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Gender Nonconformity in Youth and Safety: Utilizing Photo-Elicitation and Thematic Analysis

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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, GENDER NONCONFORMITY IN YOUTH AND SAFETY: UTILIZING PHOTO-ELICITATION AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS, by JENNIFER ALICIA SMITH, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education and Human Development, Georgia State University.

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GENDER NONCONFORMITY IN YOUTH AND SAFETY: UTILIZING PHOTO-ELICITATION AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

by

JENNIFER ALICIA SMITH

Under the Direction of Catherine Chang, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Social stigma against gender diverse people continues to exist (Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012), and this extends to gender nonconforming youth (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006). Expression and exploration of fluid gender identity and gender roles are part of typical human development (Institute of Medicine, 2011). Childhood gender nonconformity is defined as variation from norms in gender role behavior (Adelson & The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2012). Recommendations for research with gender nonconforming youth include gaining a clearer understanding of safe relationships, which currently lacks in the counseling literature (Institute of Medicine, 2011). Safety occurs when an individual takes psychological and interpersonal risks without fearing negative consequences (Edmondson,

1999). This study explores safety among gender nonconforming youth through the theoretical perspective of constructivism (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011) and queer theory (Plummer, 2011) and will utilize the qualitative methods of photo-elicitation (Harper, 2002) and thematic analysis (Boyatiz, 1998). Implications for counseling practitioners, counselor educators, and future research will be discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Gender nonconformity, Youth, Safety, Photo-elicitation, Thematic analysis, Counseling

GENDER NONCONFORMITY IN YOUTH AND SAFETY: UTILIZING PHOTO-ELICITATION AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to those who have wondered if they would be validated and accepted if they revealed their true selves to another, especially adolescents who identify or express themselves outside of the gender binary. I hope this work sheds some light on how we can feel safe enough with one another to feel free to take interpersonal risks. More specifically, this work is dedicated to the eight youths who took time to meet with me and be vulnerable enough to share their experiences. I will forever cherish our hours together, and you have each inspired me.

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Guiding Questions

The purpose of this study is to understand safe relationships among gender nonconforming youth. Safety, as identified in this study, occurs when an individual takes psychological and interpersonal risks without fearing negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999). This differs from social support literature in that it explores a deeper, more meaningful relational context. This study explores the following research questions: 1) What constitutes a safe relationship for gender nonconforming youth? 2) What are the components of safety? 3) How does safety impact gender nonconforming youth? 4) How does psychological safety inform your safe relationship(s)?

Review

The American Counseling Association (ACA; 2014) endorses five core values for the counseling profession. These core values speak to the importance of empowering diverse individuals and groups to achieve mental health and wellness. Four of the five values speak directly to the topic of gender nonconforming youth and safety, and they are as follows: "enhancing human development throughout the life span; honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts; promoting social justice; and safeguarding the integrity of the counselor-client relationship" (ACA, 2014, p. 3). While the ACA Code of Ethics is most

often utilized in the application and practice of counseling, Section G highlights the ethical responsibility of research to further understanding of what promotes a healthy and just society.

The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC; Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Kent, & McCullough, 2015) call counseling scholars and practitioners to integrate multiculturalism and social justice in its various forms into all aspects of counseling in order to understand how to best serve oppressed and privileged persons. Gender nonconforming youth hold many intersecting identities, both oppressed and privileged, with gender expression and gender identity being the most salient in this literature review and subsequent study. Gaining an understanding of multiculturalism, including gender nonconformity, leads to social justice (Lewis & Arnold, 1998) and the MSJCC (Ratts, et al., 2015) highlight that this begins with the counselor, moves to the clients' worldview, then the counseling relationship. The ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003) further highlight that empowerment and advocacy occur on a variety of levels from micro to macro. There are many opportunities to advocate along with and on behalf of gender nonconforming youth to work toward safety in a just society.

The Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC) developed competencies to provide a framework for building safe, supportive, and caring relationships with lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, intersex, and ally persons, which are reported as applicable to children and adolescents (ALGBTIC Competencies Task Force, 2013). These competencies assert that all persons have the potential to integrate their gender identity into emotionally healthy, fulfilling lives and relationships. Competent counselors validate the full spectrum of gender identities, not limited to the gender binary, and help clients to achieve identity synthesis and integration. Counselors who attempt to invalidate or change a

client's gender identity are acting incompetently and unethically, which may be life threatening for the client and detrimental to the counseling relationship (ALGBTIC Transgender Committee, 2010). Gender nonconformity across the lifespan has been identified as a common and culturally diverse human phenomenon that is not to be pathologized (WPATH, 2011). Social stigma against gender nonconforming or gender diverse people continues to exist (Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012; Sandfort, Melendez, & Diaz, 2007), and experiences with stigmatization and oppression extend to gender nonconforming youth with their intersecting marginalized identities (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010).

Gender Nonconformity

Expression and exploration of fluid gender identity and gender roles are part of typical human development, and gender nonconformity is often a part of normal development (Institute of Medicine, 2011). Gender is defined as social, psychological, and emotional traits that may or may not align with societal expectations of one's identity and expression as woman, man, androgynous, transgender, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, but not limited to these labels (ALGBTIC Competencies Task Force, 2013; Lambda Legal, n. d.). D'Augelli, Grossman, and Starks (2006) identified gender atypicality as the degree to which biologically assigned males and females diverge from expected and socialized gender roles. Adelson and The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Committee on Quality Issues (2012) defined childhood gender nonconformity as "variation from norms in gender role behavior" (p. 959) such as toy preferences, play patterns, social roles, gesture, speech, dress, same-sex or opposite-sex peer preference, and expression of aggression, and further identified the terms gender variance and gender atypicality historically being used in the literature. From this point forward, gender

nonconformity will be the term used to represent outdated terms such as gender variance and gender atypicality.

A significant body of research links gender nonconformity to marginalized affectional orientation identity in adolescence and adulthood (Riger, Linsenmeier, Gygax, & Bailey, 2008; Wallien & Cohen-Kettenis, 2008; Green, 1987). While childhood gender nonconformity remains one of the few predictors of non-heterosexual affectional orientation in adulthood (Currin, Hubach, & Crethar, 2015), not all gender nonconforming youth later identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ). Studies with cisgender men who identify as gay or bisexual were significantly more likely to recall gender nonconformity in childhood (Bailey & Zucker, 1995; Rieger et al., 2008). However, a significantly lower prevalence rate of recalled childhood gender nonconformity was found among cisgender women who identified as lesbian or bisexual (Lippa, 2008). Few gender nonconforming children identify as transgender in adulthood (Wallien & Cohen-Kettenis, 2008; SAMSA, 2015; Zucker & Bradley, 1995). Adolescents with persisting gender nonconformity and gender dysphoria are more likely to identify as transgender in adulthood (Wallien & Cohen-Kettenis, 2008). Approximately 10% of the population is comprised of gender nonconforming children, and therefore likely to be part of each school system and neighborhood (Roberts, Rosario, Slopen, Calzo, & Austin, 2013).

It is worth noting that gender identity and expression have historically been confounded with affectional orientation in the literature. As identified above, some studies have found a link between gender identity/expression and affectional orientation (Currin et al., 2015; Wallien & Cohen-Kettenis, 2008). However, gender identity and affectional orientation are separate identities on a continuum that are held by individuals (ALGBTIC Competencies Task Force, 2013). At times, acronyms such as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) will

represent studies that combined various identities. The use of varied acronyms is intentional to reflect the sample of the identified study. Readers will notice how often gender identity and affectional orientation are conflated and how often diverse, non-binary gender identities are studied only within a sample of marginalized affectional orientations (e.g. lesbian, gay, bisexual identified as LGB). This literature review and subsequent study will remain focused on gender in its diverse forms.

Gender Identity Development Models

Gender identity development is best viewed as an ongoing process rather than as a series of stages or phases throughout the course of human development (Herdt & Boxer, 1993). Gender identity development models explore female and male acceptance in non-linear processes (Moore-Thomas, 2014) while upholding the gender binary through exploring only female and male identities. The key model (Scott & Robinson, 2001) conceptualizes gender identity attitudes among White males. Downing and Roush's (1985) model of feminist identity describes various stages from unawareness of inequity and discrimination women face to meaningful action to remove discrimination and sexism. While Downing and Roush's model leaves room for applicability for those who are feminist, regardless of sex or gender identity, it continues to speak in binaries of female/women and male/men. Hoffman's (2006) model of female identity outlines stages from the unexamined or passive acceptance of the female identity to the achieved or integrated female identity. Hoffman's model also addresses a concept labeled gender self-confidence, which is described as "the degree of alignment with one's personal standards of femininity or masculinity" (Moore-Thomas, 2014, p. 48); however, the use of binary terms is perpetuated.

Those who identify as androgynous, non-binary, agender, or gender nonconforming continue to be excluded from gender identity development models. The absence of gender nonconforming identity development models sends the message that these identities are not worth the time and energy to develop and that these identities remain outside of what is socially accepted (Beemyn, 2015; Edwards-Leeper, Leibowitz, & Sangganjanavanich, 2016; Veale, Lomax, & Clarke, 2010). The adherence to gender binary views even permeates already oppressed and marginalized groups such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual (LGBTQQIA) community, and the need for acceptance of gender fluidity to increase resilience and safety has been identified (Farmer & Byrd, 2015). Those with gender fluid, non-binary, and nonconforming identities are pressured to identify themselves in best-case terms as feminine or masculine or worst-case terms as female or male (Markman, 2011). Gender identity development models lack integration of the fluidity that is inherent in many non-binary identities and expression (Beemyn, 2015).

Victimization and Resiliency Among Gender Nonconforming Youth

Clients who identify as having orientations, behaviors, or attractions that vary from the majority have unique struggles in seeking validation and acceptance (Currin et al., 2015). D'Augelli et al (2006) found that 53% of gender nonconforming youths were told to change their behavior by parents, 12% were punished or activities were restricted, and 8% were sent to counseling due to gender nonconformity. The National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2013) found that transgender, genderqueer, and other non-cisgender students faced the most hostile school climates compared to other lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students. Gender nonconforming youth who experienced victimization in school were more than three times as likely to miss school, have lower GPAs, twice as likely to report they

did not plan to attend college, and had higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem. Transgender students reported experiencing discriminatory policies and practices in the following ways: 42.2% were prevented from using their preferred name; 59.2% had been required to use a bathroom or locker room of their legal assigned sex; 31.6% were prevented from wearing clothes considered inappropriate based on their legal sex. Gender nonconforming youth reported being verbally attacked at earlier ages and physically attacked more often than youth who fit gender role expectations (D'Augelli et al, 2006). Gender nonconforming males are known to be at higher risk for bullying victimization and depressive symptoms than gender nonconforming females or gender conforming peers (Roberts et al., 2013). In a study sampling only LGB youth, verbal victimization began at age 11 for gender nonconforming males and age 14 for gender nonconforming females, with males being victimized by mostly other males (94%) and females being victimized equally by males (56%) and females (44%). Participants in the study reported that physical victimization began at age 13 on average, with males being victimized mostly by other males (95%) and females being victimized equally by males (53%) and females (47%). Sexual victimization began at age 13 for males and age 16 for females, and only males were reported to commit sexual victimization acts (D'Augelli et al, 2006). Thirty-eight percent of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth felt unsafe at school because of their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2013). Gender nonconforming individuals were more likely to experience discrimination and in response engage in health-harming behaviors such as attempted suicide, drug/alcohol abuse, and smoking (Miller & Grollman, 2015).

Non-compliance to gender social norms may create psychological, political, and physical consequences for individuals (Hays & McLeod, 2014). Gender nonconforming youth are at

greater risk for substance abuse, suicidality, and homelessness (Institute of Medicine, 2011; Russell, 2003). Roberts, et al., (2013) found gender nonconforming heterosexuals were also at elevated risk for bullying among peers, child abuse, and depression. Gender nonconforming cisgender youth experienced worse school climates than gender conforming cisgender youth (Kosciw et al., 2013). More than half of students participating in the National School Climate Survey (2013) often or frequently heard negative remarks about gender expression. Remarks about students not acting "feminine enough" were less common than remarks about students not acting "masculine enough." One third of students often or frequently heard negative remarks about transgender people. School personnel regularly do not take action when anti-LGBTQ biases occur reportedly due to not being prepared for how to deal with such occurrences (Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013). Educators reported lower levels of empathy and likelihood to intervene in physical bullying situations for gender nonconforming and LGBTQ youth than in situations of verbal or relational bullying, which contrasts with current findings of generalized bulling, not specific to gender nonconforming or LGBTQ youth, where physical bullying is reported as the most serious form of bullying (Perez, Schanding, & Dao, 2013). Gender nonconforming children are at elevated risk for physical and emotional abuse at home and bullying by children and adults outside the home (Roberts et al., 2013). Despite some societal shifts toward acceptance, gender diverse youth experience rejection by peers, family, or others along with criticism, ostracism, and bullying that can lead to social and psychological distress (Adelson & The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Committee on Quality Issues, 2012). Gender diverse is defined as individuals whose gender expression does not conform to the stereotypical social norms of their culture for their assigned birth sex (SAMHSA, 2015), and is often used interchangeably with gender nonconformity.

Equally as important as risks gender nonconforming youth face are the ways in which they overcome adversity and are resilient. LGBT youth reported feeling stronger after facing adversity related to their identity, actively seeking safe places and people, and have identified that exploring one's sexual identity is a natural process as resiliency strategies (Scourfield, Rosen, & McDermott, 2008). Being able to define one's gender identity and embrace the fluidity of that identity has been identified as a critical aspect of resilience among transgender adults (Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011). Supportive and affirming communities and systems have also been found to facilitate resilience among transgender youth and adults (Luke & Goodrich, 2015; Singh, Meng, & Hanson, 2014; Singh et al., 2011). Intact supportive relationships, such as family connectedness, adult caring, and school safety, can be protective factors for gender nonconforming youth from suicide and other high-risk behaviors of truancy, homelessness, and sexual exploitation (Adelson & The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Committee on Quality Issues, 2012). LGBT youth who could identify more than 10 supportive adult school personnel reported feeling safer, attended school more often, felt connected to their school community, had higher GPAs, and reported plans to attend college (Kosciw et al., 2013). Training models exist for counselors and educators for gender nonconforming and transgender ally development in schools and clinical settings (Case & Meier, 2014); yet, gender nonconforming youth continue to report feeling unsafe (SAMHSA, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2013). Counselors are uniquely positioned and charged with the responsibility of building safety with gender nonconforming clients.

The Counseling Relationship and Safety

Establishing trust and safety is crucial to the counseling relationship in order to promote client growth and the formation of healthy relationships (ACA, 2014). The first stage of

counseling is relationship building, and continues to remain crucial to the therapeutic alliance through all stages (Young, 2013). Counselors have an important role and the relationships built by counselors have the potential to honor and affirm gender nonconforming individuals and their lived experiences (ALGBTIC Competencies Task Force, 2013). Sharing personal stories, sexual scripts, and ideologies in a safe, nonjudgmental therapeutic environment are valuable for clients to gain awareness of the intersection of gender identity, emotions, and presenting concerns (Moore-Thomas, 2014). It is recommended that confidentiality be protected while emphasizing reasonable expectations of privacy through permitting exploration of gender and sexual identity free from fear, shame, and rejection with a sense of control over disclosure when working with gender and sexual minority youths (Adelson & The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Committee on Quality Issues, 2012). Authentic, affirming relational connections with non-parent adults such as counselors, family members, peers, and institutions are crucial assets for the well-being of gender nonconforming youth (Sadowski, Chow, & Scanlon, 2009). The onus is on the counselors' to gain knowledge, skills, and awareness of common experiences in addition to developing empathy and respect for gender nonconforming youth (Singh et al., 2014). Professional training inadequately equips counselors to be effective allies for gender nonconforming and transgender youth (Case & Meier, 2014); therefore, training models require strengthening in order to provide counselors with means to become effective allies.

Safety extends beyond inclusive school policies; it extends to relationships with peers, school personnel, and families. Having inclusive school policies does not guarantee a safe school environment. Students who reported inclusive school policies have also reported lower perceptions of safety for gender nonconforming youth (Russell & McGuire, 2008; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). Establishing safety takes precedence over all tasks because

therapeutic work cannot succeed without safety (Herman, 1992). Safety is characterized by the belief that one can take psychological and interpersonal risks without fearing negative consequences of their actions (Edmondson, 1999). Trust conveys willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of others (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Psychological safety and trust depend on interpersonal interactions for emergence (Curseu, 2013). The internal part of an individual heals when safety is felt (Karrasch, 2014). Psychological safety and trust have been established as critical to learning and performance within groups (Curseu & Otoiu, 2013), and that extends to gender minority persons, and more specifically gender minority youth (Goodrich & Luke, 2015).

Recommendations for research with gender nonconforming youth include gaining a clearer understanding of social relationships (Bos & Sandfort, 2015). Additionally, the positive aspects of close relationships, such as family members, counselors, and other supportive relationships, have received little attention in the literature outside of ally development (Institute of Medicine, 2011; Luke & Goodrich, 2015). A significant body of literature has focused on developing advocacy efforts among counselors for and with (Lewis et al., 2013) LGBTQ youth (Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010; Greytak, Kosciw, & Boessen, 2013; Luke & Goodrich, 2013; Markman, 2011; Ratts et al., 2013), including gender nonconforming youth (Edwards-Leeper, Leibowitz, & Sangganjanavanich, 2016; Harper & Singh, 2014; Sadowski, Chow, & Scanlon, 2009; Singh, 2010). School counselors can identify and collaborate with stakeholders in schools to develop preventative and responsive strategies for LGBTQ youth (Goodrich, Harper, Luke, & Singh, 2013). Counselors are able to engage in systemic and advocacy efforts for queer and trans students through the safe schools movement (Singh & Harper, 2013). Advocating for systemic support through gender nonconformity positive policies and services, connecting gender

nonconforming youth to resources, and advising student organizations have been suggested to improve the experiences of gender nonconforming youth in schools (Case & Meier, 2014). Recommendations for a model to identify social support and nonsupport for LGBTQ youth exist to assist school personnel in identifying paths to advocacy (Kiperman, Varjas, Meyers, & Howard, 2014). Ways for counselors to support ally development within the family system for gender nonconforming youth have been identified (Harper & Singh, 2014; Luke & Goodrich, 2015). These include, and are not limited to, assisting in identifying to whom and how youth can safely disclose (Goodrich & Luke, 2015), assisting allies in language choice and understanding the power that language has to validate or invalidate gender nonconforming youth's experiences (Luke & Goodrich, 2013), and highlighting the strengths and struggles unique to gender nonconforming youth to increase empathy among allies.

Adolescents' Perspective on the Counseling Relationship

Adolescents are particularly sensitive to power differentials and an important piece of the therapeutic relationship is identifying oneself and acting as an ally rather than imposing views and ideas as a an adult onto an adolescent (Everall & Paulson, 2002). Adolescents want adults to see them as mature, capable, and aware. Throughout the therapeutic relationship adolescents want adults to respect them, share time with them, and be open to their ideas (Martin et al., 2006). School connectedness has been shown to increase adolescents' sense of individual and collective support and care. The opportunity to take an active role in the classroom, assisting in developing school policies and practices, and the use of creativity to engage adolescents in their interests inside and outside the classroom was reported to increase connectedness and safety in the school community (Whitlock, 2006). Adolescents who reported negative experiences with helping professionals often felt as though they were told what to do rather than working towards

a common goal, which emphasizes the importance of the therapeutic environment and the mutual understanding of purpose between client and counselor (Everall & Paulson, 2002). Adolescents can easily become defined by their labeled psychological diagnosis and in turn this can affect their identity development into adulthood. Mental health providers must be careful not to pathologize adolescents as this may impede the development and examination of one's true self. This is particularly relevant for vulnerable youth in institutional settings (Levy-Warren & Levy-Warren, 2005). Overall, adolescents want adults to see them as an active participant in the relationship and to implement this adults can listen and be open to their thoughts and ideas, provide them with opportunities to take an active role in the relationship, and share quality time with them.

Implications for practice and future research

Counselors are uniquely positioned to provide safe, supportive relationships to gender nonconforming youth. Some strategies for practitioners have included using non-binary language and validating all identities held by gender nonconforming youth (ALGBTIC Competencies Task Force, 2013), identifying safe and supportive individuals for gender nonconforming youth to be open with (Goodrich & Luke, 2015), and training practitioners and individuals in the community on inclusive language and ally development (Case & Meier, 2014; Harper & Singh, 2014; Luke & Goodrich, 2015). Gender nonconforming youth's resilience is enhanced when gender identity exploration is normalized as part of typical development (SAMHSA, 2015; Scourfield et al., 2008), and counselors are positioned to validate and normalize this process of exploration with gender nonconforming youths and their systems.

While advocacy is critical in supporting and creating a safe space for gender nonconforming youth, it remains unclear how counselors develop and maintain a safe

relationship for gender nonconforming youth to be their genuine, authentic selves when engaging in mental health counseling. Further, the actual voices of gender nonconforming youth are infrequently represented in the literature. Often, even in rigorous studies, safety is simply presented in survey format to youth through questions limited by a Likert scale response, which does not allow for an understanding of what constitutes safety for gender nonconforming youth. One study measured perceptions of safety for gender nonconforming peers among high school students utilizing only two questions: "My school is safe for guys who are not as 'masculine' as other guys" and "My school is safe for girls who are not as 'feminine' as other girls" (Toomey et al., 2012). Surveys like these result far-reaching, important implications, but leaves significant questions unanswered and underrepresented voices unheard. The need for advocacy along side and on the behalf of gender nonconforming youth remains. Before advocating for gender nonconforming youth, it is crucial to gain an understanding of their experiences and needs. Attention needs to be given to what constitutes a safe relationship from gender nonconforming youth's perspectives, how safety impacts gender nonconforming youth, and how this informs the relationship between gender nonconforming youth and counselors, which lacks in the research. If an understanding is gathered on safety among gender nonconforming youth and the counseling relationship, that understanding may be applied to other vital relationships.

Photography in Research

One of many ways that researchers can integrate adolescent perspectives in developmentally appropriate ways is through the use of photo-elicitation methods. Harper (2002) defined photo elicitation as the simple idea of including a photograph in a research interview. It is argued that the use of images elicits a different kind of information from participants because of the visual part of the brain is activated in a way that words alone cannot activate, thus evoking

deeper elements of consciousness. A continuum of how images are used is discussed with an inventory of existing artifacts being at one end and intimate dimensions of the social at the other. Harper stated the latter end of the continuum allows interviews to connect core definitions of the self to society, culture, and history, which corresponds to a postmodern decentered narrative. Photo-elicitation methods have been documented as a stand alone methodology as well as supplemental to other methodologies, such as ethnography and constructionism in sociology and anthropology where it originated (Clark-Ibanez, 2004), although attempts to refine and unify an analytical framework for visual methods exists outside of the counseling literature (Pauwels, 2010).

Participant-driven photo-elicitation, a process that includes participant photographs and in-depth interviews in qualitative research, empowers participants' involvement in what is studied. This method has four documented advantages: photos can provide tangible stimuli for more effectively tapping into participants' tacit consumption of representations, images, and metaphors; produces different and richer information; assists to reduce differences in power, class, and knowledge between researcher and researched; and the unique potential to stimulate engagement (Van Auken, Frisvoll, & Stewart, 2010). Photo-elicitation stimulates participants, assists in bringing memories to the surface, leads to new perspectives, as well as assists with building trust and rapport. When participants take the photographs, as opposed to the researcher, the focus of the research remains on the participants' perspectives and their responses to their environments (Epstein et al., 2006). A study in Sweden that explored migrant women's experiences of safety in inclusive and exclusive spaces through the use of participant-driven photographic methods further supported that the use of photography as a research method elicits more information from the participant than would otherwise be evident (Giritli-Nygren &

Schmauch, 2012). Croghan et al. (2008) utilized a social constructionist perspective to explore identity through photo-elicitation methods and found the combination of verbal and visual forms of self-presentation allows individuals a greater scope for presenting "complex, ambiguous, and contradictory versions of the self" and it increases the potential "for playing with constructions of identity."

Photo-elicitation methods have been widely used with youth in various settings such as urban schools (Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Goessling & Doyle, 2009), school-based outdoor education programs (Smith, Gidlow, & Steel, 2012), and chronic illness in pediatric health research (Rich & Chalfen, 1999). The use of participant-driven photo-elicitation methods encourages youths' free recall, sense of personal control, and ability to reflect upon what is captured in their photographs (Clark, 1999). This method complements what adolescents have identified, as outlined above, as desirable in working with adults. Not only does this method meet the needs of integrating adolescent voices, it is also a viable method for including gender nonconforming youths' perspectives in the literature due to the participant driven nature of the method allowing for previously marginalized narratives to be centered.

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2 GENDER NONCONFORMITY IN YOUTH AND SAFETY: UTILIZING PHOTO-ELICITATION AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The exploration, growth, and fluidity of gender expression and gender roles are a normal part of human development (Institute of Medicine, 2011). Gender nonconformity is also part of normative human development, and can be defined as the degree to which a biological male or female diverges from their assigned gender roles (Adelson & The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Committee on Quality Issues, 2012; SAMHSA, 2015). In childhood, this can be seen through toy preferences, play patterns, social roles, gestures, speech, dress, same sex or opposite sex peer preference, and expression of aggression (Adelson & The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Committee on Quality Issues, 2012). Approximately 10% of children are gender nonconforming; therefore, it is likely they are represented in each community, neighborhood, and school (Roberts, Rosario, Slopen, Calzo, & Austin, 2013). Youth who are gender nonconforming are challenged in society, at home, and among peers at school to comply with the societal expectations of their biologically assigned legal sex, and they have a unique struggle of seeking validation and acceptance of support systems that affirm their aligning gender identity and expression.

Childhood gender nonconformity continues to be one of the main predictors of affectional orientations other than heterosexual during adulthood; however, not all youth who are gender nonconforming identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual later in life (Currin, Hubach, & Crethar, 2015). Gender identity does not follow a series of stages but is an ongoing process and is ever evolving throughout development (Herdt & Boxer, 1993). Most children who are gender nonconforming also do not go on to identify as transgender (SAMHSA, 2015; Wallien & Cohen-Kettenis, 2008; Zucker & Bradley, 1995). However, those whose gender nonconformity and

gender dysphoria persists into adolescence are more likely to identify as transgender in adulthood (Wallien & Cohen-Kettenis, 2008). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) defined gender dysphoria as "gender at birth is contrary to the one they identify with" and outlines criteria specific to children, adolescents, and adults. Despite the number of individuals who identify as gender nonconforming and the fluidity of this identity, the majority of gender identity development models including, The Key Model (Scott & Robinson, 2001), Downing and Rouche's (1985) feminist model, and Hoffman's (2006) model of female identity, exclude those who identify outside of the binary of male and female. Since all the published models to date provide more of a binary perspective on gender identity, it would seem that an identity model that addresses and includes gender fluid individuals is an important step towards greater understanding and acceptance.

Although there have been strides towards more social acceptance of gender minorities, youth who do not adhere to gender roles, are often told by parents to change their behaviors, punished or restricted from activities, and are sent to counseling to address gender non-conformity (D'Augelli et al, 2006). This often has psychological, physical, and political consequences for individuals (Hays & McLeod, 2014). Compared to youth who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, those who are transgender, genderqueer, or other gender diverse identities face the most aggressive school and social environments (D'Augelli et al, 2006). Victimization at school due to gender nonconformity is linked to three times more school absences, a lower GPA, two times less motivation to attend college, higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem (Roberts et al., 2013). Transgender students face more discriminatory school policies, such as not being able to use their preferred name, required to use the bathroom that matches their legal assigned sex at birth, and are prevented from wearing

clothes and accessories that were deemed inappropriate for their legal sex (Russell & McGuire, 2008). According to the National School Climate Survey, more than half of school children reported often or frequently hearing negative remarks about gender expression, and one third of students reported hearing negative remarks about transgender people (Kosciw et al., 2014). Educators reported feeling unprepared to deal with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) biases in school; therefore, in most instances, these occurrences are not addressed. Among LGBTQ youth, 38% reported feeling unsafe at school because of their gender expression (Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2014). Overall, gender minority youth reported experiencing higher instances of rejection from peers, family, and others as well as criticism, ostracism, and bullying which can lead to more social and psychological stress (Adelson & The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Committee on Quality Issues, 2012).

LGBTQ youth who could identify ten or more supportive and trusted adults in their school environment reported feeling safer at school, having fewer school absences, feeling more connected to their school community, achieving higher GPAs, and reported plans to attend college (Kosciw et al., 2013). Family connectedness, adult caring, and school safety are related to better outcomes for gender nonconforming youth and are protective factors against suicide and high-risk behaviors such as homelessness, truancy, and sexual exploitation (Adelson & The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Committee on Quality Issues, 2012; Luke & Goodrich, 2015; SAMHSA, 2015). According to transgender adults, the ability and space to be able to define and to embrace one's identity is important to resiliency and overcoming adversity (Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011). In promoting client growth, building trust, safety, and the counselor-client relationship are crucial elements throughout all stages of counseling (Young, 2013). Counselors can provide an authentic and affirming non-parent

relationship with gender nonconforming youth, which is crucial to their well-being (Goodrich, Harper, Luke, Singh, 2013; Sadowski, Chow, & Scanlon, 2009). For gender nonconforming youth, feeling safe physically and emotionally is important for therapeutic progress (Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010). Relationships are critical to wholeness, which refers to psychological and behavioral interconnection, and are impacted by and impact people (Luke & Goodrich, 2015). Psychological safety means taking interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences or actions (Edmondson, 1999). It is the onus of the counselor to be informed of how gender nonconforming youth define and identify safety within the counseling relationship; yet, gender nonconforming youth's perspectives on safety in relationships remain underrepresented (Case & Meier, 2014; Harper & Singh, 2014; Luke & Goodrich, 2015). What is known is that establishing safety and trust is crucial to the counseling relationship (ACA, 2014).

Advocacy efforts among counselors for the LGBTQ community, such as ally development, have primarily been the focus of research to date (Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010; Luke & Goodrich, 2015; Singh, 2010). Advocacy is a critical aspect for creating safer, more accepting environments for gender nonconforming youth; however, little is known about how to maintain safe and stable therapeutic relationships where gender nonconforming youth believe they can be their unique and authentic selves. The research to date has only provided pre-written responses in Likert scale format to capture whether or not gender nonconforming youth feel safe and have been limited to the following questions: "My school is safe for guys who are not as 'masculine' as other guys." and "My school is safe for girls who are not as 'feminine' as other girls." (Toomey et al., 2012). These questions not only exclude how youths define safety, but also perpetuate the gender binary. Adultism, defined as the oppressive system where adults hold greater power than youth (Bell, 2003), is a threat to resilience among transgender youth (Singh et

al., 2014) and has historically limited youth by preventing their voices from being heard. This research aims to provide a space for gender nonconforming youth to have voice to comment on what, when, and how they feel safe in relationships. The use of qualitative methodology provides this and allows youth to define their gender; therefore, potentially removing gender binary biases (ALGBTIC Competencies Task Force, 2013), which allows opportunity to gather rich narratives of gender nonconforming youth. Intentional sampling to include diversity in many forms is practicing competence (ALGBTIC Competencies Task Force, 2013).

The purpose of this study is to understand safe relationships among gender nonconforming youth. Safety, as identified in this study, occurs when an individual takes psychological and interpersonal risks without fearing negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999). This differs from social support literature in that it explores a deeper, more meaningful relational context. This study explores the following research questions: 1) What constitutes a safe relationship for gender nonconforming youth? 2) What are the components of psychological safety for gender nonconforming youth? 3) How does psychological safety impact gender non-conforming youth? 4) How does psychological safety inform their safe relationship(s)?

Methodology

Constructionism is an epistemology that asserts meaning is derived through experiences and interactions (Creswell, 2009). There is no objective truth to be discovered; instead, meaning is constructed and exists through social interactions as people engage with their own realities (Crotty, 1998). Relationships are one form of interaction where meaning can be constructed. This study was guided by constructionism in every aspect, from the development of initial research questions regarding safety in relationships for gender nonconforming youth through the thematic analysis of participant data.

The theoretical perspective that informed this study is constructivist interpretive, which aims to understand specific constructed realities (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Utilizing this theoretical perspective validated each participant's experience of safety. Constructivism allows researchers to hold both the subjective and objective realities simultaneously. Constructivism allows empirical validation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) of both truths, no matter how conflicting or harmonious those truths might be. While a constructivist interpretive theoretical perspective primarily informed this study, queer theory also influenced this study.

Queer theory challenges the gender binary and acknowledges the fluidity and openness of gender identity and expression (Plummer, 2011). This perspective encourages deconstructing the researcher's existing discourses to create greater openness in how categories are conceptualized and actively works to de-center fixed categories of identities. Assumptions, in this study, are challenged about how gender nonconforming youth understand, experience, and identify safety. Queer theory encourages researchers to be vigilant of how gender, outside of the binary, influences the experience of safety while rejecting the idea that there is only one method to gain this understanding. While queer theory serves as one of two interacting theoretical perspectives framing this study, it focuses more on the political and less on the methodological style. By focusing on the political, it brings the gender binary to the forefront of analysis and actively works to threaten traditional, preconceived notions about gender (Plummer, 2002). These principles identified by interpretive constructivism and queer theory heavily informed this study.

In this study, interpretive constructivism and queer theory served as two separate interacting theoretical perspectives to provide a complementary framework for approaching this study. By combining various theoretical perspectives and methodological procedures, research designs are improved when researchers examine consistencies and inconsistencies, convergences

and divergences among the different approaches, and make intentional decisions with awareness of how these paradigms work together and against each other in framing the study (Stinson, 2009). Humanist theories, like interpretive constructivism, seek meaning and human experience, while queer theory rejects this. Queer theory urges distance while constructivism requires the researcher to get close to what is being studied. Humanism wants justice for all while oppressions of sexuality and gender are prioritized through a more critical lens in queer theory (Plummer, 2011). Tensions are evident when comparing these two interacting theoretical perspectives in this study. By examining these tensions, the importance of framing this study utilizing both theoretical perspectives is highlighted. This study was enhanced by combining honoring human experiences and meanings through constructivism while honoring the political stances of queer theory. By combining constructivism and queer theory, researchers were able to approach the study with a critically self-aware stance, which is a commonality between the two theoretical perspectives. Understanding this commonality and embracing this flexible integration of two paradigms, seemingly at odds with each other at first glance, leads to a more participant centered focus (Hansen, 2002), which is also shared by the two theories.

Photo-elicitation

Photographs can lead participants to new perspectives of an experience or of their social existence (Harper, 2002). The diverse perspectives and realities that are brought to an image by participants and viewers are illuminated through photo-elicitation (Harper, 1998). Participant driven photographs prompt deeper reflection and exploration of the experience for both the participant and the researcher (Harper, 1998). Two types of photo-elicitation exists: externally driven and participant driven (Harper, 2002; Van Auken, Frisvoll, & Stewart, 2010). This study implemented participant driven photo-elicitation, because it engaged participants by having them

capture their own photographs, as opposed to using existing photographs not taken by the participant. The use of participant driven photographs brought personal connections and meanings to the research. This methodology asked participants to capture photographs of concepts, people, places, and activities of interest to the research. Participants were then asked probing questions about the context, interactions, people and objects included in the photographs to assist in gaining understanding of the meanings the participants constructed and represented in photographic form. Evidence supports that participants are more engaged in research with images (Van Auken et al., 2010) and interviews are enriched through difficult to access aspects of participant lives (Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, & Phoenix, 2008).

Participants

Due to this qualitative study focusing on a population that can be difficult to access, purposive sampling (Creswell, 2009) was utilized to recruit eight participants (n=8). Participants ranged in age from thirteen to seventeen with a mean age of 14.6 and self-identified as gender nonconforming. Gender nonconforming is defined as gender identity, behaviors, interests that do not align with societal expectations of one's assigned biological sex (Adelson & The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2012).

Participants were asked to use words they felt best captured their demographic data and some expressed holding more than one identity. Seven participants identified as White, and one identified as African American. Participants defined their affectional orientation as queer (n=3), lesbian (n=1), pansexual (n=3), heteroflexible (n=1), bisexual (n=1) and asexual (n=1). Participants were asked to use their own words to describe their gender identities; they identified as: transgender (n=4), female to male (n=4), genderqueer (n=2), gender fluid (n=1), female (n=2), and male (n=2). All eight participants lived in the southeastern United States. Participants

identified their religious beliefs as, agnostic (*n*=5), atheist (*n*=1), questioning (*n*=1), not sure (*n*=1), and Quaker (*n*=1). Five reported psychological disabilities, one an intellectual/learning disability, one chronic disability, one vision disability, and three participants reported no physical or psychological disability.

Procedures

Participants were required to be engaged in an active therapeutic relationship with a counselor in the community to ensure at least one supportive adult in the participants' lives. Community counselors served as the recruitment source for participants. The primary researcher, as a Licensed Professional Counselor in the community, relied on existing and newly formed relationships with other counselors in the community to recruit participants. The primary researcher provided a definition of gender nonconformity to community counselors who agreed to assist with recruitment and requested that counselors share the study recruitment flyer with clients who self-identity as gender nonconforming as well as have flyers available in their office for any potentially interested client. Participants were not excluded based on gender identity, assigned sex, or affectional/sexual orientation. The researcher relied on community counselors to obtain permission for the researcher to meet with potential participants to gain consent and provided the primary researcher with a time for the in person meeting. Participants, as minors, were provided the option to have a parent or guardian consent to research or if they felt the traditional consent process would potentially cause harm due to not being out to parents, the option for their community counselor to serve as a youth advocate, who was an adult available for the youth to ask questions they had about the study, based on in loco parentis was provided. In loco parentis is a legal term defined as "in place of a parent" (West's Encyclopedia of American Law, 2008) where traditional consent is waived. Although the option to waive consent

was available, all eight participants, including those who were not out about their gender identity, obtained parent consent in this study. Additionally, all participants, as minors, gave assent to participate in the research.

After the primary researcher obtained both consent and assent, participants were asked to complete a demographic form (see Appendix A) and identify a pseudonym. Participants were encouraged to only use their pseudonym during written correspondence. The researcher ensured that participants had access to a digital photographic device of their choosing. If a participant reported not having access to a digital photographic device, an inexpensive digital camera with a built-in USB drive was provided to ensure ability for the researcher to download the participant's photos in the second meeting. The researcher explained the timeline verbally and provided a written reminder of how and when to submit photographic materials (see Appendix B). Participants were provided one week to capture between one and ten images of their choice in response to the prompt: safety in relationships. The interpretation or definition of this prompt was left to the participant to decide and when participants asked the researcher about the definition or any other specifics about the prompt, the researcher replied "It's intentionally open for you to decide." Before the end of this meeting, a date and time was established for the semi-structured interview to take place in a second meeting. Participants were instructed not to capture photographs with people's faces and all photographs with individual's faces were excluded from the interviews.

All photographs were sent to an encrypted, password protected, secure email address to which only the primary researcher had access. The email address that was provided was through Hushmail, which is HIPAA compliant with encryption and two-step verification which ensured data was kept as confidential as the researcher could ensure. Participants were encouraged to use,

and were offered assistance to set up, an email address that did not identify them. If photographic data was not received after one week from providing the prompt and obtaining consent from the participant, the primary researcher emailed the participant to request the photographs and reminded the participant of the scheduled appointment for the semi-structured interview based on the photographs.

The researcher familiarized herself with the participants' photographs before the interviews, except in the one case where a participant utilized the camera provided by the researcher where the option to send the photographs ahead of the second meeting was limited. The semi-structured interviews occurred in the second meeting. The researcher ensured both the participant and herself had a copy of each photograph during the interview. All photographs were printed from the researcher's photo printer to maintain confidentiality of participant data except in the case where the photographs were not received ahead of the meeting, and those were displayed on the researcher's password protected computer. The participant driven photographs served as the basis for the in-depth interview. The photographs served as empirical data that represented the participants' potentially taken for granted point of view on the subject matter (Harper, 2000). In addition to utilizing the photographs as prompts for eliciting the participants' thoughts, feelings, and meanings on safe relationships, a semi-structured interview protocol was used (Appendix C). Interviews were digitally recorded. All the interviews lasted about one hour with most interviews lasting between 45 and 50 minutes. Members of the research team transcribed all interviews verbatim. The total number of single spaced transcribed interview pages were 124. All transcripts were stored on a password protected computer to which only members of the research team had access during data analysis. After data analysis, all data, including transcribed in-depth interviews and participant driven photographs, were moved and

stored on a password protected external hard drive to which only the primary researcher had access. The primary researcher will keep the stored data for the duration of five years. All data was only identified using participants' selected pseudonym throughout the data collection and data analysis processes.

Researchers as Instruments

The research team was comprised of five members. At the time of the study, four members were doctoral students in the same counselor education program and one member worked in the community with gender nonconforming youth seeking services through an advocacy center. Members were selected due to interest and expertise in youth and/or multiculturalism. The primary researcher identifies as a White, queer woman who is also a Licensed Professional Counselor and who works with youth in private practice. Two other researchers who were involved in the data analysis and transcribing identify in the following ways: the first, a Eurasian, cisgender, heterosexual woman with expertise in multiculturalism who holds the assumption that gender nonconforming youth may experience an in-between space with no direct community due to how society expects them to be and that action and advocacy would be part of safety; the second, a White, cisgender, heterosexual woman with expertise in working with youth identified her assumptions that trust, comfort, context, and acceptance would be components of safe relationships for gender nonconforming youth and her value of marginalized groups being represented in research. The other two members of the research team served as auditors and transcribers and identified in the following ways: the first, a White, transgender, queer person with expertise in multiculturalism and many years of experience as a school counselor; the second, a White, genderqueer, lesbian who has a public health background and currently works with diverse youth seeking services from a local advocacy center. None of

the participants in this study were current or former clients seeking counseling services from any of the individuals on this research team or the agencies for which research team members worked. The primary researcher entered this study with the subjective experience that gender nonconforming youth regardless of affectional orientation are most at risk for unsafe relationships. This perspective came from experiences in clinical work where many gender nonconforming youth struggled to authentically connect in social relationships with both peers and adults due to how they were perceived by others. The primary researcher also developed this view from personal experience during adolescence. Two of three research team members analyzing data are experienced qualitative researchers as well as one of two auditors. The second auditor is experienced in mixed methodologies as well as quantitative research.

The purpose of the research team was to provide a check and balance system to ensure that diverse perspectives were represented by members. Through honoring a variety of diverse voices among the researchers in this study, the research is strengthened (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Having three researchers analyze the data also provides opportunity for triangulation, which assists in building trustworthiness and credibility to the rigor of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Further, having three researchers coding increases the ability to reliably sense themes through recognizing the codable moment due to minimizing the potential of researchers projecting subjectivities without reflexivity and becoming fatigued with the process of data analysis and potentially missing themes in the data (Boyatiz, 1998).

Data Sources

Demographic sheet. Participants were asked to complete a nine question demographic sheet provided by the primary researcher during initial contact (see Appendix A). The demographic form asked the following basic demographics about participants: age, gender,

race/ethnicity, sexual/affectional orientation, religion/spirituality, disability/chronic illness, and grade level. Additionally, the demographic sheet asked who provided consent for the minor participant: parent/guardian or youth advocate.

Participant driven photographs. When the primary researcher met with each participant to obtain consent and gather demographic data, the primary researcher asked the participant to take one to 10 photographs of safe relationships. Participants were provided the option to utilize personal photographic devices, such as a digital camera or phone, or if they did not have such a device, they were provided an inexpensive digital camera, which was disposable to the researcher. Participants in this study typically shared 2 to 4 photographs with the primary researcher. These photographs served as the basis for in-depth interviews with the participants.

Semi-structured interviews. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted based on the same interview protocol (see Appendix C) with flexibility for appropriate, and more specific follow up questions. The interviews, as well as the protocol, were based on participant driven photographs gathered before the interview. The semi-structured interview protocol was carefully constructed with open prompts that apply to a variety of relationships that participants might experience. The protocol probed for participants' experiences with safe relationships, what makes relationships safe for them, and their depiction of their own gender identity. In addition, the protocol included probes to gather the manifest content (i.e., what is directly observable in the photographs) and latent content (i.e., the underlying meaning of the safe relationship for the participant). An example of a probe in the semi-structured protocol to gather manifest content is "Tell me about your photographs." A semi-structured interview protocol probe aimed at gathering latent content is "What do you wish others noticed about you that may or may not be present in these photographs?" The use of a semi-structured interview protocol allowed the

primary researcher opportunities to ask follow up questions when they applied to a participant and to exclude questions that were not applicable to the participant. The interview protocol was arranged to give the interviewer broad prompts to facilitate the interview with more specific follow up questions under each broader prompt. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Interviews lasted 45 to 55 minutes in length.

Memoing. The primary researcher kept a reflective journal throughout the data collection process. Memoing occurred after each interaction with a participant to provide a space to note reactions, feelings, thoughts that might not be captured from the participant during the recorded interviews. The memos provided the researcher a place to reflectively journal reactions, thoughts, and feelings to the data gathering process and interactions with each participant. Additionally, memoing was utilized during transcription for research team members to begin developing an inductive codebook through the first stages of sensing themes (Boyatzis, 1998).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Boyatiz, 1998) allowed researchers to preserve units of data that identified what they are about and/or what they mean (Saldana, 2013). Boyatiz (1998) summarized the four stages of data analysis as (a) sensing themes, (b) doing it reliably, (c) developing codes, and (d) interpreting the information and themes. These stages guided the research team throughout the data analysis process in a non-linear fashion. Before outlining each of these steps, it is worth noting that in order to bring awareness of the research team members' subjectivities, members of the research team responsible for data analysis met once to discuss these before data collection, once during data collection as members were coding interviews to re-examine subjectivities while discussing themes, and once after all interviews were transcribed. Subjectivity meetings were verbally discussed and documented in writing through the use of

memos. Subjectivity meetings were held in addition to those focused on coding and reaching consensus agreement. All research team members responsible for analyzing data were present for each of the research team meetings.

Preliminary data analysis continued during the data collection and transcribing, or data analysis preparation, stages (Grbich, 2013). Research team members were encouraged to memo any sensed themes during and after transcribing interviews. Research team members met to discuss the themes sensed during transcribing to build a tentative and flexible inductive codebook (Boyatiz, 1998) after the first two interviews were transcribed and coded and again after each set of two interviews. Codes were further developed, added, and modified while research team members closely examined the verbatim transcripts of participant interviews. The second stage of analysis required the research team to meet again and discuss codes so that they may begin to reliably and consistently code data. The third stage of analysis was practiced after researchers formalized the codebook, which occurred after the sixth interview. All interview data was analyzed using the established and agreed upon codebook. The codebook included the following elements for each thematic code: (a) a label, (b) a definition of what the theme concerns, (c) a description of how to know when the theme occurs, (d) a description of any qualifications or exclusions to the identification of the theme, and (e) examples to eliminate possible confusion when looking for the theme. Research team members reached consensus agreement on all interview transcripts (Saldana, 2013). Consensus agreement, in this study, was defined by three coders reaching 100% agreement on all codes. A recursive process was used for this study by meeting after every two interviews and for each new code that was developed, researchers reanalyzed previous interviews to determine if the new code was present. The research team met seven times with meetings averaging approximately four and a half hours. The

established codes were used to process and analyze observations, which enabled the research team to progress to the fourth stage of analysis. This stage required researchers to interpret the thematic information in ways that contributes to knowledge, which was done inductively. Themes that emerged included the manifest level, which was directly observable in content information, and at the latent level, which was the underlying meaning.

A summary of the codebook, including elements for each thematic code, was created and maintained as a Word document. Thematic coding was carried out using Microsoft word and excel software. Memos of research team meetings, including the last team meeting where emergent themes were interpreted into a conceptual framework, were kept as Word documents. All Word documents and coded interviews were kept on research team members' password protected computers. Upon the conclusion of the study, only the primary researcher kept data on a password protected external hard drive.

Trustworthiness

A recursive process was used during data collection and analysis. Participants were invited to review transcripts for accuracy and to provide feedback to the research team within a time period of two weeks and provided a week to notify the primary researcher of any additions to or inaccuracies in the transcript. The option to meet in person to review the transcript was offered to all participants, and all participants chose to have the transcript emailed to them. An audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was maintained by the primary researcher and was reviewed by two auditors on the research team. Research team members were required to bracket their subjectivities in the initial research team meeting in verbal and written forms, and verbally express personal experiences and assumptions throughout the study with the research team. Peer checking was an ongoing, reflexive process throughout data analysis and interpretation among

research team members. Three forms of data (i.e., semi-structured interviews transcribed verbatim, participant driven photographs, and researcher memos) provided triangulation of data sources and three coders provided triangulation of data interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Participants identified nine themes as integral to safe relationships among gender nonconforming youth. Six of these themes provide understanding for establishing and maintaining safe relationships (see Figure 1). These six themes are (a) components of safe relationships, (b) safety negotiation, (c) gender as a fluid process, (d) respecting autonomy, (e) advocacy, and (f) resilience. Three themes highlight threats to establishing and maintaining safe relationships (see Figure 2). These three themes are (a) harmful relationships, (b) minority stress, and (c) oppression. Findings are presented below in no particular order. The use of pronouns, including they/them, is done so intentionally to represent the participant as they/she/he identified.

Components of Safe Relationships (*n* = 8)

Participants identified several different components of safe relationships, including characteristics that are shared between individuals engaged in a safe relationship. These components address the ways in which participants experienced safety when others embodied specific characteristics or traits in interacting with participants or highlight relational components that assist in building safety for gender nonconforming youth. One of the major components participants identified was respecting and validating the whole person. Participants often reported the desire to be seen as not just their gender identity. Quin expressed this concept when they reported,

> "I'm really just a person. I don't see myself defined by labels, I guess I do define myself with labels, but the person I am comes first before that." Charlie shared his struggle with

> adults only focusing on the identity they are grieving and losing sight of his being a whole person when he reported, "Even if you feel this way, don't treat it as you're losing somebody. You're not losing me. You're not losing your daughter… [I'm] still the same person. It's literally just a different identity."

Participants also identified honesty, communication, trust, investment, time, and sharing positive experiences as components of safe relationships. The value of honesty within a relationship was identified by Bobbie when he shared, "I think that a really important thing within having a relationship with somebody, is to be honest with them, and not to hide things from them." Along similar lines, the ability and willingness to communicate was identified by participants. Non-intrusive questions and including participants in the conversations were identified as important aspects of communication. Finding the balance of how to communicate with gender nonconforming youth about their identity was identified by Charlie when explaining his metaphor, "It's a difference between having an interview, I think about this. It'd be a difference between a calm interview with somebody or being bombarded by news reporters. That's the difference. It's just the difference of approach and patience." Trust, a commonly accepted component of safe relationships, was endorsed by gender nonconforming youth in this study. Eliza shared, "I just think trust is very, very important. It's something that comes to me when I think of [a relationship with] someone… I have to trust them." Expression of investment from adults was also identified as a component of safe relationships for gender nonconforming youth. One participant, Vic, described his father's way of expressing investment in him and his well-being through the following description,

> "Probably him just accepting me and he takes me to an LGBT group two hours away from us every other Monday, so it's kind of like that dedication and him knowing that

> will make me feel better made me get closer to him as he wouldn't do that if he didn't care."

For Vic, an invested adult takes action to seek necessary supports. Vic also described what most participants also identified as a component to safe relationships, they take time to build. Vic reported, "I don't feel comfortable with telling someone something if I've just met them." Taking time to build was endorsed by participants when identifying duration, frequency, and proximity in the context of building and maintaining relationships. An additional component of safe relationships for gender nonconforming youth was sharing positive, fun experiences. Mabel shared, "Someone to talk to and stuff and being able to relate, not just with LGBT stuff, but certain things you like. Just being able to have fun with the person." The need for playful, youthful relationships leads to safety for these participants.

Participants also identified the requirement of affirming their identity in order for a relationship to be safe. Some of the ways that gender nonconforming youth believe their identity is being affirmed by adults is when there is no questioning of gender or when adults accurately use their names and pronouns. Letting go of cisgender expectations and celebrating their identity was also identified by participants as affirming their identity. Charlie shared an experience when his identity was affirmed by a close relationship,

> "I have a lot of problems [related to being] very feminine [and] trans. I always talk to him about it and something that he says to me a lot that really helps me is that even if I have feminine attributes, it doesn't make me any less of a guy to him. I think that's just really important to me, so I wanted to include that because nothing makes me feel safer and valid than that one phrase."

Participants' identities are key to understanding and establishing safety for gender nonconforming youth, and the identities adults hold were also reported to play a part in the construction of safety. Participants reported that when adults hold a personal marginalized identity that participants are informed of, they are better able to connect and openly express themselves with an adult. Further, if an adult has a personal connection to the gender nonconforming community, participants shared they are more likely to feel safe. Ezra explained this when reporting the following regarding an identified safe adult, "She was Jewish. Her sister almost ended up coming out as a trans-guy, she said… She has a [child with] autism. She's dealt with a lot of issues before... She gets it." Additionally, adults who are knowledgeable about the gender identity continuum and the gender expression continuum as well as the differences between gender and assigned sex are perceived by gender nonconforming youth to be safer relationships to fully express themselves. Bobbie explained how his counselor demonstrated this knowledge in the following way, "She knew what she was talking about. She didn't diagnose me with gender identity disorder."

Safety Negotiation (*n*=7)

Participants reported expending significant energy sorting through who they can be safe with and to what extent they are safe. This process of deciding with whom and to what extent participants are safe with others is safety negotiation. Avoiding transphobic people was identified as one method of negotiating safety. The process of assessing trust was also identified by participants. This was described as testing, so to speak. Participants would give insignificant pieces of information to others to see if they could be trusted with information before disclosing more significant details about themselves. Quin expressed their internal, intuitive process of assessing trust when they shared,

> "I feel like usually you'll just know if you don't have those feelings of doubt. If you don't have to think about all the time like, 'Is this person even here with me? Do they even care about how I feel,' anything like that. I feel like if they constantly show or tell you that they're there for you no matter what, then ... I don't feel like you should, when someone supports you, I don't feel like you really get a lot of feelings of doubt about it."

The process of assessing trust and negotiating safety was sometimes stimulated when engaging in a relationship with an outsider to their common group. For example, peers who did not attend the participant's school were identified as safer or adults who do not interact with participant's parents were believed to be safer relationships. Within relationships where participants were vulnerable and openly expressed themselves, keeping confidence was identified as imperative to maintaining safety. This concept was most often discussed when participants expressed privacy and confidence not being honored through sharing information with their parents. Eliza expressed how imperative confidentiality is to her when she shared, "If I tell someone something, like a counselor, that is really important to me and then they go out and tell…the relationship is dead."

Gender as a Fluid Process (*n*=7)

Recognizing, understanding, and embracing gender as a fluid process when engaging with gender nonconforming youth assists in building safe relationships according to participants in this study. This theme was repeatedly endorsed by participants and acknowledges gender, not only as a fluid concept, but also includes the reality that there may not necessarily be an identity to develop from participants' perspectives. Participants reported relationships where others acknowledged that gender is or can be a fluid process felt safer than relationships with others

who did not understand participants' gender fluidity. Quin explained the fluid nature of gender identity when they shared,

> "Not everyone connects to the gender that they were born as, and some people just don't feel the way that everyone sees them as. They just, some people feel like if they were born a guy, then they feel like nope, they might come to eventually realize that they're a girl and vice versa, and some people just don't really see it as a major thing in their life."

Quin highlighted the process of shifting and aligning identities. Another participant, Ezra, explains his fluid process with identity to researchers,

> "The last 2 months or so, I've been slowly drifting more to non-binary. I was fine with identifying as trans-male at first. Then lately it's just been more sliding over. Thing is, I do feel more masculine, but not as much anymore. I can still get dysphoria over my body. I'd still like to transition, but not exactly the same. I don't strive to be super-masculine anymore."

While some gender nonconforming youth hold fixed or static identities, others may experience confusion when the gender binary is imposed instead of embracing the fluidity of gender. Mabel shared his experience of confusion when exploring his identity,

> "I mean I was confused myself and then I was saying, 'I'm trans, wait no, I'm not. I'm genderless.' But now I'm just going to stick with this because I don't know if it's going to last forever. If I'm going to stick with this term [gender fluid], but I most definitely know at the moment that this is what I want to go by, so I'm just trying to go with it because it gets confusing at some points."

Respecting Autonomy (*n=6*)

Participants expressed awareness of power dynamics and how they inform safe relationships. Respecting participants' autonomy and being aware of the power differential youths experience assist in building safety. Participants reported when others, namely adults, are aware that youth do not get to choose the relationship, exerting power over youths is unnecessary, and that enacting power over youths silences them, safer relationships are built and maintained. Charlie shared his thoughts on how adults need not exert unnecessary power over teens,

> "Just being able to confront your faults, too. Yeah, you're the adult but you're not always right and you have to grow, too. Even though you're an adult, there's still things you can learn from youth. Don't treat youth and people that are younger like they're stupid because they're not. You can actually learn a lot from people if you just sat down and talked to them."

Bobbie reported the following experience,

> "[My therapist] just thinks that because I'm 14, and he's got a degree in psychology, that he is all-knowing and can't learn anything from a 14 year old. He still diagnoses gender identity disorder, which is information from, like, 2000. I've told him, I'm like, 'Dude, that's really old information. We don't diagnose gender identity disorder anymore.' He's just kind of like, 'Oh, you don't know anything. You don't have a degree in psychology.' I'm like, 'Okay, I guess, but you still could learn a couple of things.'"

Advocacy (*n*= 6)

Participants reported advocacy among peers as well as adults, with both relationships experiencing increased safety as a result of the advocacy alongside the participant or on behalf of the participant. Advocacy was reported to occur in various forms, and the most often reported

forms of advocacy that were meaningful to participants were on the individual level and presented as adults advocating for use of correct pronouns or names. Ezra captured this when he shared, “You just have to think about the stuff that's coming out of your mouth. Just think for a moment. Don't reflexively keep using the wrong pronouns because then you're going to keep doing it, if you don't correct yourself.” Participants identified safe peer relationships practicing advocacy in similar ways- correcting own and other’s inaccurate pronoun use or use of dead name.

Protective systems were also identified as advocating for change by participants. These systems included places such as school, although rarely, support groups, and summer camp. Isaac shared an experience with a system that was inclusive, and openly addressed inclusivity through dialogue as well as policy, in the following excerpt,

> “The actual camp is more about acceptance and accepting everybody else and loving yourself and loving everybody else. That's basically the main place that I actually get asked my preferred gender pronouns. We go in a circle and we ask gender pronouns at the beginning of the week every week, just so that people can get them right. We actually put them on our name tags too, so that if you forget, you can hold it up and you have your name and then your preferred gender pronouns on there. Only if you want them on there. You don't have to have them.”

Resilience (*n*=7)

Participants in this study reported help seeking behavior, adaptive expression, self-affirmation, self-advocacy, and hope for change as forms of resilience. Acknowledging the resiliency inherent in gender nonconforming youths builds safe relationships according to

participants in this study. Ezra explained help-seeking behavior in reaching out to a safe teacher to plan coming out,

> "I originally first came out to one of my teachers, in 7th grade because she was really cool, and I knew she would be accepting. She's very non-judgmental, and very up to date with stuff… I wanted advice, like I wanted to come out to my parents, but I don't know how… Originally, we were going to have a meeting. She was going to call my mom in for a meeting. There would be another adult in the room. When I came out, in case things didn't go well, because I felt they would go okay, but you can never really know."

Gender nonconforming youth repeated expressed forms of making a way when other options were limited. Ezra highlighted this form of resilience when sharing about his artwork with a researcher,

> "It shows with my characters, and my art, and stuff. The mass majority of my characters are usually non-binary. Not exactly feminine, not exactly masculine, just somewhere in between, and just wear whatever I feel like putting on them. Usually it ends up being more cute, feminine stuff… If I can't wear it, at least my characters can."

When resources were limited, Ezra found a way to express himself and his gender identity through drawing. Self-affirmation was used to remind participants of who they are and the strengths they posses. Charlie self-affirmed his transition when sharing, "It's a renewal thing, too. It's a lot of downs, but then the ups are worth it." Vic described self-advocating to wear what he chose, despite experiencing pressure to conform to the gender binary. He shared,

> "I've kind of talked about it with my parents, I haven't talked about it with my mom. I feel like it's something you probably should have in a conversation, especially if you feel really uncomfortable when your parents say, 'Why are you wearing that if you identify as

> that?’ You should confront them and tell them why you feel like you should be able to wear this clothing without necessarily fulfilling a gender role that you don't want.”

Another form of resilience was expressed by Isaac when identifying hope for change in the future. Isaac reported,

> “The adults at my school are very ignorant, extremely ignorant. I wouldn't be able to talk to them about [gender identity and expression] anyways. That's why I think this is really great that you're doing this, because then [adults] might know, and at least for some people it could help.”

Harmful Relationships (*n*=7)

Participants identified countless experiences with the opposite of safe relationships-harmful, unsafe relationships. This theme not only embodies the opposite of what participants shared regarding safe relationships, it specifically outlines in what ways relationships are experienced as harmful. Participants identified using their incorrect name or pronouns, focusing on body parts, overreacting to news, placing blame on the participant for their gender identity, feeling unacknowledged or dismissed, adults focusing on their own needs, and violating the participant’s integrity publicly as specific ways relationship are harmful.

Isaac recounted an unsafe experience of an adult using the incorrect name when sharing the following,

> “Adults misgendering is probably the worst thing that there could be, to be totally honest. Or for someone like me, in my opinion. In my situation. I have gotten misgendered by a couple substitutes… I’ve actually been kicked out of a classroom before… The sub refused to call me Isaac. That's a big thing, too, calling someone what they want to be called is something that is very important, whether it's their pronouns or their name.”

During the interview, Isaac shared how upon returning to the classroom, this substitute would emphasize incorrect pronouns when addressing Isaac and even made a point of addressing Isaac as “Miss” and used Isaac’s birth name. Others focusing on body parts of participants led to harmful relationships. Mabel provided an example of this when he shared, “Inappropriate questions. Like ‘What's down there?’ Or ‘How do those things work with other people in a relationship?’ ‘Do you have to date a bi person because you're both?’ Weird questions that are uncomfortable answering.” Participants also explained how overreacting to news can lead to unsafe and harmful experiences in relationships. Vic described this when he said,

> “I wish that they knew how their words would affect their child and how any reaction that you have that's going to be negative about something that your child is, is going to affect them. Not short term, but long term it's going to make them hesitate when telling people about their identity for the rest of their life, not just with you. I really don't condone trying to have a negative reaction when your child tells you something.”

Vic focused on the parent-child relationship in this description, and this is not the only relationships that participants discussed the negative impact of overreacting to news may have.

Participants also reported harmful and unsafe relationships to place blame on them for being who they are. This theme often surfaced in the context of adults insinuating that gender identification is a choice. Charlie described feeling blamed and questioned by adults in his life and shared a recommendation and explanation in the following way,

> “One thing to avoid, which I have heard so many times and it actually makes me really mad, is when adults say things like, ‘Are you sure you want to go down this path of life? It's a difficult one.’ I already know it's a difficult one and if I could choose, I wouldn't go down it. Me personally, if I could choose, I don't ... I wouldn't want to be trans. I would

> want to be [a] dude, like born a guy. It's not a choosing thing and you've ... even if it was, I already know that."

Participants also reported feeling unacknowledged or dismissed in harmful, unsafe relationships. Bobbie described being dismissed by an otherwise supportive caregiver when he shared,

> "We go to family therapy. I originally started out going to him as a one on one therapist, and I told my mom that he used the T-slur around me, he's transphobic, said I wasn't a real boy. He did all of these different things, and she was like, 'Oh, it's fine.'"

Dismissing important experiences of gender nonconforming youth negatively impacts relationships. Further, adults in participant's lives that focus on themselves, their own needs, and their own process instead of the participant's needs and process were reported as harmful. Vic described how a caregiver focused more on her unwillingness to understand instead of what Vic needed when he shared,

> "I feel like you shouldn't try to change the person or change what they feel or try to put a different label on them because with my mom, she tried to ... She gets what my sexuality is and she understand that, but for her, it's hard to understand why I believe I'm a guy. No matter how hard I try to explain it or how much I tried to explain it, she doesn't understand… I have this saying, 'If you don't understand something, like trans people or gay people or non-binary people, I don't understand Korean, but I still know it's a language.'"

Vic expressed the need for his mom to step outside of her own process of not understanding to see him as the person he is.

Participants also shared that harmful relationships include those where adults violate their integrity in public. Charlie described how harmful the following interaction with a teacher was for him,

> "If they're doing it to be mean, like directly mean, like my teacher knew every single time she called me [combined dead name with chosen/aligning name] because she thought it was funny she could combine the names. That was ridiculous. It got to the point where I literally just started not going to her class, which, was that a mistake? Yeah. It was affecting me so bad. I wasn't even getting her work done anyway. It was like, not get work done and be harassed the entire class or just get other work done."

Harmful relationships have detrimental consequences for gender nonconforming youth, much like Charlie's experience highlights.

Minority Stress (*n*=8)

Minority stress threatens safe relationships for gender nonconforming youths in this study. Participants described stressors involved in navigating various relationships not separate from their marginalized gender identity status. Participants repeatedly identified pressure to conform to the socially accepted gender binary. Participants shared how they feel limited to expressing themselves as either masculine or feminine and even pressure to hold identities of either man or woman with no room to identify with both categories or neither category. Isaac expressed how the pressure to fit the gender binary impacts how Isaac identifies, "To be completely honest, I would identify as gender neutral and I would go by they/them if I didn't live in the world that I live in because it's just not something that people are used to saying." Ezra also shared how this pressure has impacted his identity development. He shared, "That's one problem when you come out as trans, as soon as you come out as trans then you get questioned a

lot, and you're expected to be either hyper-feminine, or hyper-masculine." Participants reported feeling disempowered, which is an experience of minority stress. Disempowerment was often connected to the belief that they were unable to make a choice for themselves and follow through on that choice. Vic described feeling disempowered in the following way,

> "It kind of feels crappy. It kind of feels hurtful, but I know that's just how it's going to have to be for some time until he gets used to it. I don't hold it against him. I do sometimes get mad when he doesn't correct other people because he knows. I'm like, 'Please correct him because I can't.'"

Another form of minority stress experienced by participants was being given the burden to educate others. Mabel shared this experience, "They think that because I'm different I've got everything figured out and I need to tell them everything so they can understand. They can't just take 'Hey I'm both.'" Participants often reported the expectation from others to carry the responsibility for providing education to those who have not educated themselves about gender nonconformity.

Participants also reported the following feelings as part of the minority stress they experienced: internalized shame, isolation, and anxiety. Bobbie explained his experience of internalizing negative messages from others, which led to feeling shame. He shared,

> "I sort of started believing what other people had thought of me. I had never really been popular in any sense, and I had never really been liked by anybody. Everybody was not quiet about it. I knew they didn't like me, and they told me they didn't like me. I sort of just didn't like me either, after that. It was just sort of from what other people were telling me, what I started to believe about myself."

Isolation was reported by participants as an experience of minority stress. Gender nonconforming youth, while resilient and adaptive, also are at risk of feeling isolate. Charlie shared his experience with isolation, "Yeah, it's sad. It's really sad. I don't have a ton of friends. I actually don't have any friends in real life. Well, I have one but we just don't talk outside of school." In addition to shame and isolation, participants reported experiencing anxiety. This anxiety was externally driven, meaning the anxiety was in response to stressful circumstances surrounding navigating their gender identity and expression with others in their lives. For Isaac, anxiety increased exponentially when needing to use the restroom. Isaac reported,

> "Whenever I see a single person restroom, I'm just like, 'Thank god.' Those are my favorite because I don't have to deal with anybody else… because whenever I walk in the restrooms, I'm like, 'Oh, get prepared for the hailstorm of comments,' and stuff like that, like when I walk into a restroom that's multi-stall and stuff. Every single time I go into a bathroom, if I see someone in there, I'm subconsciously like, 'I'm a girl.' Subconsciously, I'm like, 'Please think I'm a girl. I'm in here for a reason.' Then I feel like that might make my body language a little suspicious in some ways."

Basic human needs, such as using the restroom, become stressful events that require navigation for gender nonconforming youth.

Oppression (*n*=8)

The last theme focuses on the forms of oppression gender nonconforming youth experience, which was reported by participants to threaten safety. Participants identified systems and individuals who treat them in unfair and cruel ways. Some forms of oppression reported by participants were more overt than others. The more overt form of oppression include transphobia, trans stigma, and violence. Oppression also occurs in covert ways, such as

perpetuating a culture of silence around gender nonconformity, cisgender privilege, and through institutions themselves and the policies they implement. These are reported below.

Transphobia was reported by participants in their experiences with developing and maintaining relationships. Mabel shared difficulty in maintaining supportive friendships due to their transphobia. Mabel shared,

> "[Relationships] don't really last that long because my old friends when they figured about this kind of just left me… So I have a whole new group of friends because the old ones were awesome people and I thought they would be able to accept it right away but they didn't."

Transphobic biases prevent the formation of safe relationships, and even result in unsafe experiences for trans and gender nonconforming youth. Stigma experienced by trans and gender nonconforming youth also prevent safe relationships. Charlie shared how trans stigma impacts him when said, "You want to hide it. You don't want to let anybody see it. People make fun of you for it." Trans and gender nonconforming youth experience oppression through stigma and well as through violence. Participants reported experiencing violence in various settings. Charlie described the impact violence has on his sense of safety in the following way,

> "There's a lot of things that happen to trans kids that are really gross. Because it's a minority group of people who are not completely, fully accepted yet, there's a lot of violence. There's a lot of violence and even just being one person that isn't violent to a kid or even an adult, male, female, whatever, non-binary, anything. Just being that person in someone's life that says, 'It's okay. I'm here for you if you need anything. You don't have to worry about me hurting you or me wanting to be mean to you or something.' Just

> being that one person for somebody, even if it's just every once in a while, does make a difference for someone."

Likely, transphobia and stigma causes violence.

Participants reported covert forms of oppression experienced by gender nonconforming youth. Adults oppress gender nonconforming youth through perpetuating a culture of silence. Participants reported adults did not openly discuss gender identity and expression. Isaac reported how her family perpetuates the culture of silence in the following words, "It's not really a thing until I tell them, I guess, which is dumb. I don't think we should have to come out anyways, but whatever." Adults oppress gender nonconforming youths' identities by not expressing willingness to discuss who they are and how they express themselves. Another form of covert oppression participants experienced was cisgender privilege. Those who are cisgender have the privilege of navigating the world without realizing the amount of oppression, prejudice, and discrimination gender nonconforming people face daily. Participants reported that when cisgender individuals do not realize their privilege, gender nonconforming individuals are negatively impacted and further oppressed.

Schools were often reported as oppressive systems for participants. Bobbie shared his experience of oppression in his school:

> "I really haven't had a good teacher relationship or anything like that, or a good counselor relationship or anything like that. I've sort of just kind of been shunned, and I think made fun of, I think, in the teacher department. I think that they universally know me as 'that trans kid,' and they just don't like me. I'm just a problem kid to them, and they just don't like me. My counselor ... I was with my counselor in a meeting, and she called it 'the gender issue,' while she was having a conversation with me."

Bobbie's experience brings to light the reality of how schools perpetuate oppressive systems for gender nonconforming youth.

Discussion

Gender nonconforming youth in this study discussed what contributes to and threatens the development of safe relationships as well as the impact safety or lack thereof has on their daily lives. Nine themes were identified with six (i.e., components of safe relationships, safety negotiation, gender as a fluid process, respecting autonomy, advocacy, and resilience) focusing on understanding, developing, and maintaining safe relationships with gender nonconforming youth, and three themes (i.e., harmful relationships, minority stress, and oppression) focusing on threats to safety for gender nonconforming youth. Participants highlighted that as gender nonconforming youths they have unique and universal needs in the development of safe relationships.

This study sought to answer questions about what makes a relationship safe for gender nonconforming youth, how gender nonconforming youth are impacted by safe relationships, and to consider what this means in the counseling relationship. Respecting autonomy, embracing and being knowledgeable about gender as a fluid process, advocating through action and modeling correct pronoun use, understanding how gender nonconforming youth negotiate safety, and more specifically upholding confidentiality and privacy are what constitutes safe relationships from these participants' perspective. Components of safety for gender nonconforming youth include: affirming identity, respecting and validating the whole person, being accepting and non-judgmental, being authentic, being trustworthy, understanding relationships take time to build, displaying investment through listening to gender nonconforming youth, valuing equality, and holding a personal marginalized identity. Safety, or the lack thereof, can have major implications

for gender nonconforming youth. Participants in this study voiced the impact that harmful relationships and the lack of safety have on them, and these include minority stress and oppression that are experienced as a result of being gender nonconforming in a culture that holds people to the expectation to conform to a binary. This study informs counselors of how to develop and maintain safe relationships through their communication and actions with adolescent clients who identify as gender nonconforming. Hopefully, counselors see the critical nature of upholding confidentiality and even privacy from gender nonconforming youths' caregivers. The study also aims to reveal the detrimental impact of beliefs, actions, and words from counselors that gender nonconforming youth have identified as detrimental to the relationships (e.g., using the incorrect name/pronouns, outing the participant, publicly violating one's integrity, dismissing their perspective, insinuating their gender identity is a choice, and lacking accurate, validating knowledge about gender nonconformity).

Affirming identities of gender nonconforming youth as they identify is necessary in building a safe relationship. Providing affirmation requires adults to respect youths as people who know themselves. It also requires understanding and knowledge of gender expression and identification outside of the gender binary. Embracing the fluidity of gender has positive effects for youth, such as developing safe relationships as in this study. Gender as a fluid process, a theme in this study, highlights participants expressing various identities- some more fluid, and others more fixed. The reality exists that for some individuals this process of realizing one's identity is not as much of a linear developmental process as it might be for others. Some youth move from one identity to another while others identify with multiple gender identities simultaneously or none of the gender identities. Gender nonconforming youth in this study reported experiencing pressure to determine an identity as if it is a simple choice or a choice that

should conform to socially accepted norms. Half of the participants in this study reported using pronouns that conform to the gender binary because it was easier for others than using what they believed more accurately represented their identity (i.e., using he/him instead of they/them). Research exists that conceptually examines the gender binary and the oppressive nature of it for gender nonconforming persons (Beemyn, 2015; Markman, 2011); yet, these articles have not specifically addressed the gender binary for nonconforming youth. The responsibility to embrace the fluid nature of gender for some youth is on counselors and other adults in youths' lives to understand instead of forcing them into the gender binary if this does not align with who they are. After all, expression and exploration of fluid gender identity and gender roles have been identified as part of typical human development (Institute of Medicine, 2011).

Gender nonconforming youth in this study were aware of the power differential that permeates the relationship between youths and adults. Relationships where youths' autonomy is respected and the power differential is reduced were reported as safe. In order to maintain safe relationships with gender nonconforming youth, counselors and other adults must realize the delicate nature of maintaining confidence. Findings exist that identify adolescents' need for privacy to be protected and confidentiality to be preserved in the therapeutic alliance (Everall & Paulson, 2010); however, gender nonconforming youth were not included in this sample. Participants identified the need for counselors to navigate validating youths' identities through the use of accurate pronouns and names, among other forms of validation, while maintaining confidentiality and privacy about their identity from their parents (i.e., not outing them as trans, queer, non-binary). Safe relationships for gender nonconforming youth include mutual learning and sharing while having humility. When adults emphasize and exert power over youth, we run

the risk of silencing their voices. Silencing youths' voices, like those in this study, could have detrimental impact on the person as well as the relationship.

Advocacy increases safety for gender nonconforming youth, and the onus is on the adult to advocate. The need for advocacy for gender nonconforming youth in schools has been well documented (Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010; Goodrich et al., 2013; Greytak et al., 2013; Harper & Singh, 2014; Russell & McGuire, 2008; Singh, 2010). Few studies have examined advocacy for LGBTQ youth outside of schools, and those that have most often focused on the family system and youth who identify as LGBTQ (Harper & Singh, 2014; Luke & Goodrich, 2015). This study addressed the gap of how gender nonconforming youth specifically want to experience advocacy and how counselors in the community can address this need. These include asking youth their pronouns and names and using the one with which they identify, taking action on behalf of the youth when they notice others disregarding their identity (e.g., use of their dead name), and assisting in developing safer policies to aid in protecting gender nonconforming youth. Participants reported knowing that an adult was safe and could be called upon in a potentially unsafe or frightening scenario strengthened their relationship. An action as simple as asking youth their pronouns enhances safety. Congruent with other studies that have focused solely on transgender persons, gender nonconforming individuals embody resilience and practice resilience in a variety of forms (Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011), and this extends to transgender youth (Singh, Meng, & Hanson, 2014). As participants in this study identified, resilience includes self-advocacy (e.g., help seeking behaviors and resisting oppression), externalizing negative messages, prejudice, and stigma, and hoping for future change. This study includes previously excluded voices from gender fluid and non-binary youth.

Gender nonconforming youth experience minority stress as was identified in the results of this study, and this highlights the impact of safety at the individual and systemic levels. Participants identified that they experienced intrusiveness in harmful relationships that felt violating. Gender nonconforming youth are surrounded by invalidating and negative messages from others daily, and eventually may experience shame as a result. Current literature examines the negative effects of victimization for LGBT youth (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; Kosciw et al., 2014), but these have heavily focused on sexual minority youth and identified the internalized effects of victimization. This study aimed to keep the onus of the harmful relationships on those who perpetuate those unsafe conditions, not gender nonconforming youth who experience the harmful relationships. Systems were often reported to be unsafe and oppress gender nonconforming youth in this study. The institutions themselves along with the policies that are enforced have the potential to oppress. Those working within those systems that enforce the oppressive policies can either prevent or perpetuate oppression for gender nonconforming youth. A lack of acceptance of identities and expressions of gender outside of the binary negatively impacts and limits youth as participants identified in this study.

Counselors have the ability to develop safe relationships for gender nonconforming youth; and in many cases, counselors are responsible for providing the only safe relationship in youths lives that identify outside of the gender binary. Building rapport and establishing trust are key components of a therapeutic relationship that are facilitated by acceptance, genuineness, and understanding (Rogers, 1995). Inherent in this professional relationship, is the counselor's ability to create a safe space where the client can openly disclose personal information and express their thoughts and feelings. The role of a counselor in a client's life is therefore highly impactful and can have a profound effect on safety, especially when accepting, understanding, and validating

relationships are limited as identified by participants in this study. Relationships with gender nonconforming youth are enhanced when their voice is valued, respected, and understood through mitigating the inherent power differential between youths and adults (Everall & Paulson, 2002). Participants reported harmful relationships include those that dismiss their gender identity or do not understand gender fluidity. Individuals are impacted by relationships and create impact on others through relationships, which are critical to one's sense of wholeness (Luke & Goodrich, 2015). This further validates the profound impact relationships have on gender nonconforming youth and safety.

Based on the results of this study, it is important for counselors to understand and value the wholeness of the individual, as well as the level of awareness of their experiences. DuBois (1903) discussed the concept of double consciousness as the fragmentation of self, which makes it seem impossible to feel like a whole person. While his writings were in reference to the discrepancies experienced by what it means to be both African and American, this concept can be related to what it means to be a gender nonconforming youth in a culture that enforces the gender binary and the limitations of expression that are inherent in the gender binary. While issues of legitimacy of citizenship are not necessarily the focus for this group, similar issues of legitimacy of what it means to be human are at play. Gender nonconforming youth have the unique ability to understand both their own experiences and the experiences of the dominant view. Participants identified ways of navigating between their subordinate identity and the identity of the dominant group. This appears especially evident in public settings, particularly schools.

It is also necessary to understand the relationships between the themes that are identified in this study. For example, while this navigation of systems can be seen as a clear strength and

resiliency. Previous studies have established the compounding, interconnectedness of resilience and threats to resilience (Singh et al., 2011). It is also important to acknowledge the relationship between the resiliencies and minority stress. While the participants are advocating for themselves (i.e. resiliency) they are using up energy (i.e. minority stress). In addition, harmful relationships and minority stress are largely informed by the oppression theme. Similarly, the mere identification that acknowledging gender as a fluid process contributes to safe relationships speaks to the oppressive norm, which would be the domination of the gender binary. It would be a grave mistake and disservice to view the results of this study as a "do's" and "don'ts" list, though we do feel that we could encourage that you do not misgender or misname your clients. More importantly, though, is understanding the deeper meaning behind these individual acts, such as misgendering. To attempt to identify a simple list of things to do and not do would further encourage counselors to engage in political correctness while working with marginalized groups, which further contributes to their oppression.

Gender nonconforming youth who seek counseling carry with them a unique set of life experiences, often including acts of discrimination and oppression, thus requiring the counselor to be especially aware of the power of their interactions with this population. Participants have identified a desire to be actively involved in relationships through mutual respect, shared time, and adults being open to listening to them; and this was found to be applicable in the context of the therapeutic relationship (Martin et al., 2006). While voice is an important aspect of working with gender nonconforming youth, it is important to acknowledge that receiving voice without responding can be viewed as a continued support for the dominant oppressing group. This highlights the importance of the counselor acting as an advocate for and with gender nonconforming youth, who are already engaging in their own self and group advocacy, in order

to be culturally responsive.

The youth interviewed in this study recognized their marginalized identities greatly influenced their everyday life from the clothing worn to navigating when and where to use the restroom to how they communicated with others about who they are. Participants' expression of gender tended to have a profound impact on their ability to form relationships, their sense of self, emotional and physical safety, ability to form their gender identity expression, and ways in which they navigated various societal systems (i.e. school). Evident by their accounts of minority stress, oppression, and discrimination, this particular population must be viewed through the lens of queer theory when provided counseling services. The use of queer theory (Plummer, 2011) would embrace the fluidity of gender and open affirming dialogue between the youth and the counselor leading to better embracing the whole person, not just a fragmented piece of these youths. Viewing symptoms of depression, anxiety, social isolation in a silo would be detrimental to gender nonconforming youths' long-term emotional well-being and integrity of the counseling relationship. Instead, counselors need to work to incorporate the related systems into their conceptualization of youths' presenting concerns and treatment plan. Bringing this topic into counselors' awareness and discussing with clients its potential impact on their lives could also aid in removing shame and normalize their experiences.

Limitations and Future Directions

As with all research, there are limitations to this study. There is an underrepresentation of gender nonconforming youth of color as well as gender nonconforming youth whose gender identity or expression are on the feminine side of the continuum. Convenience sampling limited participants to the Southeast region of the United States. Gender nonconforming youths' experiences with safety in relationships may be experienced differently or similarly in regions

outside of the Southeast or outside of the United States. This study actively worked to include voices of gender nonconforming youth who might otherwise be excluded from research by providing an option for consent to be waived in the presence of a youth advocate. Researchers made this choice in an effort to gather perspectives on safe relationships from youth who may have limited safety and are not "out" with parents about their gender identity. All participants in this sample were able to obtain parental consent, although not all participants were "out" with their parents, and continued efforts are needed to gather perspectives of gender nonconforming youth who are silenced in research by the inability to obtain parental consent.

Researchers used several methods to establish trustworthiness; however, issues with subjectivities influencing data collection and analysis always exists. While the use of auditors was practiced in this study and subjectivities of researchers were regularly discussed, there is potential for the semi-structured interview and thematic analysis to remain influenced by researchers' subjectivities. This is a limitation of the study as well as a strength due to diverse perspectives and experiences represented by research team members. Additionally, the use of a research team can sometimes lead to response bias such as group think or social desirability despite efforts of the practice to do the opposite. This was examined during the auditing process to reduce the likelihood of occurrence.

Further research is needed with gender nonconforming youth to gather their perspectives on safe relationships. Some of the recommendations for further research include stronger representation of gender nonconforming youth of color, gender nonconforming youth who identify on the feminine side of gender identity and expression continua, gender nonconforming youth outside of the Southeastern region of the United States, and youth who may not have the ability to obtain parental consent due to it being unsafe for them to be "out" to their parents and

caregivers. Additionally, follow up studies are recommended to specifically address safety in the counseling relationship to ensure the results from this study are directly applicable to the therapeutic alliance from youths' perspectives. Recommendations also include exploring counseling supervisors understanding and application of these results in constructing safe relationships with gender nonconforming youth engaged in counseling. Future directions for research are abundant in developing, understanding, and implementing safe relationships in counseling for gender nonconforming youth.

Conclusion

This study aimed to capture the voices and experiences of gender nonconforming youth in how they build and maintain safe relationships. Youth collaboratively examined and expressed aspects of safe and harmful relationships in their current lives. Gender nonconforming youth navigate a world of discrimination and oppression from their home community to school environment to the counseling relationship. From this research, we hope to build counselors understanding of how gender nonconforming youth experience safe versus harmful relationships and integral aspects of building safety within the therapeutic relationship. We hope this study and those that follow inform the building of safer relationships for gender nonconforming youth seeking counseling and safe adults, and that gender nonconforming youth cease to experience what Bobbie, a study participant, experienced that led him to share "My therapist is an example of somebody who doesn't understand it."

Figure 1. Six themes provide understanding for establishing and maintaining safe relationships for gender nonconforming youth. These six themes are (a) components of safe relationships, (b) safety negotiation, (c) gender as a fluid process, (d) respecting autonomy, (e) advocacy, and (f) resilience.

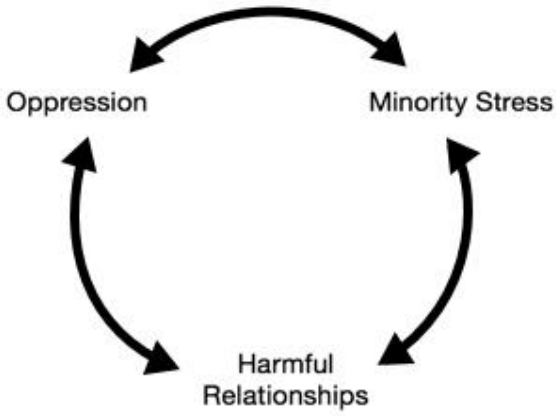

Figure 2. Three themes highlight threats to establishing and maintaining safe relationships. These three themes are (a) harmful relationships, (b) minority stress, and (c) oppression.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Participant Demographic Form

Q1. Age:

Q2. Gender (Please check all that apply):

- ❑ Male (1)
- ❑ Female (2)
- ❑ Transgender (3)
- ❑ Genderqueer (4)
- ❑ Intersex (5)
- ❑ Two-spirit (6)
- ❑ FTM (7)
- ❑ MTF (8)
- ❑ Gender Fluid (9)
- ❑ None of the above. I identify as: (10) _____

Q3. Race or Ethnicity (Please check all that apply):

- ❑ African American or Black (1)
- ❑ Latino/Latina or Hispanic (2)
- ❑ Asian/Asian American (3)
- ❑ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (4)
- ❑ American Indian or Alaska Native (5)
- ❑ White or European American (6)
- ❑ Multiracial (7)
- ❑ None of the above. I identify as: (8) _____

Q4. Sexual Orientation:

- ❍ Gay (1)
- ❍ Lesbian (2)
- ❍ Bisexual (3)
- ❍ Queer (4)
- ❍ Pansexual (5)
- ❍ Questioning (6)
- ❍ Heterosexual/Straight (7)
- ❍ None of the above. I identify as: (8) _____

Q5. Religion/Spirituality:

- ❍ Hindu (1)
- ❍ Muslim (2)
- ❍ Buddhist (3)
- ❍ Christian (4)
- ❍ Jewish (5)
- ❍ Pagan (6)
- ❍ Atheist (7)
- ❍ Agnostic (8)
- ❍ None of the above. I identify with: (9) _____

Q6. Chronic Illness/Disability impacting daily functioning (Please check all that apply):

- ❑ Not applicable. I do not experience a disability (1)
- ❑ Chronic/other medical health (e.g. HIV, diabetes, hypertension) (2)
- ❑ Hearing (3)
- ❑ Intellectual (4)
- ❑ Learning (5)
- ❑ Mobility (6)
- ❑ Motor Activity (7)
- ❑ Psychological/psychiatric (8)
- ❑ Speaking (9)
- ❑ Vision (10)
- ❑ Other. Please explain: (11) _____

Q7. What grade are you currently in?

- ❍ 8th
- ❍ 9th
- ❍ 10th
- ❍ 11th
- ❍ 12th
- ❍ Other _____

Q8. Did your parent or guardian provide consent?

- ❍ Yes (1)
- ❍ No (2)

Q9. Did your counselor or trusted adult provide consent?

- ❍ Yes (1)
- ❍ No (2)

Appendix B

Pseudonym: _____

Send 1- 10 photographs that capture safety in a relationship. There are no right or wrong answers and it is important that you are the photographer. Please be sure not to take pictures of people's faces.

Please send photographs to me within a week, which would be _____.

When you are done taking pictures, you can send them to studyhelp@hushmail.com.

In the body of the email, only include the total number of photographs you are submitting and your selected pseudonym. If you are concerned about others seeing what you sent, please remember to delete the email from your sent folder and trash folder and log-out of the email program after you have sent me the photos.

We will meet again for approximately an hour to talk about the photographs you shared and your ideas about safety in relationships on the following date _____ at _____am/pm. Feel free to email me if you need to change this date or time. Thanks!

Appendix C

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

- Take a moment to reflect on the photographs in front of you (participant driven photographs placed in front of the participant and pause to provide time for the participant to re-examine). Tell me about your photographs.
    - What do you want me to see about your photographs?
    - What do you wish others noticed about you that may or may not be present in these photographs?

- How is your identity represented in these photographs?
    - More specifically, how do you express your gender in these photographs?
    - How does this relate to your daily life?
    - How does this play out in relationships?

- How did you represent safety in these photographs?
    - Tell me what it means to be safe for you.
    - What is left out about safety in these photographs?
    - How do you know when you feel safe?
    - With whom do you feel safe?
    - How are they represented in these photographs?

- Tell me about the relationships in these photographs.
    - Who is important to you and where are they in these photographs? Why are they important to you?
    - How do you know you can trust them? And rely/count on them?
    - What about relationships do you wish you could have captured in these photographs?
    - What do you wish adults knew about safe relationships for you?

- What do you want to share that I didn't ask about during our time together?

 Be sure to thank them for their time!