

Experiences of Trans Joy in the United Kingdom

Hallow Foster, (they/them)

Exeter University, hafoster74@protonmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experiences of joy in trans individuals based in the UK to counter the damage-centred narratives that dominate trans research. In its attempt to respond to calls for complex, desire-based research, this paper uses ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and a narrative interview approach, to highlight stories of how trans individuals experience joy both because of and despite their marginalised identity. This research is situated within the wider UK socio-political context of increasing transphobia, as well as the broader academic context of trans studies and the anthropology of wellbeing and the good life. Through its examination of the joy of self-determination, language, embodiment, and affirming relationships, this paper argues that research on the trans experience should not be limited to the damage-centred narratives that currently dominate trans research, due to the negative effects this epistemic foreclosure has both on the individual and the community.

Keywords: Trans joy, epistemic foreclosure, autoethnography, United Kingdom

"The things that I have valued from my transition are not that I've got like, boobs now. It's that I have got a voice" (Clara)

This research project responds to Tuck's (2009), Shuster and Westbrook's (2022), and Holloway's (2023) calls for research that resists the current damage-centred narratives that pathologize transness, homogenise experiences, and entrench external beliefs onto community experiences. By actively shifting the paradigm to focus on what Tuck (2009, 419) calls a "desire-based research framework," this paper draws on ethnographic interactions with trans people living in England to add to our understanding of the "complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of [the] lived lives" of marginalised and underrepresented people in social research. Through its phenomenological ontology and use of participant-focused methods, such as interviews and co-production, this project counters the existing epistemic foreclosure — the focus on certain knowledge systems to the detriment of the research group — and contributes to the growing understanding of the importance of joy and happiness within social studies of personhood, identity, and gender.

It should be acknowledged that 'joy' is an incredibly complicated term, and whilst definitions of joy were explored in my interviews, there is currently not the scope to address the intricacies offered by my participants. For this paper, joy is defined as "an emotional state [that] is always about something, and usually, this is news about something good in one's life. Joy is a response to some good object" (Emmons 2020, 2). This is not an all-encompassing definition; it focuses on the emotional reaction and does not account for the physical, as other definitions

have (Johnson 2020). However, as this paper primarily focuses on participants' subjective understanding of the self, an emotion-based definition of joy is helpful.

Socio-Political Context

This project comes at an increasingly strained time for the UK trans community. Since I became invested in my local community, I, alongside many others, have become steadily more concerned over the increasing prevalence of transphobia at a national, institutional, and local level; a sentiment that was previously supported by a UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2023).

Trans-related discussions have become part of increasingly socially and politically divisive debates, colloquially referred to as 'culture wars.' The full scope of the trans culture war cannot be explored here. In short, one of its main fault lines is the response from Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists to legislation such as the Gender Recognition Act. This stems from their belief that the "self-declaration of gender will reduce the safety and well-being of cis women" (Hines 2020, 706). Duffy et al's (2021) examination of culture wars (Figure 1) highlighted how contentious this issue has become, with an equal split between those who believe trans rights have gone as far as they should and those who think trans rights have not gone far enough.

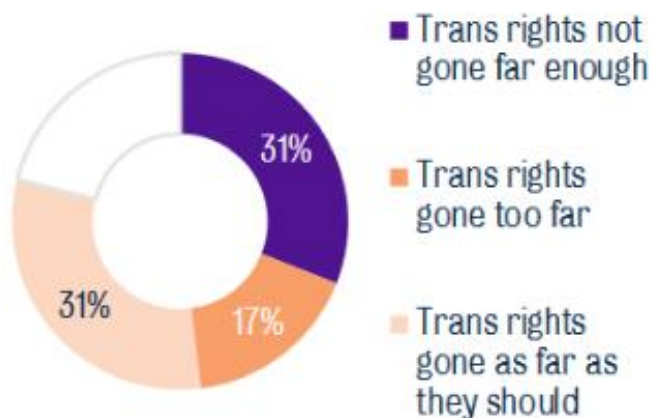


Figure 1 – Duffy et al. (2021, 4). The white section refers to those who answered, "Don't know" or "Prefer not to say."

The debate has only worsened in recent years, especially following the Supreme Court's ruling on *For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers* (2025) and the release of the *Independent Review of Gender Identity Services for Children and Young People* in April 2024. Despite severe public and academic backlash, both have led to changes in the legal rights and medical support offered to trans people in the UK, causing a drastic decrease in feelings of safety for many (BBC News 2024; *TransActual CIC and another -v- Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and another* 2024; Human Rights Watch 2025). A partial reason for the increasingly divisive and extreme positions within these debates comes from the epistemic foreclosure created by the prioritisation of damage-centred narratives. Therefore, whilst it is not the full solution, I argue that a focus on the joy and complex issues of personhood experienced as part of the trans lived experience is vital to add depth to these crucial debates.

Academic Context

Joy

Anthropology's focus on joy as a valid area of study is a recent development, one brought about through examination of the field's problematic past (Robbins 2013, Thin 2010). Whereas emotions were initially considered "too individualistic and psychological" for the anthropological approach, they have now become an area through which anthropologists examine social and cultural differences (Robbins 2013, 23).

There is a broad range of sociological and anthropological approaches to emotions, many of which engage with the debate over whether the origins of emotions are "not in human biology but in culture" and the effect this has (Turner 2009, 341). A shared claim across these approaches is that emotions are, to an extent, socially patterned, morally regulated, and intertwined with societal relationships, instead of being solely private, internal states of being. Anthropological approaches investigate how emotions are learned through everyday practises, and embedded in culturally specific systems of meaning-making through which individuals interpret social situations and moral

obligations (Lutz and White 1986). Hochschild's (1979; 1983) sociological work on "emotion cultures" and "feeling rules" also examines how societies and institutions prescribe what individuals should feel and how those feelings should be expressed. This is painfully relevant to the concept of trans joy due to the dominant narratives of suffering, regulation, and marginalisation that restrict which emotions are viewed as culturally intelligible within the trans community.

Epistemic Foreclosure

Tuck (2009) argues that the damage-centred research carried out on marginalised groups, though often well intentioned, perpetuates a form of academic violence, as it homogenises the experiences of diverse groups. Shuster and Westbrook (2022) develop this further with their focus on epistemic foreclosure. This refers to when certain knowledge systems, approaches, and focuses become prioritised over others, which perpetuates the status quo and reinforces inequalities. Combining damage-centred research and epistemic foreclosures within research into marginalised groups is dangerous as, "if the main story told about a group is that their lives are filled with trauma, discrimination, and violence, then that is likely what most people believe about the group, including members of the group itself" (Shuster and Westbrook 2022, 5). This can have damaging effects on both the individual and the community, as it forces us into a "homogenous subjecthood," deflects "attention from possible solutions," and defines our identities as a "potentially unliveable category defined by fear" (Westbrook 2021, 15–16).

This perspective has been perpetuated by the classification of trans people as an ethically vulnerable research group (Shaw et al. 2020). While heightened ethical awareness is essential, researchers must also be mindful that attempts to protect communities do not further silence or remarginalize their voices (Robbins 2013; Shuster and Westbrook 2022). It is these categorisations that this paper aims to push back against through its simultaneously inclusive and ethically responsive methodology, as the deeply complex and human nature of

trans people's experiences of joy, identity, and personhood can no longer be ignored.

Trans Studies

The complexity of gender has been a seminal field for anthropological work, epitomised by Butler's (1993) groundbreaking text, *Bodies That Matter*, wherein they argued that gender was not innate but a performative act by individuals and their societies. This was supported by Strathern's (1998) *The Gender of the Gift*, and Moore's (1994) *A Passion for Difference*. Strathern's (1988) focus on multiplicity, Butler's (1993) focus on performativity, and Moore's (1994) focus on positionality all supported the growing trans movement, which saw gender and the gendered body as processual, fragmented, and in continual construction.

These works, along with many others, became the focus of what is now called gender studies, a field that focuses on what the experiences of and interactions between cis men and women can reveal. A subsequent branch of gender studies, queer theory, aimed to challenge "hegemonic understandings of the relations between identity, sex, gender and sexuality" (Morland and Willox 2017, 4). Trans studies takes these discussions further through its usage of ever-evolving approaches to existing debates.

Schilt and Lagos (2017, 425) argued that the history of trans studies in the social sciences could be split into two distinct paradigms: "a focus on gender deviance (1960s–1990s) and a focus on gender difference (1990s–present)." In the first paradigm, trans people became passive objects of study, with researchers taking a highly medicalising and pathologizing approach. The second paradigm was marked by a rise of notable trans academics, such as Sandy Stone (1992), Leslie Feinberg (1993), Susan Stryker (1994), Jack Halberstam (1998), and Julia Serano (2007). Here, trans people became active subjects of study, empowering them by viewing the community as "sociologically important in their own right" and prioritising the collection of qualitative data to examine lived experiences (Schilt and Lagos 2017, 426). The field's focus on the experiences of trans people attempts to undo the "long

history of academic objectification" that has been forced upon them (Bettcher and Garry 2009, 1).

Trans Joy

Despite these developments, the study of transness continues to focus on social, medical, and legal suffering. This often relies on the deviance paradigm, is done without the involvement of trans people in key researcher roles and is highly damaging to the community (Galupo 2017; Schilt and Lagos 2017; Shuster 2020; Jacobsen and Devor 2022; Melo 2023). Holloway (2023, 614) calls this approach the "tragic trans trope" and urges other researchers to move away from this damage-centred research approach to one focused on desire, joy, and wellbeing. He argues that the shift would assist in acknowledging the complexity of the group's members and would help the community more than the one-dimensional, harmful approach previously taken.

As of writing, there are relatively few published articles centring on trans joy, with only a few recent undergraduate and postgraduate theses, such as Davies (2022), James (2022), and Warwood (2024). One main paper, however, is Shuster and Westbrook's (2022) *Reducing the Joy Deficit in Sociology*, which focuses on responses to the question, "What do you find joyful about being trans?" Whilst the discussions emerging from this project intersect with Shuster and Westbrook's (2022) three categories (belonging to a marginalised group, connection, and improved quality of life), my study aims to add to this topic by exploring how joy is derived in complex and experiential depth. By exploring themes of language, embodiment and connectivity, I respond to Holloway's (2023) call for an increasingly multidimensional understanding of trans personhood, experience, and identity, and therefore resist the effects of academia's current epistemic foreclosure upon the trans community.

Methodology

A Note on Language

When I first started on this project, I ran into the issue of what to call the community I wanted to work with. With a desire to include the voices of those I would be representing, I turned to my local community's trans-specific Discord server and asked what language people would feel most comfortable with. There were a lot of different responses: "Non-cis," "trans and non-binary," "trans and/or non-binary," and "trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming" were all suggested and rejected during a two-hour conversation, which ended with no clear consensus on what I should call the subjects of this project. Eventually, I settled on "the trans community" for reasons similar to Stryker (2008, 23) in *Transgender History*: "they are short, easily pronounced, familiar words that can serve as a shorthand for a more complicated idea or identity or way of acting." This includes transgender and transsexual people, trans men and trans masculine people, trans women and trans feminine people, and non-binary and genderqueer people, amongst many others.

Readers should also be aware that trans studies is a rapidly evolving field (Shuster 2020, 2). Much of the language used in early trans works has now been problematised or dismissed entirely, and some terms or views expressed by my participants will be seen as problematic by others. With such a diverse community, this conflict is inevitable and significant; the contestation of terminology between different groups or generations is an important space for individuals to work out their sense of place, ownership, and sense of belonging within their communities. Therefore, where language that may appear strange or offensive has been used, it has been to maintain the integrity of the data, respect the participants who gave it, and ensure that their stories have been told accurately.

Autoethnography and Self-Reflexivity

Autoethnography and self-reflexivity were central to this project. It was important to me that if I was asking my participants to be vulnerable in sharing their experiences, I

needed to do the same. Whilst autoethnography is a contested method within anthropology, I agree with Jones and Adams (2016) when they argue that it is an inherently queer approach to data collection and participant relationships. Both autoethnographic authors aim to "refuse received notions of orthodox methodologies and focus" in favour of a more grounded, empowering, and politically active approach (Jones and Adams 2016, 197). This project draws upon Anderson's (2006, 375) "analytical autoethnography," wherein the ethnographer is a full, visible member of the research group and uses an "analytic research agenda" to improve "theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena."

I identify as a trans masculine, non-binary, queer person, and have done so for several years. At the time of writing, I was heavily immersed in my local LGBTQ+ community, and my status as an opportunistic, complete-member researcher deeply affected my work (Anderson 2006). Being known first as a community member helped my participants feel secure and confident when sharing the complexity of their experiences. Moreover, it helped me locate research participants, as I could access gatekeepers and the spaces they protect, which is often tricky for outsider researchers (Moore 2018). If I had not used my existing connections in the field, comparable access, trust, or disclosure would have been unlikely. I was also mindful of not assuming that I would share all my participants' trans experiences. For example, my relative social privilege means that I do not inherently have the same fears, experiences, or desires as others within the trans community, and assuming so would have been detrimental. As Anderson (2006, 386) states, "No ethnographic work—not even autoethnography—is a warrant to generalize from an 'N of one.'" Therefore, continuous self-reflexivity and co-production were essential to maintain positionality and manage power imbalances.

Ethnographic Fieldwork

Interviews

After reviewing several interview models, I adopted a semi-structured, narrative-based

approach, as narrative and biography were central to my research aims. I moved from the typical timeline approach to an artefact-elicitation approach, as this gave space for the often non-linear nature of biographical narratives. I gave no criteria for this object, apart from it being something related to each participant's understanding of trans joy. By then opening the interview with curiosity into what the object was and why it was chosen, I was able to build more of a connection with my participants, therefore allowing us to co-produce unique data for difficult and abstract questions. Not all of my participants objects are discussed throughout this paper due to space constraints, but images have been included in an appendix to further humanise my participants and respect the stories and experiences they shared with me.

Participants

Due to time and resource constraints, I limited recruitment to my local community's trans-specific Discord server, which primarily hosts individuals from a town in the Southwest of England. I ended up with six participants and held both face-to-face and online interviews over two months (see Table 1); most of my participants were trans women or trans femme, and none, aside from myself, identified themselves as being trans men or trans masculine. Two have been removed due to consent conflicts.

As the trans community has previously been classified as an ethically vulnerable group to study, greater care is required during research to ensure their safety (Shaw et al. 2020). Therefore, although intersectional factors such as age, class, and race drastically affect experiences of trans identity, this data was not collected to minimise the risk of outing or forced disclosure. Interview recordings were kept only until I was able to create pseudonymised orthographic transcripts and were then destroyed. Identifying details about workplaces, residences, third parties, or participants' real names were changed, and participants were invited to choose their own pseudonyms, pronouns, and identity descriptions.

Participant	Pro-nouns	Gender Identity	Object
Roxanne	She/her	Trans Domme	High-heeled black boots (Figure 7)
Clara	She/her	Trans Woman	Workplace award (not photo-graphed).
A. A.	She/her	Goth Trans Woman	Black velvet choker (Figure 3), Cursed (feat. Wvlfpakt & Mecha Mai-ko) by Alex, Tokyo Rose, Wvlfpakt, and Mecha Maiko, and Skin of the Night by M83.
Naomi	She/her	Trans-sexual Woman	Pink cat mug (Figure 4), postcard (Figure 5) and letter (not pic-tured) from an online friend, Sylva-nian Family toy (Figure 6), keycard (Figure 7), and Discord pro-file picture (not pictured).
Re-searcher/ Author	They/ them	Non-binary, trans masculine, queer person	N/A



Figure 2 - A.A.'s object - a black velvet choker. Photo by Author 2024.



Figure 3 - One of Naomi's objects - a pink cat mug. Photo by Naomi 2024.



Figure 4 - One of Naomi's objects - a postcard from an online friend. Photo by Naomi 2024.



Figure 5 - One of Naomi's objects - a Sylvanian Family toy. Photo by Naomi 2024.



Figure 6 - One of Naomi's objects - a keycard. Photo by Naomi 2024.

The Joy of Relationships

T4T refers to “trans for trans,” an acronym initially used by trans people on Craigslist to advertise for queer-friendly or queer-only hookups (Awkward-Rich and Malatino 2022, 2). Over time, the term has moved away from its hookup-based origins to encompass a variety of inherently queer approaches to kinship and relationality, wherein individuals create dense

relational dynamics that prioritise support, compassion, community knowledge, and intimacy (Awkward-Rich and Malatino 2022; Holloway et al. 2023; DiCesare 2024). This is why some individuals may identify as T4T, instead of identifying as someone that prefers T4T relationships, as it can be something that permeates all areas of a person's relational map.

Whilst Naomi did not specifically say that she identifies as T4T, I resonated with many aspects of her perspective on the topic: "I didn't really understand what it meant to have something that I would describe as like, a same-sex relationship until I was with another trans woman, by which I mean there is a degree of sameness between us that I've never experienced in any of those relationships before."

As someone who does describe themselves as T4T, the term, for me, refers to my sexual partners, but also to my romantic partners, friends, and ways of approaching relationships. Whilst I am open to relationships with cis people, I prefer to cultivate relationships with other trans people, something shared by some of my participants. I do this as it helps me ensure that the people I become intertwined with have a similar life story to mine. This means that they understand the difficulties and joys of transness, as well as the emotional work involved, in a way that, I believe, cannot be understood in the same way by a cis person.

Emotional work can be defined as the "labour [which] one is required to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind to others..." especially in private settings, such as the home or intimate relationships (Hochschild 1983, 7). One example is the frequent, informal teaching and knowledge brokering requirement by disabled workers for non-disabled coworkers (Church et al. 2007, 10). Such education is done "informally (and invisibly) through daily encounters" such as casual conversations and is often brought about by a lack of understanding, leading to the fear of offending their disabled coworkers (Church et al. 2007, 10). This is something that Roxanne alluded to in her interview:

It's easier to empathise with another

trans fem, because they're making the same journey as I am. But I can also empathise with a trans masc, even though I personally do not understand the concept [of] why anyone would want to be a man [laughs]... I can empathise with the fact that you didn't feel right in your body, and that you are making the right decision for you.

Later in the interview, Roxanne discussed how she had initially struggled with empathy, almost slipping "down the pipeline of becoming a right-wing radical" due to her unhappiness with herself, as she looked at figures such as Joe Rogan and Jordan Patterson believing "they're successful, they know the answers." However, as she explored her identity more and became more comfortable with herself, she began to "learn empathy," especially for other members of the trans community. She realised that there was "something" about the figures which made her realise "no, that's not the path I can follow." I believe that part of this was due to the development of her trans social identity. As she grew more comfortable with herself, she was able to enter new community spaces and partake in conversations where the emotional work of knowledge brokering was less necessary, due to increased likelihood of shared experiences and lexicons. As neither participant was forced to educate the other, both had greater freedom to decide when, why, where, or how to disclose important information or knowledge, which allowed them to experience more of the joy of being themselves.

Church and colleague's (2007, 7) report on disabled bank workers also highlighted the emotional work involved in the "second job" of concealment. They describe this job as the process of social norms that require disabled employees to actively choose when to hide or not disclose certain aspects of their disability, to "facilitate their own integration... prevent negative reactions, [and] also to secure privacy against unwelcome curiosity" (Church et al. 2007, 7). It is through this lens that Naomi's quote, "I think ultimately trans people are the only people who can really fully see me," stands out. First, it raises the question of what it is that trans people are seeing that cis people cannot

see. Second, it asks whether this differing perception is because of active concealment or because of a lack of understanding. Why are trans, and not cis, people able to see this undefined quality?

One answer could be that Naomi has let other trans people physically see things that she would not feel comfortable with cis people seeing. Passing has been defined as “a trans person’s ability to be read by observers as cisgender” (Anderson et al. 2025, 45). It is a controversial concept and will be discussed in more detail below. However, for those who aim to pass, one commonly cited reason is the safety that comes with it. If Naomi allows someone to see her in a visibly trans state, such as when she said that she could be “unapologetically themselves” with her trans partner, she becomes even more vulnerable to transphobic attacks or discrimination. This focus on the body, and especially the harm that can come through its transness, was echoed in A.A.’s explanation of her choice of song, as it “feels like someone trying to reveal this hidden part of themselves. Literally just digging her nails into her chest to reveal this like, hidden part of herself, and that really appealed to me.” By letting her trans partner see these aspects of herself, Naomi is leaving herself vulnerable, potentially opening herself up to physical and emotional wounds. The trust that she places in her partner to keep her safe from harm fosters a deeper connection between both individuals, which, in turn, fosters joy.

However, it is also important to acknowledge the complexity that Clara’s point brings: “my protection is being very open about it. [...] I have to come out to you. And that is a risky proposition in a way that being like very, very open is not.” While some of my participants may hide their trans status, others, me included, attempted to pre-empt any potential risks by consistently outing themselves. As Clara says, “then if someone wants to say something transphobic, they have to say it to my face.” This lack of concealment provides a similar sense of security, but also requires a similar amount of emotional work. It is, therefore, understandable that Naomi, amongst others, would feel as if other trans people are the only ones who can “really fully

see [her],” as a T4T relationship lessens the risk of a partner demanding concealment or disclosure in such a way. This then allows joy to flourish in the relationship, as it enables participants to be fully seen and understood by those around them, leading to safe and supportive kinship networks.

The Joy of Monstrousness

Over my life, whilst I have experienced highly gendered, misogynistic violence, I have yet to experience transphobic violence. Because of this, some may call me lucky.

I know that I am a non-binary trans-masculine person, but I also know that I am rarely visibly trans; those seeing me in passing will likely categorise me as a lesbian or a female tomboy. Only people who know me well can read me correctly. This is often upsetting to me, especially when I am frequently misgendered or ignored. However, I am also aware that because of this, I can hide my trans status in situations when being open would be unsafe.

The reason I have been lucky enough not to be a victim of transphobic violence is because I am privileged enough not to be read as I truly am.

This lack of experience has also meant that I have not had to become familiar with common transphobic and homophobic slurs used against the members of my community who are read as trans. Therefore, many slurs have remained taboo for me. This is why I was uncomfortable when my participants used terms such as “sissy,” “faggot,” and “transsexual” to describe themselves. As soon as they said it, I felt ashamed and embarrassed. I immediately worried about how language that felt crass and hateful to me would be received by my majority cis audiences. It felt like they shouldn’t be reclaimed. (Author)

Before exploring the joy Naomi gains from the power of monstrousness, it is first necessary to acknowledge the depth of joy she finds in passing:

I would be lying if I said my experiences of trans joy is not related to passing in some ways. I feel much happier in myself and my transition when I pass.

For context, I don't even mean cis pass always. There have been times I've been clocked or outed myself, and yet people have still evidently been unable to really see me as male. [...] I also get a lot of joy from times like that—where I pass without having to hide some part of myself. In fact, that is when I am most happy with my experiences of transition. Fear of not passing was something I struggled with a lot when I was younger, and so I get a lot of self-confidence and pride in being able to give 'female,' you know?

During our interview, Naomi described herself as "the variety of transsexual that is insane about my body." This is cultivated by a Discord server she uses frequently, which encourages "hid[ing] the fact that you're transitioning until you can pass flawlessly." As Naomi points out, this is a difficult thing to do, especially when many medical transition policies have previously required an individual to be living as their preferred gender for a specified period in the UK (Barker and Wylie 2008, 124).

For better or worse, it is indisputable that the social groups Naomi was surrounded by in the early days of her transition have impacted what she prioritises and finds joy in. As she says, "I feel much happier in myself and my transition when I pass." However, in the middle of discussions regarding the importance of passing, Naomi still made a point to highlight how she does not inherently mean "cis pass." She wants to "give 'female'" but she also wants to be able to be open about her identity as a transsexual woman, something that is incredibly important to her: "I transitioned not because of some, like, abstracted thing about some internal essential gendered self, but because I wanted to fuck with my sex lol. I enjoy my sex being weird and different and female."

This quote easily encapsulates some of the questions held by Stryker's (1994) article, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix*, wherein she discusses the parallels between the trans body and the body of Frankenstein's Monster. It is a profoundly evocative piece which examines how the "transsexual body is an unnatural body," one

formed through technological intervention and the tearing and resewing of flesh into "a shape other than that in which it was born" (Stryker 1994, 238). She depicts a world of suffering and struggle, a world where trans bodies are seen as monstrous or inhuman for their ability to become something more "than the creatures our makers intended us to be" (Stryker 1994, 242).

One way trans people can purposefully recraft their bodies is with Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT). HRT was initially created for cis patients to treat psychological and sexual disorders (Cammenga and Lubinsky 2022, 357–360). However, it has since become an important part of many trans people's transitions, becoming "an ontological necessity for a liveable life" for those who view it as a central part of their identity and transition (Fondén 2020, 29). All my participants directly referenced being on HRT and its positive connections with trans joy throughout our interactions. The social context of HRT, medical transition, and transphobia at time of writing is of vital importance here. Within the last few years, puberty blockers have been banned for trans children and young adults (Department of Health and Social Care 2024), the UK has drastically dropped on international rankings of LGBTI equality laws (Nathan 2025), and 96% of respondents to a UK wide survey of trans people said that transphobia in the media had impacted how strangers treated them (Sperring and Grassian 2026).

Multiple participants, including Naomi, highlighted the joy they found in the power of HRT to change and control their physical bodies. Common changes for my participants included physical changes, such as the creation of boobs (Clara), emotional changes (Naomi), and increased congruence between self-perception and external perception of the body (A.A).

Naomi states that she enjoys her sex being "weird and different and female," a compelling combination of words. For a transsexual woman like Naomi, who views passing as important, it would be reasonable to believe that she would take deep joy in her sex being 'female,' as it would indicate congruence between her body's sex and her internal

gender. However, as explored earlier, Naomi takes joy in being fully seen, residing in the tension between passing and living “without having to hide some part of myself.” She states that “there have been times I’ve been clocked or outed myself and yet people have still evidently been unable to really see me as male.” She seems to find great joy in the fact that her connection to the concept of “female” is so strong that cis outsiders cannot comprehend her as anything but, despite the artificial methods involved in its creation.

When saying she “wanted to fuck with [her] sex lol” as she “enjoys” it, her language indicates the strength of the joy she feels in this process of self-creation and pushing past the maker’s intentions. By achieving the “similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process” and highlighting the “seams and sutures” that reside in all individuals, trans or cis, Naomi echoes Stryker (1994, 241) in finding pleasure in herself and her actions. She takes distinct pride in the monstrousness of her body as deemed by cis-normative societies, in its unseemly and unsightly aspects, in activities that would be considered unacceptable being pushed further into the realms of taboo simply by their “means of [their] embodiment” and methods of existing, something that has become even more pressing in recent years (Stryker 1994, 238).

She makes this even more apparent in her explanation of why she uses the term “transsexual,” instead of the more commonly used “transgender:”

I think there’s again a playfulness to it. I like when cis people recoil when I out myself: ‘I’m a transsexual, actually.’ They do not know how to handle that word. And I like when trans people who are unfamiliar with it tell me I cannot use it; that it’s bad politics or dated. Like, no, actually, it’s not some regressive thing, and you’re not going to police how I express my transness — I have been living this for a very long time lol.

There’s a kind of stubborn, resistant thing that I enjoy too, as I often feel so much pressure to be prim and proper and meek. ‘Transsexual’ rejects that. It

has shock value, it’s taboo, you know? To me, that feels very queer. Like, why are you so hung up on labels?

Also, like, I think it’s cunt lol. I just love how it sounds. I love that I can say it in ways that are powerful and cool, or coquettish and playful, or any number of things.

All of that stuff about transsexual also goes for the word ‘tranny.’ If I out myself to people I’m passing to, it will always be ‘I’m a transsexual’ or ‘I’m a tranny.’ Because I have so much confidence and control in those moments, it takes people aback, and makes me feel all sorts of good feelings lol.

In his paper, *Becoming Ever More Monstrous*, Nordmarken (2014, 39) uses Stryker’s (1994) parallels to provide a brutally honest recreation of how cis-normative society reacts to his “transsexual male-ish” body at different stages of his medical transition. He argues that whilst being monstrous is a kind of “definitional inferiorization” in its “terrifying otherness,” its ability to evoke terror in those he sees is “a certain kind of power,” a power he specifically claims and enjoys (Nordmarken 2014, 40).

It is this power that Naomi describes when talking about why she uses slurs and problematised language as identity descriptors. By employing language that others do not have the right to say, she publicly announces her place within a particular group, a belonging in which she takes great pride. When discussing *Frankenstein’s Monster*, Nordmarken (2014, 39–40) highlights that he “resists dehumanization” by providing himself and others with the language to make himself legible through “speaking about his experience of exclusion.” Through reclaiming these slurs and declaring her membership, Naomi creates a synergy between her linguistic practices and embodied realities, collapsing the often-upheld dualisms of body/mind and self/other.

Moreover, she finds joy in resisting categorisation from both societies surrounding her. In further discussion, Naomi explained her dislike of the term “transgender,” as she believes that, as the term is now widely

accepted, it carries with it a set of stereotypes that can be actively damaging to her and her community. By labelling herself as a “tranny” or “transsexual,” she resists any attempt by others, cis or trans alike, to dehumanise and forcibly homogenise her. This then allows her to retain both her womanhood and her personhood, proving to others that she is not inherently monstrous because of her transness; she is violently and viciously human, the same as anyone else.

This echoes Stryker’s (1994, 240) call to power, where she says that she aims to “lay claim to the dark power of [her] monstrous identity without it being used as a weapon [...] or being wounded by it [herself].” Naomi takes pleasure in how her language choices force people to “recoil,” not because they have been physically wounded, but because of her ability to make them confront their discomfort and reconcile with the effects of their words. She crafts a joyful mirror for the people surrounding her, not only to reveal the distress caused by the tensions of the gendered society around them but also to make others feel the burden of oppression typically felt by marginalised genders (Nordmarken 2014, 40).

As explored earlier, I am an example of how some members of the trans community are uncomfortable with the reclamation of slurs; some are uncomfortable due to historical usage against them, some are uncomfortable due to a lack thereof. However, the complexities and contradictions within Naomi’s story highlight the false nature of the homogenous stories told about trans people. By pushing singular narratives on trans identities and experiences, trans people are denied aspects of their humanity and are therefore denied autonomy over how others perceive them and how they perceive themselves.

The Joy of Embodiment

Clothes are important in how we express ourselves, and I feel [the choker (Figure 3)] communicates my vibes the best, and I also like it. And that’s what matters most. I don’t do it for anyone else but myself (A.A.).

Roxanne’s object, black leather high heels (Figure 2), is particularly pertinent in discussions of embodied performances of gender. In her discussion of why she brought along high heels as her object, she mentioned two contributing reasons: one was the sensory aspect of how the heels felt, “I love the way it wraps around my shin,” and the other was the feeling of correctness and confidence it brought her:

Previously, buying shoes was just horrendous. [...] I’d always find something wrong with them: they would always be uncomfortable, they would always be wrong. But the first time I put on heels, it’s like my body was built for [it] [laughs] [...] I think there’s some feeling of correctness there because it changes the way my feet are, changes



Figure 7 - Roxanne’s object - a pair of high-heeled black boots. Photo by Roxanne 2024.

the way I stand, and then I can... I stand with more confidence, and I come across more confident. [...] And that’s probably where the feeling of power comes from.

She believed that this confidence was because of the physical changes the heels make upon her body, something which has been supported

by literature (Gurney et al. 2017). However, I believe that it also linked the joy that comes from gendered embodiment.

In modern UK culture, the high heel has become a widely understood and replicated symbol of femininity (Dilley et al. 2015; Wright 2020). To see someone read as masculine wearing high heels is to see a rather obvious break from the traditional gendered norms. Whether or not she agrees with this cultural norm, this appears to be a belief that Roxanne has internalised. Whenever we discussed wearing heels, she referred to them within the context of womanhood and femininity, with both of us laughing at the idea of me, a trans masculine person, wearing heels and other feminine clothing later in the interview.

Therefore, when putting on her heels, Roxanne is also putting on the associated gendered norms that come with them. She steps out into the world in her heels, just as she steps out into the world as a feminine-coded body. In this act, we can see Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenological framework of the "body-subject," or body-self, coming into play. This refers to the idea that one cannot understand the self without understanding how the body is perceived by others, how it itself perceives, and vice versa. Put simply, in this moment, "the body and mind are indistinguishable" (Mascia-Lees 2016, 154). In Roxanne's example, she feels how the heels change her stance, which increases her confidence. She also, either consciously or unconsciously, recognises how she has now become more feminine in others' perception of her, therefore leading to more physical changes. The body reinforces the mind, and the mind reinforces the body, leading to both internal and external gender affirmation and joy (Migdalek 2021, 723).

This also echoes A.A.'s argument that "You can express less with your naked body than you can with what you adorn that naked body with." As discussed previously, the level of vulnerability that comes with being naked in front of another person is often unsafe for many trans people. Whilst for some, it may be empowering and euphoric, for others, it can cause dysphoria or disclose their status as a trans person, something that may put them at

risk. Therefore, the use of adornments, such as jewellery, clothing, or makeup, can be both a preventative safety tool and a way to reinforce their performance of their gender identity, for themselves and others.

The argument of gender as performance, found in Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble*, is one that revolutionised gender and queer studies. In essence, Butler argues that gender comes from a set of acts that everyone performs in accordance with the sociocultural expectations of the gender assigned to them because of their sex. These acts are embodied; they centre around the body, how it holds itself, and how it interacts with other bodies in the space. A.A. echoes Butler's (1988, 521) infamous quote, "one does one's body," when A.A. states that "gender is something you do. Like it is a performance, and as you keep doing it, you feel more comfortable with certain aspects of it."

Clara discusses this sense of affirmation through performed acts of embodied gender in her example of Ethan offering to carry her bag:

When I'm out with Ethan or with other trans men, something that will often happen is they'll be like, 'Oh, can I take your bag for you?' and I often let them just because... Even though that form of chivalry is really stupid, and I would never say that a woman is weak, the fact that they are offering means something to me. I guess I found a certain kind of affirmation from the trans community that's really instinctive and reflexive and valuable.

She refers to the expectation that women are weaker than men and that a man physically shows care through the act of offering to take a heavy bag. This is reminiscent of the example explored by Migdalek (2021) wherein he and a cis female friend experimented with how gender is embodied and performed in the act of a female resting a hand on their "male partner's proffered arm" (728). When they tried reversing the norms, with him placing his hand on her proffered arm, he writes that they both found the reversed position "decidedly uncomfortable and awkward," something he attributes to social conditioning and the lack of examples in Western media (Migdalek 2021,

728). They have not performed the roles enough times to become comfortable in them; they are still learning their lines. There is clearly an embodied aspect to the norms at play. Whilst we disagree with them, both Clara and I are performing learned gender norms wherein men are seen as stronger and supportive, whilst women are weaker and receptive. These are then physically played out by the apparent display of weakness from the woman (being unable to carry the bag) and a countering display of strength from the man (being able and willing to carry the bag).

Clara decries these gendered norms as “really stupid,” forcefully stating that she would “never say that a woman is weak.” Nonetheless, the embodied performance of gender still plays out: Ethan offers to take her bag, and she lets him. To justify this dissonance, she states that “the fact that they are offering means something to me.” She appreciates the “instinctive and reflexive and valuable” affirmation of her gender that it brings, despite its arguably misogynistic origins. This is reminiscent of past surveys in which trans women have reported objectifying experiences, such as catcalling, to be a form of gender affirmation, as “they are objectified in ways that mirror the sexual harassment of non-transgender women” (Sevelius 2013, 677).

It may appear contradictory: a trans woman who has rejected many of the social norms surrounding gender, relying on gendered norms to affirm her identity. However, as Van Wolputte (2004, 263) argues, the body-self is “fragmentary, often incoherent and inconsistent, precisely because it arises from contradictory and paradoxical experiences, social tensions, and conflicts.” This is not exclusive to trans identities. The process of continual self-refinement and contradiction is one that every individual takes part in, but it is often only discussed in relation to marginalised groups, especially trans people. Clara’s trans identity does not mean she has discarded every social norm that has left an imprint on her body-self; in fact, they have likely become hyper-significant.

Moore (1994, 2) provides a partial explanation for this, as she describes how, through the process of identification,

individuals create differences between groups. To belong to a group, one must first create the group; it must be differentiated from the other groups that threaten to absorb it. This embodied act of gender performance is joyfully affirming for Clara, just as it is reflexively affirming for Ethan; both reject the lines originally assigned to them in favour of new, more appropriate lines and, in the process, reinforce the boundaries between them. This joy is the other side of the same joy that was explored earlier; whereas Naomi found joy through her explicit rejection of sexed norms, Clara found joy in the implicit acceptance of some gendered norms.

The explicit relationship between joy and their gendered interactions was overwhelmingly clear in my participants’ answers to the question of what they found joyful outside of being trans. All participants struggled to find an answer to this question that was unrelated to their transness. Some gave examples of distinctly non-trans-related hobbies, such as watching the Eurovision Song Contest or playing Warhammer 40,000. However, they still then linked them to transness in some form: Clara linked Eurovision to Dana International, the only trans woman to win the competition, and Roxanne said she finally settled on the Iron Warriors, her main Warhammer 40,000 faction, as she felt them to be “extremely trans egg coded.” Egg referring to a popular meme in online trans spaces that refers to trans people who do not know they are trans, or who are aware but are in denial (Lavery 2020).

Naomi made it even clearer when she said:

I'm finally able to think five years ahead. That's new to me. I'm having exciting new experiences that are positive. All of them are related to me being trans [laugh]. And, you know, you say, ‘What brings you joy other than that?’ I've just been in survival mode for so long that I couldn't even answer that. [...] But the things that do bring me joy at the moment are related to having that increased stability, I suppose. And inevitably, that comes back to me being trans in some way.

If, as Mascia-Lees (2016) claims, there is no separation between the mind and the body, then it is understandable that people who have had to fight through a great deal of resistance to align their cognitive gender and the body's perceived gender could begin to think through a highly gendered lens. This would not be the same implicit gendered lens that permeates most of society, but a more explicitly gendered and self-critical lens, one wherein every movement, every piece of clothing, and every sound made could drastically change others' perceptions, potentially leading to unsafe situations.

This is the lens of embodied transness. As they do not have the privilege of their gender being taken for granted, trans people cannot simply perform their gender; they must perform their transness as well. Their gender did not come innately with their sex; it was crafted through a period of intense self-reflection and analysis, and so every performed act of gender is intentional. Trans individuals can often then only leave 'survival mode' and free up their emotional energy when they are performing correctly. By leaving survival mode, my participants can explore themselves more fully, allowing them to find things that then bring them joy outside of their transness. However, paradoxically, as they only found this 'increased stability' because of their transness, an unbreakable link is made between their now correct performance and any joy that comes thereafter. This lens is vital to trans people's experiences of joy and identity. However, it is not something that has been much explored in previous literature. The damage-centred focus that has been so dominant until now has prevented this multi-faceted and contradictory understanding of the self from being explored, something that must be countered by future research.

Conclusion

This research project has responded to the calls for moving away from damage-based frameworks, instead approaching the lives of marginalised groups as the complex realities they are. I aim to counter the epistemic foreclosure currently affecting the trans

community and to lessen its harmful impact by providing alternate narratives for what life as a trans person can include. It has specifically looked at the lives of trans people in the UK, and how their identities can influence experiences of joy and contribute to the multifaceted complexity of human nature.

Recommendations for Future Research

As has been discussed, the ethnographic study of trans joy is a new and quickly developing field. While this project directly responds to this gap in the literature, it was limited in participant group size, participant diversity, and location. Future research should focus on specific age groups, races and ethnicities, or different locations, to name a few factors. There is also a need for literature that explores cis people's understandings and explorations of gendered joy, as well as literature that examines how trans individuals experience joy at different stages of their transition.

Trans research should not be singular in its approach. Although the trans community is small in comparison to other marginalised groups, the full complexity and diversity of trans experiences must be explored to understand what this community means and how it contributes. As this field grows and as the epistemic foreclosure that prioritises the tragic trans trope relaxes its grip on trans academia, the narratives told about trans people should become representative of their authentic lived experiences and can become something that serves and supports the community. If these narratives do not change, we must begin to "consider the long-term repercussions of *thinking of ourselves as broken*" (Tuck 2009, 409, original emphasis).

Acknowledgements

To my supervisors, Dr. Sally Atkinson and Professor Julien Dugnoille, who helped me find the literature for an incredibly niche topic and were never-endingly supportive. To all those who have read this project over the two years I've worked on it and have provided me with so much useful feedback. To my friends, family, and partners who have listened to me talk about this nonstop, and who have supported me in my first foray into publishing, I'm more thankful than I could ever say. I promise I won't put you through the stress of me doing a Master's degree too soon. To my participants, without whom this project literally would not have been possible. Thank you for trusting me with your stories, answering all my questions afterwards, and allowing me to publish this. I hope that I've represented you well.

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