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University of Southampton

Faculty of Environmental and Life Sciences

School of Psychology

What are Microaffirmations and How are they Experienced by Gender Diverse Young People?

by

Amy Brockwell

Thesis for the degree of Doctorate in Educational Psychology

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2684-1476>

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Abstract

Research has documented the negative impacts that discrimination and marginalisation can have for gender diverse young people (GDYP), including poorer mental and physical health. Microaffirmations represent one way in which individuals could work to ameliorate these impacts. Microaffirmations are affirming, inclusive acts which communicate care and concern to those from marginalised communities. To date, all literature exploring microaffirmations has been either conceptual or focused on a specific identity group. This systematic literature review used thematic synthesis to build on the current conceptual understanding of microaffirmations by drawing together all empirical literature on microaffirmations, working to develop our understanding of how microaffirmations are described by participants and researchers across identity groups and settings. It was found that microaffirmations are described in a wide range of ways, but what they have in common is how they make people feel - connected, seen and valued - and the context of discrimination and marginalisation in which they exist.

Prior to this research there was no empirical literature exploring the microaffirmation experiences of gender diverse individuals. The current study used an online survey to gather the voices of 97 GDYP, aged 16-25, from 17 countries. Participants shared a total of 142 microaffirmation experiences, which were analysed using codebook thematic analysis which resulted in 11 descriptive themes. The microaffirmation experiences shared by GDYP included the use of inclusive language, curiosity about their identity, being accepted as themselves, and seeing others who share their identity. These microaffirmations normalised their experiences, modelled what was possible and provided external validation that others saw them as they see themselves, leading to their days continuing positively, developing their confidence and connections with others. It is hoped that these findings will contribute to the development of inclusive practices at both a personal and professional level, fostering belonging and inclusion for GDYP around the world.

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List of Accompanying Materials

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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Amy Brockwell

Title of thesis: What are Microaffirmations and How are they Experienced by Gender Diverse Young People?

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

Signature:

Date: 30.05.2025

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Chapter 1 - What are Microaffirmations and How are they Experienced by Gender Diverse Young People?

1.1 Aims and Rationale

The overarching aim of my thesis was to develop our understanding of the concept of microaffirmations, particularly in relation to gender diverse young people (GDYP). By GDYP, I refer to any young person whose gender identity differs from their biological sex at birth, for example those who identify as transgender and non-binary (Cronesberry & and Ward, 2023). I was motivated to focus my research on exploring ways to support GDYP, recognising the challenges they face worldwide. This was only reinforced by the recent actions of the Supreme Court in the United Kingdom (*For Women Scotland Ltd (Appellant) v The Scottish Ministers (Respondent)*, 2025), which stipulated that having a gender recognition certificate of the female gender does not permit someone to fall within the definition of a woman, and the White House in America (The White House, 2025) which rescinded all gender inclusive documents and guidance published by the Department of Education.

There is a vast range of research documenting the discrimination experienced by gender diverse individuals. Truszczynski (2022) found that gender diverse individuals experience, on average, at least one discriminatory event per day; these experiences most commonly included being misgendered and hearing about anti-trans news stories (Truszczynski et al., 2022). GDYP were found to be more likely to experience both verbal and physical attacks than their cisgender peers (Aparicio-García et al., 2018), and described experiencing discrimination throughout the school environment, including the curriculum, setting, peers and teachers (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). This discrimination and marginalisation has been shown to have a significant negative impact on individuals' mental and physical health, including greater levels of depression, anxiety, substance misuse and suicidal behaviours (DeSon & Andover, 2024; Drabish & Theeke, 2022; Klinger et al., 2024). It is therefore critical that research works to understand what can be done to support this community.

When considering where to position my thesis more specifically, I learned about microaffirmations - small, inclusive acts which affirm and validate individuals from marginalised

groups, supporting them to succeed (Rowe, 2008). I was intrigued by this concept and interested in its applicability to my future work as an Educational Psychologist, recognising the positive impact that understanding microaffirmations could have for GDYP and the educators and professionals supporting them. I was initially interested in exploring the impacts of microaffirmations, understanding how they could be used to support GDYP's wellbeing. However, I quickly discovered that microaffirmation research is still in its infancy and that there was not enough research to be able to develop scales and measures to make this possible. Therefore, my focus moved to develop the understanding of the concept of microaffirmations, both as a whole and more specifically for GDYP.

When talking about my thesis with others, I am often asked about how microaffirmations differ from affirmations, this is something I have developed clarity on during my time exploring the literature. It is important to note that the concept of microaffirmations was developed in relation to microaggressions (or micro-inequities), rather than affirmations, and so are not seen as a *type* of affirmation, but instead they are seen as their own distinct concept which works to counter discrimination and marginalisation. Microaffirmations are described as seemingly small actions which have a positive impact for socially devalued groups because they convey messages which counter discriminatory experiences (Rowe, 2008; Sue et al., 2020). Where anyone can experience an affirmation, only those who feel socially devalued or have experienced threats to their identity will experience a microaffirmation. For example, most people would appreciate being welcomed into a lecture but this would not have a significant impact on their feelings of inclusion and identity, however for someone who feels like they do not belong in this space this may be an important experience which affirms that they should be there, making it a microaffirmation.

When doing preliminary reading into microaffirmations, I found a number of papers and books which described microaffirmations from a conceptual perspective (Boyce-Rosen & Mecedon-Mann, 2023; Pittinsky, 2016; Rowe, 2008; Sue et al., 2020). There was also a range of empirical papers which explored individuals' experiences of microaffirmations (Demetriou et al., 2023; Ellis et al., 2019; Koch et al., 2020). All the empirical papers explored the microaffirmation experiences of particular groups, such as specific racial, gender and sexual identities, or a particular demographic

group, such as students. This research is important to understand the unique experiences of these groups, recognising that microaffirmations will differ across groups. However, there was a gap in the literature between the broad, conceptual ideas about microaffirmations across marginalised groups, and the empirical evidence of singular identity groups. Therefore, this systematic literature review aims to synthesise the available empirical research, build on our conceptual understanding of microaffirmations, and identify common themes across groups.

In relation to my empirical research, I decided to expand our understanding of ways in which educators, professionals and individuals could support GDYP. Microaffirmations felt like a helpful concept to research, as understanding them would provide small, actionable ways that professionals and educators could support GDYP in everyday life. There has been recent research exploring the microaffirmation experiences of queer and transgender people of colour (Paul et al., 2025). However, to date, there has been no research exploring gender diverse young people's experiences of microaffirmations. This study, therefore, aimed to gain the voices of GDYP, to develop our understanding of what GDYP consider to be a microaffirmation, what makes these experiences affirming and what the consequences of these small affirmation experiences are. My hope is that this research will provide a space for GDYP's voices, sharing what supports them to feel affirmed in daily life. This information is intended to empower professionals and educators to feel more confident in understanding and recognising ways that they, as an individual, can have a positive impact on the lives of GDYP.

1.2 Ontology and Epistemology

This thesis is based on a relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. My view is that microaffirmations are shaped by personal experiences, cultural norms, and social context, which aligns with a relativist ontology, assuming that there is no single objective reality (Wright, 2002). Similarly, an interpretivist epistemology views knowledge as being constructed (Levers, 2013). Across both papers, knowledge is viewed as being co-constructed between researchers and participants, and meaning is understood as being developed through language, context, and interpretation.

The systematic literature review focuses on understanding how microaffirmations are experienced and understood across different settings and identity groups. Underpinned by a relativist ontology, I used thematic synthesis to interpret and integrate the findings from 19 qualitative papers exploring people's experiences of microaffirmations. In these studies, researchers either introduced the concept of microaffirmations to participants or applied their own interpretive frameworks during data analysis. This highlights an interpretivist epistemology, recognising that the understanding of microaffirmations developed through this process has been co-constructed by both researchers and participants (Hammersley, 2012).

The empirical paper aimed to explore individuals' experiences of microaffirmations, with a specific focus on the unique experiences of GDYP. While this research is primarily grounded in a relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, it was also informed by a pragmatic approach (Pratt, 2016). In addition to analysing participants' qualitative descriptions of microaffirmations, a numerical component was incorporated to identify broader patterns. Pragmatism provided methodological flexibility, enabling the integration of qualitative thematic analysis with quantitative pattern recognition. This approach acknowledges that while microaffirmation experiences are deeply personal and shaped by individual context, they may also reflect wider social patterns or systemic dynamics. Pragmatism complimented my interpretivist stance by allowing the inclusion of quantitative insights to enrich understanding, without claiming a singular or objective truth.

1.3 Reflexivity and Axiology

Given this thesis is grounded in a relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, recognising the role that I, as the researcher, have on the data analysis and findings is important.

I am a cisgender, White woman who lives in the United Kingdom. I do not feel that I have experienced marginalisation during my life, due to working and studying in predominantly female fields (primary education and psychology). My interest in a thesis exploring microaffirmations, and particularly microaffirmations experienced by GDYP stems from my passion about young people's wellbeing. At present, GDYP are growing up in a world where they do not always experience the inclusion they deserve, instead often experiencing discrimination and marginalisation (Drabish &

Theeke, 2022; Reisner et al., 2015; Truszczynski et al., 2022). As can be seen by the research shared throughout this thesis, these experiences are having significantly harmful consequences for these young people's health and wellbeing. I know from working in schools that many adults feel uncertain about how best to support GDYP, so when I heard about the concept of microaffirmations I thought this was an important concept to better understand. By understanding the microaffirmation experiences of GDYP, I believe we will be able to inform the support networks around them, enhancing GDYP's experiences of affirmation and inclusion.

I was conscious of my position throughout the research process, recognising that as I have not experienced marginalisation, I have also not experienced the microaffirmations I was researching. I was therefore grateful for the guidance of my supervisors, who are experienced gender researchers and have their own personal experiences of marginalisation. This helped me to shape this thesis in a compassionate and inclusive way, by supporting me to identify and consider different perspectives. In addition, I sought the advice of a wonderful expert-by-experience, a gender diverse young person, when writing my empirical survey. They were able to ensure that the questions were accessible and did not include any unintended microaggressions of which I may not have been aware. It was important to me to seek the support of people who had a personal understanding of marginalisation and microaffirmation experiences to support me to capture and interpret participants experiences in an inclusive way.

1.4 Dissemination plan

The two research papers in this thesis have been written with the intention of being published in peer-reviewed journals. For this reason, the papers are written to the requirements of the journals in which I hope to publish. The journal I am looking to submit my systematic literature review to is 'Current Psychology'. This is a peer-reviewed journal, with an impact factor of 2.5, which is described as "a journal for diverse perspectives on diverse psychological issues" (*Current Psychology*, 2025). This journal has been chosen as its focus on diverse research captures the broad range of fields (such as race, disability, gender and sexuality) included in my review. In addition, it has

previously published an empirical paper exploring culturally diverse students experiences of microaffirmations (Koch et al., 2020), which is included in the review.

The empirical paper will be submitted to the 'International Journal of Transgender Health'. This journal has been chosen due to its wide reach, with an impact factor of 10.5, its focus on supporting gender diverse populations and its commitment to international research, as this reflects the content of my empirical paper. Both the journals selected offer the opportunity to publish open access which would allow the research to be accessed by professionals who would not otherwise have access to papers published in paywalled journals. I have also been accepted to present my empirical paper as a poster at the International School Psychology Association (ISPA) 2025 Conference. This will provide the opportunity to share my findings directly with those who can use these to support GDYP in schools, which was a key part of my motivation to engage in this research.

Chapter 2 - What are Microaffirmations? How Participants and Researchers Describe

Microaffirmation Experiences – A Systematic Literature Review

2.1 Abstract

Microaffirmations are defined as small, affirming, inclusive acts that communicate care and concern, and occur where people wish to help others to succeed (Rowe, 2008). Microaffirmations represent one way in which we could ameliorate the effects of marginalisation and discrimination, by fostering inclusion, recognition and belonging. To date, all of the research exploring microaffirmation experiences has been carried out in relation to specific identity groups or contexts. This systematic literature review builds on the current understanding of microaffirmations, by exploring how microaffirmation experiences are described, by both participants and researchers, across identity groups and contexts. To do this, 19 qualitative research papers were analysed using thematic synthesis. It was found that people describe microaffirmations in a wide range of ways, including gestures of inclusion, supportive acts and representation in the environment. What they have in common is the context of discrimination and marginalisation in which they exist, and their positive impact, making people feel connected, seen and valued.

2.2 Introduction

Belonging is a fundamental human need that motivates human behaviour (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). A person feels a secure sense of belonging when they feel connected to a social group (Dunning, 2011) that makes them feel accepted, safe, and valued (Allen et al., 2024). Being a part of a social group develops a person's social identity, meaning that they perceive greater similarities to others in this group and greater differences to those outside the group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner & Reynolds, 2012). Having a strong social identity and sense of belonging is related to greater wellbeing, self-esteem, motivation and engagement (Allen et al., 2024; Harris & Orth, 2020; van Kessel et al., 2025). However, although forming social groups has a number of benefits for its members, it results in there being an out-group who experience discrimination due to their perceived differences (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986).

Discrimination is a widely used term that can be difficult to define (Greenland et al., 2022), within this thesis the APA dictionary of psychology definition will be used ('Discrimination', 2023). Here discrimination is defined as the behavioural manifestation of prejudice, which involves the negative and hostile treatment of members of an out-group, resulting in unjust or differential treatment of that group, often on the basis of their gender, sexual, religious or racial identity. Discrimination is closely linked to and contributes to marginalisation (Franklin, 2024). When a group is marginalised, they are perceived negatively, given less status in society and are confined to the margins of social, cultural, political and economic systems (Sue, 2010), resulting in a disadvantage and disempowerment in society (Fluit et al., 2024).

Experiences of discrimination and marginalisation that occur in relation to systemic structures have been termed *macroaggressions*. Macroaggressions are the active manifestation of systemic and institutional biases that exist in the policies and practices of institutions and communities (Sue et al., 2019). Macroaggressions are directed towards large groups of marginalised people and require change at an institutional level (Sue et al., 2021). In contrast, *microaggressions* are everyday actions which invalidate and exclude marginalised group members (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2019, 2021). Microaggressions stem from individuals' biases and require change at an individual level (Sue et al., 2021). The concepts of macro- and microaggressions were predominantly developed within the race literature (Sue et al., 2007, 2019), but have been used to understand discrimination experiences across marginalised communities (Nadal et al., 2016; Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2021). Repeated exposure to macro- and microaggressions have been linked to poorer psychological wellbeing and physical health (Costa et al., 2023), with marginalised groups being at greater risk of anxiety, depression, emotional distress, burnout, suicidal ideation, alcohol and cannabis use (DeSon & Andover, 2024; Kimber et al., 2024; Lui & Quezada, 2019; Marchi et al., 2024; Newman et al., 2025).

Microaffirmations represent one way in which we can ameliorate the effects of discrimination and have a positive effect on marginalised communities. First described by Rowe (2008), microaffirmations were developed as a way of understanding how underrepresented groups

could be supported in the workplace, and can be described as small gestures of inclusion and caring which open doors to belonging and opportunity. Rowe (2008) defined microaffirmations as “apparently small acts, which are often ephemeral and hard-to-see, events that are public and private, often unconscious but very effective, which occur wherever people wish to help others to succeed” (p. 46).

Microaffirmations are thought to help counter negative identity experiences by fostering inclusion, recognition, and belonging (Boyce-Rosen & Mecadon-Mann, 2023; Pittinsky, 2016). Rowe (2008) suggested that delivering microaffirmations would not only have direct positive impact on the individual being affirmed, but would also foster a more inclusive environment through modelling of positive behaviours. In addition, she stated that intentionally working to affirm others may decrease the likelihood of engaging in unintentional microaggressions. This is echoed by Sue (2021) who stated that because microaffirmations operate within the context of group marginality, exclusion and disempowerment, they “directly and indirectly counter prejudice, bias and discrimination, and their negative consequences on both the individual and institutional levels” (p. 55). This highlights the wide, positive influence microaffirmations could have. However, it is important to note that all the microaffirmation literature discussed above is conceptual, with empirical research supporting this concept being in its early stages.

At present, the majority of research has focused on understanding individuals’ experiences of microaffirmations. Microaffirmation experiences have been studied within specific population groups, including individuals who are gender diverse (Anzani et al., 2019; Galupo et al., 2019; Pulice-Farrow et al., 2019; Rosati et al., 2022) and sexually diverse (Flanders et al., 2017), individuals with intellectual disabilities (Eisenman et al., 2020), those recovering from addictions (Topor et al., 2019), and individuals from racially marginalised groups (Brown, 2023; Corral, 2023; Palmer, 2023; Pérez Huber et al., 2021, 2023; Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021; Rolón-Dow & de Novais, 2024; Soriano, 2022). The majority of these studies have been carried out in the context of higher education (Demetriou et al., 2023; Koch et al., 2020), but have also been conducted in the contexts of therapy (Anzani et al., 2019; Rosati et al., 2022) and romantic relationships (Galupo et al., 2019; Pulice-Farrow et al., 2019).

To date, no research has looked across populations and contexts to establish the commonalities of microaffirmation experiences.

There is little evidence exploring the impacts of microaffirmations, likely due to the difficulty of measuring them. Qualitative studies have indicated a range of positive impacts of microaffirmations, including increased confidence, sense of belonging and perseverance (Demetriou et al., 2023; Koch et al., 2020). This is supported by quantitative research which indicates that microaffirmations can have a positive impact on individuals' psychological wellbeing (Fuston & Koch, 2024), reduce the link between microaggressions and mental health difficulties (Yodlorchai et al., 2024), and support young people's integration into scientific communities (Estrada et al., 2019). However, two quantitative studies have found no impact of microaffirmations on bisexual participants' levels of happiness, depression or suicidality (Salim et al., 2019), or on their intentions to seek mental health treatment (DeLucia & Smith, 2021). The researchers suggested that this may be because the impacts of microaffirmations were not strong enough to counteract the negative impacts of marginalisation in the bisexual community (DeLucia & Smith, 2021; Salim et al., 2019). As there is limited research in this area, our understanding of the impacts of microaffirmations is inconclusive. However, a range of positive impacts have been described, and no studies indicate any negative impacts of microaffirmations. Therefore, with the potential positive impact for marginalised communities, further research is important to develop our understanding of microaffirmations.

This review was started in response to the author's desire to research the impact of microaffirmations, however, there was the recognition that a clear definition and conceptualisation across populations was needed first (Ellis et al., 2019). Therefore, this systematic literature review aims to build upon the current conceptual understanding of microaffirmations, by exploring the qualitative literature to understand how microaffirmation experiences are described, by both participants and researchers, across identity groups and contexts. This is intended to support the development of empirical measures to measure microaffirmation experiences, alongside developing our understanding of how to create more inclusive environments for all, by providing an

understanding of actionable ways to foster belonging and self-esteem through the promotion of positive identity experiences.

2.3 Method

This review aims to explore how microaffirmation experiences are described across various population groups and contexts. A systematic literature search was conducted, guided by the central research question: *what are microaffirmations: how do participants and researchers describe microaffirmation experiences?*

A review protocol exists and can be accessed from Prospero. ID: CRD42024577213.

2.3.1 Search techniques

The key components of the systematic search strategy were considered using the SPIDER tool (Cooke et al., 2012), see Table 1 below.

Table 1

SPIDER Tool with Systematic Search Strategy

S – Sample	Any individual who has described experiencing a microaffirmation and the perspectives of researchers who have sought to understand microaffirmation experiences.
PI – Phenomenon of Interest	The concept of microaffirmations – how they are described and understood by individuals who have experienced them and researchers who have researched them.
D – Design	Any qualitative data collection design, such as questionnaires, interviews and focus groups.
E – Evaluation	The voice/perspective of the individuals and the interpretations given by the researchers.
R – Research Type	Qualitative studies

To identify key search terms, an initial scoping search was conducted. The finalised search terms were:

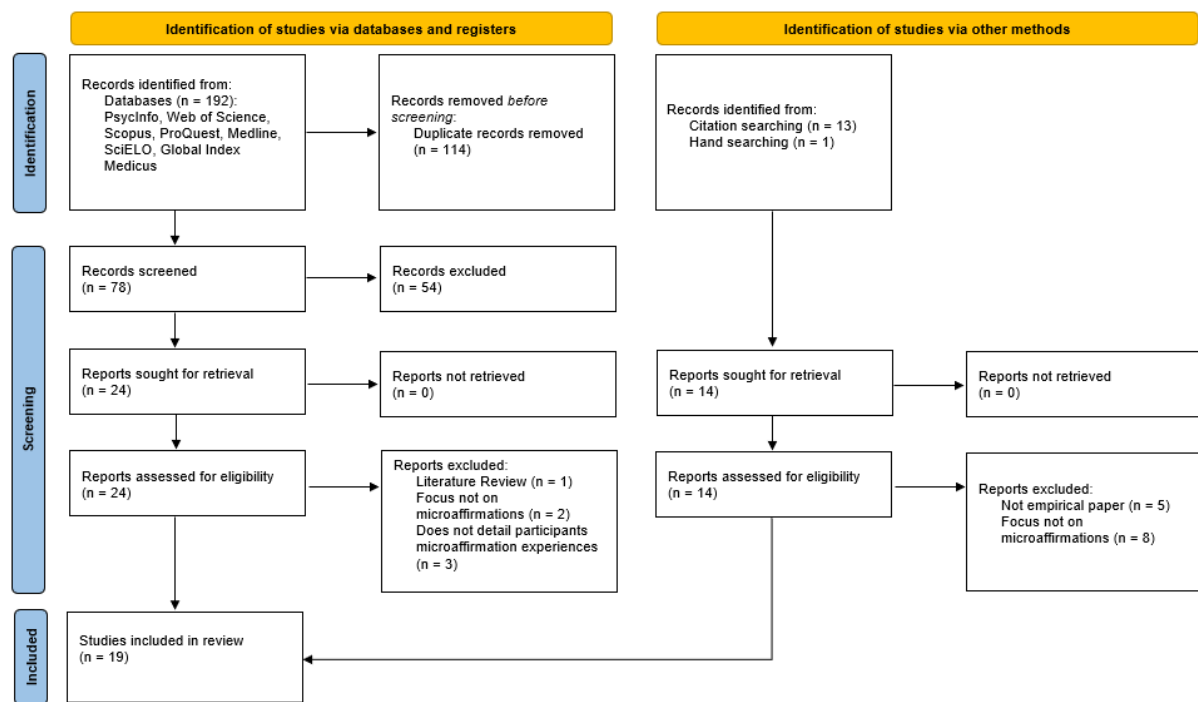
microaffirmation OR micro-affirmation* OR “micro affirmation*”*

These search terms were consciously broad to ensure that all qualitative research exploring microaffirmations would be included in the search results. Abstract, title and keyword searches of these terms were conducted by the lead researcher on PsycINFO, Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest, MEDLINE, SciELO, Global Index Medicus. Grey literature was included to reduce publication bias and develop a balanced understanding of the available evidence within this review (Paez, 2017). Proquest Dissertation and Theses Global database was used to search for this literature. Additional relevant papers were retrieved through citation searching.

A study was included in the current review if it met the following criteria: (i) an empirical research paper, which (ii) used qualitative research methods, where (iii) the results section described participants' views and experiences of microaffirmations. Papers were hand screened by the lead researcher and brought to supervision to discuss if there was uncertainty about whether a paper met the inclusion criteria. This process was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) approach (Page et al., 2021) as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Systematic Search Strategy using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) Approach (Page et al., 2021).



2.4 Results

2.4.1 Data Extraction and Quality Assurance

All 19 papers found to be eligible for this review were evaluated for quality using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme Checklist (CASP; 2018), detailed in Appendix A. All studies were found to be of a high quality, with no exclusions required. Data was extracted focusing on participant characteristics, context of microaffirmations and method of data collection (see Table 2 and Appendix B). The studies were conducted between 2017-2024, gathering the voices of 1,495 participants, aged 18-84, from at least 13 different countries (some studies did not specify the countries).

The studies were predominantly conducted in the USA, with 14 of the studies only collecting data from the USA and seven of these studies only collecting data from one institution each. 13 studies explored microaffirmations in the university environment, three in therapy, three in health care, and three explored microaffirmations across all environments (instead focusing on a particular identity). Nine studies focused on race, four on gender, one on disability, one on sexuality, one on addiction, and three focused on students microaffirmation experiences more generally. Six of the studies collected data using online questionnaires, one using an online daily diary and the remaining 12 conducted interviews and/or focus groups, three online, three in person and six unspecified.

Table 2*Summary of Studies Included in the Review*

	Author	Year	N	Context	Data collection
1	Anzani et al.	2019	N = 64	Transgender clients' microaffirmation experiences in therapy	Online questionnaire
2	Brown (thesis)	2023	N = 5	African-American faculty members in higher education	Semi-structured interviews
3	Carter (thesis)	2021	N = 361	Academic advisors microaffirmations to students	Online questionnaire
4	Corral (thesis)	2023	N = 9	Latiné undocuqueer (undocumented and queer) university students	Virtual semi structured pláticas
5	Demetriou et al.	2023	N = 350	Undergraduate students	Online survey
6	Eisenman et al.	2020	N = 9	Students and alumni of program for those with intellectual disabilities	Narrative interviews
7	Ellis et al.	2019	N = 296	First generation university students	Online survey
8	Flanders et al.	2017	N = 91	Young bisexual and nonmonosexual people	28 day daily diary
9	Galupo et al.	2019	N = 161	Microaffirmations from romantic partners to gender diverse individuals	Online survey
10	Koch et al.	2020	N = 13	Culturally diverse graduate students	Semi-structured interviews
11	Palmer (thesis)	2023	N = 11	Black Master of Social Work university students	Semi-structured interviews
12	Pérez Huber et al.	2021	N = 30	Racial microaffirmations in higher education	Focus groups
13	Pérez Huber et al.	2023	N = 30	Graduate students of colour experiences of racial microaffirmations	Group pláticas
14	Pulice-Farrow et al.	2019	N = 339	Microaffirmations in romantic relationships of transgender individuals	Online survey
15	Rolón-Dow and Davison	2021	N = 34	Microaffirmations related to racial identities in higher education institution	Narrative interviews
16	Rolón-Dow and de Novais	2024	N = 8	Black, female's experiences of microaffirmations in higher education institutions	Narrative interviews
17	Rosati et al.	2022	N = 25	Non-binary clients' experiences of psychotherapy	Semi-structured interviews
18	Soriano (thesis)	2022	N = 18	Latinx undergraduates experiences of Latinx Cultural Center	Semi-structured interviews
19	Topor et al.	2019	N = 40	Individuals recovering from alcohol and drug addictions	Interviews

Two papers by Rolón-Dow (2021; 2024) and Pérez Huber (Pérez Huber et al., 2021, 2023)

which involved the same participants and data set, but with different foci, were included to ensure that all perspectives on microaffirmations were captured.

2.4.2 *Synthesis of findings*

Full papers were entered into NVivo and the data was analysed using thematic synthesis, as set out by Thomas and Harden (2008). This method of synthesis aligned with the researchers' epistemological position of interpretivism, viewing knowledge as being socially constructed and context dependent. This was particularly relevant to the current review, as microaffirmations are not yet a widely understood concept and so are subject to researcher interpretation. The studies included in the review involved the researchers providing a definition of microaffirmations, either directly to the participants, or when analysing the data. This means that both the researchers' interpretive frameworks and participants' lived experiences had the potential to influence the findings, highlighting the interpretivist nature of the current review, with researchers and participants co-constructing our understanding of microaffirmation experiences.

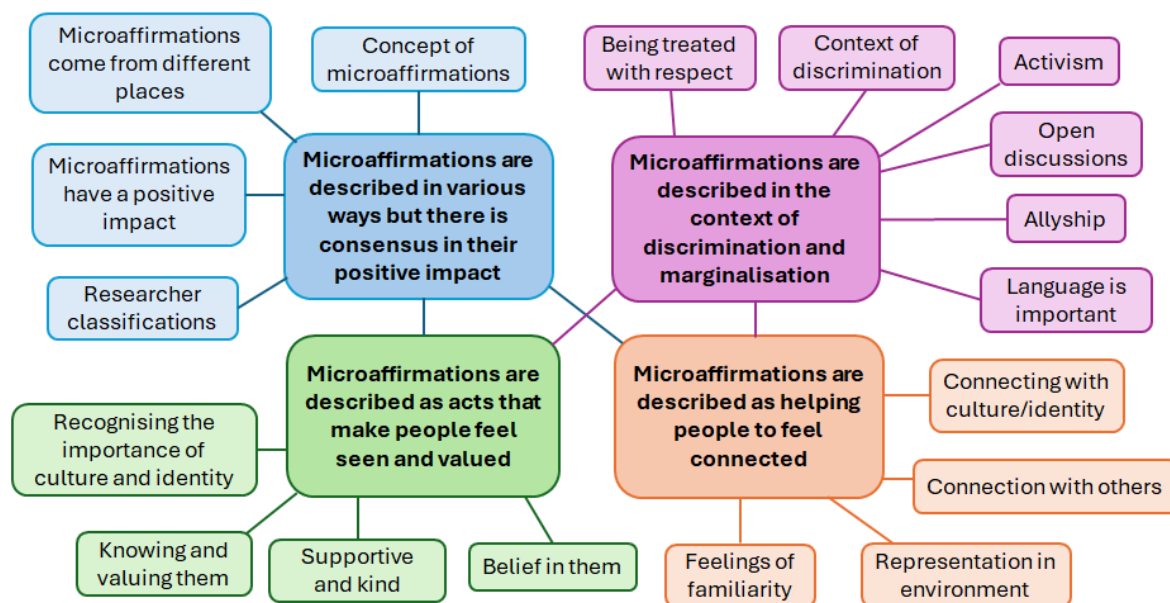
The analysis involved the lead researcher line-by-line coding of all text in the results/findings that related to participants descriptions of microaffirmations. This was an iterative process involving codes being revisited and renamed to translate concepts between studies, resulting in 157 codes. These codes were then grouped, based on their similarities, into 18 descriptive themes. The final stage of analysis is described by Thomas and Harden (2008) as *going beyond* the content of the original studies, to create new understanding that answers the research question. In this review, this involved developing an understanding of how microaffirmation experiences are described across demographic groups and contexts. The descriptive and analytic themes were taken to supervision, discussed and adapted to ensure that they were clear, represented the data and met the aims of the study. To answer the research question 'How do Participants and Researchers Describe Microaffirmation Experiences?' four analytic themes were developed:

1. Microaffirmations are described in the context of discrimination and marginalisation
2. Microaffirmations are described as acts that make people feel seen and valued
3. Microaffirmations are described as helping people to feel connected
4. Microaffirmations are described in various ways but there is consensus in their positive impact

These themes were well represented across the literature, with two themes containing codes from all 19 papers, and two containing codes from 18 of the papers. As can be seen from the names of the themes and the way in which they connect (see Figure 2), microaffirmation experiences, their context and their impact were found to be highly intertwined, with the context and impact of the experiences being a key to what made them microaffirmations.

Figure 2

Descriptive (lighter) and Analytic (darker) Themes Developed Relating to Participant's and Researcher's Descriptions of Microaffirmations



2.4.3 Theme 1: Microaffirmations are described in the context of discrimination and marginalisation

Across the literature, it was clear that microaffirmations, which may appear small or insignificant, hold meaningful value because they exist within a context of marginalisation, helping to counter the negative impacts of discrimination on one's sense of self and belonging. This analytic theme was captured across 18 of the papers reviewed and was made up of six descriptive themes (see Figure 2).

For some, microaffirmations are described simply as someone treating the individual with respect (1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14, 19, see Table 2). This can be seen in Eisenman et al. (2020) where a

participant shares: “They talk to me like a normal person instead of a person with a disability, or baby, like I’m a child” and in Anzani et al. (2019), where a participant shared that their therapist “not responding (to them) with disgust” was affirming. These examples highlight the context of discrimination in which microaffirmations exist, as for most people these actions would be expected and not considered to be out of the ordinary, however for these individuals they appeared to be impactful due to negative past experiences.

Due to historical discrimination and marginalisation, participants experienced the use of affirmative and inclusive language as a microaffirmation, alongside the avoidance of unwanted and discriminatory language (1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 14, 17, 18). For example, “The student described that professors convey microaffirmations ‘when they use inclusive language, including the acknowledgment of different gender identities and sexualities; when they speak positively of women in the field’” (Demetriou et al., 2023). The use of language as a microaffirmation could be personal and context dependent. One participant described how it was affirming when their partner would consistently switch between using ‘correct’ and ‘safe’ language to describe their gender in different contexts:

My partner regularly and consistently uses correct (or safe – by which I mean ‘correct’ would be they/them/their but in environments where gender nonconformity can be dangerous then he/him/his is the preferred ‘safe’ option) pronouns in spaces where my gender can be questioned ... and checks in with me before swapping from ‘safe’ to ‘correct.’ (Pulice-Farrow et al., 2019).

Participants described how microaffirmations were experienced when they felt safe to have open conversations about their identity and had opportunities to engage with and listen to discussions about culture, identity and discrimination (8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 19). They described others’ showing a willingness to grow and learn, showing curiosity about cultures and identities, and recognising the unique challenges that they face. Descriptions also included when people were able to recognise their own privilege and prejudices, acknowledging mistakes they had made. Many described microaffirmations where others had used their social privilege to speak out against

discrimination and promote inclusive environments. Not only were the acts of others promoting inclusivity described as microaffirmations, but also the individual themselves promoting inclusivity. They described how this could occur through them acting as a visual representation of their culture/identity in the environment (2, 6, 8, 18), offering support and mentoring to others within their identity group (2, 15, 18), engaging in advocacy and receiving acknowledgement and appreciation for this (4, 8, 11).

2.4.4 Theme 2: Microaffirmations are described as moments that make people feel seen and valued

Microaffirmations were often described as acts of kindness, communicating that the person matters and others care about them. These acts could be as small as welcoming someone to a space, either verbally or non-verbally, for example, smiling (5), hugging them (13), placing a hand on their shoulder (19), making eye contact (6), or holding the door open for them (5). They could involve someone remembering their name in a large group (5) or checking in with them (1, 5, 6, 11, 18) with simple messages asking how they are or offering moral support, such as ‘good luck’ or ‘you can do it!’. These seemingly small acts of kindness led to participants feeling *seen*, as described by one participant: “Being affirmed, when it has happened ... makes me feel like a solid piece of extant matter, as opposed to the ghostly placeholder I usually feel like.” (Pulice-Farrow et al., 2019).

This feeling of being seen was described across the research, with participants describing feeling validated when people showed a genuine interest in who they are. This involved other people recognising their identity/culture and understanding the importance of this, whilst also looking beyond to value the individual as a whole person with their own unique experiences and perspectives. “There’s that fine line of, ‘well, I want you to know that this is a part of me, but then I don’t want you to make a big deal out of it.’” (Koch et al., 2020).

It was described that others could show recognition of the importance of an individual’s culture/identity by taking time to ask about it and actively learning about it themselves (9, 10), demonstrating the value they place in understanding their experiences. In addition, compliments relating to their identity were seen as affirming, these included positive comments about their

clothing (7, 14), physical appearance (1, 16) and other symbols of their identity (18). Participants described how people asking them questions about themselves, their experiences and their perspectives, demonstrated genuine interest about them as a whole person, rather than focusing on their culture/identity. Not only asking, but also showing appreciation for these contributions, for example responding with positive comments (11), remembering what was shared and referring back to this later (19), and ensuring they have a voice in larger groups (15). These acts were seen as microaffirmations because they demonstrated the value that people placed in what they shared.

These expressions of value led to people feeling that they were supported and believed in. Feeling that others believed in them also acted as a microaffirmation in its own right. This belief could be shared explicitly, such as showing interest and optimism about their future (4, 5, 10) and encouraging them to apply for opportunities (3, 7, 10, 11) or could be more subtle. For example, one participant shared that their professor referring to them as a 'physiologist' communicated belief in their capability of completing the course (5). Participants described how receiving feedback on their work, both positive and constructive, could act as a microaffirmation (2, 3, 5, 11) as it helped them to feel that they belonged in that setting and that others believed they could be successful.

2.4.5 Theme 3: Microaffirmations are described as helping people to feel connected

The analysis of the included studies indicates that microaffirmations promote a sense of belonging and connection. Participants described feeling welcomed and comfortable in a space, connecting with one's personal culture/identity and direct connection with others. "Participants felt that microaffirmations helped to create a sense of belonging in institutions that did not truly reflect them or their experiences. As such, microaffirmations helped participants find a sense of belonging at their institutions" (Corral, 2023).

Many descriptions of microaffirmations that related to direct connection with others are captured in Theme 2. This includes people feeling connected through greetings and small gestures of kindness, together with spending their time with people who understand and value them. It was noted that when connection with others was described as a microaffirmation, participants primarily described this in relation to others from their community/identity group. Participants explained how

powerful it was to be able to connect with others to whom they related, both in experiences and communication style.

And it felt like, I felt like I was dying in the undergrad space, but then being able to connect with folks on that [shared identity], I felt like I had life again. I felt like I woke up. I was like, 'These are people that I could survive with'. And so to me, that felt like life was brought back into my body. (Pérez Huber et al., 2023)

Sasha, an undergraduate student that identifies as Hispanic, also described a validating experience. She explained that her Latinx sorority, made her 'feel like everything I've been through, I haven't been through it alone because other people have experienced it too.' (Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021)

Having specific spaces, groups and events where people could connect with others, often from their community, helped to foster microaffirmations (1, 4, 6, 8, 12, 13, 15, 16, 18). For some, just knowing that these spaces and events existed was a microaffirmation (3, 7, 15). There was a vast range of inclusive spaces described, including cultural centres (16, 18), gay bars (8), student unions (6), book clubs (12), support groups (1) and theatre projects (15), amongst many more. Participants described experiencing microaffirmations when working or studying alongside others from their community (2, 4, 10, 13, 15, 18) and seeing people in positions of authority with whom they could identify (2, 3, 4, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15). This representation allowed participants to see people from marginalised communities who had succeeded in their chosen area, supporting them to visualise themselves being in this position in the future, and enhancing their feelings of belonging.

Alongside direct connection with others, experiences that enhanced people's feelings of connection with their culture and identity were also described. For example, listening to music and eating food related to their culture (12, 13), learning about their family history (18) and engaging in cultural dances and events (13, 15, 16) were described as microaffirmations. Together with seeing physical representation of their culture in the environment, such as seeing inclusive or cultural flags, images of cultural leaders, cultural artifacts and cultural décor (4, 13, 18). Representation also occurred in the wider community, with participants describing how media can play a role in their

feelings of connectedness. Participants described microaffirmation experiences occurring through memes/posts on social media, podcasts, blogs, tv shows, books and video games (8, 13), helping them to feel connected to their culture and community.

Although the majority of examples given in this theme have related to connection with people's identity, and others from their identity group, microaffirmations were also described when connecting with people outside of these groups. Descriptions outside of the marginalised group were seen most often from participants with disabilities. This may be because the participants included in the review with disabilities (Eisenman et al., 2020) were studying alongside others who also had disabilities and so they valued being able to connect with people outside of this group. Contrastingly, those from other marginalised groups may not have the opportunity to connect with others who share their identities as often, meaning that they valued connection to in-group members more greatly.

2.4.6 Theme 4: Microaffirmations are described in various ways but there is consensus in their positive impact

Participants described how microaffirmations can come from anywhere, including family (7, 8, 8, 14, 15, 18), peers (2, 5, 7, 8, 11, 15), superiors (2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 18), themselves (8, 14), the environment (5, 16, 18), and social media (8, 13). They described how microaffirmations could be either verbal and non-verbal, direct or indirect and delivered by both in-group and out-group members. Researchers have sought to understand microaffirmation experiences through various classifications (2, 3, 6, 7, 15, 18), but these differ across the literature, highlighting the challenges in establishing a shared understanding of microaffirmations.

Both participants and researchers described the complexity and intricacies of microaffirmation experiences (1, 5, 6, 10). It was described that there is a 'fine line' between microaffirmations and microaggressions (1, 10), with researchers and participants explaining how the same act could be experienced differently depending on the person and the context in which it is delivered: "Subtle differences such as tone of voice, a person's sincerity, or the setting could make one behavior microaffirmative or microaggressive" (Koch et al., 2020). In addition, there are both

individual and group differences in what makes something a microaffirmation. For example, Eisenman (2020) noted that none of the participants in their study described specific affirmation of their disability identity, and instead their microaffirmation experiences focused on being included in the wider community, this also appeared to be the case for individuals recovering from drug and alcohol addictions (Topor et al., 2019). However, for participants from racial minorities and sexual/gender diverse communities, specific identity affirmations were important and commonly described as microaffirmations. One participant shared how microaffirmations from others who have similar experiences can have a healing impact (12, 13), with a participant sharing:

I think there needs to be bravery, vulnerability, and community in these spaces for a microaffirmation to happen because at the same exact time you're [saying], I'm wounded, oh, you're wounded too? I see you, let's heal a little bit together and boom, that's what microaffirmation is. (Pérez Huber et al., 2021)

The key commonality that was shared across the microaffirmation experiences described, was the positive impacts that they had (5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 19), particularly when these were experienced and reinforced regularly (5, 11, 18). Although this review did not set out to explore the impacts of microaffirmations, it proved impossible to separate microaffirmation experiences from their impact. It was described that microaffirmations "can change how people feel about themselves" (Demetriou et al., 2023). Building on the positive impacts described in previous themes, microaffirmations were characterised by the feelings of validation they elicited (2, 4, 5, 10, 18). Participants reported that microaffirmations made them feel supported (3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 16, 18, 19) and cared for (5, 10, 11, 16, 19), while also enhancing their confidence and motivation (3, 5, 6, 10) and increasing their sense of comfort and safety in their environment (2, 4, 10).

2.5 Discussion and Implications

This review builds on the current conceptualisation of microaffirmations, by creating a synthesis of microaffirmation experiences across demographic groups and contexts. The findings demonstrate that microaffirmations can be any number of things, including direct or indirect acts, representation of their identity and symbols of inclusivity. They can be delivered by family, friends,

superiors, social media and the environment. There is no one answer to what these experiences look like or where they come from, however there is consensus in how they make people feel and the positive impacts that they can have, such as helping people feel seen, valued and connected. The microaffirmations described ranged greatly from being shown basic respect, hearing inclusive language, and feeling safe to discuss identity, to witnessing others acknowledge their privileges and speak out against discrimination. These acts exist and are seen as affirming of individual's identities because of the discrimination and marginalisation they have experienced. This cements the understanding that microaffirmations are impactful because of the context they exist within.

This review did not set out to explore the impacts of microaffirmations, but through analysis of the current literature, it became clear that that people's descriptions of microaffirmations and their impact are highly intertwined and almost impossible to disentangle. Although there are not yet large numbers of quantitative studies demonstrating the positive impacts of microaffirmations, the qualitative literature describes how microaffirmations increase participants feelings of safety, confidence, motivation and connection, alongside feeling that others believe in and value them. Allen et al. (2024) described how students feel a strong sense of belonging when they feel connected, accepted, safe and valued, which is reflected here in what participants shared. This suggests that microaffirmations may have a positive impact on marginalised individuals' sense of belonging. An increased sense of belonging has been linked to increased levels of motivation, engagement, job satisfaction and wellbeing (Allen et al., 2024; Barak & and Levin, 2002), indicating the wider positive impacts that these small gestures could have. Not only this, but participants descriptions of the impacts of microaffirmations also reflect the fundamental human needs of safety, belonging, and self-esteem described by Maslow (1943), demonstrating the important role microaffirmations could play in ensuring these needs are met.

Many of the microaffirmations described by participants directly related to recognition of and connection with their identity. This reflects previous research which emphasised the importance of marginalised groups feeling represented in their environment (Mbire-Chigumba et al., 2024; Sealy & Singh, 2008) and having opportunities to connect with others from their identity group (Murrell et

al., 2021; Ong et al., 2018). Institutions and workplaces can use the findings of this review to implement changes to promote inclusivity and increase the likelihood of individuals experiencing microaffirmations. DeLucia and Smith (2021) found that greater outness (of bisexuality) predicted more frequent microaffirmation experiences, indicating that spaces in which individuals feel comfortable expressing their true selves foster microaffirmation experiences. A step towards this would be ensuring that the environment represents the people who spend time there, for example, including art, flags, music and food from diverse groups and cultures. Providing opportunities for people to connect with others they can relate to is also key. Participants described taking part in advocacy and supporting others from their identity groups as affirming. Therefore, it may be helpful to set up mentoring programmes and empower individuals to set up their own groups and events to connect with like-minded people. This is likely to provide microaffirmation experiences for both those mentoring and setting up groups/events, and for those who access and attend these.

Not all microaffirmations appeared directly linked to the individual's identity; many were instead small gestures of inclusion, such as welcoming a person into a space, showing interest in them, ensuring their voices were heard, and showing them respect. Although these experiences do not appear to be directly linked to their identity, Identity Threat theory (Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Emerson & Murphy, 2014; Steele, 1997; Steele et al., 2002) posits that two individuals will experience the same situation in distinct ways based on their past experiences, therefore if a person's past experiences have made them feel less comfortable or welcome in a space they are more likely to experience these small gestures as microaffirmations. Two of the studies included in this review sought to understand the microaffirmation experiences of students more generally (Carter, 2021; Demetriou et al., 2023), rather than a specific minority group, although these participants did not necessarily identify as being part of a marginalised community, the experiences they shared are likely to have been influenced by feelings of threat to their identity (this may be a more broad identity, such as their identity as a successful student).

Microaffirmations are an important starting point from which to support individuals to feel seen, included and valued in their environment. This review highlights the small ways in which

individuals can affirm each other, for example, simply ensuring that we greet, listen to and take time to understand others. These everyday actions from friends, family, colleagues or new acquaintances, communicate that people are important and valued. Institutions and workplaces should prioritise enhancing opportunities for microaffirmations, as this could lead to greater systemic changes. By supporting minority groups to feel welcomed in a space, individuals are more likely to stay, share their experiences, contribute unique perspectives and act as role models to others entering the space (Allen et al., 2024; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Sealy & Singh, 2008).

At the outset of this review, the author hoped that the findings would provide a greater understanding of microaffirmations to support the development of scales to quantitatively measure people's microaffirmation experiences. What this review has established is that although there are commonalities in experiences that are described as microaffirmations there is also great variation. Individuals' personal experiences appear to impact what is viewed as a microaffirmation, for example, if a person is expecting to be misgendered then someone using their correct pronouns is likely to be described as a microaffirmation, whereas someone who has not experienced misgendering in the past is unlikely to describe someone using the correct pronouns as a microaffirmation. For this reason, scales aiming to measure microaffirmations should not only measure the number of typical microaffirmations someone has experienced but also how impactful they were to that individual, as impact is a defining characteristic of microaffirmations.

2.5.1 Strengths and Limitations

This systematic literature review is the first to bring together the qualitative literature on microaffirmation experiences. By applying Thomas and Harden's (2008) thematic synthesis approach, it captures microaffirmation experiences across contexts and identity groups, advancing the understanding and conceptualisation of microaffirmations in this emerging area. One limitation of this study is that certain groups and contexts were represented more than others in the current literature, meaning that their voices are likely to have come across more strongly in this review. There were nine studies included that explored microaffirmation experiences for racially marginalised communities but only one that explored experiences of those with disabilities. Similarly,

thirteen of the nineteen studies looked at microaffirmations in the university context, which may not be representative of experiences outside of this context. In addition, fourteen of the studies only explored experiences in the USA. As culture and language are such important elements of identity, research should continue to explore different populations' experiences of microaffirmations, across contexts, so that our understanding of these experiences can be developed and further understood.

The majority of studies were of a high quality and methodologically sound, with all studies including participants descriptions of microaffirmations. However, one study (Carter, 2021) did not accurately explore people's microaffirmation experiences which may have impacted the results of this review to some extent. Carter (2021) aimed to capture participants microaffirmation experiences by asking questions based on Ellis' (2019) taxonomy, however, the questions they asked did not fully reflect this taxonomy. For example, asking participants "if they could recall a time when their advisor said or did something that left them feeling 'appreciated, praised, admired, or respected' (microcompliment)" (p. 23), which does not fully reflect Ellis' definition of microcompliments as "subtle communications implying praise, admiration, or respect for an individual's identity or heritage" (p. 268). The questions asked did not ask about experiences linked to participants' identities and heritage, which is an integral element of Ellis' taxonomy. It is likely that this is why there were no codes from Carter's (2021) findings in Theme 1: Microaffirmations are described in the context of discrimination and marginalisation'. This discrepancy was not captured within the quality assurance table (Appendix A) as exploring microaffirmation experiences using qualitative methodology was not an explicit aim of their study, instead being an additional element that they included. Literature that does not highlight the importance of identity and marginalisation in relation to microaffirmations, particularly when they are using this to explore participant experiences, is likely to confuse the wider definition and understanding of microaffirmations.

2.6 Conclusion

This systematic review built upon the theoretical understanding of microaffirmations by creating a synthesis of real-world examples, developing our understanding of microaffirmation experiences across demographic groups and contexts (see Figure 2). It illustrates how small actions

by one person can have a significant impact on the feelings of another, particularly when they are delivered in the context of discrimination and marginalisation. Although microaffirmations can be any number of things and arise from any number of places, what they have in common is their positive impact, making people feel connected, seen and valued within contexts that are often marginalising and discriminatory.

Chapter 3 - Gender Diverse Young People's Experiences of Microaffirmations – An Empirical Research Project

3.1 Abstract

Microaffirmations are defined as seemingly small, affirming, inclusive acts, which open doors of opportunity to those from marginalised groups (Rowe, 2008). It has been suggested that experiencing microaffirmations could increase young people's feelings of belonging, confidence and perseverance (Demetriou et al., 2023; Koch et al., 2020). To date, no research has explored gender diverse young people's experiences of microaffirmations. The current study aims to explore the microaffirmation experiences of gender-diverse young people (GDYP), recognising their unique perspectives and experiences.

Ninety-seven young people aged 16-25 from 17 countries responded to an online survey and shared a total of 142 microaffirmation experiences. The data was analysed using codebook thematic analysis, resulting in 11 descriptive themes. The microaffirmation experiences shared by GDYP included the use of inclusive language, curiosity about their identity, being accepted as themselves, and seeing others who share their identity. These microaffirmations normalised their experiences, modelled what was possible and provided external validation that others saw them as they see themselves, leading to their days continuing positively, developing their confidence and connections with others. It is hoped that these findings will contribute to the development of inclusive practices at both a personal and professional level, fostering belonging and inclusion for GDYP around the world.

3.2 Introduction

Gender is often expressed in relation to masculinity and femininity, traditionally assumed from the sex an individual is assigned at birth (Cartwright & Nancarrow, 2022; Stonewall, n.d.). Within this paper we will use the term *gender diverse* to refer to individuals whose gender identity differs from traditional expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth, this includes those who identify outside of the binary genders of male and female (Youth Access, 2024). Globally it is reported that 3% of the population identify as a gender other than the sex they were assigned at birth (Ipsos, 2023), with 1% describing themselves as transgender, 1% as non-binary, gender non-conforming, or gender fluid, and 1% as other but outside the binary categories of male and female (Ipsos, 2023); these categories are not generally viewed as mutually exclusive but appeared to be conceptualised as such in this research. Young people appear more likely than the rest of the population to identify as gender outside of the sex they were assigned at birth, this has been found in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2023), America (Suarez, 2024) and Canada (Government of Canada, 2022). These findings indicate that young people are expressing their gender identity more openly and/or viewing gender in a different way to previous generations, highlighting the importance of understanding their unique perspectives and experiences.

At present, most countries around the world are hostile places for gender diverse individuals to exist, with discrimination being experienced by the majority of gender diverse individuals on a daily basis (Drabish & Theeke, 2022; Truszczynski et al., 2022). This discrimination is experienced across contexts, including education settings (Allen-Biddell & Bond, 2022), the workplace (Cancela et al., 2025), public transport (Ivanova & O'Hern, 2024) and healthcare settings (Ayhan et al., 2020; Heward-Belle et al., 2025). In many countries, discrimination and marginalisation occurs at the highest levels of society, evidenced in the UK by the recent Supreme Court judgement which states “a person with a [gender recognition certificate] in the female gender does not come within the definition of ‘woman’” (*For Women Scotland Ltd (Appellant) v The Scottish Ministers (Respondent)*, 2025, p.86), and in the USA by the recent White House presidential actions include the rescindment of all gender inclusive documents and guidance published by the Department of Education (The

White House, 2025). The discrimination experienced can cause gender diverse individuals to internalise this stigma and can, in turn, lead to harmful psychological outcomes, such as substance abuse, eating disorders, low self-esteem and suicidal behaviours (Drabish & Theeke, 2022; Klinger et al., 2024). The Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003) posits that individuals from marginalised communities, such as gender diverse individuals, often suffer from chronic stress due to the discrimination and marginalisation they experience, which leads to negative psychological and physical health outcomes, and increased morbidity (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Jardas et al., 2023). This highlights the critical importance of society changing to ensure that these stressors are eliminated.

Societal discrimination and marginalisation of gender diverse individuals is often experienced in everyday life in the form of microaggressions (Truszczyński et al., 2022). Microaggressions are subtle forms of discrimination which communicate hostile, derogatory or negative messages towards members of a marginalised group (Kimber et al., 2024; Sue et al., 2007). In the case of gender diverse individuals, microaggressions often communicate non-affirmation or rejection of their gender identity (Nadal & Corpus, 2010), and are experienced an average of once every other day (Doyle et al., 2024). As with wider discrimination experiences, microaggressions have been linked to a range of negative mental health outcomes (Kimber et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2024). Looking more specifically at the impacts for gender diverse young people (GDYP), microaggressions are associated with higher levels of depression, suicidal behaviours, and cannabis use (DeSon & Andover, 2024).

The findings above present a negative picture for GDYP's health and wellbeing, yet these adverse outcomes are closely linked to the discrimination and marginalisation these young people experience (Drabish & Theeke, 2022; Hidalgo et al., 2013), therefore it is important to consider how to counter these experiences at an individual and systematic level. Affirmative care, including social, legal and medical affirmation, aims to support gender diverse individuals to align their physical and social characteristics with their gender identity. Accessing affirmative care is associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety and psychological distress in gender diverse individuals (Expósito-Campos et al., 2023) and parental support for affirmation is associated with lower levels of

depression in GDYP (Belmont et al., 2023). Supporting affirmation in the contexts of the legal and medical systems is important, but these are complex systemic issues which individuals may not feel agency to change. In comparison, social affirmation is a tool with which all individuals can engage.

Research on the impacts of social transition for young people is still in its infancy (Hall et al., 2024), however preliminary research has indicated a positive impact of social affirmation. For example, GDYP who had socially transitioned and were using the pronouns associated with their gender across all contexts do not experience significantly different levels of depression and self-worth from their cisgender peers (Durwood et al., 2017). Similarly, GDYP who were able to use their chosen name across more contexts (home, school, work and with friends) reported fewer depressive symptoms, and less suicidal ideation and behaviours than those who could use their chosen name across fewer contexts (Russell et al., 2018). This research highlights the ways in which individuals can affirm GDYP, positively influencing their mental health and wellbeing. Everyday actions and comments that positively affirm a young person's gender identity are known as *microaffirmations*.

The term *microaffirmations* was first introduced by Rowe (2008) to describe small gestures of inclusion which develop opportunities for underrepresented groups in the workplace. Since then, the concept of microaffirmations has been developed and explored in the research fields of race, disability, gender and sexuality (Boyce-Rosen & Mecadon-Mann, 2023). Microaffirmations are defined as experiences which affirm a person's identity and humanity, and exist in the context of marginalisation and exclusion, working counter to the prejudice and discrimination experienced (Sue et al., 2021). Rowe (2008) suggested that intentionally working to affirm others would not only benefit the individual, but also model inclusivity to others, and decrease the likelihood of engaging in unintentional microaggressions (Rowe, 2008). It has been found that people describe microaffirmation experiences as helping them to feel seen, valued and connected (see Chapter 2).

Research into microaffirmations is still in its infancy, but preliminary research of young people's experiences appears to indicate positive effects. Two qualitative studies exploring young people's experiences of microaffirmations found a number of positive impacts, including increased confidence, and a sense of belonging and perseverance (Demetriou et al., 2023; (Koch et al., 2020) et

al., 2022). A quantitative study has also shown that microaffirmations can lead to greater integration of undergraduate students into scientific communities and, in turn, lead to greater intentions to pursue a scientific career (Estrada et al., 2019). This suggests that microaffirmations could be a helpful tool to support young people to feel more integrated into the wider community and demonstrates the potential positive influence they could have.

In relation to gender, microaffirmation experiences have been studied in the context of therapy (Anzani et al., 2019; Rosati et al., 2022) and romantic relationships (Galupo et al., 2019; Pulice-Farrow et al., 2019). A range of studies have explored young people's experiences of microaffirmations in the university context (Carter, 2021; Demetriou et al., 2023; Eisenman et al., 2020; Koch et al., 2020), particularly in relation to race (Brown, 2023; Corral, 2023; Ellis et al., 2019; Palmer, 2023; Pérez Huber et al., 2021, 2023; Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021; Rolón-Dow & de Novais, 2024; Soriano, 2022). One study looked at sexually diverse young people's microaffirmation experiences across contexts (Flanders et al., 2017), and another explored queer and transgender people of colour's experiences across contexts (Paul et al., 2025). However, to date no research has specifically explored GDYP's views and experiences of microaffirmations. The current study aims to explore the microaffirmation experiences of GDYP, across contexts, recognising their unique perspectives and experiences. Through these findings, we aim to expand the understanding of microaffirmations experienced by GDYP, considering their nature, frequency, and impact. This contribution is intended to inform the development of inclusive practices across education and professional settings, with the goal of fostering belonging and inclusion for GDYP. To support this aim, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What microaffirmations do GDYP experience?
2. What makes these experiences affirming?
3. How do GDYP experience the consequences of microaffirmations?

3.3 Method

3.3.1 Design and procedure

An online, qualitative survey was developed and distributed to GDYP around the world, using opportunity sampling, to explore their experiences of microaffirmations. Participants were recruited through charities, education settings, social media and the paid survey platform Prolific, those recruited through Prolific were paid £2.50 when they completed the survey. The survey data was collected anonymously through the Qualtrics platform, between September 2024 and February 2025. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Southampton Ethics Committee (ERGO: 91071).

3.3.2 Participants

Participants were young people, aged 16-25 ($M=22.25$), who identified as gender diverse. As it is known that young people often do not disclose their gender identity to others initially (Turban et al., 2023), this study focused on young people aged 16-25, recognising that they are able to consent independently and will have a broad range of educational and life experiences to reflect on. In total, 107 participants responded to the survey, 10 responses were removed due either to misinterpretation of the questions, not meeting the demographic criteria stated above, or being fraudulent (such as using AI). This resulted in 97 responses being analysed.

3.3.3 Questionnaire

A questionnaire was created by the research team with support from an expert-by-experience, a gender-diverse young person, to ensure the questions were accessible and did not include any unintended microaggressions. The questionnaire collected demographic data (see Table 3) and provided participants with a short definition of microaffirmations, with some examples gathered from existing literature (see Appendix C). Participants were then asked six questions about their microaffirmation experiences:

1. Imagine that you are telling a friend about a microaffirmation that you have experienced. Describe what happened:
2. What was affirming about this experience?

3. What happened next (if anything)?
4. Where did this microaffirmation occur?
5. Who/what delivered this microaffirmation?
6. Can you think of another time you have experienced a microaffirmation?

If the participant answered 'yes' to the final question, they would be presented with the same six questions again, being able to share as many experiences as they would like. All participants shared at least one experience, with some sharing up to four.

3.3.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using Codebook Thematic Analysis, also known as 'medium Q' (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This approach was chosen as it offered a structured yet adaptable framework (Wolgemuth et al., 2025), that allowed for an iterative, inductive coding process while ensuring that the development of themes remained closely aligned with the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. This process was carried out by the lead researcher, under the supervision of two experienced gender researchers. The process began with the lead researcher familiarising themselves with data, and initially coding alongside a supervisor before completing the rest of the coding independently using the agreed upon structure. This structure included ensuring that each code referenced the question it was developed in response to, so that the frequency of codes occurring in relation to each question could be quantified. These codes were then organised into descriptive categories and developed into themes that answered the three research questions. These themes were initially defined and named by the lead researcher, before being reviewed alongside supervisors to ensure the themes clearly reflected the data and answered the research questions. This was followed by a write up of the analysis.

To build on the qualitative findings and allow additional insights into the data, the frequency with which each code presented itself in the data was calculated and data from questionnaire questions four and five were coded and counted. This allowed us to establish how often participants

described a particular form of microaffirmation, the frequency of who delivered them and where they occurred.

3.4 Findings

Demographic data were collected from all participants (see Table 3). Participants resided in 17 different countries and reflected a range of gender identities and ethnicities. The majority of participants were White, aged 22-25, identified as non-binary, and resided in the UK or USA. When asked about their gender identity, participants often described having more than one identity, for example 'non-binary and gender fluid' as these categories are not mutually exclusive (Richards et al., 2016). For this reason, the numbers of each response (N) add up to a total greater than 97 for this question.

Table 3

Demographic Information of Participants (n = 97)

Demographic information	N	%
How would you describe your gender identity?		
Non-Binary	64	59.81
Transgender	12	11.21
Genderfluid	10	9.35
Agender	8	7.48
Genderqueer	4	3.74
Gender non-conforming	3	2.80
Demigirl	3	2.80
Male	1	0.93
Questioning	1	0.93
Bigender	1	0.93
What is your main country of residence?		
USA	30	30.9
UK	27	27.8
Poland	11	11.3
Mexico	4	4.1
Spain	4	4.1
France	3	3.1
Canada	3	3.1
Australia	2	2.1
Chile	2	2.1
Germany	2	2.1
Italy	2	2.1

Portugal	2	2.1
Ireland	1	1
Russian Federation	1	1
South Africa	1	1
Sweden	1	1
Croatia	1	1
What is your current education status?		
Currently attending secondary school	1	1
Currently attending college/sixth form	16	16.5
Currently attending university	40	41.2
Not currently in education	37	38.1
Other	3	3.1
Please indicate which of the following best describes your ethnicity...		
White	76	78.35
Black/African/Caribbean	5	5.15
Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, any other Asian background)	3	3.09
Arab	2	2.06
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups	6	6.19
Other	2	2.06
Prefer not to say	3	3.09
Would you describe yourself as disabled?		
Yes	35	36.08
No	56	57.73
Prefer not to say	6	6.19
What is your religion?		
Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations)	11	11.34
Hindu	1	1.03
Jewish	1	1.03
Muslim	1	1.03
Any other religion	5	5.15
No religion	73	75.26
Prefer not to say	5	5.15

Ninety-seven participants shared a total of 142 microaffirmation experiences, these were coded and analysed as described above. Through the process of thematic analysis 11 descriptive themes were identified, with five themes addressing more than one research question (see Figure 3). Overall, five themes address research question one, five address research question two and four address research question three, alongside two overarching themes that describe the wider context in which microaffirmations were delivered. Alongside the developed themes, this review provides

numbers and percentages to illustrate how frequently microaffirmation experiences were linked to each theme (see Table 4). In addition, participants' responses to the questions about where and who/what delivered the microaffirmation were counted and are displayed in Table 3 to provide a deeper understanding of microaffirmation experiences of GDYP. Some participants described microaffirmations being delivered by more than one person and/or in more than one place, for this reason the occurrence (N) totals are greater than the 142 experiences described.

Figure 3

Thematic Map of Descriptive Themes

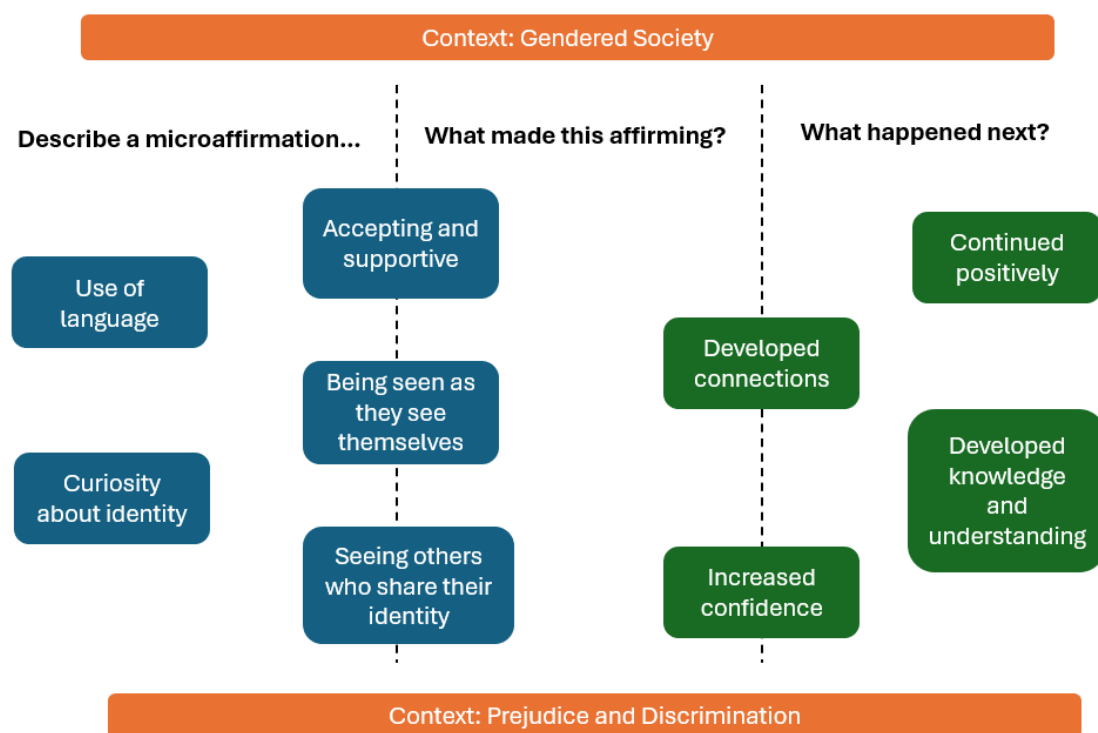


Table 4

Descriptive Themes with References and Percentages

Theme	References	%
(Q1) Descriptions of a microaffirmation...		
Use of language	64	45.07
- Pronouns	45	31.69
- Name	12	8.45
- Inclusive language	7	4.93
Accepting and supportive	55	38.73
- Acceptance	33	23.24
- Support	22	15.49
Curiosity about identity	33	23.24

Being seen as they see themselves	28	19.72
Seeing others who share their identity	14	9.86
(Q2) What made this affirming?		
Accepting and supportive	95	66.90
- Acceptance	69	48.59
- Support	26	18.31
Being seen as they see themselves	40	28.17
Seeing others who share their identity	18	12.67
Developed connections	13	9.15
Increased confidence	13	9.15
(Q3) What happened next?		
Continuing positively	32	22.54
Increased confidence	20	14.08
Developed knowledge and understanding	17	11.97
Developed connections	15	10.56
Context (across all questions)		
Context of prejudice and discrimination	28	19.72
Context of gendered society	15	10.56

Table 5

Who/What Delivered Microaffirmations and Where They Occurred

	N	Percentage
Where did this microaffirmation occur?		
Wider community	59	40.26
School	31	21.68
Home	25	17.48
Work	11	7.69
Online	7	4.90
Therapy	4	2.80
University	4	2.80
Other	2	1.40
Who/what delivered this microaffirmation?		
Friend	47	32.19
Acquaintance	20	13.70
Stranger	20	13.70
Family member	16	10.96
Parent	7	4.79
Romantic partner	6	4.11
Undefined	3	2.05

Teacher/Professor	15	10.27
Colleagues	11	7.53
Environment	8	5.48
Therapist	4	2.74
People online	2	1.37
Myself	2	1.37
Other	1	0.68

It can be seen from this data that the majority of microaffirmation experiences described by GDYP occurred in the wider community, this included parties and friends' houses, with a high number also occurring in school and at home. The majority of microaffirmations described were delivered by friends, followed by acquaintances then strangers, family members and teachers/professors.

3.4.1 Thematic Analysis

As illustrated in the thematic map (Figure 3), the descriptive themes were developed in relation to the research questions. Five themes related to question one, five to question two and four to question three, with two overarching themes describing the context that the microaffirmations occurred within.

3.4.2 Research Question 1 - What microaffirmations do gender-diverse young people experience?

3.4.2.1 Language. Language was a prominent theme across participant's descriptions of microaffirmations, with 45% of responses detailing other people's use of language when talking to or about a GDYP. Most commonly, participants described others using their correct pronouns but also included people using their chosen name and using inclusive language for groups. Using inclusive language appeared particularly impactful in countries with gendered languages, with a participant sharing "everytime my collage professor [sic] refers to us students she uses inclusive language. Polish is a very gendered language so it requires a conscious [sic] decision to do so" (Participant 1; P1).

3.4.2.2 Accepting and supportive. Acceptance of participants' gender identity and presentation was often described as a microaffirmation. This was particularly prevalent in situations where participants shared their gender identity with others for the first time and received a positive and accepting response. Acceptance was not only seen as a microaffirmation when it was directed at

the individual, but also when it was observed from others. One participant shared: “A micro affirmation I have experienced was the other day; someone I work with was telling me about her non-binary child and used they/them for her child” (P2). Experiences that conveyed support for the young person and their gender identity were also described as being affirming. This included others supporting and celebrating their transition, using humour when talking about gender and challenging microaggressions. Humour was described as a way in which others could convey their support and enhance participants’ feelings of connectedness. When describing people challenging microaggressions, participants predominantly described others correcting people’s pronoun use when referring to them, particularly in a gentle or subtle way, for example by using correct pronouns themselves.

3.4.2.3 Curiosity about identity. Participants described experiencing microaffirmations when others did not assume their gender, instead asking them how they identify, their pronouns and their name. This theme links closely to the theme of ‘Language’ and demonstrates that many GDYP feel validated and affirmed when someone asks about what language they would prefer others to use when referring to them. P3 shared “My best friend's mum asked me what I would like to be called and how I would like to be referred in the early days of when I first came out. It felt very liberating and amazing and accepting”. Participants also described curiosity as a microaffirmation when others showed an interest in their gender identity and journey, demonstrating a willingness to learn and develop their own knowledge.

3.4.2.4 Being seen as they see themselves. This theme refers to participants’ descriptions of people viewing them as the gender they understand themselves to be. Participants described experiences of strangers assuming their gender correctly, receiving compliments relating to their appearance or gender expression, being invited to correctly gendered events and experiencing others’ attraction to them. These experiences often linked to the binary genders of ‘male’ and ‘female’, but did not always, with several participants describing microaffirmation experiences when people appeared uncertain about their gender, for example P4 shared “i really like it when people are verbally unsure how to gender me, like they'll use a they/them pronoun or swap pronouns.”

3.4.2.5 Seeing others who share their identity. Participants described experiencing microaffirmations when they observed others who shared their identity in the world. This could simply be seeing others freely expressing their gender identity in public, particularly when these people appeared happy. This also extended to other aspects of a person's identity, such as sexuality, disability and race. Microaffirmations were experienced when participants saw people who they related to in roles of authority, such as a doctor, in career fields they would like to work in and in the media. Participants described media representation in art, politics, tv, films, video games and social media. They explained how seeing others going through a similar journey, or simply existing, made them feel less alone, for example:

I saw a person who was just like me the other day on Tiktok, they were the same race and gender as me and even better, our upbringing was almost the same. I felt really valid and seen and didn't feel like I was alone and I decided to follow them.

(P5)

3.4.3 Research Question 2 - What makes these experiences affirming? (“What was affirming about this experience?”)

3.4.3.1 Accepting and Supportive. When an act communicated acceptance and support of a GDYP's identity, it was viewed as a microaffirmation. In 67% of experiences shared, participants described that they felt affirmed due to other people's acceptance and support. This included participants descriptions of experiences occurring without judgement or discrimination. These experiences ranged from quiet support to explicitly challenging another person's views. At times, it was simply someone else making an effort to understand and support their identity, with P6 explaining “The support is the most affirming thing to me. I know my mom always tries her hardest, even if she doesn't fully understand it all.” Participants described how these experiences resulted in them feeling safe, seen and reassured.

3.4.3.2 Being seen as they see themselves. Experiences were seen as microaffirmations when they provided external validation of how GDYP felt internally. As described above, although these experiences often related to the binary genders of ‘male’ and ‘female’, they did not always. For

example, a participant shared: “people, and especially strangers, second guess how they gender me. i fully love that” (P7). Many participants explained that they felt validated when someone questioned their gender, this was either because it meant they were not automatically being viewed as their biological sex, validating their gender expression and transition, or because they recognised that they had made people question the gender binary which validated their view of gender.

3.4.3.3 Seeing others who share their identity. Participants described how seeing others who shared their identity, both in public and in the media, was affirming because it normalised their experiences and provided a model of possibility of what could be. Representation supported GDYP to feel that they were not alone in their experiences, as can be seen from P8’s response: “Seeing other disabled queer people makes me feel like I stick out less, that I’m more a part of the group.” Not only did representation support GDYP to feel included but also supported them to picture themselves in different roles and spaces. P9 shared “To see someone like myself attend the same classes as me and achieve their goals is especially affirming to my identity. It reminds me to let go of others’ perceptions of my identity.”

3.4.3.4 Developing connections. An act was described as a microaffirmation when it communicated care for the young person, supported them to feel included and strengthened their relationships with others. P10 explained that the microaffirmation they experienced was affirming because they felt “included in a community even though on the daily i feel like i’m excluded and do not belong there”.

3.4.3.5 Increasing confidence. Microaffirmations occurred when GDYP were supported to feel more comfortable in themselves and more confident to express who they truly are. This occurred on a personal level, as described by P11: “It helped me gain self respect, something I previously lacked because of self-consciousness and feelings of worthlessness or unrealistic expectations of myself”. As well as increasing confidence specifically around the people who delivered the microaffirmation or in the environment in which it occurred, as described by P12:

To come from a household where my chosen name isn't something that's respected,
it made me feel so much more comfortable around my professors. I knew I would be

able to talk to them about stuff regarding my identity, and they wouldn't judge me for it.

3.4.4 Research Question 3 – How do people experience the consequences of microaffirmations?

(“What happened next?”)

3.4.4.1 Continuing positively. When asked what happened after the microaffirmation occurred, many participants reported that not much changed, but that their days continued positively. They often described feeling happy, smiling and having a good time with those they were with. For example, P13 shared: “I felt really happy! Shopping for clothes is really hard for me, so this experience was very nice.” Alongside these general positive feelings, participants described feeling reassured and validated. Several participants described how it left them hoping it would occur more often, such as P14 who said: “I hoped it would just grow and happen more and more often”.

3.4.4.2 Increased confidence. After a microaffirmation occurred, participants described feeling more confident and comfortable in themselves: “It just gave me a quiet confidence, like I was truly seen for who I am” (P15). Microaffirmations supported them to feel more comfortable in environments where the microaffirmation occurred and around the people who delivered the microaffirmation. It was shared that microaffirmations made participants feel more able to have open conversations about their identity, express their gender identity and enter spaces they did not before. This is evidenced by P16, who shared “I regularly attend my doctor appointments, which I didn't do before.”

3.4.4.3 Developed knowledge and understanding. It was described that microaffirmations could lead to others changing their perceptions; this included the individual themselves changing their perception, developing other people’s understanding, and creating wider change. Participants described how someone delivering one microaffirmation, often linked to them delivering more microaffirmations in the future. For example, P17 shared “this person developed a better understanding of singular they/them pronouns which i know is difficult for some people, and they improved at using my pronouns without having to correct themselves”. Not only did these individuals deliver more microaffirmations, but it was also shared that this could lead to others also

delivering more microaffirmations. For example, one person using correct pronouns led to others doing the same going forward.

3.4.4.4 Developed connections. Microaffirmations were described as supporting GDYP to strengthen their relationships and feel more connected to those around them. They also helped to develop supportive environments in which participants felt welcome. One participant described how their lecturer using the correct pronouns fostered a positive academic relationship:

...his act of 'microaffirmation' made me feel extremely comfortable around him. I talked to him about my academic struggles, as I trusted him to be accepting and understanding. We had an amazing academic relationship that was built on the trust he inspired within me, by his reaction to my identity. (P18)

3.4.5 Context

In addition to the themes developed to address the three research questions, there were some common threads across responses to all questions. These described the wider context in which the microaffirmations occurred: the context of a gendered society and expecting prejudice and discrimination.

3.4.5.1 Gendered society. This theme highlights that many of the microaffirmations described occurred within a society which frequently separates things by the binary genders of 'male' and 'female'. For example, a participant shared:

I went shopping for clothes. When I was asked if I was getting clothes for myself, the lady working there didn't assume a specific gender and showed me both sections, emphasizing that she could show me any kind I would like to try on. When I wanted to try on the articles, she asked me about which changing room I would feel more comfortable in (P13)

This example highlights how gendered society can be, making it challenging for GDYP to navigate. This theme was particularly prevalent when microaffirmations were described by participants from countries with gendered languages, such as Spanish and Polish. Participants who

spoke these languages explained how microaffirmations occurred when others made a conscious effort to change their language to ensure they were acting in an inclusive way.

3.4.5.2 Prejudice and discrimination. In just under 20% of the experiences shared, microaffirmations occurred in situations where participants expected to experience marginalisation and discrimination. For example, someone responding positively to a GDYP sharing their identity was described as affirming because it was unexpected, someone using correct pronouns was affirming because they expected to be misgendered, and developing connections was affirming because they often feel isolated. P19 shared “What stood out was the way they acknowledged my experience and identity without any hesitation or judgment.”

A couple of participants shared how a microaffirmation from one person could lead to microaggressions from others. One participant shared that they were afraid of experiencing violence following a microaffirmation in public where a child had questioned their gender. This demonstrates that although microaffirmations are ordinarily positive experiences, they often occur in the context of discrimination and can lead to negative experiences when the individual is not in a safe, supportive environment.

3.5 Discussion

This study aimed to explore the microaffirmation experiences of GDYP. It was found that microaffirmation experiences often related to people’s use of language, curiosity about their identity, being seen as they see themselves, and encountering others who share their identity. These experiences were affirming because they communicated that the young person was accepted for who they are, and that others believed they could succeed and be happy in the world, developing their confidence and connections with others. Many participants described how experiencing a microaffirmation contributed to them continuing to have a positive day, and at times helped increase others’ knowledge and understanding - ultimately leading to further microaffirmations. These findings reflect Rowe’s (2008) original conceptual understanding of microaffirmations, which suggested that these experiences would not only benefit the individual, but also model inclusivity to others.

Although participants were not explicitly asked about the wider context in which microaffirmations occurred, it was found that context was often key to understanding their experiences. The two contexts identified were the binary gendered societies participants lived within, and the prejudice and discrimination that participants were used to experiencing. The fact that these contexts were present in participants descriptions of microaffirmations supports Sue et al.'s (2021) conceptual description of microaffirmations, emphasising that microaffirmations occur within the context of marginalisation, countering prejudice, bias and discrimination. These findings highlight the unique nature of microaffirmations; anyone can experience acceptance and support, but the power of these experiences for GDYP stems from the context of discrimination and marginalisation that they exist within. Within this research, we asked specifically about participants' experiences of gender identity affirmations, which is what was shared, but it is important to note that microaffirmations can be broader than this and can affirm different aspects of a person's identity (see Chapter 2). Self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) posits that if aspects of a person's identity are threatened, such as their gender identity, then they will be able to better navigate this if they feel affirmed in other aspects of their identity, such as their social or academic identity. It is therefore important to hold in mind that we should be supporting GDYP to feel acceptance and value across all aspects of their identity, but that microaffirmations relating to their gender identity are likely to have the greatest impact due to their past experiences of discrimination and marginalisation.

The majority of microaffirmations to GDYP were delivered by friends (32%), followed by acquaintances (14%) and strangers (14%). Previous research has found that young people are more open about their identity with friends than with family members (Government Equalities Office, 2018) and it is possible that friends were most able to affirm GDYP because they had the best understanding of their gender identity. In contrast, acquaintances and strangers are less likely to know GDYP's gender identity or biological sex, which means that they will be responding to them based on their gender expression and how they present themselves, providing opportunities for curiosity, preferred language use, and being seen as they see themselves, rather than preconceived ideas. This suggests that expressing and sharing their gender identity would increase opportunities for GDYP to experience microaffirmations, an idea supported by DeLucia and Smith (2021) who

found that greater outness (of bisexuality) predicted greater microaffirmation experiences. Similarly, UCAS (2021) found that the majority of GDYP who reported having a good experience at school attributed this to being able to talk openly about their identity. Yet it has been found that GDYP who realise their gender identity differs from societal norms in childhood do not share this with another person for an average of 14 years (Turban et al., 2023). The researchers hypothesised that is likely due to fear of rejection and stigma, which is supported by the understanding that humans are motivated by a need to belong and be accepted by others (Dunning, 2011). This clearly highlights the importance of creating safe, accepting environments in which people feel able to express and share their gender identity, enhancing opportunities for microaffirmation experiences and feelings of inclusion.

A high number of microaffirmation experiences shared by GDYP described other people's use of language (45%). These experiences predominantly described people's use of their pronouns but also included use of their chosen name and using inclusive language for groups. Together with this, 23% of participants described others being curious about their identity as a microaffirmation, such as others asking about their language preferences. This suggests that a simple way to increase opportunities for microaffirmations to occur, and to reduce minority stress experiences (Meyer, 2003), is to ask young people about their language preferences and to use these when working with them. Research shows that GDYP who were able to use their chosen name across contexts, such as home and school, reported significantly fewer suicidal thoughts, behaviours, and symptoms of depression than those who could not (Russell et al., 2018). However, current guidance does not always advocate for inclusive language. In the UK, the Department for Education (2023) states that "no teacher or pupil should be compelled to use these preferred pronouns and it should not prevent teachers from referring to children collectively as 'girls' or 'boys'" (p. 13). The findings from the current study run counter to this guidance and suggest that individuals working with young people should ask about and use their preferred language, alongside using inclusive language when referring to groups. This is echoed by Nath et al. (2024) who found that GDYP who described their school as gender-affirming were also more likely to report lower rates of attempted suicide, highlighting the significant impact of respecting a young person's gender identity.

3.5.1 Implications for Educational Psychologists (EPs)

The findings of this study can support the development of educational psychology practice at a number of levels. At an individual level, it is important for EPs to understand the importance of asking about a young person's identity when they meet them and respecting what is shared, for example using the name and pronouns they share when referring to them both in person and in written form, such as when writing reports. At a more systemic level, EPs can support schools to develop their inclusive practices to support GDYP. This could include disseminating the findings of this research to those working in schools, building their knowledge and confidence in knowing how to support GDYP and supporting those working in schools to recognise the importance of the seemingly small actions they take on an everyday basis. In addition, EPs can support schools to create an inclusive environment, promoting symbols of inclusivity and creating groups and spaces where GDYP feel able to express themselves and connect with others who have similar experiences.

3.5.2 Strengths, limitations and directions for future research

A strength of this study was the diverse range of voices gathered to better understand GDYP's experiences of microaffirmations, gaining the perspectives of 97 young people, with a wide range of identities and life experiences, from 17 different countries. However, it is important to note that the majority of participants were non-binary, White and from the UK or USA, which means the themes identified will predominantly reflect the experiences of these groups. In addition, this study explored the microaffirmation experiences of GDYP, however this is not a homogenous population (Watson et al., 2020), as can be seen by the range of gender identities provided in the demographic information (see Table 3). It would therefore be interesting for future research to extend the findings of this study by exploring microaffirmation experiences of GDYP across cultures, and within specific gender identities to better understand the similarities or differences that occur between groups and across societal contexts.

The concept of microaffirmations is relatively new and we were therefore aware that participants may not be familiar with this term, for this reason participants were provided with a simple definition and four examples of microaffirmations shared by participants in previous research.

Sharing these was important to support participants' understanding of the questions being asked in the survey but may have led to them sharing similar examples. In addition, participants were given the opportunity to share as many experiences as they would like, however most only shared one or two which may mean we have not fully captured the variety of people's microaffirmation experiences. As the concept becomes better understood it will be important to explore whether the microaffirmation experiences of GDYP are broader than those captured within this study.

This study found that GDYP described microaffirmations as setting a positive tone for the rest of the day and reported a range of additional benefits, including increased confidence, stronger connections, and greater understanding of their identity by others. This reflects the findings of previous qualitative research where participants also described the positive impacts of microaffirmations (Demetriou et al., 2023; Koch et al., 2020). However, these impacts have not yet been explored within quantitative literature and it will be important for future research to explicitly explore the impacts of microaffirmations, including the impacts for the individual, the person delivering the microaffirmation and those who observe microaffirmations.

3.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the small ways in which both individuals and institutions can support GDYP to feel accepted and supported. The microaffirmations described include the use of inclusive language and curiosity about identity, providing a space where GDYP feel accepted as themselves and are able to connect with, or simply see, others who share their identity.

Microaffirmation experiences were described as affirming by GDYP because they normalise their experiences, model what is possible and provide external validation that others see them as they see themselves. Participants described how microaffirmations allow their days to continue positively, developing their confidence and connections with others. However, GDYP also often referenced the gendered society within which they live and the discrimination they experienced in daily life. In this study, GDYP shared experiences that they found affirming, providing a better understanding of how we can incorporate inclusivity into both our personal and professional lives, fostering environments where acceptance is the norm, not the exception.

Appendix A – CASP Quality Assurance Checklist

[illegible]

way that addressed the research issue?																			
Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Y	CT **	CT	Y	CT	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	CT **	Y	CT ***	CT ***	Y	Y	CT
Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Y	Y	Y	CT ****	CT ****	CT ****	Y	Y	CT ****	CT ****	Y	CT ****	CT ****	Y	CT ****	CT ****	Y	Y	Y
Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Is there a clear statement of findings?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Is this research valuable?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

*Only recruited from one university

**Reflexivity is mentioned but not evidenced

***Reflexivity is evidenced but used personal networks to recruit with no discussion about whether they knew participants or how this was addressed

****Appeared ethical but no ethics board has been mentioned

Appendix B – Data Extraction Table

Authors	Year	Participants (number, age, gender)	Location	Context of microaffirmations	Directly asked about microaffirmations?	Data collection method and analysis	Coded themes
Anzani, Morris and Galupo	2019	N = 64 Age: 18-65 (M=30.73) Ethnicity: 79.69% White, 20.31% Ethnic/racial minority	10 Countries: Australia, Brazil, Canada, England, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Scotland, and the United States	Transgender clients' microaffirmation experiences in therapy	Yes	Online questionnaire Thematic analysis	• Absence of microaggressions • Acknowledging cisnormativity • Disrupting cisnormativity • Seeing authentic gender
Brown (thesis)	2023	N = 5 Age: Mid-30s to late 40s Ethnicity:	USA	African-American faculty members in higher education	No	Semi-structured interviews (virtual)	Microaffirmations: • Microsupports • Microvalidations • Microcompliments • Microrecognitions • Microtransformations

		All African-American Gender: 3 female 2 male				Phenomenological research method	• Microprotections Taken from previous research – combination of Rolon-Dow (2018) and Ellis (2018)
Carter (thesis)	2021	N = 361 Age: 18-59 years (M=22.03) Mainly identified as female (66.5%), White or Caucasian (59.8%), low-income (41.3%)	USA – One “large, public university located in the Southwestern United States”	Between academic advisors and students	Yes	Online questionnaire Thematic analysis	• Advisor communication behaviours • Students feelings and perceptions
Corral (thesis)	2023	N = 9 Age = 20-32 Gender: 4 female, 3 male, 1 transgender woman and 1 non-binary	USA - Public institutions in California	Latiné undocuqueer (undocumented and queer) university students	No	Virtual semi structured pláticas - Nine individual pláticas and one small group plática	Microaffirmations Racial microaffirmations
Demetriou, McNulty, Powell and DeVita	2023	N = 350 undergraduate students Ethnicity: 76.2% White Gender:	USA - One “large, public research institution in the southeaster	Undergraduate students – no specific group except students	Yes	Online survey Qualitative content analysis	• MA came from key individuals and the campus environment • MA came in multiple forms • Content was motivations, inclusive, generous and • future oriented

		81.2% female	n United States'				MA influenced perceived academic performance, persistence and navigation of challenges 4 more themes about impact
Eisenman, Rolon-Dow, Freedman, Davison and Yates	2020	N = 9 Ethnicity: 6 White, 3 African American/Black Gender: 2 female, 7 male	USA - One 'mid-Atlantic university'	Students and alumni of program for those with intellectual disabilities	Yes	Narrative interviews	- Microrecognitions, - Microvalidations - Microtransformations - Microprotections
Ellis, Powell, Demetriou, Huerta-Bapat and Panter	2019	N = 296 Age: M = 22.9 years Ethnicity: 58% White, 12% Black/African American, 20% Latinx, 10% other racial/ethnic minority Gender: 68% female, 31% male	USA - One 'highly selective, public research university in the southeastern United States'	First generation university students	Yes	Online survey	A priori codes: - Microsupports - Microcompliments - Microvalidations
Flanders, Tarasoff, Legge, Robinson and Gos	2017	N = 91 Ethnicity: 74.3% White, 17.1% Bi/Multi racial, 3.4% Latino and	USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, Spain, and the	Young bisexual and nonmonosexual people (attracted to	Yes	28-day daily diary	- Interpersonal - Intrapersonal - Institutional

		5.4% from other backgrounds Gender: 30 male, 49 female, 7 genderqueer	Netherlands (not formally assessed)	more than one gender)			(Framework developed from Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Model)
Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, Clements and Morris	2019	N = 161 Age: 18-54 (M=22.35) Ethnicity: 77.65% White, 22.35% Racial/ethnic minority	USA - Participants 'represent 39 States in the USA'	Microaffirmations from romantic partners to gender diverse individuals	Yes	Online Survey Thematic analysis	Themes: • Identity Validations • Identity Endorsements • Active Learning • Active Defence
Koch, Knutson, Loche, Loche III, Lee and Federici	2020	N = 13 Age: 24-42 Ethnicity: 2 African American, 5 White, 1 South Asian, 1 American Indian, 2 unknown Gender: 7 male and 6 female	USA – One 'large Midwestern University'	Culturally diverse graduate students	Yes	Semi-structured group interviews (in person) Consensual Qualitative Analysis	Four Domains: • The Construct • Recipient's Experience • Qualities of a Microaffirming Person • Result of Microaffirmation
Palmer (thesis)	2023	N = 11 Age = 21-55	USA – Four 'predominat	Black master of social work	No	Semi-structured	Microaffirmations and other positive experiences: • Microaffirmations

		Ethnicity: All identified as Black or African American, with two also identifying as White and one as Hispanic Gender: 10 female, 1 male	ely White Institutions'	university students		interviews (virtual) Post-intentional phenomenology using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens	• Microaffirmations and Black Faculty • Microaffirmations and White Faculty • Microaffirmations in Field Practicum Microaffirmations from Other Students
Perez Huber, Gonzalez, Robles and Solorzano	2021	N = 30 Age = 20-55 Ethnicity: 18 Latinx, 2 Asian, 5 Black, 5 bi/multi racial Gender: 23 female, 5 male, 2 non-binary	USA - One Californian University	Racial microaffirmations in higher education	Yes (racial microaffirmations)	Focus groups Critical Race Theory	Types of racial microaffirmations as protective factors: • Ethnic studies • Texts • Visual & performing arts • Everyday validations • Everyday affirmations • Counterspaces
Perez Huber, Robles and Solorzano	2023	N = 30 Age = 20-55 (M=30) Ethnicity: 18 Latinx, 2 Asian, 5 Black, 5 Bi/Multi racial Gender: 23 female, 5 male, 2 non-binary	USA	Graduate students of colour (racial microaffirmations)	Yes (racial microaffirmations)	Group pláticas Critical Race Feminista Approach	Racial microaffirmations categorised as: • Power of physical touch • Feeling seen • Tastes and smells of home • Sounds of community • Healing

Pulice-Farrow, Bravo and Galupo	2019	N = 339 Age 18-84 (M=23.41) Ethnicity: 82% White	76% lived in USA, the others covered 19 different countries	Microaffirmations in romantic relationships of transgender individuals	Yes	Online Survey Thematic Analysis	• Acknowledging and using cisgender privilege • Centring on partner's identity • Affirming gender(less) presentation • Helping partner process identity • Seeking permission • Using affirming language • Acknowledging milestones
Rolón-Dow and Davison	2021	N = 34 Ethnicity: All identified as African-American, Latinx or mixed race (no percentages)	USA – One 'large, predominantly white institution (PWI) located on the East Coast of the United States'	Microaffirmations related to racial identities in higher education institution	Yes	Narrative Interviews Critical Race/LatCrit theoretical framework	Developed microaffirmation typology: • Microrecognitions • Microvalidations • Microtransformations • Microprotections
Rolón-Dow and de Novais	2024	N = 8 Ethnicity: All Latinx, Black, or multiracial Gender: All female	USA	Black, female's experiences of microaffirmations in higher education institutions	Yes	Narrative Interviews	• Mapping microaffirmations • Navigating through microaffirmations

Rosati, Lorusso, Pistella, Giovanardi, Di Giannantonio, Mirabella, Williams, Lingiardi and Baiocco	2022	N = 25 Age = 19-35 (M=27.44) Ethnicity: All White and Italian	Italy	Non-Binary Clients' Experiences of Psychotherapy	No	Semi-structured interviews Codebook thematic analysis	The Practice of the Psychotherapist: • Non-Binary Affirmative Approach through Validation and Microaffirmations
Soriano (thesis)	2022	N = 18 Age = 18-33 Ethnicity: All identify as Latina/o/x, Hispanic, or as a member of a Latin American ethnic group, such as Mexican American Gender: 13 female, 5 male	USA – One California State University designated as a Hispanic-serving institution	Latinx undergraduates experiences of Latinx Cultural Center	No	Face-to-face semi-structured interviews Thematic analysis	Fostering Racial Microaffirmations: - Nurturing a sense of safety - Visual microaffirmations - Linguistic microaffirmations - Familial microaffirmations Affirming One's Latinx Identity
Topor, Greiff and Skogens	2019	N = 40 Age = 26-62 Gender: 13 female, 27 male	Stokholm, Sweden	Individuals recovering from alcohol and drug addictions	No	Interviews Thematic analysis	• My own decision, but with the help of others • The need for structures and going beyond them • Small trivial things of great importance

Appendix C – Microaffirmation Examples

"I actually feel really accepted when people are curious and they want to help."

"My therapist has shown genuine emotion and excitement multiple times when I've reached milestones in my transition, like surgery, changing my name, starting testosterone."

"Always referred to me as male without needing prompting or reminders, even before I began to medically transition."

"Yeah, if I see someone who looks like me in a higher position of power, or in college, just doing something that's really beneficial to the community, I feel like that's affirming too."

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