

GENDER IS NOT A FIXED BOX. THE EXPERIENCE OF CONSTRUING ONESELF AS A NON-BINARY PERSON THROUGH PERSONAL CONSTRUCT PSYCHOLOGY (PCP)

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Abstract: In this study, we wanted to explore the experiences and personal narratives of five non-binary individuals. We did so using the theoretical framework of Personal Construct Psychology and focused on the relational and subjective aspects of gendered identities. We used semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to explore the participants' gender constructions. In particular, we focused on the relationship between the construction of oneself as a non-binary person and the relational environment, as well as on discrimination and the role of activism in self-narrative.

The research offers a multifaceted understanding of the development and maintenance of non-binary identities, highlighting the importance of an inclusive and context-sensitive approach to gender in psychological practice and theory.

Keywords: Gender Identity, Non-binary, Transgender, Sexual Identity, Activism.

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1. WHAT IS "NON-BINARY?"

The term "non-binary" refers to a set of gendered identities that go beyond male-female binarism (Schudson & Morgenroth, 2023). Non-binary people can experience their gender in very different ways (Borrelli, 2025; Rosati et al. 2025): for some being non-binary means rejecting the binary system altogether; for others it might involve moving between genders, identifying partially with one, identifying with a third, or not having a gender at all. These variations are described with terms like *genderqueer*, *genderfluid* or *agender* and reflect different experiences (Coleman et al. 2022; Matsuno & Budge, 2017; Rosati et. al. 2025). These labels tell us about

possible commonalities¹ in construing one's gender, but they do not narrate or represent the embodied and personal experience of individuals. Our research seeks to move beyond labels and categorizations (Gemignani, 2025) to understand the development of gendered experiences of identity for and with the *person*. To do this, we conducted semi-structured interviews with five non-binary Italian people. In Italy, being or identifying with a non-normative gender is not easy, especially because of the persistent invisibilization of Queer communities, the absence of legal recognition beyond the man/woman binary, and a broader cultural framework that continues to resist gender non-normativity. The country's legislation does not

¹ "To the extent that one person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by another, his psychological processes are similar to those of the other person" (Kelly, 1955/1991, Vol. 2, p. 5).

recognize a third legal gender option, and the way Italian language is commonly reified as a strict binary, despite its potential for change, further complicates daily interactions by increasing the likelihood of misgendering (Rosati et al., 2022). These difficulties can be compounded by geographical and cultural disparities: while urban centers may be relatively open to diversity, rural areas tend to maintain more conservative attitudes. A strong catholic tradition continues to shape dominant norms and moral frameworks, influencing both public discourses and individual self-perceptions of gender and sexuality. Institutionally, access to gender-affirming medical and legal procedures requires mandatory evaluations and approval of psychiatrists or psychologists, and legal authorities. This reinforces an asymmetrical power dynamic in which access to transition remains contingent upon external validation rooted in a longstanding medicalization and pathologization of trans* identities (Rosati, 2024; Rosati et al. 2025). Legal protections for queer individuals in Italy remain limited: there is no specific anti-discrimination law protecting queer individuals and while the 2016 civil union law provided partial recognition for same-gender couples it excludes some rights such as adoption or access to assisted reproduction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing research depicts a concerning picture in which non-binary people experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts and perceived risk of violence and discrimination (Aparicio-García et al. 2018; Monro, 2019; Scandurra et al. 2019). Reviews of the academic literature point out the lack of specific contributions on the experience of non-binary people (Bower-Brown et al. 2021; Davis, 2018; Matsuno & Budge, 2017; Suen et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2019). Rarely does this research include the voices of the people involved (Monro, 2019). In addition, it is common for research to

aim at figuring out how professionals should *deal with* non-binary people, rather than trying to *understand* them. And then there's another issue: many tools we use in research still fail to offer gender options that reflect the diversity of experience (Suen et al., 2020). That said there's also good news. In recent years an increasing number of qualitative studies on non-binary experiences has been published, instead of those that focus only on healthcare procedures or statistical analyses (Aparicio-García, 2018; Bower-Brown et al., 2021; Rosati et al. 2025; Cuzzolaro & Milano, 2018; Luciani, 2021; Mirabella et al., 2020; Opperman, 2018). These new contributions are helping to reframe the narrative and, hopefully, to bring the voices of non-binary people at the center of the conversation, where they belong. Our goal is not so much to reveal fragments of a given reality but rather to be involved in a process of "intersubjective confrontation" (Armezzani & Chiari, 2015). To this goal, a narrative approach was most suitable to: a) rigorously explore the experiences of non-binary identity; b) enhance the development of constructive alternativism²; c) give voice to individual experiences through semi-structured interview (Stiles, 1999).

The data collected through the interviews were subsequently analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), a method particularly well-suited for investigating sensitive issues, such as those related to identity (Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2000; Testoni et al., 2017). Thematic analysis gave us the tools to listen to the voices in front of us, not just as sources of information, but as people actively making sense of who they are. This method allowed us to go beyond a mere categorization of responses, enabling a deeper engagement with the participants' meaning-making processes. Rather than treating the interview data as static or objective, we approached them as processes or dynamic expressions of lived experience, shaped by the interplay between individual subjectivities and broader sociocultural discourses.

² According to this principle, in fact, there is no objective reality to be discovered but "We assume that all our current interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement" (Kelly, 1955, in Epting, 1990, p. 27).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE DATA ANALYSIS

In academic works *gender* is often not defined in itself but only in relation to other experiences such as *gender identity*, *expression*, and *roles* (Coleman et al., 2022). When attempts are made to define it, gender is typically framed as a sociocultural construct of “men” and “women”, linked to biological sex differences (Andersen, 1993; Buikema & Van der Tuin, 2009). From a PCP perspective our concern is not with defining gender as a real, fixed entity. Neither do we see people as passively shaped by social norms. Rather they actively interpret and give meaning to these norms (Cross & Epting, 2015). The categories we use to classify experience, such as “male”, “female”, “heterosexual”, “homosexual” (or even “non-binary”), are invented and maintained through use (Epting, Raskin, & Burke, 1994). Yet we are fully aware that the implications of constructions of sexual identity and gender are *real*. As Jacobson et al. (2020) suggest, if there is one definitive truth about gender, it is that it is always relative to context, to perspective, and to personal construing. To anticipate experiences related to gender, we draw upon a culturally shared system of constructs (Palazzolo, 2011), which may exhibit formal characteristics such as tight³ relations between constructs, regnancy⁴ and constellatory⁵ construing, but not necessarily shared personal meanings. Regnancy refers to a type of superordinate construct that attributes its elements to distinct categories according to a dichotomous logic: either you are *male* or you are *female*, either you are a *man* or you are a *woman*. This type of construing excludes any possibility of overlap or ambiguity between categories: being male, for example, automatically implies not being female, just as identifying as a man excludes the

possibility of identifying as a woman. The constellatory interpretation, on the other hand, refers to stereotypical anticipations (Bannister & Fransella, 1986) according to which being male or female implies adherence (or not) to specific ways of being and acting in the world. This way of structuring gender-related constructs suggests the possibility of adopting, often at low levels of awareness⁶, constructs that rest on a normative and prescriptive social system. This tends to constrain expressive and identity possibilities by adopting superficial or face-value anticipations, such as believing that someone who has a penis is a man and therefore has certain interests and attitudes, whereas someone who has a vulva is a woman and has just as many, often opposing, ones. While the formal organization of these constructs is socially available the meanings attributed to them are always personally construed and embedded in individual histories and relational contexts. In this sense, shared constructs provide a common symbolic framework, whereas personal meanings reflect how individuals appropriate, negotiate, or resist that framework within their own construct systems.

4. SAMPLE

To carry out our research, we spoke with five Italian people who self-identify as non-binary. Contact was made informally through local volunteer associations in Padua. For the sake of privacy and confidentiality we assigned each participant a pseudonym. We want to emphasize that these are not just case studies or anonymous data points, these are people and their voices are at the heart of this work. In designing and conducting this research, we tried to remain as close as possible to the lived realities of the

³ "A tight construct is one which leads to unvarying predictions" (Kelly, 1955/1991, Vol. 2, p. 7/1991).

⁴ "A regnant construct is a kind of superordinate construct which assigns each of its elements to a category on an all-or-none basis, as in classical logic. It tends to be nonabstractive." Kelly, 1955/1991, Vol. 2, p. 7).

⁵ "A constellatory construct is one that fixes the other realm memberships of its elements. This is stereotyped or typological thinking." (Kelly, 1955/1991, Vol. 2, p. 6)

⁶ "The level of cognitive awareness ranges from high to low. A high-level construct is one which is readily expressed in socially effective symbols; whose alternatives are both readily accessible, which falls well within the range of convenience of the client's major constructions; and which is not suspended by its superordinating constructs." (Kelly, 1955/1991, Vol.2, p. 6/1991).

participants not only by listening attentively to what they shared, but also by engaging with the process in a committed way, both personally and ethically (Armezzani, Grimaldi, Pezzullo, 2003). Our approach was grounded in a sincere effort to reflect the complexity of individual experiences rather than to impose predefined categories or assumptions, as we explain in the following paragraphs dedicated to the creation of the interview.

5. INSTRUMENT: THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

To gain a broad range of perspectives we included sources from the grey literature, such as blogs, collections of testimonies (Twist, et al. 2020; Yaedon-Lee, 2016), and reports that represented the voices and experiences of non-binary people. We submitted the preliminary version of the interview guide to a collaborator of the project who identifies as a non-binary person. While we are fully aware that the experience of a single individual cannot capture the full complexity of the non-binary population, we deemed it useful to incorporate a non-cisnormative perspective. Because our aim was not to generalize, we consider each interview as a unique and unrepeatable intersubjective encounter (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2010). We kept the questions loose⁷ enough to accommodate the variety of experiences and meanings (fig. 1) and tight enough to allow the creation of initial anticipations that could be reviewed during the interviews themselves. The order of the questions below does not necessarily correspond to the order followed in the interviews as each interview developed in response to the content that emerged.

fig.1. TABLE OF QUESTIONS

- What pronoun do you prefer to use to describe yourself?
 - What expression do you prefer to define yourself?
 - How would you explain the meaning of non-binary to someone who is not familiar with this term?
 - What does it mean to you to be a non-binary person?
 - What is gender for you?
 - From the moment in which you recognized yourself as non-binary how has your life changed? And what has remained the same?
 - Thinking back to the path that led you to recognize yourself as non-binary how did you come to identify yourself in this way?
 - What is important for me to know to better understand this experience?
 - What advice would you give to another person who is beginning to identify as non-binary?
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The aim of the questions was to enable the identification and elaboration of core and role constructs and to understand their experiences. According to Kelly (1955/1991, p. 482), “*Core constructs* are those that govern people’s maintenance processes – that is, those by which they maintain their identities and existence”. These constructs are deeply embedded in the person’s lived experience. The metaphor of the “core” refers to something essential, like the seed within a fruit: it is central but not separate from the rest of the person (Butt, 2013). Among these, the concept of a *core role structure* is particularly relevant. Core role relationships are those through which people define themselves in relation to significant others, and they are central to the experience of identity and agency. While the self has often been considered an internal pre-social entity Kelly’s theory suggests it is a construction that emerges from participating in meaningful relational roles (Walker, 2016). We

⁷ “A loose construct is a construct that leads to variable predictions but maintains its identity” (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 565).

consider that people make meaning of their experiences by organizing the continuous flow of events according to recurring themes (Kelly, 1955/1991), which help to create a life “plot” endowed with coherence and continuity over time (Neimeyer, 2000). In formulating these guiding questions, we also kept in mind that narratives reveal the role of social context in the definition and expression of core constructs as well as their change (Bakhtin, 1981; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004).

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE DATA

After collecting the audio-recordings, we classified the constructs according to their formal characteristics (regnancy, constellatory, preemptive⁸, propositional⁹, loose and tight construing) and to the thematic content. This classification allowed us to organize the data systematically and to reflect on the processes associated with constructs involved. Thinking in terms of processes, rather than relying solely on static classificatory categories, allowed us to shift the focus from asking *what* something is to exploring *how* people construct meanings. For example we weren't interested in finding a universal definition of non-binary identity. So we didn't ask “*what does it mean to be non-binary person?*”. We asked what it means *to the person* we interviewed, *how* they construct their non-binary identity, and *how* this identity has channeled their experience. Aware that there could be similarities and differences, we focused our attention on the personal meanings of the people interviewed.

We then identified the recurring themes that the participants shared. We approached the data with the expectations, informed by both academic literature and grey sources, that central themes included experiences of discrimination,

interpersonal relationships and coming out. As the analysis progressed, however, additional layers of meaning emerged, such as the role of activism and the anticipation to be understood. This iterative process led us to focus on four key areas: gender identity, anticipation of being understood, discrimination and activism. We present them in two paired sections:

- 6.1. *The self in relation: seeking understanding, not permission.* This section examines how interviewees construct their gender identity in relation to others, highlighting how this process is intertwined with expectations of understanding, acceptance and/or discrimination.

- 6.2. *From pain to new self-narratives.* This section explores how experiences of discrimination or the anticipation of it, acted as a catalyst for some interviewees leading them to develop new self-narratives through activism.

The decision to organize the results into two paired sections was therefore analytical and not a priori, it is aimed at capturing the relational and processual nature of meaning-making. In particular, gender identity emerged as closely intertwined with anticipations of being understood or misunderstood, while experiences of discrimination often functioned as turning points that promoted new narratives through activism.

6.1 The self in relation: seeking understanding not permission

The participants organized the narratives related to personal constructions of gender as propositional constructs not bound to rigid implicative logics such as “if you are male, then you are man”. Rather, gender was constructed as a subjective and changing relationship between the self and the world. This perspective sees gender as an individual, relational and transformative process (Dell'Aversano, 2009).

For example, two participants, said:

⁸ “A construct which preempts its elements for membership in its own realm exclusively is called a preemptive construct. This is the 'nothing but' type of construction - 'If this is a ball it is nothing but a ball.'” (Kelly, 1955/1991, Vol. 2, p. 6).

⁹ “A construct that does not carry any implication regarding the belonging of its elements to other domains is a propositional construct. This is uncontaminated construing” (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 562).

«Being non-binary is the freedom to say: 'I don't have to be just this, I can be this and something else too'». (Luce)

«For me, it is transcending a fixed label, to explore what one feels inside that one wants to explore». (Raffa)

This perspective considers gender as a construct that does not carry fixed implications about the belonging of its elements to other domains. This view opens up the possibility of reading gender as an entanglement (Brewis et al., 2025). Such entanglement can be understood as having expressions that are simultaneously culturally inspired and subjectively interpreted and experienced, as personal construct systems mediate between shared cultural meanings and individual sense-making (Kelly, 1955/1991; Miletić, 2016; Miletić, 2025; Craighero & Ottaviani, 2025; Procter & Parry, 1978).

Sex and gender are not seen as separate, static categories but dynamically intertwined. Central to this process is the dynamic interplay between the individual's efforts to express themselves and their anticipations of being mis/understood by others. For our participants these anticipations are a lens to navigate social spaces and anticipate whether it is safe to self-express.

«It's not something I only bring into play with people who are activists like me or who are into queer activism, so to speak. It's something I bring into play whenever I sense I can communicate in an honest and non-judgmental way. It's really a bodily feeling of openness». (Luce)

The need to feel understood is therefore not simply a desire for permission, agreement or categorical recognition, but a deeply relational experience rooted in subjective meaning-making. «So usually, outside of my group, I'm very aware of gender. Within my safe group of people, I don't perceive it at all. I know it's there, and I

know they know I'm trans masc nb¹⁰, no one questions it, everyone uses the right pronouns». Interviewees described the need of being understood as emerging particularly in contexts where curiosity and openness replace preemptive or rigid constructs. Understanding, in this sense, is not about fully grasping the other in objective terms, but about engaging in an experience of sociality¹¹, a process of relational construction in which the other genuinely values me and is valued by me. Crucially, participants do not always require others to "get it right" to understand them in every aspect. However they expect their interlocutors to approach them with sincerity, flexibility and respect.

«If I sense that the person is open and mature enough not to take things for granted, and if I perceive there's curiosity, then I can express myself». (Luce)

Social support and validation were identified as key factors that sustain psychological well-being (Muñoz-Plaza, Quinn & Rounds, 2002; Mustanski & Liu, 2013; Ryan et al., 2010; Sheets & Mohr, 2009; Shilo & Savaya, 2011; Weinhardt et al., 2019), especially for those navigating gender-diverse or non-normative identities. While open environments can allow for an expansion of one's personal constructs and a freer exploration of identity, the perception of threats¹² may constrict¹³ construing. Such constriction may entail limiting self-expression to safer groups or developing regnant or preemptive views of others as either affirming or invalidating.

While affirming approaches play a crucial role in validating marginalized identities, PCP reminds us that assertion should not become prescriptive (Epting et al., 1994). The goal is not to reinforce a singular truth but to facilitate the conditions for the ongoing creation and elaboration of meaning.

¹⁰ "Trans masc non-binary" refers to people who identify as non-binary and feel a connection to masculinity. Often assigned female at birth, they may express their gender in masculine ways without identifying as men.

¹¹ "To the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another, he may play a role in a social process involving the other person" (Kelly, 1955/1991, Vol. 2, p. 5).

¹² "Threat is the awareness of an imminent comprehensive change in one's core structures" (Kelly, 1955/1991, Vol. 2, p. 7).

¹³ "Constriction occurs when a person reduces their field of perception in order to minimize obvious incompatibilities" (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 532).

This does not mean, however, that one should deny or question another's experience in the name of some abstract search for "the truth" about identity. Accepting what someone shares about their identity calls for active, respectful engagement. Acceptance, then, is not a passive or static stance; it is an active, ethical, and reciprocal process (Gilberto, 2017) that involves effort, curiosity, and openness to the other's world. On the one hand, affirming and asserting practices play a reassuring and validating function for the individual and group. On the other hand, when not driven by human curiosity and relational involvement, they might limit the possibility to imagine, explore, and redefine oneself beyond existing categories.

6.2 From pain to new self-narratives

Recent literature on the mental health of non-binary people employs the Minority Stress model to examine how social contexts explain mental health disparities between binary and non-binary people (Lingiardi & Nardelli, 2007; Meyer, 2003). This model points out that non-binary people commonly experience specific forms of stress, such as the non-recognition of their gender identity, misgendering¹⁴ and dead-naming¹⁵, and gender dysphoria¹⁶ (Abreu et al., 2022; Rosati et al., 2025, Testa et al. 2015). In addition, a general state of burden seems to be related to the pressure and responsibility that non-binary people feel to reassure cisgender¹⁷ people about confusion or difficulty in dealing with non-binary identity and to educate others about their gender identity, including health professionals. The model develops along three areas: a) the experience of

discrimination, b) perceived stigma, and c) internalized transphobia¹⁸. Following this structure, we divide the results into these three areas.

6.2.1. Discrimination

Four out of five participants experienced discrimination related to their gender identity, ranging from explicit situations of violence or marginalization to more subtle and frequent microaggressions or pervasive devaluations of who they are (Nadal, 2008; 2011; 2013). This finding is consistent with the literature on the topic (Anzani, 2019; Anzani, Sacchi & Prunas, 2021). For example, one of the interviewees describes a microaggression that he experienced:

«Even though we have been in the office together for a year and a half, he continues to call me by my legal name, continues to use feminine pronouns, and continues to ask me questions like: "how can you women wear high heels all day?". (...) That's what bothers me. The assumption is: "This is your gender therefore your whole being as a person comes from this"». (Raffa)

The experience of lack of recognition can also emerge from institutional dynamics, for instance: «in medical context, when others decide what you are [...]. For me, this is one thing that makes the trans experience very difficult in the health sector». (Raffa)

Some people might choose to cope with this type of experience with constriction to limit their field to what is manageable and limiting involvement in

¹⁴ The term refers to the use of language that does not correctly reflect the gender with which a person identifies. It can be a pronoun (he/him, she/her, they/them) or a manner of address (Mr., Ms.) (Coleman et al. 2022).

¹⁵ The term refers to the practice of using the legal name of a trans* or non-binary person even when that person has requested the use of their chosen name (Coleman et al. 2022).

¹⁶ "Gender Dysphoria describes a state of distress or discomfort that may be experienced because a person's gender identity differs from that which is physically and/or socially attributed to their sex assigned at birth. Gender Dysphoria is also a diagnostic term in the DSM-5 denoting an incongruence between the sex assigned at birth and experienced gender accompanied by distress. Not all transgender and gender diverse people experience gender dysphoria." (Coleman et al. 2022, p. 252).

¹⁷ "Cisgender refers to people whose current gender identity corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth." (Coleman et al. 2022, p. 252).

¹⁸ We have used the term "transphobia" because it is much better known, but in recent decades it has been replaced by the term transnegativity, which derives from homonegativity. According to Graglia's definition it refers to "(...) the set of cultural representations, social practices, individual beliefs, and interpersonal behaviors that invalidate, demean, or attack LGBTI+ behaviors, identities, and communities" (Graglia, 2019, p. 139).

situations that are potentially threatening to their identity system. For example Jan says: «Maybe I limit myself a bit on certain things, but when I come across a bigot on the street who tells me 'you are an abortion of nature' I say 'Well, fuck you' and I close my ears (...) ». (Jan)

Another possibility could be to face invalidation¹⁹ with aggressiveness²⁰ by actively seeking spaces in which one's gender identity can be accepted and legitimized even if it does not conform to the dominant expectations on identity.

In any case we believe it is important to underline that the way in which non-binary people deal with discrimination cannot be configured as a passive reaction to discrimination. Rather, it is an elaborative choice²¹ through which the person can preserve their own identity in a world that often does not recognize and legitimize it. The words of one of the people interviewed are illustrative here:

«I can also die of hunger and hardship, as long as they recognise me as a person. What is superfluous for you is essential for me; what is important for you is something in life that may or may not be there, and that does not identify me at all». (Raffa)

Being and considering yourself a person depends on being recognized as a person by others. 'Personhood' is constructed through a deep and broad sense of similarity with others, a shared identity that encompasses and gives shape to other aspects of who we are. We suffer when this recognition is denied or even when we anticipate being excluded from it (Giliberto, 2017).

So gender discrimination is not limited to an isolated act or event but can profoundly affect the very possibility of building oneself as a recognized and recognizable person within one's

community and the broader social context. As numerous studies show, experiencing discrimination on regular basis can have a negative impact on mental health and well-being (Anzani, Sacchi & Prunas, 2021; Bockting et al., 2013; Bockting et al., 2020; Budge, Adelson & Howard, 2013; Frost, Fine, Torre, & Cabana, 2019; Meyer, 2003).

6.2.2. Perceived stigma

With the expression "perceived stigma" we refer to the set of anticipations that non-binary people have of being subject to discrimination (Meyer, 2003). As Goffman (1963, p. 7) stated the person can "*perceive, usually quite correctly, that regardless of what others say, they will not really accept him or her and that they are not ready to relate to him or her on an equal footing*". The perceived stigma implies a constant state of alertness and vigilance, which grows proportionally to the perception of social rejection and can contribute to high levels of chronic stress and psychological distress (Meyer, 2003; Nardelli & Lingardi, 2014; 2023).

6.2.3. Internalized transphobia

Internalized transphobia encompasses negative attitudes and emotional experiences that people may feel toward their gender identity: «In the beginning I lived it very much in secret, especially with friends and family (...) I felt wrong, different or anyway that I wouldn't be understood, that I would be made fun of...». (Germano)

«I was so afraid of being trans, I was terrified of being a lesbian... and now those are the two things that make me happiest in the world! I was afraid because I didn't know what it was, they were presented to me in a caricatured way... trans people were prostitutes, lesbians were the women who are so ugly and lame that men don't like them, and therefore they are worth less». (Raffa)

¹⁹ "Invalidation is one of the outcomes of the testing out of our construing. We act in a manner that is consistent with the ways we make sense of the world. By doing so we can consider the consequences of our behaviour. Sometimes our sense-making is contradicted by the feedback we receive about our experimentation. It is this that the term invalidation encompasses.." (Walker, M. 2004 in <https://www.pcp-net.org/encyclopaedia/invalidation.html>)

²⁰ "Aggressiveness is the active elaboration of one's perceptual field." (Kelly, 1955/1991, Vol. 2, p. 7/1991).

²¹ "A person chooses for himself that alternative in a dichotomized construct through which he anticipates the greater possibility for extension and definition of his system" (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 64).

What is presented here as "internalized transphobia" can be understood in PCP terms as the anticipation of a social or relational threat (Stoppa, 2018).

Studies on the impact of media representation in the experience of non-binary people indicate that queer people with positive role models report higher levels of well-being (Taylor, Chan & Saewyc, 2021), lower isolation (Craig et al. 2015) and being able to "make sense" of their experiences. People interviewed share that in the early stages of recognizing themselves as non-binary, they did not have at their disposal dimensions of meaning that were useful for constructing their experiences and identities. These early stages of questioning were often accompanied by a sense of loneliness, which contributed to the participants' anxiety²² as a result of being less able to anticipate significant events or processes of their life (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 495). In the following quote, Raffa expresses his anger and suffering for the absence of role or identity models in the media and in their social circles:

«If I had known someone like me when I was 15 years old, I wouldn't have been in therapy for five years, I wouldn't have attempted suicide; I wouldn't have been on antidepressants. No, all that would not have been there. And that's one thing that bothers me: I came to have all these issues because I didn't have representation, either of lesbian people or trans* people; and when I did have it, it was all filtered through straight and cis eyes, so it was even worse than not having it».

In Jan's words «I would have simply wanted to hear so many different stories [...] and be able to say: 'Wow! So, this thing that I've only just imagined, can be real!'».

As previously mentioned shared constructions of sexual identity play a role in the construction of one's own identity to the extent that the ways in which we construct our own and others' identities are in constant dialogue with the ways

we may share and consider acceptable or unacceptable (Cabitza & Vatteroni, 2021). In this interpretation of the Commonality Corollary we need to recognize ourselves (and be recognized) in a common category in order to be able to be and place ourselves among others (Giliberto, 2017). This corollary also serves as the foundation for the Sociality Corollary, which reminds us that in order to engage in social interaction and take on social roles, we should be able to understand the construction processes of the other person to attempt to see the world from their point of view. The absence of media representation and role models led some of the interviewees to enter the world of activism and by doing this craft a new narrative of their identity. Activism facilitated a redefinition of self marked by higher levels of self-esteem and empowerment (Vestergren et al. 2016), understanding the latter as "(...) a socio-psychological state of confidence in one's ability to challenge existing relations of domination" (Drury & Reicher, 2005). In literature, political queer activism is associated with high levels of well-being expressed as life satisfaction, positive affect, personal growth, social integration and vitality (Klar & Kasser, 2009). Activism is also associated with lower levels of psychological distress (Frost, et al. 2019) and positive development of transgender and non-binary identities (Valente et al. 2020). On the other hand it is also linked to higher levels of vigilance and exposure to discrimination which may increase psychological distress (Breslow et al. 2015; Valente et al. 2020). From a PCP view it might be reductive to attribute lower or higher levels of psychological stress (or well-being, depending on the variables considered) to activism per se. It is the meanings associated with people's experience of activism that need to be elicited and interpreted in order to better understand its role for non-binary individuals and communities. The participants talked about how their experiences of suffering, anger and discomfort informed the changes they hope to see in society:

²² "Anxiety is the awareness that the events with which one is confronted lie mostly outside the range of convenience of one's construct system." (1955/1991, Vol. 2, p. 7).

«(...) I never had a positive representation of being trans. I didn't know that I could be anything else but cis. This was most painful and it bothers me the most. That's why I do activism: (...) I don't want anyone else to have the same experience as me. Ultimately the way we build and see things creates them. So I think that it can be useful to have the courage to express our experiences, dreams, and struggles. If you just keep them to yourself, maybe you deny someone the chance to ask questions». (*Raffa*)

Having words to describe one's identity can be seen as a process of tightening. Tight constructs allow an experience to be anticipatable and its implications to be taken into account. The process of self-narrative involves active construction through language. In fact, language is not so much a way of representing reality as a way of creating it (Neimeyer, 2012). About the possibility of sharing one's experiences with others, one of the participants says:

«I ask you for a space but at the same time I am also giving myself a space. I see myself and I also allow myself to be seen». (*Luce*)

For them, sharing one's experiences through activism allows for a legitimization of one's identity (Vestergren et al. 2016).

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study explored lived experiences of non-binary individuals through PCP lens highlighting how gender identity emerges as a dynamic and deeply personal process, shaped by both individual meaning-making and relational contexts. Two central thematic areas emerged: the construction of gender identity in relation to others and the experience of discrimination in its various forms, alongside activism as a means of self-redefinition. Participants' narratives revealed how gender identity is shaped by personal constructs and relational environments. The anticipation of being understood or misunderstood plays a crucial role in how

individuals express themselves, engage with others, and navigate social spaces, underscoring the relational and propositional nature of identity. At the same time stories of marginalization, invalidation and social exclusion highlight the psychological burden of inhabiting identities that "deviate" from normative gender expectations. In this context activism emerges as a generative and empowering process through which individuals reclaimed agency, constructed alternative narratives and cultivated community belonging. Activism thus became a meaningful space for affirming identity and fostering connection. Furthermore, fluidity should not be seen just as loose construing. The participants described their gender identity through precise and consistent personal constructs. In some cases, being non-binary became a central and even preemptive aspect of their identity system, guiding the interpretation of other domains of experience. This suggests that non-binary identities, while fluid in content, can be tightly organized in form. Such findings prompt further reflection on the flexibility and rigidity of identity constructs and how personal construing can support or limit openness to alternative ways of being. As clinicians and researchers, these reflections invite us to understand non-binary experiences as affirming practices of identity construction.

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