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Transitions into and through higher education: the lived experiences of students who identify as LGBTQ+

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ+) during their transitions into, and through, higher education. Existing literature presents tragic narratives of students with LGBTQ+ identities which position them as victims. This study conceptualises transitions as complex, multiple and multi-dimensional rather than linear. The objectives of the study were to explore: the lived experiences of students who identify as LGBTQ+ in higher education; the role that sexuality and / or gender identity play in their lives over the course of their studies and LGBTQ+ students' experiences of transitions into and through higher education. The study is longitudinal in design and draws on the experiences of five participants over the duration of a three-year undergraduate course in a university in the UK. Methods used include semi-structured interviews, audio diaries and visual methodologies to explore participants' experiences of transitions. Data were coded and analysed thematically.

This study uniquely found that the participants experienced multiple and multi-dimensional transitions during their time at university and that these transitions were largely positive in contrast to the mainly tragic narrative that is dominant within the previous literature. In addition, this is the first study to have explored the experiences of LGBTQ+ students using a longitudinal study design. As far as we are aware, no existing studies apply multiple and multidimensional transitions theory (MMT) to students in higher education who identify as LGBTQ+.

Introduction

Large-scale studies have demonstrated that there is an increasing prevalence of student mental ill health in higher education. In 2016, 49,265 undergraduate students in the UK disclosed a mental health condition compared with 8415 in 2008 (UUK, 2016). In addition, large survey data from Vitae (2018) found that between 2011-2015 there was a 50% increase in students accessing wellbeing services in university. However, claims about increasing student mental ill health should be treated cautiously as more students might be willing to disclose poor mental health as a result of attempts to destigmatise it in recent years by the government and universities (DfE and DoH, 2017).

Nevertheless, students who identify as LGBTQ+ have been found to experience an increased risk of developing depression and anxiety (Neves and Hillman, 2017). Going to university can be both exciting and stressful. Students are expected to navigate multiple and multi-dimensional transitions across different domains (Jindal-Snape, 2016). These are multifaceted and unfold as students interact with academic, social and institutional contexts (Cole, 2017). Students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender are at risk of experiencing multiple stressors which can result in negative mental health outcomes (Meyer, 2003; Hatchel et al. 2019).

The academic research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in higher education presents a bleak picture. Much of the literature positions LGBTQ+ students as victims highlighting students' experiences of bullying, harassment and discrimination (for example, Ellis, 2009). Despite this dominant negative portrayal of LGBTQ+ students' experiences, more recent literature has emphasised university as a positive experience which provides students with an opportunity to explore their gender and sexual identities (Formby, 2015). However, to our knowledge, there are no published studies that have explored the transitions of LGBTQ+ students in higher education using a longitudinal study design.

Although existing literature has focused on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in higher education (Ellis, 2009; Formby, 2015; Taulke-Johnson, 2010; Tetreault et al., 2013), published studies have not explored how students navigate transitions both over time and within the same timeframe across different contexts using a longitudinal study design.

Choice of university

Research indicates that for students who identify as LGBTQ+, perceptions of safety, acceptance and tolerance (Formby, 2014) are important factors which influence university choice-making. Thus, they may choose specific localities which they perceive to be 'gay-friendly' and accepting and they may avoid places which are perceived to be repressive or intolerant (Formby, 2015; Taulke-Johnson, 2008; 2010). These 'push and pull' (Formby, 2015, p. 21) factors also reflect broader LGBTQ+ migration patterns (Cant, 1997; Formby, 2012; Howes, 2011; Valentine et al., 2003). For example, research from the UK (Formby, 2015) and the US (Stroup et al., 2014) suggests that discrimination based on sexual orientation is more widespread on rural campuses.

For many students, the prospect of disconnecting from families, friends and home communities to attend university can be daunting (Chow and Healey, 2008). However, research has found that students who identify as LGBTQ+ may desire to escape from heterosexist and homophobic home communities which have 'strictly regulated boundaries of acceptable (i.e. heterosexual) behaviour' (Taulke-Johnson, 2010, p. 256). Heterosexist communities strongly promote and regulate heterosexuality as a way of life. Strong heterosexist and transphobic discourses within these communities can result in homophobia and transphobia. These serve to both regulate the dominant discourses and to punish those who transgress from them. These environments were 'stifling' and 'claustrophobic' and 'restricted their expression and living out of their gayness due to them continuously being on stage' (Taulke-Johnson, 2010, p. 260) and students are lured by environments which were perceived to be more liberal, open-minded and which offered freedom of expression (Binnie, 2004; Brown, 2000; Weeks, 2007) and in which individuals could be safely 'out' (Epstein et al., 2003). They may perceive university environments to be 'gay-friendly' due to perceptions of the level of education and maturity of other students (Taulke-Johnson, 2010). In their desire to escape from 'the hetero-saturated nature of their home towns' and 'small town heterosexism' (Taulke-Johnson, 2010, p. 258) which forces them to maintain their invisibility, LGBTQ+ students may

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choose to embrace queer environments where they can construct families of choice (Weeks et al., 2001) and queer social networks which offer an alternative to the heterosexist and often close-knit communities that they had been brought up in.

Student accommodation

However, Taulke-Johnson (2010) found evidence that university accommodation can be intolerant, unwelcoming, hostile and homophobic. He found evidence of anti-gay sentiments being written on doors of rooms resulting in gay students modifying their behaviour so that their ‘gayness’ did not have a visible presence in the accommodation. The homophobic bullying resulted in feelings of isolation and psychological distress as well as feeling obliged to educate housemates in order to change their negative attitudes (Formby, 2015; Keenan, 2015; Lough Dennell and Logan, 2012). Additionally, Valentine et al. (2009) found evidence of inappropriate responses by institutions to homophobic behaviour in student accommodation such as institutions moving the victims out of the accommodation rather than the perpetrators. Whilst some students would have preferred ‘gay-friendly’ housing, others did not want to be segregated into ‘gay only’ accommodation and they wanted their institutions to create safe, inclusive accommodation for all students (Valentine et al., 2009). According to Foucault (1977, p.172), separate spaces ‘render visible those who are inside…provide a hold on their conduct…carry the effects of power right to them’. Separate housing is not an adequate solution because it creates an ‘othering’ effect which leads to further marginalisation and discrimination. It can make the process of ‘othering’ visible and results in the creation of colonies of exclusion within mainstream environments (Valentine et al., 2009).

Further, literature from the UK and America has specifically noted concerns about accommodation for students who identify as trans or as gender non-conforming. These were due to lack of gender-neutral bathrooms and shared bedrooms for these students (Beemyn, 2005; Krum et al., 2013; Pomerantz, 2010; Singh et al., 2013), and due to the negative attitudes and misunderstandings of housemates (Formby, 2015).

Curriculum

Addressing the issues through the curriculum helps to foster inclusive attitudes in all students, regardless of the subject one chooses to study. Keenan (2014) has emphasised the invisibility of LGBTQ+ issues in the higher education curriculum, supporting earlier research by Ellis (2009). This can result in marginalisation and curriculum invisibility is worse for transgender students who have reported a lack of trans experiences and trans history reflected in their curriculum (McKinney, 2005; Metro, 2014; NUS, 2014). Attempts to queer the higher education curriculum have not been universal and literature suggests that courses continue to be strongly heteronormative (Formby, 2015). Whilst some universities celebrate annual events such as Pride and include a commitment to LGBTQ+ equality in their policies, there is evidence in the literature that the higher education curriculum does not seriously address issues around LGBTQ+ equality. Students continue to be presented with the achievements of the ‘same old straight, white men’ and the curriculum is ‘pale, male and stale’ (student participants in Formby, 2015, p. 32). For example, there is evidence which suggests that LGBTQ+ issues are invisible in health-courses (Formby, 2015), thus presenting students with only a partial perspective on their disciplines. This is surprising given the association between mental health and LGBTQ+ (Bradlow et al., 2017).

Campus climate

Whilst one-off celebration and recognition events go some way towards addressing LGBTQ+ diversity and equality, and create a positive campus climate, all students need to understand their responsibilities in promoting inclusion, diversity and equality and LGBTQ+ inclusion is part of this broader agenda.

In the United States homophobia on campus is endemic and there is evidence of physical violence and verbal harassment (Ellis, 2009). This has resulted in a 'climate of fear' (Ellis, 2009, p. 727) in which students do not feel comfortable disclosing their sexual identity. Additionally, there is evidence of students negotiating their homosexuality by avoiding known lesbian and gay locations, disassociating from known LGBTQ+ people and 'passing' off as straight (Ellis, 2009). Research by Rankin et al., (2010) found evidence of name calling, homophobic graffiti and physical abuse all of which contributed to the creation of a hostile climate for LGBTQ+ students. Students who identified as transgender reported higher rates of harassment and LGBTQ+ students of colour tended to report race as a reason for experiencing harassment than their sexual and gender identity. Research in the UK presents evidence of homophobia on university campuses (Keenan, 2014; McDermott et al., 2008; Valentine et al., 2009) and a negative campus climate has been related to students considering leaving their course (Tetreault et al., 2013).

Plummer (1995, p. 82) has described the 'coming out' process as 'the most momentous act in the life of any lesbian or gay person', which' does not just occur once and has to be repeated when LGBTQ+ people meet new people in different contexts. This can result in anxiety due to a lack of certainty about others' response. It is difficult to 'come out' to their peers at university, especially when they share social spaces with male peers who display anti-gay attitudes and if there is a strong heterosexist discourse in the social and academic spaces of the university. Intolerant, disapproving and hostile environments can force male students to negotiate their homosexual identities by adhering to upheld protocols of traditional masculine behaviour (Taulke-Johnson, 2008). This is a form of concealment which Meyer (2003) identified as an effect of proximal stress. They may even frame comments and anti-gay behaviour as banter to form friendships with heterosexual peers. However, this 'banter' reinforces anti-gay discourses and compulsory heterosexuality (Keenan, 2015) and places pressure on individuals to keep their sexual and gender identities in check.

Aldridge and Somerville (2014) found that nearly a quarter of LGBTQ+ students thought that they would face discrimination from other students. This is an example of proximal stress (Meyer, 2003). Research has also found that fears relating to prejudice and discrimination impacted negatively on levels of 'outness' in universities (Formby, 2012; 2013; 2015). This suggests that even where bullying, prejudice and discrimination are not experienced directly, fears around these can impact negatively on LGBTQ+ students' experiences of higher education and thus, campus climate can be influenced by overt or covert factors.

Research by Ellis (2009) reported the existence of homophobia on university campuses in the UK and this also replicates earlier findings in the US (Rankin, 2005). Ellis concluded that '[Lesbian, gay and bisexual] students do not particularly perceive a 'climate of fear', but [still] actively behave in ways that respond to such a climate' (Ellis, 2009, p. 733). Ellis found that students deliberately concealed their gender or sexual identity because they did not feel comfortable disclosing their sexual identity. However, in contrast, Valentine et al., (2009) found that trans students reported a higher proportion of negative treatment, including threat of physical violence, compared to those who identified as LGB and these findings have also been replicated in the US (Garvey and Rankin, 2015). The masculine culture which exists on some university campuses (NUS, 2012) may also make some LGBTQ+ students feel uncomfortable and cause them to conceal their identities (NUS, 2012).

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169 Keenan (2014) found that despite institutional commitments to equality and diversity, the lived
170 experiences of LGBTQ+ students suggests that these policies are often not borne out in practice. It is
171 evident that abuse is still apparent on university campuses, although in the UK verbal abuse is more
172 common than physical abuse (Keenan, 2014). Additionally, other research has found that
173 homophobic language is sometimes explained away merely as 'banter' but nevertheless this still
174 pathologises students who identify as LGBTQ+.

175 Positive transitions

176 Gay male students have been portrayed in the academic literature as victims (Taulke-Johnson, 2008)
177 and accounts have documented the impact of homophobia, intolerance and harassment on their
178 psychological wellbeing, academic achievement and physical health (Brown et al., 2004; Tucker and
179 Potocky-Tripodi, 2006). These accounts situate gay students within a 'Martyr-Target-Victim' model
180 (Rofes, 2004, p. 41) and positive accounts are largely unreported and ignored (Taulke-Johnson,
181 2008). Accounts which portray the 'tragic queer' (Rasmussen and Crowley, 2004, p. 428) with a
182 'wounded identity' (Haver, 1997, p. 278) are only partial and they locate gay students within a
183 pathologised framework. These accounts are largely unquestioned and remain unproblematised and
184 label gay students as victims.

185 Therefore, whilst experiences of homophobia, harassment and discrimination are unfortunately a
186 reality for some students, it is important to offer a more balanced perspective which reflects the lived
187 experiences of the gay student population. An alternative narrative which presents non-victimised
188 accounts of their experience offers a more nuanced, inclusive and comprehensive insight into gay
189 students' experiences (Taulke-Johnson, 2008) of higher education.

190 During their time at university gay students can experience fulfilling, enjoyable and empowering
191 experiences. These might potentially include falling in love, developing sexual relationships,
192 establishing new social networks and friendships and having fun. For some LGBTQ+ students,
193 university is a time when they can explore and develop their self-identities in safe, accepting
194 environments (Taulke-Johnson, 2008). Taulke-Johnson's participants emphasised how they had been
195 able to construct positive LGBTQ+ identities in accepting and liberal environments whilst studying
196 at one UK university. These counter-narratives challenge the dominant discourses of homophobia,
197 victimisation and harassment which are well-documented in the literature (Greene and Banerjee,
198 2006; Kulkin, 2006; Peterson and Gerrity, 2006).

199 However, despite these positive narratives, university spaces once described as 'threateningly
200 straight' (Epstein et al., 2003, p. 138), are places where varying levels of 'outness' or self-censorship
201 (Formby, 2012; 2013) may exist. Even where LGBTQ+ students experience university spaces as
202 liberal and accepting, the heterosexist and heteronormative discourse can result in them modifying
203 their behaviour so as not to transgress heterosexual norms (Taulke-Johnson, 2008).

204 Given that there is a paucity of research which present positive narratives of LGBTQ+ students in
205 higher education, this was identified as a priority within the context of this study. Also, since no
206 studies have explored LGBTQ+ students' perspectives using a longitudinal study design, this was
207 also a key contributing factor which influenced the design of this study.

208 Conceptual frameworks

209 Not all transitions research presents the conceptualisation of transitions to university, and not all
210 conceptualisations cover all aspects of transitions. Transitions research broadly categorises higher
211 transitions into three perspectives; transition as induction, change in identity and becoming (Table 1).

212 We conceptualise transition to university as a dynamic ongoing process of educational, social and
213 psychological adaptation due to changes in context, interpersonal relationships and identity, which
214 can be both exciting and worrying (Jindal-Snape, 2016). This conceptualisation can be further
215 understood by using the Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) Theory (Jindal-Snape,
216 2012) which acknowledges that higher education students experience multiple changes at the same
217 time, such as moving to a new city, organisational culture, higher academic level. Not only will they
218 adapt to these changes over time, their multiple transitions will trigger transitions for significant
219 others, such as their families and professionals, highlighting the multi-dimensional nature of
220 transitions.

221 We can also understand transitions through Meyer's (2003) theory of Minority Stress which includes
222 three elements: circumstances in the environment (general stressors); experiences in relation to a
223 minority identity (distal stressors) and anticipations and expectations in relation to a minority identity
224 (proximal stressors). Meyer's (2003) model is shown in Figure 1.

225 According to Meyer (2003), general stressors are situated within the wider environment. These
226 environmental stressors may include experiences of social deprivation, financial pressures or
227 stressors within relationships. These stressors may be experienced by individuals regardless of
228 minority status. In contrast, minority stressors relate to an individual's identity and their association
229 with a minority group (Meyer, 2003), such as the LGBTQ+ community. Thus, individuals who
230 identify with non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations may experience minority
231 stressors which also intersect with general stressors. According to Meyer (2003) minority stressors
232 are categorised as either distal or proximal stressors.

233 Distal stressors include the direct experience of rejection, discrimination, prejudice and stigma based
234 on the individual's minority stratus, in this case, LGBTQ+ students. Proximal stressors relate to an
235 individual's perception and appraisal of situations. Students who identify as LGBTQ+ may anticipate
236 rejection, prejudice and discrimination based on their previous experiences (distal stressors) of
237 homophobic, biphobic and transphobic abuse and prejudice. Meyer's model identifies affiliation and
238 social support with others who share the minority status as critical strategies which can 'ameliorate'
239 the effects of minority stress and he argued that, in some cases, a minority identity can become a
240 source of strength if individuals use their minority identity as a vehicle to pursue opportunities for
241 affiliation with others who share the minority status.

242 Research questions

243 This study addressed the following research questions.

244 - What transitions did the participants experience throughout the duration of their higher
245 education studies?

246 - What were their transitions experiences and their impact on the participants?

247 - What factors influenced the participants' experiences of transitions?

248 Materials and methods

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249 This section outlines the methods that were used to collect the data, the ethical considerations
250 associated with the study and the methods of data collection and analysis.

251 In line with our conceptualisation of transition as an ongoing process, we undertook a longitudinal
252 study. We used multiple methods of data collection for crystallisation of a complex and rich array of
253 perspectives (Richardson and St Pierre, 2005). Given the sensitivities involved in this research, we
254 used a case study approach. This paper presents a cross-sectional analysis of the data to identify
255 common themes across the cases.

256 **Interviews**

257 Longitudinal narrative interviews can illuminate changes across an aspect of a participant's life (West
258 et al., 2014). Therefore, in-depth semi-structured interviews were used to explore the participants'
259 experiences of transitions into and through higher education. Interviews were conducted at three
260 points during the study; once in the first year of their studies, one during the second year and once
261 during the final year. In each interview participants were asked the following questions:

262 - What social connections and / or personal relationships have you established and how are
263 these going?

264 - How are you getting on with your academic studies?

265 - How are you getting on in your accommodation?

266 - How would you describe your mental health now and why?

267 - What challenges or successes have you experienced?

268 In addition, participants were given some ownership of the interviews through identifying pertinent
269 foci for discussion that related to their on-going experiences. Interviews were digitally recorded and
270 transcribed.

271 **Diaries**

272 Audio and written diaries can enable participants to efficiently record their on-going experiences,
273 thus facilitating data collection in real time as participants interact with the different contexts which
274 influence their lives (Williamson et al., 2015); they offer unique insights by capturing critical events
275 as they occur (Bernays et al., 2014). Diary methods can provide 'a continuous thread of daily life'
276 (Bernays et al., 2014, p. 629) and they can capture a 'record of the ever changing present' (Elliott,
277 1997, p.2). For this reason, the method was deemed to be particularly suitable for this longitudinal
278 study. Participants were invited to submit longitudinal audio diaries between interviews. Many used
279 the audio diary method as an opportunity to document and reflect on critical incidents which related
280 to their transitions. No limit was placed on the number of diaries that participants could submit.
281 Participants recorded their audio diaries on their mobile phones and uploaded these as MP3 files to a
282 password protected electronic folder which only they and the researchers had access to.

283 **Photo-elicitation**

To complement data collection through interviews and audio-diaries, photo-elicitation was used, which is becoming increasingly popular in qualitative research (Gibson et al., 2013). Participants were asked to construct meaning from photographs (Dunne, 2017) and it helped them express their emotions, feelings and insights (Lopez et al., 2005). The participant-generated photographs also provided opportunities for them to document their ongoing experiences making it particularly suitable for this longitudinal study. Participants were invited to submit photographs between interviews. They were informed that the photographs must not represent people (to ensure that people who had not consented were not in photographs) but should reflect their experiences of transitions. Time was allocated in each interview for participants to provide meaning to the photographs.

Participants

Participants who identified as LGBTQ+ and were in the first year of an undergraduate degree course were recruited. They were recruited from one university in England. The first author was employed in this institution but did not know or teach the students. This reduced the power imbalance between the main researcher and the participants. An e-mail was circulated across three university departments to recruit participants to the study. This secured 5 participants who could demonstrate a sustained commitment to the study over a three-year period. There was no attrition. Details of the participants are shown in Table 2. Pseudonyms have been used.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was sought using a participant information sheet and consent form. Participants were assured of their rights to confidentiality and anonymity. The research explored sensitive aspects of the participants' experiences of transitions including their mental and emotional health. Participants were pre-warned about the sensitive nature of the research and signposted to support services both within and beyond the institution. Ethical approval was obtained by X University's Research Ethics Committee.

Data collection

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the first author. Audio diaries were also transcribed by the first author. Participants submitted photographs to a secure electronic folder. These were discussed during the interviews. The participants' interpretations of the photographs were digitally recorded and transcribed during the interviews by the first author. All transcriptions were verbatim.

Data analysis

This study used thematic analysis as the method of analysis. Case studies of each participant were produced from the raw data to illustrate the participants' experiences of transitions. The themes were drawn from the raw data for each participant. Braun and Clarke (2006) have argued that 'thematic analysis should be the foundational method for qualitative analysis' (p.78). The transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step model to generate themes. This process was conducted by the first author and the themes were validated by the other authors. Cross-sectional analysis was used to identify themes from across five case studies (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79).

Results and discussion

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The following section summarises the findings arising from the cross-sectional analysis of the five case studies. Brief information is first provided about each participant to set the context.

Brentley

Brentley's initial transitions to university were not smooth. He has started a course the previous year in a different institution and had become heavily involved in the LGBTQ+ scene. He did not develop positive social connections with his peers in student accommodation. Brentley engaged in substance abuse as a result of his participation in the scene and this resulted in poor mental health. Brentley withdrew from his course and re-commenced his higher education the following year at a different university. His second attempt at higher education was much more positive. He excelled on his course and made good social connections due to making a deliberate choice to live with professionals rather than students. He challenged homophobia on campus when he experienced it and demanded changes to university policies and practices to address this.

Christopher

Christopher's initial transitions to university were positive. At the start of his degree he entered a relationship which provided him with positive self-worth. However, during his second year the relationship dissolved, and this had a negative effect on his academic, social and psychological transitions. Christopher accessed support from the university counselling service and eventually his mental health started to improve. With this support he was able to complete his course successfully.

Mark

Mark was a mature student in his late twenties. Prior to coming to university, he had experienced domestic abuse in a relationship, and he was also a victim of rape. His first year of university was dominated by the rape trial and he sought support from the university counselling service. He was initially rejected by the service because he was informed that the service did not support male rape victims. He successfully challenged this and eventually he was able to gain access to counselling. His mental health improved as time progressed. He developed good social connections through his participation in the LGBTQ+ scene and he experienced positive academic transitions once his mental health started to improve.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth's transitions into student accommodation were not smooth due to experiencing micro-aggressions from peers. She moved out of student accommodation and moved in with her long-term partner who was also studying at a different institution in the same city. Following this, her transitions through university were generally positive. She excelled in her academic studies and it contributed to good self-efficacy. She developed a secure social network of friends and rejected the LGBTQ+ scene. She was undertaking a course of initial teacher training and she was exposed to discrimination during one of her placements.

Andy

Andy was a mature student. Andy used they/them pronouns. They had experienced homophobia in the workplace prior to coming to university. At university they became an active member of the LGBTQ+ society and through this they experienced positive social transitions. Academic transitions for Andy were smooth. However, professional transitions were problematic. Like Elizabeth, Andy

363 was training to be a teacher and experienced direct discrimination during one of their school
364 placements. This resulted in Andy challenging university policies and practices in relation to
365 LGBTQ+ inclusion.

366 **Multiple and Multi-dimensional transitions and support systems**

367 All five participants experienced transitions across several domains (Jindal-Snape, 2012). These
368 included social, academic, psychological, professional and identity transitions.

369 Apart from Andy, all moved away from home to study and had to develop new social connections.
370 They all successfully navigated their academic transitions, although for some this was easier than for
371 others. Mark was frustrated about the slow pace of learning on his course. Christopher was able to
372 cope with the academic demands of his course, but he was not motivated by the subject he had
373 chosen to study. Elizabeth, Brentley and Andy all excelled on their courses, and consequently, their
374 self-efficacy improved. They emphasised their academic competence by stating the grades they were
375 achieving. Mark and Andy experienced psychological transitions by accessing support from the
376 counselling service to enable them to overcome previous trauma. All had come to terms with their
377 sexuality or gender identities prior to attending university but most chose not to primarily define their
378 identities in this way. However, Brentley, Elizabeth and Christopher said that they partially
379 concealed their sexuality, not because they felt obliged to do so, but because they did not consider
380 this facet of their identity to be significant.

381 Navigating professional domains was particularly problematic for Elizabeth and Andy, who were
382 both training to be teachers. However, they used their negative experiences to bring about positive
383 changes at a structural level which resulted in a transition for their institution. The participants
384 navigated these various transitions to varying degrees as they moved between academic, social,
385 psychological, professional and other domains within the same timeframe. Participants' willingness
386 to challenge structural discrimination (Mark) and homophobia (Christopher) also resulted in changes
387 to university policies.

388 All participants drew on their peer networks to support them through the transitions that they
389 experienced rather than accessing support from their families. For example, Elizabeth and
390 Christopher drew heavily on the support from their personal relationships and friendships.
391 Elizabeth's transitions also resulted in transitions for her partner when she left her university
392 accommodation to move in with her. Mark, Andy and Brentley gained their social capital from
393 friendship groups, which they had established through shared housing (Brentley), through
394 participation in the scene (Mark, Andy) or through participation in the LGBTQ+ student society
395 (Andy). For all participants, their social connections were critical in supporting them to adapt to the
396 transitions that they experienced.

397 The social capital that the participants held was critical to their ability to adapt to new situations as it
398 enabled them to provide psychosocial support (Lee and Madyun, 2008). Elizabeth drew on her social
399 networks and personal relationship for this purpose when she experienced negative interactions with
400 her peers in student accommodation. Rienties et al. (2015) emphasise how social capital can provide
401 a sense of belonging to a social group. Rienties and Nolan (2014) highlighted the important role of
402 social capital in reinforcing a sense of social identity. Rienties and Jindal-Snape (2016) stressed the
403 role of social capital in providing solidarity and mutual support. The LGBTQ+ society and the scene
404 provided Andy with solidarity, mutual support, a social identity and a sense of belonging and social
405 inclusion (Putnam, 2001). These factors played a role in supporting Andy to navigate multiple

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transitions. Mark's social capital was derived from the scene. Brentley's social capital was derived from his friendship group but also from online networks which facilitated social connectivity and access. Brentley's restricted access to social capital in his first university resulted in him withdrawing from the institution. Thus, social capital played a critical role in Brentley's transitions into higher education. Christopher's social capital was derived from his relationship with his partner, but his resilience was detrimentally affected when this relationship broke down.

Research demonstrates that being part of a group is important for a successful transition (Rienties and Jindal-Snape, 2016). However, so too is self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Rienties and Jindal-Snape, 2016). Students who are highly motivated with goals and aspirations are more likely to experience successful transitions at university (Rienties and Jindal-Snape, 2016). Self-determination was evident in several case studies. Brentley and Elizabeth were motivated to achieve good academic results. Mark was motivated to achieve a successful lucrative career as a result of his degree. Their self-determination enabled them to successfully navigate transitions. Self-determination was less evident in Christopher's case study and this might explain why he struggled with his course following the breakdown of his relationship. Andy's motivation to advance equality and social justice was a form of self-determination which enabled them to successfully navigate transitions.

The data were consistent with MMT theory (Jindal-Snape, 2012). Transitions were not pre-determined or linear, but rhizomatic. They were an everyday occurrence rather than linear and sequential. The participants experienced synchronous transitions as they navigated different domains daily. Transitions were largely positive in that participants experienced university as largely positive. Transition was not a process of moving from one identity to another (Ecclestone et al., 2010) but a process of exploring multiple identities, often within the same timeframe. For most, their sexuality was not critical to their sense of identity in that they did not use it to define themselves.

Identity transitions

The participants also mitigated stress through the extent to which they allowed the LGBTQ+ label to define their identities. Identity transitions were a part of the participants' experiences of university. Although some embraced their LGBTQ+ identities (Andy), others invested in developing their academic (Brentley, Elizabeth) or social identities (Mark, Andy, Elizabeth). The participants were particularly keen to explore multiple identities. However, identity was also a push and pull factor which influenced other transitions as well as being experienced as a transition. Some participants emphasised that their LGBTQ+ identity was not their primary identity (Brentley, Elizabeth). This allowed them to navigate other transitions more smoothly. This was evident, for example, when Brentley rejected the scene and 'all that jazz' (Brentley, interview 1) to focus on investing in his academic transitions. Elizabeth was also not invested heavily in her lesbian identity and this enabled her to focus on her academic and social transitions. Identity is therefore an influencing factor which enabled some participants to successfully navigate other transitions.

> My LGBT identity does not represent my whole identity. It is part of me. Before I came to university people saw me as a lesbian. But when I came to university, I decided that I could be whoever or whatever I wanted to be. I pushed back my LGBT identity a little and although I have developed friendships with other LGBT people, we don't just talk about being LGBT. We have other interests. (Elizabeth, interview 1, October 2017)

447 I didn't accept my sexuality and gender at first but now I do. I can't deny who I am. However,
448 my gender and sexuality are only fragments of me. They are not the whole me. (Andy,
449 interview 1, November 2017).

450 Coleman-Fountain (2014) discusses how young LGBT individuals often situate themselves within a
451 post-gay paradigm. That is, they resist being defined by their sexuality or gender identity or even
452 being defined by anything. They question the meaning of labels which trap them into a narrative of
453 struggle and instead often choose to embrace a narrative of emancipation (Cohler and Hammack,
454 2007) in which sexuality or gender identity are not the prime aspect of a person's identity. It could be
455 argued that repudiating labels is an attempt by individuals with minority identities to establish an
456 identity as an 'ordinary' person' (Coleman-Fountain, 2014). Brentley was keen to emphasise that
457 being gay was only one part of his identity and he identified other aspects of his identity that he
458 considered to be important. Elizabeth was proud of her academic identity which was more significant
459 to her than her identity as a lesbian. It could be argued that these were direct attempts by the
460 participants to emphasise the 'ordinariness' of LGBTQ+ people (Richardson, 2004).

461 Literature demonstrates how some people claim identities through labels, but others resist them
462 (Hammack and Cohler, 2011). Although none of the participants resisted defining themselves by
463 their sexuality or gender identity, some did define themselves by identities that made them appear to
464 be 'ordinary', thus refuting divisions based on non-normative identities (Hegna, 2007). Brentley
465 repudiated the stereotypes that are typically associated with being gay, including flamboyancy,
466 dramatisation and other associations with 'being camp'. He acknowledged that being gay meant that
467 he was attracted to other males, but he rejected all the 'baggage' that is stereotypically associated
468 with being gay (see also Coleman-Fountain, 2014; Savin-Williams, 2005). For Brentley, these
469 characteristics were not a valid form of masculinity (Coleman-Fountain, 2014) and he sought an
470 authentic identity which extended beyond the boundaries of the caricatures that are dominant in the
471 media and on the gay scene (Savin-Williams, 2005). Christopher, Mark and Elizabeth also
472 acknowledged their sexuality, but they rejected the associated stereotypes and refused to be defined
473 by either of these.

474 None of the participants denied the labels that related to their sexuality, but they questioned their
475 meaning, particularly Brentley and Elizabeth. Apart from Andy, they turned their sexuality into a
476 secondary characteristic and invested instead in what Appiah (2005) refers to as a narrative of the
477 self. They rejected collective ascriptions. They acknowledged their non-heterosexual feelings but
478 consciously refuted this as the prime aspect of their identity (Dilley, 2010). They refused to be
479 unequally positioned in a hierarchy of sexuality and gender which is embedded with assumptions and
480 stereotypes (Coleman-Fountain, 2014). Although research suggests that traditional labels (gay,
481 lesbian, homosexual) may be perceived as too limiting (Galupo et al., 2016) and are often associated
482 with stigmatisation and negative stereotypes (White et al., 2018), most participants in this study did
483 not reject these labels. However, they did not use the label to describe a prime aspect of their
484 identities.

485 Mark's decision to 'own' the label when he was subjected to homophobic abuse was a strategy for
486 not internalising the effects of the distal stressor to which he was exposed. Owning the label was also
487 evident in Brentley's account of his experience in the gym and Christopher's account of his
488 experience on the bus when they were subjected to homophobic language. However, although these
489 participants identified as gay, it was not the prime component of their identities but when they
490 experienced inequality, they felt compelled to address it, thus demonstrating moral courage.

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Within the context of this study, the way in which the participants negotiated their identities served to minimise the effects of minority stressors (Meyer, 2003). Their sexuality and gender identities were only one component of their overall identity. They had already integrated these identities into their overall identities. When they experienced minority stress the effects of it were negated by investing in other aspects of their identity. Elizabeth experienced micro-aggressions in university accommodation but her identities as a partner, a friend and a student compensated for the stressors to which she was exposed. Brentley emphasised the importance of being a runner, a brother and a student as well as being gay. These multiple identities helped to mitigate the effects of minority stress. Christopher's identity as a partner within a relationship helped to minimise the effects of micro-aggressions to which he was exposed. Andy's prime identity was derived from being an active member of the LGBTQ+ student society, which helped to negate the effects of minority stress. Mark's identity as a mature student and an employee helped to mitigate the effects of homophobic abuse.

Thus, this study contributes to theory in that it has identified a wider range of coping mechanisms to mitigate minority stress than Meyer (2003) originally suggested in his model.

Social transitions

Literature demonstrates that self-worth is influenced by the quality of our relationships with others and the extent to which we meet other people's expectations (Jindal-Snape and Miller, 2010). However, during transitions individuals may lose the relationships that have previously contributed to positive or negative self-worth and they may receive different feedback from new relationships which can have a positive or negative effect on self-concept (see the seminal works of Cooley, 1902; Coopersmith, 1967; Rogers, 1961). All participants described difficult experiences prior to coming to university which impacted negatively on their self-worth. However, their social transitions at university were largely positive in that they established new friendships and relationships which contributed positively to their self-worth and therefore their overall self-esteem.

Social transitions facilitated a sense of belonging for the participants. The importance of the LGBTQ+ scene in fostering a sense of belonging for individuals with non-normative identities is a theme in the literature (Holt, 2011). However, although Andy and Mark had embraced the scene, Christopher, Brentley and Elizabeth rejected it and sought their sense of belonging from other sources including friendship groups and relationships. Literature demonstrates that the scene is a paradoxical space which offers support and validation but also presents risks (Formby, 2017; Valentine and Skelton, 2003). It can also be an exclusionary space (Formby, 2017). Brentley experienced the scene both as risky and a place of exclusion, thus resulting in him seeking a sense of belonging from other social networks. He also initially struggled to establish social connections in student halls which resulted in negative social transitions. However, he managed to build good friendships later when he moved into private housing.

> Other students were acting like a bunch of buffoons, pushing each other down the stairs and pulling each other's pants down. I didn't fit in in student halls. (Brentley, interview 1, October 2017)

> I was going out, getting drunk and was hung over 3 days a week. I found a grey hair and that was caused by the scene. I had my drink spiked. It is all drama on the scene, people saying, 'this person has been with this person' and so on. I could not establish meaningful relationships. The gay scene is like a 'stale soup'. Every ingredient has touched everything, it

534 is all homogenous and everything tastes the same. Occasionally you get the odd bit of Cajun
535 spice (young new guys) who join which makes it taste better. (Brentley, interview 2, October
536 2018)

537 For the last two years, I have deliberately chosen to live with people who have jobs rather
538 than students. I have been able to build strong friendships with the people I live with.
539 (Brentley, interview 3, June 2019)

540 Christopher and Elizabeth felt excluded on the scene because they did not identify with others and
541 gained their sense of belonging from friendships, intimate relationships, online networks and
542 academic study. Mark and Andy experienced a sense of inclusion and therefore belonging on the
543 scene. Regardless of how their sense of belonging was met, experiencing belonging was critical to
544 their self-esteem. Collective self-esteem refers to an individual's evaluation of their own worthiness
545 within a social group (Hahm et al., 2018). Andy gained this through participating in the LGBTQ+
546 society which provided a sense of belonging. Research demonstrates that community connectedness
547 is associated with increased psychological and social wellbeing (Frost and Meyer, 2012). The data in
548 this study also suggest that belonging is associated with self-esteem. Experiencing a sense of
549 belonging in the institution (Elizabeth), within friendship groups (Brentley, Elizabeth), within the
550 LGBTQ+ community (Mark, Andy) and within relationships (Christopher) supported the participants
551 to experience a positive sense of self-worth.

552 **Academic transitions**

553 All participants experienced smooth academic transitions during their time at university and these
554 provided participants with positive self-worth.

555 I love learning. I am getting 70s and 80s in my assignments and I am beginning to see myself
556 as an academic (Christopher, interview 1, November 2017)

557 I'm just in the coffee shop with my friends and we are discussing Foucault. I never thought I
558 would be bright enough to do things like this. I feel like an academic. (Christopher, audio
559 diary, February 2018)

560 Positive academic transitions were particularly evident with Elizabeth who realised that she had good
561 academic ability at university, despite describing herself as an 'average' student during her time at
562 school. Each participant successfully completed their degree course.

563 I was labelled as underachieving in sixth form and I felt defeated by it. I thought, 'what's the
564 point? However, since coming to university I have been diagnosed with dyslexia. I now know
565 that I'm not stupid. I love learning. I am getting 70s and 80s in my assignments. (Elizabeth,
566 interview 1, October 2017).

567 **Professional transitions**

568 Transitions into professional roles were not smooth for Elizabeth or Andy. Both were studying on
569 professional teacher training courses and both experienced negativity from colleagues in the
570 workplace during their professional placements. Andy used this negative experience to implement
571 changes to mentor training programmes at the university to ensure that workplace mentors
572 understood their legal duties to prevent discrimination during employment. These two cases
573 demonstrate that universities can meet their legal obligations in relation to ensuring equality for

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students on campus, but this can break down when students carry out part of their courses within workplace contexts. However, the university is still legally responsible for the entire student experience, even when students are studying away from the campus. Andy and Elizabeth's negative experiences of professional placements resulted in difficult transitions into their chosen profession but also resulted in positive changes to university policies and practices, thus reflecting the multidimensional nature of transitions.

Psychological transitions

Some participants concealed their identities in the workplace, in their homes and communities to reduce the likelihood of experiencing distal stressors (Andy, Mark), resulting in internalised homophobia and psychological distress. Lack of agency or restricted agency impacted detrimentally on their identity transitions prior to coming to university. However, during their time at university, participants embraced their multiple identities which resulted in positive psychological transitions. Some participants experienced positive psychological transitions by accessing support from the counselling service to enable them to overcome previous trauma (Mark, Andy).

Stress

The participants in the study drew on their networks to mitigate the effects of stress. Networks included friends, relationships and family, although support from family networks was not a dominant theme in the narratives. The importance of social networks in alleviating stress is a consistent theme in the literature (Montgomery and McDowell, 2009; Rienties and Jindal-Snape, 2016). Mark and Andy mitigated the effects of stress not only through social networks but also through accessing psychological intervention. The role of psychological intervention in mitigating stress is also a consistent theme in the literature (Meyer, 2003).

Some strategies for mitigating stress were evident through the photo-elicitation. These are shown in Figure 2.

Regardless of the support they gained from others and its role in mitigating stress, the participants also mitigated stress through the extent to which they allowed the LGBTQ+ label to define their identity. Coleman-Fountain (2014) discusses how young LGBT individuals often situate themselves within a post-gay paradigm. That is, they resist being defined by their sexuality or gender identity or even being defined by anything. They question the meaning of labels which trap them into a narrative of struggle and instead often choose to embrace a narrative of emancipation (Cohler and Hammack, 2007) in which sexuality or gender identity are not the prime aspect of a person's identity. It could be argued that repudiating labels is an attempt by individuals with minority identities to establish an identity as an 'ordinary' person' (Coleman-Fountain, 2014). Brentley was keen to emphasise that being gay was only one part of his identity and he identified other aspects of his identity that he considered to be important. Elizabeth was proud of her academic identity which was more significant to her than her identity as a lesbian. It could be argued that these were direct attempts by the participants to emphasise the 'ordinariness' of LGBTQ+ people (Richardson, 2004).

None of the participants denied the labels that related to their sexuality, but they questioned their meaning, particularly Brentley and Elizabeth. Except for Andy, they turned their sexuality into a secondary characteristic and invested instead in what Appiah (2005) refers to as a narrative of the self. They rejected collective ascriptions. They acknowledged their non-heterosexual feelings but consciously refuted this as the prime aspect of their identity (Dilley, 2010). They refused to be

616 unequally positioned in a hierarchy of sexuality and gender which is embedded with assumptions and
617 stereotypes (Coleman-Fountain, 2014). Although research suggests that traditional labels (gay,
618 lesbian, homosexual) may be perceived as too limiting (Galupo et al., 2016) and are often associated
619 with stigmatisation and negative stereotypes (White et al., 2018), most participants in this study did
620 not reject these labels. However, they did not use the label to describe a prime aspect of their
621 identities.

622 Mark's decision to 'own' the label when he was subjected to homophobic abuse was a strategy for
623 not internalising the effects of the distal stressor to which he was exposed. Owning the label was also
624 evident in Brentley's account of his experience in the gym and Christopher's account of his
625 experience on the bus when they were subjected to homophobic language. However, although these
626 participants identified as gay, it was not the prime component of their identities but when they
627 experienced inequality, they felt compelled to address it, thus demonstrating moral courage.

628 Within the context of this study, the way in which the participants negotiated their identities served to
629 minimise the effects of minority stressors. Their sexuality was only one component of their overall
630 identity. When they experienced minority stress the effects of it were negated by investing in other
631 aspects of their identities. Elizabeth experienced micro-aggressions in university accommodation but
632 her identities as a partner, a friend and a student compensated for the stressors to which she was
633 exposed. Brentley emphasised the importance of being a runner, a brother and a student as well as
634 being gay. These multiple identities helped to mitigate the effects of minority stress. Christopher's
635 identity as a partner within a relationship helped to minimise the effects of micro-aggressions to
636 which he was exposed. Andy's prime identity was derived from being an active member of the
637 LGBTQ+ student society, which helped to negate the effects of minority stress. Mark's identity as a
638 mature student and an employee helped to mitigate the effects of homophobic abuse.

639 The strategies employed by the participants to mitigate the effects of stress were more varied than
640 those strategies originally outlined in Meyer's (2003) model. Meyer's model of minority stress
641 emphasises social support as the key approach for mitigating stress. Although the participants did
642 rely on social networks to mitigate stress, they also largely underplayed the significance of their
643 LGBTQ+ identities by embracing other aspects of their identities. This helped to counteract the
644 effects of minority stress.

645 **Resilience**

646 The participants presented themselves as courageous individuals who were prepared to challenge
647 inequality to advance an agenda for social justice. Their courage in addressing discrimination to
648 advance equality and social justice supported them to be resilient (Christopher, Mark, Andy). Their
649 ability to invest in multiple identities enabled them to overcome adverse experiences (Brentley,
650 Elizabeth). In addition, their ability to negotiate their identities by presenting themselves as
651 heterosexual (Brentley, Mark) or by being selectively 'out' only to certain individuals (Christopher)
652 enabled them to minimise their exposure to stressors.

653 In relation to external factors, the participants all developed social networks which enabled them to
654 stay resilient. This demonstrates the relational nature of resilience (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016).
655 Most established friendships in their accommodation rather than on their course, although for others
656 their capacity to do this was restricted due to not living in student accommodation (Andy). Some
657 chose to participate in the 'scene' (Andy, Mark) but others rejected the scene because they did not
658 identify with the scene culture or the other people on the scene (Christopher, Elizabeth, Brentley).

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659 The scene was therefore not a consistent source of support for all participants and for Brentley it was
660 a source of stress. Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016) have highlighted how support networks can
661 become risk factors if they break down. Brentley became increasingly dissatisfied with the scene and
662 it contribute to him developing substance abuse, poor mental health and eventually to him
663 withdrawing from his first university. Although he initially participated in the 'scene' he eventually
664 rejected it because it had a detrimental impact on his transition to university. In line with Pachanis et
665 al. (2020) who present a case for intraminority stress, status-based competitive pressures within the
666 gay community contributed, at least partially, to Brentley developing poor mental health. Some
667 participants participated regularly in online networks by joining Grindr (Brentley, Mark). This is a
668 gay dating app which allows people to connect and meet socially or for sex. For these participants
669 this online platform played a critical role in supporting their resilience because it enabled them to
670 connect with other people who also identified as gay. Elizabeth had formed a strong social network
671 offline and this supported her resilience, particularly when she encountered problems in university
672 accommodation. Mark drew on the support from close friends in his hometown in addition to the
673 friendships he had established in his accommodation and on the scene. None of the participants
674 identified family as a strong source of support. This supports recent research by Gato et al. (2020
675 who found that LGBTQ+ young people tend not to identify their families as a source of social
676 support, despite this being a dominant theme in the general literature on resilience (Roffey, 2017).
677 For some, relationships with family members had become impaired due to the disclosure of their
678 sexuality or gender identities (Christopher, Mark, Elizabeth). In addition, none of the participants
679 established strong relationships with people on their courses. Friendships were mainly established
680 through participation in the scene (Mark), friends of partners (Elizabeth), friendships established
681 through the LGBTQ+ society (Andy) and friendships within accommodation (Brentley). In addition,
682 although literature has identified the importance of student-staff relationships in supporting student
683 resilience in higher education (Evans and Stevenson, 2011) this did not emerge as a protective factor
684 in the data.

685 Course and institutional level protective and risk factors were also evident in the data. Out of all the
686 participants, Elizabeth demonstrated the greatest engagement in her studies. Her love of studying her
687 subject in university supported her resilience. Participants highlighted the fact that their taught
688 modules did not include curriculum content on LGBTQ+ identities and experiences, even though this
689 content could have been easily embedded into the curriculum. This aligns with existing literature
690 (Formby, 2015; Formby, 2017). In addition, none of the participants were given the opportunity to
691 complete an assessment task on LGBTQ+ identities and experiences, again supporting existing
692 literature (Formby, 2015). This could have been easily embedded into Christopher's film making
693 degree or Elizabeth's education degree. This absence of LGBTQ+ curriculum visibility did not help
694 the participants to experience a sense of belonging at course level and it impacted detrimentally on
695 their academic transitions. It contributed to Brentley withdrawing from his first degree course and it
696 was a factor in explaining why Christopher was not fully invested in his course.

697 Institutional factors also served as protective and risk factors in relation to resilience. A negative
698 campus climate was evident in some cases (for example Brentley's experience in the changing
699 rooms). However, the participants largely had positive experiences within the institution which
700 served as protective factors. Some participants had engaged in a peer mentoring programme
701 (Christopher, Mark) which provided them with agency and Elizabeth had been given the opportunity
702 by the student union to participate in community volunteering. These actions served as protective
703 factors because they provided the participants with meaningful opportunities to make a positive
704 contribution to their communities and they provided them with agency.

705 Strategies to protect resilience were evident in the photo-elicitation. These are shown in Figure 3.

706

707 **Limitations**

708 There are several limitations to the study design and data collection process which must be explicitly
709 highlighted. Although the sample size was small and therefore generalisations to other participants and
710 institutions cannot be made, nonetheless the study provides rich data which could not have been
711 captured through a quantitative study. It was never the intention to claim generalisability. Although we
712 acknowledge that scholars working within the positivist paradigm would criticise the small sample and
713 question the reliability of the findings, nevertheless we believe that this study makes an important
714 contribution to qualitative research.

715 The sample was male dominated. A representative sample would have demonstrated a better
716 representation of different genders, sexual orientations and gender identities. Only one participant was
717 included in the sample who identified as both transgender and gender non-conforming and most
718 participants identified as ‘gay’, resulting in a minority of lesbian and bisexual participants. A more
719 carefully selected sample would have included a more equal representation of gender identity and
720 sexual orientation and this would have increased the reliability of the study. In addition, three of the
721 participants were aged between 18-21 and only two participants over the age of 21 were included in
722 the sample. No participants were over the age of 30 and therefore the study does not represent the
723 experiences of older LGBTQ+ students who come to university to study undergraduate programmes.
724 This compromises the reliability of the study. The sample was relatively homogenous in that it did not
725 adequately represent intersectional identities, for example the intersectionality between race, disability
726 and non-normative gender identities and sexualities. All participants were white British. In addition,
727 the study focused exclusively on the experiences of undergraduate students. Postgraduate taught
728 students and postgraduate research students were not included in the sample and therefore the study
729 does not represent the full LGBTQ+ student body. Again, this compromises the generalisability of the
730 findings.

731

732 **Future research**

733 Future research should explore the transitions experiences of students with other minority identities
734 which intersect with identities based on sexual orientation and gender. Transitions research could
735 explore the intersections between social class, race, disability and sexual orientation and/or gender
736 identities. In addition, future research should explore lesbian, bisexual and transgender students’
737 experiences of transitions. Finally, future research should explore the experiences of postgraduate
738 students who identify as LGBTQ+.

739

740 **Conclusion**

741 All participants had positive and negative experiences of higher education. Higher education was a
742 life phase in which the participants could explore and develop their personal and academic identities,
743 come to terms with their sexual orientation or gender identity and contribute to the development of
744 inclusion. Negative experiences were reported but largely the participants’ experiences of transitions
745 were positive.

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746 Each participant experienced multiple and multidimensional transitions which they navigated, often
747 within the same timeframe. These included geographic transitions (moving away from home to a new
748 city), social transitions (meeting and establishing friendships and relationships with new people),
749 academic transitions (coping with the demands of academic study in higher education and adapting to
750 new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment), identity transitions (developing their identities
751 as individuals who identified as LGBTQ+, developing a student identity and transitioning from
752 student identities to professional identities for students studying on professional courses). As they
753 progressed through their studies, they became more confident about their multiple identities and this
754 had a positive impact on their overall sense of self.

755 The participants had both positive and negative experiences of transitions. Although some
756 participants experienced both distal and proximal stressors due to their sexuality or gender identities,
757 each was able to mitigate the effects of these stressors. Overall, all participants had a positive
758 university experience and they navigated the multiple transitions successfully. All participants
759 demonstrated a strong sense of agency and they were proud of their sexual orientation or gender
760 identity. However, two participants actively decided to conceal their personal identities in specific
761 contexts, thus feeling the need to negotiate their identities. Although they recognised that
762 concealment of their identities should not have been necessary, they demonstrated a strong external
763 locus on control, thus protecting their sense of self.

764 The participants demonstrated a strong sense of resilience which helped them to navigate each of the
765 different transitions successfully. The themes of resilience, agency, locus of control and minority
766 stress were common across all participants. There were variations between the participants in how
767 they navigated the different transitions and the sources of support that they drew upon to foster their
768 resilience. However, what emerged strongly in the data were largely positive narratives rather than
769 victimised accounts which are prevalent in the literature.

770 The data suggest that the institution should ensure that a whole-institutional approach to LGBTQ+
771 inclusion is implemented, specifically to address aspects such as curriculum inclusivity and to further
772 embed a positive campus climate. The institution should continue to ensure that students undertaking
773 professional placements are not exposed to prejudice or discrimination by continuing to embed
774 LGBTQ+ equality training into professional development courses for workplace mentors.

775 This study is the first study to have studied LGBTQ+ students' multiple and multi-dimensional
776 transitions in a university context. It is the first study to our knowledge that has applied MMT theory
777 in this context. It has made a unique contribution in highlighting that these students were not victims,
778 they were active agents in their academic and life transitions. Further, the strategies employed by
779 participants to mitigate stressors go beyond those suggested by Meyer (2003) in the context of
780 minority stress.

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Author Contributions Statement

All authors designed the study. JG collected and analysed the data. JG wrote the first draft of this paper. SS wrote the section on minority stress, checked the references and formatted the paper. DJS edited and wrote the second draft of the paper, and both finalised and approved it.

Conflict of interest Statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Contribution to the Field Statement

Existing literature positions Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ+) students in higher education as victims. Most research highlights that these students experience prejudice, harassment, bullying and discrimination. Literature in the United States highlights homophobic bullying, including exposure to physical violence. Although these experiences are less common in higher education in the United Kingdom, research suggests that LGBTQ+ students negotiate their personal identities in order to fit in with heterosexual campus climates.

No studies have explored the transitions experiences of LGBTQ+ students using a longitudinal study design. This study explored the transitions that this group of participants experienced as they entered and moved through three years of undergraduate study. Specifically, it sought to identify the types of transitions that participants experienced, whether these were positive or negative and the factors that influenced the transitions. No research to date has applied Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions (MMT) theory to this group of participants. This conceptualisation of transitions assumes that students in higher education experience multiple transitions at the same time. Additionally, it assumes that these transitions trigger transitions for people and institutions they are connected to.

We demonstrate that LGBTQ+ students' experiences of transitions were largely positive in contrast with existing research which over-emphasises negative experiences. The participants adapted well to a variety of contexts and situations and their transitions triggered positive transitions for university and other educational contexts that they inhabited. They demonstrated resilience, high self-esteem and were able to effect positive change.

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1044 **Table 1: Perspectives on university transitions**

Transition as induction	Transition as identity	Transition as becoming
- Emphasis on induction into higher education and the first-year experience (Krause and Coates, 2008) - Emphasis on the student journey (Furlong, 2009) - Emphasis on linearity and pathway.	- Emphasis on the move from one identity to another (Ecclestone et al., 2010)	- Emphasis on the discontinuous nature of the process of development (Gill et al., 2011). - Reject linearity and the metaphor of a pathway. - Emphasis on individual student trajectories (Pallas, 2003).

1045 **Table 2: Participant details**

Pseudonym	Gender	Sexuality /gender identity	Age	Ethnicity	Number of submitted photographs	Number of submitted audio diaries	Number of words of transcribed interview data
Brentley	Male	Gay	20	White British	5	6	12,370
Christopher	Male	Gay	20	White British	2	3	10,427
Mark	Male	Gay	26	White British	6	7	15,874
Elizabeth	Female	Lesbian	19	White British	3	4	13,129
Andy	Non-binary	Transgender	27	White British	8	3	12,075

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