurity can be linked to unstable or nonexistent employment protection for transgender people. At present, 27 states do not have legislation that protects any LGBTQ person from employment discrimination and among the 22 states that do, only 14 specifically protect
transgender people in both the public and private sector (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.). This discrepancy speaks volumes to the ways in which the political gains of gay, lesbian and bisexual people do not always equate to victories for those identifying as transgender.

**Healthcare.** Economic inequality is one of the leading causes of health disparities (Woolf & Braveman, 2011; Phelan, Link, & Tehranifar, 2010), and the World Health Organization (WHO) asserts that health care is a fundamental human right that must be non-discriminatory, accessible, and acceptable (culturally appropriate and sensitive to gender and lifecycle needs) (WHO, 2015). However, the U.S.’s profit and capitalist driven approach to healthcare makes quality healthcare unattainable to many marginalized and oppressed people. This is particularly true for those facing poverty, which transgender people disproportionately experience (James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet & Anafi, 2016).

When medical care is accessible, many transgender people describe hostile environments in which they face continued transphobia and discrimination (Bradford et al., 2013; James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet & Anafi, 2016; Kenagy, 2005). Transgender activist and author Leslie Feinberg articulates this reality stating in hir pivotal book, *Trans Liberation: Beyond pink or blue* (1999):

> This [experience with medical discrimination] is not an individual crisis. Throughout the United States, masculine females and feminine males, cross-dressers, transsexuals and intersexuals are home alone dealing with pain, fevers, the trauma of gang rape and beatings, and other emergencies, hoping the symptoms will go away so they don’t have to reveal themselves to a venomously hostile doctor or nurse” (p.80).

In the face of such challenges, some healthcare centers have implemented specific staff training and patient services programs aimed at meeting the specific healthcare needs of trans people and assisting in reducing service barriers. Examples of such programs found in New York State
include Mount Sinai’s Adolescent Health Center, The Gender Wellness Center of Bassett Health Network, and Callen-Lorde Community Health Center.

**Mental Health.** In *Discrimination at Every Turn*, Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison and Herman (2011) report that 75% of transgender people in their study sought psychotherapy for issues specifically related to their gender identity. Similar to their LGB peers, trans people have reported significant rates of both suicidal ideation and behaviors (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Kenagy, 2005; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016) and James et al. (2016) found that transgender people are nearly nine times more likely than the general population to have attempted suicide.

There has been a strong connection between experiences of depression and suicidality and gender-related dysphoria (i.e. the sense of discomfort and incongruence people may feel within their body and assigned sex) (American Psychological Association, 2013; Spade, 2003; Spade et al., 2009). As such, social workers must be aware of the relationship between gender dysphoria and mental distress while remembering that not all transgender people experience dysphoria. Such distress also has a well-documented correlation with experiences of discrimination, stigma, and harassment (Bockting, Miner, Swinburne Romine, Hamilton, & Coleman, 2013; Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016).

**Transition-related Care.** Many transgender people seek gender-affirming medical services including cross-sex hormonal treatment and gender confirming surgeries. While not all transgender people seek such care, and transition-related goals vary, some degree of medical intervention is desired by many. For those who do desire such services, care may be inaccessible due to a lack of insurance coverage. Furthermore, a shortage of knowledgeable medical providers, as well as antiquated and paternalistic regulations, serve as institutional
hurdles many struggle to clear (Burdge, 2007; Lev, 2013; Spade, 2003; Whitehead, Thomas, Forkner & LaMonica, 2012).

Guidelines governing access vary state by state and the denial of coverage for care is a common experience (James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet & Anafi, 2016). Service-seeking individuals are often required by state regulations and insurance companies to meet with a mental health professional for assessment and diagnosis in order to access medically necessary gender-affirming care. The role that such diagnosis (and the accompanying mandate of assessment from a mental health service provider) has in the attainment of medical care has been a site of debate among professionals, clients, and advocates (De Cuypere et al., 2010; Ehrbar, 2010; Lev, 2004 & 2013).

Such diagnostic systems run the risk of labeling transgender people ‘disordered.’ Such a system results in a concentrated focus on pathologizing and problematizing transgender individuals at the expense of ignoring the oppressive nature of an exclusively dichotomous social construction of gender (Burdge, 2007; Markman, 2011).

**Non-binary representations and experiences.** Facing heightened rates of discrimination emerging in the literature, some scholars suggest that non-binary individuals may be at greater risk for negative mental health outcomes than their binary transgender peers (Budge, Rossman, & Howard, 2014; Losty & O’Connor, 2017). Furman (2017) reports that non-binary people engaged in an arts-based study described compromised mental health resulting from discrimination and yet, some of these participants noted fear of accessing services as they worried their gender would be pathologized.

Despite the number of people identifying as non-binary and the mental health disparities that are beginning to be documented, much of the transgender related academic literature
available focuses on transgender men and women. While a growing awareness of such experiences is beneficial, a singular focus on binary ways of being transgender promotes an incomplete and at times grossly reductionist view of transgender people (Matsuno & Budge, 2017). It is, however, quite likely that non-binary people do in fact engage in research studies. The challenge is that such participants may not have had the opportunity to communicate their non-binary identity and thus were counted among the transgender male and female populations (Richards, Bouman, Seal, Barker, Nieder & T'Sjoen, 2016). Fortunately, this trend is beginning to change in literature from both within and outside the academy.

In January 2017, National Geographic released a special issue titled, Gender Revolution. The issue was filled with poignant and illuminating photographs and narratives told by transgender individuals, their families, and researchers from around the world. Drawing attention to the vast possibilities of gender and the specific experiences of young people, Henig (one of the issue’s contributing authors) states, “…people today—especially young people—are questioning not just the gender they were assigned at birth but also the gender binary itself” (p. 59). Henig continues, reflecting on conversations with a young transgender person named E:

E’s thinking about where they fit on the gender spectrum takes the shape it does because E is a child of the 21st century, when concepts like transgender and gender nonconforming are in the air. But their options are still constrained by being raised in a Western culture, where gender remains, for the vast majority, an either-or (p.69).

Reflections such as this challenge and inspire National Geographic readers to reconsider what they think they know about gender and introduce them to the notion of gender as a social construct. Such a mainstream representation of non-binary identities seems both timely and long overdue.
Struck by the diverse and seemingly creative ways the gender-queer participants in their study described their gender and sexuality, Saltzburg and Davis (2010) sought to inquire further into the experiences of non-binary people. Returning to the community center, from which their original data were gathered, the researchers were invited to attend a gender-queer support group and use the meeting as a focus group. Guided by discursive and narrative practices, the researchers introduced a few broad questions about gender, sexuality, and identity and the participants gave accounts of their identity and experience. Several key themes emerged from Saltzburg and Davis’s (2010) data. For the young adults (ages 18-23), language about identity served as a tool to build connection and situate oneself within a world often denying such opportunities. The participants reported experiences of feeling isolated and alone in their non-binary experience and described the limited awareness that their mental health providers had regarding transgender experiences. For many of the youth, the providers they had worked with viewed being transgender exclusively as identifying as the “opposite” sex or as an alternative way of fitting into the already existent binary.

The importance of language and defining one’s own gender also arose in a phenomenological study conducted by Singh, Meng, and Hansen (2014). Working with 19 transgender participants between the ages of 15-25, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews focused on transgender resiliency. One of the key themes the researchers present is the importance the transgender people in their study (both binary and non-binary) place upon the “ability to self-define and theorize one’s gender” (p. 211). Some of the researchers’ participants describe this self-theorizing process occurring within a counseling relationship. Others suggested it takes place through independent reflexive practice and community activism related to transgender issues. Similarly, the role of language (particularly identity labels and correct
pronouns) in non-binary peoples’ experience of social connectedness and empowerment has been explored in the qualitative work of (Losty & O’Connor, 2017).

From a queer and feminist perspective, the approaches employed by Singh et al. (2014) and Saltzburg and Davis (2010) are more than stylistic or methodological choices fit for answering specific research questions. Such approaches to research situate transgender young people in a way that their narratives can influence the professional literature about them. Rather than expecting participants’ identities and experiences to fit into pre-determined categorical boxes, these studies present the opportunity for participants to set the very terms used to describe and understand them.

Stripped of academic jargon and ponderings many gender-queer or otherwise non-binary young people live queer theory in individual and idiosyncratic ways. For such individuals, the process of self-discovery and identity construction is an act of resistance against social expectations as well as a creative and playful form of self-expression (Harrison et al., 2012; Saltzburg & Davis, 2010). Echoing Butler’s (1999) reflections on gender performativity, the growing body of non-binary research reveals the importance that young people place on being able to locate, understand and create themselves within and through language.

Analysis of Transgender Literature

Like their cisgender queer peers, transgender young people can be a population that is difficult to study. The varying ways that researchers operationalize what it means to be transgender, participants’ degree of openness, and fear of exploitation within the research setting, all create unique challenges. Despite such difficulty, there is a strong and growing body of research that has drawn attention to many of the challenges and risks that both transgender adults and young people face. The findings of such studies contribute to the knowledge needed for
social workers, and others engaged in health and human services, to identify, understand, and address the complex realities of being transgender in a transphobic society. While each of the studies that have been reviewed for this dissertation offer significant contributions to the field, they are not without limitations. Of note are those limitations that appear widespread throughout the literature and that relate to non-binary invisibility through researchers’ operationalization of what it means to be transgender.

Deciding how to operationalize what it means to be transgender inherently sets imperfect inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the language one uses may attract or deter various potential participants. These issues are discussed by Kenagy (2005), who describes measurement limitations associated with a study of 182 transgender people in Philadelphia. In addition to diverse uses of the term “transgender” and various interpretations of its meaning, the demographic data collection tools that Kenagy used seem to oversimplify important identity characteristics for the sake of organization within quantifiable demographic variables. Kenagy’s needs assessments forced people into male-to-female (MTF) or female-to-male (FTM) categories based upon their assigned sex at birth. Through this process, the uniqueness of identity is lost and the possibility of being non-binary is erased.

Kenagy’s 2005 study is not the only one to collapse gender identities in an effort to organize them categorically. In their 2006 article on transgender victimization and suicidality, Clements-Nolle, Marx and Katz engage in such a process as well. During their recruitment phase, the researchers had interest from a wide range of people including those who identified as transgender, bigender, and intersex. Noting that they could not categorize intersex people as FTM or MTF, the authors discussed their decision to exclude such individuals from their study. Unfortunately, their article does not discuss similar considerations for those that expressed an
identity of bi-gender. However, after reviewing a more comprehensive discussion of their recruitment strategies (Clements-Nolle, Marx and Katz, 2001) it appears that all engaged participants were categorized as MTF or FTM.

The work of these authors represents a problematic approach to research in transgender communities. Although their studies boast large samples, strong designs, and offer important findings, they are flawed in their assumptions regarding gender. Whether such assumptions reflect the researchers’ own understandings or beliefs about gender, or are simply representative of methodological limitations, is unclear. What is evident is the trend in social science research to uphold falsely discrete and binary gender categories. While such work advances the visibility of some transgender people, it also perpetuates essentialism and an incomplete transgender narrative; one that is reductionist in its articulation of gender diversity. Similarly, authors like Burdge (2007) and McPhail (2004) have offered a critique of social work and the ways in which many practitioners fall into the same essentialist/binary trap as they aim to advance care, justice, and service for transgender people.

The challenge of oversimplifying transgender identities or forcing such identities to assimilate into binary categories has been avoided in other studies (see Reisner et al., 2015). This is done by asking participants to check a box regarding their gender identity and permitting them to “check all that apply.” Such instrument designs may include an “other” category that prompts an open dialogue box for participants to self-identify. Furthermore, qualitative work, such as that offered by Saltzburg and Davis (2010) and Signh et al. (2014), not only provide rich descriptive and narrative data regarding the topics of interest, but also permit such richness in the expression and articulation of demographic and identity information that is otherwise missed.
Clearly there is value in continuing to build the body of transgender-focused literature. Yet in doing so scholars must be sure to avoid study designs and data collection approaches that further marginalize or erase non-binary identities. Researchers must be committed to processes of self-inquiry and reflection that bring attention to personally held assumptions about gender. Such self-inquiry would benefit from drawing upon queer theory to critically examine the ways in which hegemonic and patriarchal frameworks position individuals as social scientists and inform the tools of scientific inquiry. In drawing upon such theories, there is the opportunity to explore the possibility of research as both a scientific and political process.
Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework

The following chapter presents the conceptual framework used for the research. First, I present a brief summary of the theoretical perspectives that have oriented this work, namely drawing from queer and feminist theory specifically, and critical theory more broadly. Next, I outline and describe key theoretical concepts that are used throughout this dissertation and finally, I conclude with a presentation research questions.

Theoretical Perspectives

Critical feminist and queer theories, situated within postmodern and poststructuralist frameworks, have offered a foundation for a wealth of literature deconstructing dominant notions of sexual and gender identity as essential and fixed categories. As a part of a broader tradition of critical inquiry, feminist and queer theory offer ways to productively examine of the role of language, social power, and politics in shaping sexual and gendered identities. These theoretical approaches offer the opportunity to question available identity options, gain access to new ideas about the complexity of gender, and understand how chosen identity labels and categories influence daily living.

While these theoretical frameworks offer context to the current non-binary and transgender research agenda, broad and abstract notions of post-structural theorization are often criticized for their inaccessibility and intellectual distance from transgender people’s everyday lives and realities (Hines, 2006; Namaste, 2000). Nonetheless, I will continue to explore feminist and queer theories’ utility as it seems that perhaps the way academics describe theory is more of the culprit for disconnect than are the theoretical concepts themselves. The relationship between theory and lived experience is discussed below, in a review of methodological literatures.
Within the following pages I draw attention to nuanced theoretical considerations and debates regarding the ontology and taxonomy of gender and their potential impact on transgender and non-binary people. Although neither queer nor feminist theory reach consensus regarding the ontology of gender, each focus on the fundamental experience of gender, as a social concept or political system, in relation to the impact it has on those who inhabit various gendered spaces and roles. Given the tendency towards agreement across schools of feminist and queer thought regarding the presence of misogyny, or the ways in which patriarchy operates as a social, cultural, economic, and political juggernaut, little time in this dissertation will be spent on such topics. Rather, I will use this time to examine particular elements of theory that frame the relevance of social work research with non-binary young people.

**Queering theory.** The term queer carries multiple meanings and is a point of contention between those who embrace the term and others who find it offensive. Queer is often used as a catchall term to represent LGBTQ people. However, given the derogatory history of the term, many people find the catchall use of the word offensive. For others, using the term queer is a way to claim a sexual or gender identity that is outside normative expectations of cisgender heterosexuality. This personal adoption of identity language also rejects and challenges essentialist and reductionist efforts to label and organize identity and experience into fixed and dichotomous categories. For many, queer is both a sexual or gender identity as well as a political one.

Queer theory utilizes elements of feminist and post-structural theory in its analysis of issues dealing with gender and sexuality. Rooted in the tradition of critical theory, queer theorists examine power, dominance, and the ways in which they are reinforced through the norming of particular identities and narratives (Duggan, 1992). Queer theorists are largely concerned with
destabilizing myths of fixed identities that reify oppressive social attitudes. For example, queer theorists and writers have been critical about the mainstreaming of particular gay rights initiatives like marriage equality. For many queer theorists, marriage rights are a misdirected focus that maintains an oppressive social institution while rewarding queers who assimilate (e.g., get married) with benefits while withholding such benefits, or punishing, those that do not (Conrad, 2014; Sycamore, 2008).

French postmodernism is an important framework in which to situate queer theory. Foucault’s discourse analysis (1978) emphasizes the ways in which certain gender or sexual identities are constructed as normal while others are conceptualized as maladaptive or deviant. Judith Butler (1999), whose work reflects this ideology, argues that the gender binary is reinforced by (and in effect reinforces) heteronormativity, or the belief that heterosexuality is the only normal form of sexual orientation. Specifically, heterosexuality assumes a linear connection between sex, gender, and desire. Queer theory disrupts these constructs by recognizing the diversity in bodied sexes, expressed genders, and the expansive fluidity of attraction.

For many, “queer” becomes not only an umbrella term for gender, sexual identity, or a course of study, but an engaged political process of “queering,” or playing with and upsetting otherwise unexamined assumptions and social attitudes. Through such acts of queering, non-binary young people explore, express, and assign meaning to gender identities that are, by their very nature, acts that reject essentialist and normative expectations. As such, my inquiry into their lived experiences seems best grounded in theories that are not only concerned with the politics of identity but also demand critical examination into the ways in which discrete and stagnant categories of gender and sexuality are constructed.
**Conceptualizations of gender.** Historically, theoretical literature oscillates between the conflation of sex and gender and debates surrounding the genesis of these concepts. Haslanger (2012) states, “Within these debates, not only is it unclear what gender is and how we should go about understanding it, but whether it is anything at all” (p.95). Haslanger (2012) illustrates the wide range of gender conceptualizations from essentialist (i.e., viewing gender as innate, immutable, and pre-social) to socially constructed and performative when stating:

Some theorists use the term ‘gender’ to refer to the subjective experience of sexed embodiment, or a broad psychological orientation to the world (“gender identity”); others to a set of attributes or ideals that function as norms for males and females (“masculinity” and “femininity”); others to a system of sexual symbolism; and still others to the traditional social roles of men and women. (p. 100).

While these views represent fundamental differences in theory and have direct practice and policy implications for transgender people, most queer and feminist theorists agree that gender is reified within a social and political hierarchy that privileges some and marginalizes others.

Broadly speaking, social constructionism posits that although identities related to race, gender and class may be culturally relevant, they are not innate or biological truths. Rather, such identities exist as the result of social and institutional processes that construct and maintain notions of difference and inequality (Ore, 2010). The development of such dichotomous categories (e.g. man/woman, black/white, gay/straight, etc.) result from a three phase process described by Berger and Luckmann (1967). This process involves externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Externalization is the creation of values, social beliefs and cultural artifacts that while created by individuals are perceived to be external to them (Ore, 2010). In the case of gender, Lorber (2010) argues that upon birth an infant is placed into either a male or female category and subsequently treated in accordance with the social values and expectations regarding such categorical assignment.
In the second stage of Berger and Luckmann’s model, objectivation occurs. This stage occurs when socially constructed categories (and their differences) are assumed to be objective realities that are essentialist truths about those belonging to a group or category. The third and final stage, internalization, involves conditioning and reinforcement of one’s status as an insider or outsider to a particular group through socialization. Socialization rewards congruence with categorical expectations and punishes transgressions. Consequently, identity and meaning of identity is internalized and reproduced.

Expanding upon the social constructionist work of Foucault, feminist scholars like King, (2004) have discussed the ways in which gender specifically is constructed and used to maintain power and domination. Feminist theory calls for attention to be paid to the ways in which gender is reified within social institutions. From this perspective, Risman (2004) reflects upon the work of feminist theorist Judith Lorber stating that, “Lorber (1994) argued that gender is an institution that is embedded in all the social processes of everyday life and social organizations. She further argued that gender difference is primarily a means to justify sexual stratification” (p. 430). In the organizations in which social workers operate, such as clinics, social services agencies, and schools, gender is always being socially produced moment to moment. Therefore, the work of unraveling gender binarism falls on social workers and others through micro, mezzo, and macro informal and formal interventions.

Numerous feminist and queer scholars who have adopted a constructionist perspective have rejected the idea of gender essentialism. Nonetheless, some retain essentialist notions while actively denouncing the idea of inherent gendered qualities or characteristics. This is exemplified by some cisgender feminists who claim that transgender women are not in fact women (see Jeffreys, [2014] and Raymond, [1994] for examples of these arguments). Critical race feminists
and “womynists” have argued that traditional schools of feminism have portrayed an unrealistic, shared, or generalized female experience based largely on the perspectives of white women. In doing so, political aims have largely focused on needs, goals, or critiques largely devoid of the voices and experiences of black women (hooks, 2014; hooks, 2000). Such approaches to feminism have been criticized as promoting ignorance (and thus reinforcement) of classism and racism (Butler, 1999; Crenshaw, 1995; Williams, 2000).

In the 1988 book Inessential Woman, Spelman discusses the ways in which “traditional feminism” (or first and second wave feminism) has worked to undermine certain forms of domination while perpetuating others. Although earlier feminist efforts resulted in numerous political victories related to employment and domestic violence, Spelman asserts that within such feminist theory, middle-class white women are falsely assumed to represent all women, a phenomenon that some have referred to as “hegemonic feminism” (Sandoval, 1991). Haslanger (2012) states, “If we consider all females—females of different times, places, and cultures—there are reasons to doubt that there is anything beyond body type (if even that) that they all share” (p.100). Similarly, Butler (1999) considers gender as a social construct by examining it in relation to race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. Butler asserts that it is impossible to separate gender from the “political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained (p.6)”.

Sandra Bem (1981) was a feminist scholar who contributed to ideas about gender being developed within a social context. A background in cognitive psychology informs her idea that gendered social expectations are learned through observation, modeling, and the internalization of gender schemas, or collections of concepts regarding what it means to be of a particular
gender. These schemas are reinforced as we move through life and observe and integrate social messages that are schema congruent while ignoring or rejecting those that are not (Bem, 1981).

Any discussion of gender as a social construct, particularly one as brief as that offered here, is incomplete without the specific mention of the contributions of Judith Butler. Her groundbreaking and often cited 1999 book, Gender Trouble, begins with a critical inquiry into the idea of feminism’s dependence upon a universal notion of “woman” or being “female” as inherently problematic. Asserting that such notions promote the same regulatory generalization that feminism seeks to abolish, Butler (1999) posits that there is no innate being of a particular gender that is independent of the socio-cultural forces that produce it. She argues that gender is unique across cultures and time and thus, with consideration to race, class and sexuality, setting boundaries to define what is and what is not contained within the concept of “woman” is an exercise in futility.

Concerned with the ways in which such identity politics (particularly feminist efforts to establish a stable concept of “woman”) sabotage their very aims, Butler states, “[t]hese domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regulatory consequences of that construction [that of gender], even when the construction has been elaborated for emancipatory purposes (p.7).” It seems that this may be the experience for gender-queer young people whose understanding of self has not been reflected within much of the LGBTQ rights or feminist discourse despite such works’ efforts towards liberatory ends.

Building upon her critique of the myth of a stable and fixed experience of gender, Butler presents the contribution to feminist and queer theory that she is most known for, that of gender performativity. Foucault’s The History of Sexuality largely informs Butler’s notions of performativity. In this work, Foucault describes sex and sexuality as a discursive phenomenon,
arguing that the idea of an inherent sexuality is a relatively new social concept. Challenging the belief in the “truth of sex,” Foucault builds his argument through historical analysis and proposes that sex needs to be understood as a construct that is directly related to, and in service of, social power and domination.

Butler’s position, like Foucault’s, is that there is no ontological status of gender or sexuality separate from the social and cultural forces that suggest its existence. She explains that gender involves a series of social interactions, reinforcements and internalizations and that “such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (p.173).” She explains performativity as the reciprocal process of interpreting, internalizing, and responding to social messages that then produces an “illusionary core.” Such a core suggests our expression of a gendered or sexual self is an independent and internal “truth.” This process is then repeated and reinforced through the ongoing experience of having one’s expression(s) read or interpreted by others. Upon gender interpretation, there is an elicitation of reaction (conscious or subconscious) informed by the interpreters’ own experiences and paradigms. Such reactions then prompt the subject’s internalization of such responses and the messages they carry. In the end, the socially guided continuation of some presentations and the discontinuation of others produce what one understands to be a concrete and fixed self as a particular gender.

In later works, Butler urges for a distinction between gender as a performance and gender as performative. Performance, she asserts, carries with it a notion of freedom and choice and can be seen as moment-to-moment representations of gender adherence or divergence. In contrast, performativity is a repeated process of reinforcement and engagement of culturally formed
conceptualizations of gender that result in the production of a sense of being of a particular
gender or genders (Butler, 2011). Butler (2009) explains that, “To say that gender is
performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment; the ‘appearance’ of gender is often
mistaken as a sign of its internal or inherent truth; gender is prompted by obligatory norms to be
one gender or the other (usually within a strictly binary frame), and the reproduction of gender is
thus always a negotiation with power (p.1).” Throughout much of her work Butler argues that in
this way gender constancy and conformity is enforced through formal means such as psychiatry,
medicine, and language as well as informal means such as parental feedback and bullying.

In my own preliminary research with gender-queer young people, Butler’s notions of
performativity arose as participants discussed processes of construction, expression, and
assimilation. Such processes were explored in relation to negotiating power dynamics with peers,
family, and service providers. These ideas emerged both as participants navigated what it meant
to be gender-queer (particularly when they had little to no non-binary social representations to
engage with), and when they experienced the internal and external regulation of binary
expectations and demands. Further inquiry presents the opportunity to better understand these
processes and the role that social work may play in terms of their reinforcement and
deconstruction.

**Research Questions**

Drawing upon notions of identity construction and the expression of a gendered self
within one’s social environments, queer and feminist theory presents a coherent and powerful
foundation for work with non-binary young people. Upon such a foundation is the opportunity to
build a greater understanding of both the experiences of non-binary young people and inquire
into the meaning assigned to such experiences. My first research question (RQ1) asks *how do non-binary young adults come to identify their gender?*

Inquiry into the experiences of non-binary young adults and provide the opportunity for social work practitioners and scholars to develop a greater understanding of gender diversity. Such improved awareness is central to reducing cisgenderism and binary assumptions, and to improving the field’s capacity to better serve transgender people in both the direct practice we engage in and the policies we inform. Additional questions related to this inquiry include (RQ2) *what are the perceived facilitators and barriers young people experience regarding identity support and affirmation?* And, (RQ3) *what are the implications of these facilitators and barriers for social workers wishing to promote transgender-affirming services?*

Lastly, this study presents the opportunity to explore the role that peer engagement and critical arts-based research can play in relation to the broader questions related to identity, stigma, and support. Thus, this study seeks to answer a fourth, and final research question (RQ4), *in what ways can arts-based PAR support the identification of social problems faced by transgender and non-binary young people?*
Chapter 4: Methodology

For researchers grounded in feminist and queer theory, there must be critical examination of ethical issues regarding who and what we study, as well as how we study. Given the limited representation of non-binary people within our emerging knowledge of transgender identities, the experiences of young adults who hold such identities are central to building a queerer body of social work literature. Further, engaging in intentional research processes that de-center the distribution of power within knowledge production can be useful in elevating unheard and marginalized voices.

Participatory Action Research

Empowerment and participatory action research (PAR) methodologies are proposed given transgender youth’s experiences of marginalization (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006). Such approaches have been suggested and used in research with transgender individuals and others who are members of a sexual minority group (Wagaman, 2015; Hill, 2007; Wernick, Woodford, & Kulick, 2014). Participant engaged research, and participatory action research specifically, have a long history of use within feminist scientific inquiry. This relationship is echoed by Mann and Huffman (2005), who discuss the role that knowledge generation (in this case research) has in relationship to social change and action. They state, “…within movements for emancipation, resistance can take the form of counter discourses that produce new knowledges, speak new truths, and constitute new powers.” (p.56).

Participatory action research (PAR) draws from various theoretical frameworks including critical theory and its prioritization of engaged social transformation as the foundation of its methodology (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). PAR shifts academic and scientific inquiry away from a tradition of social observation for the sake of knowledge generation and towards the use
of research for critique and transformation. PAR has been well suited for research utilizing feminist and queer theory in that it supports the building of knowledge related to experiences of oppression and marginalization while also exploring opportunities to construct new solutions and social realities.

In particular, PAR offers an opportunity for a blend of knowledge production and social action not only through the direction that its critical lens looks, but through the very means in which such research is conducted. Creswell (2012) suggests that many qualitative approaches have the capacity for research to be a tool of empowerment for participants as they share their stories within an environment that minimizes the usual power relationship between researchers and participants. PAR takes this notion a step further and utilizes processes that engage research participants as co-researchers; it aims to build knowledge through action, and strives to conduct research to create change within the communities.

Drawing from the transformative work of Paulo Freire (1970, 2014), PAR approaches scientific inquiry from the position that local perspectives and understandings of problems are dismissed as social science frequently seeks to justify the interests of the powerful (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000). This is congruent with feminist critiques that claim traditional paradigms of inquiry have largely reflected the perspectives, ideas and values of patriarchal scholars and institutions (Devault, 1999). When research occurs in a manner that does not prioritize the ideas and expertise of stakeholders, the resultant knowledge can perpetuate domination and oppression of already marginalized populations (Lawson, 2015).

As a research methodology PAR is dedicated to the extensive inquiry into an issue or problem and the generation of knowledge about it. Yet the course of study and production of such knowledge differs from other more positivist research traditions. PAR boldly adopts the
stance that people who are not formally trained as researchers have valuable ideas and skills to offer throughout the research process, and that such processes can disrupt the power imbalance held by “experts” (Pyles & Svistova, 2015; Pyles, 2015). Participatory action researchers believe that those most impacted by a social problem are essential in the acquisition and sharing of knowledge about it (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2015). Within a PAR project, participants frequently act as leaders in developing the research agenda, defining key questions, collecting and analyzing data, and using both the research process and findings to affect change within their social circumstances (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006; Lawson, 2015; McTaggart, 1997).

**Photovoice.** PAR studies may take many forms and utilize various methodological approaches to data collection and analysis. One approach is photovoice. Combining photography and Freire’s use of critical dialogue, photovoice enables participants to enter their communities as researchers, equipped with cameras to document their experiences, reflections, and the realities of their daily life. Initially developed by Wang and Burris (1997), photovoice was first utilized to engage rural Chinese women in telling their stories, and using their experiences to inform the development of policies impacting their lives. Using photographic imagery to capture and reflect the lived realities of those experiencing a community issue or phenomenon, photovoice has addressed several social and health issues including youth wellness (Bozlak & Kelley, 2010), health of older adults in rural communities (Yankeelov, Faul, D’Ambrosio, Collins, & Gordon, 2015), adolescent parenthood and health (Stevens, 2006), homelessness (Bukowski & Buetow, 2011; Dixon & Hadjialexiou, 2005; Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000), and a range of experiences related to living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Kubicek, Beyer, Weiss, & Kipke, 2012; Markus, 2012; Rhodes, Hergenrather, Wilkin, & Jolly, 2008; Teti, Pichon, Kabel, Farnan, & Binson, 2013).
According to Wang (1999), photovoice is based upon the following five key concepts: images can teach; images can inform policy; community members should be involved in the creation, and defining or explaining of the images used to shape policy; influential community members should be engaged as an audience witnessing participants’ experiences; and photovoice can emphasize both individual and community action. To put these concepts into action, a researcher must first obtain participant consent and explore themes for photographic inquiry as a group. After participants have had a chance to reflect on the topic and engage in photographic data collection, they are invited back to the group setting to share their experience and analyze their data. Finally, as described throughout the photovoice literature, the project concludes with a sharing of art and findings with community leaders and stakeholders. Figure 1 provides an overview of the photovoice process, adapted from Wang (1999).

**Figure 1.** Photovoice process. This figure outlines the steps used in this research.

Reviewing the literature, there are a few examples where photovoice methodology has been used specifically with transgender participants. Among these studies, the Montana Department of Health and Human Services reported their findings from a photovoice project exploring the lives and HIV/health related needs of transgender people in the state (Sondag & von Gohren, 2014). Rhodes et al., (2015) engaged photovoice as a way to explore the lives and
priorities of Latina transgender women and in their dissertation research, Hill (2016) conducted a photovoice study to understand the ways in which members of a local transgender community were communicating about their health needs.

The successful prior use of photovoice with transgender participants suggests that my proposed study fits as part of an emerging scholarly foundation that can be used to both increase awareness, as well as promote empowering research methodologies. The work described in this dissertation is intended to complement that of other transgender focused photovoice researchers while also filling the current gap, as there is no photovoice project (known to me) that looks exclusively at the experiences of non-binary young people.

**Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

Drawing from rich phenomenological traditions, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a methodological approach advanced by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). IPA systematically reviews qualitative data bringing attention to both the lived experiences of participants and the meaning (or interpretation) they make of these experiences. With an interest in not only what participant co-researchers experience but also, how their perception of such experiences shape their feelings of identity support and stigma, IPA is a methodological approach that complements this study’s PAR and arts-based approach.

The use of IPA is also beneficial due to the group members’ limited time and availability. Group members’ engagement in the photovoice portion of the research provided the basis for the study’s findings however, the group was not available for ongoing analysis of all the additional data collected (group-based activity sheets, transcripts of meetings, etc.) and so, engaging in an IPA of this remaining data, and keeping such an analysis grounded in the group’s collective
findings, presented the opportunity for myself and the study’s research assistant to add a nuanced richness to the themes emerging from the photovoice analysis.

**Study Overview**

This research was designed to engage non-binary young people in critical inquiry about their lived experiences surrounding their gender identity. Further, as a PAR study, participant co-researchers engaged in dialogue about the facilitators of and barriers to identity affirmation as they navigate their social worlds. Participating young people had the opportunity to co-design specific guiding questions (referred to as “inquiry prompts”) that directed their collection and analysis of arts-based data. In doing so, they identified ways to address their previously identified barriers and promote the facilitators of support that they found most beneficial.

This study engaged nine non-binary young adults ages 18-24. Participants were positioned as co-researchers and engaged in arts-based data collection and analysis through the use of photovoice. Participant co-researchers met with Parker, a research assistant, and myself over the course of seven group sessions. The sessions were designed to move from developing group norms and fostering rapport, to identifying specific questions of inquiry, collecting and analyzing photographic data, and finally, sharing findings with the public and community leaders.

Although participants joined the study with already developed over-arching research questions guiding the focus of their inquiry, early group sessions were devoted to “education for critical consciousness” (Freire 1970, 2014). These meetings involved discussions aimed at developing specific and focused questions. These more specific questions served as “inquiry prompts” and were the inspiration for participant-researchers’ photographs. During the following group sessions, participant co-researchers reviewed and selected key photographs that they felt
best represent their response or reaction to the inquiry prompts. Photographs were then individually and collectively analyzed using Wang’s (Wang, 1999) suggested SHOWeD method (described below). Participant-researchers used their analysis of the photographs to develop descriptive captions for each image. These captions accompanied the photographs as they were mounted and prepared for public presentation.

Group-based activities concluded with the participant-researchers sharing their art and discussing its meaning at a community-based arts and education exhibit presented to community stakeholders. These invited exhibit attendees were selected by the entire team of researchers. Publicly sharing photographs selected by the participant-researchers and discussing the ideas and experiences that they reflect is a common practice of photovoice projects. Such engagement can reduce barriers of age-based segregation in civic engagement that result in young people experiencing limited social power or access to adult decision makers (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). By concluding a photovoice study in this manner, the learning and construction of knowledge that occurred within the group setting is shared externally. Sharing of this knowledge with community stakeholders is intended to promote further collaboration and aims to engage the use of participant voices in shaping policy.

Parker, the research assistant I hired, is a non-binary 22-year-old who participated in my pilot study. We have presented our findings at workshops and they expressed an interest in participatory action research and this project in particular. Further, they recently decided they wished to pursue a career in social work and have since been admitted into the University at Albany’s social work undergraduate program. As discussed further in the researcher positionality section of this dissertation, Parker offered a rich and insightful perspective during both the data collection and analysis phases. Parker’s ongoing engagement provided them the chance to
conduct academic presentations and professional trainings, thus gaining access to opportunities that are supportive of their career goals but that might not otherwise be offered to them. The process of Parker moving from being a research participant, to becoming a presenter of the findings of our study, to working as a research assistant and co-author of future publications, is an asset to the production of emic knowledge, as well as an expression of PAR’s commitment to community leadership and empowerment.

**Pilot Study.** A full understanding of this dissertation research is best understood within the context of it as an outcome of a series of prior research efforts. In addition to the specific methodologies I have used, it is the relationship between my pilot project and this study that help frame such work as participatory action research. Figure 2 provides a visual overview of the relationship between the pilot project and my current research.

**Figure 2.** Role of pilot research. This figure presents an outline of my pilot research and its relationship to the study presented in this dissertation.
**Pilot Study Phase I.** Working as a clinician and having over a decade of experience working with LGBTQ youth, the complexity and diversity of queer sexualities and genders were not unfamiliar territory as I entered the doctoral program at the University at Albany’s School of Social Welfare. Similarly, both my personal and professional relationships with non-binary people prompted concern with what I perceived to be little discussion and recognition of non-binary identities within the field of social work despite the profession’s increasing articulation of a commitment to serving transgender people.

Informed by the stories of my colleagues, clients, and friends, in 2015 I proposed a pilot study focusing on gathering exploratory qualitative data from non-binary young people (ages 14-21) regarding their gender identities. After obtaining approval from my university’s IRB, I circulated recruitment flyers and emails among a statewide network of LGBTQ health and human services providers. These materials were distributed on several listservs and social media sites utilized by queer youth and their adult service providers. Requirements for participation included that youth be: (a) 14-18 years old (if under 18 both participant assent and parental consent were required), (b) have a gender identity that was non-binary, and (c) live in New York State. Interested youth were invited to contact me at which time they were provided a packet that contained information about the study as well as consent and assent forms. I was initially in contact with four interested participants. Due to scheduling conflicts and lost communication, two of these four young people participated in semi-structured interviews.

At the conclusion of each interview, I spent time engaged in reflexive journaling. Doing so allowed me to document unspoken exchanges, observed body language and my own emotional and cognitive observations (Creswell, 2012; Glesne, 2014). Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and then went through a multi-cycle coding process in Atlas.ti. Through
such analysis, three significant themes emerged from the interviews: the pervasive nature of the gender binary, gender as communicated through performative acts, and the experience of non-binary invisibility. These findings will be discussed briefly to contextualize my dissertation research. In this discussion the pseudonyms Alana and Conrad will be used to represent the two participants from phase 1 of the study.

The pervasive gender binary. Both Alana and Conrad discussed the ways in which they navigated their external worlds (school, social groups, family, etc.) and such worlds’ general understanding of gender to be binary and dichotomous. They discussed the ever-present sociocultural paradigm that viewed gender exclusively as either male or female and the impact that such a consistent and inescapable social norm had on their own internal emotional landscape and identity development. Limited access to language and a community that supported the exploration of and identification with a non-binary gender seemed to be reinforced by the pervasive nature of the gender binary. Such limitations related to access and social representations were suggested to be barriers in being able to come to terms with and understand one’s self as non-binary. Simply put, with limited social representation or access to language with which to understand one’s self, a sense of isolation and an inability to fully articulate one’s sense of self was a shared experience among those I interviewed.

The emergence of this particular theme and the specific experiences of Alana and Conrad are similar to those reported by Losty and O’Connor, (2017), who also utilized qualitative interviews to study the experiences of non-binary young adults. Losty and O’Connor describe how their participants, with limited awareness of non-binary gender options, did not come to fully understand their gender (or its queerness as a viable gender option) until they accessed LGBTQ peers. This was also the case for Conrad and Alana who described the identity clarity,
confirmation, and validation experienced when they connected with other LGBTQ and non-binary young people both online and in person. In fact, for Alana, gender was perceived as forced by external social pressures, and was felt to be unclear or “foggy” until they encountered non-binary people on a popular social media site.

For both participants, binary paradigms were present across diverse social communities. They each reported that such exclusionary understandings and assumptions about gender existed among the straight and cisgender peer and social groups they interacted with as well as among those that were LGB and transgender. The interviewees highlighted the importance of several current general LGBTQ and transgender-specific political efforts but also commented on how they often reinforced the ideas that one’s gender had to be either male or female. This came up as one participant brought up the need for advocacy regarding transgender people having access to bathrooms that correspond with their gender. While this was viewed as an important effort, a need to expand this work to include gender-queer people (who might be better served by a non-gendered or gender inclusive restroom) was expressed.

**Gender as Performative.** Experiences related to the pervasive presence of the gender-binary also came up when participants discussed the pressure they felt to express the queerness of their gender in how they performed it externally through clothing and other social cues of identity. One participant (who was assigned female at birth) shared about how not having desired any level of medical transitioning, they could often be misread as a woman. They discussed how they felt that people try to “read” others based on their clothing, the way their bodies look, and the way they communicate their gender and then use information to place people in either a “male or female box.” The other participant (who had accessed medical transition-related services) explained how the binary did not fit them but that when they started transitioning and presenting
in more masculine ways, they felt torn between being gender-queer and being seen in the world as a cisgender man. They reflected on how, given that they live in a world that understood gender in a binary way, they felt themselves at times thinking about and conceptualizing their own gender as male based on their masculine gender presentation. They shared that over time this shifted and they felt more comfortable existing in multiple and more nuanced ways.

*Gender-Queer Invisibility and Identity as an Act of Resistance.* Both participants shared about how they felt that people’s binary assumptions created pressure to communicate their gender in ambiguous or “queered” ways. Failure to do so resulted in them being misgendered as either male or female. They shared how this occurred in their interactions with both cisgender and transgender people and how such experiences led to their identity becoming invisible. Creating visibility and the very articulation of their authentic selves became an act of resistance against a gender paradigm that had excluded them.

While the previous three themes were found to be the most common between both participants, the interviews created space to discuss other ways in which non-binary identities were supported and the ways that they were not. These data suggested opportunities for further exploration of issues holding significant relevance to social workers engaged in all levels of practice. Furthermore, both participants discussed the benefits to exploring and discussing identity with other non-binary people. This was attributed in part to the sense of connectedness often experienced in exchanges between those with shared experiences, and due to the aforementioned issues of invisibility, isolation, and limited access to non-binary social representation. With this in mind, in 2016 a modification to my original IRB proposal was submitted and I was granted permission to continue recruitment and data collection through the use of an abbreviated photovoice project.
**Pilot Study Phase II.** For this next phase of study, one returning participant and one new participant (age 21) joined me in a two-session photovoice study. During our first session together, participants were invited to engage in a group interview focused on their own articulation of what it meant to be non-binary, and on further exploration of the themes that emerged from my previous interviews. Each participant spent time talking with their peer participant and I about experiences related to identity stigma and support. As a group, questions of inquiry (and photographic documentation) were identified: *What is it like to be non-binary? How is my gender and identity supported? How is my gender identity not supported? What does the world need to know about being non-binary? And finally, what assumptions are made about being non-binary?*

During the group session, participants had the chance to learn about photovoice methodology and were invited to engage in an activity to assist in focusing ideas of how they might wish to document their experiences through photographs. As the session came to an end, each participant was provided a disposable camera. Photography ethics and restrictions (e.g. participants were not permitted to photograph other people) were reviewed.

After one week of taking pictures, I collected cameras and developed the film. Pictures were provided to each participant electronically prior to our second meeting and in printed form at the meeting. Due to many of the participants’ photographs being over or under exposed, they each chose to create supplemental artwork to help express their ideas. Each participant reviewed these documents individually and selected one photograph or piece of art that best represented their response to each prompt. After sharing about the photographs, they engaged in Wang’s (1999) SHOWeD analysis (outlined on page 50). Following a review of each photograph, the group discussed what they perceived to be significant themes. Image 1 is a sample of participant
photographs and the notes taken during our analysis focused discussion. Participants agreed that the most salient issues were related to the assumptions that to be transgender means one must identify as male or female, and that to be non-binary suggested either gender confusion or a simple “stepping stone” towards an identification as a transgender man or woman.

![Image](image.png)

*Image 1.* Sample content from Photovoice meeting. This image is an example of notes taken as participants analyzed their artwork.

Following this analysis, the participants shared what they thought we should do with such findings. Both participants felt that their artwork and our study’s findings should be shared at transgender-focused conferences and at educational events attended by service providers. Participants were provided an optional waiver that gave permission for them to be identified as study participants for the purposes of community action and education. Both participants opted to sign the release.
The findings that have emerged from both phases of my pilot study, and the continued relationship I have with the data through educational action have served as the building blocks for the dissertation research presented here. The larger research project discussed throughout the remainder of this dissertation, provided the opportunity for other non-binary participants to further explore these previously identified themes, contribute their own perspectives, and, through the use of a longer process, be positioned as co-researchers and community change agents.

In addition to building a foundation for my dissertation’s conceptual framework, my pilot study provided me the opportunity to experience and understand some of the institutional challenges related to action research and research with minors. Although IRB approval was given for the aforementioned study, I was required to change recruitment strategies as I moved into my photovoice phase of data collection. Upon review of my request to expand data collection and recruitment, I was no longer permitted to recruit minors through social media or flyers posted within the community; such permission was previously granted under the expectation that upon being contacted by a minor, I would immediately send them parental consent paperwork. Under the new guidelines, I was not able to have any contact with a minor, including the posting of recruitment flyers, until parental consent was established. Naturally, this posed a number of barriers to the recruitment of transgender youth who often have tenuous relationships with family regarding their gender. Such barriers, their perceived impact on participation rate, and the risks that parental consent of this nature can present to young people who may not be out to their parents (Mustanski, 2011), resulted in my decision to focus my dissertation on those eighteen and older.
Study Design

Photovoice methodology is the primary source of data collection and the process for data analysis of this study. Conducting data analysis as part of a group process ensures the emic knowledge of the participant-researchers is prioritized (Wang & Pies, 2004). This focus is central to my approach because it offers the opportunity to access perspectives and knowledge not typically accessible to outside researchers (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). PAR, as an action-oriented approach, challenges positivism as it encourages community engagement in all phases of the project.

A large portion of this dissertation emphasizes the photovoice work done through group-based data collection and analysis. Building upon this work, I conducted additional data analysis with Parker’s support. Once group meetings concluded, we reviewed participant co-researchers’ photographs, captions, worksheets and the transcribed audio recordings from group meetings. All data were imported into Atlas.ti for coding and identification of themes and this second level analysis was grounded within the themes that emerged from the group’s collective analysis process.

The following sections describe recruitment methods, an outline of the photovoice group sessions (including a description of photographic data collection and analysis), and conclude with an overview of the analysis of data that occurred after our group sessions ended.

Sampling. Given the challenges experienced in my pilot work, and due to the very specific population this research focuses on, I utilized snowball, convenience, and purposeful sampling. Creswell (2012) describes purposeful sampling as the researcher selecting participants “…because they can purposely inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p.156). Convenience sampling, a form of purposeful sampling,
engages participants as they are available. While inclusion and exclusion criteria may be set, participants are engaged based on their accessibility to the researcher and their willingness to engage in the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). While such an approach limited the diversity of the sample and its generalizability, these concerns are well addressed through other methods built into my design (see section on confirmability and credibility, page 68) or, in the case of generalizability, are not the intention of this research.

Beginning in August 2018, following IRB approval, I began recruitment of participant co-researchers through utilization of my professional contacts and the dissemination of recruitment materials throughout the greater New York Capital Region’s queer and queer-serving networks (all recruitment materials can be found in appendix A-C). This recruitment strategy included the use of social media posts describing the study and inviting interested participants to contact me. Recruitment flyers were made available both online and through postings at community spaces frequented by transgender and non-binary young people. While participants were not required to be college students, many of them were. It is likely that this is a result of intentional networking with college LGBTQ campus programs. Specifically, I emailed information to campus-based clubs/organizations at five local college/universities. Additionally, Parker and I posted flyers around UAlbany’s campus, and Parker attended a meeting with the university’s Center for Sex and Gender Relations where they discussed the project.

I received responses from 12 interested individuals, all of which were screened for eligibility and provided with an informational packet that includes a study overview and a consent form (see appendix D). Of the 12 interested, 9 joined the study and reported learning about the study from multiple sources.
There is no shortage of debate regarding the pros and cons of cash compensation for participation in research. Monetary incentives can be seen as appropriately valuing participants’ time as well as being viewed as potentially coercive (Head, 2009; Seymour, 2012). Further, monetary compensation may be critiqued as a tool that reinforces unethical capitalist ideals (Gallagher, 2009 as cited by Seymour, 2012) and undermines the more altruistic desires that may motivate participants to engage in a study (Seymour, 2012). While these are valuable concerns to consider, the idea that a person should participate in research simply because it “feels good” or makes the world a better place (as opposed to it being a source of payment for time), also suggests undertones of capitalism. In such an approach, marginalized people’s time is suggested to be of less economic value than that of the researcher (who will likely gain ongoing financial benefit from their publication of study findings).

After considering these concerns, I adopted the perspective offered by Seymour (2012), which suggests that incentives (inclusive of those that are intrinsic and extrinsic) can be ethically utilized within studies in such a way that rewards not only encourage participation but also, recognize and value it. Participants frequently noted that the project was a rewarding and enriching positive experience. While I anticipated this benefit as I conceptualized this study, I also recognized that LGBTQ people could be difficult to engage in research studies, as they may feel exploited or further stigmatized. Although transgender people are disproportionately economically disadvantaged (James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet, & Anafmore, 2016), they are routinely asked to provide free work by donating their time and emotional labor to the education of others (namely cisgender people) about their experiences. Many transgender activists with whom I work, and some of the young people who participated in this study, have described this as donating their time to teach others how to not oppress them. For these reasons, I
chose to compensate participants with $25.00 per group session. I believe that this level of payment is substantial enough that it communicates value without being so high that it interfered with consent.

All group members were given a visa gift card after our first meeting and earned money for each subsequent meeting they attended. I intended to continue to pay members after every meeting, but failed to realize that each individual visa card had an activation fee. By the end of this study, the total that would have been paid in these fees presented a financial barrier to me. As such, remaining payment was awarded to group members as a gift card at the project’s conclusion. Two participants approached me privately during the course of the study to request payment for meetings attended, citing personal financial challenges that they hoped payment would alleviate. Each of their requests were accommodated and I made this option available to all group members.

**Group Processes.** Participant-researchers were invited to attend 6 group sessions and a photo exhibit all held at the University at Albany’s School of Social Welfare. The format of meetings was largely informed by the tradition of popular education. This critical and social justice-oriented approach to learning is often associated with the work of Paulo Freire and rejects the idea that knowledge is something to be transmitted from teacher to student. Instead, popular education posits that knowledge should be co-constructed (Burke & Dudek, 2010, as cited in Glowacki-Dudka & Griswold, 2016) and pays particular attention to individual and collective experiences related to power and oppression. Citing Heaney (1992), Glowacki-Dudka et al. (2016) describe popular education as:

> Providing a forum for the participants to engage actively in their learning while a “facilitator” serves as a coordinator and a resource to the group… encourage[ing] safe and open spaces while providing activities for the group to explore issues and solve problems together (p. 379).
Meetings focused not only on data collection and analysis, but also blended group discussions and games designed to engage in co-learning and teaching through activities drawing from Augusto Boal’s (1993) *Theater of the Oppressed*. A brief narrative summary of each session is provided below and is followed by Table 1.

**Overview of Photovoice Group Meetings.** The following provides a summary of group meetings that were used for both data collection and analysis. Although adapted to meet the focus of this particular study and the group members, much of this design has been modeled after prior photovoice studies including Bozlak (2010) and Hill (2016).

**Session 1- Introductions and project orientation:** The first session was used to build rapport with and between group members. During this session I shared with the group information about qualitative and participatory action research and Parker provided additional information about photovoice specifically.

To begin the session, group members worked together to develop group expectations and rules. Through this collective process, participant co-researchers suggested expectations and explained why each was important to them. While the group members independently developed many such expectations, Parker and I ensured that they contained: confidentiality (participant co-researchers were reminded of the nature of the study and my role as a mandated reporter); respect; and voluntary participation (participant co-researchers were reminded that they could abstain from any activity and/or terminate their participation at any point).

Next, participant co-researchers engaged in a peer interview designed to help introduce group members to one another. This interview also assisted in the collection of demographic data (the interview guide can be found in appendix H). Interview sheets were collected and became part of the body of phenomenological data analyzed by Parker and myself.
At the close of the first session, group members were invited to engage in reflective journaling about what they thought was important for others to know about non-binary experiences (this activity is referred to as “Assignment 1” within this dissertation. Journaling prompts can be found attached as appendix I). The group was informed of the intention to share reflections with others at the next meeting.

**Session 2- Identifying project focus:** (audio recorded) Adolescence and young adulthood is a time in which personal identities are being constructed and explored. As such, it is important for young people to have the space to express and share themselves in safe and creative ways (Institute for Community Research, 2014). Icebreaker games allow for such space and also support the cultivation of a group culture built on healthy expression and sharing. With this in mind, session 2 began with an activity adapted from the Institute for Community Research’s 2014 youth PAR (or YPAR) curriculum. Copies of this activity’s directions are in appendix J. The goal of the game was to encourage group members to interact and learn more about each other. The activity also provided Parker and I with demographic information about each group member.

After the game, participant co-researchers were invited to share reflections from Assignment 1. Once reflections were shared, Parker and I facilitated a discussion in which participant co-researchers brainstormed key areas of focus related to their shared journaling. The group worked together to develop specific photo prompts from this discussion.

Once photo prompts were identified, the group reviewed and discussed photography guidelines and ethics as outlined by Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001) and the IRB. At this time, participant co-researchers were given the option to use personal camera phones, or camera phones provided to them as needed. Using the cameras, participants were asked to take 3
photographs reflecting their thoughts, feelings, or insights on each of the prompts (Assignment 3).

In between sessions 2 and 3 participant co-researchers emailed their photographs to me. During the 2-week period between sessions, participant co-researchers were also invited to join a “photo field trip” intended to offer the opportunity to walk to selected locations near our meeting venue to take photographs as a group. This activity was offered to promote photographic activity as well as to foster a sense of community and group cohesion. Although such activity was discussed, group members felt that their schedules would not permit it.

**Session 3 and 4- Visual data analysis:** (audio recorded) In order to accommodate the time needed to focus on each image, the group was split into two and each sub-group presented their work at either session 3 or session 4. Each session began with participant co-researchers checking in and sharing about what it was like for them to document their reflections and experiences with photographs. After this check in, the group began Wang’s (1999) process for the analysis of documents produced as part of photovoice. Printed copies of their individual photographs were provided to each group member. Participant co-researchers each selected one of their own photographs to represent their response to each inquiry prompt.

The central part of Wang’s analysis is the photographers’ reflection upon their images and answering five key questions (which can be remembered by the acronym SHOWeD): “What do you **See** here? What is actually **Happening** here? How does this relate to **O**ur lives? **W**hy does this situation, concern, or strength exist? What can we **D**o about it?” (Wang, 1999, p. 188). To begin, participant co-researchers individually engage in a modified SHOWeD analysis using the “photo captioning worksheet” (appendix K).
Upon completion of the SHOWeD analysis, group members displayed their photographs and corresponding worksheets on the meeting room’s dry erase boards. Participant co-researchers each took time to view one another’s work and provide supportive feedback using post-it notes. Once all photographs were viewed, the group engaged in a facilitated discussion designed to serve as a collective group analysis identifying key elements and themes emerging from their individual sharing and reflection.

At the conclusion of each of these sessions, group members brainstormed what they wanted to see at the exhibit based on their findings. I took notes and facilitated this brainstorming session that was revisited multiple times. A final list was generated and shared with the group via SurveyMonkey and group members were invited to anonymously indicate discomfort with inviting any community organization or individual presented on the list. While the group indicated comfort with all guests, they were notified that any one group member’s discomfort would be grounds for an individual or organization to not be invited.

**Session 5- Final group analysis:** (audio recorded) Group members had time at the beginning of this meeting to socialize and leisurely enjoy provided food (which was available at each meeting). After a casual check-in, we discussed the upcoming exhibit and we developed an agenda for the evening.

Following our exhibit planning, the group viewed a PowerPoint presentation that I created and that displayed all their photographs and SHOWeD worksheets. Group members took notes during this presentation and were invited to share any additional ideas or themes they were noticing. Based upon their observations and feedback, formal findings were generated with the intention of their dissemination at the exhibit.
**Session 6- Taking action:** ( Portions of this session were audio recorded) The research team invited community leaders and other guests to an educational art exhibit at the School of Social Welfare. Invited guests were informed that the exhibit is part of an ongoing study and those that chose to stay for our audio-recorded discussion completed participant consent forms.

Prior to the event, selected images were displayed and light refreshments arranged to be available to guests. Participant co-researchers had the opportunity to meet with invited guests individually and discuss their artwork during a portion of the event. They also had the opportunity to present formally to those in attendance and share about the project and our findings. The last portion of the event was dedicated to a facilitated group discussion (audio-recorded) between participant co-researchers and community members. This discussion focused on group reflections and ideas moving forward.

**Session 7- Reflections and closing:** (audio-recorded) One week after the group’s art exhibit, we reconvened at our usual meeting location to debrief the exhibit and the photovoice project as a whole (Assignment 5). Group members were provided an anonymous survey with which they offered their feedback (Assignment 6). After survey data was collected, the group had a discussion about their experience being part of the project. After the discussion we held a closing celebration.

**Table 1**

**Outline of Photovoice Group Meetings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Session 1:** Introductions & Project Orientation | 90 min  
• Group introductions  
• Icebreaker exercises  
• Establishing group norms and expectations  
• Overview of project and study  
• Assignment 1 given (reflective journaling on topic) |
**Session 2:** Identifying Project Focus  
90 min  
- Opening exercise  
- Sharing assignment 1  
- Brainstorming specific questions/photo prompts  
- Photography guidelines and ethics  
- Camera phones provided as needed

**Session 3 & 4:** Visual Data Analysis  
2 hours (each)  
- Opening exercise  
- Individual photo selection and SHOWeD analysis  
- Group members engage in collective analysis of the data as a whole

**Session 5:** Final Group Analysis  
2 hours  
- Group members socialize  
- PowerPoint presentation of data is presented  
- Final themes are agreed upon  
- Photo exhibit is discussed

**Session 6:** Taking Action  
2 hours  
- Community leaders, activists, and supporters are invited to educational exhibit  
- Photographs and reflections are shared by participant-researchers  
- Community members and participant co-researchers reflect on exhibit in a group discussion

**Session 7:** Reflections and Closing  
90 min  
- Participant-researchers engage in a debriefing discussion and attend a closing celebration to share food (provided by primary investigator) and spend time together.

**Data Analysis.** This study utilized two distinct but related phases of data analysis. The first phase of analysis occurred with the photovoice group participant-researchers. In this phase (outlined above), group members engaged in individual and group-based reflective analysis of their artwork, based on Wang’s (1999) framework. The findings the group developed through
this process served as the basis for further analysis that was conducted by myself and Parker, the project’s research assistant. As we engaged in this second phase of analysis, we reviewed the group’s findings and used them to frame our own systematic review of all data collected throughout the study. Each of these analyses is described below.

**Group analysis.** Group members self-selected to share their photographs in either the first or second of two group analysis meetings (meetings 3 and 4). During each of these meetings participant co-researchers reviewed all of the photographs they had taken (which I printed and provided to them). From their collection of images, they each selected one photograph to represent their response to each photo prompt. This resulted in each member sharing a total of four photographs (one group member did not offer photographs but did choose to participate in the group analysis).

After photographs were selected, participant-researchers were provided a worksheet based upon Wang’s (1999) SHOWeD analysis (appendix K). This worksheet provided group members the chance to document the reasons they took their photographs, what they represented and how it related to the questions they were answering. Group members completed one worksheet for each of the photographs they displayed. After the first analysis meeting, the group collectively decided that since the worksheet analysis took a considerable amount of meeting time, they preferred that the next round of presenting members complete their photograph selection and individual SHOWeD analysis ahead of time.

With their photographs and analysis sheets in hand, group members created an informal “gallery” by displaying their materials on the wall during these two analysis meetings. Once materials were hung the group participated in a “gallery walk,” taking time to view each image and read the accompanying analysis sheets. As group members reviewed the work they offered
reflections on small notes they hung by each display. Once the activity was completed, group members shared that reading their peers’ responses was affirming and that they appreciated having the chance to add their insights to one another’s work. These notes were originally intended to serve as a tool to assist group members in formulating their thoughts individually prior to sharing with the group; however, as Parker and I engaged in phenomenological analysis of the data, these notes also served as a form of triangulation.

Following the gallery walk and individual review of the data, the group engaged in a discussion aimed at identifying key themes from the collection of works. Parker and I offered discussion prompts such as, “What stood out to you?” “Were there things the photos had in common?” and “What did you notice after viewing all the works?” Facilitating a conversation as the group discussed the images, we encouraged group members to elaborate on their ideas and invited the opportunity for all group members to share and comment. After this process had occurred at both of the initial analysis meetings, a third and final analysis session was offered (session 5).

During this final group analysis, participant co-researchers were shown a powerpoint slideshow of all of the photographs and scanned analysis sheets (organized by the four photo prompts). During the slideshow group members were invited to take notes. After each of the four groups of images concluded, the participant-researchers were asked once again to reflect and share what seemed to stand out to them. This group discussion was aimed at narrowing their broad and robust ideas from the first two analysis meetings into specific and targeted key points they felt were most relevant to share with the guests who would be attending our upcoming exhibit.
Quickly, the group found that having an authentic conversation while also developing key points was an unwieldy process. Parker and I were charged, by the group, with the task of taking notes during their conversation and then reviewing these notes and the meeting audio with the goal of simplifying and articulating the ideas shared into “bullet points.” I conducted the first round of this process and then submitted my summary to Parker for additional review. We then shared our articulation of key findings with the group for review and approval. Once approved by the group, these key points were printed and displayed at the exhibit along with the photographs and analysis worksheets. As a PAR study, I offer these findings in the final chapter as means to center the participant-researchers’ voices and to assist the reader in grounding “my” phenomenological findings and interpretations in those of the collective group.

**Interpretive phenomenological data analysis.** As discussed, this study is first and foremost a PAR project. The intra-group decisions, photographic data collection and analysis that occurred within the group setting are the primary focus. However, time and resource limitations presented barriers to the entire group participating in further in-depth qualitative data analysis once group meetings ended. Although it can be argued that photovoice’s SHOWeD analysis can stand alone as rich data, my pilot study has suggested that additional engagement with the data over time allows for new insights to emerge. This observation is perhaps best represented by Creswell’s (2012) “data analysis spiral,” in which the act of analysis is in fact not an act (in the singular sense). Rather, analysis is an interactive process of data gathering, reflective reviewing and interpretation, a process that rarely occurs in a strictly linear manner. And so, the participant co-researchers’ analysis served as the foundation upon which further analysis occurred. I (with Parker’s assistance) explored further the group identified themes by employing a phenomenological analysis of all data points combined (photographs, captions,
reflective writing, and group discussion). Table 2 provides an overview of all data and its analysis. Following the table is a description of the study’s analysis plan.

**Table 2**  
*Data Collection and Analysis Plan*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session Description</th>
<th>Collected Data</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Session 1: Introductions &amp; Project Orientation</strong></td>
<td>Data point 1: Primary Investigator and Research Assistant observations reflected in memos.</td>
<td>Data uploaded to Atlas.ti and coded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group members engaged in introductory exercises and spent time learning about PAR and Photovoice.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignment 1 (reflective journaling) provided to group.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Session 2: Identifying Project Focus**               | Data point 2: Icebreaker worksheet  
Data point 3: Reflections on assignment.  
Data point 4: Group discussion and development of inquiry prompts. | Icebreaker worksheets were scanned and uploaded to Atlas. ti and coded  
Audio recording of data point 3 and 4 were transcribed and uploaded to Atlas.ti and coded |
| Group members participated in data collection icebreaker. |                                                                                |                                              |
| Group members shared their personal reflections from assignment 1. |                                                                                |                                              |
| Group members engaged assignment 2, which involved an open discussion about the themes emerging from assignment 1 and identified inquiry prompts for photographic documentation. |                                                                                |                                              |
| Photovoice ethics were reviewed and assignment 3       |                                                                                |                                              |
(request to take photographs) was provided.

**Session 3, 4 & 5: Visual Data Analysis**

Group members selected photographs from assignment 3 to represent their response to each inquiry prompt. Each group member engaged in assignment 4 (SHOWeD analysis).

After assignment 4, the group participated in a collective identification of themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data point 5: Photographs selected from assignment 3.</th>
<th>Photographs were uploaded to Atlas.ti along with photo captioning worksheets and the transcribed audio recording of data points 6 and 7. Data analyzed after group meetings conclude. Codes were assigned to sections of the transcriptions and used to explore details of the themes identified by the group. Photographs were linked to the codes they related to. Additional themes were identified by the primary investigator and the research assistant through additional phenomenological analysis of data.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data point 6: SHOWeD analysis (photo captioning worksheet and group discussion). Data point 7: Group identified themes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Session 6: Taking Action**

Group members and invited guests attended an exhibit of the group’s photographs. Group members shared reflections and findings with the guests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data point 8: Researchers’ observations reflected in memos. Data point 9: Audio recorded group discussion between community guests and</th>
<th>Data uploaded to Atlas.ti. and used to enrich the understanding of the entire body of data.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
### Session 7: Reflections and Closing

Group members participated in a discussion about their experience with the photovoice project and the art exhibit (assignment 5).

- Data point 10: Group members’ reflections shared in group discussion.
- Data point 11: Group members’ survey responses.

Audio recordings from assignment 5 were transcribed and uploaded to Atlas.ti. The Primary Investigator and the Research Assistant analyzed the data to gain an understanding of the group members’ perception of PAR, and the potential strengths and limitations of its future use with the population.

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Conceptualizing gender through a critical queer lens, and drawing from Butler’s (1999) work related to social constructionism and performativity, gender itself can be understood as an experienced phenomenon. Phenomenology is interested in the shared or common meanings that multiple individuals assign to an experience (Creswell, 2012; Manen, 2015). As described by Smith and Osborn (2015), “The aim of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world, and the main currency for an IPA study is the meanings particular experiences, events, states hold for participants” (p. 53).

With the research group identified themes as the starting point for further analysis, Parker and I analyzed the collective body of data (combining photographs, transcribed audio recordings, group notes, etc.) to explore further details related to identified themes, and note additional
concepts not discussed by the group as a whole. All data were uploaded to Atlas.ti where they underwent multiple cycles of coding.

In preparation for coding, I met with Parker and offered them informal instruction in qualitative analysis. This meeting focused upon topics including inductive vs. deductive analysis, phenomenological inquiry, the utility of coding, and provided an outline of my proposed analysis schedule (table 3). Lastly, we discussed the relationship between parent-level and child-level codes.

To begin coding, Parker and I reviewed two photographs and their accompanying SHOWeD analysis sheets for each of the study’s photo prompts. We agreed to each review the group’s findings as a way to ground ourselves in the salient points most relevant to them and thus, hopefully, have their voices reflected authentically in our analysis. Individually, we each coded this data applying Vagle’s “whole-parts-whole process” (2016, pp. 98-99). Taking this approach, we individually reviewed the selected photographs, read their accompanying SHOWeD analysis worksheet line by line, and reviewed the group’s findings related to the prompt the data was associated with. Continuing with Vagle’s (2016) approach and this participant-grounded perspective, we each re-read the data and took reflective notes. Next, utilizing in vivo coding, we labeled the quotes and sections of data with key words or simple statements taken directly from the participants’ own words as means to capture and reflect meaning. This was used as a form of open coding that allowed for themes to organically emerge independent of the study’s theoretical orientation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013).

After this round of initial coding was complete, Parker and I met to review our codes and discussed our agreements and differences. Together we developed a code book that was used to begin analyzing the remaining data. We continued to meet bi-weekly to review one another’s
work, discuss emerging ideas and update the code book as needed. Such analysis actions assisted
our efforts to keep our analysis grounded in the photovoice group’s findings and to develop
inter-rater reliability. Being the primary investigator, I assumed responsibility for analyzing the
majority of the data but engaged with Parker and utilized our meetings as opportunities to
receive feedback, make adjustments and develop greater trustworthiness in this study’s findings.
The following offers outlines how coding responsibilities were divided between myself and
Parker.

Table 3

Data analysis schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date (week of)</th>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12/30</td>
<td>PR &amp; DC*</td>
<td>Photos and captions</td>
<td>Code 2 documents from each prompt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/4</td>
<td>PR &amp; DC</td>
<td>Photos and captions</td>
<td>Develop initial code book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/7</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>Worksheets, photos and captions</td>
<td>Code 3 worksheets&lt;br&gt;Code 4 photos and captions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DC</td>
<td>Worksheets, photos and captions</td>
<td>Code remaining worksheets, photos and captions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/11</td>
<td>PR &amp; DC</td>
<td>Worksheets, photos and captions</td>
<td>Review coding process&lt;br&gt;Adjust code book as needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/13-2/15</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>Meeting transcriptions</td>
<td>Clean and code 2 documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DC</td>
<td></td>
<td>Clean and code 4 documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/15</td>
<td>PR &amp; DC</td>
<td>Meeting transcriptions</td>
<td>Review transcript coding&lt;br&gt;Identify needs for second round coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/15-2/22</td>
<td>DC</td>
<td>All data</td>
<td>Complete second round coding of all data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/22</td>
<td>PR &amp; DC</td>
<td>All data</td>
<td>Review results</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once coding was complete, Parker and I met several times to discuss expand, collapse and eliminate duplicative codes. During these meetings we continued to discuss the data and the meaning of the codes we were working with. Engaging Parker’s feedback and insights, I then reviewed all codes and organized them into themes helpful in summarizing and presenting our phenomenological findings.

Emergent themes from the data were then sorted to identify significant experiences related to identity conceptualization and construction (RQ2). Through this process I considered the experiences shared by the participant co-researchers through the lens of Butler’s notion of gender performativity and examined what the process of non-binary self-identification and expression has looked like for the group. Similarly, we drew upon the group-based findings and those of our phenomenological analysis to note themes related to the ways in which non-binary identities are supported and the ways in which they are stigmatized (RQ1).

Examination of findings related to research questions 1 and 2 provide the opportunity to address the research question relating to social work practice (RQ3). Parker and I explored the data and the themes we developed with the goal of identifying potential implications for social work clinical practice, community practice, advocacy, and education. We sought to make clear and specific practice suggestions that not only affirm non-binary identities but that also actively address stigma and marginalization. The findings we offer are presented within the implications chapter of this dissertation.
Considering my fourth research question (RQ4), this study explores the potential role that PAR and arts-based research can play in the identification of social problems experienced by participants. Like Bozlak’s (2010) photovoice research examining youth wellness, it is my intention that this project can serve as a case study. This research offers the opportunity to better understand the challenges and benefits of using these methodologies with young people. Further, the lessons learned from this project can be used to promote meaningful and ongoing engagement and leadership among young people as they shape and inform the policies that impact their lives. These ideas and the findings related to my fourth research question are also detailed in the implications chapter.

**Researcher Positionality**

Relevant to any discussion of analysis is articulation of my own personal identities. In qualitative research, the researcher is a tool in data collection, analysis, and interpretation and it is common in many qualitative traditions, and feminist approaches to inquiry, to briefly share about the researcher’s own identity, experiences, and their relationship to the proposed study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Herr and Anderson (2015) have described positionality as a researcher asking themselves, “who am I in relation to my participants and my setting?” (p. 37). Pyles (2015) discusses the importance of reflecting upon one’s relationship, status, and identity in relation to the focus of research despite such reflections and, moreover their disclosure, often being seen as “anathema to traditional social science research… (p. 637).” Attention to identity and one’s own experiences can help both researchers and participants come to the research process aware of commonalities, differences and issues of power. Such disclosure also allows the readers and consumers of research to contextualize the presented findings. The articulation of my social positioning helps not only frame the research, but as I have reflected upon the topic
throughout the research process, such reflection has served as an important component of bracketing (or becoming increasingly aware of assumptions and preconceptions [Creswell, 2012]).

To begin, I bring to this study 15 years of experience as a sexuality educator and 4 years as a psychotherapist working with transgender and queer individuals and families. Despite my career addressing a wide range of topics related to human sexuality, my focus has largely been on work with LGBTQ young people. I was first introduced to feminist theory, queer theory, and justice work in adolescence when I had the opportunity to join a sexuality and gender-focused peer education program. This program employed positive youth development and peer leadership as means to construct and deliver their theater-based sexual education and community activism.

Despite holding a queer identity, I move through the world experiencing privilege that is disproportionate to many of my co-researchers. I am cisgender, white, male, and was raised in a socioeconomically middle-class setting. I move through the world able-bodied and with no visible disabilities. I hold an advanced degree, I am a licensed professional, and I am nearing the completion of a doctoral education. These identities and experiences have shaped my worldview and how I understand what it is I am directing my inquiry towards. While the study’s methodology and the group activities have been designed to position the participant co-researchers as experts, such efforts do not erase the influences of power and privilege (Nygren, 2009) and further reflections on this topic and its role in the study are discussed in chapter 7. In brief, the pervasiveness of ageism, white supremacy, cisgenderism, and male dominance are not eradicated simply through a carefully executed icebreaker or discussion, no matter how intentional such efforts might be. Instead, I have intended for these activities not to give the illusion that such forces are non-existent in our study but rather, to illuminate the ways in which
they exist throughout life (inclusive of the research setting). Through my own process of reflective intention setting prior to each session, and my journaling and debriefing with the research assistant after each session, I had the opportunity to examine the ways in which my identities may have disrupted or supported the research process.

While other researchers may build into their study’s design room to continuously adapt, revise their timeline, and thoroughly explore new ideas and opportunities presented by participant researchers, this (regrettably) has not be a defining feature of my work. Although the study was designed to be a PAR project, it was also constructed as an opportunity for me to demonstrate my capabilities as a researcher. While I am most certainly motivated by my politics, queerness, and my commitment to advocacy for transgender communities, I also have motives that are inextricably linked to the pressures I experience as a doctoral student who is facing financial and familial pressure to complete a dissertation, the professional pressures of publication expectations, and the desire to present myself as a strong applicant as I navigate the job market. These pressures have undoubtedly influenced my relationship to the study due to my motivation to complete my doctoral program and move into an academic career.

Such pressures cannot be ignored, and failure to acknowledge them seems unethical. Knowing that this is the constellation of self-experience that I carry, I have sought to balance them through various processes aimed at maintaining academic integrity and trustworthiness. Specifically, I have reflected upon my field notes and personal journaling with Parker and a peer from my doctoral program that is familiar with PAR.

Confirmability and Credibility

Discussing the importance of positionality within all forms of research, Herr and Anderson (2015) argue that such awareness is of value in action research as the relationship
between “outsiders” (those not of the population or community being studied) and “insiders” is central to understanding issues related to validity and trustworthiness. Further, in their book *The Action Research Dissertation* (which has served as a guide and a map for this dissertation), Herr and Anderson (2015) consider the problems of attempting to evaluate action research through the use of the same validity criteria that one might use to judge more positivistic studies. Instead, they offer five criterions with which to assess the quality and validity of action research projects: dialogic validity, outcome validity, catalytic validity, democratic validity, and process validity.

Although Herr and Anderson’s (2015) framework for validity is a significant shift away from the positivistic epistemology of other research traditions, they acknowledge the problematic nature of reifying concepts like “validity” in an effort to defend constructivist work. Where one stands in the debate between appropriating quantitative concepts and developing uniquely qualitative ones largely depends on one’s target audience and the goals of the research (Creswell, 2012). Writing for graduate students who plan to defend an action research dissertation, Herr and Anderson (2015) make a compelling argument for strategically adopting language to communicate about and advance one’s research agenda. Herr and Anderson’s (2015) five forms of validity are discussed below.

**Outcome validity.** The authors argue that the validity of an action research project can be judged based upon the “resolution of the problem that led to the study” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 67). Although Herr and Anderson acknowledge that action research often leads to new and complex understandings of a problem, and thus the identification of new problems, they suggest that this form of outcome validity is a helpful tool in assessing the “success” of a study.

While further understanding and articulation of social problems evolved though the reflective guidance of participant co-researchers, I began this study with a concern about the
underrepresentation and invisibility of non-binary young people in both research and community awareness of LGBTQ identities. This proved to be a salient experience and one of concern among group members. As such, the act of asserting visibility though both the in-group activities and the concluding photovoice exhibit suggest a micro, meso, and mezzo resolution of the target problem. While such resolution may be finitely confined to the project (i.e. non-binary people will remain marginalized), I have found the use of photovoice methodology to present the opportunity for continued action directed at the problem.

At the time of writing this, group members have already identified several other actions they would like to take to share their work and increase visibility. Most notably, as the group discussed the invisibility they experienced (and the impact it had on them when they were younger and just coming to understand their gender) they agreed that seeing one another’s photovoice work was itself something that helped them feel visible and affirmed. Reflecting on this experience, the group agreed that they would like to hold another exhibit and invite local middle and high school students. It is their hope that such an event will provide younger non-binary people with the opportunity to feel seen, and to be exposed to the types of gender representations that they themselves had previously been denied.

**Process validity.** Herr and Anderson (2015) suggest that outcome validity is dependent upon process validity. In short, the PAR process must engage the population in ways that facilitate reflexivity and continued re-examination of the problem and the participants’ understanding of it. It is also suggested that a strong action research process invites critical inquiry into what constitutes as “evidence.”

Engaging in triangulation allows for the opportunity to broaden one’s conceptualization of evidence and one’s understanding and interpretation of it (Herr & Anderson, 2015). As
defined by Creswell (2013), triangulation involves the use of “corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (p. 251). Such evidence, according to both Creswell and Herr and Anderson, may come via a range of sources and methods.

As discussed in greater detail earlier in this dissertation, photovoice is a methodology designed in a way that directly addresses the issues central to establishing process validity. For example, early group sessions were spent conceptualizing and discussing target problems and were followed by sessions focused on reflecting and sharing personally expressive documents. This evolving nature of sessions invited participant co-researchers to engage in an iterative and reflective process. Participant co-researchers each brought with them unique experiences and understandings of both their identity construction and the ways that the world around them interacts with such an identity. Their reflections, offered through facilitated group discussion and activity worksheets, served as sources of data that were added to their photographs, SHOWeD analysis and post-exhibit debriefing. In this way, triangulation and the cyclical processes of reflection (among the participant co-researchers, Parker, and myself) built into the method all aided in the establishment of process validity.

**Democratic validity.** Action research validity is established by making sure all who have “a stake in the problem under investigation” have the opportunity to collaborate in the research process (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 69). Intentionally bringing the multiple perspectives of stakeholders together supports process validity but in the context of democratic validity, is rooted in the ethics of representation and justice (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

While the wide representation and collaboration suggested as necessary for democratic validity is perhaps ideal for many studies, it has not seemed appropriate for the work I engaged in. Research aimed at understanding and addressing a systems problem at a human service
agency would certainly benefit from the perspectives of agency executives, middle management, frontline staff, service consumers, and community members. My research, however, has been specifically interested in the unique experiences and perspectives of young people who are routinely marginalized and misrepresented. As such, I believe there to be value in centering space and process around their lived experiences independent of others who may have an interest in (or contribute to) their perceived invisibility (e.g. other LGBTQ people, queer-serving health and human service providers, etc.).

**Democratic/local validity.** Considering Cunningham’s (1983) *local validity*, Herr and Anderson (2015) offer another form of democratic validity that better fits with the aims of this study. This form of validity focuses on the extent to which problems are grounded in the experiences of those engaged in the study and to what extent outcomes of the research are locally appropriate and applicable. Participant co-researchers collaboratively identifying the local stakeholders to invite to our exhibit strengthen this validity. In presenting their work, the young people had the opportunity to express their needs and experiences to others, as well as articulate their desired outcomes. Participant co-researchers also participated in a group debriefing of the exhibit, the photovoice project, and their personal reflections on PAR. Their feedback and perception of the project’s impact is used to assess local validity and discussed further in chapter 7.

**Catalytic validity.** Echoing Freire’s (1970, 2014) emphasis on co-learning and conscientization, action research is focused on deepening both the researcher’s and the participants’ understanding of the problem or focus of inquiry (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Catalytic validity is assessed by the degree to which the research process supports the development of new understandings. Further, action research participants and researchers should
not only be re-negotiating their understanding of the problem of inquiry, but they should also be called towards action to change it (Herr & and Anderson, 2015). In this way, catalytic validity can be linked to outcome validity.

Herr and Anderson (2015) comment on the experience of layered re-orientation of understanding. They state that, “The most powerful action research studies are those in which the researchers recount a spiraling change in their own and their participants’ understandings” (p. 69). Throughout this study, both the participant co-researchers and I experienced a re-examination of what we “knew” about the targeted phenomenon. Through engaging in group discussion where participants reflected on their identity development/construction, and asking questions based upon literature and practice, we developed a deeper understanding of the ways in which non-binary genders are affirmed and stigmatized. Through the act of expressing these experiences through art, participants had the chance to think creatively about how best to represent their ideas. Further, they developed new and layered understandings of their photographs and lived experiences as they inquired into and learned from the works shared by their peers. In this transactional manner, richer and more nuanced understandings about individual stories emerged as participants’ stories interacted and provided new context for one another.

**Dialogic validity.** In presenting the concept of dialogic validity Herr and Anderson (2015) emphasize the value of peer review in all forms of research. They suggest that, much like the peer review process in place for publication in academic journals, researchers should be seeking feedback from others about their work. Review from peers experienced in either content or process can offer insight and suggestions ensuring that the research, methods, process and its findings are sound.
As a doctoral student working under the guidance of a dissertation committee, I have the benefit of this dialogic review being institutionally built into my study. While photovoice participant co-researchers offered feedback and process guidance, so too did my committee. This committee has been comprised of two participatory action researchers (including a photovoice researcher) and a quantitative researcher. In addition to supporting dialogic validity through review by participant co-researchers, the research assistant, and my committee, I also enlisted the support of peer qualitative and participatory action researchers through a cross-institutional methodological study group I belong to. This group provided the opportunity to share about the progress of my study, discuss challenges and routinely seek supportive guidance.

As mentioned previously, following the completion of the photovoice project, Parker and I continued to analyze data. Striving for confirmability, credibility and trustworthiness in our phenomenological analysis I utilized a number of “validation” techniques. Working in collaboration with Parker, we engaged in triangulation through the sharing of our individual perspectives across multiple sources of data. The coding and theme building that occurred during this phase of the study was based upon the analysis and findings presented by the photovoice participant co-researchers. As such, trustworthiness was developed as findings were based upon both the experience of the photovoice participants, as well as the analysis conducted by the research assistant and myself.

Similar to Herr and Anderson’s (2015) dialogic validity, Creswell (2013) suggests the use of peer review when engaging in qualitative data analysis. Not unlike quantitative interrater reliability, peer review provides the opportunity for multiple perspectives to guide the interpretation of the data. In the case of this study, Parker and I both initially engaged in individual coding and data review. In the earliest phase of analysis, I selected data for us to
review and independently develop the initial codes in response to. Next, we reviewed one another’s work, compared notes, and discussed the data until consensus was obtained about each code. This step also helped develop greater reliability through the use of an intercoder agreement (as described by Creswell, 2013 and Miles and Huberman, 1994). Peer review and intercoder reliability continued as I thematically coded the remaining data and regularly reviewed my work with Parker.

**Participant Co-Researcher Cooperation and Ethical Considerations**

The following offers a brief description of important ethical considerations. These considerations span the study as a whole (inclusive of group-based work and phenomenological analysis).

**IRB issues.** I was excited to be granted permission by the IRB to engage minors in my pilot research. Unfortunately, recruitment restrictions were put in place that prevented me from sharing flyers, recruitment letters, or parental consent forms with minors directly. I was denied contact with interested participants until receiving a signed parental consent form, a feat proven difficult given that I was unable to *give* minors the consent form until I had *received* said form (which they did not have access to) from their parents.

The challenges associated with recruiting vulnerable youths influenced my decision to only recruit participants 18 years of age and older. Drawing from my previously approved work, I used similar forms, and confidentiality releases for those participants who wish to engage in public events and be known as study participants. Participant co-researchers who wished to participant in the study but did not want to be part of the visible community actions, or be “outed” as participants, were excused from the exhibit and their confidentiality maintained. As
such, I did not experience any significant concerns raised by the IRB as this design followed that of my previously approved research.

I did decide to contact the IRB well before I submitted my protocol to outline my study and inquire about any particular concerns the board had. Upon consideration, I was quickly informed that my preparation for the project seemed to have identified the key areas that the IRB would be concerned with and that they believed my review would be straightforward, despite the unique nature of the work. Following my formal submission, I received one request for review and re-submission due to a missing recruitment material and other minor requests regarding clarification. Upon re-submission, I was granted approval.

**Risks and benefits.** Risk associated with participating in the study was assumed to be minimal. Some young people find talking about their gender and/or sexual orientation very helpful and empowering, others may find that it causes embarrassment and or distress. As a trained social worker, I was sure to ask questions in a sensitive manner, using my clinical wisdom based on social work practice experience. Participant co-researchers were welcome to skip any questions or activities they wished and were notified that they could excuse themselves from the study at any point.

At the first group meeting I spent time discussing the nature of the study and discussed the options individuals had to either be known as a participant or to have their identity unknown. The group established a series of agreements that they wished to hold each other accountable to. Among these expectations was be a group committed to confidentiality. Although the study’s findings will be shared publically, individuals were notified that they were expected to not disclose personal information about one another without consent.
All information gained during this study was stored on a password-protected computer in order to protect individuals’ privacy. While some group members choose to be known as participant co-researchers by engaging in community actions and education, any future presentation of study findings that I produce (conference presentations or articles) will have all information directly identifying participants removed.

The study also offered several group member benefits. Participant-researchers reported that they enjoyed the opportunity to share, reflect, and connect with others who had similar experiences. Additionally, drawing attention to problems as pervasive, and socially bound (vs. individual) seemed of value to the group. The positive impact of such experiences of connectedness is discussed in the literature regarding LGBTQ young people. LGBTQ young people’s participation in school clubs or groups that focus on sexuality and gender promote a sense of community in the face of isolation (Lee, 2002; Mayberry, 2006). The opportunity to affect positive change through such groups can be an empowering experience (Lee, 2002; Mayberry, 2006). Furthermore, while this study was not designed to be an evaluation of an intervention, research has found that peer-connectedness among LGBTQ young people can serve as a protective factor and promote a positive sense of self and of one’s sexual/gender identity (Singh, 2013; Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011; Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2014).

Other Ethical considerations. Although PAR presents opportunities to disrupt the oppressive power dynamics often reproduced in traditional positivist-based research, such approaches are not an inherent or automatic solution to these problems. Researchers experienced in PAR methodologies stress the importance of an awareness of the ways in which problematic power differentials continue to exist within the utilization of PAR (Nygreen, 2009; Pyles, 2015). This becomes a poignant issue when one considers the privileges frequently carried by those
positioned as academic researchers (Nygreen, 2009; Pyles, 2015), as well as the challenges related to project ownership, scale, and authorship of published findings (Nygreen, 2009).

When considering the specific potential ethical issues related to the use of photovoice methodology, Wang (2001) offers a helpful overview of concerns to pay attention to. While some of the ethical concerns she outlines in her paper did not apply to my study because of the greater decision-making power held by co-researchers in this project, several key issues remain. First, Wang (2001) acknowledges the tension between the formal researchers’ desire to avoid influencing the focus of the photographs and her youth’s need for direction and guidance. Wang explains, “We wanted to avoid influencing or defining the types of themes that would emerge, yet found that some participants complained about a lack of ideas” (p.569). For this project, I was working with young people older than those in Wang’s study and experienced a greater degree of leadership and independence from them. They were clear about what they wanted to photograph and the relevance the topics of focus held in their lives. However, my personal need to “keep the project moving” may have resulted in similar concerns that prevented the group from moving in a greater direction of organic autonomy.

There is also the ethical concern of the degree to which photovoice actually disrupts or shift socio-political and community power dynamics. Citing Minkler (1978) and Ballerini (1997) Wang (2001) notes that the status quo may not be challenged through photovoice in that, “bringing the issues to policy makers does not shift power from one group to another” (p. 569). Instead, Wang (2001) suggests that the method’s intention is to assist in bridging the gap between community members and elevating the voices of those who may not be heard due to the power structures in place.
Chapter 5: Findings

This dissertation contains two sections that reflect the project’s findings. First, content offered here presents the findings that the group and I developed together throughout our photovoice meetings; these findings were subsequently shared with guests who attended our exhibit. Separately, the results of the phenomenological analysis are presented. These findings reflect data collected throughout the project by myself and Parker, the study’s research assistant.

Description of Photovoice Group and Participant-Researchers

Our photovoice group affectionately named themselves “The Basement Kids” in a humorous yet critical reflection on their experience of gender-inclusive bathrooms being typically found in the basements, or other “out of the way” locations, on college campuses. The group met six times and held one exhibit over an eleven week period (October through December 2018). Recruitment efforts resulted in final group membership of nine non-binary participant-researchers, Parker and myself. The nine participant-researchers remained involved in varying degrees throughout the project’s duration. Five members engaged in all group meetings (including the exhibit), and the remaining four participated in activities as their schedules allowed, but experienced scheduling conflicts due to school and work. Table 4 provides an overview of member participation. All nine members engaged in group photograph analysis.

A brief summary of each group member is presented next. The descriptions reflect their responses to demographic questions, as well as information they chose to share and identified as important to understanding their unique life experiences. Pseudonyms are used for all group members throughout the text.
Delaney: A white 21-year-old using both “they/them” and “he/his” pronouns, Delaney identified as a physically disabled mathematician. Delaney also shared that they were bisexual and when asked to describe themself, offered the word, “zesty.”

Ty: Using “they/them” pronouns, Ty shared that they were a white 20-year-old college student. Ty identified as a trans-masculine, non-binary bisexual and described themself as “goofy” and “shy.”

Victoria: A Black, non-binary 20-year-old interested in Witchcraft and “spooky shit,” shared that her pronouns were “she/her” and that both her gender and sexuality were queer.

Karmen: A 23-year-old white, gender-flux lesbian, Karmen used “they/them” pronouns and shared that they were polyamorous. Karmen described themself as “animated.”

Dev: 20 years old and describing themself as “passionate,” they used “they/them” and identified as half white and half Filipino. Dev described themself as gender-queer and their sexuality as pansexual and queer. Dev also shared that they were hard of hearing.

Krissy: Using “they/them,” Krissy shared that their gender and sexuality were queer. Krissy was 22, white and polyamorous. Krissy described themself as “weird.”

River: Identifying as half Hispanic and half white, River was a 22-year-old who described their gender as agender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming and used “they/them” pronouns. River shared that they were bisexual and described themself as, “multifaceted.”

Sarah: Identifying their sexuality as queer and gender as non-conforming, Sarah used “they/them” pronouns. Sarah was a white, 20-year-old and used the word “queer” to describe themself.

Caz: A white, 19-year-old queer lesbian, Caz described their gender as non-binary and fluid, and used “they/them” pronouns. Caz describe themself as, “queer… a lot.”
Table 4:

**Overview of Participation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Other Identities</th>
<th>Mtg 1</th>
<th>Mtg 2</th>
<th>Mtg 3</th>
<th>Mtg 4</th>
<th>Mtg 5</th>
<th>Exhibit</th>
<th>Mtg 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caz</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaney</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dev</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>White/Filipino</td>
<td>Hard of hearing</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karmen</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krissy</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>River</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White/Hispanic</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ty</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Description of Exhibit Guest Participants**

As the Basement Kids shared and analyzed their photographs, they began to develop key points and “important ideas” they felt needed to be shared with others. Through discussing these ideas and how best to use them to address challenges and promote positive change in the community, the group developed a curated guest list of people they wished to invite to a photo exhibit. While some individuals were specifically added to this list as they were known community leaders, much of the list consisted of the names of local organizations, and those with various roles (e.g. social work faculty, medical providers offering transgender-affirming care, etc.). Taking the group’s suggestions, I reached out to professional networks, community organizations and individuals. A total of 13 individuals attended the exhibit, 10 of which participated in our post-exhibit meeting. This post-exhibit meeting was audio-recorded and
ultimately became part of the larger body of data collected. Limited information was gathered from these individuals so no demographic details were available. A description of their professional role is offered in the table below.

**Table 5:**

*Exhibit Guest Roles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social work faculty (interest in LGBTQ practice and policy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker, doctoral student (interest in gender equity, education and PAR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public health faculty (interest in health equity and PAR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elemetary school teacher and board member of local LGBTQAI advocacy and education organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social work clinician working with LGBTQI individuals and families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice manager and social worker at a community practice offering counseling and psychotherapy to LGBTQI individuals and families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center Manager at a local sexual and reproductive healthcare organization offering gender-affirming care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinician and Medical Care Manager at a local sexual and reproductive healthcare organization offering gender-affirming care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered Nurse and Quality Care Manager at a local sexual and reproductive healthcare organization offering gender-affirming care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender Care Specialist at a community organization serving LGBTQAI people of color</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Photovoice Group Findings

By documenting their responses to our photo prompts, the Basement Kids had the opportunity to visually represent their experiences and the meanings they assigned to such experiences. The group engaged in individual and collective group reflection (using Wang’s [1990] SHOWeD analysis), allowing the participant-researchers to identify convergence and divergence across and between their personal experiences and their interpretative understanding of them. After reviewing the most salient themes that arose through multiple analysis sessions, the group prepared to share their findings with community members attending their upcoming exhibit.

The following pages offer a summary of these group-based findings. Additional findings identified through analysis of all research data (photographs, worksheets, observation of group activity, and audio transcripts) are presented later in the chapter.

Prompt 1: What do people need to know about being non-binary? The following is a summary of the group’s key findings following their analysis of photographs and SHOWeD worksheets responding to the prompt.

There is more than one way to be non-binary. The Basement Kids spoke frequently of non-binary diversity. The group felt it was important to acknowledge the presence of assumptions and stereotypes about non-binary people (namely that they are assigned female at birth [AFAB], white, thin and present in a strictly androgynous manner). Group members also wanted to use their work as a way to highlight the diversity among non-binary people and the
diversity in how people experience what it means to be non-binary. The idea that gender identity is experienced in varied ways, was emphasized by the group as preparations for the exhibit unfolded. For example, Victoria shared that “gender-queer people don’t all have to fit one mold;” the group highlighted her exhibit image and caption titled, Wooden (image 2) as an example of this theme. Victoria explained:

“Non-binary people are all different. The figure [in the photograph] is completely blank…many people want to attribute specific looks and behaviors to queer people.”

Noting similarities to their own image, River stressed the importance of creating space for all non-binary people to be non-binary in the ways that made sense to them regardless of whether or not it matched what the rest of the world thought non-binary people should look or act like.

*Narrow social expectations of gender are harmful.* Group members identified a need for others to be aware of, and ultimately challenge, binary-centric assumptions. Such assumptions suggest that holding a binary identity (whether transgender or cisgender) is the normative default that is expected, leaving little room, if any, for the conceptualization that someone might be non-binary. This consequently contributes to such identities becoming invisible. Group members linked invisibility with a sense of social isolation as well as a difficulty in locating one’s identity within broader social gender constructs. Reflecting on the photographs, Dev shared that, “Society is built on a [gender] binary that excludes non-binary folks” and that it was “frustrating” to see “non-binary identities constantly erased because we don’t have any representation of our identities.”

**Prompt 2: How is my gender identity supported?** Group members were excited to share about the ways they felt others supported their gender identity. They offered artwork and
stories of community and peer support, love, relationships, and everyday interactions that affirmed their non-binary identity.

Visibility matters. Identity affirmation involves having one’s gender visible. Group members shared that others recognizing their gender resulted in feeling “seen” and “understood.” Group members also stressed the importance of non-binary visibility in media within their daily social lives. This visibility contributed to feelings of identity validation and provided opportunities to explore and develop a rich understanding of one as non-binary. Group members suggested that these opportunities helped them overcome feelings of isolation.

Affirming language. Group members identified the use of chosen names and pronouns as direct personal actions that could be taken to support non-binary people. They suggested the practice of asking new people their pronouns upon meeting and that doing so not only allowed for correct pronoun usage, but also communicated that one was thinking critically and sensitively about gender. Demonstration of such awareness and a commitment to using respectful language produced a sense of affirmation and joy that group members referred to as “gender euphoria.”

Institutional recognition. Group members reported that when their identities were recognized on an institutional level, via identification documents and school and medical records, public and other types of spaces feel accessible and safe. Noting that they often felt a pressure to explain to others what it meant to be non-binary, group members explained that when they experienced affirmation in their schools and at health and human service providers’ offices, such pressure was alleviated and they felt more able to authentically engage with the services being offered.

Prompt 3: How is my identity not supported? Participant co-researchers easily identified examples of how they felt their identities were not supported. Group members shared
art and analyses that reflected the impact of non-binary invisibility, the ways non-binary stereotypes furthered this invisibility and the impact these experiences had on their well being.

**Lack of representation.** Group members noted that when non-binary people don’t have access to social representations of their identities, there could be a sense of isolation and a difficulty in coming to understand their own identities and experiences. The stereotypes and assumptions group members experienced regularly compound such challenges.

**Non-binary stereotypes.** With limited representation and visibility, group members reported many assumptions about what it means to be non-binary. These assumptions draw upon the idea that to be non-binary means one is assigned female at birth (AFAB), white, thin and presenting in a seemingly androgynous way. Group members noted the relationship between this finding and their assertion that it is important for people to be aware of non-binary diversity.

**Constantly having to defend yourself takes a toll.** The pervasive presence of binary gender assumptions results in non-binary people routinely being interpreted as belonging to one of two equally incorrect gender categories (i.e. male or female). Group members described this as a regular and nearly consistent process of being misgendered. Further, the group shared that when they had to defend their identities (for many this was described as defending their very existence), their mental and emotional well-being was compromised. When sharing one of their photographs of a street they frequently walk down, Caz talked about how this difficulty was exacerbated when physical threats and harassment were present. Caz shared stories of being perceived to be a woman and being sexually harassed by strangers on the street. Caz noted that such harassment was particularly painful because in addition to the verbal violence and threats to safety it presented, it also was an act of misgendering.
Prompt 4: How can things be improved? In addition to offering suggestions about what people could do with the information conveyed in their photographs (the “D” in SHOWeD), group members wanted to include a specific prompt exploring solutions and improvements to our list of questions guiding their photography. This prompt invited the opportunity to move from critical analysis of current conditions towards an envisioning of future possibilities.

Recognize intersectionality. The Basement Kids imagined a world where there was greater attention paid to the richness and complexity of non-binary identities. Such a world understood that while gender was an important part of one’s identity, it was not the only part of their identity. Group members’ gender identity interacted with their race, ethnicity, ability and mental health. The group urged others to remember that knowing one part of a person’s identity did not mean the totality of their experience was understood. Victoria stressed, “You can’t understand one part of my identity without knowing about the other ones.”

Offer opportunities for people to self-identify. Participant co-researchers urged others to abandon pre-conceived notions about gender and to avoid making assumptions about people’s gender based on their appearance or what is known (or unknown) about their assigned sex. They encouraged people to adopt the practice of asking about pronouns and names. The group also noted that when someone comes out as being non-binary, they are sharing something very personal and important. To this, Delaney suggested, “treat this invitation like a gift not a burden.”

Work towards liberation, not assimilation. When acceptance is conditional a limited version of queerness and gender diversity is permitted. Participant co-researchers imagined a world where transgender and queer advocacy and support did not expect queer people to fit into
predetermined “socially acceptable” narratives. The group articulated a vision and desire to work towards queer liberation that was free from the expectation that people should fit into discrete identity categories.

**Make spaces accessible.** Several photographs highlighted the ways physical spaces are often gendered in a binary manner. These spaces include bathrooms, locker rooms, clothing stores, residential treatment programs and schools. The group shared how access to gender inclusive physical spaces (like bathrooms) is needed for both comfort and safety. Similarly, the use of inclusive language, forms, and paperwork (at health and human service agencies) are small and concrete steps that people can take that have a tremendously positive impact on making social spaces, as well as health and human services, more accessible.

**Summary of Group-based Findings**

Documenting their experiences and their interpretations of such experiences through photography, the group had the opportunity to visually represent both their inner and outer worlds. Their individual and collective analysis has noted several ways in which the group felt their non-binary identities were supported and the ways in which they felt stigmatized. Additionally, the group has drawn attention to the ways that they feel non-binary support and affirmation can be improved.

While having diverse personal experiences and interpretations, the group collectively identified the aforementioned key themes. In brief, these themes stress the importance of: (1) recognizing non-binary diversity; (2) respecting non-binary identities as authentic and valid; (3) making non-binary people (and their diversity) more visible as a means to reduce isolation and promote opportunities for young people to conceptualize and concretize their identity; and (4)
affirming diverse gender identities through inclusive language and institutional practices that recognize one’s gender identity (rather than assigned sex).

**Community Exhibit and Discussion**

A summary of the findings mentioned above were printed and posted alongside corresponding photographs and captions during the group’s community exhibit. A total of 14 community professionals, advocates, educators, and researchers attended the exhibit. Of these 14 guests, 10 stayed to be part of an audio-recorded discussion (contributing study data) with the Basement Kids. Our exhibit took place in the basement (contributing to the group’s nickname) of the School of Social Welfare. Victoria and Caz collected participant consent forms and distributed nametags while greeting attendees.

Guests spent a few moments enjoying food and chatting before Parker and I started the program. After the group introduced themselves, I offered an overview of the study, its rationale, and some contextual information about PAR. Parker provided a description of photovoice and shared some details about the group processes that had resulted in the work on display. Delaney spent time acknowledging some of the strengths and limitations of our project. They discussed that the work was meant to bring attention to the group members’ experiences as a way to raise awareness about non-binary people. Delaney also acknowledged that the work was not representative of all transgender and non-binary people and that while our group did have some racial and ethnic diversity, the work was reflecting the experiences of a largely white group. Next, guests had a chance to view the captioned artwork. Photographs were mounted on gallery grade cardstock and suspended by string from the ceiling. Next to each photograph the artist’s mounted SHOWeD analysis was displayed. Work was organized by prompt and each section concluded with a display of findings.
Once guests finished viewing the work, the group gathered in a circle and discussed the art, the study and the experiences reflected in both. Facilitating this discussion, I encouraged dialogue directly between the guests and the group members. The participant co-researchers lead the conversation with only minimal guidance from me. I was responsible for keeping time, encouraging participation throughout the group, and making sure key questions were addressed. Together, we asked the following: What are the immediate reactions you are having to the exhibit? Are there things you have learned from this exhibit (if so, please explain)? And finally, what can you do in your area of work to support non-binary people? Parker and I analyzed the data provided during this conversation, along with that collected throughout the Basement Kids’ group meetings (artwork, SHOWeD worksheets, audio recordings, etc.). Findings from this phenomenological analysis are discussed next.

**Phenomenological Findings**

Engaging in multiple cycles of iterative coding, Parker and I sought to analyze the large body of qualitative data this study collected. As discussed on pages 59-66, we intentionally grounded our analysis and interpretation of data within the findings the Basement Kids developed in preparation for our exhibit. Our intention was to review the group’s work within the context of additional data (namely worksheets and audio transcriptions) to add detail to the group’s findings and reflect upon them with consideration of the study’s overarching research questions. The following is a detailed presentation of phenomenological findings organized by the research question they address. Readers will note that two of the research questions (RQ3-what are the implications of these facilitators and barriers for social workers wishing to promote transgender-affirming services? And RQ4- in what ways can arts-based PAR support the identification of social problems faced by transgender and non-binary young people?) are not
discussed in this chapter. Rather, given the nature of these questions and their answers, I chose to present them in the chapter focusing on implications for practice and research.

**Research Question 1: What are the perceived facilitators and barriers young people experience regarding identity support and affirmation?**

This first question is organized into two subsections. The first section presents findings and supporting data that describe the Basement Kids’ reflections regarding the ways in which they felt their gender identity was not supported or affirmed. The second section presents findings outlining experiences of identity affirmation.

**Factors promoting barriers to identity support and promoting gender-based stigma.** As noted in the presentation of group-based findings, the Basement Kids had no difficulty articulating the presence of social and inter-personal factors that present as barriers to identity affirmation and that, in many cases, are active sources of identity stigma. Group members reported experiencing stigma through *broad socio-political structures*, within their daily *local environments* and as they engaged in *interpersonal interactions* with peers and family members.

**Broad socio-political structures.** The group frequently discussed broad socio-political forces that produced gender binarism. In analyzing the group’s data, it became clear that most of these experiences seemed related to *pervasive social beliefs* regarding gender resulting in *gender invisibility*, which promoted (and was mutually supported by) *stereotypes and assumptions* about non-binary people. Each of these sub-themes is presented in sequential order below. Table 6 (on page 126) illustrates the relationship between these factors.
Pervasive social beliefs. Among the most vocal and seemingly passionate critics of the social factors that they felt served as the foundation for institutional and individual oppression was Dev. During one of our meetings Dev shared, “I know we have a lot of institutional issues that are really hard to address like structurally. Our society is built this way [upon binary and dichotomous ideas of gender].” Dev’s perspective on the pervasive nature of binarism was depicted in their photograph titled, Leaves (image 3). In sharing this photograph, representing a lack of identity support, Dev explained,

Society feels the need to sort things into binaries even though they don’t fit there perfectly. They separate things into sides. This is active social construction and not natural. I think binaries make things easier for people to understand but are really harmful for those shoved in boxes.

Delaney responded by stating,

I think it's a really gorgeous image, it's striking. It also struck me that it makes the point that this categorization of these forced binaries, these aren't natural. This isn't that what nature tends towards and it's something that's especially frustrating as a biology major listening to people talk about how trans people and non-binary people can't exist.

This forced social organization was illustrated in Dev’s image where yellow and red leaves are separated and categorized by color. During Dev’s presentation of the image, as well as during the group’s photovoice exhibit, there was much discussion about how forced and artificial this felt when seen in the natural environment, and yet how commonplace such processes were in our social environments. One exhibit guest, a social work doctoral student, explained that, “I was like, yeah, it just looked so absurd, right? To take these leaves and separate them into categories, it's like who does that?” She continued reflecting on how while this felt artificial when it came to
leaves, it seemed even more artificial when such categorization was expected of people. Agreeing, Victoria and Caz also noted the ways in which most of the leaves, despite their assignment to one side of the stick or the other, were not exclusively red or yellow. The leaves, like gender, were each unique and carried an array of qualities that could not be represented within an organizational system that was dichotomous and mutually exclusive. The doctoral student concluded by noting how autumn was a beautiful season, not because colors and leaves were separated, but because “You see autumn leaves, and you see this carpet of color, everything's all layered on top of each other.” For the Basement Kids, this colorful array of genders and expression was not only manifestation of resistance to an oppressive social system, but also a source of beauty, excitement and possibility.

As a group, the Basement Kids concurred that all too often these unrealistic and exclusionary social norms were so commonplace that at times it was hard to recognize their presence even though they had a direct negative impact on one’s daily life. In responding to the prompt, what is important for others to know about being non-binary? River presented their photograph titled Spheres (image 4). The group discussed how, in the photograph, the bowl (which held all the individual spheres) represented a frequently unseen and unexamined set of social expectations regarding “gender performativity” (River noted that their understanding of these concepts was greatly informed by the work of Judith Butler). River
explained that these expectations were social “rules” that forced people to engage in a process of learning, performing, and reproducing gender in very specific ways.

As the group discussed River’s image and the idea of socially constructed genders and gender rules, they noted that such forces were harmful to all people (binary, non-binary, transgender and cisgender). River, Parker and Victoria offered the following,

Parker: Yeah, I thought all the photos were really fantastic and I liked your description, River, of your photo with be able, be representative of ... I can't remember the words you used.

River: Constraints, restrictions.

Parker: Yeah, and how if that was gone, all of the balls who are, theoretically people in the scenario, would be free to-

River: Yeah, they'd be free to run in whatever direction they want.

Victoria: Also, with that picture, my memory is really bad, but I'm pretty sure the black ones are supposed to be cisgender folks and then the white one was supposed to be non-binary people and even then who we see as cisgender and straight, what people see as normal even then, if the bowl was removed and they're allowed to move freely then they would probably fluctuate a lot more than they're allowed to in society.

**Gender invisibility.** Like the participants in my pilot study, the Basement Kids experienced invisibility resulting from the pervasive presence of binarism. For participant-researchers, moving through social environments embedded with a lack of awareness of non-binary identities meant that they were constantly misgendered as men or women (even if they were perceived to be transgender). Further, many group members discussed how exhausting it was to constantly have to correct people’s assumptions, come out, explain (and in many cases defend) their gender identity in order for their experiences to be made visible.
Sharing their photograph, *Erasure* (image 5), Dev showed the word “non-binary” being erased from a piece of paper and commented that, “Non-binary identities are constantly being erased because we don’t have any representation of our identities.” They continued asserting that complacency with the status quo is a form of, “active erasure.” Similarly, Ty shared their untitled photograph of a blank TV (image 6) noting how there is a lack of non-binary representation in the media. While this image and what it represented also relates to this study’s first research question (and is discussed again later in this chapter), the absence of media representation contributed to a general sense of otherness and isolation.

During the first of three group analysis meetings, Krissy reflected on the photographs illustrating how group members felt that their gender identity was not supported. Considering the collective body of photographs and their own unique personal experience, Krissy offered the following.

It almost feels like we’re performing like every constant minute of our lives and we switch roles constantly. Like I definitely feel like I have a role that I play while I’m at work versus when I’m at home or with friends.

River and Caz both had strong reactions to what Krissy expressed and, commenting on how it accurately reflected their own experiences, they each shared that they felt as though they had to “put on a mask.” The group then considered how when non-binary people are forced to mask...
their gender (for self-protection and preservation) and move through social environments that leave little to no room to conceptualize a non-binary identity, they become invisible to one another. Comparing it to a story they once read, Caz explained, “everyone in this universe [in the story] is blue and there are two people who are red, but they’re wearing a blue mask [to fit in] and they’re constantly trying to find someone else who is red. But because they’re hidden, they can’t find each other.”

Non-binary stereotypes and assumptions. The presence of many social assumptions about what it means to be non-binary contributed greatly to the group’s general experiences related to a lack of support and specifically to many of their feelings of invisibility. As noted in what the group shared with exhibit guests, most of the Basement Kids reported that cisgender and binary transgender people frequently assumed that non-binary people were assigned female at birth, White, thin, able-bodied and presented their gender in androgynous ways. While elements of this non-binary “recipe” were true for some group members, the collective picture it painted failed to reflect the comprehensive experience of any of the Basement Kids.

The presence of these assumptions erased the diversity of non-binary people’s race, ethnicity, ability, bodies, etc., and also erased the diversity in the rich and complex ways in which they experienced being non-binary. In reviewing the group’s meeting transcripts, it is noteworthy that all participants reference non-binary identities as a plural concept that is anything but monolithic. Still, this nuanced awareness was something that few reported experiencing outside of the group we formed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the absence of such awareness furthered feelings of invisibility. Delaney shared with the group their photograph titled, This is Not a Prerequisite (image 8) and Victoria presented, Wooden (image 7). Each of these images helped facilitate a conversation around non-binary diversity and intersectionality.
Victoria explained that her photograph was meant to show that non-binary people could be anyway they want and that “[we] are all different.” She continued by commenting on Delaney’s work sharing,

I really like the [photograph] over there. Where they’re like, pulling out their skin and it was about how a lot of people see queerness or being non-binary as a very white, able bodied, thin thing. Like you can't be androgynous unless like you're able-bodied and you're white, you have short hair and you're conventionally attractive. That's like the only way to be queer. That's the only way to be non-binary. To make it like palatable [and visible] to the outside world… I relate to that a lot because I'm not able-bodied, I’m not thin, I'm not white. So like, moving through queer spaces is a little bit different for me because there are a lot of things that I have to deal with. Just because you’re queer doesn’t mean you're not racist. Just because you are another person of color, doesn't mean you're not racist. Like things like that. Intersectionality was something that was brought up and how all people won't fit this really specific mold.

As discussed in Crenshaw’s (1989) work on intersectionality, group members described needing to navigate the world holding multiple subjugated identities. For Victoria, River, and Dev these identities involved their experiences of being people of color. Intersectionality was also discussed related to the group members’ experiences of not just gender related oppression but also their movement through the world with physical and mental health conditions, varying financial resources and a range of sexualities.
Some group members contributed to the discussions of invisibility by commenting on the photographs’ emphasis on assumptions around non-binary gender expression and what it meant to express oneself in a world in which others likely interpret such expressions through a binary lens. Sarah shared,

I think [some of the photographs] show how people make assumptions off your appearance about your gender. Like the way you dress and stuff. Then there's kind of pressure like, oh maybe I wanna dress this way but if I do everyone's gonna assume that I use “she” pronouns or I use “he” pronouns. So, there is kind of that pressure. Just even getting dressed every day, like what kind of message am I sending to people by the way I dress and what are they gonna think about me? It's kind of ... doesn't feel good

Local environments. The broader social forces the group discussed were frequently experienced as they manifested within the participant-researchers’ local environment. For example, healthcare systems (described below as health, wellness and service access) and physical spaces (such as bathrooms and college campuses) are accessed as part of one’s day-to-day world. It was within these local and daily contexts that the abstract concepts of social constructionism and binarism presented themselves in ways that are tangible and direct. The impact of such reflections were presented in the group members’ artwork, their individual and group analyses, and the conversation they had with exhibit guests.

Health, wellness and service access. Group members shared extensively about their experiences accessing healthcare services as non-binary people. Overwhelmingly, the Basement Kids described these as stigmatizing and dismissive experiences during which they felt that they
could not come out or authentically share the richness of their experiences, even when it might be clinically relevant to the care they were seeking.

Victoria contributed a photograph of a messy bedroom that she titled, *Redo* (image 9). In discussing her artwork, Victoria shared with the group about the pressure she felt to compartmentalize the various parts of her identity. She said,

I have a lot of shit going on up here [pointing to her head] and I kinda forgot about my sexuality and my gender when I was really going through some shit because people force you to either choose, "Do you want to deal with your gender? Do you want to deal with your sexuality? Do you want to deal with your queerness or do you want to deal with your mental health?" and they don't see how those things interact with each other and then it makes it really difficult because they're such big parts of my life.

Victoria was not the only group member who felt the need to selectively prioritize parts of her identity in order to get the support that was most relevant at the time. Delaney shared with the group that they experienced a number of physical health conditions that resulted in periods of chronic pain and ongoing limited mobility. Delaney commented on how prior to their formal physical health diagnoses, providers thought that they were merely attention seeking. Delaney noted that this was because their gender was not taken seriously and was interpreted as a “fad” that “millennials” participated in to be “special snowflakes.” Several group members noted that they believed providers think that they were “collecting identities” in order to be unique. For these group members, they worried if a provider knew that they identified as non-binary and had a health condition, their gender would suggest that they and their health concerns should not be taken seriously. As a result, Delaney told the group that they had chosen not to come out to their medical providers. They explained their rationale by stating, “I have not told any of my physical health doctors that I am non-binary because I don’t want to die and if they stop giving me adequate care that could happen.”
Delaney’s experiences of dismissal followed them into the offices of their mental health providers. They commented,

I felt a pretty strong reaction to Victoria's photo with the feet in the messy room (image 9) and talking about mental health and it reminded me very viscerally of a personal experience of when I was 15 and in therapy for the first time and I thought it was okay to talk to my therapist about whatever so I mentioned being non-binary, and I very clearly remember her being like, "Are you non-binary because you don't have any good women role models?" I was like, "First off, that's the exact opposite of what is true for me. I am from a long lineage of trash men and the only good role models I've ever seen have been women. If that was how it worked, I would be very much a woman." At the same time, regardless of if that was true, it sent this message of, "Oh, my gender is something to be psychoanalyzed and this is something that you can solve."

Delaney continued, explaining that based upon experiences like this, they often felt like they had to present themselves as “cis and straight” as possible when they needed either mental health or physical health care.

Like Victoria and Delaney, Karmen had also struggled navigating mental health service delivery as a non-binary person. Responding to Delaney’s comments, Karmen shared, “Unfortunately, I can relate really well. A couple years back, I was in and out of [local psychiatric inpatient facility], obviously for mental health shit but I had to go through it as not a non-binary person. I was like, ‘Hi, I'm Karmen. Hello, I'm a woman.’ It sucked.”

Other group members shared similar experiences. Those that had come out to service providers reported that they perceived a “shift” in how the provider treated them. Others echoed what Delaney and Victoria shared and discussed that they often feared that they would either be denied care or that their mental health providers would choose to focus on their gender, rather than the concerns that they brought to the helping relationship. For some, these fears were based upon previous experiences they had. For others, their fear was in anticipation of the rejection and stigma that they had so often heard their non-binary and transgender peers report.
As the Basement Kids shared their artwork and these concerns with those who attended our exhibit, service providers commented on how they themselves had witnessed or inadvertently contributed to such experiences. Collectively, the providers and non-binary young people began to explore some of the systematic and structural ways in which healthcare services become uninviting to non-binary people. The manager of a healthcare center that is part of a multi-county organization offering sexual healthcare services, reflected on the work their organization was doing.

We [the speaker and two other guests] work at [organization’s name], and linking back to the photo of the close up of the beard [image 10] and how beards are meant to be masculine, and that's not always the case. When we first started offering transgender hormone services and puberty blockers two years ago, we had this huge in-service where we learned about pronouns, and we changed our forms, and we all got pins [indicating that they were “trans-affirming”], and we're all like, "Oh my god, we're so great, this is awesome." It wasn't until like, two weeks ago, we were looking over the informed consent forms that we use when we start patients on hormones, and [in the forms] we talk about the risks and the benefits, and one of the benefits of testosterone is beards and one of the benefits of estrogen is breast development, and it's like who gets to decide that that is a benefit?

As providers and participant-researchers continued to discuss the ways in which binarism was frequently an unexamined paradigm embedded in healthcare systems, attention was brought to intake forms and language. For many, intake and new client paperwork is one of the first, if not the very first, interactions a service seeker has with their new provider. While perhaps a small afterthought compared to the many other moving parts of a medical or mental health clinic, these introductions carry significance. During one meeting Delaney offered suggestions regarding
improving clinical experiences and intake forms, “I think simple things like using gender-neutral pronouns and things, and not having a box to check as male or female. I think people notice when you use they instead of he or she. Or at least non-binary people notice.” During the exhibit, Caz returned to this and encouraged providers to not just be mindful of gender diversity, but to also think about how their forms recognized or erased intersex clients as well. Many group members expressed a desire for intake paperwork to not have the gender option be a check box, particularly if the only options were male and female. Rather, some suggested an open-ended question where clients could self-report their gender.

While the providers attending the exhibit expressed agreement with the group’s recommendations, they noted barriers that they felt were beyond their control. One provider from a healthcare agency shared that she saw two challenges. First, she said that the agency’s recent adoption of an electronic medical records system was preventative. She shared,

Everything needs to be a checkbox, it's a yes or no, so as much as you see the binary in everyday life, the medical field in general is super yes and no, and even just trying to get them to put "other" with a comment section, for any of the things, is extremely hard.

Another provider noted challenges related to her being at an agency that was funded by the New York State Department of Health. As such, she explained that there are State Department of Health regulations regarding the collection of demographic information. For agencies in the room, it seemed this information needed to fit into pre-determined discrete categories. Another medical provider commented on this and added her perspective on why state requirements regarding demographic data collection were so restrictive. She suggested efforts to get New York State’s Department of Health to abandon male/female check boxes for open-ended questions was particularly challenging, as it was tied to the state being able to analyze data and produce reports. She explained,
I understand why there's all this pushback because with a text box [where clients could self-report gender], you can't write a report on that. Do you know what I mean? Whereas you have these nice check boxes, these are your only options. Yes, the data is beautiful but does the data really represent life?

Hearing these concerns, Krissy challenged the State’s resistance. They stated,

This whole trying to fit data with real life… as part of my senior project I had to create a study and collect data, do all the analysis, and all of this, and part of it is obviously getting demographics… I hadn't seen any options for anything other than male or female, [in other studies] they usually put an M and a F, and you had to circle one. It's not that hard in SPSS [a quantitative data analysis program] to have another category, it's not that hard to add another category for ethnicity, so why is it hard to add another one for gender non-binary people?

Other exhibit guests reported different experiences with the use of electronic medical records and agency-wide change. A social worker that works at a community practice and a large medical center shared that she felt the problems related more to the need for broader social change. She also felt that providers who were able to make positive changes needed to be sharing their strategies with others.

_Navigating the binary in physical spaces._ For the Basement Kids, binary assumptions and identity erasure did not just exist in the offices of service providers, such experiences were common throughout daily life. Participant-researchers shared specifically about their workplaces, school environments and other settings in which physical spaces were gendered. The most frequently discussed example of this was bathrooms. Like those in my pilot study, group members noted the political, public, and media attention that was given to transgender bathroom access and the need for transgender men and women to access bathrooms (and other gendered facilities) that corresponded with their gender identity. And, like the reflections of those in my pilot work, the Basement Kids expressed a sense of this being incredibly important but dangerous if transgender advocacy only focused on men and women and thus reinforced the very binary system that was, in their eyes, at the root of so much violence and stigma.
Exploring how gender affirmation could be improved. Karmen offered the photograph of a restroom sign that they titled, *Assumptions* (image 10). In their analysis of the photograph, Karmen noted, “Non-binary (and binary trans) people have to navigate their days by the gender norms in their society.” For Karmen and others, this was evidenced by frequently needing to decide which bathroom to use. Personal comfort, physical and emotional safety, and gender presentation were all elements that the Basement Kids reported went into their decisions about what bathroom they were going to use. Caz (who shared, an image of them in a bathroom titled, *Pissing is a Right* [image 11]) explained, “I think it is a right to feel safe where you pee, as well as being comfortable.” When asked why the concern or need that motivated their taking of the photograph existed (part of the SHOWeD analysis), Caz stated, “Because people who aren’t cis get raped, harassed and assaulted in gendered bathrooms.”

Caz’s photograph and SHOWeD analysis resonated greatly with the rest of the group. When displayed for the group’s private “gallery walk” (described on page 57), numerous other participant-researchers responded via post-it notes. One group member shared “I have been called too femme for the men’s and too masc[uline] for the women’s. We need gender
neutral bathrooms.” In conversation, others talked about similar experiences and that they engaged in a daily assessment of their gender presentation to decide what bathroom they were going to use.

For the group, the absence of gender inclusive bathrooms was a visible and physical representation of how they felt invisible and erased. Connecting this idea to their broader critique of the social construction of binary gender (and leading to a series of in-group jokes that resulted in the coining of the name “the Basement Kids”), Dev explained, “Our buildings are built this way [as a reflection on beliefs around gender]. Like, the gender inclusive bathroom in this building is like in a basement or something.” In addition to bathroom facilities not being inclusive, Sarah shared that she was struck by the images used to symbolize men’s and women’s rooms. Feeling as though bathroom signs communicated gender expectations, Sarah offered, “Like even when I was younger, it would bother me that the female sign had like a skirt like I never wore a skirt. I’m like why does it have to be like that? What does that mean you have to look like that to be a woman?”

Regardless of how physical spaces were gendered, group members discussed having to navigate their social environments in ways that were often complicated by the legal records or documents. For some group members, the school records used to assign their gendered student housing or generate class rosters contained their “dead names” (names given at birth that are no longer used) or their assigned sex. With their records being inconsistent with their gender identity or pronouns or their chosen name, many of the group members faced situations where they had to correct others (typically those in positions of authority – like professors) and thus publicly out themselves as transgender or non-binary. For others, when such exchanges occurred, it was easier to take the route used when accessing healthcare and simply remain closeted.
To help visually represent the experience of moving through the world with legal records that do not reflect one’s identity, Karmen shared a photograph titled, *Stuck in a Name* (image 12) that showed their state driver’s license. In Karmen’s SHOWeD analysis of the image they comment on how the cost of obtaining a legal name change is a barrier for some non-binary people and that for them, inconsistency between their identity and their legal documents contributed to a general sense of dysphoria. Other group members also shared that while some of them experienced dysphoria related to the relationship between their assigned sex, physical body and gender, others’ sense of dysphoria was less about how they themselves felt in their body and more about the ways in which those in their social environments perceived or interpreted their bodies and ultimately made gender-based assumptions as a result.

**Interpersonal interactions.** In addition to feeling unsafe in bathrooms, group members discussed experiences of being harassed on the street and facing microaggressions at work and school. At times, harassment arose from instances where identity documents did not match group members’ presentation or identity. Other times, harassment involved targeted acts of violence seemingly aimed at policing gender or to intimidate and objectify those perceived to be female or feminine. Caz discussed their experiences being street harassed and “cat called.” They reflected on how this felt particularly complicated for them because the act itself felt violent and humiliating, and the harassers’ assumption that Caz was a woman felt invalidating.
Caz’s photograph and reflection not only resonated with others in the group but it also had an impact on those attending the exhibit. An elementary school teacher and LGBTQ advocate, viewed Caz’s work and shared,

The picture and the conversation about the person walking to the drugstore, right here on [street name], that's my neighborhood, and it makes me ... I was crying, because there was someone walking in my neighborhood, in my home neighborhood, that is not feeling safe. That doesn't feel safe. That has been harassed and followed into a store, and it just, I don't know, it made me cry.

For many of the participant-researchers much of their energy was spent preparing for the management of other people’s reactions and assumptions regarding their gender. Frequently, group members noted feeling as though they needed to become a “queer encyclopedia” or an “expert on all things trans.” This frequently occurred in both social situations and, for those that were college students, within the classroom when the topics of sexuality and gender were brought up. Group members shared that they were willing to educate others about being non-binary, but only on their own terms. By contrast, several members shared that they often felt put on the spot and were shouldered with a tremendous responsibility to which they had not consented. Dev noted the emotional toll being put in such a position could take,

It’s so much emotional energy. It’s like if you have an identity that’s outside of the normative realm of like how you’re supposed to identify, it suddenly seems like you owe the world your identity or really cis people like straight people, those folks feel entitled to your identity.

The weight of this responsibility was associated with feelings of vulnerability and as though one was expected or, in some cases, required to educate others about their experience. Furthermore, some participant-researchers shared that they feared their explanation of their personal gender would be inappropriately used to generalize about the experiences of all non-binary people. Ty expressed this by sharing, “[binary people assume] that every non-binary person has the same
experiences too or that they’re like ‘Oh, what do you identify as?’ And if you say something like ‘oh, I’m gender fluid,’ then they’d be like ‘oh, all non-binary people are gender fluid.’” Similarly, during the group’s final meeting Delaney discussed how they felt more comfortable sharing about their gender in the context of this study as it was (with the exception of me) a group of all non-binary people. Delaney shared,

I think a large part of [being comfortable in with discussing gender] is that this is a room full of non-binary people. Like I'm not preaching to the cis masses. Like it's not your one non-binary person versus 50 cis people and you're like, if I don't explain gender right, right now, these people are going to go out there and just think it's something it's not forever.

For some group members, the careful navigation of identity disclosure, and the expectation of having to educate others about gender, was also an experience they faced at home with family. Many group members shared that their parents were not supportive of their gender and when activity worksheets asked about the places and people that were least affirming of group members’ gender, several participant-researchers responded with, “at home” or “my parents.” Caz described being out about their identity as a lesbian to their mother but not feeling as though they could share about their gender. Dev, on the other hand, was out to their family but described an insulting dismissiveness from their father. During one meeting Dev shared that their father felt that being asked to use “they/them” pronouns was a sign of disrespect because it required him, an adult, to have to re-learn language. Dev also described that their father refused to respect their pronouns because he could not make sense of what it meant to be non-binary. Dev said, “Even if I could explain it in a perfect way, my father is not entitled to that information. He should still just love me anyway. But it does not always work that way.”

**Binarism within LGBTQ Communities.** Finally, like those in my pilot study, the Basement Kids faced binarism and disaffirming social exchanges from other transgender and
LGB people. Although a sense of connectedness to a queer community was among the most supportive experiences that group members reported, there was a clear distinction between social spaces that were “queer” and those that might be LGBTQ-inclusive, but not queer or non-binary affirming. For participant-researchers, just because a social space or community group was made up of other transgender and LGB people did not necessarily mean it was going to be a space that they, as non-binary people, felt welcomed. Group members noted that they felt there was a greater likelihood of other LGBTQ people “getting” them, but that this was not always the case, and binary and dichotomous assumptions regarding both gender and sexuality were not always absent in such environments. Victoria shared,

I don't really have friends, but I used to have a lot of binary trans friends. Gay friends. Lesbian friends. But my sexuality I identify as queer and my gender I identify as queer. So even when I try to talk about that in LGBT spaces, I'm like, this is really uncomfortable…Because a lot of them are really uncomfortable around anyone who identifies as anything other than like, lesbian or gay.

Dev expressed the feeling that a lot of non-binary exclusion within LGBTQ spaces and movements was linked to “assimilation” efforts. They described this as LGBTQ people trying to say, “oh we are just like you [heterosexual and cisgender people], we just have this one thing…but besides that we are just like you.” As Dev explained this, the group agreed that this approach to social movements left out numerous queer and non-binary people whose identities are, “just too complicated.”

This exclusion within LGBTQ spaces made some of the group return to the idea of non-binary invisibility. Caz shared, “You never see non-binary people on TV. On [popular LGBTQ-themed television show], sure, there is a trans guy but where am I? Where do I fit in?” For the group, this was the underlying concern that articulated their shared enthusiasm for LGBTQ
culture and community, but underscored their experience of often being an outsider within these very spaces and environments.

**Experiences of identity affirmation.** Although the group documented numerous examples of the ways their identities felt stigmatized across their various social environments, they also offered a wealth of insight into acts of identity affirmation. Participant-researchers contrasted the experience of gender dysphoria with that of “gender euphoria.” This sense of “excitement,” “comfort,” and “authenticity” was described as an inward experience that often came with external validation and affirmation of their gender. The analysis of the group’s data has been organized into the following themes, *expressions of gender, the use of affirming language*, and finally, *inclusive communities and space.*

**Expressions of gender.** Group members stressed the importance of feeling as though they could express themselves and their gender through their clothing and physical presentation. The group emphasized that there was, as Ty put it, “no one way to be non-binary” and so, there was no single way to express gender through clothing. Group members shared a diverse interest in expressing themselves in typically masculine, feminine, and androgynous ways. Karmen noted that non-binary people could be better supported if others would “Try not to see clothing or bodies as gendered.” Rather the
participant-researchers felt affirmed when they could express themselves through clothing of their choice and not have that result in others making gender assumptions.

Victoria shared a photograph of her shoes and pants titled, *Cloth* (image 13). In her SHOWeD analysis she noted, “My clothing and fashion choices are a way to show who I am and how I feel. Being able to wear things that support my queerness is incredibly helpful.” Similarly, Krissy shared an image of their favorite socks (image 14) titled, *Corgi Cutie*. Krissy discussed how at times their body and facial hair felt disaffirming of their gender (image 10, p. 101), and so, it was important for them to be able to wear articles of clothing that were seen as traditionally “feminine” and allowed them to “feel cute.” Krissy also said that when others appreciated how cute their socks (or other clothing) were, they felt a sense of “gender euphoria.”

*The use of affirming language.* As described previously, the Basement Kids took several photographs and excitedly engaged in many conversations that stressed the importance of gender-inclusive language. Just as language that misgendered the participant-researchers was seen as a significant source of identity disaffirmation, inclusive and gender-affirming language was presented as a seemingly simple, yet impactful, way to support non-binary people.

For group members, there was an importance placed on others’ avoidance of binary language. Caz noted that when they wear clothing that is “masc” they are referred to as “he” and
when presenting as “femme” they are called “she.” Caz stressed that regardless of clothing, they are “they” and wished that other people would use appropriate pronouns regardless of their appearance. Others in the group reported similar experiences and described a desire for the use of gender-neutral language until someone’s actual gender identity was known. They described an appreciation for opportunities to share their chosen name (as opposed to the one assigned to them at birth) and pronouns, but emphasized that when only those who are assumed to be transgender or non-binary get asked their pronouns, the result is a feeling of being singled out and othered. Rather, the group envisioned social exchanges where all people were invited to share about their identities as they felt comfortable.

One of the photographs that generated a great deal of discussion among the group was Delaney’s, *Sticks and Stones may Break my Bones but Language can Affirm me* (image 15). In their analysis and discussion of this image, which showed mixed scrabble tiles, Delaney explained, “When inclusive language that doesn’t force me into a false binary is used, I feel instantly more at ease in a place [and] around people.” Delaney continued, “It is a subtle way to show non-binary people that they will be safe and will be able to come out.” Although, through further conversation Delaney and others noted that safety could never be guaranteed and that sometimes non-binary people feel like they can come out and then things get “weird.” The group continued to stress that the use of inclusive language and affordance of opportunities for people to share their pronouns was an actionable way to communicate support and begin building social environments that are affirming. These experiences were additional
examples of those that produced “gender euphoria.” One participant commented on Delaney’s photograph via post-it note and shared, “Language can really force binaries or free them depending on how intentional we are.” Another simply noted that, “words have power.”

As the group further discussed Delaney’s photograph (and those with similar foci), the evolving nature of language was explored. Many in the group reported facing resistance from others who refused to use “they/them” pronouns. Group members described teachers and family members asserting their resistance and attributing it to their belief that “they” was exclusively a plural pronoun. To this, participant-researchers noted several examples of times when it would be appropriate to use “they” to refer to a single person of an unknown gender (e.g. “Someone left their water bottle in the classroom.”). For the Basement Kids, resistance to inclusive language seemed more rooted in transphobia than an adherence to proper grammar. The group also reflected on the ways in which both general language and identity-based terms change as socio-cultural understandings shift. Dev explained, “I think language, it's always evolving and even without the push of people who wanna make things gender neutral or gender inclusive. Language is always evolving.”

During the group’s exhibit, a social worker at a local LGBTQ-serving counseling center reflected on the role that language plays in both affirming one’s identity, and also in helping to make non-binary identities visible in the world. He shared, “I think that's what's really powerful and striking around this sort of movement that we're in around identity and language is that folks have existed, gender fluidity, non-binary, it's existed, it's just the language around it hasn't.” He continued drawing attention to the role of education in creating social change and promoting the use of affirming language,
I think a lot of the power and change will come from training and education, and I think what we need to realize is that people have to unlearn so much. That's where the work is, is unlearning certain things.

**Inclusive communities and spaces.** Although most of the group’s discussions regarding social interactions and their navigation of various physical spaces (school, work, doctors’ offices, etc.) highlighted the ways in which they felt excluded and unsupported, they identified several key elements of inclusive environments and the ways that such spaces felt particularly affirming. Places of affirmation were physical environments that did not force them into a false male or female gender, and social environments that they shared with other queer and non-binary people.

**Inclusive physical spaces.** The group’s sense of support found in community extended beyond the people that made up their social environments and included the physical spaces and institutions they interacted with. Just as schools and workplaces that endorsed binarism were stigmatizing and unsupportive, those environments that were inclusive were experienced as affirming and a respite from many of the challenges the group members navigated.

Ty reported a positive experience on their university’s campus. This was reflected in their image of their student identification card (image 16). The name on the card was not their assigned birth name but the name that they preferred to use and felt most affirmed their gender. Others in the group also shared that when affirming language (as previously discussed) was used in physical environments, like the classroom, they felt they could more fully participate in what was happening around them, as they felt safe and at ease.
Gendered bathrooms were noted as a source of stress among the group. Some participant-researchers reported that they avoided public restrooms altogether and others described spending a great deal of time and mental energy planning which gendered bathroom they were going to use each day. When group members had access to gender-inclusive bathrooms (not designated exclusively as male or female) they described a sense of ease and comfort and many group members reported a preference for single user restrooms. When listing places that group members felt their gender was supported and the places that they felt it was not, Delaney noted bathrooms in each list and referenced the potential for the space to invite gender dysphoria or euphoria.

For group members who were college students, the presence of queer clubs and resource centers seemed to help promote a feeling of being welcome on campus and supported identity affirmation. Some group members were active volunteers in such spaces and helped plan events, while others used such spaces on a “drop in” basis when they felt they needed additional emotional or peer support. Such spaces represented a physical location that group members could go to when needed while also serving as a catalyst for community networking and peer relationship building.
Queer community. Although no participant-researcher photographs explicitly documented or expressed the role of queer community and non-binary peer relationships, these themes were evident in the group’s discussions of their artwork and their reflections regarding their experience being part of the photovoice group. In addition to the importance of daily social interactions that allow for non-binary identities to be seen and articulated, participant-researchers also valued social spaces and communities that were intentionally queer. Some of the group members expressed that, given the invisibility and isolation they often felt, access to peer groups and social environments made up of other non-binary people provided significant opportunities for support and belongingness.

Many of the Basement Kids shared about the ease and comfort they felt in being themselves around other queer and non-binary people. The group’s excitement and contentment in being a part of such social spaces was electric and nearly tangible as I observed their interactions with one another. Unlike their description of having to perform, defend themselves, and explain their gender in other environments, our group meetings were filled with curiosity, laughter and what appeared to me to be a sense of quickly emerging closeness (e.g. group members often arrived and departed together, they quickly exchanged contact information and stayed in touch beyond the confines of the study).

At our final meeting, Delaney shared how they used to engage in frequent public education events and would often talk about their gender with others. Over time, Delaney explained, that this resulted in “burn out” and was not sustainable. They described expending a great deal of emotional labor with little nourishment in return. Delaney described this study being a positive and affirming experience for them largely because it provided a space to be in community with other non-binary people. Similarly, Victoria reflected on the sense of
community she felt during the study, “I really liked seeing other people like myself that are my age. It helped me figure out some more stuff and be more comfortable with my identity.”

The importance of seeking and building community came up numerous other times throughout our group meetings as the participant-researchers described how they found support in their daily lives. Karmen shared a photograph titled, *Rat Den* (image 17). In discussing this image, it became clear that the physical space depicted in the photograph (a hallway) was not as much of the work’s focus as was the community and peer relationships it represented. Karmen and another group member familiar with the hallway shared that it was in a home occupied by other queer and transgender peers. One group member left a post-it note on Karmen’s photograph stating, “Feeling you belong and are safe is an amazing thing to have.”

Early into the group’s meetings Sarah shared that they felt their gender was most affirmed in, “LGBTQ [social] spaces where I know people are open and accepting about gender.” Like Karmen, Sarah, and Delaney, Ty said that they felt most supported when they had, “good social community with LGBTQ+ people.” Ty also described non-binary people providing empathetic support during difficult times when one was experiencing “dysphoria or feeling bad about their gender.” They valued the ability other non-binary people had in being able to relate to one another and come together. Ty saw their queer community as a source of strength and they
noted, “I like just like how much community spirit there is.” Like the young people who made up the group, one of the non-binary exhibit guests and service providers shared that being surrounded by other non-binary people during the exhibit was a powerful and positive experience. They told the group, “I love this so much, there are not many spaces where I feel like I'm represented in the room, and tonight I feel that way, so it's really cool to be here.”

Krissy also shared a photograph that represented their experience of using difficulty to support others facing similar challenges and thus, finding strength in community. To express this, Krissy shared a photograph of chopsticks that they titled, Broken but Holding on (image 18). In discussing the image Krissy and the group described the strength and resiliency that they experienced as non-binary young people.

Through their SHOWeD analysis Krissy shared, “Being non-binary, for me, takes all my past experiences and traumas and lets me know I am still important… I use my gender to validate other people.” Krissy also noted a recommendation for others; “You can realize you are strong even if you feel broken.”

**Research Question 2: How do non-binary young adults come to identify their gender?**

Outside of critical inquiry, it is not common to examine how one comes to identify as cisgender, as male, female, or as heterosexual. As such, I approach addressing this question cautiously. The inquiry is not rooted in the assumption that to identify as non-binary is to engage in a process so seemingly “deviant” from the norm that it warrants a unique investigation; nor is it to inadvertently normalize cisgender experiences at the expense of transgender ones. Rather,
rooting myself in Bem’s (1981) and Butler’s (1990) notions of learning gender and gender preformativity, this study sought to explore how, within the pervasiveness of binarism, young people come to develop an understanding of their non-binary gender. In other words, how do young people form identities and identity meanings that resist and transform hegemonic gender paradigms?

In addition to examining the development and construction of a non-binary identity, I am particularly interested in this process as it relates to adolescence and young adults. Citing Tharinger and Wells (2000), Glover, Galliher and Lamere (2009) describe adolescence as a “critical period” during which young people are “…expected to negotiate developmental tasks including forming a cohesive sense of self, achieving autonomy while maintaining belongingness, and demonstrating independence while balancing being supported” (p. 78). Continuing, Glover, Galliher and Lamere (2009) note that since such tasks are frequently accomplished through social comparison to others and dominant cultural expectations, young people who experience an identity that does not conform to heteronormative (or the case of the present research, cisnormative and binaristic) expectations may face a unique trajectory. Further understanding the identity development-related experiences of those in this study has direct implications for social work practice at all levels. Such an understanding allows providers and practitioners to engage in supportive processes that promote non-binary young people’s ability to engage in healthy and affirming queer identity construction.
Understanding gender and the impact of invisibility. Those whose identity does not fit within socially constructed and dichotomous categories may experience a sense of invisibility as they contend with hegemonic notions of sexuality, gender, and race. Such has been the experience reported by those who hold multiracial identities, are bisexual or gender diverse (Bettez, 2010; Furman, 2017; Pascale-Hague, 2015). Most of the group members discussed barriers that they faced in coming to understand their gender as non-binary. This was largely attributed to the lack of representation of non-binary people in the media and the queer invisibility that gender binarism produces. Participant-researchers described difficulty in making sense of their feelings about gender in the absence of connection with other non-binary people. For most of the group, discomfort living in the world as male or female were experiences that had occurred much earlier in life—that is, prior to when they could conceptualize and intellectualize their experience. Participant-researchers who described this, noted the power of language and the sense of clarity they experienced when they began to have access to non-binary genders (either conceptually or through social representations).

With the photograph titled, *Old Stomping Grounds* (image 19), depicting an empty swing set, Delaney explains their experience of feeling isolation in the absence of non-binary role models. In their SHOWeD analysis Delaney wrote, “Many non-binary people, especially young ones, are terrified of growing up because of a lack of representation that makes it seem as though being non-binary is not something you can do as an adult.” For Delaney, although they had reached a point where they were aware of and comfortable with their non-binary identity and had connected with some other non-binary people, there was still some fear that stemmed from a lack of non-binary visibility (in this case of older adults). These fears were shared by others and referenced by Krissy, who during the exhibit shared,
I haven't met a lot of people who are much older than 25 or 30 that might identify as non-binary. Again, because either they're not still comfortable enough coming out, or they did try to come out and were mistreated.

Invisibility of non-binary older adults, who the group shared they thought were either “in the closet” or made invisible though binaristic assumptions, not only contributed to young people’s sense of isolation but also contributed to cisgender adults’ dismissal of queer and non-binary identities. Victoria explained this by sharing,

Adults see queer young people being "special snowflakes" or wanting to have another trauma or identity to add to their book, or whatever. A lot of adults discredit queer young people, because they always think that we want to be special, we want to add things to our story… I feel like a lot of adults just need to realize that the reason that there's more queer young people is not because there's more of them, it's because we're more okay with accepting who we are and coming out to say who we are.

Group members came to identify as non-binary at different points in their lives. For some they had held a non-binary identity for nearly eight years and others shared that they first identified as non-binary “just a year ago.” Many of the Basement Kids described first beginning to explore and understand their gender as non-binary when they were in high school or early in their college careers, as it was at this time that they had access to other queer people, queer literature, and queer language. During one of the group meetings, participant-researchers engaged in an icebreaker game where they had the chance to share about themselves and answer questions related to the study (game instructions can be found in appendix J). After the game, participant-researchers had the chance to each review the responses to a particular question and share what themes they noticed. As Sarah reviewed responses to a question regarding identity realization, they noted,

A theme was kind of maybe like you kind of already— They didn’t like know what to call their gender, but felt this way and then like the term [non-binary or gender queer] felt like fit for and they like identified with that.
Some group members, like Delaney and Caz, shared that they first began to explore their non-binary identity in middle school. Ty (who was 20 at the time of the study) shared, “I was having issues with gender at age 11 but didn’t have the language to put it until 15. I’ve identified as my current label since 16.” Delaney (21 years old) noted, that although they had identified as non-binary since they were 13, their understanding of what that means, “grows as I grow.”

Several participant-researchers shared that as they began to realize their feelings about gender (and for many their queer sexuality), there was a period of time during which they remained “closeted,” not just to the outside world but to themselves as well. Group members described this to be the result of internalized binarism and when asked what advice they would give their younger selves, responses like, “accept yourself sooner” and “[realize] you don’t have to be cis or het earlier in life.”

**Finding a home in gender.** Many of the participant-researchers found a sense of comfort and belonging once they had access to language and social representations that presented the possibility of being non-binary. Despite the significant examples of discrimination and stigma they faced, the group members were happy with their gender and discussed many of the things they enjoyed most about being non-binary. For several members, like Sarah, coming to understand their gender as non-binary provided a sense of freedom from the rigid gender expectations associated with their assigned sex. Similarly, Krissy explained, “I am allowed to be myself.” During one of the group’s interactive games, Delaney shared that being non-binary had provided them with the opportunity to develop a level of self-reflective introspection they did not think they would have otherwise experienced. Delaney also commented about how their gender informed other parts of their identity in ways that being assigned female and identifying as cisgender may not have. On a worksheet they wrote, “Coming to terms with my [gender] identity
helped me BE GAY and be feminine.” During meetings, others also shared that they felt a degree of comfort being in touch with parts of themselves traditionally labeled as “masculine” or “feminine” once they understood themselves as non-binary. For these group members it was not masculine or feminine expressions or, for some (but certainly not all), their bodies that contributed to feelings of gender dysphoria but social interpretations of their bodies and expressions that produced discomfort.

**Constructing self within a social environment.** Ty shared an untitled self-portrait (image 20) in which they wore clothing and makeup that they felt were symbolic of their gender and their experiential understanding of it. In the image, Ty wears blue clothing that they explain is associated or “aligned with ‘male’ gender.” They also have on makeup resembling green tears. For Ty, the green represents their non-binary gender and the tears are coming from the inside. As such, it was noted by Ty and the group, that while expectations and cultural meanings of all genders are socially constructed, one’s sense of self and of authenticity “comes from the inside.”
For some group members being non-binary meant living a gender absent of a dichotomous male/female binary. For these members, their gender was described as “outside [or beyond] the binary.” Others, like Caz described their gender as something that creatively moved across a spectrum that existed between these categories. To reflect this concept Caz shared a picture of them self holding a “men’s” shirt and a “women’s” dress while they wear a shirt described as “androgynous” (image 21).

When asked to describe their favorite thing about their gender, many group members shared about the feeling of freedom they experienced when they were able to express themselves. Excited by the ability to exist outside of male and female “boxes,” Sarah said that being non-binary meant, “I feel free to express myself.” Delaney elaborated on this,

> When you do something that is gender non-normative in your expression, you do not lose all of your ability to function as a human being. You will be able to function just as well and you'll be a lot happier, so realistically, you're going to function a lot better because you're going to actually feel like you're living honestly.

This sense of openness, creativity and, at times, excitement was shared by the whole group and was emphasized by a photograph Dev shared of a colorfully decorated car (image 21). In discussing the photograph, Dev shared that they enjoyed the freedom they felt in finding ways to outwardly express their gender. In their SHOWeD analysis of the photo Dev noted, “My non-binary identity
gives me a gender expression that is exciting, fluid, and colorful.”

As the group viewed Dev’s photograph they discussed how adopting and altering or “queering” socially constructed symbols that communicate gender (like clothing, hair, etc.) helped create a sense of congruence between identity (the internal sense of self) and outward expression (the outward interaction between self-concept and socio-cultural environment). Further, given the overwhelming sense of invisibility that many in the group reported, the creative self-expression that members described as “freeing” and “exciting” was also a tool used to combat erasure. Group members described such forms of expression as a validating way of being seen and of being able to see others like themselves. In other words, seeing others presenting their queerness and gender through visible forms of expression served as a tool to affirm one’s own gender and provided encouragement for continued self-expression. In discussing the process of making one’s queer sense of their gender visible in the world, the group also noted that a person’s gender identity was not dependent upon or always congruent with their expression. Summarizing a group conversation, Parker commented, “It doesn't matter how I dress or express myself. I'm still non-binary. Even if others think I look binary. However, I can use queer and colorful expressions to present myself to the world in a way that makes me visible and connects me to others.”

Findings summary

The participant co-researchers in this study shared data and their own photovoice research findings. The group’s data and collective findings were then further analyzed using an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach. This analysis revealed findings that describe the ways in which the group experienced support and stigmatization of their gender. The analysis
brings attention to how group members personally came to understand their gender within pervasively binaristic environments.

Much of the data the group shared were coded and organized into the broad theme of factors promoting barriers to identity support and promoting gender-based stigma. Within this theme, secondary themes emerged noting the various sources from which participant co-researchers experienced this stigma. Sources of stigma included broad socio-political structures, local environments, interpersonal interactions, and binarism within LGBTQ communities. Tertiary themes identify the results of binarism and stigma (the following chapter discusses the relationship between secondary and tertiary themes as they mutually influence one another).

Data was also organized to note experiences of identity affirmation. Like the prior broad theme, this theme was organized by secondary and tertiary themes that provided a greater level of detailed attention to the ways group members experienced support and affirmation.

Finally, data was also grouped by three themes organizing the ways group members experienced developing an understanding of their gender. These themes include, understanding gender and the impact of invisibility; finding a home in gender; and constructing self within a social environment. Table 6 (below) offers a summary of key themes from the interpretive phenomenological analysis.

Table 6:

Organization of findings by theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Secondary Theme(s)</th>
<th>Tertiary Theme(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the perceived facilitators and barriers young people experience regarding identity</td>
<td>Factors promoting barriers to identity support and promoting gender-based</td>
<td>Broad socio-political structures</td>
<td>• Pervasive social beliefs</td>
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<td>• Stereotypes</td>
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<td>support and affirmation?</td>
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| Local environments      | • Health, wellness and service access  
|                         | • Physical spaces |
| Interpersonal interactions |   |                 |
| Binarism within LGBT communities | | |
| Experiences of identity affirmation. | Expressions of gender | |
|                         | The use of affirming language | |
|                         | Inclusive communities and spaces | • Inclusive physical spaces  
|                         |                         | • Queer community |
| How do non-binary young adults come to identify their gender? | Understanding gender and the impact of invisibility | |
|                         | Finding a home in gender | |
|                         | Constructing self within a social environment | |
Chapter 6: Discussion of Findings

The young adults who formed the Basement Kids and participated in this project have offered rich and telling perspectives regarding their lived experiences as non-binary people. This arts-based youth participatory action research study has been informed by interpretive phenomenology. Wherein attention is paid not just to the experiences reported by those engaged in the inquiry at hand, but also to the meanings such experiences hold as participants interpret them. In all, this research provides insight into the ways in which non-binary young adults understand and experience their gender, and the ways in which such experiential understandings are both supported and stigmatized as individuals move through their social worlds. Participant co-researchers’ personal stories and art work, coupled with this dissertation’s findings, present opportunities for social work practitioners, researchers and educators to examine their own work and consider the ways in which it promotes and/or hinders the affirmation of transgender and queer identities. The following chapter presents a discussion of key findings in light of established theory and current literature. The discussion focuses on six main themes that have emerged from the study’s findings. (1) The impact of binarism on young people’s process of identity construction and meaning-making; (2) experiences of isolation and erasure; (3) the interaction between socio-political structures; (4) non-binary young people’s experiences navigating oppression; (5) the importance of honoring rich and complex identities; and (6) the importance of peer connectedness.

Binarism, Identity Construction and Meaning-making

The presence of binarism in the lives of the Basement Kids created experiences of isolation and erasure and thus they were excited to reflect on Judith Butler’s work without prompting. River, Delaney, and Dev were all familiar with her contributions to queer and gender
theory. Others in the group, while perhaps not familiar with her by name, were well versed in concepts like *gender performativity* through their own lived experiences of responding to socio-cultural gender expectations while exploring and developing/constructing their own gender identity.

In her book, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*, Namaste (2002) engages a post-structural sociological analysis to examine the ways in which transgender people (and the experiences of their daily lives) are made invisible in medicine, housing, employment, and social service access. She explains, “…transsexuals and transgendered [sic] people are erased from the institutional world as a function of specific policies and administrative practices in health care and social services” (p. 189). Namaste, like the members of the Basement Kids, uses the term “erasure” to denote the phenomenon of transgender people’s invisibility. Transgender erasure is not simply the result of being overlooked but rather, an active construction of a gender paradigm that renders them impossible.

Similarly, Rankin and Beemyn (2012) note that non-binary young people describe unique challenges in coming to understand and embrace their gender when there is an absence of role models and non-binary representations.

Social constructionism illuminates the ways in which identity development (including race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality) does not happen in an organic manner independent of cultural and political processes. Critical theorist further posit that such processes are informed by a rage power structures that often serve to maintain the status quo (Butler, 1999; Foucault, 1978; Lorber, 1994; Ore, 2010). Given that role that social comparison has in the mastery of adolescent developmental tasks (Glover, Galliher & Lamere, 2009), it is important for social workers to consider the ways in which gender invisibility and binaristic socially constructed gender schemas
influence the availability and concretization of a non-binary identity. For participant-researchers in this study, a sense of invisibility appeared to directly impede the ability to construct an embodiment of gender in a way that felt authentic and affirming. This does not suggest that group members experienced an absence of gender identity, nor were they excused from moving through the world in gendered ways. Rather, group members report experiences of performing gender or, as West and Zimmerman (1987) state, “doing gender” (p.126) in ill-fit ways that were perceived as restrictive and inconsistent with their emerging understanding of self. In some cases, group members’ ‘doing gender’ involved expressing soon to be rejected binary identities and in other cases, it meant exploring queered genders that were not quite understood at the time.

In the context of gender performativity (Butler, 1999), binarism reproduces gender structures in ways that reify hegemonic masculinity and femininity as exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Consequently, many group members spent years performing binary genders both as a means for safety and the result of unexamined social assimilation. Processes through which group members engaged in binary gender assimilation were frequently the result of having no access to language or conceptual frameworks of gender that offered non-binary examples. In short, many of the group members spent time assuming (often begrudgingly) that they were young men or women simply because they had not yet had experiences that permitted the conceptualization conceived of a gender outside this paradigm.

When the pervasiveness of binarism results in the practice of individuals interpreting one anothers’ gender as either “male” or “female” non-binary people are not only rendered a seeming impossibility but are also made invisible to one another. This invisibility, while clearly harmful to group members’ psychosocial, spiritual and emotional well-being, also results in obscuring the
very possibility of paradigmatic shift, as non-binary people are routinely misgendered as men and women (thus perpetuating the notion of a binary).

Binarism and transphobia negatively impact both cisgender and transgender people. The idea of stigma and prejudice adversely affecting dominant groups is not a new concept. Blumenfeld (1992) discusses the ways in which homophobia and sexism discourages intimate relationships between heterosexual members of the same sex, and reinforces strict gender roles. Straying from gender-related social norms can result in fear of being perceived as LGB.

Similarly, in River’s presentation of the image *Spheres* (image 4, p. 93), depicting a bowl containing several colored globes, and in the group’s subsequent discussion about the work, attention was brought to the restrictive impact binarism plays in the gender exploration and expression of all people. To illustrate this type of restriction, the group members offered an invitation to consider the possibility that many more people in our society may in fact be transgender or non-binary. It may be that limited access to the range of gender possibilities leads to incomplete schemas that prohibit people from fully comprehending the many gender possibilities present. Many others may in fact find a home and a sense of authenticity in being non-binary but do not even know that the possibility exists.

The availability or absence of social representations and schemas with which to understand and further conceptualize one’s non-binary gender can be understood through the lens of social constructionist theory. Broadly speaking, theorists posit that categories like race, class, sex, and gender are created within a social and political context. Although one’s experiences moving through the world holding identities within each of these (and other) social categories may yield very real and tangible consequences related to privilege and subjugation (i.e. racial profiling, economic disparity, access to social power, etc.), the social categories
themselves are a function of institutional and inter-personal processes that construct notions of categorical difference (Ore, 2010; Butler, 1990).

Through a process involving externalization, objectivation, and internalization (see page 25 for more details), Berger and Luckmann (1967) argue that socio-cultural expectations regarding the essentialist nature of aptitudes, interests and abilities among various groups are projected onto and adopted by members of a society. Consequently, an “in-group” and “out-group” mentality develops and one comes to understand their social identity (and those of others) in a contrasting manner that emphasizes differences (Goffman, 1963) that inevitably become actualized through socialization (Ore, 2010). Queer and feminist theories (e.g. Butler, 1999 Lorber, 2010) have suggested sex and gender categories develop within a patriarchal framework that function to justify unequal distributions of power among a gender hierarchy (with men and masculinity existing at the “top”).

Considering this study’s findings within the context of social constructionists’ theories of sex and gender, not only does the absence of non-binary representation result in barriers to one conceptualizing their identity as such but such hegemonic views of gender function to contribute to what Andersen and Collins (2004) refer to as a “matrix of domination” in which not only is there a male/female social hierarchy but also a cisgender/transgender stratification. Within this social framework, it is suggested that being cisgender is a normative state, whereas being transgender is seen as a deviation from this assumed state of normalcy. In contrast, this research supports the idea that all gender is socially constructed and that being cisgender is simply one particular way of doing gender that (like all genders) results from Berger and Luckman’s (1967) process of learning and internalizing social identity.
Isolation and erasure

Like the participant-researchers in this study, prior literature has noted non-binary people experiencing a sense of isolation compounded by erasure both outside of and from within LGBTQ communities and also specifically among transgender peers (Budge, Rossman & Howard, 2013; Losty & O’Connor, 2017; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). Similarly, the Basement Kids stressed that while some transgender men and women may experience gender-affirmation through accessing gender-segregated physical and social spaces (men and women’s restrooms, gender clubs, etc.), such spaces present obstacles for non-binary people. These “male” and “female” spaces can result in non-binary young people experiencing discomfort, compromised safety, and invisibility (such experiences are also reported by Matsuno & Budge, 2017; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). These considerations were central to the group’s desire to see transgender justice work focus on transformative liberation and not simply gender assimilation. In doing so, the group envisioned a world where all transgender people, not just those who passed as being cisgender, could be safe and affirmed.

This study’s findings related to non-binary invisibility support the similar findings offered within prior literature (Furman, 2017; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012) while also emphasizing the importance of non-binary social and media representations that reflect non-binary experiences across the lifespan. Delaney’s work, Old Stomping Ground (image 19, p.120, depicting an empty swing set) articulates the group’s collective sense of feeling as though there is an absence of opportunities to imagine what future chapters of their lives might look like as non-binary people. Further, researchers must consider the impact of literatures that largely reflect LGBTQ people in a deficit and risk-oriented manner (Wagaman, 2015) as such approaches may leave little room to conceptualize alternative narratives or social realities.
During one group meeting, after participant-researchers shared about what advice they would give their younger selves, Krissy noted, “I heard people say, realize you're queer sooner—and I know it’s hard.” Reviewing commonalities across group members’ data, it is evident that what Krissy describes as “hard” is both the coming to realize one’s identity absent applicable gender frameworks and language, and the general difficulty of being non-binary in a cisnormative and binaristic world. The group members’ shared desire to normalize being non-binary to their younger selves supports other findings highlighting the isolation experienced when one does not have access to social representation or a peer group who shares their identity (Austin, 2016; Austin & Goodman, 2017). In imagining themselves re-visiting their childhood, the Basement Kids became a fictional version of the gender role model they themselves had been denied. Serving as a positive role model to others (though not specifically in a way related to gender) has been linked to transgender adults’ perceived experiences of resilience when navigating oppression (Singh, 2011). Notably, the participant co-researchers emphasized the importance of having a gender role model whenever the group discussed their desire to plan a future exhibit that could be shared with younger transgender and non-binary people.

**The interaction between multiple socio-political structures**

Returning to the themes previously discussed in chapter 5, it becomes evident that the ever present and pervasive forces of social and political binarism that were described by group members mutually influence/reinforce one another. Figure 3 (below) illustrates this interaction. In this figure, binaristic views of gender create social frameworks for understanding gender that relegate non-binary as being nonexistent/invisible.

These binaristic views and related non-binary invisibility each support non-binary stereotypes. In other words, when there is little-to-no understanding or visibility of non-binary
people, stereotypes persist. As the group noted, these stereotypes often assume that non-binary people are white, assigned female at birth, and androgynous. They may also perpetuate the assumption that all non-binary people are exploring a “gender phase” or are confused. These assumptions and stereotypes make those that do not reflect increasingly invisible (e.g. non-binary people of color, those who are assigned male at birth, etc.), thus reinforcing and perpetuating binary constructions of gender. Figure 3 depicts the relationship between these socio-cultural structures.

Figure 3. The relationship between the socio-political structures experienced by group members.

Navigating Oppression

This study’s findings, particularly those focusing on the ways in which group members feel their gender identities are not supported, contribute to the current literature focused on transgender people’s experiences of transphobia and “genderism” (as described by, Hill &
Willoughby, 2005). While the group certainly offered examples of blatant harassment and systematic discrimination, much of what they shared can be understood as forms of microaggressions. Microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups” (Nadal, 2008 p. 23). Focus group data from nine transgender men and women revealed twelve types of microaggressions: (1) use of transphobic and/or incorrectly gendered terminology, (2) assumption of universal transgender experience, (3) exoticization, (4) discomfort/disapproval of transgender experience, (5) endorsement of gender-normative and binary culture or behaviors, (6) denial of existence of transphobia, (7) assumption of sexual pathology or abnormality, (8) physical threat or harassment, (9) denial of individual transphobia, (10) denial of bodily privacy, (11) familial microaggressions, and (12) systemic and environmental microaggressions (Nadal, Skolnik & Wong, 2012, p.64).

Many of their findings noted above align with experiences reported by the non-binary young people participating in this photovoice study. Of note, group members reported both systemic and environmental microaggressions, as well as those from family members. The Basement Kids also provided several examples that, like Nadal, Skolnik, and Wong’s participants, illustrated incorrect gender language; the assumption of a singular or universal transgender experience (particularly when they were expected to be the de-facto experts on all gender and transgender-related topics in school); and assumptions of pathology (namely by medical and mental health providers).

Building upon the current literature regarding transgender discrimination broadly and microaggressions specifically, this study illustrates the ways in which non-binary people may
face many of the same challenges as their binary transgender peers, while also facing additional difficulties resulting from a lack of social awareness of non-binary people and of binarism. This is specifically illustrated by group members’ reports of facing rejection from both cisgender and transgender people, and of being misgendered even when someone may be attempting to acknowledge their transgender identity, but fail to conceptualize the possibility of being transgender while not identifying as a man or woman.

While not wishing to ignore the unique differences between experiences related to racial and ethnic identity, sexuality and gender, the group’s experiences of invisibility and their navigation of oppression have notable similarities to those reported by others facing racial and/or sexual marginalization. Specifically, other scholars have noted the ways in which those with bisexual and/or mix-race identities often experience conflicted insider and outsider status among other more clearly and categorically defined social groups, and navigate social environments in which they face identity invisibility (Bettez, 2010; Bradford, 2004; Pascale-Hague, 2015; Renn, 2003). Bettez (2010) draws parallels between Butler’s theoretical perspectives on gender construction and those related to race, stating that,

One way of thinking about how racialized subjects are formed is through Judith Butler’s framework of the formation of gendered subjects. In that conception, gender operates through a reiteration of norms and is temporal. If one thinks of race within that framework, then reiterative practices define raced subjects. However, those same practices also simultaneously define out-liers to the norm. Mixed-race women often call into question the legitimacy of race-based identities. As they articulate how they do or do not belong to the specific racial or ethnic categories that they embody, their discourses actively define, reify, and disrupt race cultures (p. 161).

Similarly, non-binary people may see themselves as belonging to all, none or multiple gender categories and thus disrupt cisnormativity, binarism, and gender essentialism

Group members noted the lack of support they experienced when they felt tokenized. Like Nadal, Skolnik, and Wong’s (2012) microaggression category assumption of universal
transgender experience, participant co-researcher’s in this study described feeling tokenized when their transgender experience or gender was forcibly used as a teaching opportunity for others. In those instances, the complexity of individual experiences is reduced solely to one’s gender. Those initiating such tokenism (namely, college professors) seemed to expect those in this study to speak on behalf of all transgender people and provide a well-justified and detailed description of what it means to be non-binary. These exchanges were seemingly intended to enrich the learning environment of others with little consideration to the emotional labor and vulnerability they demanded of participants. These findings echo what has been presented through Furman’s (2017) arts-based research with non-binary people. Furman notes, “Tokenism encompasses when trans-identified people are put in positions where they are expected to educate others about their experiences of transness. Participants felt that tokenism is harmful because trans individuals are not being compensated for the time, effort, and emotional energy they expend while educating others” (p.64).

This study’s findings, related to the experiences of navigating stigma and oppression, bring attention to the Basement Kids’ experiences of binarism manifesting in their daily lives and social environments. Figure 4 (below) illustrates the ways which group members described the aforementioned interaction between socio-political structures and the everyday impact of such processes. For group members, the cyclical and self-perpetuating nature of socio-political factors producing binarism manifest within: their local environments (including health and human service agencies and their school and work place settings); their experiences within LGBTQ community programs and support groups; and their interpersonal interactions with peers and family members. In turn, experiences within local environments, LGBTQ community spaces, and through interpersonal interactions contribute to the reinforcement of binarism.
In summary, the impact of these binaristic socio-political structures resulted in the Basement Kids reporting challenges to maintaining visibility in cisgender, heterosexual and LGBTQ spaces where binarism was present. Gender invisibility, especially among participants of color, those assigned male at birth and those that do not present androgynously, was perpetuated by social adherence to non-binary stereotypes. Such invisibility served as a barrier to developing community connectedness. Finally, whether visible or invisible, group members often found themselves educating others about their gender. The experiences reported by group members and the conceptual models presented in this dissertation bare similarities to findings reported on the experiences of bisexual identity development, invisibility and community connectedness (see Pascale-Hague, 2015 p. 6-14 for a summary).
Binarism’s influence on participant co-researchers’ daily lives

Fig 4. Group members’ local environments, community experiences and interpersonal interactions were all influenced by pervasive binarism.

Rich and Complex Identities

Presenting findings from a photovoice dissertation, Hill (2016) stresses that, “there is no singular transgender experience or narrative” (p.253) and Matsuno and Budge (2017) note that the term “non-binary” itself reflects a wide range of identities that fall outside of the dichotomous gender binary. The findings of this study bring attention to not only the many different ways that non-binary people experience and understand their gender, but also the diversity that non-binary people hold beyond that of their gender. The participant-researchers in this study represented diverse experiences across race, ethnicity, and ability status. Findings suggest the importance in recognizing non-binary experiences within an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989; Combahee River Collective as cited by Taylor, 2017) and this was
reflected in particular, when group members stressed the ways in which their genders interact with race, ethnicity, physical abilities, and their mental health.

There are many examples of literature stressing the pathological, stigmatizing and reductionist nature of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) diagnoses related to being transgender. Some of these works emphasize the ways in which accessing gender-affirming medical care requires people who are transgender (both binary and non-binary) to adopt false personal narratives that endorse ideas of gender essentialism and monolithic problem-saturated ideas of what it means to be transgender (Lev, Cosgrove & Crumley, 2018; Spade, 2003). Adding to these concerns, this study brings attention to the ways in which non-binary young people may have to not only adjust their narratives around gender to access such care but also, either hide or prioritize various elements of their identity and experience to access the gender, medical, mental health services, or social supports they need. Participant-researchers in this study shared stories of pretending to be binary or cisgender to access medical care and mental health care for fear that should a provider know about their gender, their presenting needs would not be taken as seriously or that their gender would become the undesired focus of treatment. Participants of color shared about how they sometimes felt they had to decide whether they wanted their racial and ethnic identities or their gender to be the point of focus in both social and human service forced interactions.

Peer Connectedness

Young LGBTQ people experience psychological and social benefits when connected to peers who share similar identities and experiences (Lee, 2002; Mayberry, 2006; Singh, 2013; Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011; Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2014). The findings of this study support this idea, as the group members often spoke of the value of peer relationships and noted
the ways in which relationships promoted a better understanding of their personal experiences and reduced isolation.

The findings also offer two unique contributions. First, this research brings attention to experiences of non-binary exclusion from both LGB and transgender spaces. Secondly, participants brought to light the ways in which communities of people who are non-binary can challenge the invisibility they otherwise experience while exploring their identity with others.

While often presented as unified with transgender peers towards overlapping political aims, LGB communities are far from free of transphobia. In Stern’s (2012) article, “This is What Pride Looks Like,” published in Scholar and Feminist, Miss Major the veteran Stonewall rioter, life-long activist and transgender woman of color, critiques the mainstream gay rights movement. She states, “I feel like we’ve been pushed to the outside and then prevented from looking in. It’s the stares, the non-inclusion over decision-making, exclusion from events that would build this movement. I think if they could eradicate us, they would.” (Stern, 2012, p. 3). In fact, gay rights advocates have routinely excluded transgender legal protections from LGB-focused legislation in attempts to increase the chances of legislative victories (Talusan, 2016).

The Basement Kids’ experiences echo this legacy of exclusion as well as prior findings that report non-binary people feeling a sense of separation compounded by erasure within their own community – not just within the LGBTQ community at large, but also specifically among transgender peers (Budge, Rossman & Howard, 2013; Losty & O’Connor, 2017; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). This study’s findings, and the personal accounts they represent, emphasize the risk of viewing LGBTQ, and specifically transgender people, in a monolithic manner. While such a paradigm obscures the uniqueness across LGBTQ experiences and identities (particularly when additional identities like race, class, and ability are considered), it also suggests a singular
or collective community that fails to represent those whose experiences are not reflected by those who are cisgender, binary, white, and male. Ultimately, such a lens leaves femmes, non-binary and other transgender people (or any combination thereof) exceedingly marginalized. This may be especially true for those that also hold identities as people of color.

Secondly, the group’s experiences speak to the value in non-binary peer connection while navigating social environments that routinely pathologize or make invisible their gender identities. For the participant co-researchers in this study, attending our group meetings offered the opportunity to be in a social space that was (with the exception of myself) made up entirely of other non-binary people. Group members noted that while this provided the sense of normalization, acceptance and camaraderie that one might expect, it also offered an environment where the group members felt they could explore their identity, examine their experiences, and exercise creative self-expression without the fear that they were, despite being in a study, “under a microscope” or as though their actions and thoughts would be taken to represent all transgender and non-binary people.

Unlike their school, work, and (in some cases) family environments, group meetings were not a site of pathologization, personal critique, or a space where members felt as though they needed to justify or “over explain” their gender. Group members contrasted hostile, pathologizing, and tokenistic experiences with those they had in our research meetings. Member feedback suggests that some of this sense of comfort was due to research design and meeting facilitation (discussed in the next section), largely a result of being surrounded by those who understood, despite intra-group differences, on a personal level what others were experiencing. As Hill (2016) notes, “Being transgender in a world designed by and for cisgender people is an emotionally exhausting experience, taking its toll on a person’s emotional, psychological, and
physical state” (p. 242). Members of our photovoice group stressed the emotional labor that is often required of non-binary people and they welcomed the opportunity to connect with peers, share experiences and reflect upon their similarities and differences.

**Discussion Summary**

Situated within critical feminist and queer theory, and building upon the current body of transgender and non-binary research literature, the findings of this study offer unique contributions to the body of knowledge needed to best understand diverse gender identities. Through a social constructivist lens, this work notes the impact of binarism on identity construction and meaning making (stressing the impact of limited gender schemas and non-binary social representations available to young people). This absence of representation not only serves as a barrier to non-binary identity development, but it also contributed to the experiences of isolation and erasure faced by this study’s participant co-researchers. Invisibility and erasure resulting from binarism further reproduce cissexism and (through continuing to limit non-binary social representations) reinforce binarism itself. This process seems most often to be the result of interactions between multiple socio-political structures (e.g. binaristic views of gender, gender stereotypes, and non-binary invisibility) and necessitates non-binary young people needing to navigate oppressive social environments.

Review of this study’s findings suggests the importance of honoring rich and complex identities held by non-binary people. In doing so, one is able to affirm diverse gender identities while not assuming gender to be the totality of a non-binary person’s experience. Finally, in an effort to reduce isolation and erasure (and the negative mental health consequences they contribute to), non-binary peer connectedness is of significant importance. Such connectedness can challenge isolation while also providing the types of social representations of non-binary
gender that many participant co-researchers report are missing. Consequently, these connections can contribute to integrated understandings of one’s own non-binary gender.
Chapter 7: Process Reflections

Other authors have urged researchers (particularly those who are cisgender) to consider the ways in which transgender people may experience objectification and further marginalization through scientific inquiry and thus adopt methodologies that engage empowerment practices (Hill, 2007; Namaste, 2002). With this charge in mind, this study aimed to not only explore the lived experiences of non-binary young adults, but also examine the ways arts-based PAR can support the identification of social problems faced by transgender and non-binary young people. Although this project was not designed as an intervention study, photovoice group members spent time reflecting on their engagement in the project and discussing the impact they felt their time in the group had on them. One group member with an interest in the “hard sciences” and quantitative research shared at the conclusion of our final meeting, “I was sort of judgmental towards photovoice as a research method at first, but my opinion has wholly changed due to this project! I have a new-found respect for qualitative research.” Others, while perhaps not as skeptical, voiced an appreciation for their time in the group and the processes that we engaged in together.

Having concluded a discussion of this research’s findings in the previous chapter, I now turn to a discussion of the research processes itself. As a PAR study, the findings are but one important component of the project. In fact, Herr and Anderson (2015) advocate for an evaluation of PAR to be largely based upon process-related factors. In this chapter I argue that this research utilized creative expression to promote conscientization and bring attention to social problems faced by non-binary young adults. Drawing from a rich tradition of YPAR, this work can also be understood within the context of PYD and its strength-based approach to
supporting young people’s development, self-esteem and community belonginess (Barber & Rainer, 2011; Kennedy, 2018; Lerner 2005; Mirra et al., 2015). In the following sections, I outline how work of this nature can promote individual and social transformation through its ability to support a sense of belonging among group members and its capacity to function as a tool of social action. Finally, I posit that PAR with marginalized communities is a process that engages social work values in important ways.

The value of creative expression. Creative engagement in the arts has been found to enhance emotional and psychological states (Heenan, 2006; Staricoff, 2006). In discussing their PAR and theater-based work with LGBTQ young people, Wernick, Woodford and Kulick (2014) argue that “storytelling” can help participants connect with others and understand their experiences navigating heterosexist and genderist environments. Although not theater-based, the photovoice process also engages a storytelling process and promotes similar possibilities.

After conducting a systematic literature review of the therapeutic value of arts-based interventions, Stuckey and Noble (2010) report that although there is a need for additional research, data suggest that engagement in arts-based activities (including movement-based expression, creative writing, visual arts, and music) can have positive impacts on mental health and mood.

Potash and Ho (2011) describe art within the context of human relationships stating that art is, “a creative encounter whereby art serves [as] a facilitator between the artist and viewer—even in the absence of each other” (p.74). The authors go on to note that such connections are beneficial in terms of building empathy, pro-social behavior, and social change-oriented action due to, “[the] biological mechanisms of mirror neurons that allow people to access and imagine the feeling states of others.” (Gallese, 2008 as cited by Potash & Ho, 2011, p.74). Building a
connection between art therapy, specifically, and social change efforts, Hocoy (2005) suggests that,

One way in which social action and art therapy are linked is through the versatility and power of the image. Social action is ultimately predicated on the relationship between personal and collective suffering, and the image has the unique ability to bring to consciousness the reality of a current collective predicament, as well as the universality and timelessness of an individual’s suffering.

Such concepts as art as a personally beneficial tool, and one capable of informing and inspiring action, were made evident throughout the Basement Kids’ time in our photovoice group. While a small number of group members reported the photo taking process to be challenging due to the difficulty they experienced trying to “get a point across” or trying to represent an experience that was not visible, all group members provided positive feedback about their engagement with PAR (in a broad sense) and photovoice as a specific arts-based approach. Of note, several group members expressed the value they experienced in having a creative outlet. One member explained that they enjoyed, “turning both happiness and negative aspects into art”, while another shared that they liked “turning something abstract into information that says something important about my experience.” Finally, suggesting the empowering nature of arts-based inquiry and expression, another participant co-researcher shared that the photovoice process, “allowed me to show who I am.”

**Promoting conscientization.** While engaging a group of LGBTQ young adults in a PAR project examining bigotry within LGBTQ communities, Wagaman (2015) collected process related data aimed at understanding the value that PAR holds for social service delivery. Reporting the study’s findings, Wagaman notes that PAR can increase participant-researcher self-awareness, critical consciousness regarding power dynamics, and can provide an empowering experience as group members engage in leadership roles. LGBTQ young people’s
engagement in group-based activities that explore issues of isolation and harassment can promote a political and contextual understanding of experiences as not just individually focused, but as the result of broader injustice and oppression (Wernick, Kulick & Woodford, 2014).

Similarly, a photovoice study engaging women from Madrid, Spain in an examination of their local food environment (Budig, Diez, Conde, Sastre, Hernan, & Franco, 2018) and a CBPR project addressing food insecurity in the USA (Jacobson & Rugeley, 2007), both reported a development in a critical awareness of community, power, and social problems, as well as individual and group empowerment and self-awareness.

Photovoice has been conceptualized and utilized as a tool useful in practicing Freire’s (1970/2014) “problem-posing pedagogical approach” to education (Bozlak, 2010). Citing Shor (1992) Bozlak (2010) explains, “The key to problem-posing pedagogical approaches is to ask the students [in this case co-researchers] key questions to situate themselves within the issue and define it for each other and themselves” (p. 239). Throughout the duration of this study’s data collection and group-based analysis, attention was paid to activities as a means to answer research questions, and also to consider the implications that this methodology might hold in regards to future work. Such work may focus more specifically on the experiences those facing binarism, as well as social and institutional racism, non-binary experiences within LGBTQ community spaces, or other projects that aim to build both social work knowledge and advance activism.

Throughout this project, the Basement Kids engaged in a series of activities that supported their own self-examination as well as the development of a critical consciousness regarding genderism and binarism. While many participant-researchers joined the group with an interest and a great deal of experience critically examining social structures and practices related
to the construction of a dichotomous gender binary, the process of group-based discussions fostered the process of conscientization (Freire, 1970) as group members analyzed their experiences within the context of increasingly understanding them as shared and collective vs. individual. Describing the process of conscientization, Jacobson and Rugeley (2007) note, “group members connect their personal troubles to powerful social, political, and economic systems and they re-evaluate their tendency to internalize society’s messages that simplify problems to individual failings alone” (p. 30).

One such activity that supported these processes was engaged as group members participated in their first viewing of one another’s photographs and SHOWeD analysis worksheets. Participant co-researchers were invited to reflect on one another’s work and provide responses and feedback on small notes. While initially envisioned as a way to gather additional data from group members, this activity proved to be one of the most meaningful for the group. These notes contained comments connecting the individual’s experience or ideas to those shared by others by stating things like, “this happened to me too” or “that’s how I feel”; other comments praised one another’s reflections and complemented group member’s insights. In fact, these notes were so important to group members that when they were offered the opportunity to take copies of their photographs home after our meetings, no one was interested (they had electronic copies), but almost everyone wanted to keep the notes associated with their work.

**Supporting a sense of satisfaction and belonging.** Like the note exercise described above, formal activities (including ice-breaker games, facilitated discussions, data analysis) and those that were more informal (e.g. casual conversations over pizza) all supported an environment in which group members felt a sense of belonging. Group members reported
feelings of satisfaction in knowing that their efforts were part of a collective action that was promoting increased transgender and non-binary visibility.

A sense of belonging has been associated with identity strength and mental health well-being among transgender men, women and non-binary people (Barr, Budge & Adelson, 2016) and may serve as a protective factor against suicidal ideation for LGB young adults (Hill, Rooney, Mooney & Kaplow, 2017). Similarly, a recent study of both binary and non-binary transgender young adults found that a sense of thwarted belongingness was linked to both suicidal ideation and attempts (Grossman, Park & Russell, 2016). As discussed previously, members in this study reported that belonging to a group made up of other non-binary people was in-and-of itself a rewarding part of the project and many described this social connection as something that directly combated the isolation and invisibility they often felt. The group also noted the sense of empowerment they experienced after holding their photo exhibit and sharing their experiences and findings with community activists and service providers. One group member noted that the project was, “good for my gender affirmation.” As reported by Wernick, Kulick and Woodford (2014), a similar sense of empowerment has resulted from LGBTQ young peoples’ use of creative approaches to educate others and affect change.

An approach for social action. Reflecting on prior experiences, group members noted the ways in which they had previously participated in transgender-focused community education and social action. Many of the participant co-researchers shared that they had experienced a sense of “burnout” doing this work, largely due to the high level of “emotional labor” it required. According to group members, this occurred when they were asked to speak in a way that suggested their experience represented that of all transgender and non-binary people, or when they were asked to share about themselves in ways that serviced what they perceived to be a
voyeuristic curiosity. These types of actions were utilized formally and informally by LGBTQ rights organizations, as well as community service agencies and higher education institutions. While such approaches presented opportunities for others to develop an increased awareness about gender diversity, they were not sustainable ways of supporting the non-binary advocates. Subsequently, group members reported feeling depleted and like there was very little offered that supported their own comfort, growth, or well-being. In many ways, group members reported feeling used.

In contrast to the experiences described above, members of the Basement Kids described feeling like the work they were doing as part of photovoice was mutually beneficial (to them and their photo exhibit guests). The process was rewarding and enjoyable as they had the chance to connect with peers and build nourishing relationships. Furthermore, the collaborative and participatory approach this project took resulted in group members feeling less objectified than they described feeling through other forms of activism and research. All but one group member reported that they would like to participate in similar projects in the future. At the time of this writing, I am working with group members to plan a second exhibit that will be made available to younger transgender youth (with the hopes of promoting identity visibility) and a workshop that will share our findings at a transgender-focused conference.

**Engagement and expression of social work values.** Participatory approaches to research, and photovoice in particular, have been described as being a positive experience for study participants and holding the potential to enhance community awareness of social issues (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010; Wagaman, 2015; Wernick, Woodford, & Kulick, 2014). The potential PAR holds for both individual and community-based transformation, along with its commitment to local knowledge, shared decision-making, and its attention to participant
worth and dignity, situate it as a methodology well aligned with social work values (Altpeter, Schopler, Galinsky & Pennell, 1999; Barbera, 2008; Newman & McNamara, 2016). In addition to social work and PAR’s philosophical alignment, other scholars have noted the ways in which their compatibility encourages a complementary relationship between research and practice (Bradbury & Reason, 2003; Lawson, et al., 2015).

Although the ethical alignment between participatory action research and social work may seem to be self-evident, PAR is rooted in a tradition of de-centering authoritative and expert approaches to knowledge generation (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Lawson, 2015). As such, its critical and egalitarian orientation may in fact find itself at odds with social work’s ongoing professionalization, reliance on positivist notions of evidence-based practice, and use of approaches to service that are increasingly reflective of a medical model of care. As the field of social work responds to the demands of neoliberalism, it finds itself adopting “market logic” by placing increasing value on the efficient achievement of economically-driven outcomes (Schram & Silverman, 2011), while focusing more on individual responsibility and less on the contextual and social forces (Liebenberg, Ungar & Ikeda, 2015; Schram & Silverman, 2011). In fact, PAR’s movement from articulation of social justice values towards their enactment may be a means for social workers to return to their historical activist roots.

Summary

Concluding this study, I believe that arts-based PAR with non-binary young adults presents social work researchers with the opportunity to deeply engage their professional values, specifically those pertaining to a commitment to social justice, the importance of human relationships, and respecting the dignity and worth of individuals. Further, these approaches draw upon the value of creative expression, promote the development of critical social
awareness, and support a sense of group member belonging. For those in this study, such experiences and the sense of connectedness they felt presented a model for engaged and sustainable social action.

For individuals who have experienced systematic marginalization, isolation and erasure, critical and group-based work can support a dialectical process that is as healing as it is informative. As suggested by scholars and activists like Freire (1970) and Boal (1993), such processes can shift participant perspective from the ways in which they individually experience injustice and towards the collective experience of the phenomenon. Consequently, problems can be understood not as personal deficits, but as structural and socio-political injustices.
Chapter 8: Study Implications

The following offers a brief summary of key points related to social work practice, education and research, and possible implications of the findings. In offering this discussion, I present my suggested implications with a degree of caution and with skepticism of concepts such as “best practices” and prescriptive “next steps.” Each of these common colloquial frames suggest a degree of certainty, authority, and absoluteness that fail to align with the questioning uncertainty of a “queered” practice. Embracing the uncertainty, the purpose of this section is for readers to consider the unique ways in which they might integrate findings into their own practice communities, while also inviting a space for continued critical examination. The chapter (and ultimately, this dissertation) concludes with a review of limitations and a final conclusion.

First and foremost, this study presented the opportunity for participant co-researchers to connect with one another and critically examine specific experiences within the context of arts-based research. Through such activities, co-researchers collectively developed an understanding of issues related to identity construction, its interaction with the social world, and how issues of power relate to such experiences. Based upon self-report, members found the project and its activities to have a positive impact on their experiences related to identity understanding and expression.

Building upon prior literature focusing on social constructionism and gender theory (Bem, 1981; Butler, 1999 2009; 2011; Ore, 2010), this work contributes to scholarly efforts to fill a void in social, cultural, and political awareness regarding both non-binary people as well as incomplete, reductionist, rigid, and harmful social conceptualizations of gender. Participant co-researchers’ experiences in the group facilitated opportunities to not only discuss and examine gender-based experiences but also, actively engage in making meaning of such experiences.
Group members noted that given the general absence of non-binary social representations, the research setting itself (which was made up of other non-binary people) provided a space in which group members could actively and consciously participate in the intentional construction of their personal and unique genders.

Gender theorist Judith Lorber (2010) notes the ways in which gender functions as a process stating that, “In social interaction throughout their lives, individuals learn what is expected, see what is expected, act and react in expected ways, and thus simultaneously construct and maintain the gender order” (p.116). Noting the contributions of Butler (1999), Lorber continues by advancing the idea that through such a gender process, individuals either “produce” gender by acting in ways aligned with what they have learned to be expected, or by “rebelling” against such norms (p. 116). For those in this study, a gender rebellion was central to their individual and collective experiences, and yet the binary system against which they were rebelling obscured the possibility of their very existence by advancing a gender system in which being anything but a man or woman was an unconceivable impossibility.

In addition to being a process, Lorber (2011) posits that gender is also a stratification system that functions to segregate people into distinct and dichotomous gender classes. Within this class system, men maintain higher social status and are regularly viewed as the dominant ruling class, with degrees of power and privilege varying by other factors like race and ethnicity. This system of gender stratification is disrupted and troubled by the existence of non-binary people who cannot be readily classified. Still, the group’s attention to the common assumption that all non-binary people were assigned female at birth, suggests that dominant binaristic and sexist social paradigms may consequently regulate non-binary people to the category of “woman” or “feminine.” In doing so, social perception may endorse the cisnormative and
transphobic assumption that non-binary people are women rebelling against femininity (but woman nonetheless). At the same time, such a paradigm further erases the experiences of non-binary people who were assigned male at birth or intersex. Undoubtedly, further research is needed to explore these social processes, their function, and etiology.

This research presents the opportunity to offer an increasingly queered understanding of both gender and sexuality. Such an understanding is of benefit to social work education, practice, and policy, as its absence promotes the reinforcement of essentialist and problematized understandings of human identity, sexuality, and relationships. Too often, the promotion of sexual and gender rights is advanced through the promotion of “normative” narratives guided by the goal of assimilation. In this manner, the tyrannical myth of normalcy prevails and radical social change, critical transformation, and abolition of oppressive systems succumb to the illusion of progress, while the very paradigms and social structures that produce inequality remain intact. In fact, to truly make social services affirming and accessible, practitioners and policy makers must problematize the very social paradigms that recreate the notions of who is appropriate, deserving, or eligible of care.

**Social Work Practice**

The findings of this study suggest ways to improve both micro and macro practice with non-binary people and communities. Given the high percentage of transgender people who identify as non-binary (James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet, & Anafmore, 2016) and the reported high level of need and demand for social work-related services that transgender people experience, it is essential that practitioners develop a deep and appreciative understanding of gender diversity. While such advancements will be beneficial to transgender individuals, they
will also ensure the profession’s adherence to its core values of the dignity and worth of the individual and social justice.

**Clinical social work.** Those in clinical settings are encouraged to consider the ways in which they can promote non-binary visibility within their agencies and practice settings. They are also advised to develop practices that invite all people (transgender and cisgender) to engage in a critical and reflective examination of gender.

**Promoting visibility and social representation.** A lack of visibility and representation were among the chief ways in which group members felt stigmatized. Clinicians and direct-practice workers should be sure that their clinical intake forms, bio-psycho-social-spiritual assessments, and all related paperwork offer opportunities for clients to indicate a non-binary identity. Furthermore, these forms should avoid cisnormative language. For example, when gender options include “man” or “woman” contrasted by “transgender man” and “transgender woman”, there is a perpetuation of the idea that trans people aren’t “real” men and women. Similarly, practitioners should consider whether or not a client’s status as a transgender or cisgender person is relevant or needed for the care and services they are requesting and avoid collecting such data arbitrarily. If it is important to know whether a client is transgender, it is also important to know if one is cisgender and wording should be structured to reflect this. To do otherwise is to suggest that cisgender people are simply and authentically their gender and transgender people are not, which is an act of cisnormative violence and suggests the services one may receive at an agency are not transgender-affirming. An example of an inclusive gender questionnaire is offered in appendix Q.

The use of gender-affirming language, the sharing of and request for gender pronouns, and the readiness to provide referrals to transgender and non-binary-related services and support
is recommended. Asking clients about, and then subsequently using, the pronouns that affirm their gender signals a clinician’s critical thinking about gender, their avoidance of assumptions, and their commitment to respecting their client’s identity. When inquiring about pronouns and using transgender-affirming language, clinicians are urged to do so with all clients, not just those they know to be or assume to be transgender and/or non-binary. Additionally, clinicians are encouraged to share their own pronouns, as it normalizes the experience, promotes a more egalitarian working relationship, and can model this behavior for those unfamiliar with it.

Engaging in such inquiry can be as simple as stating something along the lines of, “Hi, my name is Darren. My pronouns are he, him, and his. Is there a name you’d like me to use for you? Could you tell me what gender pronouns you use to refer to yourself?” Doing this with all clients allows providers to offer an opportunity to learn more about them and signals awareness of gender diversity. Inquiring about this with all clients also helps us avoid assumptions about who is transgender and who is cisgender. For transgender clients, this can be an affirming experience and if it causes any confusion or discomfort among cisgender clients, clinicians may find benefit in using the exchange as an opportunity for learning by explaining their personal and professional commitment to respecting the gender identities of their clients.

**Peer connectedness.** Visibility may also be enhanced through group programming and group-based supports. As discussed, participant co-researchers noted that their engagement in the study provided a sense of visibility and connectedness to others that reduced feelings of isolation. Similar findings have been reported regarding LGBTQ youth engagement in school and community-based groups (Lee, 2002; Mayberry, 2006). Such group-based interventions may yield clinically positive outcomes and further research in this area is encouraged). Members of this project suggested that promoting visibility is of the upmost importance. Furthermore,
transgender-affirming group therapy offered within a social justice framework has been suggested as a useful practice modality in working with transgender clients (dickley & Loewy, 2010).

Agencies and community-based organizations that focus on LGBTQ services should be sure that the programming they offer is not only transgender-inclusive but is non-binary inclusive and affirming as well. For providers who do not have LGBTQ-specific programming (e.g. support groups, identity-based clubs, etc.), familiarity with such programs, if they are locally available, is recommended. Providers should be ready to make referrals as a way to support and promote peer connectedness. Peer support groups can serve to connect non-binary young people with others and offer mutual aid and identity-based clubs can offer opportunities to connect those with shared identities while focusing on other activities or interests (e.g. sports, music, or other hobbies).

Supporting gender exploration and creativity. Considering the ways in which non-binary young people may struggle to identify and articulate their sense of gender when denied accessible social representations or frameworks that embrace gender queerness, social workers engaging in direct practice with young people are uniquely positioned to support and encourage gender exploration and reflection. Supporting client self-examination aimed at promoting a critical unpacking of social messages and pressures can help clients understand what their gender means to them, regardless of their gender identity. While the findings from this study suggest this to be a beneficial process for those whose gender is made invisible, such processes may promote a critical awareness for all clients (cisgender and transgender). Bringing intentional attention to the production of gender and gender roles can be valuable to all clients, as it invites the opportunity to be a much more actively engaged and
conscious in one’s own participation in the social construction of gender. As Lorber (2011) has noted, “…everyone ‘does gender’ without thinking about it” (p.114). Clinically focused self-examination provides an opportunity for clients to be reflective and active in the social processes they are inevitably already engaged in. When working with transgender clients, providers must move away from rigid gender assumptions regarding a strictly binary trajectory of trans identity (Lev, Cosgrove & Crumley, 2018). Moreover, in the rejection of previously held assumptions, there is the opportunity to create space for therapeutic guidelines and referrals (e.g. for medical transition related care) to be informed by the voices of the non-binary young people represented in this study.

**Social work and gender affirming medical care.** Counter to the false accusations that such change is cosmetic in nature, gender-affirming care is a medical necessity for many transgender people. Research has found that access to transition-related care has, in fact, had a significant impact on reducing feelings of dysphoria and the psychological stress that accompanies it. Transitioning allows for the opportunity to feel more comfortable in one’s body and this can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression (De Cuypere, Knudson, & Bockting, 2010). Like the broader transgender population, members of The Basement Kids expressed varying desires regarding medically transitioning. While not all in the group wished to pursue transition-related services, they emphasized the importance of insuring access to care as such services are crucial for many.

Social workers may find themselves needing to discuss identity-related documents with clients. Some clients may present for services with a sex indicated on various forms of documentation that does not correspond with their actual gender identity. This may be the result of their state of residence not having a non-binary option for government-issued IDs and
insurance documents, or it may be the result of restrictive processes and costs associated with legally changing documents. For some clients, there may be a medical need to maintain their assigned sex on documentation related to insurance, as some companies will not cover care that is perceived unnecessary based on one’s gender (e.g. not covering a hysterectomy because the client is listed as male). Clients may need social workers to understand the difference between their assigned sex on their documentation and the gender with which they actually identify. In some cases, clients may need social worker support and guidance in navigating challenges related to documentation, or may need social workers to assist them with changing documents if so desired.

Many legal systems rely upon medical information regarding gender in order to recognize the true identities of transgender people and protect their gender-based rights (Gehi & Keisling, 2007; Khan, 2011). Some states require that transgender people undergo varying degrees of medical transitioning prior to legally changing the sex marker on their identification documents. Therefore, for transgender people without access to services, this can result in documents that are not congruent with their gender. This can present difficulties and compromise safety when related forms of identification (e.g. a state issued identification card or license) are required. This is a particular concern when interacting with law enforcement, as police officers are more likely to make an arrest when they are engaged with an individual who does not have identification (Gehi & Keisling, 2007). Consequently, denial of access to such services reinforces risk factors associated with harassment, violence, unemployment, and poverty. Service denial reinforces the insidious relationship between negative mental, physical, social and economic health (Gehi & Keisling, M, 2007).
While some states permit transgender and non-binary people to access gender-affirming hormone treatment through an informed consent model (meaning, there is no need for a mental health care provider’s approval), this process is a barrier for many who find costs prohibitive and require the use of private or state-issued insurance. In many states (including New York), transgender and non-binary people must receive a medically-reimbursable diagnosis in order to have care (specifically hormones and surgeries) covered by Medicaid. This is also true for many private insurance companies. This often results in the need for the individual to meet with a licensed mental health provider for assessment and a DSM-based diagnosis of *gender dysphoria*. Frequently, even when not mandated by insurance companies, the medical service provider who desires the input of a mental health professional requires these processes.

For a profession committed to social justice and self-determination, our clinical role in securing access and acting as a gatekeeper in transgender people’s procurement of gender-affirming medical care is complex. If social workers are committed to an individual’s right to pursue services that have been proven safe and enhance social/emotional/physical wellbeing and, are committed to rejecting the narrative that being cisgender is any more natural than being transgender, then the role of the assessment and application of a psychiatric diagnosis related to transgender experiences becomes increasingly problematic. Although many may benefit from engagement with a social worker, mandated mental health evaluations and diagnoses stigmatize transgender and non-binary people, while ignoring broader social challenges related to an essentialistic and binary gender paradigms (Burdge, 2007; Markman, 2011; Spade, 2003; Lev, Cosgrove & Crumley, 2018. Furthermore,

The very acts of assessment and diagnosis can put mental health providers in the role of gatekeepers, determining what transition-related doors will open or close for clients and access is often governed not only by state and insurance guidelines, but also by
providers’ own biases or assumptions regarding gender (Whitehead et al., 2012, as cited in Lev, Cosgrove & Crumley, 2018 p.27).

Even if social workers suspend a critique of the medicalization of gender and transgender experience, one cannot ignore the presence of binarism within the diagnostic criteria so many must endorse to access care. Through a quick read of the DSM’s criterion, one will note the way in which the authors, while seeming to take an expansive view, use phrases like “the other gender.” Additionally they reify gender essentialism through the suggestion that “rough-and-tumble play” is gender typical for children assigned male.

Thankfully, the American Psychiatric Association (2013) has noted that diagnostic criteria can only be met if an individual is experiencing “clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning” (p.453). This specification recognizes that an interest in gender “a-typical” behaviors, or a rejection of socialized gender norms, does not make one dysphoric, nor does it mean one is transgender. Nonetheless, the need for clinical distress may present a barrier to some transgender people who may not be “distressed” but who still desire medical care for personal or social reasons. In the same vein, the diagnostic criteria fail to adequately recognize that many transgender people (including some in this study) experience distress and compromised functioning not because they have an inherent discomfort with their body, but because they live in a world that medicalizes their body and identity and exhibits pervasive transphobia and cissexism. For these individuals, medical care may be desired not because of an experience of dysphoria, but so that they may navigate their social worlds with reduced threats of violence and harassment. Similarly, Hill (2016) explains,

Some argue being transgender requires experiencing extreme forms of gender dysphoria, but it is not agreed upon what constitutes “extreme.” Additionally, there are some
transgender people who do not experience dysphoria at all. Some transgender people feel whole and complete in their bodies without any forms of medical intervention. Suggesting gender dysphoria is required in order to identify as transgender allows outside forces to determine a person’s gender identity for them, exactly the type of experience most transgender people would affirm their existence works against (p. 255).

Ultimately, the pathologizing and restrictive policies that govern access to gender-affirming medical care are built upon a distrust of transgender people’s ability to make sane and rational decisions regarding their bodies (Lev, 2013). While providers may find themselves in clinical relationships with clients where they find they must engage in a diagnostic process in order to assist in service access, they should do so with critical attention being paid to the social and political beliefs regarding gender that are being reified. Providers must be aware that engaging in gender-related diagnostic practices and participating in processes through which one’s role facilitates access to medical services, may in fact affirm individual client’s genders, while also reinforcing gatekeeping practices that compromise client autonomy and self-determination.

Despite concerns of pathologization, there is a lack of consensus regarding the role of such a diagnosis among providers and advocates, many of whom argue that removal of such a diagnosis may result in compromised access to service, as they may no longer be deemed medically-necessary and thus reimbursable (De Cuypere, Knudson, & Bockting, 2010; Ehrbar, 2009; Ehrbar, 2010). Social workers are encouraged to engage in policy and service redesign towards the improvement of service availability and access. Such work is being done by activist organizations like the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP) in New York. SLRP initiatives that focus on transgender healthcare include coalition letter writing, outreach to the New York State Department of Health, campaign meetings, local grassroots actions, and the distribution of educational materials.
This critique is not to reject or dismiss the very real feelings of dysphoria that many transgender people experience. Rather, it is aimed at bringing attention to the complications and ethical challenges that accompany any attempt to medicalize and standardize the diversity of human experience and expression. Furthermore, the members of this project’s photovoice group discussed their own experiences of dysphoria (noting both feeling gender dysphoric and gender euphoric), but did so in a way that articulated a felt experience as opposed to a standardized clinical diagnosis found in the DSM.

**Organizing and advocacy.** Group members in this study discussed the importance of several current LGB, and transgender specific political efforts, while also commenting on how the norms of such groups and organizations tended to reinforce the ideas that one’s gender had to be either male or female. Much of the mainstream advocacy for transgender rights centers around the experiences and identities of transgender men and women. Such efforts often exclusively center what Cordes (2013) calls the “socially acceptable trans narrative.” Often this narrative reflects the experience of a transgender person feeling “trapped in the wrong body.” While such a narrative does reflect the experience of some transgender people, it is problematic when this becomes the only narrative available. When advocacy is dependent upon such narratives the work may inadvertently promote gender essentialism and leave room only for the transgender people they represent.

Recent media campaigns advocating for transgender people to have access to bathrooms that correspond with their gender have been dependent upon the use of images of transgender men and women who look like stereotypical cisgender men and women. Often, these images are accompanied by statements such as “do you really want me in the [wo]men’s room?” While aimed at promoting transgender rights and justice, such approaches endorse the idea that
transgender people in bathrooms are a risk to others and ignore the experiences of those who do not “pass” as cisgender or binary.

Perhaps most relevant to this study, these approaches overlook the needs of those for whom a men’s room or a women’s room still does not meet their gender needs. In our work together, group members stressed the importance of promoting advocacy efforts and transforming social policies in ways that were not dependent on transgender people’s ability or desire to assimilate into cisgender culture or expectations. Group members seemed skeptical of the effectiveness of “trickle-down social justice”, wherein the rights and protections of some people are prioritized over others. Within LGBTQ advocacy campaigns, the policy and political demands of people who are gay and lesbian garner more attention and resources than do transgender people. Similarly, LGBTQ people who look white are often prioritized over people of color and those who are undocumented.

A “trickle-down” approach occurred in New York State when the Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act was passed in 2003. Originally, the proposed legislation aimed to protect gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people from housing and employment discrimination, but when policy-makers expressed hesitation regarding the inclusion of transgender protections, new strategies were developed and, with the support of many leading advocacy groups, the proposal changed its focus exclusively to sexual orientation (Thorpe, 2019). At the time, advocates argued that once they secured LGB protections, they would focus on those for transgender people. It was not until 2019 that gender identity and expression were included as protected under the state’s hate crime laws. Such approaches to legal protections expect that once more privileged or socially acceptable groups have been awarded rights, the rights will slowly be awarded to others as well. While it can be argued that this is in fact what
happened in New York State, many transgender people and activists felt that the approach suggested transgender rights were less important than those of LGB people.

Critics of assimilation-based and “trickle-down” approaches to LGBTQ rights also argue that such efforts remain dependent on operating within the current sociopolitical structures and do little to transform the very systems that oppress and harm queer and transgender people (Spade, 2015). While those in this study did not explicitly note this, their critiques of assimilation into gender norms as means for accessing support and social acceptance suggest this may be an area for further inquiry.

**Implications for research**

The fourth research question for this study asks, “*In what ways can arts-based PAR support the identification of social problems faced by trans and non-binary young people?*” While I believe this has been addressed throughout this dissertation, I would like to bring explicit attention to some of the key implications I see as relevant and related to engaging with this particular inquiry. Specifically, this research offers insights regarding the use of participatory action research with non-binary and transgender people as well as implications for the use of other methodologies in ways that are increasingly representative of non-binary people.

**Use of PAR with non-binary populations.** Participatory action research and arts-based approaches to inquiry have been presented as meaningful approaches to engaging in collaborative study with transgender and non-binary people (Furman, 2017; Hill, 2007). Evidenced by the experiences of those in this study, such methodological approaches present the opportunity to gather data that might not otherwise be accessible to a formal university-based researcher (particularly one who is cisgender). The collaborative and creative processes utilized in this study cultivated a sense of trust and rapport that supported group members reflecting and
sharing in honest, and at times, vulnerable ways. Six of the participant co-researchers suggested that they would not have shared as much had we not been working within a PAR group made up of other non-binary people.

Participant co-researchers responded well to our research group’s use of PAR and expressed a sense of feeling as though they were able to authentically contribute to and influence the project’s direction. That said, one member did note initial confusion around the process and stated they felt some tension early in the process between feeling like a source for data and a co-leader in the project. Despite these feelings, the same participant co-researcher expressed a sentiment shared by the rest of the group stating later that, “[other approaches to research] call for impersonal answers. We are wanted as sources of information, but it’s very rare to be able to get personal about it.” Other members noted in our closing reflective discussion and questionnaire (focused on evaluating the research process) that they had a positive experience being part of the project and that “the participant-researcher aspect of it [the study] was one of the best ways to collect subjective data.”

This study affirms the notion that such participant-driven and action-oriented methodological approaches yield powerful results all while engaging in transformative research processes. Reflecting on the group’s experiences and our collective findings, these processes have not only served as a tool to center non-binary voices, but have also supported the collection and interpretation of data that likely would not have been available through deductive approaches.

Specifically, arts-based PAR can support two related and interactional processes in the identification of social problems faced by non-binary and transgender people. First, such approaches allow for the engagement of conscientization (Freire, 1970), thus deepening a critical
awareness and understanding of one’s individual and collective experiences. Secondly, these approaches provide space and opportunity to engage in both an individual and collective creativity that can help bring an interpretive understanding and articulation to phenomenon not easily expressed or articulated.

**Supporting critical awareness and social understanding.** Thinking creatively and collectively provided the participant co-researchers the opportunity to engage in Freire’s (1970) conscientization and develop a deeper understanding of their personal and collective experiences within the context of social and political power systems. Group members also had the opportunity to provide insight and context to the experiences they were sharing. Not only are such approaches well aligned with PAR and the values that social work may claim (but struggle to put into action), it is also essential given how little empirical information is available regarding non-binary people’s experiences. With a dearth of such knowledge, it would be easy for researchers to inappropriately interpret data through social paradigms and frameworks that are not representative of the group’s experience (i.e. through a binaristic lens).

Drawing upon the work of Campbell and Jovchelovitch (2000), Bozlak (2010) brings attention to the social psychology theory of participation by stressing that participation in health promotion efforts can enhance awareness of relationships between individuals and society, promote positive health outcomes, and addresses issues related to engaged citizenship. While Bozlak notes these factors in regard to health promotion and public health policy, there are clear parallels that carry relevance for social work. Such relevance is evidenced by participant co-researchers in this study having opportunities for their engagement to serve as a tool to both enhance their understanding of social and human service systems, as well as engage with service providers as they shared their artwork and research findings.
**Creative interpretation and expression.** Arts-based research is well positioned to explore topics that have “complex subtleties” (Eisner, 2008 as cited by van der Vaart, Hoven, & Huigen, 2018). Creative methodologies, like photovoice, provide “…nuanced insights unlikely to emerge through questionnaires or interviews” (Dunn & Mellor, 2017, p. 293). For those involved in this study, creative reflection and expression was noted by group members to be helpful in developing an understanding of their experiences and then ultimately sharing those experiences. Group members noted that engaging in creative games, reflective activities, and photography provided a space to explore, examine and reflect in ways that allowed them to understand and express experiences that they felt would otherwise be challenging to articulate.

**Non-binary representation in social science research.** As discussed in this dissertation’s literature review, the ways in which researchers operationalize what it means to be transgender inevitably impacts who is recruited for a particular study and how their gender is understood and reflected. Frequently, the over-simplification of gender in most data collection instruments excludes, erases, or misrepresents the experience of people who are non-binary. This occurs when non-binary people are not included in research studies, when they are assumed to identify as male or female, when restrictive collection measures are used (e.g. requiring a participant to check either a “female-to-male” or male-to-female” box), and when non-binary people’s information is removed from the data because their identity does not fit within the study’s demographic framework.

Not only do such research practices limit what we know about non-binary people, and perpetuate their underrepresentation, they also call upon us to question the validity of the data and knowledge we think we know about transgender people in general. In other words, consumers of research must consider if the findings presented about transgender men or
transgender women are truly reflecting the populations they claim to represent. Is it not possible that they are in fact reflecting (to a greater or lesser extent) the experiences of non-binary people who have been mistakenly categorized as men and women?

First and foremost, researchers (particularly those who are cisgender) seeking to study transgender identities and experiences are encouraged to consider the value, need, and motives of their research. Given the ways in which transgender people’s bodies, identities, and experiences have been medically sensationalized, careful consideration of the impact of one’s work must be made. Further, it is important for researchers to be aware of the history of exploitation transgender people and communities have faced as they have engaged in research studies (Hill, 2007; Namaste, 2000) including further pathologization, tokenization, and little individual or community benefit resulting from the extensive emotional labor extended as research “subjects.”

If research seems appropriate and can be conducted in such a way that it is respectful and of benefit to transgender people, researchers must critically examine their own conceptualizations and socialized understanding of and about gender. Given the pervasiveness of binarism, it likely that most researchers (both transgender or cisgender) have internalized some degree of binary assumptions. Thus, bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2012) and other reflexive exercises aimed at illuminating personal bias are recommended.

Data collection itself should be carried out using tools that provide for a wide-range of transgender identities to be reflected. When possible, open-ended questions that allow participants to self-identify their gender is recommended. When such approaches do not fit one’s research design (e.g. discrete categorical options are being used in quantitative work) it is recommended that several gender options be provided. At a minimum they might include male, female, non-binary, and other. Clearly, additional options like gender-queer, gender fluid, and
Agender would be more representative. Researchers and data collectors may also note the suggestions offered regarding clinical intake forms (see page 153) to ensure the avoidance of cisnormative language.

Implications for education

This study’s findings have implications across educational disciplines. The importance of respecting non-binary young adult’s identities, their pronouns, their autonomy and privacy are not confined to the social work classrooms. Consider, for example, the following quotation from Delaney who shares about the pressure to be a transgender “encyclopedia” and to teach everyone (particularly in classroom settings) about what it is like to be non-binary,

I think the burden of choosing to come out and choosing to be someone’s encyclopedia is really exhausting. I was very open about [being non-binary] and it got so exhausting that became a job and like after my first year of college and stuff, I went back in the closet cause it’s like I don’t wanna do this anymore like I’ll just make it private.

For Delaney, and others in the group, having to either “over-explain” or justify their gender in order to have their correct name and pronouns used by classroom instructors, or being expected to share about their personal experiences as means to educate fellow students was an invasive and dehumanizing experience. Educators of all levels and disciplines are encouraged to review the recommendations presented for social work clinicians (pages 153-161) and adapt them as appropriate for the classroom. Of specific note, is the suggestion to provide opportunities for all students to share their name and pronouns, avoid exclusively binary language (consider welcoming students to class with “Good afternoon class/students/folks” rather than, “Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen.”). Just as educators must be prepared to address racism and sexism in their classrooms, they should also be prepared to cultivate a classroom environment that promotes transgender inclusion and respect. Noting the harm done with when derogatory
and racist classroom comments go unaddressed by instructors, Covarrubias (2008) offers the following,

… as central bearers of power in our classrooms, we shoulder the sometimes difficult challenge of negotiating diverse interests, perspectives, and emotions on behalf of our students. Perhaps we do not respond to all contingencies in the moment because, for whatever reason, we cannot. Yet, whether in the moment or even in retrospect, in our socially constructed worlds, ultimately, it is up to all of us to collaborate to reinvent more just selves by deciding when it is ethical to exercise silence or to speak up” (p.247).

Similarly, unaddressed binarism and transphobia (whether explicit or in the form of microaggressions) foster a lack of safety for transgender and non-binary students on college campuses (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012; Goldberg, 2018; Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Dickey, 2019) and transgender-focused microaggressions have been linked with poor academic outcomes (Woodford, Joslin, Pitcher, & Renn, 2017).

Experiential learning and intergroup dialogue courses have been suggested as ways to integrate social justice focused education on college campuses (Dessel, Woodford, & Warren, 2011; Nagda, Gurin, Sorensen, Gurin-Sands, & Osuna, 2009). Drawing from the processes described by Nagda et al., (2009), intentionally facilitated courses that allow for students of different identity groups to engage in critical conversations around sexual orientation has been reported to be a meaningful educational exercise (Dessel et al., 2011). Raske (1999) has proposed the adoption of “feminist rules” within a classroom to promote a learning environment that brings attention to social justice and a critique of institutional oppression.

In addition to the aforementioned general practices related to classroom culture and norms, I offer the following specific considerations for social work educators contextualized within the Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE) core competencies. CSWE is the governing body that accredits all approved baccalaureate and master’s social work programs in the United States. Modeling itself after other health and humans service disciplines, CSWE
adopted a competency-based approach to social work education in 2008. This approach has been aimed at promoting an outcomes-oriented view of curriculum development and design and the council’s 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), succinctly outlines nine core competencies. These competencies are to be integrated into the curriculum of any social work school or department that prepares students for generalist practice.

Competency-based education has been criticized as a means to standardize social work training, reduce critical thought and promote curricular uniformity (Barter, 2012; Rossiter, 2002). Against the backdrop of neoliberalism and a focus on performance measures, competency-based social work education has become increasingly focused on the management of problems rather than on broad social change (Campbell, 2011; Barter, 2012). These concerns notwithstanding, the competencies do offer a useful framework that can provide guidance to social work educators. Further, the competencies have been noted as being consistent with the promotion of transgender-affirming practice; however a lack of transgender visibility, classroom microaggressions, and an absence of transgender-specific educational content has served as barriers to such practice’s promotion (Austin, Craig & McInroy, 2016).

**Competency 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior**

This competency highlights the importance of social work students’ development of professional identities that promote advocacy for clients to be able to access services. One’s professional identity is built upon a commitment to ongoing learning and ability to self-reflect. This research supports the development of a professional identity built upon these aims as it invites social work educators to provide students with opportunities to consider their own internalized values and beliefs about gender and work towards service systems’ greater attention to the needs and experiences of non-binary people.
Social work students must be able to manage their personal values in order to be effective and ethical practitioners. Careful attention to, and management of, personal values allows for professional values and ethics to guide practice. Social work educators should note the ways in which affirming non-binary peoples’ experiences and identities is a form of recognizing and upholding the dignity and worth of each individual (NASW, 2017).

**Competency 2: Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice, and Competency 3: Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice**

Social work students must develop an appreciation for and understanding of human diversity. It is important that this understanding include recognition of marginalization, oppression, and privilege. Social workers must develop self-awareness as a means to address personal bias and while related content may be the focus of diversity specific classes, such topics may be integrated across undergraduate and graduate education. Findings from this study are presented to encourage educators to examine their own gender related biases and assumptions and recognize how such positions influence their teaching pedagogy and curricula. This study’s findings can be used to inform an understanding of gender diversity and the experiences of marginalization faced by non-binary people.

Social work educators are encouraged to promote the normalization of non-binary identities by including non-binary people in fictional case scenarios and in practice focused discussions. Such inclusion may highlight binarism and transphobia, but also include examples where one’s gender is not the point of focus but rather a demographic detail. Additionally, it is suggested that educators adopt language that names clients’ (in example cases) cisgender status. Such a practice avoids “othering” transgender people by referencing their transgender experiences, while normalizing cisgender peoples’ experiences by simply referring to them as
men and women. By understanding the mechanics of the gender-based discrimination and oppression that non-binary people face, social work students can begin to work towards social justice efforts targeting the elimination of binarism and transphobia.

**Competency 4: Engage in Practice-informed Research and Research-informed Practice**

In preparation for practice, students must be able to demonstrate critical thinking skills. Using such skills involves drawing from and assessing multiple forms of knowledge and analyzing practice models (including assessments, interventions and evaluations). The findings of this study can be used to enhance the body of knowledge informing our professional understanding of gender and this dissertation invites educators and students to bring critical attention to the ways in which practice models may be built upon and perpetuate binarism and cisnormativity.

CSWE expects students to understand the bi-directional relationship between research and practice. Specifically, both practice and research must be informed by one another. Both PAR and CBPR are effective ways to navigate this relationship (Lawson, 2014). Having been a study informed both by a dearth of literature focusing on non-binary people and my own social work practice with non-binary and queer young people, this study presents as a case example of both practice-informed research, and the ways in which research can inform and guide future practice.

**Competency 5: Engage in Policy Practice**

Social work education is designed to prepare students to engage in practice that advances social and economic wellbeing. Educators are invited to consider this dissertation’s discussion focusing on non-binary people social wellness and compromised access to gender-affirming medical care. Reflecting on this content, educators teaching macro- and policy-focused courses
can promote a critical and more inclusive examination of social policies related to “LGBTQ rights.” Specifically, social work education can benefit from adopting a less monolithic approach to understanding queer and transgender experiences and promote a critical assessment of social policies that reinforce cisnormativity and binarism. Taking an intersectional approach when asking students to engage in critical analysis of policy, educators can ask students to consider ways in which policies privilege or disadvantage various social groups. Such a critique can include a consideration of the ways policies may address or ignore the needs of transgender and non-binary people (e.g. healthcare access policies). Students should also be encouraged to consider whose experiences are normalized through the language used in policies (i.e. is binary language endorsed? What impact does this have?).

**Competency 6: Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities**

Upon completion of an accredited social work education, practitioners are expected to be able to apply their knowledge of human behavior, the social environment and a person-in-environment perspective to engage diverse client-systems. This research’s findings speak directly to the experiences of non-binary people as they develop an understanding of their personal identities and navigate the social worlds in which they are living. Social work educators may draw upon this work to guide a more nuanced examination of identity construction and the role of that social representation (or the absence thereof) can play in one’s understanding and experience of self. While this can be integrated in coursework across the curriculum, it has strong applicability to courses focused on human behavior and social environments. Such courses provide students with the opportunity to examine the notions of self within socio-cultural
environments and, in doing so, consider the social construction of normalcy and the ways in which such processes provide or deny individuals access to various identity options.

As students apply a critical lens to their examination of these topics, educators may also encourage their consideration of the gaps between classroom learning, theory, and practice work. This necessitates an effort to move curricula away from strictly conceptual and theoretical instruction and more towards engaged, experiential and action-oriented learning modalities (Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang, 2008). With greater conceptual understanding and the opportunity for practice-applied knowledge, social workers are better equipped to meaningfully engage with non-binary individuals, families and groups in ways the respond to their experienced needs and strengths.

**Competency 7: Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities; Competency 8: Intervene with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities; and Competency 9: Evaluate Practice with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities**

Like the ongoing engagement process, social workers must be able to effectively assess the client-systems with which they are working. Assessment cannot be done in a meaningful way if one does not have a strong understanding of client populations and communities. This research promotes a deeper understanding of gender diversity while also challenging the binarism and cisnormativity that is embedded within assessment frameworks (e.g. the DSM’s gender dysphoria diagnosis). The findings of this study suggest the need for direct-practice courses to bring attention to the ways in which soon-to-be social workers’ assumptions and beliefs around gender may support or impede non-binary clients from accessing affirming services.
Since prejudicial beliefs often operate at a subconscious level (Nicotera & Kang, 2009) they may remain unnoticed, thus making it difficult to identify their presence within broader systems. Awareness of such structural biases, like those in the DSM (Burdge, 2007; Caetano, 2011; Lev, 2013; Markman, 2011; Whalen, 2012) can begin with both educators and students examining their own. By engaging in consciousness-raising and self-reflective processes, social work students can begin understanding the biases they hold (Wahler, 2012). Once one understands their own biases, and the role that biases can play in their professional assessments with clients, students can begin to examine such biases presence within diagnostic tools and models.

Further problematizing the DSM, Khoury, Langer and Pagnini (2014) note risks found in the manual’s use of, “absolute unconditional language leading to a narrow perspective of the complex human mental conditions.” In doing so, less attention is paid to the impact of social conditions on human experience (p. 4). With these considerations in mind, educators are advised to avoid teaching students to have unquestioning faith in diagnostic tools and inviting opportunities to explore such tools’ utility and shortcomings.

CSWE stresses the importance of intervention enhancing client capacities. However, with limited knowledge or understanding of non-binary people, such service cannot be offered in a truly client-centered manner. This research is positioned to assist in filling this gap, promoting the advancement of client capacities that are reflective of client identities and the social environments they navigate as they hold such identities.

Like engagement, assessment and intervention, the evaluation of social work practice must reflect a shift away from the gender paradigms that pathologize and erase the lived experiences of non-binary people. Such evaluation must not be based upon stagnant or single
trajectories of gender identity development or transition-related care. Emerging social workers must develop a comfort with gender curiosity, exploration, and even uncertainty. Practitioners must trust their clients’ ability to engage in self-determination and define their genders in ways that make sense to them within the context of their own cultures, values and lived experiences.

**Concluding thoughts on the implications of the research**

I am not so naïve as to assume that this research is going to usher in a wave of professional transformation resulting in a restructuring of medical care, service delivery practices, or the removal of inappropriate DSM diagnoses. I see this research as timely and well situated within the context of broader queer activism. While positioned as research, this project is an act of advocacy designed to elevate the voices of marginalized people, trusting them as natural leaders and engaging in action aimed at social change. I hope that, as such, this work has produced results that can be incorporated into the wide scope of social work practice, policy, research and education and, in doing so, enhance future practitioners’ critical examination of the profession and of themselves.

Ultimately, this work provides the opportunity for an expansion in how gender-related issues are discussed in courses focusing on human behavior and the social environment, identity and human development, and those focused on sexuality and diversity. It is my hope that this research helps students explore issues related to gender as well as how scientific knowledge is developed and disseminated. Reinforcing the profession’s commitment to social justice, this dissertation encourages community engagement and participation in leading social change efforts. As organizers and activists, we must seek not only just ends that promote equity and wellness but utilize tactics that represent, engage and models the very changes we are striving for.
Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this research, many of which are embedded in the sampling and data collection methods of the overall research design. Other limitations are connected to methodological challenges experienced as the group and I navigated the tension between the conceptualization of PAR and the demands of our daily realities. These challenges arose regarding our limited availability of time and resources, and the demands such scarcities placed on the group’s processes. The following section begins by discussing limitations related to general study design, and concludes with those related specifically to data collection and analysis methods.

Design limitations

The limitations resulting from this study’s design are largely a product of my approach to sampling and the nature of group-based PAR. While I believe that the benefits, rigor and integrity of the study were strengthened by these methodological decisions, there are noteworthy limitations that arise.

Sampling. Depending heavily on snowball sampling, participant co-researchers largely came from shared social networks and all had some degree of undergraduate college education. Three of the participant co-researchers directly knew one another and joined the study as a group. Others learned of the study from campus groups, listservs and online communities they belonged to. And so, while group members discussed isolation and a need for community, it is unlikely that their experiences reflect those of non-binary individuals who face even greater social isolation or do not have access to any form of non-binary support network.

Furthermore, while group members lived in various urban and suburban settings, all had some degree of access to resources (support groups, social gatherings, etc.) that were offered
through local community-based organizations. While the group offered important critiques of many of these organizations and services (namely, that they were binary transgender focused), no group members reported a complete absence of resources. In other words, the group identified ways in which available services could be improved, not that there was a total absence of service. Future research should consider the experiences of rural non-binary young people who, like those in this study, may be coming to understand their identities with limited social role models, but who might also face a greater shortage of formal support.

Finally, while the group included three members who identified as people of color, the majority of the group identified as white. As noted, the group did discuss issues regarding race and ethnicity, and their intersectional relationships with gender, therefore, I attempted to address such issues and take an intersectional perspective on my interpretation of findings and their implications. Nonetheless, this research does not adequately examine the experiences of non-binary people of color. Given the disproportionally high rates of violence and marginalization faced by transgender people of color (James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet, & Anafmore, 2016), a well-developed exploration into the lived experiences of non-binary people of color is a much-needed area of future social work research.

**Research setting and process.** Given that the research occurred in a group setting, it should also be noted that the sample was made up only of those young people who were willing to have their non-binary identity be known to others. This study did not provide the opportunity for consideration of the experiences of those not willing to be out (at least to some degree), or those who are uncomfortable with group-based work and personal sharing. Future research may seek to engage other non-binary participants through one-on-one interviews, electronic surveys, and questionnaires. Continued use of online and social media tools for recruitment may prove to
be fruitful, while avoiding the requirement to attend multiple in-person meetings might result in representation from young people not reflected in this study.

**Methodological challenges**

Participatory methods of research have been reported to raise challenges for those working in or seeking employment in traditional research universities. The time required to skillfully conduct a PAR project is rarely conducive to the productivity expectations of research institutions, and the blurred lines between “researcher” and “researched” may not sit well with those that are more positivist oriented. While my university and dissertation committee has been extremely supportive of this project, the pressures of time and dilemmas regarding my role as part of the research team arose throughout the study.

**Time constraints.** PAR takes a great deal of time and a PAR dissertation can place significant demands on students who face time pressures from both within and outside of their academic programs. For me, this largely had to do with the need to complete my dissertation, graduate, and find employment for financial and familial reasons. Additionally, given that so many of the photovoice participant co-researchers were college students, they also faced time constraints related to part-time work schedules and coursework demands.

These concerns arose over the course of the project as two group members (River and Carmen) needed to withdraw early due to schedule conflicts. Similarly, a number of group members needed to miss various group meetings (as indicated in table 4, p. 81). Furthermore, as we continued to plan for post-study events and community actions (additional art exhibits and trainings), students’ schedules prevented active involvement, despite the fact that many of these activities were ideas that group members themselves enthusiastically identified as next steps.
Lastly, this research was funded through a doctoral scholarship provided by the University at Albany’s School of Social Welfare. While the funds covered most of the project’s expenses, costs did exceed this award and were paid out-of-pocket. And so, while there was some flexibility in the number of group meetings that could occur (and group members voted to add an additional meeting to prepare for the exhibit), limited funds contributed to the pressure to adhere to a relatively strict schedule. Such pressures prevented the project from being as adaptive to evolving group demands and goals as I and other PAR scholars might have liked.

**Navigating research team roles.** Had the group been able to hold additional meetings, more time could have been spent on building group rapport and participating in more discussions aimed at laying a foundation for the study. While the group did develop closeness, I believe that the absence of flexible time early in our meeting process delayed the development of these connections. As a seeming result, during our first two meetings when group members were invited to participate in activity and dialogue aimed at developing photo prompts (questions they wished to answer through their photographs) the group was less talkative, expressive or engaged then they naturally became towards the end of the process. With our limited time, and the delay in rapport building it caused, it was easy for the group to fall into a habit of operating in a more traditional sense rather than the collectivist approach I had hoped for. This was expressed as group members raising their hands in order to speak, directing comments to me (rather than one another), and seeking my guidance regarding our research process. By the end of these early meetings, the group had agreed to adopt the photo prompts I had proposed to them with only one additional question developed. At the time, it felt like the group was operating in a less egalitarian manner than I had intended.
It seemed that early in the project (a critical time for developing a shared vision and cooperative leadership), the group functioned in ways that positioned me as the leader. In retrospect, this is unsurprising, as I had already engaged in a great deal of planning prior to the formation of the group. My experiences related to navigating power within this project are not unique. Reflecting on her own participatory action research in rural Haiti following the 2010 earthquake, Pyles (2015) discusses power dynamics explaining,

> And while addressing discrepancies in power is a fundamental goal of both PAR and critical ethnography, sometimes there is nothing that can be done about such power imbalances other than to cultivate awareness of and be as transparent as possible about the ways that privilege and disenfranchisement manifest themselves in the situation (p. 637).

Pyles stresses the ways in which power imbalances manifest vis-à-vis race, class, gender, and resource access. In the current study, I took primary leadership on the project’s overall design. Nygreen (2009) notes that power issues are common within university-based PAR studies because “in practice PAR projects may quite easily *reproduce* and *exacerbate* power inequalities while obscuring these processes through a discourse of false egalitarianism” (p.19). While I feel this may be an overstatement of what occurred in our project, it is not without merit and is well worth further consideration in the planning of future projects.

Another perspective is that group-based egalitarian relationships facilitate member contributions that vary based on individual skill sets. My own experience with group facilitation and traditional research inherently provided group members the space and opportunity to contribute their own skills. The expectation that each group member “speak up and contribute to question development” for example, was not truly meeting the group “where they were at;” expecting group members to fill a predetermined role rather than find themselves contributing to
the process in ways that were reflective of their own interests and abilities was specifically avoided.

As time progressed, group dynamics shifted and group members took more ownership of the project. By the time of the exhibit, group members seemed very comfortable directing the process, leading many portions of the discussion, and facilitating much of the activity of the evening. I would recommend future projects build in additional time and resources to support a period of time during which group members can exclusively focus on relationship building, learning about one another, developing a strong understanding of PAR and ultimately contribute greater leadership earlier in the process.
Chapter 9: Conclusion

Hird (2002) suggested that psychological based inquiry and theorization about transgender experiences have largely been based upon the notion of gender authenticity, that is, the transgender person moving towards their authentic gendered self, whereas sociological work rejects the notion of sex and gender as real concepts and rather the result of outcomes of social interaction. As Dallas (2004) states,

Unfortunately, society was not yet ready [in the 60s and 70s] to acknowledge that gender comes in shades of grey. Both transsexuals and the professionals who treated them had little choice but to function as best they could within the confines of a world that saw gender as black-and-white, male or female (p. 28).

Historically, medical and psychological treatment for transgender people has been based on the framework of gender identity disorder and gender dysphoria. The emphasis of these diagnoses, the specific criteria they carry, and the binary model through which many providers have come to understand gender has reinforced the adherence to masculine and feminine stereotypes in order to be deemed eligible for transition related care (Dallas, 2004; Spade, 2003).

Like social frameworks that view racial, ethnic, and sexual identity categories as exclusive, static and dichotomous, a gender paradigm that views gender as a binary fails to reflect and honor the rich, complex and diverse realities of human experience. Within social frameworks that adhere to such a reductionist and incomplete understanding of gender, it is common to assume that healthy transgender identity development concludes with an integrated self-image and presentation as completely male or completely female (Diamond et al., 2011). Recollection and critique of such assumptions are not only present within literature by transgender people (Bornstein & Bornstein, 1995; Cordes, 2013; Feinberg, 1999; Spade, 2003), but were a common experience shared by group members throughout the project, and among the transgender people close to me in both my personal and professional life. Such stories are filled
with a sense of erasure manifest though questions like, “which way are you transitioning?” “have you had the surgery?” or, “when will you be done (with transitioning)?” Such endpoint myths not only promote a model of identity development that embraces gender essentialism, but reflect an attitude that transgender people’s identities are incomplete and false until a certain set of criteria are met.

While there have been significant improvements in understanding the diverse experiences and needs of transgender people, there is a continued need to look specifically at those of non-binary people. As practitioners, scholars, and community organizers professionally obligated to examine and challenge systems of oppression, we must advance models of care that do not reify the very gender, sexual, and racial binaries that warrant critical deconstruction. Such critiques are not originated in this dissertation, as they have been advanced by researchers and practitioners alike (see Burdge, 2007; Lev, 2013; Markman, 2011; McPhail, 2004), yet there is very little research specifically reflecting the lived experiences and self-articulated needs of non-binary young people.

It is in this void that I hope this work can find a home. From such a position, it is my intention to contribute to the scholarly body of knowledge, to advance work that promotes critical practice, and prioritize the expertise of those otherwise considered research “subjects.” Through the utilization of participatory action research, I have intended to work alongside non-binary young people to creatively build collective knowledge rooted in lived experience and thus, inform scholarship and action that is relevant to those it engages.

It is my hope that rather than resolving questions, this work has raised additional uncertainties about gender and queerness. It is in such spaces of openness that there is room for the uniqueness of individual experiences and identities to exist and it is precisely the recognition
of “not knowing,” of having more questions than answers, and of abandoning our assumptions, that we can recognize the boundlessness of human identity. Returning to the words of Leslie Feinberg (1996), I close with the following,

We have a right to live openly and proudly...when our lives are suppressed, everyone is denied an understanding of the rich diversity of sex and gender expression and experience that exist in human society (p. 88).
Non-binary people between 18-25 are encouraged to join this arts-based participatory action research study.

If you participate you will be invited to
Join a group of other non-binary people and:

- Share about your gender through discussion and games
- Use digital photography to document and express your experiences
- Discuss ways to support non-binary people

At the end of the project we will present your artwork and ideas to a group of community leaders and activists

Group meets 6-8 times in Albany
Food provided
Receive $25 for every group meeting

If interested contact:
Darren Cosgrove
UAlbany, School of Social Welfare
GenderQueerResearch@gmail.com
APPENDIX B. Recruitment letter

Participatory Action Research with Non-Binary Young Adults

While there is a growing understanding and appreciation of the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people, little information is available on transgender young adults and even less is known about young people who are gender non-binary.

Darren Cosgrove, a social worker and doctoral candidate at the University at Albany's School of Social Welfare is looking for gender-queer and gender non-binary young adults to participate in a participatory action research study designed to gain a better understanding of the experiences, needs and identities of non-binary people. Unlike traditional research, this study is an arts-based participatory action research project. This means that those who choose to participate will become active leaders in helping to decide some of the content the study focuses on. Participants will also be actively involved in helping build an understanding of the study's findings and will be invited join Darren and other study participants in a community action aimed at raising awareness about the experiences of non-binary people.

Participants will be asked to attend 5-8 group meetings held at the University at Albany. During the meetings non-binary participants will have the chance to engage in group activities and discussions regarding their experiences as a non-binary person. Specifically, the study will use an approach to research called "Photo-Voice." Photo-Voice asks participants to document their thoughts and ideas through photographs. The group will share their photographs with one another, discusses what they think is most important for others to know (in this case- what should other people know about being non-binary?). The group’s collective findings and artwork will then be shared with community leaders, policy makers and other individuals that participants wish to share their ideas with.

To join the group and participate in the study, individuals must be between the ages of 18-25, identify as gender-queer, gender non-binary or otherwise hold a gender identity that is not exclusively male or female. Participants will be given $25.00 for each group session they attend.

If you are interested in learning more about this study please contact Darren Cosgrove at:

dcosgrove@albany.edu
Sample social media post directed towards potential youth participants

Gender-queer or Non-binary?
Your voice is needed!
I am a queer justice educator, advocate and social work researcher and I am looking for folks to participate in a participatory action research study that uses art and community education to increase awareness of non-binary identities and experiences.

If you are between 18-25 years old, identify as gender-queer, non-binary or otherwise have a gender identity that is not exclusively male or female and want to help please contact me at:

dcosgrove@albany.edu

Sample social media post directed towards service providers

Do you work with gender-queer or non-binary young adults?
I need your help!

I am a queer justice educator, advocate and social work researcher and I am looking for folks to participate in a participatory action research study that uses art and community education to increase awareness of non-binary identities and experiences.

If you work with non-binary or gender-queer people between 18-25 years old and want to help please contact me at:

dcosgrove@albany.edu
APPENDIX D. Consent form

University at Albany
Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Participatory Action Research with Non-Binary Young Adults

Researcher: Darren Cosgrove

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Loretta Pyles

- You are being asked to be in a research study. Studies are done to find better ways to help and support people and to better understand their needs.
- This form will tell you about the study to help you decide whether or not you want to participate.
- You should ask any questions you have before making up your mind. You can think about it and discuss it with your family or friends before you decide.

1. What is this study about?
This research study is designed to gain a better understanding about the experiences of gender non-binary people your age. Unlike traditional research, this study is an arts-based participatory action research project. This means that if you agree to participate you will become an active leader in helping to decide some of the content the study focuses on. You will also be actively involved in helping build an understanding of the study’s findings, and (if you wish) you will be invited join me and other study participants in a community action aimed at raising awareness about the experiences of non-binary people.

2. What will I need to do if I am in this study?
If you choose to participate you will be asked to attend 5-8 group meetings (depending on your availability) each one lasting between 90-120 minutes). These meetings will be attended other non-binary people who have decided to be a part of this study. The meetings will take place at the University at Albany’s School of Social Welfare. We will pick a meeting time that works for the majority of group members. During the meetings you will have the chance to participate in group activities and discussions regarding your experiences as a non-binary person.

The main focus of the study uses a research activity called “Photo-Voice.” Photo-Voice asks participants document their thoughts and ideas through photographs. The group then shares their photographs with one another, discusses what they think is most important for others to know (in this case- what should other people know about your experience as a non-binary person?). We will be using camera phones for this activity (I’ll have spares in case you’d like to borrow one).

After the group shares and discusses the photographs with one another, we will share the photographs, our reflections, and the ideas that we think are important, with a group of
community leaders that we as a team have decided to invited to an art exhibit. You can choose to be a part of the study but skip the exhibit if you like.

If you join the rest of the group at the exhibit, you’ll have a chance to share your artwork and discuss with guests what you think community leaders should know, or do to best support non-binary people. After all these meetings are finished, we will have a small party for the group members and I will ask you to complete a survey that will provide me with anonymous feedback about your experience.

3. How long will I be in the study?
You will be invited to attend 5-8 group meetings (including the photo exhibit). We will set a group schedule together.

4. Can I stop being in the study?
Yes, you may stop being in the study at any time.

5. What bad things might happen to me if I am in the study? What good things might happen?
Risks are assumed to be minimal. Some people find talking about their gender identity very helpful and empowering, others may find that is causes embarrassment and or distress. I will do my best to ask questions in a sensitive manner and will be mindful of your comfort throughout the study. You are welcome to skip any research activities you wish or end your participation early if you want to.

If you join this study, you will be sharing information within a group of other non-binary people. The group will be expected to maintain confidentiality, but I cannot control actions outside the group. All information gained during this study will be kept private from those not a member of the group. This information will coded and password protected on a computer that only I, my advisor, and a research assistant (who will be attending our groups) will have access to. As with anytime personal information is disclosed, not all unforeseen circumstances can be anticipated and the risks of data being inappropriately accessed are present but extremely unlikely. If you choose to participate in the photo exhibit you will be a known research participant by others attending.

Once the Photo-Voice group is complete I will continue to work a research assistant on the study and analyze the data we have gathered. Findings, quotes, and artwork you decide to provide may be shared publicly in published journals, at conferences and at community presentations. I will remove any personally identifying data from any public presentation of findings so that your participation in the study remains confidential. However, you will have the opportunity to co-present at conferences/workshops if you are interested. If you decide to join me at any of these presentations your participation will no longer be confidential.

Participation in this study could provide the potential benefit of greater self-awareness, comfort and the pride that comes with articulating and affirming one’s own experience and ideas. Your participation might also support this experience among your peers. Additionally, this particular
APPENDIX D. (continued)

study is designed in such a way that data collection occurs within a group and workshop context. As such, you might find it fun and rewarding to interact with your peers on this project.

Finally, the data collected will be used to support the continued learning and understanding of professionals working with the transgender and non-binary young people so that service delivery reflects the desires and needs of the population.

6. **Will I be given anything for being in this study?**

I will be giving everyone who participates $25.00 per group session they attend. This is a token of my appreciation for your time and help. At the conclusion of the study you will be given a visa gift card (redeemable anywhere accepting visa credit cards) in the total amount you are entitled to.

Food and refreshments will be provided to you at each of the meetings.

7. **Who are you?**

I am going to be asking you a lot about yourself and so I think it is only fair for you to have a little background on who I am and why I am doing this research. I am a doctoral student at UAlbany’s school of Social Welfare and I am really interested in learning about the experiences of queer, trans and gender-non-binary young adults. I have spent many years working with these communities and doing education, justice and advocacy work. I am practicing social worker serving queer, trans, and non-binary youth, adults and families in the Albany area.

I want to make sure that as social work professionals we offer services to queer communities that are respectful, affirming and reflective of the needs and desires people articulate themselves. I would like to conduct research in a way that positions you and I as co-learners and co-researchers who work together to identify ways to address the needs and desires of non-binary people.

8. **Who can I talk to about the study?**

For questions about the study you may contact me at: Deosgrove@albany.edu

My faculty advisor is Dr. Loretta Pyles. She may be reached at: lpyles@albany.edu or 442-5152

**IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint:** Research at the University Albany involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject or if you wish to report any concerns about the study, you may contact University at Albany Office for Pre-Award and Compliance Services at 1-866-857-5459 or hiconcerns@albany.edu.

9. **Optional Public Engagement:**

As we near the conclusion of the study, you will have the opportunity to publicly share about what it was like to participate in this project and become involved in the display of the creative
works developed through their participation (this will include the photo exhibit mentioned earlier). This is a completely optional opportunity designed to raise public awareness and provide the space for you to engage in community education. Only if you opt into this component will you be publicly affiliated with this study. If you do not opt in, your identity will not be associated with the dissemination of study finding (as previously indicated in this document). A permission form will be provided to you prior to the photo exhibit so that you can indicate your interest in this piece of the project. Choosing not to opt into this effort will not impact your participation in the actual study or your right to any of the incentives associated with study participation.

**Signing the consent form**

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to provide consent to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

**Printed Name:**

**Signature:**

**Date:**

I agree to be video and audio recorded.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

**Phone number that I can be reached at:**

**Email I can be reached at:**
APPENDIX E. Post-study engagement consent form

Optional Post-Study Engagement

Thank you for your participation in this research study. Moving forward, any dissemination of research findings and data (including artwork and quotes) will be shared in a way that you will not be personally identified.

If you would like to be involved in sharing what this experience was like for you and to be associated with some of the artwork and content developed during these workshops, you are invited to do so by signing below. Such opportunities might include (but are not limited to) art exhibits and educational conference presentations. If you choose to participate, you will be invited to share about your own reflections and experiences and will be held to the group’s confidentially expectations regarding respecting the privacy of your peer participants.

Your decision to participate/not participate is completely voluntary.

If you would like to have the opportunity to participate in the sharing of the research findings, and therefore be identified as a study participant, please return this signed form to Darren Cosgrove.

__________________________
Printed name participant

__________________________
Signature of participant

This signed form can be returned to Darren Cosgrove at dcosgrove@albany.edu
APPENDIX F. Community member exhibit consent form

University at Albany
Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Participatory Action Research with Non-Binary Young Adults
Researcher: Darren Cosgrove
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Loretta Pyles

- You are being asked to be in a research study. Studies are done to find better ways to help and support people and to better understand their needs.
- This form will tell you about the study to help you decide whether or not you want to participate.
- You should ask any questions you have before making up your mind. You can think about it and discuss it with your family or friends before you decide.

1. What is this study about?
This research study is designed to gain a better understanding about the experiences of gender non-binary young adults. Unlike traditional research, this study is an arts-based participatory action research project. This means that participants become an active leader collecting and analyzing data and presenting findings. To do this the study uses a research activity called “Photo-Voice” which asks participants document their thoughts and ideas through photographs. The non-binary participants in this study have been taking photographs to document their experiences and to help represent their answers to research questions. We will be showing these photographs, discussing our study and sharing ideas about how to support non-binary people at an upcoming exhibit. We would like to invite you to join us at this event.

2. What will I need to do if I am in this study?
If you choose to attend the event, you will be joining our study as a community participant. You are being invited because you’ve been identified as a community leader and someone important to share this information with. As a participant at the exhibit you will be asked to view the displayed photographs and listen to non-binary young people talk about what their artwork means and what they hope others become aware of regarding their experiences. At the conclusion of the exhibit, a research assistant and I will facilitate a group discussion between community members (like yourself) and the non-binary research photographers. We will discuss your reactions to their photographs, ideas and suggestions you have regarding supporting non-binary people, and identify potential strategies and next steps in addressing the problems and ideas identified through the photographs and our conversation. This conversation will be audio recorded and analyzed (along with the rest of the study’s data). During the exhibit photographs and videos will be taken to document the event. The exhibit and our discussion will take two and a half hours.
APPENDIX F. (continued)

Once the study is complete and data has been analyzed, findings, quotes, and artwork may be shared publicly in published journals, at conferences and at community presentations. I will remove any personally identifying data from any public presentation of findings so that your participation in the study remains confidential. However, since the exhibit itself is public, you will be interacting with others and your participation will be known to them. I will ask other participants to respect your confidentiality but such confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

3. How long will I be in the study?
The event you are being invited to will take 2.5 hours.

4. Can I stop being in the study?
Yes, you may stop being in the study at any time.

5. What bad things might happen to me if I am in the study? What good things might happen?
Risks are assumed to be minimal. You will not be required to share any information you do not wish to. During our conversation we will be discussing some to the ways in which non-binary people are supported and some of the ways they feel stigmatized. You will be asked to share your thoughts, reflections and opinions. You may have ideas and reactions that are different than those of others. I will facilitate the conversation in a way that respects differing experiences and ideas but such conversations may be uncomfortable for some people.

Participation in this study could provide the potential benefit of greater awareness of self and others. Additionally, this particular study is designed in such a way that data collection occurs within a group setting. As such, you might find it enjoyable and rewarding to interact with your others.

Finally, the data collected will be used to support the continued learning and understanding of professionals working with the transgender and non-binary young people so that service delivery reflects the desires and needs of the population. Your participation will help support this goal.

6. Will I be given anything for being in this study?
Food and refreshments will be provided at the event.

7. Who are you?
I am a doctoral student at UAlbany’s school of Social Welfare. I have spent many years working with LGBTQ+ young people and doing education, justice and advocacy work. I am also a practicing social worker serving queer, trans, and non-binary youth, adults and families in the Albany area.

8. Who can I talk to about the study?
For questions about the study you may contact me at:
Deogrove@albany.edu or [Redacted]

My faculty advisor is Dr. Loretta Pyles. She may be reached at:
lpyles@albany.edu or 442-5152
APPENDIX F. (continued)

IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint: Research at the University Albany involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject or if you wish to report any concerns about the study, you may contact University at Albany Office for Pre-Award and Compliance Services at 1-866-857-5459 or hsconcems@albany.edu.

Signing the consent form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to provide consent to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Printed Name:

Signature:

Date:

I agree to be photographed and audio recorded.

Signature:

Date:

Phone number that I can be reached at:

Email I can be reached at:

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**APPENDIX G. Outline of group meetings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Session 1: Introductions & Project Orientation** | 90 min  
- Group introductions  
- Icebreaker exercises  
- Establishing group norms and expectations  
- Overview of project and study  
- Assignment 1 given (reflective journaling on topic) |
| **Session 2: Identifying Project Focus** | 90 min  
- Opening exercise  
- Sharing assignment 1  
- Brainstorming specific questions/photo prompts  
- Photography guidelines and ethics  
- Camera phones provided as needed |
| **Session 3 & 4: Visual Data Analysis** | 2 hours (each)  
- Opening exercise  
- Individual photo selection and SHOWeD analysis  
- Group members engage in collective analysis of the data as a whole |
| **Session 5: Final Group Analysis** | 2 hours  
- Group members socialize  
- PowerPoint presentation of data is presented  
- Final themes are agreed upon  
- Photo exhibit is discussed |
| **Session 6: Taking Action** | 2 hours  
- Community leaders, activists, and supporters are invited to educational exhibit  
- Photographs and reflections are shared by participant-researchers  
- Community members and participant co-researchers reflect on exhibit in a group discussion |
| **Session 7: Reflections and Closing** | 90 min  
- Participant-researchers engage in a debriefing discussion and to attend a closing celebration to share food (provided by primary investigator) and spend time together. |
APPENDIX H. Session 1 peer interview guide

Group Interview-Introductions

Please use the following worksheet to interview your partner. Be sure to record their responses in the spaces provided below. After your interviews, you will each use this worksheet to help introduce one another to the group. *This worksheet will be collected by Darren when introductions are finished.*

1. What is your name?

2. What are your gender pronouns?

3. How old are you?

4. What terms do you use to refer to your gender and sexuality?

5. What is your race and ethnicity?

6. Are there other parts of your identity that you would like to share?

7. What was the last song/musical artist you listened to?

8. What are your hobbies and interests?

9. If you could live in a TV show or movie for a day what would it be?

10. What is one word that you would use to describe yourself?
APPENDIX I. Session 1 and 2 journaling prompts

Reflective Journaling- Assignment 1
(Adapted from Bozlak, 2010)

What do I think is important for others to know about being non-binary?

How is my gender identity supported?

What are symbolic or visual representations of how my gender identity is supported?

How is my gender identity NOT supported?

What are symbolic or visual representations of how my gender identity is NOT supported?
APPENDIX J. Session 2 icebreaker data collection game outline

**Starburst Shuffle**

*This activity is adapted from the Institute of Community Research (2014)*

After the game, group members will write their responses on a printed copy of the questions.

*This sheet will be collected.*

Envelopes containing starbursts of various colors will be provided to each group member. Each color will be associated with a question (below).

Group members will trade starbursts with the goal of each getting an envelope full of a single color. To trade a starburst, group members must answer the question of the candy they are giving away.

1. When did you first realize your gender?
2. Where/how do you feel your gender is most affirmed?
3. Where/how do you feel your gender is least affirmed?
4. What is one thing you wished people understood about being your gender?
5. What is your favorite thing about being your gender?
6. If you could give your younger self one piece of advice what would it be?
7. If you could ask your future self one question what would it be?
APPENDIX K. Individual analysis and worksheet

Photo Captioning Worksheet

Adapted from Wang’s (1999) Photovoice Analysis

Please use one worksheet per photograph

Artists Name (you may use a pseudonym): 

Photograph Title: 

Inquiry Prompt: 

1) What do you See here?

2) How does this relate to the inquiry prompt?

3) Observation- what do you think of what is happening in this photo?

4) Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist?

5) What can people Do with this information?
APPENDIX L. Participant-Researcher Photographs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photographic Prompt:</th>
<th>Image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do others need to know about being non-binary?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist name</th>
<th>Image title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delaney</td>
<td>Old Stomping Grounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ty</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krissy</td>
<td>Broken but Hanging On</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Photographic Prompt:**
*What do others need to know about being non-binary?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Image title</th>
<th>Image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caz</td>
<td>Versus</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Caz Versus Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>River</td>
<td>Spheres</td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="River Spheres Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karmen</td>
<td>Pile</td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Karmen Pile Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX L. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photographic Prompt: What do others need to know about being non-binary?</th>
<th>Image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name</strong></td>
<td><strong>Image title</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dev</td>
<td>Erasure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Wooden</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Photographic Prompt: How is my gender identity supported?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist name</th>
<th>Image title</th>
<th>Image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dev</td>
<td>Expression</td>
<td><img src="image1.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Cloth</td>
<td><img src="image2.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caz</td>
<td>Honey</td>
<td><img src="image3.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX L. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Image Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>River</td>
<td>Sky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karmen</td>
<td>Rat Den</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaney</td>
<td>Sticks and stones may break my bones but language can affirm me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krissy</td>
<td>Corgi Cutie</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Photographic Prompt: How is my gender identity supported?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Image title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ty</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Photographic Prompt: How is my gender identity not supported?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Image title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delaney</td>
<td>This is not a prerequisite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>River</td>
<td>Just for men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Image of ID card](image1.jpg)

![Image of underarm hair](image2.jpg)

![Image of shaving cream](image3.jpg)
APPENDIX L. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photographic Prompt: <em>How is my gender identity not supported?</em></th>
<th>Image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name</strong></td>
<td><strong>Image title</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ty</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Hay man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caz</td>
<td>Laundromat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Photographic Prompt:** *How is my gender identity not supported?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Image title</th>
<th>Image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Krissy</td>
<td>Bearded</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image of a beard" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dev</td>
<td>Leaves</td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image of leaves" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karmen</td>
<td>Stuck in a name</td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image of an ID card" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX L. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photographic Prompt: <em>How can things be improved</em></th>
<th>Image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name</strong></td>
<td><strong>Image title</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Redo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karmen</td>
<td>Assumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dev</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX L. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photographic Prompt: How can things be improved</th>
<th>Image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name</strong></td>
<td><strong>Image title</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caz</td>
<td>Pissing is a right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krissy</td>
<td>A concerned pup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaney</td>
<td>Systems of differential equations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX L. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photographic Prompt: How can things be improved</th>
<th>Image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Image title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ty</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX M. Final group meeting survey

1) How did you hear about this project?
2) What did you enjoy most about this project?
3) What did you enjoy least about this project?
4) What did you like about taking photographs to share your experience?
5) What did you not like about taking photographs to share your experience?
6) What did you like most about the photo exhibit?
7) What did you like least about the photo exhibit?
8) If this type of project was offered again what would you like to see stay the same?
9) If this type of project was offered again what would you like to see change?
10) Would you participate in a project like this again? Why/why not?
11) Do you have any additional comments?
APPENDIX N. Interpretive phenomenological analysis- data analysis plan

**Analysis Schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12/30 (week of)</td>
<td>PR &amp; DC*</td>
<td>Photos and captions</td>
<td>Code 2 documents from each prompt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/4</td>
<td>PR &amp; DC</td>
<td>Photos and captions</td>
<td>Develop initial code book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/7 (week of)</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>Worksheets, photos</td>
<td>• Code 3 worksheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and captions</td>
<td>• Code 4 photos and captions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DC</td>
<td>Worksheets, photos</td>
<td>Code remaining worksheets, photos and captions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and captions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/11</td>
<td>PR &amp; DC</td>
<td>Worksheets, photos</td>
<td>• Review coding process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and captions</td>
<td>• Adjust code book as needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/13-2/15</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>Meeting transcriptions</td>
<td>Clean and code 2 documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DC</td>
<td>Meeting transcriptions</td>
<td>Clean and code 3 documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/15</td>
<td>PR &amp; DC</td>
<td>Meeting transcriptions</td>
<td>• Review transcript coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Identify needs for second round coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/15-2/22</td>
<td>DC</td>
<td>All data</td>
<td>Complete second round coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/22</td>
<td>PR &amp; DC</td>
<td>All data</td>
<td>• Review results of second round coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Begin identifying themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/22-3/8</td>
<td>DC</td>
<td>All data</td>
<td>Develop themes further</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/8</td>
<td>PR &amp; DC</td>
<td>All data</td>
<td>Review/finalize themes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* DC= Darren

PR= Parker
APPENDIX O. Inclusive data collection/intake form

Name: 

Date of Birth: 

Address: 

Phone number: 

Email: 

The following help us [insert an explanation of why the following data is being collected]. Please review each the following categories and select the identities that best reflect your experience.

Race/Ethnicity (select all that apply)
- Asian
- Black/African
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Native American
- Pacific Islander
- White
- Other (please list): ___________
- Prefer not to answer

Sexual orientation (select all that apply)
- Asexual
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Straight
- Queer
- Questioning
- Pansexual
- Other (please list): ___________
- Prefer not to answer

Gender (select all that apply)
- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Other (please list): ___________
- Prefer not to answer

What sex were you assigned at birth?
- Female
- Male
- Intersex
- Other (please list): ___________
- Prefer not to answer
APPENDIX P. Gender and sexuality terminology

The following is a list of gender and sexuality terms used throughout the attached dissertation but not defined within the body of the text.

Assigned sex: Also known as natal sex or biological sex. Use of the word “assigned” directs attention to the social process of an infant’s sex being assigned (usually by a medical provider) on the basis of visible genitalia. Such an assignment may not represent the full biological experience of sex and may overlook several undetected intersex conditions.

Binarism: A form of sexism that endorses the belief in only two genders (namely, male and female).

Cisgender: A term used to describe individuals who experience congruence between the sex they were assigned at birth and their gender identity.

Cisnormativity: The assumption that all people are cisgender.

Cissexism: Social norms, behaviors, or beliefs that privilege cisgender people.

Gender expression: A person’s external communication of gender (may or may not reflect their gender identity).

Gender identity: A person’s internal sense of their own gender.

Heteronormativity: The belief that heterosexuality is the only normal or natural sexual orientation. The assumption of heterosexuality among others.

Heterosexism: Social norms, behaviors, or beliefs that privilege heterosexual people.

Intersex: A term used to describe a wide range and diverse group of people who develop primary and/or secondary sex characteristics that do not fit neatly into the social constructed and exclusive categories of male or female. Being intersex does not refer to one’s gender identity. Rather, it is a descriptor of biological and physical traits associated with assigned sex.

Legal transition: Processes that involve a person legally changing their name and gender markers (e.g. on identity documents) to reflect their gender.

Medical transition: A series of medical services some people pursue to better align their body and physical gender presentation with their gender identity. Medical transition services may include hormone treatment and surgeries.

Queer: The term “queer” is used by many as a reclamation of a pejorative epitaph used to identify persons or people who are not heterosexual and/or cisgender (Rand, 2014; Sullivan, 2003). The term is also used in reference to queer theory and the sociopolitical deconstruction of static identity labels (Sullivan, 2003).
**Sexual orientation:** Refers to a person’s sexual, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or other genders and sexes. People may identify their sexual orientation as gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, queer, etc. A person’s sexual orientation does not reflect whether they are transgender or cisgender.

**Social transition:** Steps a person may take to express their gender identity within their social environment. Elements of this type of transition may involve the use of a name or gender pronouns that better represent a person’s gender, and/or the outward expression of one’s gender through clothing.

**Transsexual:** A term that some transgender people identify with. The word is often used in medical settings to refer to a transgender person who identifies as a man or women and is seeking medical treatment to transition. Many not be the preferred term of many transgender people.
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