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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Feeling the weight of the water: young nonbinary individuals and their strategies for manoeuvring through a binary world

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ABSTRACT

Studies of transgender individuals often focus on the transgressive nature of their identities and practices or on experiences of transphobia, rejection and violence. Rather than focusing on transgression or marginalization, this paper offers insight into practical knowledge, presenting a feel for the game that young nonbinary individuals develop out of social necessity, as the social world, with its gender binary social structures, remains resistant to nonbinary identities and practices. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 12 nonbinary participants in Slovenia and Bourdieu's concept of practical knowledge, this paper analyses skilful practical strategies for coping with anticipated and experienced misrecognition. These strategies encompass tactful playing along with the binary rules of the game, pushing the rules into a state of limbo and directly engaging and confronting the rules of the game. Moreover, a differentiated domain of strategies emerges, according to the parameters of safety, anticipation of achieving recognition and affective investment in the relations. Overall, the data show that nonbinary individuals are skilful agents who apply a range of practical strategies to manoeuvre through a gender binary world. The article enables insight into young people as actively engaging with objective conditions that are not of their making.

Introduction

The global North is experiencing a rapid 'discursive proliferation of gendered terms and identities' (Allen et al., 2021, p. 1); however, on the other hand there is also an increasingly organised resistance to gender plurality (Kuhar & Patternote, 2017). Due to the increasingly polarised situation in regard to gender diversity it remains important to avoid isolated discourses that cherish transgender transgressions while neglecting the resistance on the part of social structures (Hines, 2007; McNay, 1999) and of the social 'messiness' of gender non-normativity. Pierre Bourdieu's (2000, p. 108) warning seems to apply here: 'one may in any case doubt the reality of resistance, which ignores the resistance of "reality"' as it points towards the necessity to think about transgender phenomenon from the perspective of the social world and its structures because the latter prove resistant to the already lived transgender realities, or at best, to be painfully slow in acknowledging them as existing.

Moreover, Allen et al. (2021) note that youth, as a collective subject, are invested with the promise of bringing the 'gender revolution' to life. This is problematic not only because it ignores intra-

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generational differences, as the authors warn, but also because it could lead to ignoring 'lived experiences' (Hines, 2007, p. 27, 2010; Namaste, 2000) and the 'negotiation of conflict and tension' that gendered lives entail (McNay, 2004, p. 185). These have been addressed in studies focusing on transgender people's experiences of transphobia and other forms of violence (Davidson & Halsall, 2016; Fahs, 2021; McLemore, 2015; Mullen & Moane, 2013; Pulice-Farrow et al., 2017). What is often underdeveloped in this strand of research, however, is the consideration of transgender individuals as agents endowed with a feel for the social game and therefore able to persist and manoeuvre through cisnormative social conditions, albeit to varying degrees (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019; Davy, 2016).

The aim of this article is to analyse the experiences of nonbinary individuals in Slovenia,[1] not from the standpoint of their experiences of misrecognition and dichotomous transgression or conformity, but rather by considering their practical knowledge. The aim is to analyse the practical knowledge and strategies that enable nonbinary agents to persist through the socially generated tensions that result from the misrecognition of nonbinary existence. In doing so, I rely on qualitative data from a study I conducted on the everyday lives of nonbinary individuals. The focus is on nonbinary individuals precisely because of an omnipresent gender binarism that carries the potential for countless tensions and misrecognitions of nonbinary identities. Rather than analysing experiences with misrecognition as such, I focus on the practical strategies of nonbinary individuals that enable them to manoeuvre through the social world, which leaves little room for the social recognition of nonbinary existence, and I do so by drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical framework. In the following sections, I first turn to Bourdieu's theoretical concepts and then to the empirical data.

Feeling the weight of the water

Bourdieu's discussions of gender have received ambivalent responses for being 'strong on class, weak on gender' (Atkinson, 2016, p. 104). However, Skeggs (2004, p. 21) notes that Bourdieu's theoretical approach is valuable for gender studies because it has '*explanatory power* that is not offered elsewhere'. Moreover, Adkins (2004, p. 3) argues that Bourdieu's 'substantive omission' of women and gender should not be taken to mean that his approach is irrelevant to gender issues. Like McNay (2000), Skeggs (2004), Hines (2007) and Atkinson (2016) – to name a few – I recognize the particular value of his theoretical concept of habitus, which allows us to analyse the relations between social structures and subjective experiences.[2]

Namely, habitus refers to an open system of dispositions – perceptions, thoughts and actions formed according to one's social position (Wacquant, 2016). These dispositions are durable but not eternal. They are open to new experiences, and although there is a tendency towards inertia – that is, of habitus incorporating new experiences in a way that affirms its structure – (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133; see also Bourdieu, 2000; Wacquant, 1992, 2016), the dispositions are nevertheless modifiable. Habitus is a *structured structure* in the sense of being a product of (past and present) differentiated social conditions, and a *structuring structure* in the sense of acting as a 'little generator' of one's practices (Bourdieu, 2020, p. 65; Wacquant, 2016). Habitus provides agents with a non-theoretical, practical knowledge that enables them to have a feel for the game and to master it by 'providing an adequate response' to everyday life situations (Atkinson, 2020; Bourdieu, 2000, p. 142), in other words, to immerse themselves in the spontaneity of everyday life.

When objective conditions and habitus are congruent, a specific 'native' or 'doxic' relation to the world emerges (Bourdieu, 2018; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The world is taken for granted and self-evident, and questions about the rules of the game, let alone the game itself, are dismissed before they even arise. This doxic orientation to the social world allows agents to feel like 'fish in water: [they do] not feel the weight of the water' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). Agents feel at home in the world because this very world and its objective conditions are formative of their habitus. However, Bourdieu (2000, p. 157, 1992) is clear that this more or less harmonious relation between an agent's position and their habitus is only one of the modalities,

albeit a predominant one. Moreover, he explicitly addresses the multiplying situations – the diversity of conditions and, accordingly, of habitus, an agent's movements across various fields and the particular effects of one's social trajectory – that increase the likelihood of habitus being out of place (Bourdieu, 2000; 2008a; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; see also Ingram & Abrahams, 2016; Silva, 2016).

When congruence between objective conditions and habitus is lacking, agents occupy 'awkward positions' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 163) in which they are less able to entrust themselves completely to the spontaneity of their dispositions, and consequently, feel less at home in the world. In other words, they feel the weight of the water that usually goes unnoticed. As discussed by Bourdieu in relation to masculine domination (1996–1997; 2001), a gender binary typology is an elementary part of the taken-for-granted vision of the social world, and I argue that nonbinary individuals occupy the above-mentioned awkward positions due to tensions and conflicts arising from binary-structured objective conditions and nonbinary existence. For this reason, nonbinary individuals are less able to rely on the spontaneity of everyday life afforded to those who enjoy the 'symbolic profit of normality' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 23).

In the next sections, I first turn to the research process, and then to the corpus of practical knowledge that nonbinary agents develop out of social necessity regarding everyday practices as they attempt to 'creatively [mediate] the tensions between structural recognition and agency' (Davy, 2016, p. 126).

Methods

This article draws on the research on the everyday lives of individuals with nonbinary sexual and gender identities conducted in Slovenia between 2015 and 2019. The research aim was to analyse how nonbinary identities are formed and how they persist throughout everyday life, heavily characterized by gender and sexual binary classifications. Individuals who identified with nonbinary identities, were living in Slovenia and were at least 18 years old at the time were eligible to participate. A total of 23 respondents participated in 52 in-depth interviews. Additional mechanisms were employed to ensure the well-being of the participants and to address power dynamics. Trigger warnings were placed in front of the questions that could result in participants' discomfort, the participants were continuously reminded that they could opt out of any questions without any consequences and the results and the researcher's final interpretations were authorized by the participants. At the time of the research, the researcher was of the same age group as the participants, was a member of the LGBTIQ+ community and was active in the LGBTIQ+ activism, which, according to the participants, proved significant in creating an interview situation that was as trustworthy and safe as possible.

I relied on a snowball sampling method, which is well suited for accessing marginalized groups (Brečko, 2005), and on sampling with the help of institutional gatekeepers and the researcher's personal network (Emmel et al., 2007). The research obtained approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. As per the Research Ethics Committee's instructions and given the marginalized position of nonbinary individuals, oral consent only was obtained by the informants in order to avoid possible situations of misrecognition in the case of discrepancy between the gendered names that the participants were assigned to at birth and that may still be recorded on their official documents, and the names the participants were using at the time of the research, to avoid participants' potential discomfort and unwillingness to provide written consent and to provide them with additional assurance of anonymity.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were anonymized and analysed (Berg, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2013) using the MaXQDA programme (VERBI Software, 2017). For analysis purposes, transcripts were read several times and initial observations were made. After rereading the transcripts, codes were ascribed to smaller units with common meaning and assigned to higher-level categories – that is, to more abstract codes and top-level categories that were

precisely defined. I relied on data-driven category formation, as the codes and categories were developed based on the empirical data (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). The hierarchical coding scheme was continuously refined and revised according to the meaning patterns identified in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019; Saldaña, 2009).

In the analysis, I followed Bourdieu's acknowledgement that (subjective) narratives 'about the most "personal" difficulties/ . . . /frequently articulate the deepest structures of the social world and their contradictions' (1999, p. 511). Rather than approaching nonbinary participants' narratives on practices of coping with anticipated and experienced misrecognition as a matter of individual resilience or creativity, I approached these practices as socially necessitated out of the contradictions between objective conditions and nonbinary existence.

Results

In this article, I focus on a subsample (12 individuals) of participants who identified as nonbinary (in the sense of identifying outside a gender binary classification that functions strictly in an either-*or* way) and were 18 to 29 years of age. Their average age was 24.5 years (median 23.5). I acknowledge that the category of youth is a matter of classificatory struggles rather than a 'natural or objective fact' (Bessant et al., 2020, p. 78). Broadly speaking, the term 'young' is a temporal designation referring to the stage *prior* to adulthood, and it is this 'prior', as emphasized by Selimović (2015), that often serves as the rationale for directing and correcting young subjects. Similarly, Bourdieu discusses youth as the temporary status of being 'the half-way house between childhood and adulthood' (1993, p. 96).

However, for research and analytical purposes, the boundaries must be drawn in a more tangible manner. Following Bourdieu (1993, p. 95) and his discussion, I am aware that speaking about youth as a collective unit, especially when neglecting the 'two youths' distinguished by the closeness to the 'pole of power', is already an act of obvious manipulation. As Bourdieu acknowledges, the period of succession is lengthening, meaning that the transition to adulthood by taking up the socially inherited positions is longer, non-linear and incoherent (1993). For this reason, I define youth and young adults[3] as young people from the age of 18, which is considered the age of majority in Slovenia and was therefore set as the lower age limit of our sampling, to the age of 29, following the Eurostat data and the European Commission's (2018) age-based definition of young people (15–29 years of age). Setting the said upper age limit also allows us to include those who find themselves in the social 'no man's land' of incoherent, non-linear and in-between positions (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 96). Returning to age group classifications as a matter of classification struggles and acts of manipulations, I hope that the obviousness of the arbitrary age-based limits will lessen the manipulative effects of setting them in this particular – and not some other – manner. In terms of gender identity, the participants identified in various ways, either with a single or a combination of specific identity terms (e.g. demiboy) or with nonbinary identity in a general sense.

I understand misrecognition in a Bourdieusian sense, as elaborated in *Pascalian Meditations* (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 237) – that is, as the question of the justification of one's existence, as the right to 'feel justified in existing as he or she [sic] exists'. Bourdieu (2000, p. 241, 2020) relates the issue of justification to symbolic struggles 'for access to a socially recognized social being', which are viewed as closely tied to the issue of the social power of naming and classifying (Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 241–242). Therefore, the phenomenon of one's existence being perceived as nonexistent or recognized in a socially devalued form - in short, as socially unjustified - is understdood as misrecognition.

We are interested in practical strategies for coping with misrecognition, which makes it harder for nonbinary individuals to feel at home in the world due to its gender binary schemata. The following categories of strategy were identified: 1) self-protective and tactful playing along, 2) challenging the rules of the game and 3) employing practical strategies within certain parameters. These categories were interpreted using the Bourdieusian framework: the nonbinary individuals' skilful practical strategies encapsulated by tensions and

contradictions were approached as a way to grasp the 'objective structures expressed in and by these contradictions' and as socially necessitated agents' practical knowledge (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 511). They reflect nonbinary agents' practical sense of 'what is to be done' in a given situation (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 25), including almost instantaneous adjustment of one's practices in a tactful and self-protective way and sensible practical evaluation of what could happen.

Self-protective and tactful playing along

All participants reported that their nonbinary identity was something they carefully disclosed in their everyday lives. Given the socially taken-for-granted gender binary classification, nonbinary individuals are bound to experience misrecognition. Allowing their identities to be misrecognized can be part of self-protection to avoid negative experiences that emerge from the gender binary social order. In rare cases, such as Alex's (AMAB, nonbinary queer, 24),[4] this self-protective strategy may take the generalized form of allowing *durable misrecognition in non-intimate relations* by subjecting one's gender expression (e.g. adopting a masculine clothing style) in public places to self-control at the price of everyday life spontaneity in order to avoid being recognized as a gender non-normative subject:

> I have realised that by playing the [male] role, by adopting [masculine] clothing style, by using the voice [perceived and classified as male] in social contexts and in relationships that are not intimate/ . . . /this brings me safety and peace and action and money and yes, a life without extra problems.

For others, allowing the misrecognition of their nonbinary identity is limited to *situation-specific contexts*. Djuro (AFAB, transgender, nonbinary, 22) recounts actively misgendering themselves in the context of their work. At the time of the interview, they were employed as a telephone interviewer and in order to avoid raising suspicion by the apparent discrepancy between the pitch of Djuro's voice that was expected to be socially perceived as female and the (masculine) name and pronouns they used, Djuro was forced to misgender themselves:

> For a long time, I didn't want to work here because it was horrible for me to misgender and deadname myself six hours per day. I was forced to put myself in a certain state of mind, as if I were just playing the role so that I could survive that.

Practices of self-protective playing by binary rules also include subtle and preconscious practices of regulating one's bodily *hexis* (Bourdieu, 2013, pp. 93-95, 2008b) in ways that confirm social expectations. However, bodily practices that are preconscious for most social agents (e.g. gait) are sometimes pushed into practical reflection for nonbinary agents. The common modality of experiencing everyday life through bodily spontaneity is thus suspended: rather than feeling like a fish in water, the 'water' is experienced as weighing down the nonbinary agent. Jaka (AFAB, nonbinary, 23) describes their conscious regulation of bodily practices in situations perceived as particularly vulnerable to violence. In order not to arouse 'gender suspicion', they take special care to be as invisible as possible and to be unambiguously perceived as a man, that is, as gender normative:

> I feel like that has made my life easier./ . . . /Especially when I'm out and about, for example, or in the evening, when I go home at night/ . . . /I act like a man as much as possible, always making certain [masculine] gestures and/ . . . /that makes me feel safer/ . . . /in the night-time hours. I pull up my hood and walk extra widely because I feel threatened.

In this case, Jaka's main goal is not to be recognized as gender non-normative. To achieve this, it is sufficient that they are unambiguously recognized within the gender binary; thus, Jaka uses their practical knowledge on doing gender in socially normative ways (e.g. emphasizing a gait, socially perceived as masculine). To let oneself be misrecognized through the gender binary lens is a form of tactfulness to achieve safety and avoid the social tensions that predominantly accompany gender non-normative lives. Moreover, the following narrative demonstrates that playing by the binary rules

of the game can take the form of playing the game only to outplay those granted institutional power to shape transgender lives, for example, in the field of medicine, which has the power to regulate access to gender confirmation processes (Davy, 2016). Being aware of the difficulties that can follow when entering the gender confirmation process as a nonbinary individual (see, for example, Latham, 2017), they deliver the 'typical transgender binary narrative' that is institutionally demanded in order to receive the procedures they need. This was already put forward by Stone (1992, p. 161; see also Hilário, 2017) in a discussion on how '[transgender] behaviour matched up gratifyingly with Benjamin's criteria', leading to acceptance for surgery due to the transgender community passing around Benjamin's book, which was a standard reference at the time. Hilário (2017) also identifies three particular ways of making sense of the diagnostic process of gender dysphoria: alongside contestation and instrumental resistance, strategic confirmation of gender essentialism is also identified, meaning that certain information that could compromise the process is being withheld:

> I disguised my demiboy identity because I was advised to do that by people who were having trouble because of it./ ... /You have to fake it a little bit./ ... /You really have to present yourself as a healthy person in all the aspects./ ... /I knew anyway that he's not a psychiatrist who really cares about me; he's just a person who can make [gender confirmation procedures] happen for me, and I just had to persuade him to do so. (Izak, AFAB, demiboy, 24)

However, this self-protective and tactful playing along is not limited to more public social spaces. As the following story about Virginia's (AMAB, trans feminine, 26) entering into sexual relationships with people who identify as gay men attests, this is also present in the private sphere, albeit to a lesser degree:

> Most of the time, I just let it slide because it's just about sex./ ... /For them, it's just important that they get someone that they perceive as a cis man. On the one hand, it's disgusting because I'm erasing myself [by allowing misrecognition], but on the other hand, I feel like I just want to have sex sometimes, and I don't want to complicate it, because I feel I might get left hanging. That's self-serving, but it's also a cruel reality.

In order for Virginia to have sexual relations with others, especially men, she plays along and allows herself to be misrecognized according to the gender that was assigned to her at birth (male). However, this does not happen without the affective costs of letting misrecognition go unaddressed ('it's disgusting').

In these narratives, nonbinary individuals do not report directly coping with misrecognition as such. Rather, it is the anticipation of being misrecognized that guides their practices. According to Bourdieu, anticipation is part of one's practical knowledge and predominantly coincides with 'objective probabilities' (Bourdieu, 2000, 2020, 2021). Given the dominant gender binary, nonbinary individuals are practically aware of the objective probabilities of experiencing misrecognition, and these probabilities are formative of their subjective expectations. However, in contrast to Bourdieu's discussion on agents 'desir[ing] what they can attain' (Bourdieu, 2020, p. 125), for nonbinary agents these objective probabilities do not take the form of 'looking forward' to what is socially destined for them. Rather, objective probabilities are formative of nonbinary agents' subjective fears and uncertainties about what is to come for the 'likes of them'. Given the uncertainty of a situation where 'anything may happen and the worst is most likely' (Bourdieu, 2021, p. 148), it is precisely the fact that 'the worst' can happen that necessitates nonbinary individuals to build up and put to use (self-protective) practical knowledge.

This enables nonbinary individuals to close down the probabilities of being recognized as gender non-normative and thus exposed to forms of violence before these probabilities have a chance to realize themselves. They do this by allowing others to misrecognize them within the binary framework. As their narratives show, this is not (only) a matter of conformism; it is (also) a matter of the 'weight' of the social structures that do not grant them a socially justified existence. As the next section shows, however, the rules of the game are not only played and sometimes outplayed; they are also challenged.

Challenging the rules of the game

Nonbinary participants reported numerous practices for dealing with anticipated and experienced misrecognition that challenged and destabilized taken-for-granted binary schemes of gender perception and classification. These practices were distinguished primarily by the level of direct engagement they required from nonbinary individuals. One of the reported modalities involved *pushing the rules into a state of limbo by refusing to play along*. In this case, nonbinary individuals engaged with the rules of the game without directly exposing themselves to possible backlashes. Jaka's (AFAB, nonbinary, 23) refusal to follow the gender binary rules at the airport, where the official rules dictate that the person must be subjected to a security check by an official of the same gender, is an example of this. Because Jaka's gender expression was ambivalent in the eyes of gender binary schemes, officials were unable to categorize them neatly, which left them confused as to who should conduct the security check. However, Jaka refused to make their work easier by refusing to explicitly categorize themselves within gender binary categories, as it was expected by the officers:

> [The officer] said, 'Yes, but what would you prefer?' I said I didn't care, and then a woman approached me and said, 'If you are a guy, then a guy will do it, and if you are a woman, then I will do it'. I replied, 'Okay, yeah, whatever, then you do it./ . . . /As if she's not ready for me not to tell – like, 'What do you think you're doing?'

As can be seen from the quote, the officers were confused and could not accept that Jaka would not tell them who should carry out the process. The gender binary rules of the game were momentarily pushed into a state of uncertainty and suspension by Jaka's refusal to identify within the given gender binary classifications.

Gender binary rules of the game can also be challenged by *encouraging 'brain fireworks' from a distance* without being directly involved in close interactions. For example, Lex (AFAB, nonbinary, 26) told a story about walking down the street and, according to their perception, caused confusion by making it difficult to categorize them neatly in terms of gender. Despite the 'fireworks' being only a matter of Lex's perception – that is, not necessarily experienced as such by passers-by – it was Lex's practical intent of causing the gender confusion that is significant in terms of the agent's attempts to challenge the rules of the (binary) game:

> You know, when you see people watching you, and you are holding hands with your girlfriend and – this is how I perceive it – they initially think, 'Aha, two girls – no, wait, a girl and a boy – no, wait, is that two boys? What?'/ . . . /You can see the wheels turning in their heads and that they are experiencing fireworks in their heads and that they don't understand what is going on.

In the above modalities, nonbinary individuals challenge the gender binary rules of the game by pushing them into a state of uncertainty or creating 'gender confusion'. In the following modality, the rules that give rise to misrecognition are *directly confronted and exposed*. In this way, they are pulled from the silence of *doxa*, the state of being taken for granted, and exposed by making visible that which otherwise remains invisible (Bourdieu, 1992, 2018). However, because these strategies are more confrontational, they are also riskier in the sense that they directly expose nonbinary individuals to additional misrecognition, violence and various kinds of losses (e.g. intimacy). For example, Djuro talked about the strained relationship with their brother, who refused to acknowledge their gender identity, so Djuro confronted him and, by doing so, directly exposed the gender binary rules, otherwise operating at the level of preconscious assumptions:

> If you don't respect what I am and who I am and what I feel and what I want, [expletive] how are we going to have a relationship? You know, should I refrain from talking about [my transgender identity] forever? Then I told him, 'Okay, we can talk like this, throwing the wrong pronouns and names at each other randomly'/ . . . /and then he was offended because I was supposedly acting like an idiot. No! You don't get it!/ . . . /Since then, we don't talk anymore. We don't have a relationship.

Challenges to gender binary rules are usually accompanied by more in-depth conversations about nonbinary identities and transgender lives in general. These explanatory positions are taken up in an attempt to change other individuals' schemes of perception and classification – to change their

vision of the world and make room for nonbinary existence. However, this can be a burden for nonbinary individuals as they confront the socially dominant and naturalized vision of the world that is backed by the social order and the power of 'common sense' (see Bourdieu, 2018, p. 76):

> I experience it as a burden, honestly, but it depends on the day, on my mood – am I ready to defend, to explain and validate myself or am I ready to let it go, 'think what you want'? And even if I do engage in explanations and defences and affirmations, and whatever else I feel is needed, I don't know, in some situations, it's still not enough. (Oli, AFAB, gender questioning, 22)

As is evident from the narratives, nonbinary people develop a feel for the game with various practical strategies for coping with and challenging misrecognition that stems from the gender binary schemes of classification and perception. These strategies range from pushing the rules into a state of limbo and creating and playing with 'gender confusion' to directly challenging the rules as they manifest in the misrecognition by others.

Practical knowledge and the space of possibilities

In this section, we discuss the conditions under which these various practical strategies are used by nonbinary individuals. Given the social dominance of the gender binary classification and the fact that gender is a 'lived social relation' (McNay, 2004, p. 175), tensions and negotiations are inevitable. This necessitates a particular practical sense of 'what is to be done in a given situation' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 25): adjustments to one's practices and potential responses to anticipated or experienced misrecognition are implemented sensibly and almost instantaneously. In the words of Bourdieu (2000, p. 162), practical reflection, which is 'necessary to evaluate instantly the action or posture just produced', emerges, allowing one to reflect on the situation and action, but at the price of suspending the spontaneity of everyday life and feeling at home in the world. In this case, practical reflection is not only evaluative in terms of potential 'corrections' that need to be made to avoid misrecognition, but also in terms of challenging the misrecognition and thus of evaluating the space of possibilities. One of the most important parameters of the practical strategies discussed by the participants was *ensuring physical safety*. This was evident in Metka's story (AMAB, transgender woman and agender, 23) of her experience of being directly challenged by a stranger on the street to clear up the 'gender confusion':

> You are walking down the street, and a random person comes up to you, stops you – literally stops you – and asks, 'Are you a man or a woman?'/ . . . /What could come out of this?/ . . . /You don't know if this person will react violently, even physically, against you or is just interested for the sake of it./ . . . /I try to play around, but I'm aware that this could trigger an aggressive reaction, so I know that this is not a safe practice/ . . . /and then I say, 'Yes, I am a man. Don't you see?' – even though that made me completely uncomfortable.

In addition to safety, another constitutive element for orienting one's practical strategies is the *expectation and anticipation of actually achieving affirmation* of one's existence. Broadly, when the individual feels that the effort, for example, of confrontation and explanation, will 'pay off', they are willing to invest themselves more. This is evident in the narrative by Oli (AFAB, gender questioning, 22):

> If I see that the person is listening, then I try harder. If I see that the person understands or at least comes closer to it/ . . . /then it's easier for me to say something more because it might have an effect. But if the person doesn't listen and makes counter-arguments, then I try for a while, but after a certain point, when I realise that things are not progressing, I'll just try to end the conversation.

Additionally, practical reflection on situational and relational dynamics also relies on differentiated *affective investments* that give rise to differentiated practical strategies: not all recognition counts equally, and the same is true for misrecognition. To return to Bourdieu (2001, p. 110), what counts most is recognition within intimate relations, which carry the (often unfulfilled) promise of being a 'world of non-violence', a 'world of mutual recognition', meaning that the

stakes for experiencing recognition by those with whom one is intimately related are much higher. This also means that the expectations of experiencing recognition by anonymous others are almost a priori abandoned and perceived as less (affectively) significant in one's everyday life. For non-intimate others, the practical strategies of confronting misrecognition are broadly guided by the principle of 'picking one's battles', while for intimate others, the stakes and expectations run higher, as is evident from Oli's comment (AFAB, gender questioning, 22):

> Nonetheless, with people I'm close to or those who are outside of the LGBT+ community, but they know about me/ . . . /I have higher expectations of them being more accepting and knowledgeable than someone who does not.

On the other hand, the following comment by Djuro (AFAB; transgender, nonbinary, 22) testifies to stronger affective investments in terms of their nonbinary identity being recognized in an intimate relationship. They told the story of their intimate partner, who identified as a woman and who identified as heterosexual before entering into an intimate relationship with Djuro. Their partner's continuous identification as heterosexual would mean that Djuro would be misrecognized as a man rather than recognized in transgender nonbinary terms:

> I don't need her to identify as pansexual or whatever; it's just important that she doesn't identify as straight. Because that means I'm a guy, which I'm not. So yeah, she understood what I was trying to say right away.

Because being recognized within intimate relations counted the most, nonbinary individuals reported greater willingness and effort to address anticipated and experienced misrecognition; however, this willingness might not have been enough, as some intimate relationships fell apart due to persistent rejection and misrecognition from significant others.

In addition to the parameters already mentioned, the participants reported that they gradually found it easier to challenge and address misrecognition as it happened. As if countless experiences with misrecognition served as durable practical training, nonbinary individuals gained practical know-how and, most importantly, courage. In other words, they reported that they gradually attained 'the practical mastery' for challenging the gender binary rules of the game in line with the above-mentioned parameters: 'I have much more courage now to correct them, more and more. Because in the beginning, I didn't have it' (Djuro, AFAB, transgender, nonbinary, 22).

Discussion and conclusion

As gender binary structures remain socially dominant despite the 'discursive proliferation of gendered terms and identities' that the global North is witnessing (Allen et al., 2021, 1), nonbinary individuals' experiences with misrecognition – of being perceived and classified as non-existent or in socially devalued ways – are inevitable. The above comments show that gender is indeed a lived social relationship full of tensions and negotiations (McNay, 2004). However, the tensions resulting from addressing them and coping with them are often overlooked.

Because the habitus of nonbinary individuals is discrepant with gender binary objective conditions, the individuals are placed in awkward positions, and what is mostly taken for granted for others is often a matter of practical reflection for nonbinary individuals. This need for practical reflection is socially necessitated, as nonbinary individuals are forced to manoeuvre through social spaces, and, as their stories show, it comes at the price of spontaneity being chipped away by acute reflections on the situational and relational circumstances of everyday life situations. Put differently, nonbinary individuals feel the weight of the water – of social structures and gender binary classificatory schemes that predominantly remain invisible for those who remain on the right side of normativity. Thus, 'the feeling of being at home' in the world is unevenly distributed, not accessible to all and a matter of social power.

However, the data also show that nonbinary individuals have a corpus of practical knowledge that is strongly shaped by their socially awkward position. This practical knowledge encompasses strategies of allowing misrecognition to happen, that is, superficially playing by the binary rules, either in the name of safety or in the name of ensuring what is needed (e.g. gender confirmation process), and various strategies of subtly or directly challenging anticipated and experienced misrecognition. One's feel for the game also encompasses reflection on the 'space of possibilities', that is, on the 'continuous decoding of the perceived' (Bourdieu, 2013, p. 10), especially in terms of the situational and relational limits of what is achievable and reachable within a given set of parameters and objective probabilities.

As can be seen from the data, certain strategies are used more frequently within a certain set of parameters. Self-protective and tactful playing by the rules, as well as pushing the rules into a state of limbo, are often, although not solely, used within public spaces (e.g. streets) because the possibilities for prolonged engagements are often limited and heightened uncertainties about experiencing social sanctions ('anything may happen'; Bourdieu, 2021, p. 148) are present. Precisely because anything is possible, practical strategies often remain limited to producing 'ambiguous conduct that can be disowned at the slightest sign' (Bourdieu, 2013, p. 10) of threats, as Metka's story shows.

On the other hand, delving deeper and addressing the issue of misrecognition by challenging and questioning the rules guiding misrecognition are more frequent in intimate relations. Namely, the nature of these relations – being less governed by official norms and regularities (Bourdieu, 2013) – allows for prolonged engagement and extensive space for 'practical improvisation'. Moreover, a stronger affective investment in these relations orients individuals towards challenging misrecognition (Perger, 2022). Indeed, the more that is at stake – having one's existence recognized by those that matter the most – the more serious is the game, and this seriousness necessitates greater effort and willingness, although these are not unlimited, as one of Djuro's stories demonstrates.

The stories presented above show that transgender lives are not just about transgression and subversion, nor are they just about victimization and marginalization. Bourdieu's concept of habitus, of practical knowledge, enables us to gain insight into the 'efforts that these young people are making to build lives in conditions not of their own choosing' (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014, p. 472) and, what is more, in binary conditions that (attempt to) negate their existence. It enables us to gain insight into the efforts that may not be neatly captured (or captured at all) if the gaze is predominantly focused on transgression (i.e. transgressive and non-normative gender identities), that is, in line with the 'revolutionary figure' of youth or by focusing on the marginalized social position of nonbinary young individuals (i.e. experiences with misrecognition), in line with the figure of 'at-risk' youth (Threadgold, 2020). The narratives of young nonbinary individuals and their socially necessitated practical strategies give us insight into how 'being out of step' with the world that leaves little room for 'slow reflection' is struggled with by relying on a feel for the game (Woodman & Threadgold, 2015, p. 560) – on almost instantaneous reflections on what is possible and achievable, which orient one's adjustments and challenges of the rules. Put differently, the concept of habitus enables us to acknowledge young people as 'active subjectivities', as those who are actively engaged with objective conditions (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014, p. 472).

As lived social relations, transgender identities – and nonbinary ones in particular – contain both elements – transgression as well as marginalization – but also much more. As lived social relations, they are also about the practical feel for the social game, whose rules do not allow nonbinary agents to feel at home in the world and which necessitate skilful practical strategies of nonbinary individuals in order to carve out a space for themselves.

Notes

1. In Slovenia, legal gender confirmation is possible and medical gender confirmation is available under the condition of a medical diagnosis. However, transgender-relevant legislation is lacking, and no legal options are available for nonbinary genders (Kuhar et al., 2017; TGEU, 2021).

2. We approach gender in a Bourdieusian sense, as elaborated by Atkinson (2016, p. 115): as gender traverses particular fields, it needs to be approached as a 'phenomenon of one's social surface' (i.e. as 'the combination of forces emanating from *all* fields' rather than in relation to a particular field; p. 136).
3. The latter are approached as 'intermediate figures' who may have already achieved some of the social markers and expectations of adulthood (i.e. employment or living apart from one's family of origin), but not all.
4. For every participant, the gender assigned at birth, present gender identity and age at the time of an interview are stated in this order. We use 'AMAB' to refer to 'assigned male at birth' and 'AFAB' to refer to 'assigned female at birth'.

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