

# Effects of therapists affirming and non-affirming reactions to transgender identity exploration on the therapeutic relationship: An analogue study

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## Abstract

Transgender individuals seek mental health counseling for a variety of reasons (Bockting, Knudson, & Goldberg, 2006). However, their experiences in therapy are not always positive, and some experiences are quite negative (Rachlin, 2002). The present study utilizes an analogue research design and video vignettes to investigate how a therapist's response to transgender identity exploration affects participants' perceptions of the therapist and the therapeutic relationship. The study utilized a series of mock therapy video vignettes that vary the way that a therapist responds to the client including transition-affirming, gender non-binary affirming, and non-affirming responses. Transgender participants watched one of three mock therapy clips before completing a series of questions about their perception of the therapist's expertness, likability, trustworthiness, and the session smoothness, depth, positivity, and arousal. Results indicate that the affirming and non-affirming messages the therapist provides in session significantly affect the perceptions of the therapist and the quality of the therapeutic relationship. This study provides a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which transgender individuals experience different therapeutic approaches and how these perceptions may be different based on their own desire to transition or not transition.

## Introduction

- Transgender individuals access therapeutic services for a number reasons and their experiences of therapy are not always positive.
- Guidance exists, especially for transgender people who want to transition. However, not all transgender people want to transition medically
- Current recommendations may not be helpful for counseling transgender clients who are not interested in transitioning

## Participants

- Self-identified as part of the transgender-spectrum, 18+ years old, live in United States ( $n = 409$ )
- **Gender:** 39% genderqueer, 20% trans men, 17% trans women, 6% women, 6% men, 13% something else
- **Age:** 62% 18-29 y/o, 31% 30-50 y/o, 6% 51+ y/o
- **Race/Ethnicity:** 78% European American, 8% African American, 7% Latino(a)/Hispanic, 5% Asian American, 5% American Indian/Alaska Native, 2% Middle Eastern, 5% "other"
- **Transition plans:** 38% no plan to transition, 34% interested in transitioning, 19% in process, 10% already transitioned.

## Design

- An analogue research design was used to create the conditions that approximate the therapeutic relationship (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2007).
- Created video vignettes of a mock therapy session between a therapist and a client questioning their gender identity.
- Recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), social media, listservs, emails, & community centers.

## Procedure

### VIDEO CONDITIONS

**Transition affirming:** therapist presents the option of transitioning and explains the process

- *Sometimes people choose to transition to help them feel more like themselves.*

**Non-binary affirming:** Therapists presents the option that the client can explore their gender identity and fluidity

- *sometimes people are flexible and fluid with their identity. They may feel comfortable being in between...maybe both male and female or neither male nor female.*

**Non-affirming:** therapist encourages client to identify with birth assigned sex.

- *Sometimes the best option is to work toward being more like other strong men who are sure of their masculinity*

### MEASURES

- *Counselor Rating Form- Short* (CRF-S; Corrigan & Schmidt, 1983)
- *Session Evaluation Questionnaire* (SEQ; Stiles & Snow, 1984)
- *Attitude Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale* (ATSPPHS; Fischer & Turner, 1970)
- *Transgender Adaptation and Integration Measure* (TG AIM; Sjoberg, Walch, Stanny, 2006):
- *Measures Transgender Congruence Scale* (TCS; Kozee, Tylka, Bauerband, 2012)

## Results

**Hypothesis I:** Therapeutic relationship will be rated higher for the transition affirming and non-binary affirming conditions as compared to the non-affirming condition.

- Significant difference with a medium to large effect size,  $F(8, 404) = 9.55, p < .0001$ ; Wilk's  $\Lambda = 0.71$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .159$ .
- Significant difference between both affirming videos and the non-affirming video condition

**Hypothesis II:** Ratings will be higher when there is a match between the transition plan (i.e., have transitioned/plan to transition or no plan to transition) and the video condition.

- No significant difference,  $F(8, 404) = 1.097, p = .364$ ; Wilk's  $\Lambda = 0.958$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .021$ .

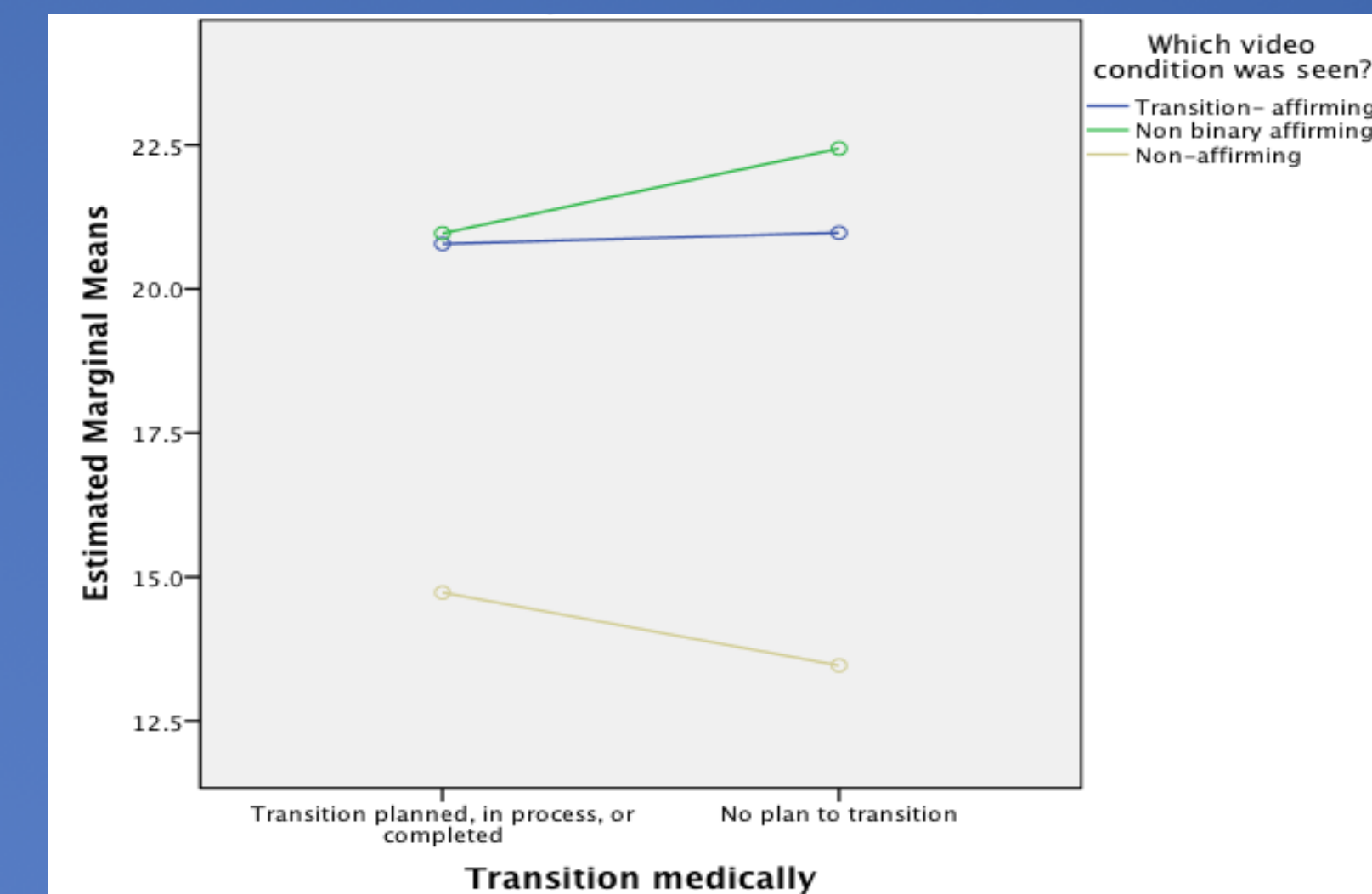


Figure 1. Estimated marginal means for Counselor Rating Form

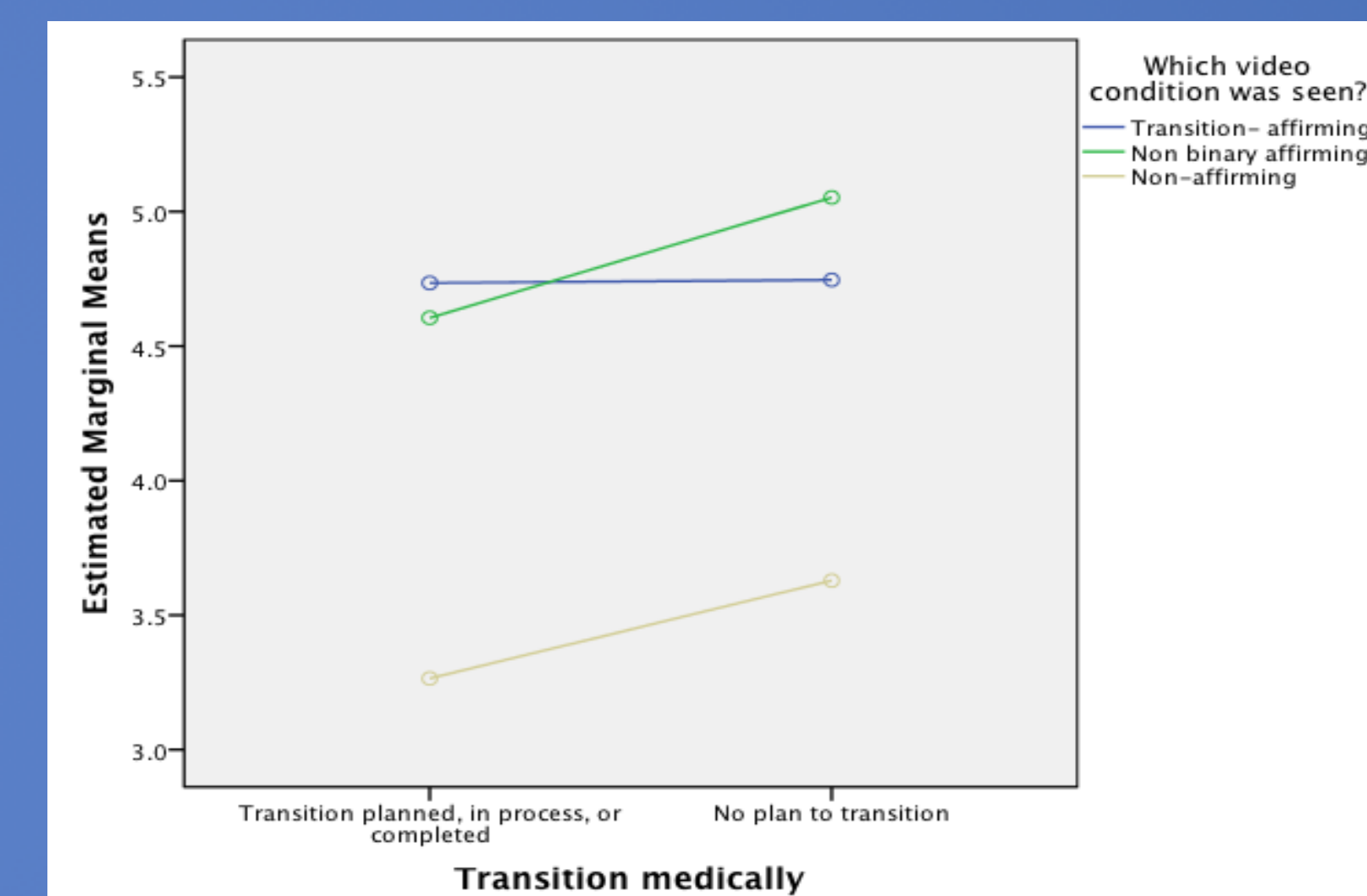


Figure 2. Estimated marginal means of SEQ depth subscale.

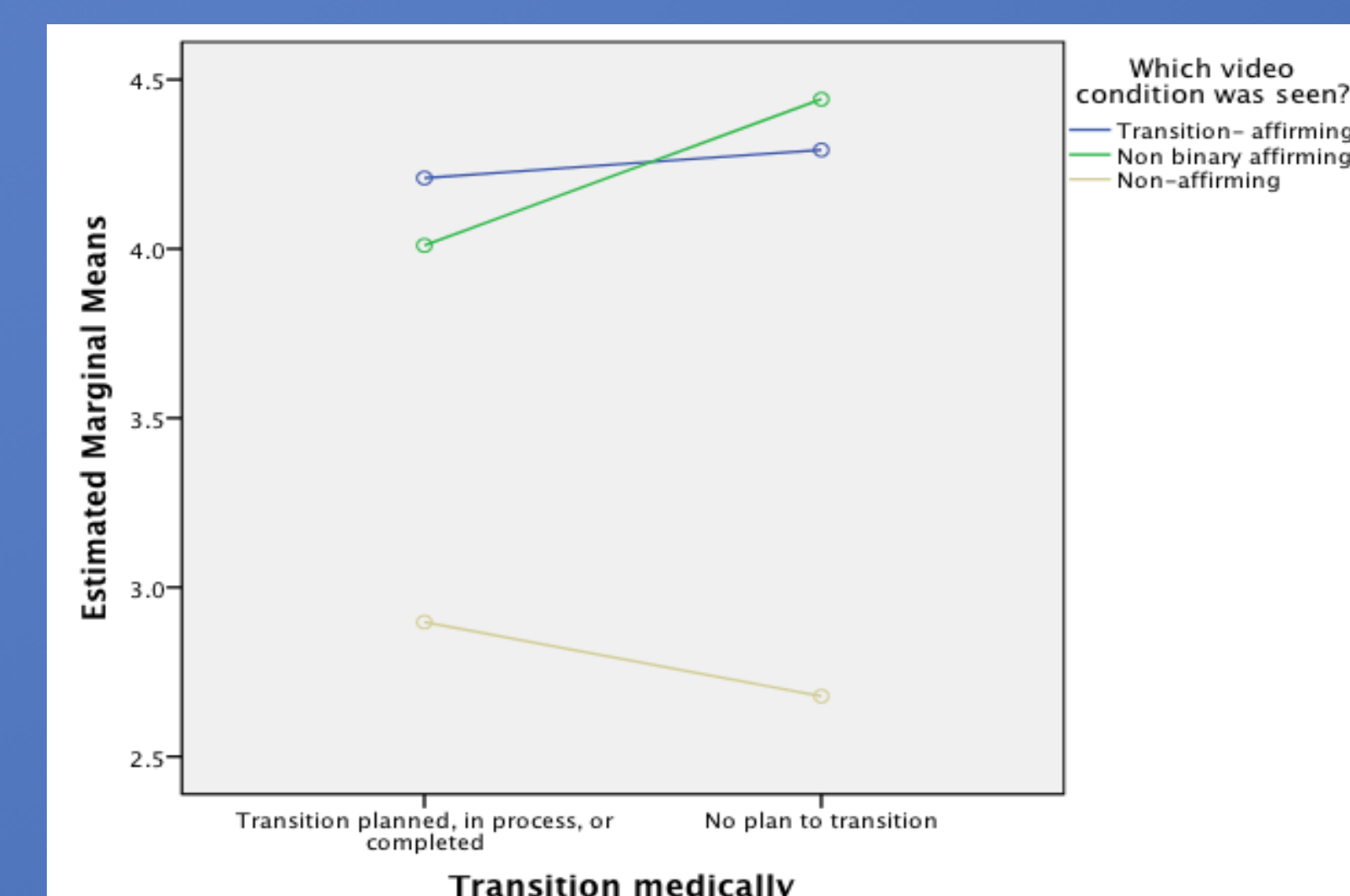


Figure 3. Estimated marginal means of SEQ smoothness subscale.

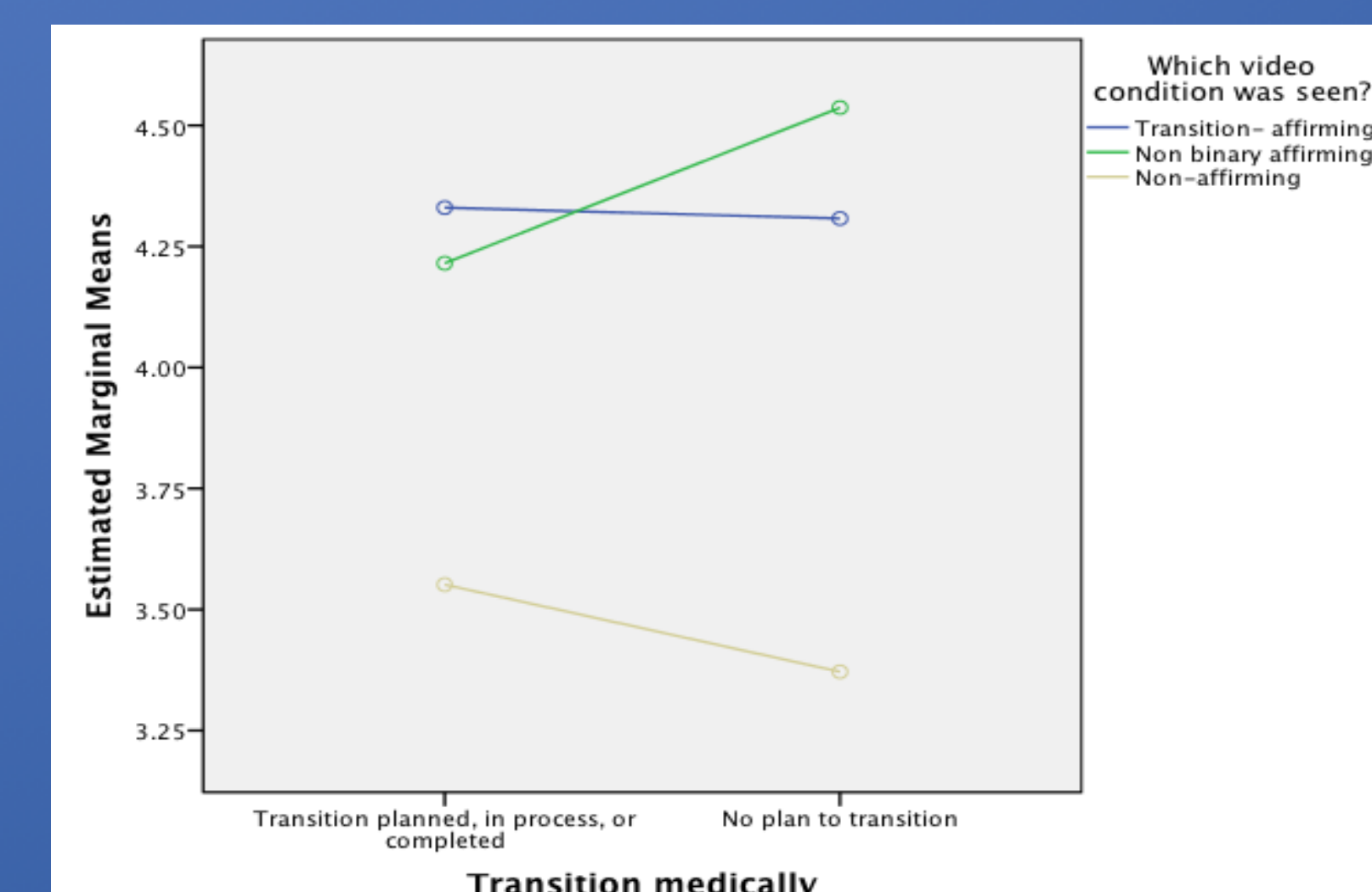


Figure 4. Estimate marginal means for SEQ positivity scale

## Discussion

- Provides strong empirical evidence of the damaging effects that non-affirming interventions have on the therapeutic relationship for transgender individuals
- Trend in data that shows it may be possible that what is affirming for transgender clients differs based on their plans to transition or not transition.

### Implications for practice:

- Being warm, supportive, and attempting to be helpful is not enough to counter the invalidating statements throughout the non-affirming video.

### Implications for training:

- Training should include the basics about gender identity, transgender identity, gender fluidity, and the differences between sex, gender, and sexuality.
- Training should also include information about the various facets of affirming and non-affirming approaches that might help or hinder the development of a strong therapeutic relationship.

## Limitations

- The video vignettes might not have been a strong enough manipulation for the transition affirming and non-binary affirming approaches.
- Might have detected differences in the affirming approaches with a different manipulation, more participants, or a different research method.

## Future Directions

- Additional research is needed to help support or challenge the standards, guidelines, and recommendations for working with transgender clients.
- Research is needed to understand the differences between various affirming approaches for people who do or do not plan to transition.
- Additional research is needed about the positive and negative experiences of non-binary and genderqueer clients who may or may not be interested in transitioning.
- Research is needed to further explore the positive experience of transgender individuals in therapy and what makes it positive.

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