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Dr Luke Ward & Dr Siân Lucas

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"You're trying to put yourself in boxes, which doesn't work": Exploring non-binary youth's gender identity development using feminist relational discourse analysis

Dr Luke Ward[a] and Dr Siân Lucas[b]

[a]Department of Psychology & Sociology, University of Northampton, Waterside Campus, University Drive, Northampton, UK; [b]Department of Social Work, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

ABSTRACT

There are growing numbers of non-binary youth in the U.K. with increasing representation, whilst simultaneously forms of gender diversity are being heavily regulated. Non-binary youth face unique challenges regarding their gender development due to age-based expectations for single and stable identities, and the gender binary. This article explores the regulation of gender identity borders and how non-binary youth navigate these. Ten non-binary youth living in the U.K. aged 16–21 years old took part in semi-structured individual interviews. Feminist Relational Discourse Analysis was used to explore forms of regulation through discourse analysis whilst also tracing the personal experiences through the discursive realms by constructing I poems. The analysis highlights how a non-binary gender provides freedom from the gender binary for identity development and understanding of oneself in context. However, the freedom provided by non-binary identities is precarious and risks being regulated by individualism and attempts to shame, which cause youth to censor their gender diversities. The research contributes to non-binary theory by focusing on the intersection of age to highlight the discursive realms and voiced experiences of non-binary identity development.

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Non-binary; gender; youth; identity development; feminist relational discourse analysis

Introduction

This article aims to explore the regulation of identity borders and how non-binary youth navigate these. The authors recognize that non-binary identities fall under the 'trans umbrella', as they both involve identification with a gender different to the one assigned at birth (Vincent, 2020; Richards et al., 2017) and since all the participants within this research felt part of the trans community. In the U.K. there has been a surge in anti-trans movements and precarity for gender diversity, with increased media and political attention, coined the 'trans moral panic' (Hines, 2020). The moral panic gave rise to the 'TERF wars' (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) (Pearce et al., 2020), where biological essentialist arguments are used by TERFs and religious fundamentalists to delegitimise self-determination for trans authenticity. Consequently, there has been a rise in pathologisation towards non-binary and trans people in the U.K., this is despite global shifts to depathologize and affirm gender diversity (Horton, 2022). Literature focusing specifically on non-binary genders is drawn on, where available; however, this field is small (but growing), so we also draw on broader trans research due to the overlap of identities and relevance for this paper.

CONTACT Dr. Luke Ward luke.ward2@northampton.ac.uk Department of Psychology & Sociology, University of Northampton, Waterside Campus, University Drive, Northampton NN1 5PH, United Kingdom

There are various discursive gendered pressures regarding identity development such as the gender binary and cisheteronormativity which reinforce dichotomous forms of development, e.g. girls and boys are expected to develop and behave in certain ways (based on the heterosexual matrix) (Riggs, 2019). During childhood, an internal sense of self begins to develop, including gender identity, suggesting that, from an early age, young people have a sense and awareness of their genders (Renold, 2004). Such research challenges misconceptions that young people are often too young to know about their genders, which is a particular area of tension concerning non-binary and trans youth (Hill & Menvielle, 2009). There are often few or no concerns around cisgender youth knowing their genders, which highlights the inherent cisgenderism in current climates (Riggs, 2019). In contrast, when youth express gender diversity, they are often not believed or pathologised, which reinforces binary identity borders and shows how cisgender identities are privileged (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore how do non-binary youth navigate their gender development given such discursive pressures.

There are also developmental pressures regarding identity development. The development of a stable identity is influenced by modernist understandings of the self as singular, which develops in a straight line from childhood (where one is 'becoming'), to adulthood (where one is 'being' and has achieved a stable and unified sense of self) (Linstead & Pullen, 2006; O'Dell, 2014). In addition to conceptualizing selfhood as boundaried and unified, modernism also reinforces dualistic thinking, illustrated through the separation of childhood and adulthood (Tisdall & Punch, 2012).

Where developmental theories do provide 'space' for youth to explore their genders, they often implicitly assume fixedness of identity 'in the end', feeding into mainstream psychological accounts whereby a person will 'settle' on an identity as part of their developmental process, e.g. Cass (1979), Erikson (1994), and Troiden (1989) (O'Dell et al., 2017; Ruble et al., 2007; Schwartz et al., 2011). Furthermore, space to explore gender is located within childhood discourses of being unsure; a phase of not truly knowing oneself, feeding into sequential models of child development – that youth is a time of transition and of becoming, and adulthood is not. Therefore, identity borders are reinforced through psychological assumptions and expectations to 'achieve' a 'fixed' identity.

However, non-binary people often articulate and experience their genders in different ways, given that they exist outside/between/beyond the gender binary. Therefore, this article uses borderland theory (Anzaldúa, 1987) as a theoretical framework to understand identities from an affirming perspective, rather than pathologise identities that do not conform to the binary (discussed further in the analytic steps). The small body of research on non-binary people highlights the unique experiences of challenging the gender binary, for example, Vincent (2020) and Cordoba (2022) have found that non-binary people talk about a sense of continued becoming. Specific research on non-binary youth has also shown that young people emphasize the importance of flexibility and fluidity for their well-being and navigating gender identities during their transitional positioning (Ward, 2021). This article aims to build on existing non-binary research by exploring how such youth navigate identity borders that separate, given their 'becoming' and more fluid sense of gender.

Visibility and representation of gender diversity has increased, such as more celebrities 'coming out' as non-binary, as well as more young people identifying as non-binary (Paechter et al., 2021). Cultural shifts in language use and labels highlight how current youth may be distinct from previous generations in their understandings of gender and identities (Barsigian et al., 2020). For example, there is now more expansive language around gender, sexuality, and relationships, which enable the articulation of nuanced experiences and therefore shifts identity borders (Hammack et al., 2021). However, there may be unique challenges for non-binary youth who challenge the gender binary and developmental expectations through more flexible and fluid identities, for example, ambiguous and/or changing gender presentation (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). Due to this, non-binary youth have reported feeling extremely visible and vulnerable in their gender non-conformity whilst also feeling invisible as their genders are often unrecognizable to others e.g. they may be misgendered (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018).

Whilst new language around gender has opened possibilities for articulating experiences, issues of recognition, visibility and regulation remain for non-binary people, given the systemic dominance of the gender binary (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). Therefore, little is known about how non-binary youth navigate the challenges of binary identity borders and how they experience their gender development within such constraints.

The 'messiness' of gender has been theorized by considering gender as a process, rather than an innate/internal aspect that people already have, which is shown through the move away from modernist to poststructuralist epistemologies (Linstead & Pullen, 2006; Shotwell & Sangrey, 2009). Shifting gender paradigms from essentialist to process, challenges additional broader binaries, such as permanence and transience, whereby permanence is privileged, as it signifies stability and achievement, and transience is less stable and ongoing (Vincent, 2020). Hegemonic discourses consider gender as fixed and enduring across the lifespan, privilege cisgender identities, and question 'movement' or 'instability' of gender, such as non-binary and other gender diversities (Richardson, 2007).

Given that developmental discourses privilege stable and fixed identities, there are potential challenges for non-binary youth as their sense of self and gender may not fit within such developmental and identity-based expectations. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the regulation of gender identity borders for non-binary youth, guided by the research question: how do youth navigate discursive pressures around gender and identity borders, as well as age-based expectations?

Method

Based on borderland theory's (Anzaldúa, 1987) philosophical assumptions of identities encompassing multiplicity and fluidity, this article uses a feminist-informed and pluralist approach, designed to 'hear' the complexity and multiplicity of voiced experiences within the discursive realms to explore the research question (Thompson et al., 2018).

Participants and recruitment

Participants were recruited between February 2019 and March 2020 using social media (Twitter and Tumblr) to avoid geographical limitations and because research suggests that non-binary people are often part of online communities (Ellis et al., 2020b; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). The research was framed as an exploration into how non-binary genders are regulated and the 'borders' between identities. The inclusion criteria consisted of being between 16 and 21 years old, having a non-binary gender identity and living in the U.K. As there is no current legal recognition of non-binary genders, in the U.K., it was important that participants could make their own judgements about fitting the gender criteria, to avoid policing of gender identities. Therefore, the definition of non-binary used within this research was: an identification that is not exclusively male or female (Vincent, 2020; Richards et al., 2017). The age range and label of 'youth' were used to capture 'transitional periods' of development in the U.K., including young people, adolescence, and early adulthood, where many new developmental, social, and political opportunities are opened up (Crafter et al., 2019). For example, end of compulsory education and ability to access gender identity healthcare, alongside normative expectations of pursuing sexual and/or romantic relationships, beginning employment, and moving away from home (Kehily, 2013).

The interviews were audio recorded and mostly took place online and one in-person lasting an average of 1 hour 20 minutes. Informed consent was gained by electronic or in-person signature on the consent form. Ten participants took part in the research and were given a £10 gift voucher to reflect the living wage and to thank them for their time. The participants chose the pseudonyms that are used.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Age	Pronouns	Gender	Ethnicity	Sexuality	Disability
RW	20	They/Them	Non-binary	White	Bisexual	Partially sighted, autism, depression, anxiety
Noah Faith	16	They/Them	Non-binary	White English	Asexual Lesbian	-
Phoenix	19	They/Them	Non-binary /genderqueer	White British	Gay/Queer	-
Han	21	They/Them	Queer	White British	Queer	-
Kai	21	They/Them	Agender (non-binary also works)	White British	Asexual demisexual	-
Ren	20	They/Them	Non-binary	Mixed Korean English	Demisexual	Suspected depression and ADHD, but not formally diagnosed
G	21	They/Them	Non-binary	Malaysian-Chinese	Queer	None
Em	19	They/Them	Non-binary	White British	Gay	N/A
Cornelius	21	They/He	Transmasculine non-binary	White	Pansexual/ Queer	Autism Spectrum Disorder, Depression and Anxiety
Niv	21	They/Them	Genderfluid	Asian Indian	Asexual	None

The terms used in Table 1 reflect the direct language of the participants, obtained via email when sending the consent form. Open spaces were provided for the participants, e.g. 'pronouns: _____, ethnicity: _____' to be as inclusive as possible.

Interview and schedule

Individual interviews were used to provide a space for the participant to explain their own experiences of their gender without facing alternative understandings that might surface during focus groups. The first author created a semi-structured interview based on three broad areas from the literature (gender, age, and identity) to design questions about identity borders and how they are regulated (Callis, 2014; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Nagoshi et al., 2014).

The questions were designed to be open-ended using a range of question types to facilitate a rich and detailed exploration (Smith et al., 2009). An important aspect of the interviews was to allow participants to take part in ways that felt comfortable for them. Given the trans moral panic and increase in hate crimes (Pearce et al., 2020), it was important to provide both in-person and online ways of participating.

Ethics

The research was approved by the General University Ethics Panel at the University of Stirling (GUEP583) and guided by the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (British Psychological Society, 2014). Historically psychological research on transgender and non-conforming gender identities has been highly pathologising (Ellis et al., 2020a; Iantaffi, 2020). Therefore, in addition to considering the BPS' Code of Ethics and their specific guidelines for working with gender diversity (British Psychological Society, 2014; Richards et al., 2019), this article draws on Vincent's (2018) paper, which highlights the following six categories for ethical trans research: importance of transgender history, the assurance of transparency, the significance of nuanced language use, the benefits of feminist methodological contributions, the value of intersectionality, and the necessity of respecting trans spaces. To ensure that the research was ethically rigorous and sensitive in its focus.

Analytical framework

This article uses borderland theory (Anzaldúa, 1987) to conceptualize non-binary genders as borderland identities e.g. beyond the gender binary, and between child/adult positionings for youth. Borderland theory is also used to understand how identity borders are constructed, maintained, and challenged (how non-binary genders are regulated) and what might be 'opened up' (non-binary possibilities) from conceptualizing gender this way. Borderland theory has been applied in research focusing on the complexity and intersectionality of identities. In anthropology, borderlands were used to acknowledge often ignored cultural borders and change, noting the existence of borders at less 'official' boundaries, such as, gender and age, considering them as productive (Rosaldo, 1993). Borderland theory developed to recognize that border identities should be considered as heterogeneous, and that researchers should also discuss 'border reinforcers' and the multiplicities of identities that are performed on the border (Vila, 2000). Borderland theory has been applied to non-binary sexualities, such as bisexuality (Callis, 2014; Henningham, 2021) and shown how these identities exist outside of the homosexual/heterosexual binary, highlighting identity multiplicity and the nuances of such experiences.

Previous method/ologies for non-binary youth and early adult research are varied and include photovoice (Cosgrove et al., 2020; Cosgrove, 2021), surveys (Frohard-Dourlent et al., 2016), body mapping (Furman et al., 2019), and diary-keeping (Vincent, 2020). This article contributes to the variety of methodologies and is the first research to utilize feminist relational discourse analysis (FRDA) (Thompson et al., 2018) for non-binary genders to explore discursive regulatory forces and track personal experiences through the discursive realms. The consideration of both personal and discursive aspects within the analytical framework complements trans theory (Monro, 2005; Nagoshi et al., 2014), which advocates for the recognition of socially constructed and self-constructed aspects of gender. FRDA and borderland theory both recognize how people are located within multiple power relations and therefore approach identities as complex and shifting. Furthermore, FRDA recognizes that the political discursive realm is always personal and therefore the analysis centres on the experiences of non-binary youth, showing the complexity of navigating hegemonic identity borders that are assumed to be 'objective' and 'universal' (Thompson et al., 2018).

FRDA is a two-phase approach, consisting of one: a Foucauldian-informed poststructural discourse analysis using Willott and Griffin's (1997) method to identify the discourses that the participants negotiated in their accounts. And two: the construction of I poems, using Gilligan et al's. (2006) Listening Guide, to trace the participants' voices, and how they (re)located themselves, through the discursive realms. The I poem phase of FRDA consisted of (1) multiple listenings to the interview/transcript, whereby the 'plot' or themes of the individual's personal account were identified. Step two focuses on the creation of the I poems by taking each participants' quotes within a specific discursive realm and identifying each 'I' statement with any accompanying verbs. Each new 'I' statement begins on a new line to resemble the lines of a poem. For example:

> "I'm fairly comfortable in myself
>
> I'm not open about it
>
> I have to sort of curate or limit" (Kai)

Step three involves listening for the multiple (or contrapuntal) voices within each poem, which could be contradictory or complementary, to identify the layers of the person's experience. This step captures the personal in relation to the political and considers the self as mediated by both discourse and experience by emphasizing first-person voice as the central site of meaning (Thompson et al., 2018). Through this approach, multi-layered voices and experiences can be heard whilst acknowledging the discursive realms within which they are situated. Finally, step four consists of constructing a theoretical account to address the research question.

Using FRDA, this article explores regulation in ways that considered institutional and social power structures whilst also acknowledging personal and lived experiences through focusing on and considering voice as a central site of meaning. FRDA provides an analysis of discourses and how they impact individuals in terms of how subjects position/locate themselves within such discourses, whilst also allowing for personal experiences to be heard within those discourses.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity shows that the researchers have considered their positionalities throughout the research process and how these will inevitably have shaped the research (Yardley, 2015). The authors found it useful to draw on Treharne and Riggs (2015) writing on insider/outsider positions, who suggest the concept is simplistic as it only focuses on one aspect of the researcher and the participants and does not consider a person's multiple identities. The authors acknowledge the multiple communities that exist within the LGBTQ+ acronym (Formby, 2017) and although the first author is a queer person, they are not an insider within all LGBTQ+ communities. Research shows how doing LGBTQ+ research can entail deep introspection and may result in a change of identity (Nelson, 2020). Throughout the research, the first author's gender shifted from binary male to genderqueer, which they openly communicated to participants. Researching the falsity of the gender binary was profound for the first author as it changed their way of thinking about gender and identity.

Analysis and discussion

To answer the research question of how non-binary youth navigate gender identity development given the regulation of identity borders, the analysis focuses on developmental discourses before presenting one I poem to illustrate the experience of negotiating such discursive pressures. The participants understood their gender identity development as an ongoing process that was also contextual, which was freeing but there was also the potential to reinforce individualistic ideals. The participants used contextual understandings to trouble notions of easily reading subjects' docile bodies and genders for a coherent sense of self.

Whilst 'lifespan' and 'becoming' understandings helped participants resist the gender binary disciplinary pressures to identify and articulate a stable sense of self created pressure to conform. Restrictive messages were internalized and therefore limited aspects of the participants' genders and identities through self-censoring.

Making sense of gender as contextual: a lifespan process

This sub-section helps answer the research question by providing insight into how the participants navigated the regulation of gender identity borders as fixed and enduring by embracing a contextual understanding. Traditional models of identity development focus on achieving a fixed point of stability, which is recognizable to others (Schwartz et al., 2011). Stability is associated with adulthood (conceptualized as 'being'), while childhood and youth are understood as 'becoming' (Prout, 2011; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Participants spoke of understanding their subjectivities as a contextual and continual process of development. The participants' experiences of gender identity development challenged expert discourses, such as modernist ways of understanding the self, which suggest a singular, stable, and enduring subjectivity (O'Dell et al., 2017; O'Dell, 2014). Instead, the participants articulated poststructural and social constructionist accounts of the self as on-going, impermanent, and contextual (Nagoshi et al., 2014).

Han, a 21-year-old, queer person drew on a situated knowledge paradigm to suggest that 'everything is contextual'. For Han, there was a need to be seen in context, which included the possibility of a change of gender:

> Let's just say if you need to know what that … let's just say genderqueer, but to be aware of the fact that that's very contextual, and like in a month's time, you know, I might not be that. I might not want you to see me as that. So, yeah, yeah, if I wanted someone to see me as like my real authentic self, I feel they need to understand that about me and like, you know, take everything with a pinch of salt like everything is contextual, everything is changing all the time.

Han acknowledges the possibility of change throughout the lifespan, rather than ascribing to an essentialist discourse of psychosocial development (Lindley et al., 2020). Also, Han's 'authentic self' is located within a contextual understanding of identity, as they state that for somebody to see them authentically, they should understand Han as able to change and therefore, see them in the present context. Therefore, resistance against contextual understandings means that Han would not be understood by others in the same way they understand and make sense of their subjectivity. Feminist and/or geographical literature has shown that context is important to gender identities as it can regulate gender roles and presentation through place-based scripts; youth may complicate such gender-based scripts through locating the space/borders between them (Giddings & Hovorka, 2010). However, contextual understandings are often less privileged as ways of understanding, as scientific discourses promote positivist and objective knowledge (Haraway, 1988). Situated understandings of gender identity development decentre dominant discursive regulation, for example understanding the development of genders psychologically, as individualistic and modernist, and (re)locates the power to know and understand someone's gender relationally and contextually. Being in a state of constant becoming draws on socially and culturally contextual references about development, rather than Han's gender being based on time, providing a liminal understanding of identity development (Barras et al., 2021).

Han's quote illustrates 'the duel' (Flint, 2018) of intersections and webbing between the discourses and throughout the analysis, which are simultaneously freeing and restricting (Ahmed, 2006; Foucault, 1977). The process of articulating knowledge of the self positions non-binary youth in the double bind of a discursive duel. There is disciplinary pressure for youth to articulate a stable subjectivity to be believed about their gender identities and not be delegitimised, however, this not congruent with their understandings of themselves as contextual and becoming.

Freedom from binary pressures

This section focuses on how contextual and non-binary understandings helped the participants resist discursive regulation of their identities. For some participants, a non-binary gender allowed them to be more themselves and find and access spaces with others who identify in similar ways, increasing self-confidence. Participants constructed non-binary as 'individual', 'contextual' and 'no one way to be non-binary' which provided the participants with a sense of freedom from regulatory pressures that they discussed about binary genders. For example, the participants could present themselves in less restricted ways. Therefore, the participants functioned as border reinforcers, to maintain non-binary borderlands as free from (binary) gendered stereotypes and disciplinary forces.

Research on non-binary sexualities, such as bisexuality, found that gendered and sexual spaces reproduce binary understandings, by reinforcing 'passing, blending, and biphoria', rendering non-binary identities as invisible (Weier, 2020, 1320). The participants spoke to this notion of being restricted by binary gender norms and stereotypes that limited their ability to be themselves that create nuanced difficulties for non-binary belonging (Bower-Brown et al., 2021). Therefore, a non-binary subjectivity functioned to create distance from binary genders that were assigned to the participants at birth, illustrated by Phoenix, a 19-year-old, non-binary/genderqueer person, below:

> So, for me identifying as non-binary means that I … Well first of all I don't really feel a connection with either male or female and I think the word non-binary sort of allows me to feel that, like allows me to recognize that that's ok to feel that. And really it's just more about me being allowed allowing myself, to feel to be me and not feel pressured into fitting sort of male or female stereotypes, or being … feeling like I need to connect … feel connected with being female. So really that's sort of what it feels what it means to me, but really it's just about allowing myself to be me.

A non-binary subjectivity also gave permission and validated subject positions that were outside of the gender binary, as Phoenix says '[non-binary] allows me to recognize that that's ok to feel that'. Therefore, a non-binary gender provided a way to challenge the disciplinary forces and essentialist discourses of gender that produce docile bodies (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). By not determining or limiting gender to bodily characteristics, Phoenix emphasized being understood as contextual, thus relieving pressure to connect with a gender assigned at birth. Despite the dominant essentialist and gender binary discourses, non-binary as a borderland identity provided space for agency and resistance towards disciplinary power dynamics, and therefore, bodies were less regulated.

For Phoenix, the discursive forces of adhering to binary gender stereotypes were restrictive and did not allow them to be comfortable in themselves, therefore binary gender constructions within a gender identity development discourse regulate non-binary youths' abilities to be congruent (Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). Expectations of gender performance based on the body that a person has, e.g. being assigned female, enforces 'shoulds' of traditional feminine expectations that are situated within patriarchal histories (Hines & Sanger, 2010). A non-binary counter-discourse challenges the stringent regulation of (heterosexual) gender norms and their dichotomous positioning, which is illustrated through Phoenix's quote, and their freedom from pressures to connect with their assigned gender and binary gender stereotypes.

In the participants' accounts, there was a sense of continued becoming and resistance to becoming too 'fixed'. The quotes show the participants' understanding of the self that is both contextual and contradictory. However, within the 'freedom' of the borderlands from hegemonic disciplinary forces, Foucault (1977) notes that power dynamics and discursive regulation cannot be completely escaped, therefore, the following section considers how discourses of gender identity development were limiting for the participants.

Individualistic growth

This section highlights another form of regulation for non-binary youth and shows how the participants faced pressures to navigate their identity development by themselves. In resisting hegemonic regulation and constructing their own identity borders, the participants became 'caught' in individualistic discourses, which attempt to regulate the borderlands by detaching gender identity development from contextual factors and the significance of community, to reinforce practices of self-governance. Previous research has emphasized the significance of community and belonging for non-binary people to live as their affirmed genders, which highlights how problematic individualistic discourses may be for non-binary youth (Scroggs & Vennum, 2020; Weinhardt et al., 2019). Several participants, including RW (a 20-year-old, non-binary person) and Phoenix illustrated individualistic discourses by locating identity development within the self and reinforcing messages that individuals should resist pressures to conform:

> I think, you know, a lot of being non-binary in the current political moment has to be in some way non-conformist to have an effect. And also what being being non-binary means, like, what it would it authentically non-binary means to me is presenting myself in a way with people are confused when they look at me as to where I fit. *(RW)*

> I think that links to not feeling non-binary enough, not feeling like non-binary enough or whatever, because you're just not fitting … I mean the whole idea is that we don't fit within a binary system and then you're trying to put yourself in boxes which doesn't work. *(Phoenix)*

The expectations of individual development also included resistance to conforming to expectations and further categorization. Additionally, the participants suggested that non-binary subjects must 'be non-conformist to have an effect' (RW) whilst not copying others, illustrating an extreme sense of individuality, which functions as another form of regulation to self-censor. The expectations of a non-binary subject being resistant, non-conformist, and completely individual limit youth by 'stabilizing' what non-binary is – something that all the participants spoke against: 'there is no way to be there is no non-binary look' (Phoenix). Individualistic disciplinary forces provide an example of attempts to regulate the non-binary borderlands, re-regulate the body, maintain docility, and governance/surveillance over the subjects, which the participants had worked hard to resist.

There was a unanimous consensus from the participants that there is no one way to be non-binary, for example, Noah says how there is a need to accept that you will not look like everyone else: 'you've got to make your own identity and accept that you're not going to look like everyone you see online'. However, the individualistic discourses identified illustrate the complexities and challenges of navigating non-binary identity development whilst resisting firm and regulating boundaries. Disciplinary power cannot be escaped, therefore, where one discourse may provide 'freedom' for a subject, they are regulated in other ways, e.g. the duel and docile bodies (Foucault, 1977, 1978). For the participants, a contextual and lifespan discourse of gender identity development provided 'freedom' from the gender binary, whilst individualistic discourses constrained forms of expression through regulating expectations of gender development.

Individualism within governing practices was illustrated through their active positions, such as, you must accept yourself without conforming (Noah), you must be non-conformist and politically engaged (RW) and you must not try to categorize yourself (Phoenix). Such messages make the recognition of non-binary genders difficult, as they resist categorization to construct non-binary genders outside of hegemonic ideology. Although the participants tried to make space for diversity within the borderlands, they began to reproduce individualistic discourses of development through centring the self and minimizing the importance of belonging for gender development. The analysis shows the impossibility of how the participants navigate the borderlands as spaces of 'freedom' from binary and modernist pressures, whilst being recognizable as non-binary within normative culture.

I poems

The final analysis section focuses on phase two of FRDA centring the participants' voiced experience of navigating the identity and developmental discourses mentioned and highlighting the personal aspects of gender regulation. One I poem from Kai is presented due to its powerful and emotive content. Through focusing on the first person and voiced experience, the analysis recognizes the multivocality of non-binary youth's experiences.

In Kai's (a 21-year-old, agender person) I poem, there was a prominent voice of shame as they felt conflicted between how they experienced themselves and their desires to be, act, and access things that were congruent with their gender and religious and family ideologies.

I don't feel comfortable sort of being open about it

I'm fairly comfortable in myself

I'm not open about it

I have to sort of curate or limit

the way that I am

the things that I do

the way that I look

I don't draw too much attention

I don't particularly enjoy

Kai felt that if they were to embody/perform in ways that were more comfortable to them, they would 'risk' confusion between what is right and wrong for their family, which would force them to make decisions about their child's gender based on their religious views. Kai says they felt comfortable in themselves, but not comfortable being open about their gender and not wanting to draw attention, but also not enjoying censoring themselves. Therefore, regulatory messages from religious communities and family have limited Kai's gender identity development by making their gender diversity feel inaccessible for them. Literature on shame shows that shame is perpetuated by not being spoken about, which is evident in Kai's self-censoring (Brown, 2006). Furthermore, shame that is linked to a person's self-concept is pervasive, since it is linked to who they are, rather than something they have done (Brown, 2006). Therefore, non-binary people may experience shame because of their gender identities which becomes internalized creating difficulties with their sense of self, as who they are is rejected by others (Longhofer, 2013).

even before I knew the words

I felt that I had to behave in a certain way

because of who I'm supposed to be

I tend to sort of hold back

I'm just like filtering

I'm just automatically like filtering filtering filtering

day-to-day I just might not say something

I might not do something

I might shy away from an activity that

I would otherwise be interested in because

I'm not supposed to take an interest in that or

I'm not supposed to do this or

I'm not supposed to be this way

Through Kai's I poem, it is possible to see how their voice of shame about who they are as a non-binary person affected their gender identity development. Kai's poem illustrates the functions of shame to regulate certain ways of being to belong, as Kai felt pressure for whom they were supposed to be, which was different from their sense of self. Therefore, Kai curated and limited themselves, becoming a self-censoring subject, which enabled them to stay within the family home and belong to the religious communities. However, maintaining a sense of belonging, based on messages of shame impacted Kai's gender identity development as they could not be themselves and Kai did not feel able to be 'out' about being non-binary with anyone. Through using FRDA, Kai's voice of shame could be traced through the discourse of gender development to hear how early regulatory messages may shame youth and impact their gender identity development by feeling unable to be and express themselves and/or be 'out' about their non-binary genders. Consequently, non-binary youth may work hard to censor themselves to make themselves less visible and to maintain (familial) belonging, which supports previous literature

suggesting that non-binary youth often feel hyper visible in their difference (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018).

Kai's I poem also shows multivocality through their voice of desire and longing, which spoke of how desperate they were to be more congruent with themselves. The authors reflected on how Kai's response to the call for participants showed their voice of desire as they wanted to participate despite their concerns around whether their voice would be useful during recruitment. Kai struggled to see the value in their voice thinking that it was potentially not relevant to the research, whilst also pursuing the call for participants as a space to use their voice.

Kai's participation also shows how voice may not necessarily reflect a concrete and unchanging account of experience, rather, the articulation of voices can change over time and across different contexts, constructing multi-layered, complex, and contradictory experiences (Gilligan et al., 2006). For example, Kai's voices of shame and desire were in opposition, highlighting multivocality as their voice of shame restricted their voice of desire from being heard. Kai was so deeply concerned with the impact of their gender on their family and their religious beliefs and community, that their voice of desire became minimized within the discursive realm of gender identity development, and they did not feel able to use this voice when speaking with others. The restrictive voice of shame, however, did not reflect a singular experience which was evident in Kai's participation in the research and their communication throughout the interview, where they reflected on their desires to makes changes, 'come out', and connect with more non-binary people. Therefore, Kai supports previous research and shows how borderland theory is useful for understanding the complexity and multi-vocality of non-binary identities (Callis, 2014).

Implications for future research

The present research makes several theoretical contributions to knowledge, showing how intersections of age and gender for non-binary youth produce unique challenges of navigating transitional positionings and categorical thinking. The research also shows how non-binary youth are resilient and the possibility of the borderlands. This article has expanded previous applications of borderland theory (Anzaldúa, 1987), e.g. Callis (2014) on non-binary sexualities, to exploring non-binary genders. Borderland theory been applied in a way that affirms gender diversity, in line with trans theory (Monro, 2007; Nagoshi et al., 2014) and the possibility of borderlands helps recognize the multiplicity, fluidity, and complexity of how youth navigate binary identity borders, contributing to non-binary theory. Consequently, experiences of gender identity development and resilience to discursive pressures could be recognized, which were located within the complexity. It was within a contextual and relational understanding of themselves that the youth voiced their contentment and a sense of freedom from binary restrictions. This article also contributes methodologically to the variety of methodologies used for non-binary research (Reed, 2022) through using FRDA to identify personal experiences within discursive realms of regulation. The use of I poems in this analysis is a novel methodological contribution to non-binary research, as it enables identification of multi-vocality to recognize the complex and sometimes contradictory experiences of gender identity development. Therefore, this article shows how the use of borderland theory and FRDA contribute theoretically and methodologically to non-binary research by accounting for the complexity of gender identity development in an affirming way

Conclusion

The analysis shows how participants made sense of their gender development as a constant and ongoing process that disrupts the child/adult paradigm and discourses of becoming/being. The participants also understood themselves as contextual, where they stressed the importance of being seen in the moment, disrupting temporal references, and favoured liminal understandings, whereby they could occupy contradictory positionings. However, the gender identity development discourse was also restrictive, as the non-binary borderlands risk becoming regulated by individualistic

discourses that the participants internalized. The participants spoke of a variety of ways of being non-binary in an attempt to not regulate their own communities; however, there was a presence of individuality within their accounts and unrealistic expectations of resisting conformity, but not having to be non-conforming, of finding our own way but having to be an individual. Individualistic discourses formed identity borders as they began to construct rules of being non-binary.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Data statement

Due to ethical issues, data underpinning this publication cannot be made openly available. Further information about the data and conditions for access are available from the University of Northampton Research Explorer at http://doi.org/10.24339/30b70192-c22d-43a4-a63c-09b3a484b777

Notes on contributors

Luke Ward (he/they) is a registered child and young person counsellor and a lecturer in child and adolescent mental health. Luke's research interests focus on gender and sexual identities and LGBTQ+ mental health.

Siân Lucas (she/her) is a registered social worker and has research interests in migration, linguistic discrimination, and social justice. Siân is carrying out research about memory archiving for care experienced people in Germany and Scotland (AHRC funding).

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