UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Maximum Nonbinariness

Finnish Nonbinary People's Lives and Experiences from the Margins

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Abstract:
This thesis dives into the lives and experiences of Finnish nonbinary people. With this project, I aim to participate in the expansion of Finnish gender diversity research, and it is also my own contribution to the ethnography of Western nonbinary people. I used participant observation in online groups, interviews with nonbinary individuals, and reflected on my own experiences as a nonbinary person. I also traced the history of sexuality and gender diversity, and the development of queer anthropology from both a Euro-American and a Finnish point of view in order to create a strong historical context for the analysis of current nonbinary identities. I went through the many challenges that transgender people face in Finland, without forgetting the positive effects of being nonbinary on their lives. Using Gershon's theory, I illustrated how porous social orders can be found in the lives of nonbinary people, and how, with the extensive knowledge of queer social orders, the cisheteronormative dominant social order could be adjusted to be more accepting and equal. This thesis had several goals, but the main goal was to create more visibility for nonbinary identities and allow them to tell their own stories in their own words. By amplifying the voice of a marginalized group, I hope to serve that minority to the best of my ability and promote a more equal society where gender diversity is visible and common, but also valued as it deserves.

Kypsyysnäyte/suomenkielinen tiivistelmä:

Tämä opinnäytetyö sukeltaa suomalaisten muunsukupuolisten ihmisten elämään ja kokemuksiin.Tällä projektilla pyrin osallistumaan suomalaisen sukupuolen monimuotoisuuden tutkimuksen laajentamiseen, sillä se on etenkin muunsukupuolisuuden osalta vielä todella vähäistä. Tämä opinnäytetyö on samalla myös oma panokseni länsimaisten muunsukupuolisten ihmisten etnografiaan, joka on tähän asti ollut puutteellista, huolimatta antropologian pitkästä historiasta alkuperäiskansojen ja kaukaisten maiden sukupuolten moninaisuuden tutkimuksessa.

Metodeinani käytin osallistuvaa havainnointia internet-ryhmissä, haastatteluja muunsukupuolisten ihmisten kanssa, sekä pohdiskelin omia kokemuksiani muunsukupuolisena. Jäljitin myös seksuaalisuuden ja sukupuolten monimuotoisuuden historiaa ja queer-antropologian kehitystä sekä euroamerikkalaiselta, että suomalaiselta kannalta luodakseni vahvan historiallisen kontekstin nykyisten muunsukupuolisten identiteettien käsittelylle. Kävin läpi monia haasteita, joita muunsukupuoliset ihmiset kohtaavat Suomessa, unohtamatta kuitenkaan muunsukupuolisuuden positiivisia vaikutuksia heidän elämiinsä. Gershonin teorialla havainnollistin, kuinka huokoisia sosiaalisia järjestyksiä voidaan löytää muunsukupuolisten ihmisten elämistä ja kuinka queer-järjestyksen laajalla tiedolla voitaisi muokata cisheteronormatiivista hallitsevaa yhteiskuntajärjestystä hyväksyävmmäksi ja tasa-arvoisemmaksi.

Tällä opinnäytetyöllä oli useita tavoitteita, mutta päätavoitteena oli luoda enemmän näkyvyyttä muunsukupuolisille identiteeteille ja antaa heidän kertoa omat tarinansa omin sanoin. Vahvistamalla syrjäytyneen ryhmän ääniä toivon voivani palvella kyseistä vähemmistöä parhaani mukaan, ja edistää tasa-arvoisempaa yhteiskuntaa, jossa sukupuolten moninaisuus on näkyvää ja tavallista, mutta arvostettua sen ansaitsemalla tavalla.

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Terminology

The following list is how I have chosen to use this terminology in this thesis; there are other uses and interpretations for many of these terms. I am going for simplicity and legibility above all, while still highlighting the most necessary nuances.

AFAB/AMAB = Assigned female at birth/Assigned male at birth.

AGAB = Assigned gender at birth.

Agender/Genderless = Someone who has no gender experience/does not identify with any gender.

Ally = A straight and/or cisgender person who supports the LGBTQIA+ community and advocates for their rights.

Binary trans person = someone who is a woman/man but was assigned the other binary gender at birth; trans women and trans men.

Binder = A garment designed to flatten the chest.

BIPOC = Black, Indigenous, and people of colour.

Cis(gender) = Someone whose gender identity aligns with the gender assigned at birth.

Drag = A performance art form that involves dressing in clothing and makeup traditionally associated with another gender.

Enby = Short for nonbinary; encouraged term over 'NB', which is traditionally used to mean non-black people of colour in the BIPOC community.

ILGA = International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association.

Intersex = A term used to describe individuals who are born with anatomical, genetic, or other medical differences that do not fit binary male/female classifications.

LGBTQIA+ = Acronym and collective term for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic, and more; used to highlight inclusivity over just 'LGBT'.

Nonbinary (/non-binary) = Umbrella term for people who do not fit into the traditional gender binary, also an individual identity.

Presenting/presentation = The way in which one presents themselves to the external world with clothing, accessories, (body)hair, makeup, and personal style in general. Not directly indicative of one's gender identity.

Trans(gender) = Umbrella term for those whose gender identity differs from the gender assigned at birth.

Queer = Sexual and/or gender minorities; a now commonly used reclaimed slur that can also be used as an unspecified identity. In this thesis often used in place of LGBTQIA+ for convenience and legibility.

1 Introduction

This thesis takes a dive into Finnish nonbinary people's lives and experiences. Throughout history, anthropologists have encountered, described, and analysed many cultures that have a variety of gender categories which do not fit into a binary understanding of gender. There are countless books and papers on the hijra in India (Nanda, 2015), the māhū in Hawaii and Tahiti (Robertson, 1989), Native American two-spirit people (Hill, 1935) etc. These ethnographies have also been widely used to support different theoretical approaches to gender in other disciplines as well as our own. However, western interest in these identities seems to be inseparably tied to our continued fascination with 'the exotic', 'the foreign', and 'other from us'. Western anthropologists have written very little about non-indigenous gender diversity 'at home', and most of it only recently. This seems like a significant gap in the literature, and I would like to participate in rectifying the situation.

Of course, there are countless ways of approaching such a broad topic, especially since the existing ethnography is so lacking. Quite literally any research would be a good addition currently. I think it is important to look into issues that are significant to the people in question, and I really want to hone into real lived experiences and create something meaningful for the community while adding to the ethnography of western nonbinary people. For my fieldwork, I used online forums to conduct participant observation of queer groups (particularly nonbinary communities), conducted interviews with nonbinary people, and reflected on my own experiences as a member of the community.

To create the necessary historical background for this thesis, I trace the history of gender diversity in the Euro-American and Finnish contexts, and the development of queer anthropology so far. As the new Trans Act passed in 2023, and there was a parliamentary election soon after, the implications of these very recent changes are included in this thesis. In my ethnography, I go through the research participants' experiences of coming to terms with their identities and what the common themes were, including dysphoria, presenting, passing, parenthood and healthcare. I uncover some of the problems gender minorities face in Finland, but I also want to highlight the positive aspects of being nonbinary and what an ideal nonbinary world would look like. For further theoretical exploration, I use Butler (1990) and Gershon's

(2019) theories and how they can be applied to nonbinary people's experiences. In the end, I look at which topics related to this thesis are in desperate need of research and what (my own or others') academic research could look like for the future.

This thesis has multiple goals, but first and foremost, I want to create more visibility for nonbinary identities in academia as well as public discourse and relate to the reader what nonbinary experiences can look like in the most intelligible way possible. I hope to be of service to the people I am writing about and amplify the voices of a marginalised group by bringing them to the foreground in the discussion of gender (diversity).

2 Methods

2.1 Queer Spaces Online

I have been a part of different queer groups online for many years now. Some of them are more general and some nonbinary specific, some international and some national/local. Online forums, be that Facebook, Tumblr, or Discord, for example, are where the queer people 'live' these days, and where much of the discourse on current issues is happening. Anthropological work has found that "queer subjectivities that may be impossible elsewhere have found social space and new possibilities through the use of digital platforms and new media outlets"; they can be "created and contextualized in digital forums" (Howe, 2015: 757). We would not be able to reach these subjectivities through traditional methods. Online anthropology can offer insights into the meanings and practices of online social interaction, as well as unique insights into the dynamics of contemporary social life.

While I mostly used to be what is called a 'lurker', someone who only consumes the content but does not contribute to the group/discussion, as this project started, I put the *participant* into my online *participant observation* and began engaging with the groups more. Being in a variety of diverse groups has allowed me to witness phenomena from different angles and within different contexts, which also enabled me to compare and contrast the exchanges in Finnish groups with the much larger international groups.

Additionally, this has provided some crucial intersectional tones to my overarching understanding of nonbinary experiences. However, it is important to keep in mind that the present project is limited because I only had the opportunity to work with white nonbinary people. It cannot be ignored that there are also nonbinary BIPOC (black, Indigenous, and people of colour) individuals in Finland whose gender experience and identity is directly impacted by racialisation in ways that are much too complex to address here.

2.1.1 Crowdsourcing themes

I took to social media in late 2021 to get a feeling of what kinds of issues Finnish nonbinary people wanted to see investigated. I posted a question and poll in a private Finnish Facebook group for 'gender diverse' people (henceforth referred to as *Team Q*), which I had been a member of for some time. The group has roughly a thousand members and includes both binary and nonbinary trans people (as well as some allies). My post got quite a decent amount of interest with 243 votes on the poll and 24 comments further discussing the topics. Based on my past research on nonbinary people's position in Finland, the two most popular answers did not surprise me. The main concrete problems in many nonbinary people's lives were gender related healthcare and legislation. Furthermore, both impact each other deeply and were still bound together by design at the time. The legislation informed what kind of healthcare was provided and to whom, and legal gender corrections (for which we still have only two options: female or male) required medical intervention, among other things. The system was very difficult for any trans person to navigate. Nonbinary people have had even further problems because they did not fit into the binary legislative or necessary diagnostic categories, so they have often been discouraged from or refused gender affirming healthcare.

So, there were two main issues, and the people want answers! Just pick one and move ahead with it, right? Well, no. These two topics are the most researched parts of trans lives (mostly by other disciplines than ours), but the research tends to essentialise being trans into numbers, statistics, medical terms, legal decrees etc. without considering identity and lived experiences, which is exactly the reality I am interested in. Others have, and will continue to, write much better analyses about the specific complexities of those areas, so I am happy to leave it to them. This does not, however, mean that I am skipping over them and purposefully ignoring Team Q's wishes. In fact, and perhaps most importantly, I will discuss *both* to an extent, because they are quite inseparable from any trans experience. As we will see, many of these suggestions will come up throughout this thesis.

2.1.2 Facebook group post content

Since I greatly enjoy shaking up my research methods, I decided to throw some numbers into the mix and see what happens. As you may later come to realise, *I do*

love my numbers. I came up with a way to analyse the content of posts without violating people's privacy for an unrelated but *related* assignment in 2021. I went back six months' worth of posts on Team Q, categorised, counted and organised them by how many had been posted during said period. For the purposes of this project, I thought it may be interesting to do the same again and see if there have been any changes.

Like most trans and queer communities I have encountered, Team Q is primarily very warm-hearted, helpful, and supportive of everyone. Even political disagreements are discussed respectfully and briefly, as that is not the purpose of this group. Interesting discussions have arisen about very complex issues, such as transgender people in the prison system, and the impact of gender identity on working life, but opinions are usually presented and interpreted calmly and thoughtfully. The topics of discussion are very similar to those in larger international groups, although the emphasis is slightly different. In 2021, the group shared trans and queer-related news, articles and videos the most. The purpose of them was either to share information with group members or to spark discussion about a specific problem. In addition, invitations to (remote) events aimed at queer people were actively shared. This phenomenon is certainly explained by the size and locality of the group. In more precisely defined groups, it makes sense to share such content because it is likely to concern a larger portion of group members.

When it comes to discussion topics, I was surprised to see how few "Am I valid?" queries come to this group. In larger queer groups there are often daily posts from people who talk about their journey and thoughts and want to know if they are definitely x, y or z; if their feelings are real. Even though life experiences and identity are discussed in this group, there are surprisingly few such queries. Instead, especially in 2021, there was a lot of discussion about Finnish health care under other posts, in addition to the posts directly about the topic. Members were asking for advice and other people's experiences about different measures as well as regional differences. There was a lot of discussion about the general problems of trans healthcare. The disproportionate decision-making power of individual doctors and the arbitrariness of decisions came up again and again.

There were two years between the analysed periods, which means that there were some changes in the group. As mentioned, Team Q grew in size, which also increased the number of posts from 194 to 265 in a six-month period. The number of shared pictures clearly increased as well as asking for others' advice or opinions on different matters. The number of posts on health and healthcare related issues stayed the same, but I was not surprised to see that after the changes to trans legislation, the number of posts about legal gender and name changes went down. It has gone from a massive undertaking and a grating experience to a non-issue for most binary trans people, which is a significant improvement, despite the issues with the remaining laws.

Clearly the methodology here is not perfect, since I did not use the same exact categories in 2021 and 2023. As time passes, our perspectives change (and our memories fail us) so making categorisations based on the same exact criteria proved to be difficult. The most challenging to categorise were posts related to personal experiences *and* another already existing category. I did want to add the category 'Good News!' to highlight that there are also amazing things happening in trans people's lives. Their lives do not only revolve around *the struggle*, but contain multitudes, just like everyone else's time on this earth. There was also a decrease of negative content through the implementation of a new group rule which bans the sharing of anti-trans content, even if it is to reprimand the party that produced said content. This denies hate-speech the attention and 'shares' it craves, and also protects members from having to see such content in that specific group since they probably see enough of it elsewhere.

Interestingly, while the number of selfies and such went up, there were no more posts discussing looks, fashion, make-up etc. in 2023. Perhaps the group's purpose has shifted in the members' minds, and they post about such things in other groups now. Likewise, there were not many people looking for friends to chat with anymore, which may be explained by the WhatsApp group chat created for the members in 2022. This may have moved a lot of personal interaction and chatting away from the Facebook group itself. That is why, while it may seem like the opposite has happened due to the growth of the group, the members may have become *more* engaged with each other in their day-to-day lives and create friendships through this even more private group.

2.1.3 Asking for opinions

As the Trans Act had passed in the nearing the end of my research and I had been able to discuss it with only some of the research participants, I went to Team Q one last time to ask if any nonbinary people wanted to comment on the amendments from their own perspective. I got six answers, and more group members indicated their agreement with one comment or another by 'liking' them. In total, eighteen people expressed their views on the topic.

2.2 Interviews

I posted a call for interviewees in (the private) Team Q and one public Facebook page. I got 36 responses and some people I already knew personally agreed to participate as well. To those who replied to my message, I sent out a simple form in order to get an idea of what my informant pool looked like, if there were any significant gaps, and to address people correctly when I communicated with or referenced them in the future. I also included some information about myself so the exchange would not be so one-sided, and the research participants would know that I am not just an outsider digging around.

Due to unforeseen circumstances, the interviews were done in two parts. Some were interviewed in early 2022 and others in early 2023. In the end, I conducted interviews with a total of 14 people in person, via Zoom and, by request, through email.

The research participants were between the ages of 24 and 50 at the time of the interviews and lived in seven different cities in Finland. I was given 16 different labels the research participants feel describe their identity (most wrote down multiple labels) so there is decent variety from underneath the umbrella term 'nonbinary' as well.

I came up with some miscellaneous questions to have a baseline to begin with (these were also the initial questions I sent to the research participants who wanted to conduct the interviews strictly through email), but I always prefer to let the conversation go where the research participants want it to go. Semi-structured interviews provide a safety net if you cannot come up with questions on the spot, but also allows the conversation to flow freely. As this is a highly personal topic, people

will have a lot of strong feelings about very specific issues and that is exactly the type of information I was looking for.

2.3 Seminars

In June of 2022, I attended a seminar (organised by Transfeminiinit ry) on amendments to the Trans Act, which were then on their way to being discussed in Parliament, and a panel about the future of trans research (organised by SETA's Gender Diversity committee) in the museum of contemporary art Kiasma, which was the headquarters of Helsinki Pride that year. Attending these events was also an opportunity to do some participant observation, in person at an official Pride event. There were also other Pride events happening simultaneously in and around Kiasma.

The seminar on the Trans Act proved very informative, and a good update on where the process was at the time. Many of the points the presenter Tanja von Knorring discussed had been or were later brought up by the research participants as well.

The panel was comprised of five panellists: Mai Paanala (Employment services, philosophy), Jukka Lehtonen (University of Helsinki; diversity, education), Lotta Kähkönen (University of Turku; art, culture, activism), Minna Laiti (University of Turku; gender studies, healthcare, education), and Matti Pihlajanmaa (Amnesty International; gender studies, international relations). Each panellist had their own distinct perspective on the future of trans research. The discussion included blind spots in current research, methodological difficulties, and the need for multidisciplinary research, to name a few of the main topics. This panel gave me many good ideas and topics to think about, not only for my current project, but for future research as well.

2.4 Autoethnography

As a member of the group I am writing about, I cannot avoid conducting a bit of autoethnography. I have examined my personal experiences and interactions within the community, and my experience as a group member interacting with the general population. I also wrote down what my own answers would have been to interview questions I asked the research participants and compared my own experiences to theirs. Having shared experiences with the research participants allows me to gain deeper insight into what certain elements of the nonbinary experience are like to the

individual. This also allowed me to conduct interviews as more of a discussion about 'the life', rather than as an outsider who may be unaware of many of the nuances of said life. I believe this is why most of my interviews brought me such queer joy. It is not often I get to interact with my peers one-on-one and talk about such meaningful topics in length. I have included myself as the 15th informant into the data pool to complement the numbers I am analysing.

However, it is important for me to be aware of my own biases as an 'insider' to conduct research that is ethical and meaningful. This is no easy task, as I do seem to have strong opinions about everything, let alone in relation to my marginalised peer group. I do not see this as a huge issue, as activist anthropology is already a well-established part of mainstream anthropology. There is an unacceptable amount of discrimination and injustice that nonbinary people face in Finland, not only from the general population, but systemically, so the only way to write about this that makes sense to me is to firmly stand on the marginalised side as not only one of them, but one *for them*. I am here to amplify the voices of the community so I have made a point of including their own words as much as possible and, as explained previously, involving them in the process from its inception.

2.5 Multidisciplinary Research

I have always advocated for and done multidisciplinary research. Adopting a broader research method allows anthropologists to take a holistic approach to understanding human behaviour, incorporating perspectives from various disciplines. This approach helps to create a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the human condition as well as increases the understanding of diverse global concerns. Multidisciplinary research can also help expand the study's reach and it enables us to explore new territories and domains that have remained unexplored so far.

2.6 Methodological Issues & Ethics

2.6.1 Project delay

As one can expect from any anthropological project, things did not exactly go as planned. At the initial stages of this project, (with the master's seminars in autumn 2021 and spring 2022) Finland was still under COVID-19 restrictions, which meant that nearly everything, lectures, meetings, events etc, were still held online. So, I

planned my fieldwork accordingly. I began doing (online) research, and conducting interviews through Zoom, with the hope of conducting some face-to-face interviews and participating in events in the summer of 2022, but no idea of what the future may look like.

Alas, as mentioned before, halfway through my fieldwork, life took over and my research got pushed to the back burner for months. There was a silver lining to this delay, however. This way, a major change in Finnish trans history happened while this project was still going on and could be included into my research. As I picked up where I left off in early 2023, I continued my interviews with more focused questions and able to discuss the 2023 Trans Act with the research participants.

2.6.2 Online research

While extremely useful for this project, there can be some issues with online research. Transparency, anonymity and informed consent are not easy to achieve online. Of course, as Team Q is a private Facebook group, its contents are not for public consumption anyway. I circumvented these issues by not extracting any personal information from individual group members when analysing post content, and making my position and goals clear when I was asking for participants and posted questions. I would have anonymised any personal information anyway, but this is increasingly important in queer research, as there may be consequences for group members from not doing so. It is important to ensure that methods do not infringe on the rights or well-being of participants. There are also issues of authenticity when interacting with people online, but I did not see this as an issue in the research I conducted. As the majority of my research was on Facebook, most people participated in the group as themselves or with a alternative 'queer profile' if they were not out on social media or in real life. In either case, I did not doubt anyone's membership of the community, which is the main thing that matters.

Additionally, it is quite obvious that while I engaged with various groups, the majority of my online research was conducted in one group, Team Q, on one platform. This creates a limited source of information, but as online research was only supplementary to my main fieldwork, there is no major harm in that.

2.6.3 My role as a researcher

This is something I mentioned briefly before, but it is always important to consider the implications of my role as a researcher. While I am a peer to the research participants in certain settings, the relationship between the researcher and the researched is not an equal one, which I have tried to keep in mind. I have tried to include nonbinary people themselves into various stages of the research process to create a project that has been built from the ground up and the community can feel that it accurately represents them.

I believe this project would be significantly different, had it been conducted by someone else. Not only if the researcher was not a member of the community, but even being an AMAB nonbinary person raised with masculine expectations would probably change the research in some way. This is also true for researchers of different ages, races, ethnicities, abilities etc., who would probably all find a different focus for the project.

2.6.4 Informants' safety and handling data after project

As explained above, the safety and wellbeing of the research participants is of utter importance to me. During the project, I made it very clear on multiple occasions that they were free to withdraw from the project at any time and refuse to answer any questions they wanted to. As there are many difficult subjects in nonbinary lives, I approached them with care and did not probe deeper if the informant seemed uncomfortable, even if they did not express it to me verbally. While painful experiences are often significant, it is not worth making someone relive such experiences if they are not ready to do so. Thankfully, most of the research participants opened up about their lives quite willingly and told me about many painful and defining events without any prompting.

An interesting point was made by Jukka Lehtonen during the Trans Research panel (2022). He encourages researchers to anonymise and enter research information into databases, such as Aila Data Service, for other researchers to use. This way each one of us would not have to start from a blank canvas and do everything ourselves in the future. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, Mai Paanala comments in the same panel that in such a small community, in a small country, there is a limited

number of individuals who are willing to participate in research and that we are asking too much of them by starting over every time. Contributing to databases would protect the people we are researching from having to spend the rest of their lives answering the same questions over and over again, only to have their answers, which take a huge amount of emotional labour, disappear into thin air every time. This seems like something to seriously consider, but I will not do so without consulting the research participants first. A simple dataset of participants' ages, used labels, locations etc. should be alright, but for anything beyond that, the decision is not mine. Perhaps some will agree, and this project could contribute to future research on nonbinary individuals in various ways.

2.6.5 Accessibility

I am delighted that the university provides guidelines to make these theses more accessible to all. There is also another form of accessibility in academia that deserves attention. I want to make my work understandable to people outside academia. Many writers have a tendency to be too *sesquipedalian* to be understood by commonfolk. In all seriousness, authors use language they are used to in academia, but which is inaccessible to the general population. I do understand the dilemma. While many of us do not purposefully attempt to create convoluted, jargon-filled, illegible nonsense, we want to sound like we know what we are talking about. Like we are smart enough to belong in academia. I can see this being increasingly true for those of us with working-class backgrounds, which leaves us with an incurable desire to prove ourselves. Ironically, I have already spotted multiple words in this paragraph that are not the simplest option to get the message across. I try so hard to have it both ways that I sometimes write like a 1950s bearded armchair anthropologist, only to use 'spoken language terminology' in the next sentence. It is not conscious, I promise. In conclusion, I try my best.

3 Trans History

Before proceeding to nonbinary lives today, it is important to provide some historical context. After a brief summary of the broader Euro-American history of gender and sexuality, we will look into Finland more specifically and then, the implications on trans history. It is also imperative to take a look at how anthropology/academia has dealt with gender minorities over the decades, so this chapter will finish with a section on queer anthropology.

It is important to keep in mind that there was no separation between sex and gender in many past gender ideologies, so in this chapter, these terms have mixed meanings. The rule of thumb is that 'sex' and 'gender' mean the same thing unless *both* are mentioned in that context. Then the division is usually between 'biological sex' and gender identity.

3.1 Euro-American History of Sexuality & Gender

The understanding of gender diversity in Euro-American cultures has had a long and complex history, marked by varying degrees of tolerance and intolerance towards non-normative gender identities and expressions. Generally, gender diversity was understood as a matter of 'cross-gender' (and sexual) *behaviour*, rather than a question of 'identity' per se. For example, homosexual attraction was seen as a 'side-effect' of this cross-gender behaviour and not as a separate 'sexuality' (Löfström, 1997). Most of the concepts and terminology used today did not exist, which has deep implications on how comparable historical and modern ideas of gender and sexuality are. We must be mindful when drawing parallels between past and present queerness.

The strict division of people into two 'biological sexes' was predated by various alternative gender ideologies with their own sociocultural implications. For example, the 'one-sex model', consisting of "a male/masculine body and mind inscribed on the incomplete and subordinate female body" (Laqueur, 1990 in Nanda, 2014: 105), prevailed for hundreds of years overlapping with other ideologies. On the other hand, 16th-17th century northern European cultures recognised three biological/anatomical sexes: male, female, and hermaphrodite, while acknowledging two genders: man and woman. Later the term 'hermaphrodite' became more of a moral judgement

associated with infractions of gender and sexual norms (Trumbach, 1996 in Nanda, 2014:105-107), rather than what we recognise as intersex bodies today.

Beyond changes in gender ideologies, the attitudes towards gender diversity have taken many turns throughout history. By the 12th-13th centuries, the Christian church began to view gender variance as a sin and acts such as cross-dressing were frequently punished. Moving into the 16th and 17th centuries, society began to view gender variance as a form of mental illness. And individuals with non-normative gender identities were institutionalized and subjected to 'treatments' that aimed to 'cure' them of their deviant behaviour. In the 18th century, the emergence of a new discourse of sexuality began to take shape, with sexual behaviour becoming increasingly tied to the development of morality and the concept of individual identity. The 18th century saw a growing interest in the scientific study of gender and sexuality, leading to the development of early theories on transgender identities and homosexuality. The term 'homosexuality' however, was coined around 1870 (Herdt, 1994).

The 19th century was marked by significant cultural shifts regarding the matter. While same-sex relationships were still criminalized, medical professionals began to recognize 'transgenderism' and gender dysphoria as legitimate medical conditions. In addition, the emergence of advocacy for women's rights and sexual autonomy paved the way for more inclusive discussions surrounding gender and sexuality. Finally, the 20th century saw numerous strides towards greater tolerance and understanding of gender diversity, including the LGBTQIA+ civil rights movement, the decriminalization of homosexuality in many countries. In the latter half of the 20th century, advances in medical technology (the development of gender-affirming medical interventions such as hormone replacement therapy and gender reassignment surgery) and increased visibility of transgender people expanded understanding and acceptance (Suhonen, 2007).

3.2 Gender in Historical Finland

The history of gender in Finland before the 19th century is complex and diverse, shaped by a variety of social, cultural, and religious factors. The change in social gender norms was slow, starting with upper classes in the early 19th century and reaching the rural population by the 1950s (Löfström, 1997). A significant step in the

process was the Given Names Act of 1945, which prohibited cross-gender given names and attempted to mandate a strict division of names into male and female, causing a drop in gender-neutral names (Leino, 2016).

The stark polarization of sexuality into masculine and feminine started in the mid-19th century and spread to the rural population by the early 20th century. Men were expected to be strong, independent providers and women were to be nurturing caretakers and homemakers (Mustola, 2007). Before that, the male/female divide was largely centred on one's role in procreation and rural work. The division of labour was relatively flexible, but asymmetrical, with women doing men's work far more often than men doing women's work (though it was not unheard of) (Löfström, 1997).

With the rise of industrialization and the feminist movement in the early 20th century, women began to enter the workforce in larger numbers and demand equality. In the 1960s, the sexual revolution and the emergence of new social movements such as the gay rights movement in Finland began to challenge traditional gender roles and norms. There were heated debates surrounding homosexuality and the criminalization of same-sex activity in the mid-20th century. Attitudes began to shift towards greater acceptance and inclusion of sexual and gender minorities through activists' efforts. Homosexual acts were finally decriminalised in 1971, a full 27 years after Sweden, and depathologised in 1981 (Mustola, 2007). Despite these challenges, there have also been many examples of resistance and resilience among queer individuals and communities in Finland; even before the 20th century. For example, some same-sex relationships were accepted or even celebrated in certain regions and social contexts, and queer individuals found ways to support and empower each other through informal networks and alliances (Suhonen, 2007).

3.3 Finnish Trans History

Modern trans visibility and terminology emerged relatively recently in Finland, after the old agrarian views of gender variance had already been rooted out by urbanization and social ties with the rest of Europe. Transgender people have been referred to by a variety of different terms, including transvestites, cross-dressers, and transsexuals, and have long been stigmatized in Finland.

Transgressing gender roles was less socially frowned upon in the past, but the transformation from old agrarian views to new urban ones was completed by the 1950s, and 'transsexuality' began to slowly appear. There were several trans pioneers who fought for recognition and acceptance, such as self-taught surgeon Magnus Hirschfeld, who performed gender-confirming surgeries in the early 20th century (Suhonen, 2007).

The first Finnish person applied for permission to medically transition in 1959 (Christine Jorgensen had been widely covered by Finnish media in 1953) (Pimenoff, 2008: 19 in Leino, 2016). By the end of the 1960s, three trans women and one man had applied for genital surgery, the first documented surgery taking place in 1969. However, this surgery was very controversial at the time, and it was only available to a select few trans individuals who were highly motivated and financially able to pay for the procedure (Suhonen, 2007), and so the number of surgeries remained low until the 1990s (Leino, 2016). The first official gender clinic in Finland was established in the 1970s.

Leino (2016) explains how during the 1990s, the previously separately organised cross-dresser and 'transexual' (defined then as those requiring medical transition) groups evolved into recognizing various trans identities along a continuum, with one group at either end of the (intervention focused) spectrum. Established in 1994, the Transgender Support Centre (*Transtukipiste*), which adopted an inclusive approach from the outset, marked the first of two key events to bring about this change. The second shift occurred a year later, when Trasek ry (national transsexual organization) altered its bylaws to permit cross-dressers as members. These changes paved the way for nonbinary identities to be recognised. In the 21st century, nonbinary identities have gained much more visibility and understanding, even though they remain invisible or problematic on multiple societal levels, especially legislation and healthcare. The legal recognition of (binary) transgender individuals began with the (problematic) 2002 Gender Identity Act (Suhonen, 2007) which was significantly improved by the (still lacklustre) 2022 Trans Act.

3.3.1 'Genderfuck 1900' (Helsinki Art Museum 1.11.2019-25.10.2020)

In late 2019, Helsinki Art Museum (HAM) opened the exhibition 'Genderfuck 1900' (perhaps less provocatively 'Sukupuolen Sotkijat' in Finnish) which showcased

roughly 300 postcards, studio photos and snapshots from Europe and the US that dated back more than a hundred years, depicting alternative gender representations. The exhibition was based on a non-fiction book written by art historian and artist Harri Kalha, who also acted as the curator. Kalha wrote a preliminary article on the book project in 2015 (SQS), in which he describes his journey of discovering this specific genre of images and some thoughts on what they might mean for 'queer history'. He says he chose images in which the rigid ideals of femininity and masculinity are reproduced differently: cross-dressing, role play, masculine women and feminine men, female couples, and ambiguous children are the most common motifs for these kinds of postcards, which were the newest media at the time. Most of the postcards were produced in Europe (specifically Germany and France), but distributed globally, which, according to Kalha, means that Finland was by no means immune to the phenomenon.

The imagery, while attention grabbing, would not have been shocking to Finnish people at the time. Even among the general population of Finland, cross-dressing was deemed perfectly acceptable in the performing arts and during carnivals, and costume and bachelor(ette) parties, for example. Behaviour that was otherwise punishable by law was briefly compelling and fun during those special occasions (Mustola, 2007; 69). Therefore, nobody was unfamiliar with the sight of cross-dressing; the problems arose when the clothes implied something more meaningful.

Mixed in with the postcards are private photographs with similar themes which may have been taken for many different reasons and kept private or shared with others at the time. Kalha ponders the reason behind all these images and phenomenon. At the surface level, it is easy to rejoice in the fact that even in times of strict gender roles, people have been breaking the rules and creating their own narratives. Hurrah for making queer history visible! However, as Kalha emphasises in his article (2015) and later materials related to the exhibition (Kalha, 2019b; Parkkinen, 2019), applying current terminology and concepts to historical content may lead to false interpretations about the cultural climate at the time and motivations behind these images. There was no awareness of identity as a concept, let alone queer identity (Lehmusvesi, 2019). Additionally, while there are plenty of these nonnormative images around, Kalha reminds us that for each one, there is a thousand or ten thousand normative ones.

What are we to make of this, then? Kalha's thesis is that these images materialised strategies that had no names yet; that the pictures predate language, and political and theoretical concepts. Cultural expression with the potential for revolution, either subconscious or not. He calls the phenomenon '*protoqueer* picture culture' and 'the forgotten *prehistory* of modern gay and lesbian culture' (2015). It is impossible to ever know the exact meaning of these images, but it might be safe to say that the popularity of these kinds of postcards, for example, meant the main population found them fun to send and perhaps a refreshing airing of the dominating roles. Simultaneously, those who we would consider sexual and gender minorities today, will have found not only representation in them, but a new way of (covert) communication. This would be one of the 'informal networks and alliances'

queer individuals could use to support and empower each other that were discussed above. So, the phenomenon is no doubt meaningful queer 'prehistory', but also very much tied to the main population and their motivations in complex ways.

Four years after the aforementioned article, there was a book, and then the exhibition. In his 'message from curator' (2019b), Kalha reminds the viewer that "the ethos of the exhibition is not to politely promote 'tolerance'" but the imagery should serve as a "constant source of bafflement and entertainment while also providing an alternative introduction to gender" for people of all ages. Nevertheless, he reminds 'literate adults' to "humbly honour that which was once called the margin of society" because he sees it as a "cradle of creativity and counterpower" that the main population has historically tried to sweep under the rug.

3.3.2 Finnish Nonbinary people who have been influential in their fields

Aleksi Bardy: Bardy is a nonbinary film producer and screenwriter from Finland. They have worked on several award-winning films and series, including "Tom of Finland," "Big Father, Small Father and Other Stories," and "Bordertown."

Jenni Gastgivar: Gastgivar is a nonbinary artist who works with photography, video, and performance. They have exhibited their work in galleries and museums in Finland and around the world.

Redi Koobakka: Koobakka is a nonbinary writer, poet, and translator. They have published several books of poetry and translated the works of authors like Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein into Finnish.

Viima Lampinen: Lampinen is a nonbinary transgender activist and journalist. They write about LGBTQIA+ issues and have been a prominent voice in the Finnish trans community.

Alex Mattson: Mattson is a nonbinary DJ and producer based in Finland. They have gained international recognition for their music, which blends classical and electronic elements.

3.4 History of Queer Anthropology and Trans Studies

As we saw in the above overview, due to the complex development of the concepts, it seems to be impossible to "definitively fuse or separate sexuality and gender" (Boellstorff, 2007: 26), which seems to be a predicament in not only in Euro-American but worldwide cultural contexts. One can rarely be discussed without the other without failing to recognise the impact both have on each other. Anthropology, according to Boellstorff, is precisely the discipline to unask, rather than solve the question, "by showing their coconstitution in historically and culturally specific life worlds" (2007: 26). Nonetheless, theorizing and ethnographically investigating the relationship between the two continues to challenge anthropological inquiry.

According to Walks (2014) queer anthropology has gone through three major phases since the 1960s: the late 1960s through the 1990s, the late 1980s through the early 2000s, and late 1990s until the present.

In the initial stages of anthropological inquiry into homosexuality, the attention was on the roots of this sexual orientation, along with the exploration of same-sex relations predominantly among men and practices around the third gender/transexuals in male cultures. Some of the examples of such cultures were the Hijras of South Asia, the Kathoeys of Thailand, and the Sambia of Eastern Papua New Guinea. This form of research was a kind of "salvage anthropology," similar to other pre-postmodern studies, which aimed to explore and understand the exotic "Other." However, with time, this approach began changing to include more ethnographic studies of the West and the "at-home" populations.

Queer anthropology as its own genre emerged out of feminist anthropology, and gay and lesbian studies in the 1980-90s. A major influence on gender related academia became Foucault's (originally) 3-volume study *The History of Sexuality* (1976-84, in English from 1978), which argues that sexuality has been invented as a category of power in modern Western societies. He contends that pre-modern societies had a different understanding of sexuality, one that was not based on identity but rather on the practices and objects of sexual activity. One of the key figures in the development of queer anthropology was Esther Newton, whose book *Mother Camp* (1979) explores drag queen subculture in the United States and its role in creating new forms of gender identity and performance. Later, Rubin's important essay *Thinking Sex* (1984) discusses the concept of "sexuality" as a social construct and the ways in which it is regulated by cultural norms and institutions, and drew attention to the marginalization of non-normative sexual practices from mainstream society.

The second phase was marked by a significant shift. As postmodernism and feminist thoughts gained momentum and HIV/AIDS became widespread, the research started to centre around marginalized queer populations. Anthropologists focused on exploring HIV/AIDS-related issues relating to the most at-risk queer and trans individuals across the globe (Didier Fassin's work, for example). There was also an increase in research around lesbian and gay communities, alternative sexual practices, gender-bending, 'homosociality', and trans identities (Green, 1997 to get you started). This phase also witnessed more studies of the western, local, and traditional practices and contexts, reducing the exoticization. The growth of queer theory in general in the 1990s had a significant impact on the development of queer anthropology. Another essential text was Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), to which we will return to later. It challenged traditional views that gender is a biologically determined characteristic and argued that it is a social construction performed through repetitive acts. This idea was then applied to ethnographic research, leading to the questioning of essentialized notions of male and female identities across cultures.

The most recent phase of LGBT/queer anthropology has been characterized by a continued move away from exoticization of sexual orientation and gender identity, along with the widening of research areas. There is now sharper focus on studying the wide range of transgender identities and experiences, as well as research surrounding

LGBTQ activism, phobias, and family units. Queer anthropology has also been influenced by postcolonial, transnational, and intersectional approaches, with anthropologists being at the forefront of questioning the universality of concepts and analytical tool used in wider academia (Boellstorff, 2007). In particular, the work of Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz has highlighted the importance of examining the globalization of queer identities and practices and their intersection with race, class, and other axes of power.

3.5 Trans Studies in Finland

According to Alasuutari et al., the history of trans studies in Finland can be traced back to the early 1990s. Trasek ry was the first Finnish transgender organization and it aimed to support and advocate for the rights of transgender individuals, as well as to provide a platform for community building among trans people. At the time, trans issues were not widely recognized in society, and the establishment of Trasek was a significant milestone for the visibility and activism of the transgender community in Finland. In the following years, the field of trans studies began to grow. In 2005, the University of Helsinki established a research project on transgender issues, which aimed to provide a better understanding of the experiences and needs of transgender people in Finland. The project resulted in several publications, which helped to raise awareness of trans issues among academics and the wider public.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in trans studies and intersexuality research. In 2016, the University of Tampere established the first interdisciplinary research centre for gender studies in Finland, which includes a focus on trans and queer studies. The centre aims to promote research and teaching on issues related to gender and sexuality, including trans and intersex issues. Despite this relatively slow) progress, there are still challenges facing the field of trans studies. As noted by Alasuutari et al., there is a lack of data on the experiences of Finnish transgender people, particularly in relation to healthcare and legal issues. There is a need for more research to be conducted in these areas, as well as for more resources to be made available to support and advocate for the rights of transgender individuals.

Overall, the history of Finnish trans studies reflects a growing recognition of the importance of transgender issues in society, as well as a commitment to understanding and addressing the needs of the transgender community. While there

is still much work to be done, Finnish academics and activists are making progress in advancing the field of trans studies and promoting greater equality and visibility for transgender individuals.

3.6 Human Rights Situation in Finland

Rainbow-Europe.org hosts ILGA's Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People. Each of the 49 European countries is given a percentage to indicate the distance to total respect of human rights and full equality. Countries are ranked based on laws and policies that have a direct impact on queer people's human rights in 7 different categories: equality and non-discrimination; family; hate crime and hate speech; legal gender recognition; bodily integrity; civil society space; and asylum. These categories not only provide insights into developments in each country, but a feeling of what everyday life for queer people is like beyond laws and policies.

In the Annual Review, ILGA examined the advances made in Finland and provided concrete examples of on-the-ground situations from January to December of 2022. This, of course, means that the passing of the 2023 Trans Act, which is likely to raise Finland's score, is not considered in the review available at the moment. However, the passed changes only cover a few of the issues flagged by ILGA.

Next, a brief look at the situation in Finland pre-TA23. Finland ranks 12th in Europe, fulfilling 60% of all the criteria. Comparisons under specific categories reveal much to be desired. Under 'legal gender recognition' Finland is 26th, checking only a third of the boxes. The 'asylum' category is also only a third of the way done, placing Finland at no. 14 (shared with 15 other countries). The most worrying is the big empty zero indicating "gross violations of human rights" next to 'intersex bodily autonomy'. To be fair, this category was just introduced to the ranking, but Portugal, Malta, Iceland and Germany have reached 50%, and Spain is also getting started. However, intersex babies have always been born and it should not have taken this long to decide that arbitrary selective baby genital mutilation may be bad, even when the mutilator is wearing a white coat. I will return to this briefly later.

There was also indication that hate speech and crimes directed at the queer community were on the rise in Finland, and concern for the large number of trans

people experiencing difficulties accessing the healthcare they need. The full two-page review (2022a) addresses other issues as well, but three suggestions were made based on the annual evaluation:

> In order to improve the legal and policy situation of LGBTI people in Finland, ILGA-Europe recommend:
>
> 1) Reforming the legal framework for legal gender recognition to be fair, transparent, based on a process of self-determination and free from abusive requirements (such as sterilisation, GID/medical diagnosis, medical intervention or age restriction).
>
> 2) Prohibiting medical interventions on intersex minors when the intervention has no medical necessity and can be avoided or postponed until the person can provide informed consent.
>
> 3) Recognising trans parenthood, recognition of parents' legal gender and alignment with available gender options.
>
> (Rainbow Europe, 2022b)

As you can see, due to the age restriction on the new Trans Act, Finland is still failing to complete the first recommendation to its full extent. The other two points have not been addressed thus far. There are two criteria that address nonbinary rights directly, the first of which is connected to the third recommendation above. Under the 'family' category (Rainbow Europe, 2022b), recognition of trans parenthood is divided in to two points as follows:

> 1) Parent's legal gender identity is recognized in the documentation of kinship (e.g. birth certificate of child respects name, gender marker, gendered denomination "mother"/ "father" (where applicable) according to the parent's recognised gender identity)
>
> 2) Regulations regarding recognition of parenthood is aligned with available gender options where more than 2 gender markers are available, e.g. "mother" and "father" are not the only available options; all parents are recorded as "parent" etc.

In other words, for the criteria to be completely fulfilled, a third/other gender would have to be not only legally recognised but used coherently in other relevant legislation. Nonbinary recognition is also listed as a standard under 'legal gender recognition' (Rainbow Europe, 2022b). Full gender recognition is awarded to a country if:

1) More than two gender marker options ("X", "NB", "other", or other option(s)) are available in the public registry (e.g. Register of Births, etc.); AND

2) They are available only on request; not applied to anyone without their personal consent; AND

3) There is a procedure which provides consistent results; AND

4) They are available to anyone who seeks it without discrimination; OR

5) There is no mandatory recording of gender marker in the public registry (ability to opt out from recording of gender marker available to all, not only trans/intersex people).

This data makes it clear that Finland still has a long way to go before even reaching the highest European standards of LGBTQIA+ equality (which we tend to want to do in other rankings). It is bewildering to think that there are flagrant human rights violations going on in this country which prides itself in being an example for others to follow. These violations do not fit into the national self-image, so they get either consciously or unconsciously ignored. Finnish decision making also has a tendency to focus on the majority and push minorities even further into the margins, as also discussed in the Trans Research panel (2022). Such a political culture has significantly contributed to the government failing to provide protection to those who need it the most (the Saami, for example, are protesting right now).

4 Recent Developments

4.1 Trans Act 2023

When this project began, Finland was still living under legislation passed twenty years ago. Legislation which, after all the struggles people went through to make pass, was already outdated from the day it was implemented. But progress is always progress, there is no denying that. However, enduring forced sterilisation, pathologisation and years of 'proving themselves' to obtain the same rights that are automatically granted to the majority of the population, to be recognised as who you are, left the community little time to celebrate this win. Those who had worked tirelessly for years, would continue to sacrifice all their time to reach that mighty goal - equality.

Unlike planned, this project was still going when in early 2023 when, after all the struggles people went through to bring about change, began another era of existence under new legislation that was outdated the moment it passed. I was positively surprised and again, there was reason to be thankful. Some of us would not have to go through the same human rights violations our siblings had to endure. Some would not need to subject their minds and bodies to (possibly permanent) hurt to correct someone else's mistake on their legal documents. And yet, here we are, finally on the other side of this hurdle, but with so much work still ahead of us it is difficult to envision an ending. Work that we should not have to do, decade after decade, but are forced to, because nobody else will do it for us. And so, we persist.

One comment on my post on Facebook related how difficult the whole process was to watch as a trans/nonbinary person:

> "[it] was exhausting, made me anxious and revealed a much deeper hatred of trans people in our culture than I could have ever imagined. The way the topic was discussed in the parliament, the media, and social media made my minority stress and anxiety much worse."

Among other problems, all these changes were placed behind an age barrier. You must be 18 to correct your legal gender, something which was opposed by The Finnish Institute For Health and Welfare (THL), The Family Federation of Finland

(*Väestöliitto*), the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman (*yhdenvertaisuusvaltuutettu*), the Parliamentary Ombudsman (*eduskunnan oikeusasiamies*), The Finnish League for Human Rights (*Ihmisoikeusliitto*), The Finnish Central Union for Child Welfare (*Lastensuojelun keskusliitto*) and the Finnish Ombudsman for Children (*lapsiasiavaltuutettu*) (Kangas, 2023), to name but *a few* significant parties. Additionally, excluding children from legal gender recognition violates the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN Human Rights, 1989), something which Finland has been reprimanded for multiple times. All this, however, much like decades of complaints about other human rights violations from various international bodies (to which we will return later), has fallen on deaf ears once again.

Commenters and the research participants felt that conflicted about the act passing. All agreed that it was a good thing, overall, but its shortcomings were obvious to all. One commenter said it was “low trampling of children’s rights” and “shameful to the legislators”.

The passed amendments were also stripped of any nonbinary-specific changes. Some of the research participants remarked on how the main criticism of the act has revolved around children’s rights and the majority of the discourse ignores the exclusion of nonbinary people. As these few changes faced so much resistance, many also fear that the passed act will be used as an excuse to put ‘the trans issue’ to bed indefinitely. As a “you already got your laws” (as one of the commenters put it) type of justification to not pass any new legislation revolving trans rights until, say, 2042.

Tanja von Knorring, executive director of Transfeminiinit ry, laments that nonbinary people will probably have to wait at least until the Finnish personal identity code system redesign is completed to see any changes directly related to them (2022). This was supposed to happen by 2027, but as the project was delayed and left for the new 2023 parliament to finish, there is no knowing how late it will be in the end. As an official third legal gender marker is unlikely to materialise any time soon, the proposed gender-neutral identity codes would be a welcome step in the right direction, as they would not only provide some sense of validation to many nonbinary people, but they would also prevent misgendering and gender-based discrimination in many formal situations.

One of the commenters made a good point by arguing that having a third legal gender marker might have a positive influence on the general population's understanding and acceptance of gender diversity. Many Finnish people maintain the law as a moral compass to some extent, and historically, we have seen how legal changes have coincided with developments in the social position of homosexuals, for example. In any case, there are many who remain optimistic. Some commenters hoped that these changes will serve as encouragement to pass more laws and a base for broader trans rights to flourish from.

Food for thought: Third gender markers obtained abroad are said to be systematically changed to 'female' for legal purposes in Finland (von Knorring, 2022). I could not, however, find any government guidelines regarding these kinds of situations.

4.2 2023 Parliamentary Election

Due to the rise in hate speech against the queer community before, during and after the passing of the new Trans Act, 5543 concerned citizens signed SETA's Appeal to Political Parties (2023a) for parties and their candidates to refrain from language and claims that dehumanise members of the queer community during the 2023 Parliamentary election. The plea was sent to all party leaders to be distributed within their ranks. Gender diversity did end up being discussed leading up to the 2023 Finnish Parliamentary elections and many of the voting aid applications (VAA; Fin. *vaalikone*) released had at least one question relating to the topic. It is, however, difficult to say if the appeal had an impact on the language used in the discussions.

4.2.1 Pre-election political party values

The VAA created by Finland's national public broadcasting company YLE (2023b) was the most specific when it comes to nonbinary people, directly asking if a third gender category should be legally recognised in Finland. Without reasonable access to all individual candidates' answers in one place, we will settle for the 'official' answers YLE collected and listed from each party (2023a). Who exactly wrote the answers is unclear.

Of the twenty parties (out of 24) reached nationally, ten were for a third legal gender and ten were against it. However, this does not indicate that Finland is split exactly down the middle on the matter, as all parties are not equal in size or popularity.

Additionally, there are many significant differences between electoral districts. Nine of the twenty parties were elected to be in parliament, of which five were for the change and four against. This shifts the majority of the parties in favour of having a third gender option. These five parties won 124 seats among them, which means they are the majority of the 200-member parliament. However, it also matters which parties are invited and agree to join the Cabinet, which greatly affects how the entire term unfolds and which discussions will even be on the table. Negotiations began in May 2023 between the National Coalition Party, the (True) Finns Party, the Swedish People's Party of Finland, and the Christian Democrats in Finland, so the situation seems grim for the promotion of equality. Of the parties, only the Swedish People's Party of Finland has liberal social values, and it only has 9 seats in the parliament. The party is carrying a major responsibility on their shoulders to prevent the government from regressing when it comes to equality, but there is only so much they can do.

It may also be fruitful to inspect the additional written comments each political party left. The (narrow) winner of this election, the National Coalition, answered 'yes' but commented that the party had "no official stance on the matter", which means that it is left up to the judgement of each individual candidate. As stated above, it is not mentioned who responded to these questions, so it is impossible to know what the answers were based on, especially if there was no agreed upon policy within the party. Therefore, this answer may have been personal to whomever within the party wrote the answers and not at all representative of the rest of the party.

In general, the parties who answered 'yes' to the question referred to human rights and equality, but intersex people and scientific evidence were also mentioned in their comments. Most of the parties who said 'no' believed that there are only two biological genders and there was even a pseudolinguistic argument in the mix. Of course, it was nonsense, presumably based on some imaginary etymology of the Finnish word 'sukupuoli' (Eng. *Gender*; the latter part of which means 'half', but also 'side', for example) which supposedly legitimises the binary divide. With the same logic one could argue, for example, that the word means someone is missing half a gender or even half a family if we include the word 'suku' (currently used for (extended) family) into the 'analysis', as there have been similar terms for amputees in the language. The options are numerous.

The (True) Finns party went arguably the furthest by reciting common transphobic talking points disguised as 'radical feminism' in current gender discourse, which are aimed at trans women in particular. As they are largely a conservative nationalist party, this answer was arguably unexpected, but with a new female party leader, the party may be adjusting their image to attract more women with falsely empowering takes on women's issues.

Gathering the data on how all individual candidates who got elected had answered the question would be extremely time consuming, but since many (if not most) politicians fail to live up to their campaign promises anyway, it may be a waste of time to dwell on that. As witnessed in the debate leading up to the recent law change, most arguments against queer-related policies are based on personal beliefs, opinions, prejudice, and ignorance, while the other side desperately tries to defend equality and human rights with scientific research, foreign examples and other arguably more solid evidence.

4.2.2 Public opinion

For comparison, the public was asked a similar (new) question in the 2019 Eurobarometer on Discrimination (The social acceptance of LGBTI people in the EU) compiled by the European commission:

> Do you believe that in public documents, like passports and birth certificates, beside Female (F) and Male (M) a third option like X or O (other) should be available for those persons who do not identify as female or male?

55% of Finnish people answered 'yes' and 37% answered 'no', with 8% saying 'I don't know'. This earned them sixth highest place on positive answers in the EU, right before the UK. It has been nearly four years since the opinions were gathered and a lot has happened between then and now, so there may be a slight change to the statistics, but it would seem that the majority of Finnish people (I hesitate to use 'Finns' now) would agree with such a change. Interestingly, the attitudes towards correcting gender markers within the existing binary system ranked them lower (11th), but the approval rate was still a higher percentage (68%), as could be expected.

4.2.3 Other voting aid applications

Other major VAAs that had a queer related question were offered by Helsingin Sanomat (2023), Iltalehti (2023), MTV Uutiset (2023) and Allianssi (Youth VAA, 2023). There were some more circulated by different papers in different areas, but those were usually based on the same program as one of the VAAs mentioned (so they included the same set of questions). The candidates were presented with the following statements (translated) and had to choose between strongly agree and strongly disagree:

> Helsingin Sanomat: Gender diversity should be accommodated for more than it is now.
>
> Iltalehti: There are more than two genders.
>
> MTV: The rights of sexual minorities are discussed too much.
>
> Allianssi: Finland needs to have a trans act that allows under 18-year-olds to legally correct their gender.

These questions were usually placed under the 'values' section, which means that they do not necessarily deal with policy directly but are meant to illustrate a candidate's principles upon which decisions would be made in the future. This was also the case for YLE, even though the question directly referenced a real policy change. The VAA by Allianssi was shorter and not sectioned. These questions vary in focus, but two out of five were specifically about nonbinary genders: Iltalehti and YLE's. This clearly means that the issue is rising to the public consciousness more than ever before. Of course, had the Trans Act not just passed, the situation may have been very different and focused more on the questions relating to those issues.

4.2.4 Nonbinary candidates

Another thing I was interested in was the number of nonbinary candidates running for parliament. As neither the Information and Result Service of the Ministry of Justice, nor Statistics Finland, who generally provide official statistical information about elections, included any information about candidates under the 'other' gender category, it takes some detective work to figure out how many 2023 election

candidates do not adhere to the gender binary. Three out of the five main VAAs offered more than two gender options for candidates to choose (HS & IL did not). The YLE VAA had the most answers from candidates (2116/2424), so all the following data was manually searched from there. Out of the thirteen electoral districts, only four had no out nonbinary candidates i.e., nobody chose the 'other' option. There was also a 'would rather not say' option, but overall, no candidates opted for that one.

Unsurprisingly, the Helsinki district had the most nonbinary candidates; five (of 260) which, at 1,92%, is also the highest percentage in a given district. Vaasa, Oulu and Lappi also passed the 1% marker. The largest electoral district, Uusimaa, did have multiple nonbinary candidates, but it only reached 0,73% due to the total number of candidates. Out of all the candidates who answered YLE's VAA 17 checked the 'other' box (in reality, it was 18, but it was obvious one was either by accident or done mockingly since the candidate's answer to the third legal gender question was 'completely disagree' with the comment "Pretty harmless nonsense"), which makes the total percentage of nonbinary candidates 0,80%. Most candidates were from the Green, Leftist or Feminist Party. Unfortunately, none of them were elected this year (except our "harmless nonsense" hero, with 6586 votes).

This does not mean nonbinary people are left without allies in the Parliament. The national LGBTQIA+ organisation SETA created a list (2023b) of candidates who were committed to its cause and main political objectives. To get on this list, candidates filled out and signed a form online where they vow to actively promote queer rights and equality, work on combatting hate speech and discrimination, and ensure that queer people's own voices are heard in decision making. A total of 432 candidates vowed to be committed allies, most of whom were from liberal leftist parties, but 21 candidates from the right-wing National Coalition and 14 from the Centre Party did get involved. No (True) Finns or Christian Democrats signed up. Out of the 432, 33 were elected in the end which means that 16,5% of the elected Members of Parliament for the coming term are officially queer allies.

I have brought this element up for two reasons. The first and simpler reason is that it would be good to see more gender diversity in politics. The missing representation is clearly not for the lack of people trying to get in. But the second reason is that, in a way, this illustrates a problem also discussed in the trans research panel (2022).

When nonbinary people are categorically left out and shoved to one of the binary boxes, it is not only an act against those specific individuals, but the group they represent is collectively being made invisible in the data gathered. This is why we do not exist, officially. Why there are no statistics, so nonbinary people are assumed to not be a part of the demographic. All this information exists and is not too difficult to gather either, it is simply not done. This is true for many other groups as well, not just nonbinary or trans people. And so, each individual researcher has to spend their time collecting their own data and/or hand searching a massive amount of data to find what they need, when they could use that time more productively.

5 Ethnography

5.1 Terminology Beyond the Binary

Something that seems to come up in discussions over and over again is the number of identities and labels that exist within the queer community; especially when it comes to gender. Beyond our sheer existence, this is one of the most ridiculed things about gender minorities in general discourse and social media. For example, what began as a 2014 internet meme in English, has made its way into the mouths of cis people in Finland as well. Who knows how *attack helicopters* got dragged into it, through no fault of their own I am sure, but suddenly there seems to be a shared undying urge for cis men to identify with (and accept others as) said flying machines. This phenomenon should absolutely be looked at, first and foremost by psychologists, but it has nothing to do with nonbinary people's gender experiences and how the process works.

"'I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter' is a [type of meme] about a male who dreams of becoming a helicopter. It mocks gender and sexual identification posts by comparing the desire to be an attack helicopter with the experiences of transgender people and other LGBTQ+ people. The format (...) parodies posts by transgender people about their experience, particularly those found on forums and blogging sites" (KnowYourMeme.com). The implication is that you can identify as *anything* now. This is used to trivialise trans people's experiences, the way they express themselves online *and* the diversity of identities that cishet people do not understand. The 'joke' has taken many forms in the past decade, but if someone uses the term attack helicopter *(taisteluhelikopteri)* in a discussion about queer people, it originates from this meme. I have personally often heard the "I don't care if you identify as an attack helicopter, but..." version the most in recent years, which is arguably more indirect, so I have heard a few well-meaning people use it too, without recognising the mockery and broader implications.

To be fair, there are many more (English) label options now than there were before, and few even within the community can claim to know all of them, as new ones are coined all the time. Even Finnish has a wider selection now and freely borrows English terms when the local equivalent is yet to be born.

But how many is too many, then? Of course, there are some that would say *three* is too many, but those who believe in the gender binary so strongly can hardly be expected to offer any reasonable arguments in this particular debate. Even beyond the gender sphere, the queer community has many labels that overlap and have different explanations depending on the user. While many of these (especially older) terms have established criteria, there has always been a sort of 'choose your own adventure' mentality with labels. Pick the ones you like and explain them how *you* understand them. There are a few pitfalls in this approach. Obviously, this has the potential to confuse (especially cis) people even further, but there is also potential for disagreement between 'schools of thought' which can sometimes lead to accusations of misrepresentation, and/or exclusionary practices.

None of the research participants thought that figuring out their gender identity was easy. Approaching any new subject can be intimidating when there is a lot of new terminology to learn. Even someone who uses the most niche labels now, has been confused about the similarities and differences between identities in the past. Perhaps they still are. Learning takes time and finding something that feels your own can mean trying on several different labels an see what sticks. In the end it is more helpful to have a lot of options so everyone can find something that at least closely resembles their experience, so they can feel validated and less alone in their way of existing in this world. That is why limiting the number of terms used when discussing gender identity is in stark contrast to the idea of freedom from the limiting binary, which is the point to begin with.

Additionally, there is something so incredibly beautiful and organic about the development of different terminology, that I would hesitate to criticise it too much. Most words (and pride flags) are just things some random queer somewhere in the world came up with and shared, and others seemed to like it and spread it around until it became canon. There are no think-tanks or influential leaders making these decisions and I view that as a very good thing, especially in the days of gross rainbow capitalism. Things just develop from the ground up and become popular on the community's own terms. For example, the nonbinary pride flag was created by 17-year-old Kye Rowan in February of 2014 (Gender wiki), and many popular designs are credited to a Tumblr username and not the person's real name, which goes to show how raw the process can be. In the times of the internet, and now with the

domination of social media, you could make up a flag design or term that describes your experience better than existing ones do, and see it become canon within the community in an incredibly short period of time.

In general, the research participants, for example, are well aware that there is a lot to take in if someone is new to the idea of gender diversity, and know it takes time to learn new things. They also understand that people (even within the community, myself included) make mistakes, so there is no pressure to be perfect and know everything about everything. Not knowing or being wrong is not a crime. It is the refusal to acknowledge and respect someone's identity, even if you do not understand it, that creates a problem.

5.2 Becoming Who You Already Were

Just like for queer and trans people in general, there is not just one origin story or timeline that all nonbinary people share. Some 'have always known' to some extent, while others only awakened to their gender identity much later in life, having already established their careers and families. However, I found that for many of those who shared their story with me, the journey followed a similar trajectory. It begins with a sense of not belonging and confusion. As an unknowingly trans person, it may seem like the other members of you assigned gender all seem to share a secret that they forgot to tell you. You do not feel like one of them and have trouble identifying with their experiences. You may feel like you are just a different member of that gender or that there is something wrong with you. It makes no sense. You may have trouble pinpointing the problem, or even begin to question your gender.

Many, if not most of the research participants had had a period in their lives when they had more or less seriously considered if they were binary trans. Oftentimes this was because, at the time, that was the only known option if one's AGAB did not feel right. Most of the time, however, after sufficient pondering alone or with a friend or professional, they came to the conclusion that it is just not who they are; the concept was not enough to cover how they felt or there were too many deviations from the usual narrative. Perhaps their experience fluctuates between genders or they feel like identifying as 'the opposite gender' would be just as restricting as the one they were assigned as. After this trial, some would continue to explore other options, but others had a different reaction.

5.2.1 Overcorrection

There was an interesting element I noticed in a few of the research participants' stories. After struggling with their gender identity to no avail, many then suppressed those uncomfortable feelings and buried their questions deep down somewhere they would not have to deal with them anymore. This led to a period of "really trying" to conform to the role expected of them, overcorrection even, especially in presentation. Some to the point where their presentation took on elements of drag with its exaggerated stereotypes and sense of performance. My informant TK aptly called this phase "self-rejection" and said they had encountered similar stories from other nonbinary people as well. It is as if a last-ditch effort be cis. Maybe you had not tried hard enough before? Maybe if you gave it all you had, you would finally settle into the role expected of you and live a normal life. *Fake 'til you make it*.

> "In high school I panicked (…) and became overly feminine so I'd be seen as a woman. I thought that wearing a dress and a corset would fix the way I was feeling. I've always had an extravagant and goth way of dressing, so it was easily incorporated into my style." (LL, 33)

> "While 'femming out' is otherwise fun, behind the updos, pink sweaters and pushed-up breasts, nobody could see me even the tiny bit they did before. I thought I was dressing like a woman. They thought I was a woman." (Wonderful Abnormal, n.d.:1)

> "In 2013, I got into a super femme phase. (…) I wore very revealing clothing. I would go around in these extremely tight skirts and revealing tops, so my tits out and I would bend over like this [bends over] to make sure they were showing. Really heavy eye-makeup and heavy gold jewellery and wore clothes that really accentuated my figure, but I never felt good in that *costume*. Did I try to somehow force myself into a female stereotype? I was like an *überfemme*. I felt horrible on the inside, but to the outside, it looked like everything was going really well." (TK, 49)

This performance, however, was not sustainable, and did real damage to the mental health of some of those who tried. TK told me that this was emotionally one of the

lowest points in their life. In a way, this is a good example of those things that have to get worse right before they get better.

5.2.2 Discovery

As most of even my younger informants grew up without proper education/knowledge about gender diversity, perhaps the most fundamental discovery of all is that *there are options*. Options beyond the two roles that were both wrong. Options that will lead to a sense of belonging, perhaps for the first time ever. Of course, finding the best way to describe who you are takes time and patience, and may be a very difficult journey for some.

Knowledge and understanding come to us in different ways and sometimes it takes a special event for them to really sink into the consciousness. A few of the research participants may even share a path with some cis anthropologists discovering the world beyond the binary:

> "When I was 26, I found out what nonbinary means. I came across an article about Native American Two-Spirit people, and it really resonated with me. I realised "this is me". I started doing a lot of research on being nonbinary and how it can manifest, and it was like the gates of heaven had opened. For a few years I thought about it by myself and then I told my family." (LL)

> "The first time I encountered a gender term that described me in some way was in Hungary in 2008. I had a Canadian intern and somehow, we got to the topic of North American Indigenous Two-Spirit people. It was an 'aha experience' and I thought "that's what I am!", but I didn't linger on the idea too long, partially because I thought I couldn't just appropriate an indigenous term. My gender didn't really matter at that point in my life. Now, I have been defining my current identity and reflecting on what it means for the past five years, and I changed my name a year ago." (JA, 40)

Others also found their identity through encounters with other nonbinary people:

> "I was twenty when I found the word 'nonbinary', because my classmate was nonbinary. That opened a whole new world for me, and I realised that

> that was me. I had already thought of changing my name before then, but I didn't know why exactly or what kind of name I would want for myself. When I realised I was nonbinary, I also realised that I wanted a gender neutral name. My classmate what a great support at the time (…) and I learned a lot." (TU, 26)

> "After high school I moved to Estonia to study. There, at a party, I had a conversation with an American who told me they were pansexual and nonbinary. I didn't know what nonbinary meant so I started to look into it and noticed that "Aah! This is a word that describes *me* pretty well!" At that time, nonbinary meant that you were something between a man and a woman or neither, and I thought that was exactly what *I* felt like. I hadn't called myself a woman since I was 13 or 14, but couldn't fit myself into the male role either, which was very confusing. I found 'nonbinary' in my twenties and have been content with it ever since." (JU, 32)

It is interesting to see that North America is featured in multiple of the research participants' stories. In a way, it is not surprising, because in the Euro-American context, they have the most widespread contact with indigenous people and their gender systems that deviate from the binary view. This has perhaps enabled at least a part of the general population to know there are other options much earlier than most Finnish people would. We will leave it at that. I will not get started on the problematic historical, political, and sociocultural relationship the indigenous peoples have, and continue to have with the general population, because this will turn into an entirely different thesis very quickly.

For others, the knowledge grew slowly, but did not immediately ring a bell:

> "I don't really remember how I arrived at this identity. When I was younger, I Identified with androgynous stars like Bowie, which, I think, made me slowly realise there are other options than just man and woman. In the 90s City Magazine had an article titled something like "the new genders", which also mentioned artists I liked, that made me think that there is something for me here." (RO, 47)

"I would have always known, if I had always known. Our generations education and knowledge about these things was as minimal as possible; maybe two sentences in a textbook. So when, at the end of elementary school, I kept telling my friends I wanted to be a boy, my feelings had no explanation in my world. Not even in middle school, when I secretly wished the same and stole my brother's clothes. Only later I learned about being transgender, but at that point I had already pushed it aside and didn't think I could be. Being a trans man didn't resonate with me, even though it could have explained a lot.

I was extremely interested in [transness] and unconsciously accumulated trans friends and partners until it finally started to clear up, one piece at a time. I wasn't just a strong ally, but one of them, as something I hadn't even heard of a few years before; nonbinary." (VI, 24)

"I have not been ok with being a woman since before middle school, but in the mid-90s 'nonbinary' wasn't *a thing*, so I considered if I was really a man, but came to the conclusion that I absolutely wasn't. In the end, I came to the conclusion that being a woman is just – this. Ok. A long time passed and in 2017, I had already heard about nonbinary people, but for some reason it hadn't clicked for me until that point. In 2017 things just clicked. (…) It explained a lot of things I had been confused about. Things just fell into place." (KR, 38)

"I have no idea when I learned about 'other' genders existing. I already knew about they/them before my flatmate had a nonbinary partner in 2017 and I had to use the pronouns in conversation for the first time. I think the knowledge and, more importantly, understanding just slowly crept into my mind. Still, it took a weird dream at the age of 27 and some 'down the rabbit hole' style googling for things to click for me. Once I finally got it, it was like watching a slideshow of all the things in my life that made perfect sense looking back knowing what I now knew. I always knew most girls didn't really identify with the boys so hard, but I guess I'm a bit slow on the uptake." (CA, 30)

Many nonbinary people adopt labels that seem close enough to what they experience or ones that feel the most convenient to explain their gender experience. I do not think any of us are ever truly ready, and most nonbinary people accept that their identity, or their understanding of themselves might fluctuate throughout their lives, just as it has done before:

> "I had some thoughts stirring at my high school's 'gender bender' day, but I wasn't sure what. I thought that maybe I was just a transvestite who occasionally enjoys wearing women's clothes. I don't know, I think it somehow merged with the fact that being a man rarely gave me positive feelings. Maybe sometimes, but femininity and androgyny ware much more rewarding. Once I moved to Helsinki, I got acquainted with the Gender Diversity & Intersex Centre of Expertise and got to mull things over in group meetings. I came to the conclusion that 'nonbinary' was the most accurate term, but sometimes I've contemplated if that's the case. Maybe my idea of women is just so narrow that I didn't allow myself a female identity. But given everything, I've gone with nonbinary because it's just so flexible, since I still sometimes but rarely find some manly things rewarding and sometimes I don't care about my presentation too much, it fluctuates." (MM, 25)

As you can see, there are a lot of common threads in these stories.

After finding an identity that fits relatively well, there was still much to do for most research participants. Some nonbinary people, like myself, for example, change very little throughout the process, but there are often many things to reconsider in an individual's life after such a huge discovery. LL described the journey of finding one's 'true nonbinary self' as an evolution with many different stages.

According to LL, after the realisation that one may not be their AGAB, the main issue is uncertainty and whether one should try to hide themselves or 'come out' and to whom. This may evolve into solid self-acceptance, but with a fear of making any external changes due to social repercussions (family, employment etc.). As one becomes more secure in being nonbinary, there may be a period of trying to highlight one's nonbinary status in presentation and social contexts, really leaning into genderbending and trying to reach some sort of *maximum nonbinariness*. This,

however, also takes a lot of energy, so eventually there comes a point when one may begin to re-evaluate what being nonbinary means to them personally, and what may be the ways in which it comes out more effortlessly. How necessary is it to do certain things? Do you do them for the gender euphoria and to be content, or to get strangers to see you as nonbinary? Is there a difference for you? LL remarked that after this re-evaluation and possible adjustments, one is equipped to be and express who they truly are; their own particular brand of nonbinary that takes much less effort and feels natural. There is little need to put massive amounts of effort into the legibility of one's gender identity for the sake of others and one can begin to wear and do whatever they want.

As I said before, there is not necessarily ever a point where one is 'done' but finding a comfortable way of being and expressing oneself makes a world of difference in one's life. This trajectory seems plausible, and I have found similar elements in many of the research participants' stories. However, there are many legitimate reasons why individuals might not follow this path, especially to its completion.

5.3 Nonbinary Bodies and Legibility

5.3.1 Dysphoria

The term *gender dysphoria* was coined in the 1980s (note that *body dysmorphia* is a completely different concept). Gender dysphoria now widely used to describe the discomfort caused by a mismatch between a person's gender assigned at birth and their gender identity. It is also a clinical diagnosis used for trans people, when/where a diagnosis is necessary for treatment. Dysphoria can cause severe distress, anxiety, and depression as the person feels disconnected from their body and the gender they were assigned at birth. It can also result in a sense of isolation and loneliness as the person struggles to reconcile their inner sense of self with the expectations and beliefs of those around them (Cooper et al., 2020).

Usually, trans people divide gender dysphoria into body/physical and social dysphoria, which could be explained, in the simplest way possible, as things about one's body that cause dysphoria and things others do that cause dysphoria, respectively. Common sources of physical dysphoria for trans people, both binary and nonbinary, are genitalia, the chest, hips, shoulders, body hair, voice, and other

secondary sexual characteristics (see van de Grift et al. 2016, for example). Certain bodily functions, like periods, may also cause dysphoria. Social dysphoria is caused by the social expectations and norms imposed on individuals based on their assumed gender (Galupo et al., 2020, for example). However, it is worth questioning if physical dysphoria is really free from societal impact? This debate is closely connected to theories about sex and gender because many of the arguments that support the social construction of 'biological sex' can be used to suggest that physical dysphoria may not be innate and may have much more to do with sociocultural factors than generally thought (Amin, 2022).

I certainly found a few clear examples of this among the research participants. Some of my AFAB informants said that they experienced dysphoria about their chest and had considered or wanted a mastectomy but had also reflected on whether or not this would be the case if they were not misgendered because of their chest. In other words, it is not always the feature itself that causes the distress, but the way people interpret it that is the issue. While many felt a true alienation from certain parts of their body regardless of social interactions, it may be easier for nonbinary people to relate their relationship to their bodies with society's relationship to them, compared to binary trans people. This could be in part because there is no physical standard of, for example, chest shape for a nonbinary person, so the social construction of gendered features becomes more tangible. Kadji Amin, argues that the distinction between physical and social dysphoria may be moot because all gender dysphoria is "the affective fallout of social transphobia upon the self" (2022: 38). Regardless of the source of the problem, dysphoria can be extremely detrimental to an individual's quality of life and needs to be addressed in one way or another.

While a 'dealbreaker' for medical diagnoses, dysphoria is not a necessary condition of transness. However, most of the research participants did feel some form of what I would categorise as social dysphoria. All have felt the (sometimes not so subtle) needling of misgendering, which almost always causes a negative reaction. A few are able to brush it off as ignorance and move on with their day, but even for those individuals, continuous misgendering by 'someone who should know better' causes frustration and hurt. Many also had some level of body dysphoria.

There are many things a person may choose to do to combat dysphoria, ranging from behavioural adjustments, clothing choices and other at-home remedies to full-on surgery (when accessible), depending on the issue in question. Let us take a look at the day-to-day choices individuals make. We will return to healthcare later.

5.3.2 Presenting

With the homogeneity of the community and all of the above in mind, it seems counterintuitive to spend time thinking about what nonbinary people look like. However, beneath the surface there are many elements that *do* make sense to analyse. I am speaking of gender expression or *presenting*; the way nonbinary people choose to present themselves to the world through looks and behaviour, and more specifically what may affect presentation and in which contexts. While presenting is a commonly used 'queer term', it is a universal phenomenon, not unlike Butler's gender performance. There are many elements at play, all of which have an impact on each other.

It is best to clarify some things before we get going. No piece of fabric is inherently gendered, makeup (i.e. putting colours and shapes on one's face and body) is not inherently feminine, and just like for nonbinary people, there is no catch-all answer for what a woman/man looks like. However, in our cultural context, there is a binary divide when it comes to appearance and the things we are encouraged to do to and/or put on our bodies. Certain things are considered 'feminine', and therefore meant for women, and others 'masculine', meant for men - often exclusively and for all kinds of (equally ridiculous but relevant) reasons. So, when I use the words feminine/women's or masculine/men's, I am referring to the very basics of what is traditionally *considered feminine or masculine in our general culture* e.g. dresses are for women, men have short hair, and such.

5.3.3 Independent body modification

As mentioned, there are many factors that influence the way a trans individual presents, not the least of which is alleviation of dysphoria. Online queer groups, including Team Q, are filled with trans people asking for tips and tricks on how to lessen specific types of physical dysphoria. Creating or hiding breasts, exercises to shape the body, makeup tips to create an illusion of a stronger or more delicate

jawline, you name it and there will be someone who knows a good product or DIY hack to get (something closer to) the results you want. There is many a queer MacGyver in the community! This is partially explained by the lack of resources and support many trans people face in their everyday lives, which forces them to get creative with their efforts to match the outside with the inside. This can also drive trans people to extreme measures that are harmful to their health in the long run.

While not western, Kulick's (1997) example illustrates how people may take matters into their own hands to modify their bodies if there are no accessible 'official' routes to reach their goals. He recounts how boys who identify as *travestis* in Brazil sometimes begin taking large amounts of female hormones as young as 10 or 12 to develop feminine physical characteristics. However, a significant problem with this practice is that it can lead to chronic health issues such as nausea, headaches, heart palpitations, burning sensations, weight gain, and allergies, especially after prolonged use. After a few years, many individuals stop taking hormones but may instead choose to inject industrial silicone into areas like their buttocks, hips, knees, and inner thighs, which is clearly dangerous. In all the online groups I am part of, I have witnessed trans people without a prescription discussing buying hormones online and asking about trustworthy sources. This includes Finnish groups. Buying medication online is always risky, but at least I have gotten the general impression that the doses people administer themselves relatively in line with the ones prescribed by Finnish doctors.

A very common self-afflicted threat to AFAB trans people is binding the chest incorrectly to make it look flat(ter). Without knowledge of or access to proper (commercial) binders that are designed to flatten the chest as much as safely possible without causing damage (when worn correctly) many AFAB trans people resort to binding with athletic bandages, long pieces of fabric or even duct tape tightly wrapped around their chest. The community has become acutely aware that this is extremely detrimental to an individual's health. It can cause negative outcomes including shortness of breath, skin damage, and musculoskeletal pain and even permanent damage with prolonged use (Moffa, 2019). Most online discussions I have seen about binding have included comments from concerned members urging people to bind correctly and for a safe amount of time (ideally no more than eight hours per day and taking at least one day off from binding per week; Peitzmeier et al. in Moffa,

2019). It is great to see that awareness is rising among trans people and individuals are more protected from avoidable harm.

5.3.4 Stereotypes

As some of the research participants had noticed, transitioning itself and trying to create legibility in presenting from a nonbinary perspective was complicated by the leap beyond the binary. For binary trans people, the process can be slightly simpler at the moment, as there is a stereotypical western ideal of a woman or a man towards which one could aim, and certain features that, when achieved, trigger a specific gendered response in the general population in Finland. This is not to say that all binary trans people have it easy or that they want to look like walking stereotypes, but that there is a socially constructed goal and the closer to that goal they can get, the less likely they are to be misgendered. In contrast nonbinary trans people (theoretically) have no ideal to strive towards and have to figure it out themselves, which caused its own kinds of challenges and emotions along the way for many of those I interviewed.

All of that being said, there is a stereotype that is often applied to contemporary nonbinary people that can cause dysphoria and be difficult to weed out: the androgynous, thin, AFAB, white (and usually young) nonbinary person. This was well illustrated when I was generating the images for this thesis. I had to add a lot of specifying information to gain diversity in the results. While this stereotype has affected the expectations of some of the more in-the-know members of the general population, it was wreaked havoc withing the enby community. This image is obviously impossible for many individuals to reach but it also adds to the internalised transphobia some experience. While generally 'internalised transphobia' is understood as internalised negative attitudes about transness or discomfort with a trans identity, I have noticed that at least in the trans specific groups I have been in, the term is often applied to internalised beliefs of what a trans/nonbinary person should look and behave like, which significantly influences the way individuals feel about their bodies and present themselves. I have witnessed many nonbinary people lament their body shape and size because they felt they did not look 'androgynous enough', for example, or disparaging themselves for not wanting to cut their long hair or liking a stereotypical 'feminine'/'masculine' thing *too* much. They felt that these

things undermined their nonbinary identity or made them somehow less valid, which seems paradoxical, as if saying that who they are makes them less of who they are. This is another example of why the debate about the impact of social phenomena on body dysphoria is so relevant.

5.3.5 Passing

For those nonbinary individuals who suffer from social dysphoria, how they are perceived by others becomes a complex factor in their personal performance of gender – how they present. While 'passing', with all its problematic implications, has not, and will never be the threshold of being 'trans enough', there were still certain elements of trans lives that being able to 'pass' deeply affected. For binary trans people, passing would mean that they are perceived as cis by other people. Trans women as cis women, and trans men as cis men. I always hesitate to use this term because the entire concept is based on the idea that there is a specific way to look and behave like a woman or a man. On a more acute level, as Amin (2022: 37) puts it, "passing renders transness shameful and secretive", which leads to distress and further problems down the line. Alas, this is the world we live in, and passing as cis may save a trans person's life in certain contexts (especially trans women). Another, quite sad element to passing is explained by Sandy Stone the following way:

> "Passing means the denial of mixture. One and the same with passing is effacement of the prior gender role, or the construction of a plausible history. Considering that most transsexuals choose reassignment in their third or fourth decade, this means erasing a considerable portion of their personal experience. It is my contention that this process, in which both the transsexual and the medicolegal/psychological establishment are complicit, forecloses the possibility of a life grounded in the intertextual possibilities of the transsexual body." (Stone, 2013:231)

The reason I am compelled to bring this unfortunate concept up, is because it has an entirely different meaning when it comes to nonbinary people. To 'pass' as a nonbinary person means to pass *as nonbinary*. But since most people do not recognise nonbinary as an option, they simply do not have the capability to gender nonbinary people *correctly* with just a glance (as they would a presumed woman or man). No matter what their presentation is like, in a cis-normative world people tend

to gender a nonbinary person as either a man or a woman, which is incorrect. Of course, for some, one of those options may be *less incorrect*, and many find being misgendered as the gender they were *not* assigned at birth more acceptable. That is why, when being gendered correctly seems impossible, there is a common habit for nonbinary people to present further towards the opposite end of the binary than they were assigned at birth. There are also many identities that include one or both binary genders making the onlooker partially correct, but as the presumption is probably that our enby friend is a *cis* man or woman, they are still not quite on the money. There is only so much one can do to influence others' interpretations and their subsequent actions. This is why alleviating the effects of social dysphoria had its own special challenges, especially for nonbinary people.

So, is it impossible for nonbinary people to pass? I have come to the conclusion that causing confusion is the closest equivalent to passing nonbinary people get at the moment. If people cannot for the life of them decide whether the person they are looking at is a woman or a man, they have passed successfully! To reiterate, as passing is limited to the imagination and beliefs of *other people*, it is in no way a reflection on trans people themselves. Unfortunately, not passing or being misgendered can be crushing to many trans and nonbinary people, and a significant source of dysphoria. This impacts many areas of their lives in meaningful ways. I do, however, maintain hope that there are already many little (probably extremely queer) social bubbles where nonbinary people *can* and *do* get gendered correctly – what a lovely image.

5.3.6 Choice & Motivations

I have already discussed dysphoria as a motivator for certain ways of presenting. Next, I want to look at some other factors that influence presenting and other aspects of nonbinary lives. During this project, I have been contemplating the role of choice in queer lives. Unfortunately, this may be a dangerous route of inquiry. The narrative of 'not choosing to be gay/queer but being born that way' has been used as a tool to combat homophobia for a long time now, and the biological origins of sexuality, for example, continue to be of interest in the sciences (Bennett, 2014). The idea is that queerness is an innate characteristic; people cannot help being queer and should,

therefore not be judged for it. I am in no way denying this, of course, but it is a painfully simplistic way of looking at queerness.

It is not just about the internal factors of attraction and identity, but it is infused with so many complex elements that I would argue do involve a lot of choice. I would argue that 'the gay lifestyle' as some homophobes name it to trivialise queer people's experiences, does exist. Of course, everything depends on how 'lifestyle' is defined. I am using it to mean the things people use to express themselves, the things they do and the type of people they associate with most of the time. Much of the objections against queer people do revolve around those things and not solely on innate attraction or identity. People make so many statements along the lines of "It would be fine if they didn't (do) a, b and c.". So, arguing that anything is a choice can become ammunition against queer people very quickly. However, not considering it would be a disservice not only to academia, but queer people themselves. The idea that they are puppets at the mercy of some innate quality is not only dated, but incredibly reductive and dehumanising. *There is so much agency in being queer*.

Presenting is one of the easiest elements to connect to choice. It seems obvious and makes sense to everyone. As we have discussed before, many nonbinary people feel the need to highlight their identity in their presentation, at least for a period of time in their journey, which can be tiring. However, there are legitimate reasons to keep doing this. Queer people may choose to present in a certain way to make a (sociopolitical) statement. Making queerness/ nonbinary people visible is important to many of the research participants. Not only because they want to be seen as themselves, but to combat the invisibility of gender minorities and be out and proud for those who are still in the closet and afraid to express who they are in public.

5.3.7 Resistance & Wonderful Abnormal

There has been an element of resistance in queerness for a long time now. There is an excellent autobiographical piece on SETA's website that verbalised a lot of ideas I had been thinking about regarding motive, and a different kind of nonbinary experience. In 'Wonderful Abnormal' (*Upea Epänormaali*, n.d.), the author (whose identity, SETA told me, has unfortunately been lost) recites their own nonbinary journey, which has a slightly different element from the narratives you would usually encounter. They explain that "in addition to emotional and identity reasons, the

reason behind transitioning can be a need to show the world that forcing people to be either men or women violently cuts out a large part of gender diversity and beauty." (p.3).

Like the author, many nonbinary people have a certain envy of intersex people for being born with a 'nonbinary body' they themselves, if they so choose, have to use intrusive means to achieve. "I thought of myself as both lucky and unlucky for not being born intersex. A 'dual' body would have been beautiful to and perfect for me, but if I had gotten one, I would have probably been mutilated too and I would have become bitter for the rest of my life." (p.2). Medically unnecessary genital surgery a.k.a. genital mutilation is still performed on intersex babies in Finland. This is a blatant human rights violation that has only gained public visibility in resent years (see, for example, Toriseva, 2017 to be appalled). However, a large section of the general population in completely ignorant to this, despite Finland being repeatedly reprimanded for it by the UN, as mentioned before. This became quite clear to me as I brought the topic up with multiple (cishet) people after reading Toriseva's article for the first time. The reaction I got was denial and anger (towards me), which was shocking. 'Genital mutilation' in other cultures comes up periodically in Finnish media and is broadly deemed amoral and horrific by the general population, but it seems that the collective consciousness cannot handle hearing the same exact thing (only under the guise of 'medicine') happens in their secular or Christian, 'highly moral' society, depending on the individual. I could go on about this indefinitely but would become yet another thesis.

To return to Wonderful Abnormal, the author continues:

> "I started to increasingly feel like I wanted to change my body into precisely that which does not fit into the normal idea of a male or female body but is somewhere in the fascinating in-between. I wanted to show that someone could want to make their body exactly like the ones that doctors who cut up intersex babies find undesirable. A body that has both something too much and something too little for the normal male and female moulds. (…) I wanted all the wrong qualities in my body. Such a large clitoris that, if found on a woman, a reduction would be recommended. So much hair that treatment for hirsutism would be started

> in a hurry. A voice that raises questions. I would not give up my breasts because this size on a man would be considered gynecomastia and be removed." (p.2)

There is a clear sense of defiance and rebellion in the way the author views transition. It is a tool of disruption in a cisnormative world. This may be a more extreme approach, but a level of embodiment is present in most, if not all nonbinary experiences. A nonbinary body is rarely just a passive vessel, but an active participant in the construction and expression of identity and cultural practices. The author does emphasise that identity and emotional factors should weigh more than ideology in the decision to transition and has themself come to the realisation that framing their desire to transition in an ideological way made it easier to express their own needs. However, they want to make clear that they "still want to blur the stark dichotomy with my body and appearance and show that a body that medicine would define as unclearly gendered or as suffering from a hormonal disorder can be beautiful, desirable and worth pursuing, and not sick or abnormal or something that needs to be 'fixed' to better fit the male or female formula." (p.3) About the future, the author expresses similar sentiments as many of the research participants:

> "My social gender is still finding its form and I may never reach an ending point but always continue the journey with my gender. My appearance may already raise questions, which feels good. Being interpreted as a boy also feels good. It is the lesser of two evils, because I was not forced into that box at birth. It may well be that one day, once some time has passed, I will go out in a dress and makeup so they will have to question if I was a boy after all." (p.2)

Resistance against cisheteronormativity can also be more subtle. My informant HK communicated the need to queer code themself somehow despite presenting in a relatively generic way for someone of their AGAB. Painted nails or a rainbow ring can suffice to convey deviation from the norm and according to HK, queercode them enough to feel a part of the community.

5.4 Special Challenges in Healthcare

Existing beyond the binary has its own challenges when it comes to (trans) healthcare. As discussed in relation to general transition and presenting, while also gruelling and problematic, a binary trans person's journey through the medical transition process is simpler and more consistent than that of a nonbinary person. There are clear laws, guidelines and procedures to how the prosses goes for binary trans people. The same, however, cannot be said for nonbinary people.

> "If there are only two "real" options for gender, everything else must be considered nontypical, and therefore, transitioning from one of the major genders into the other is inherently more valid than transitioning from either to some nonbinary state. However out of touch this view is with the lives of gender minorities, it is consistent: on the one hand, nonbinary trans people are denied the possibility for transition, and on the other hand, intersex children are surgically made to conform to the binary." (Leino, 2016:455)

Not all nonbinary people, just as not all trans people in general, seek medical treatment. Those who do, however, continued to face a nearly impossible obstacle course (as one of the research participants called it), the completion of which did not guarantee access to surgery, for example. Yet, those entering the process today are luckier than many that tried before them. In 2018, medical treatment of nonbinary people was put on hold until further notice (Juupaluoma, 2018). The explanation given by the Council for Choices in Health Care in Finland (COHERE Finland) was that 'there was no medical evidence of the efficacy or benefits of treatment'. As treatment for binary trans people continued normally, many nonbinary people chose to 'bend the truth towards the binary' in order to get the treatments they needed. COHERE published their official recommendation on June 11th, 2020, which finally restarted treatment for nonbinary people.

This might give the idea that there was some sort of massive change in the treatment of nonbinary people. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Even when the full extent of services is reached, there is still inequality in the treatment of trans people. It is not possible for those with the nonbinary version of the diagnosis to get genital surgery, for example. Many doctors still follow outdated procedure and are ignorant of the

most current research on gender diversity. Even with a recommendation from COHERE, decisions are made based on inaccurate information and personal beliefs. Sociocultural reasoning is disguised as 'science' and there are major fluctuations in specialised knowledge of gender diversity within and between cities. All of this leads to an incoherent system, where treatment depends on the time and place, individual doctors' attitudes. In my experience, most trans people are acutely aware that there were still practically no standards for the whole process, which led to sharp inequality between individuals also based on things like age, AGAB, gender identity, and weight, not to mention sheer coincidence. Nonbinary people are still constantly denied diagnoses, which are the only way to get treatment, and denied certain treatments or given a 'time out' (treatment is put on hold for anywhere from months to multiple years) based on arbitrary reasons. One of the research participants has sought medical treatment three times and been rejected each time, despite being and feeling completely adjusted in their identity. The time it takes to go through the obstacle course, get rejected, wait, and try again amounts to *years*. Years that are taken away from living as themself, with less dysphoria, and more euphoria and joy. Many research participants agreed that there was dire need of more individualized services, and the fear of being left out of the system was palpable to the point that some nonbinary people were ready to conform to the binary and lie to doctors and psychologists about their gender identity in order to ensure access to the treatments and procedures they need. In general, the role of healthcare and the medical profession in trans people's lives has been significant since the 1800s (Mustola, 2007: 69) and unpacking it would demand its own thesis, so I will limit myself to the above remarks.

5.5 Parenthood

Gender and parenthood are closely connected to each other. For some of my informants, parenthood featured heavily in how they discussed their (gender) identity:

> "I became a mother when I was twenty. That's when the gender issue really started bothering me, because parenthood is so gendered. I am my children's mom, and I gave birth to them, but I don't really connect it to gender. If my name as a person is [SA], then my name as a parent is Mom,

> that's how I think about it. (…) [Back then], I felt like motherhood was such intense gender performance." (SA)
>
> "I feel like ever since my child was born, people have been trying to shove me into the 'male' box. My child calls me daddy (*isi*), which used to be difficult for me but I'm used to it now. But I've felt that more masculine behaviour is expected of than before. Unfortunately this has been from my own father, at least I assume that is why, if I complain about anything he mocks me. I feel like he believes that a father is supposed to endure anything, and they're not allowed to complain. (…) I'm not sure if he even was that way as a father. While he is pretty masculine, I don't think he was *overly* masculine. (…) Having a child didn't affect my identity, but I think I'm more conscious of it, perhaps as a reaction against the expectations growing." (RO)
>
> "When I had my second child, I was really confused about my gender and sexuality because healthcare services, especially for those who can get pregnant and give birth is *so* binary. So, I tried to fit into the motherhood box a little and got postpartum depression. I was so out of it when it came to what I was and if I was allowed to be who I was, since I didn't seem to fit into the stereotypical role of a mother, and it gave me a lot of anxiety. I am okay with my children calling me mom, but I refer to myself as a parent when talking to other people." (JU)

In addition to the healthcare related issues again, parenthood seems to put the gendered expectations of society into overdrive and make them even more inflexible. The research participants who were parents suffered from the way the rigid roles of a mother and father were imposed on them and how those roles trampled on their nonbinary identity. Parenting took a lot of compromise and adjustments to navigate.

5.6 Agender – The Minority Within the Minority

I wanted to take a moment to highlight the experiences of agender/genderless people. At the moment, they are generally placed under the nonbinary umbrella and some of the research participants in this project are agender. Many may identify as agender and other labels too, which is not uncommon. In a way, agender is to nonbinary as

nonbinary is to trans, when it comes to visibility, intelligibility, and acceptance. Agender is even deeper in the shadows that nonbinary, which has been shed a tiny bit of light to in the past few years. Even as intelligible as nonbinary may be to some people, agender is much harder to comprehend for many.

One way of looking at it is that there is a categorical difference between agender and trans/nonbinary. I had an interesting conversation with my informant SA about the whole idea. They had identified as nonbinary for a while, but even that did not sit right with them in the end.

> "I started to think about it and for about six months I was struggling with the idea of being nonbinary. Until finally I just let go [of the binary] and accepted that this is who I am. It was actually a wild feeling (…), because at that moment I moved from the mainstream to the minority. After that, gendered speech and such started to bother me in a whole different way than before. It was wild.
>
> But for some reason even 'nonbinary' didn't feel right. (…) I can't grasp what being a woman is or what being a man is but I also can't grasp what being this 'other' would be (…) so nonbinary just didn't feel right. So, then I came to the conclusion that maybe I'm just a person who simply has no gender. No gender experiences resonate with me." (SA, 39)

We went on to discuss what the experience of *no experience* is like. From this point of view, genderless people would be placed at the opposite end of the spectrum from all other gender experiences based precisely on *not having an experience*. This would place cis, trans and nonbinary people at the same end of the spectrum, because they *have* a gender experience, whatever that may be. I understand that this is slightly meta, but I would argue that so was the case for nonbinary not too long ago. I am compelled to think that not having or having a lesser gender experience is its own umbrella concept worthy of due treatment, rather than a subcategory of a subcategory, or something obscure and niche. Just as we now understand that sexual and romantic attraction not only have a direction, but a degree, we may discover that gender can be viewed the same way. That there is not only a gender identity, but a degree to which it is experienced, all the way down to 'no gender experience'.

In order to make agender identities more visible, I want to include a few more of my agender-identifying informants' stories:

> "A few years ago, I started questioning my gender. I was very strongly raised into the idea that boys are boys and like blue, and girls are girls and paly with dolls. I never really questioned it. In 2018 I started to question if I wanted kids, if I wanted to give birth, and that was the first step that led to the unravelling of the whole thing because I had been raised to believe that a woman's job is to give birth and have children. Later, I started to have these little lightbulb moments, like "wait a minute, I don't have a huge desire to be a woman or act like one, or overall identify as one, so it started to slowly crack. Like trying to remove a stubborn sticker, it comes off in tiny pieces. Then I started to wonder if it was possible I wasn't cis and discussed it with my friends, who are [gender minorities]. I thought about the trans man option for a while, that I was born in the wrong body, but decided that wasn't it. At the moment I am hovering on the nonbinary-agender spectrum. If someone asks, I will say nonbinary, but I feel like agender is a more accurate box for me. It gives me a sense of safety and freedom that I have never experienced gender-wise. So that's where I've landed, for now." (MA, 29)

> "I was already an adult when I really started to think about it, around 2017. I was in a queer Facebook group and I started to wonder why I always felt like an outsider when there was discussion about gender (…), something that I've felt since childhood. (…) I then wrote a post in the group explaining that I didn't know what it felt like to be any gender (…) and someone in the comments asked if I had thought about nonbinary identities. Coincidentally Helsingin Sanomat had a good article about SETA's president at the time, Viima Lampinen, who discussed being agender. I read it, and I was like [makes shocked face], "This is my experience!". That moment still gives me goosebumps, because it was so intensely comforting to know that I wasn't alone with my experiences. That same spring (…) [someone] told me that the Gender Diversity & Intersex Centre of Expertise (SMOK) host a nonbinary support group and I decided to go." (TK, 49)

As you can see, nonbinary, while it can be a very broad concept, is not enough to suit some individuals. Adding the 'other' (or equivalent) option to forms with just the male and female options now may not suffice. A 'none' option may be necessary to fully include all variations of gender diversity.

5.7 The Issue with Trans

While it is impossible to unpack even the carry-on bag of why people cannot accept transness, I want to point to a few individual aspects I came across in my research.

> "I have always spoken about things like transness and polyamory, without using the terminology, very openly everywhere, like at family gatherings and such, and people would always just silently nod along or something, so I assumed that everyone thought about things like me. It was a real shock to me to find out later in life that that wasn't the case. In a way the world came out *to me*." (HA, 46)

Silently nodding along to things that you do not necessarily agree with seems like such a quintessentially Finnish thing to do. Everything is fine as long as you do not have to talk about it. There are traces of this attitude everywhere in Finnish (queer) history and there was even a time when the practice was turned into law (in 1734). According to Mustola (2007: 70), contrary to the previous legislation that criminalised homosexual acts (for men), the new law feigned ignorance as legislators did not want to legally record "the sins of sodomy", as they had previously done. They seemed to not want to 'give anyone any ideas', which was already avoided before, when it came to women's homosexual acts.

Still, there are so many are unspoken rules, widespread silent (dis)approval, and a stark separation between the public and the private. What you do in the privacy of your own home is nobody's business and people do not *want* to know. In many ways, ignorance about certain things is a collective demand. To this day, things seem to become a problem only once you say them out loud or name (put a label on) them. Many of the research participants described people around them not batting an eye when they would deviate from gender norms in the past, it only materialised as an issue once they had come out. Maintaining a strong, unchanging surface-level status quo seems to be of the utmost importance, no matter what is going on beneath the

surface (that's everyone's own business). Anything that disrupts the familiar state of affairs is automatically bad.

Mary Douglas' classic 1966 theory of purity and danger examines how societal rules and boundaries around what is considered 'pure and impure' affect how we categorize and understand the world around us. Based on Douglas' theory, I would suggest that society may struggle to understand and accept nonbinary identities because they challenge traditional binary ideas of gender as a pure and stable category. This can create a sense of danger or discomfort around gender diversity, as it blurs boundaries that many people view as *essential to social order*. However, Douglas also highlights the potential for social change and redefinition of boundaries, suggesting that as societal attitudes towards gender shift as it has done until now, so will the ideas of what is considered pure and acceptable, so there is hope in this aspect.

There is also the tendency to fear what you do not know and/or understand. The fear of the unknown is a natural human response because it represents a potential threat or danger. The fact that popular culture, the media and the news frequently portray non-normative things in a questionable light does not help. It leads people to develop further unconscious stereotypes and biases towards the unfamiliar. That is why visibility and accurate representation is so important. While it is true that knowing exactly what another person's experience is like is impossible, there are certain things that are a bit easier and others that are more difficult to relate to. Understanding what nonbinary is, let alone what it is like, is entirely dependent on the person's ability to understand how concepts like gender are produced in a society. If what a person knows at a given point is taken as indisputable fact, seeing beyond things like the gender binary is virtually impossible. It takes a certain type of flexibility and willingness to admit that you were wrong to be able to accept ontological changes. The more information there is around you, the easier these changes are to digest. Visibility also aids normalisation, which removes the threat of the unknown.

Kulick (1997), wrote something that grabbed my attention, even though it was a small part of his excellent ethnography on the 'travesti' of Brazil.

> "I have also noted that the harshest scorn is reserved for unattractive travestis. Travestis (…) who closely approximate cultural ideals of feminine

> beauty are generally not publicly insulted and mocked and addressed as men. (…) One conclusion I draw from this is that the commonplace denial of travestis' gender (…) may not be so much a reaction against them as gender crossers as it is a reaction against unattractiveness in people (…), whose job it is to make themselves attractive for men. Seen in this light, some of the hostility against (unattractive) travestis becomes intelligible as a reaction against them as failed women, not failed men, as more orthodox interpretations have usually argued"

The specific ideals in question may vary between cultures, but this could be a potential (partial) explanation in Finland as well. What is commonly seen as attractive still seems to be a measure of worth here (largely for women). I would also relate this back to the maintenance of the status quo. Conventional looking (attractive) people do not rock the boat. Attractive trans women may be socially 'forgiven for being trans' if she is attractive in the same way that is expected of cis women. With not just passing, but passing as a 'worthy' cis person, trans people do not disrupt but perfectly blend into the culturally preferable aesthetic. Someone who does not look like the ideal of a man or a woman, as discussed in relation to 'Wonderful Abnormal', breaks all the rules and is a disruptor. An unconventionally attractive nonbinary person my also be seen as a threat, because heteronormativity would prohibit attraction to, and indeed refute the attraction of anyone who is not attractive in the 'correct' assigned way.

5.8 Joy and Utopia

Despite all the hardships, my informants saw having found their identity, or at least realising their transness, as an exceedingly positive thing. A common theme was the relief and sense of freedom my informants have felt since they have found terminology that explains their experiences and the way they have felt throughout their lives.

Many felt that finding the language to describe their lived experience had immense benefits, despite not necessarily accommodating every single variation of nonbinary identities. The way that everything in the past, both positive and negative, 'makes sense' in a whole new way, and the inner peace gained from (better) understanding one's gender can lead to huge changes in the person's life. The person's name,

pronouns, hair, wardrobe, comportment, activities, relationships and even the way they view their sexuality may all change as a result and produce ‘gender euphoria’, which is the opposite of dysphoria. There was a sense of bliss and unlimited joy, when things finally felt ‘right’, when the different aspects of their gender, be that internal, external or social, are aligned.

Seeing that other people with similar experiences exist made them feel like they were not alone. Marginalised minorities can find a sense belonging (especially if rejected by their biological families) and power in communities, and most of the trans and nonbinary people I have encountered tend to see themselves as a part of a broader trans/nonbinary/queer community. At a personal level, many of the research participants reported improvements in their lives. Many had improved confidence and reported a sense of clarity and calm they had not experienced before. Becoming a part of a community brought provided new friends who understood their experiences and provided support. All of the research participants agreed that, while they faced many issues from outside forces in their lives, they would not want to change who they were for anything in the world.

Many of the research participants had similar ideas of what an ideal world would look like for them. Some would prefer a world with no concept of gender at all, while some were fine with having genders, but the overarching idea was that they would like to live in a world where there were no roles and expectations forcefully put on them because of something like gender. They wanted to have the freedom do express who they were and build a life of their own that was not burdened by society’s expectations and look like whatever they wanted it to look like. There are many implications here beyond gender. Many of the research participants had expanded their thinking of societal expectations and restrictions to reflect on how they impacted their lives as a whole, and many wished for complete liberation from external pressures.

It seems as though many nonbinary people spend more time analysing the society we live in and its structures and constructions that an average cishet white person, for example, does. Not thinking about such things, of course is a privilege that comes with belonging to a dominating group/groups. There is so much knowledge and understanding in queer communities that, if utilised to its full potential, would

benefit the general population as well. At a government level, but also socioculturally, solving the problems of the most marginalised minorities often solves many problems those less marginalised. For example, I would argue that many feminist issues would become moot if even a few the research participants' ideals were applied to the society we live in. "Radically different forms of sociality are possible, but normative values are not easily sloughed off" (Howe, 2015: 4). In the meantime, as the state of affairs remains now, there are still many opportunities for queer joy and excellence to be found around us.

6 Supporting Theoretical Frameworks

6.1 Butler

Judith Butler's (1990) key argument is that gender is not inherent, but rather a social construct that is performed and enacted through repeated acts and gestures. In her influential work, "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity," Butler argues that gender is a performative and discursive practice that is therefore subject to constant change and reconstruction. Butler's theories have significant implications for nonbinary people. They challenge the traditional binary gender norms and allow for the recognition and inclusion of nonbinary gender identities. Nonbinary individuals' gender identities and expressions may not fit into traditional male or female categories, but they are still valid and equally deserving of respect and recognition.

Butler argues that there is no single, fixed gender identity, but rather multiple genders that exist within a continuum. Furthermore, gender is not something that individuals have, but something that individuals do, and it is constantly being performed and re-performed through everyday practices and interactions. This lack of a one permanent gender identity also accommodates possible change over time, which is central in allowing individuals to express their identities freely.

Butler's theory of gender as performative also highlights that gender is not based on biological sex. The notion of ‘sex’ itself is also a social construct rather than a biological fact and is determined by cultural norms and expectations. This means that bodies are not naturally gendered, but rather gender is imposed on bodies through social and cultural practices. Therefore, nonbinary individuals may have different physical characteristics but still identify with a nonbinary gender identity. Nonbinary individuals perform their gender, just like individuals who identify as male or female. However, as we you have seen, the gender performance of nonbinary individuals is not strictly based on typical societal norms surrounding masculinity or femininity. Instead, nonbinary individuals create their own unique gender performance, which may be outside the boundaries of traditional gender norms.

Butler's theory acknowledges the importance of recognition of nonbinary individuals' gender identity. Nonbinary individuals' gender identities may not fit into societal

norms, and they may face discrimination and marginalization as a result. Acknowledging nonbinary individuals' gender identity, pronouns, and gender expressions is crucial to creating an inclusive and accepting society. Butler's theory allows for the deconstruction of traditional binary gender norms, allowing for the creation and recognition of nonbinary gender. This means that allowing for multiple gender identities is necessary to create an inclusive society.

6.2 Gershon

One way of making sense of the dynamics of nonbinary lives is applying Ilana Gershon's (2019) theory of porous social orders. This theory addresses how individuals navigate and interact with the various social structures that shape their lives. Gershon argues that social orders are permeable, and individuals draw upon multiple orders to construct their identities and negotiate the world around them. Rather than seeing social orders as monolithic entities that individuals must either fully embrace or reject, Gershon argues that people are constantly moving between different orders and drawing upon different sources of authority to make sense of their experiences. This fluidity allows individuals to construct multifaceted identities unique and meaningful to them.

For nonbinary individuals, this fluidity is essential due to the limited representation and recognition of their identities in many societal structures. Nonbinary individuals may navigate multiple alternative social orders, such as queer communities, online communities, and chosen families, to find spaces where they can be fully seen and affirmed. The creation of new social structures for/by nonbinary people can help to fill gaps in existing societal structures and challenge binary assumptions.

The creation of nonbinary-specific communities and networks can provide important avenues for recognition and affirmation. While the challenges of constructing and asserting nonbinary identities in a world organized around binary gender distinctions are apparent, the potential for new forms of recognition and affirmation through the creation of new social structures and the renegotiation of existing ones is possible. This theory suggests that societal structures should be *more* porous and flexible, allowing for greater fluidity and diversity in dominating social orders.

As I have suggested above, efforts to import knowledge and understanding from queer/nonbinary social orders has the potential to increase equality in dominant social orders. This information also enables nonbinary people to be recognised as themselves and be read as nonbinary when the general population becomes informed enough to look beyond the binary. This makes the porosity of social orders extremely important, and as Gershon argues as well, it should be encouraged. Through the circulation of knowledge, we may slowly come closer to the nonbinary utopia that the research participants could only dream of before.

7 Conclusion & Future of Research

This project has attempted to fill some of the gaps in the research concerning Finnish gender diversity. By focusing on the experiences of nonbinary people, this thesis is a humble contribution to the ethnography of western nonbinary people. I used online forums to conduct participant observation, interviews with nonbinary people, and reflected on my own experiences as a member of 'the community'. I also traced the history of gender diversity and the development of queer anthropology in the Euro-American and Finnish contexts. I have gone through many of the challenges that nonbinary people face in Finland, without forgetting the positive aspects of being nonbinary. With Gershon's theory, I illustrated how porous social orders can be discovered in nonbinary people's lives and how knowledge from queer social orders can steer the cisheteronormative dominant social order to be more inclusive and equal. Overall, this thesis had multiple goals, but the main objective was to create more visibility for nonbinary identities and let them tell their own stories. By amplifying the voices of a marginalized group, I hope to be of service to the people I am writing about and contribute to a more inclusive society where all genders are visible, respected, and celebrated. I hope that this thesis is a part of a rapidly growing body of works on gender diversity and can contribute to a better understanding of nonbinary people's lives and experiences.

However, this thesis barely scrapes the surface of what there is to explore through the experiences of gender minorities. As mentioned in the beginning, it is important to account for intersectionality when researching gender, so there is plenty of work to be done in examining the intersectionality of race, class, nationality, and other identities among nonbinary individuals. There also needs to be further research on how nonbinary individuals navigate healthcare systems that are not designed to accommodate their identities and the kinds of implications that has in their lives. One aspect that the research participants brought up was the seemingly significant overlap between gender diversity and neurodivergence. Even my small sample had multiple neurodivergent individuals. The research could benefit both communities and shed light on the specific ways in which people on both spectrums relate to the world and the intersection between the two.

Much of the research on gender minorities often revolves around medical and social transition, but it needs to extend to life after the fact as well. Kinship, aging, careers, day-to-day lives etc. all contain a treasure-trove of information that is yet to be explored. It is worth investigating the experiences of nonbinary individuals in the workplace, including the challenges they face in terms of job discrimination and job satisfaction. Also important is how nonbinary individuals develop and maintain relationships with romantic and sexual partners within a heteronormative society. Analysing how nonbinary genders are represented in media and pop culture would shed light on the perceptions of the general population, and how nonbinary people view themselves. As many of the research participants, nonbinary people often become involved in queer activism. Therefore, there should also be research into the role of gender diverse people in social and political activism in the western world.

Beyond doing specific research on gender minorities, it would be crucial to include them in research that is already being done into topics that impact their everyday lives just like everyone else's. This is closely related to the scientific and statistical visibility of gender minorities discussed previously. As also discussed in the trans research panel (2022), research on general things like employment, education, and health etc. should include a trans/nonbinary perspective as well. Equally important is the inclusion of gender minorities in the *researchers* as well. These additions may bring to light some new interpretations of old topics that can significantly change the way it is understood. In the same vein, there needs to be multidisciplinary research done to provide a more well-rounded understanding the phenomena involving trans/nonbinary people.

There is so much to do that one researcher's lifetime could not cover even a tiny bit, so there needs to be a joint effort to get this thing rolling. Fortunately, the past few years have indicated a continuous growth of research into gender minorities, so we are heading in the right direction.

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