

Dissertation Research Proposal
Creativity & Value Creation
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1. Proposed Research Title

Towards climate justice: Transgender perspectives on climate change

2. Introduction and Context

In 2018, speaking at the COP24 international climate change talks, Sir David Attenborough described climate change as the greatest threat that humanity is currently facing (University of Sussex, 2023). In his later speech at COP26, he highlighted how climate change, the human-induced changes in the concentrations of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, will disrupt food production, fresh water access, and vital ecosystems around the world. He describes how this will heighten already existing inequalities between nations, communities and individuals (United Nations Security Council, 2021). Gender related inequalities are frequently intensified by the pressures of climate change, and research suggests that this will continue worsening worldwide as severe weather events occur more commonly (UN Women, 2022).

Transgender, often shortened to trans, is a word used to describe people who were assumed to be a given gender at birth, and later realise they are a different gender (Government Equalities Office, 2018). Transgender is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of people. Trans people may be men, women, both, or neither, and people who do not fit inside the category of man or woman are often termed non-binary (National Centre for Transgender Equality, 2023). Trans people face high levels of oppression and violence because of their trans identities (Faye, 2022), and in the United Kingdom, the ongoing negative reaction from media and legislative bodies towards trans people has been described as a “moral panic” (Hines, 2020).

Marginalised groups will face increased levels of oppression and experience unique struggles as the climate crisis continues, and trans people are one such group. However, there is very little existing research regarding trans people and their relationship to climate change. This study will explore this under researched area.

3. Aims and Objectives

This project aims to use qualitative interview strategies to determine the views of transgender people on climate change and how it has and will affect them and their communities. The three core objectives are as follows:

- Conduct a literature review to assess the existing body of knowledge
- Utilise semi structured interviews to gather information about the perspectives of the target individuals
- Analyse interview data gathered using thematic coding

4. Literature Review

4.1 Transgender people

Transgender people have always existed (Stonewall, 2020; Human Rights Campaign Foundation, n.d). While it may feel to some that it is a new phenomenon, this assumption is commonly attributed to increased awareness meaning language is more freely available for people to identify with, general societal acceptance allowing more trans people to come out publicly, and faster access to global news (Inch, 2016). Individuals such as Doctor James Barry (c. 1789-1865), who was assigned female when born, but proceeded to live as a man until his death, are commonly regarded to be examples of historical transgender people before such language existed (Holmes, 2020).

However, trans people have often been described as “unnatural”, separate from nature (Ladin, 2013), and experience exclusion from outdoor activities such as sports (McClearn, 2022). One study showed that trans graduate students in natural science fields experienced higher levels of microaggressions, such as misgendering, than those in social science fields (Whitley *et al*, 2022). Trans people are also often not considered in environmental policy and outreach (Wilson-Fetrow, 2021), and in the United Kingdom are facing rising levels of hate (McLean, 2021). This highlights the environmental marginalisation trans people are already facing.

It is challenging to obtain accurate data regarding the portion of the UK population who are transgender. The 2021 Census for England and Wales included a question about whether the gender the respondent currently identifies as is the same as the sex they were registered as being at birth. This question was voluntary to answer, and only asked to over-16s (Office for National Statistics, 2023). 0.5% of respondents answered that their gender identity and the sex they were registered as at birth are different. This was around 262,000 people. However, it is noted that individuals may not wish to disclose trans identity on the census, and suggested that this number is likely to be higher in actuality (UK Parliament, 2023).

4.2 Climate change and environmental justice

The unequal distribution of the impacts of environmental risks, such as pollution, have long been observed by marginalised communities. The term ‘environmental justice’ arose as a response to ‘environmental racism’, wherein polluting industrial facilities, contaminated waste disposal sites and other harmful endeavours were preferentially sited in predominantly Black communities over predominantly white communities in the United States (Mohai *et al*, 2009). Environmental justice focuses on the inclusion of marginalised communities, including indigenous, nonwhite, disabled, LGBTQ+, and low income communities in environmental decision making, using local activism, mutual aid and collective action amongst other methods (Wilson, 2010; Sze, 2020).

Examples of environmental justice led research in the UK include Rozer and Surminski (2020), who describe how newly built houses in low income areas are more likely to contend with flooding in the face of climate change. Using this data, they discuss the need for change in the way flood defences are implemented in these communities. Studies such as these could also be considered “climate justice” focused. Climate justice is an aspect of environmental justice which focuses explicitly on the effects of climate change on marginalised groups (Schlosberg and Collins, 2014).

Environmental justice concerns typically focus on three primary areas. As communicated above, the conditions of a community’s location are frequently discussed, including access to green spaces and freedom from the health impacts of pollution (Mohai and Saha, 2015). Exclusion from movements for change is another topic often focused upon, such as Black climate activists being removed from photos where white peers were not (Barnes, 2022) and inclusion of marginalised gender groups not being considered in climate campaigns (Kulcur *et al*, 2019). The third aspect, emerging especially in recent years as people imagine what “solving” the climate crisis could look like, is exclusion from scenarios of the future. These concepts of the future may overlook peoples and perspectives (Death, 2022), and further harm the abilities of marginalised groups to take active roles in creating their own futures (Davis, 2022).

4.3 Queer ecology

Thus far in this proposal, the transgender community and the concept of environmental justice have been explored. Queer ecology is a framework which links together these two subjects and demonstrates the benefits of examining ecology with an open minded perspective, and is therefore useful to contextualise this proposed study. First appearing in literature in the 1990s, the queer ecology framework suggests that the experiences of the queer community, such as expansive gender expression, same-sex relationships and non-monogamous relationships, can be applicable to ecological study and provide a more accurate picture of how organisms can behave (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2005; Bennett, 2023).

The queer ecology framework can be applied to a variety of fields, including studies on rural human populations, and is most commonly applied to zoology and evolutionary biology related topics (Seymour, 2020). Incorporating this framework can help avoid biases in research, as many organisms engage in same-sex behaviours, or have complex or fluid sex characteristics (Roughgarden, 2013). Some scholars suggest that trans people have experiences that are valuable to ecology. The experience of moving between “binary” categories, redefining identities outside of societal expectations, and familiarity with fluidity of expressions benefited Hazard (2022) in their work with dynamic river ecosystems.

5. Methodology and Justification

Climate change mitigation has been shown to need to include the worldviews of as many communities as possible to be most effective and equitable (Droz, 2019), and marginalised

communities being able to describe their own struggles helps provide that wider perspective (Climate Change and Marginalised Communities Workshop Contributors, 2020). Exploratory research is needed to provide this information for the UK trans community, which this project intends to provide.

This project will utilise qualitative methods. These have been identified as suited for research into behaviours, opinions and experiences (Tenny *et al*, 2022). Semi structured interviews will be conducted with participants, using an interview guide to ensure the topics are consistent between interviews. These interviews will be transcribed and thematic coding will be carried out to identify key themes.

Participants will be transgender people from the United Kingdom, and questions will focus on three key areas: the local environment of the participant, climate activism and participation, and perspectives on the future. This aligns with the three primary focuses of climate justice as identified in the literature review.

While it does not appear that there have been studies carried out on specifically transgender experiences and climate justice previously, other studies involving transgender people have utilised similar methodologies as outlined above. This includes use of qualitative interview strategies and thematic coding, used because of the complex and layered experiences being investigated (Humphrey, 2016; Brown, 2021).

6. Privacy and Ethical Considerations

- Participation would be entirely voluntary with participants able to change their minds about their inclusion at any point in the study.
- Informed consent would be obtained from participants prior to study commencing.
- All data collected would be stored in compliance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation.
- All information would be kept confidential, and files would be password protected.
- Gender and disclosures of trans identity are sensitive details, and all participants would be given the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview and request details that they feel would identify them to not be included in the final work.
- An ethics form would be produced and all research steps taken would comply with this document.

7. Timetable

This research project would commence in September 2024. Please see the timescale illustrated below (figure 1).

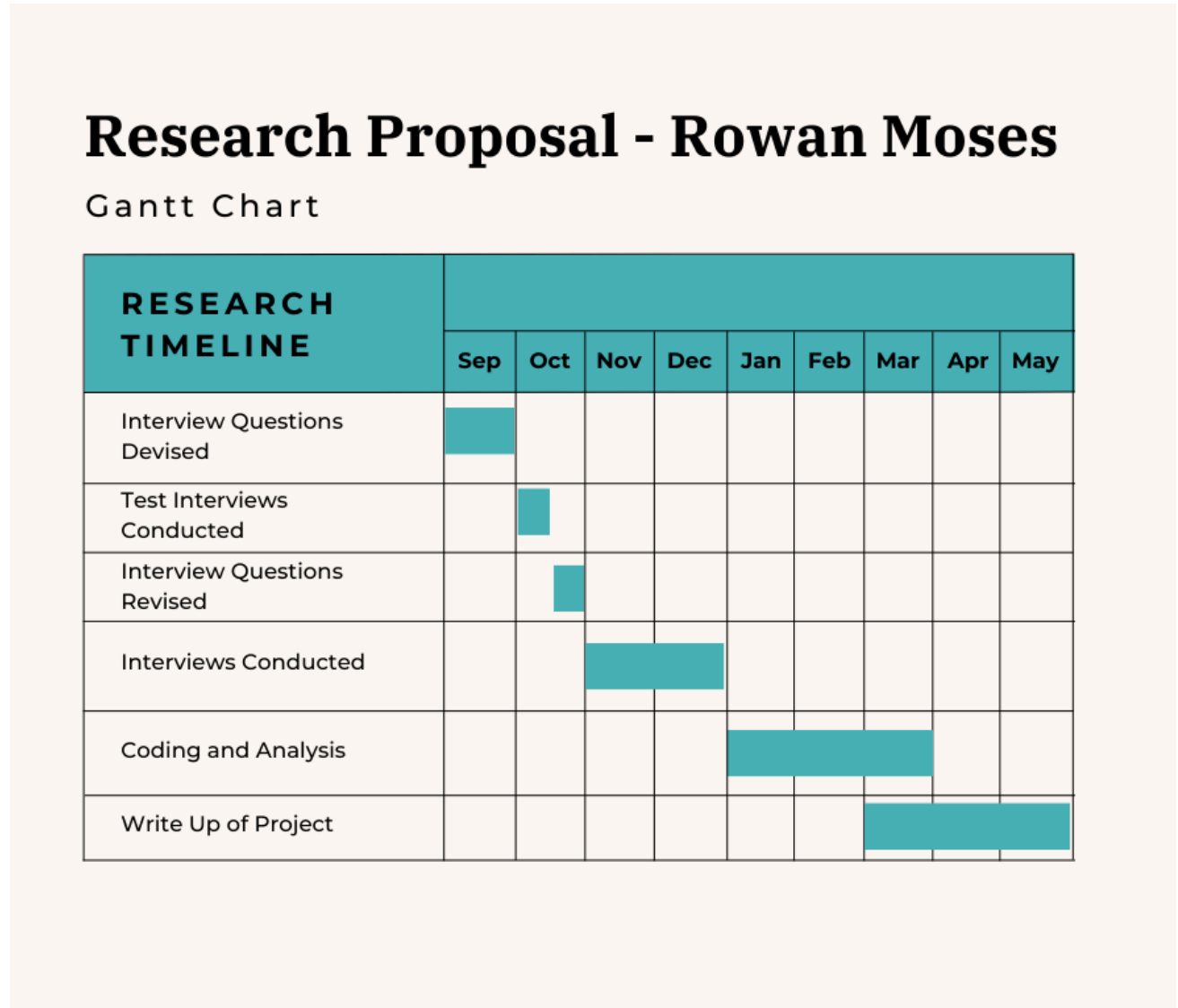


Figure 1: Research Project Gantt Chart.

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