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"You're a kid, you don't know where you are": the voiced experiences of nonbinary youth navigating discursive realms of legitimacy

Luke Ward [a], Jane E.M. Callaghan [b], and S. E. Lucas [b]

[a]Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, University of Northampton, Northamptonshire, UK; [b]Social Work, University of Stirling, Social Work, Stirling, UK

ABSTRACT

Nonbinary youth's gender identities are often dismissed and continue to be marginalised due to growing transphobic discourse. This article explores how youth navigate these developmental and gendered positionings. A qualitative methodology and individual interviews were used with 10 nonbinary youth aged 16-21 years old, living in the United Kingdom. Participants had a range of ethnicities, sexualities, and disabilities. We used Feminist Relational Discourse Analysis to combine discourse analysis and I poems. In the discursive formation 'legitimacy', we consider how participants described feeling required to prove themselves as legitimately nonbinary, whilst also feeling undermined by other aspects of their identity and how they drew on a sense of a collective voice to resist this construction of their gender as a phase. The I poems show a sense of struggle, exhaustion, and vulnerability within this discourse. The findings have implications for professionals working with nonbinary youth and contribute to nonbinary and trans-theory.

KEYWORDS

Feminist relational discourse analysis; gender identity; legitimacy; nonbinary; youth

Integrating nonbinary experiences with youth development

Dominant psychological theories of psychosocial development propose linear and progressive accounts for 'achieving' a stable and enduring gender identity (O'Dell, Brownlow, and Bertilsdotter Rosqvist 2018). Youth are therefore positioned in a 'transitional' state, between the developmental binaries of child and adult, fixing them in a state of *becoming*, rather than *being* (James and Prout 2015; Jenks 2004). Their identity is therefore understood as necessarily in flux, with traditional developmental theorists like Erikson (1994) and Marcia et al. (1993) framing adolescence and early adulthood as times of identity experimentation. This developmental narrative is highly popularised, with many aspects of youth and adolescence being described culturally as phases and trends. These ideas also position youth as uncertain about their own identity, who they really are, and that self-knowledge is presumed to be an

CONTACT Luke Ward luke.ward2@northampton.ac.uk Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, University of Northampton, Waterside Campus, Northampton NN1 5PH, UK

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outcome of maturation. This transitional understanding of youth is used socio-culturally to limit the agency and capacity of youth, compared with adults, professionals, and expert voices, delegitimising their ability to reflect with authority on their own experiences (Burman 2016). However, critical youth studies have challenged modernist assumptions about age-based categories being fixed and essential, recognising instead the socially constructed nature of youth (Crafter, Maunder, and Soulsby 2019).

Nonetheless, nonbinary youth must forge their sense of self against both this dominant developmentalism and a tide of hostile public debate that seeks to contest the nature of trans identities. The rising number of nonbinary and trans youth has produced a kind of cultural moral panic (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020), and a socio-political context characterised by intensely polarised views on the acceptance of gender diversity and trans rights more broadly (Hammack et al. 2021). Such 'culture wars' have sought to question the legitimacy of nonbinary and trans identities in multiple ways. For example, the consultation for the reform of the Gender Recognition Act (Government Equalities Office 2018) in the United Kingdom (UK), anti-trans movements, the increase in hate crimes, the 'trans moral panic' (Hines 2020; Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020; Todd 2021), and drawing on unscientific and critiqued concepts, such as rapid onset gender dysphoria, as justification for restricting gender-affirming interventions for young people, as they may later decide they are not actually trans (Ashley 2020; Restar 2019; Skinner et al. 2023). The UK government has imposed a ban on prescribing puberty blockers for treating gender dysphoria for under-18-year-olds and is due to publish its response to feedback on the draft guidance for English schools on 'gender questioning children' (Department for Education 2024; Department for Health and Social Care 2024). Furthermore, the recent Cass Review (see Horton (2024) for a critique) was used by the previous UK government as justification for specifically excluding trans people from any potential ban on conversion therapy (British Psychological Society 2022). In this context, a dominant developmental narrative that positions adolescence and early adulthood as inherently transitional, and adolescent identity as incomplete and in formation, has been further weaponised to challenge the legitimacy of more fluid and nonbinary gender identities.

In contrast to dominant developmental narratives, feminist, queer, and nonbinary/trans literature suggests that gender development is not linear and may include aspects of a continual 'becoming' and/or fluid sense of self (Cordoba 2023; Vincent 2020; Ward and Lucas 2023). Research on the culture and language of trans youth has found that nonbinary people are more likely to use expansive language and multiple identity labels, perhaps to account for a continually developing and fluid sense of their genders (Barsigian et al. 2020; Paechter, Toft, and Carlile 2021; Watson, Wheldon, and Puhl 2019). Nonetheless, many nonbinary people report complex and paradoxical

experiences of recognisability, as their supposed differences feel highly noticeable in a cisnormative and heteronormative culture, whilst that normative culture's reliance on a gender binary renders them simultaneously culturally unintelligible (Goldberg and Kuvalanka 2018).

This produces a fraught discursive terrain within which young people seek to etch out their gendered sense of self. Their nonbinary identity is rendered invisible by hegemonic cis-normativity, whilst the dominant developmental narrative of identity formation challenges their very capacity to know themselves (Lennon and Mistler 2014; Worthen 2021), make competent decisions about their own (gender-affirming or other) healthcare, or their own right to be protected from conversion therapies. Such panics can be understood as reinforcing cisgenderism, which is 'an ideology that delegitimises people's own understandings of their genders and bodies' (Riggs 2019, 6).

Trans-theories and other contemporary understandings of gender provide a useful critique of dominant understandings of gender development and support empirical research on nonbinary people's experiences by highlighting plurality, relationality, and lifespan 'becoming' (Linstead and Pullen 2006; Monro 2005; Nagoshi, Nagoshi, and Brzuzy 2014; Shotwell and Sangrey 2009). Trans-poststructuralism recognises the material-discursive, the socially and self-constructed aspects of gender, which can account for the fluidity of embodiment. Research on the everyday experiences of trans young people highlights the exhausting impact of trans hostility (Todd 2022) and the precarity of trans experiences (Travers 2018). Nonbinary youth experience unique forms of precarity and distribution of resources primarily because their gender identities challenge the gender binary, which is a fundamental and ingrained discourse in the global north (Wiseman and Davidson 2011). There is also considerable variation in how supportive families are of nonbinary young people. Further, the dominant gender binary regulates access to and use of schools and health and social care settings, whilst a lack of education, cisnormativity, and ingrained transphobic prejudice further impacts access to gender-affirming support (Vincent 2018). Support and other resources are socially unevenly distributed, further marginalising trans youth of colour, poor youth, and youth with disabilities (Travers 2018).

Overall, gender discourses (re)produce unhelpful binaries of gender development in youth development. By challenging cisgenderism in research, the artificiality of the gender binary and essentialist claims are rendered visible, showing the complex and multiple ways that gender can be experienced, expressed, and embodied by all people (Ansara and Hegarty 2011). Therefore, focusing on nonbinary people helps to (re)orientate understandings of gender, by 'stepping outside' of cisheteronormative binary categories and configurations (Ansara 2015). Drawing attention to gender diversity, rather than the gender binary, makes it possible to explore how dominant developmental trajectories reflect cisheteronormativity. For example,

nonbinary youth may 'come out' multiple times as different genders and/or sexualities, which is not accounted for or acknowledged in dominant developmental discourses/theories (Ward 2021). Nonbinary youth may also express a fluid sense of their gender, which does not fit modernist expectations of achieving a stable and enduring gender identity (Monro 2007). Therefore, critical and trans-inclusive feminist research is needed to challenge cisgenderism and explore current forms of regulation that nonbinary people face, aligning with the aims of the current research (Iantaffi 2021; Vincent 2018; Wiseman and Davidson 2011).

Deconstructions of the gender binary in poststructuralism and queer theory open possibilities for exploring the social construction of gender identity development; however, the personal and lived experiences are often missed. Our research extends existing nonbinary research extending poststructuralist critiques of gender developmental trajectories as linear, stable, and categorical (Beemyn 2015) to consider how nonbinary genders are experienced by youth at the nexus of the personal, social, and material. In particular, our work considers both material (lived and embodied) and discursive (constructed and political) aspects of gender through its methodological approach to explore the experience of regulation of nonbinary genders (Nagoshi and Brzuzy 2010). Our work examines how developmental discourses of adolescence as transitional entrenches dominant cisgenderist and modernist identity politics, using trans-inclusive, queer, and feminist epistemological frameworks we explore how these discourses regulate young people's positioning as '(in)authentically' nonbinary. However, we did not wish to focus purely on the discursive and obscure the lived, personal exploration of gender regulation, and our research question therefore asks: How do nonbinary youth experience and navigate their gender identities, in a cultural context characterised by both increasing cultural recognition of gender diversity and countervailing regulative discursive practices around gender and identity development?

Materials and methods

Design

A qualitative methodology of individual interviews was used to explore the discursive and personal experiences of gender regulation for nonbinary youth. The study's design was informed by guidelines on ethical trans research (Vincent 2018), which highlights the importance of trans-inclusive feminist approaches (Thompson, Rickett, and Day 2017). The study draws on a critical realist approach to recognise how both discursive and material aspects are interconnected to produce nuanced and complex phenomena (Pilgrim 2019). The adoption of this philosophical approach to the research is informed by

trans theory, which highlights the importance of recognising both socially constructed and embodied aspects of gender identities, particularly for gender-diverse populations (Monro 2007; Nagoshi, Nagoshi, and Brzuzy 2014; Shotwell and Sangrey 2009).

Participants and recruitment

Participants were recruited between 2019 and 2020 through a blend of purposive and snowball sampling. Local LGBTQ+ youth groups were used to directly reach young people, and social media platforms like Twitter were used to enable a wider reach across the UK, as research suggests limited access to physical inclusive spaces and communities means that nonbinary people are often part of online communities (Cronesberry and Ward 2024; Goldberg and Kuvalanka 2018). The inclusion criteria consisted of having a nonbinary gender identity, being between 16 and 21 years old, and living in the U.K. Exclusion criteria consisted of participants not being recruited from the institutions the first author was affiliated with at the request of the ethics panel.

The participant sample consisted of 10 nonbinary people aged between 16 and 21 years old ($M = 20$). Table 1 summarises participant demographics, showing that they had a range of sexual identities, ethnicities, and disabilities. All participants were given a £10 gift voucher in compensation for their time.

Interviews and schedule

The first author conducted individual, semi-structured interviews using an interview schedule that was developed by drawing on the literature on three main areas: gender, age, and identity. The full interview schedule is provided in Table 2. The interviews were audio recorded, averaged 1 hour 20 minutes, and mostly took place online (one person opted for an in-person interview, in a quiet public location). The audio recordings were stored securely on a university cloud storage folder and were deleted after the analysis was completed.

Ethics

The research was approved by the General University Ethics Panel at the University of Stirling (GUEP583) and was guided by the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (Oates et al. 2021) and their specific guidelines for working with gender diversity (BPS 2019). Much of the historical psychological research on trans and nonbinary gender identities has been highly pathologising and voyeuristic, particularly within clinical areas of research (Baril and Trevenen 2014; Eckstrand and Potter 2017; Ellis, Peel, and Riggs 2020; Iantaffi 2021). In

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Age	Pronouns	Gender	Ethnicity	Sexuality	Disability
RW	20	They/Them	Nonbinary	White	Bisexual	Partially sighted, autism, depression, anxiety
Noah Faith	16	They/Them	Nonbinary	White English	Asexual Lesbian	–
Phoenix	19	They/Them	Nonbinary/ genderqueer	White British	Gay/Queer	–
Han	21	They/Them	Queer	White British	Queer	–
Kai	21	They/Them	Agender (nonbinary also works)	White British	Asexual demisexual	–
Ren	20	They/Them	Nonbinary	Mixed Korean English	Demisexual	Suspected depression and ADHD, but not formally diagnosed
G	21	They/Them	Nonbinary	Malaysian-Chinese	Queer	None
Em	19	They/Them	No-binary	White British	Gay	N/A
Cornelius	21	They/He	Transmasculine nonbinary	White	Pansexual/ Queer	Autism spectrum disorder, depression and anxiety
Niv	21	They/Them	Genderfluid	Asian Indian	Asexual	None

light of this, the research drew on Vincent's (2018) paper on ethical recruitment and collaboration with trans populations to ensure the research was ethically rigorous and sensitive. For example, participants chose the pseudonym and pronouns they wanted used in the write-up of the research. The demographic forms included blank spaces so participants could use their own language to describe their identities. An option of online or in-person interviews was provided to ensure participation was accessible and safe in light of increasing transphobia and hate crimes. Informed consent was gained electronically via a digital signature on the consent form and verbally at the beginning of the interview.

Analytical steps

The interviews were analysed using feminist relational discourse analysis (FRDA) (Thompson, Rickett, and Day 2017), a two-phase analytic process that enabled the researchers to examine the discursive formations re-(produced) in the interviews, as well as their lived experience of those formations. This enabled an analysis of both the way that nonbinary identities are regulated socially and how the youth we interviewed experienced, lived with, and resisted such regulative practices, within the social and material world. FRDA consists of two phases: the first is a Foucauldian-informed poststructural discourse analysis following Willott and Griffin's (Willott and Griffin 1997) steps. First, the recordings were listened to multiple times to build familiarity with the stories being told. Patterns of meaning were then developed by 'chunking' the

Table 2. Interview schedule.

Interview Schedule
Section 1 – understanding nonbinary Purpose: to understand what identifying as nonbinary means for the interviewee, what are some of the important aspects of self that are captured within their gender identity, and general information about themselves/their life to help situate their future responses.
(1) To start with, I'd really like to build up a picture of what life is like for you, to help me understand some of your answers. Could you tell me what it means for you to identify as having a nonbinary gender? (a) Thinking about all of your experiences with your gender, what are some of the more important aspects of identifying as nonbinary? (b) What aspects of identifying as nonbinary impact your life the most (these can be positive or negative things)—and how do they impact your life? (2) If you can think back to when you first identified as nonbinary, or as close as you can remember, could you describe what that time was like for you? (a) If a close friend or family member was here, and I asked them what they noticed around that time, what do you think they would say? (b) What do you value in how your close friends/family see you as a nonbinary person? (3) When you think about nonbinary as an identity, what makes it different from other queer and/or non-conforming gender identities? (a) Nonbinary genders are generally considered to fall within the trans umbrella. How do you consider nonbinary as within this umbrella, and part of the wider LGBTQ+ community?
Section 2 – positioning of youth Purpose: to consider the demographics of youth and how this might create some unique experiences for people who identify as nonbinary. To also consider how a person's multiple identities and aspects of self, other than age, interact to tease out some diversities within nonbinary youth.
(4) We've talked a little about your gender identity; specifically, I'd really like to hear about how you'd describe your youth/adolescence/childhood. (a) What kinds of people were/are close to you—are any of them nonbinary/queer/LGBTQ+? (5) A lot of research on transgender young people focuses on medical aspects. What kinds of experiences would you say that people who are your age and nonbinary face? (a) How do you think this might be similar to or different from younger and older nonbinary people? (6) In psychology, there's a focus on considering the multiple identities that a person has to help understand an aspect of themselves, such as being a white, queer, man. How do you feel your other identities, such as your ethnicity, sexuality, ability etc., interact with being a young, nonbinary person? (7) Research on youth suggests that it is a time of transition. How does this relate to your experiences of your youth? (a) How does this relate specifically to your gender?
Section 3 – identity borders Purpose: to consider some of the personal, social, and cultural boundaries and barriers around nonbinary identities. Unpacking what an 'authentic' gender identity means and what functions to regulate this ideal. To engage with the surfacing issue of the binary/nonbinary binary.
(8) In the media, there's a lot of talk about being 'authentically me', for LGBTQ+ people. What does authenticity mean to you? (a) What does it mean for you to be authentically nonbinary? (9) If there are any, what kinds of things make it easier and difficult for you to be the self you were just describing? (a) What times did these difficulties feel more/less challenging for you, e.g., have these tensions changed over time? (10) Currently, the U.K.'s understanding of gender is binary (male, female), with increasing visibility and knowledge of nonbinary identities. What are your thoughts about the binary/nonbinary reproduction of a further binary way of thinking about gender? (a) Where do you imagine the boundaries of 'binary' and 'nonbinary' exist?
That's all the questions that I wanted to ask. Is there anything that we didn't mention that you'd like to discuss? Do you have any questions for me?

transcripts into sections and thereby dividing the data into sections about different topics. The 'chunks' were then labelled with descriptive codes using in-vivo labels to help sort the different topics. 'Chunks' that had similar labels, such as 'authenticity' and 'capacity', were identified and collated under the title of 'legitimacy'. Discourses were then identified by focusing on how each of the themes was constructed through different ways the participants spoke about that theme; e.g., the legitimacy discourse was identified by combining the statements that referred to this topic and nonbinary people as less legitimate, and concerns of young people's capacities to know themselves. Identifying discursive patterns was then possible, enabling focus on the patterns around the discourses in the previous step to tell overarching stories of the data. For example, discursive patterns of navigating and constructing legitimate gender identities for nonbinary youth included discourses of childhood capacities, cisgenderism, and emotional work. Finally, theoretical accounting, identifying discursive realms, involved considering relevant theory and research to interpret and make sense of the discursive patterns identified. Research showing how other minority groups are also positioned as educators (Cameron 2020) and power dynamics between children/adults impacted the discursive realm, helping make sense of the data (Tisdall, Kay, and Punch 2012).

The second phase consists of constructing I poems following Gilligan et al.'s (Gilligan, Renée Spencer, and Bertsch 2006) listening guide to trace the participants' voices through the discursive realms capturing their personal experiences. Step one involves multiple listenings, which Thompson, Rickett, and Day (2017) suggest is covered in the discourse analysis phase. A Microsoft Word document was created for each discursive realm, and the participants' quotes were copied over into separate pages, ensuring that their quotes were in sequential order. Each 'I' statement and any accompanying verbs were identified, starting a new line with each 'I' statement to resemble lines of a poem, and the rest of the extract was deleted. Multiple voices were then listened for within an individual participant's story, which can be complementary and/or contradictory. For example, complementary voices of confusion and vulnerability were heard from RW, suggesting a sense of feeling lost and scared through being delegitimised due to age and gender, as they described feeling that they did not belong. The final step involved constructing a theoretical account to address the research questions to produce a personal-political narrative where the participants' voices were central to the analysis.

This resulted in two forms of analytic product—a mapping of the discursive formations within and across the interviews, and a series of poems that represent how these formations are lived and navigated by

the individual participants. The I poem phase of FRDA challenges restrictive and oppressive ways of knowing, for example, the gender binary, by recognising how subjects can embody complexity and contradictions regarding their identities, such as their genders, by recognising how voiced accounts contain multiple I positions (Gilligan et al. 2011).

Reflexivity

Multiple reflexive processes were embedded in the research, including journalling by the first author and reflexive discussions between the first author and the co-authors at all phases of the research. When the data were generated, the first author, who was the main field researcher, identified as a white queer man. This shifted through the research, as they began to interrogate the gender binary, and this author now identifies as genderqueer. The co-authors have a range of genders and sexualities: JC is bisexual and cisgender, and SL is a white, heterosexual woman.

Therapeutic training enabled the first author to hold space within the interviews, be non-judgmental, and be empathic to the participants' experiences. Furthermore, as a queer person, the first author shared some 'insider' positionality with the participants, which may have helped initial rapport building, for example, having their own lived experience of 'coming out' (both as gay and as genderqueer). This was supported by discussions with the other co-authors about shared and diverse experiences of these processes. The first author had conducted previous research with nonbinary participants (Ward 2021; Ward and Lucas 2023) and worked as a youth leader at a young person's LGBTQ+ youth group, which provided both academic and community experience with this population. Finally, a combination of the first author's 'insider' positionality and having received and delivered specific nonbinary and trans counselling training meant they were familiar with using inclusive language and current and historical cultural attitudes towards this population.

Results

The results are presented following the two-phased structure of FRDA; phase one (the discourse analysis) is presented first to identify the discursive realm of legitimacy that the participants navigated. Phase two is then presented focusing on the I poems constructed from participants' accounts to explore how they voice their personal experiences of navigating the discourses previously identified.

Phase one: discourse analysis. The discursive realm of legitimacy

One of the discursive formations that was dominant in participants' accounts related to a sense of the legitimacy of their nonbinary identity. Participants

described a sense that their gendered subjectivities were frequently called into question in a range of ways and in varying contexts.

Healthcare and educational settings were particular spaces in which participants reported that the legitimacy of their nonbinary identity was called into question. For example, one participant stated they had been told:

> With younger people they [professionals] say that you're too young, you don't understand, you'll grow out of it, and I think that we all just sort of get similar sort of responses to people who disagree . . . or even people who don't believe that it's a real thing. (Noah, 16 years old)

Noah described how professionals here used their expert voices to delegitimise their nonbinary identity, drawing on developmental discourses of adolescence and young adulthood as a period of identity exploration and flux. This was described as challenging their claims to know themselves or to have a settled sense of their own identity. Participants described several ways that their claims to self-knowledge about their gender identities (and identities more broadly) were regulated and contested discursively, including expressions of disbelief about their genders.

Many of the participants spoke of nonbinary genders being positioned as unreal or a 'phase', which was often linked to developmentalist assumptions about age and maturity. For example, Phoenix (19 years old) said that some health and educational professionals challenged the reliability of their own capacity for self-knowledge, suggesting that:

> There's a tendency to think that younger people think it's a phase or whatever so it might not be recognised that actually younger people know themselves.

It is clear here that professionals are drawing on discourses of childhood and adolescence that position youth as 'being, not becoming' (Jenks 2004; Prout 2011), with the sense of the adult they might be 'becoming' being necessarily opaque to the young person. In this sense, youth are effectively excluded discursively from a category of persons who are capable of knowing themselves. This discourse further functions to mandate dependency on adults, who by virtue of their developmental phase are better equipped with self-knowledge and, consequently, a capacity to make accurate judgements and decisions about identity.

In this way, the 'beliefs' of the adult are accorded a primacy and power that exceed the participants' capacity to define themselves. An understanding of gender identity is reserved as 'adult knowledge' and too complicated for youth to understand. Age-based power dynamics are therefore weaponised to invalidate the participants' own self-knowledge, and by extension, the stability of their own gender identity. How the participants were positioned also impacted their ability to be active in their speaking positions:

> When I was a kid, it was a lot of 'you don't know where you are right now, you don't know what you're going through right now'. The first time I spoke about gender with the uni GP [General Practitioner], I was pushed away, I was told that I didn't belong there. And that was basically the case for trying to talk to authority figures in school too. I spent a lot of time with the well-being people at school as well, talking to them about gender. There was a lot of 'you're a kid you don't know where you are'. And yet, I was a kid, and I didn't know where I was. But the fact that I didn't know where I was in regards to gender was scary! (RW, 20 years old)

RW suggested here that they were confused about who they were, but they needed their confusion about gender to be heard, not dismissed as 'just a phase'. When RW talked about their gender, taking an active subject position, they experienced forms of regulation that function to disqualify this active agency. RW described themselves as pushed away when seeking help about gender identity, a rejection further underscored by the statement that they 'did not belong'. In this way, their attempts to seek medical support gender for issues of gender identity were positioned as illegitimate—it is not recognised as a legitimate 'medical' need, but rather a developmental one they will 'grow out of'. In this instance, the GP is gatekeeping access to medical assistance, denying trans-affirming medical care to the individual. Such claims determine who can access health services, whether somebody needs medical support, and what kinds of treatment can be provided. The language RW used here (being 'pushed away' and 'not belonging') emphasises the sense of rejection and of being excluded from needed support. It reflects a well-documented reluctance amongst many GPs to deal with gender identity and/or gender-affirming healthcare (Faye 2021). Psychologising gender distress, and treating it as a developmental process, effectively positions it as not medical, legitimising trans-exclusionary medical care. This is also potentially enabled by an assumption that nonbinary bodies do not 'require' the same kinds of medical intervention that other trans people might need, producing a transgender hierarchy of rights in access to medical care.

Noah also spoke of medical professionals, situating their experience of being delegitimised within the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)—a common pathway for young people experiencing mental health difficulties:

> Having a personality disorder means that a lot more people question whether or not it's genuine to identify as nonbinary. I suppose because they see, as I have a mental disorder, I must be making this thing that they very rarely hear of up and it doesn't make sense as being a genuine thing.

Despite the lack of an identifiable subject, 'they' had an active position, as they were questioning Noah's genuineness and the role of the mental health diagnosis. Noah was rendered passive within the quote and was discursively silenced while the professionals questioned their legitimacy and if their nonbinary

subjectivity was 'genuine'. Professionals also drew on neurodiversity as an additional intersection to challenge the participants' understanding of their genders:

> There's a big oh it's your autism just telling you you're trans you're not really trans we don't get taken seriously. (Cornelius, 21 years old)

The quote shows how ableist interpretations of autism (and its intersections with gender diversity) further delegitimised Cornelius' gender identity. For example, the literature shows how discourses of autism may restrict the recognition of nonbinary identities (Shapira and Granek 2019) through assumptions of an association of autism with masculinity (Moore et al. 2022). In addition, assumptions about autism can result in the experiences of autistic nonbinary people being dismissed as a lack of 'theory of mind' (Kung 2020).

In the analysis so far, we have demonstrated how nonbinary youth see professionals as using a range of developmental knowledge to dispute and delegitimise nonbinary gender identities. They drew on assumptions nested in claims about mental illness, neurodiversity, and age to position young nonbinary people as necessarily unable to know their own gender identity. In the next section, we explore how young people narrated their sense of resistance to these constructions.

'I don't have the energy or the mental capacity to educate them, I don't feel like it's my job': Fighting and education for legitimacy

Being delegitimised meant that the participants often reported pressure to take on an 'educator' role, informing professionals about nonbinary experiences. This was described as entailing considerable emotional labour in the very moments of self-disclosure when they might feel most vulnerable and most in need of support.

Some participants saw the need to educate as an inevitable part of their own struggle for nonbinary visibility. In a culture that is hegemonically binary, the linguistic and cultural terrain poses constant challenges to nonbinary visibility. For example, Han (21 years old) shared:

> I have to justify and like educate people on like sometimes just like why I identify as I do, but also like why I'm asking them to use certain pronouns, that is like a daily thing. So, that's like a really hard aspect of it, asking them to use certain pronouns is a daily thing.

Han suggested that 'teaching' people 'can be positive, depending on how receptive people are', since they get to help educate others and spread awareness of nonbinary genders. Nonetheless, the description of this as a 'daily thing' and Han's assertion that 'it's always draining regardless' makes it clear that it is also burdensome and exhausting. Ren (20 years old) also spoke of the struggle for recognition of nonbinary identities, as the gender binary impacts multiple areas: 'telling people that I'm nonbinary is exhausting is because it's

changing all of these ways alongside them'. Therefore, even the potential benefits of being positioned as an identity educator still operate within regulatory frameworks that seek to maintain the gender binary through exhausting nonbinary youth.

For this reason, some participants resisted the pressure to 'educate' people. For example, G (21 years old), took an active stance against this positioning of youth as educators and rejected this role:

> I actively stay away from people who aren't familiar with queerness because at this point in my life, I don't have the energy or the mental capacity to educate them. I don't feel like it's my job to educate them as well, so like that actively doing that has helped me feel more comfortable in my gender identity. Moving away from, I want to say ignorant, but I don't know if that's too bad... ignorant people.

G's active resistance was shown through them staying away, distancing, and not educating, which were all actions to not engage in the positioning of youth as identity educators. Additionally, connecting with 'the most queer, the most wholesome, the most positive and encouraging people' reduced the need for G to take on this role, as they are more likely to understand nonbinary genders and not seek to question or delegitimise. Therefore, the move away from 'ignorant' people and the fostering of supportive connections was how G was able to navigate and/or reject an identity educator positioning, where they were no longer responsible for proving the legitimacy of their subjectivity, which enabled them to feel more comfortable with their gender. The rejection of an educator positioning (re)locates the work from an individualised perspective, where marginalised youth are responsible for educating professionals, to a more systemic consideration. Therefore, in their resistance, G challenges expert subjects who have more power and institutions to take on roles of self-educating.

However, G's strategy of resistance entails its own challenges, particularly in the dependence on available queer-affirming communities and networks, which cannot always be assumed. For example, in contexts where supportive queer people are not as easily accessible, the refusal to take on an educator role may result in limited access to resources. Therefore, a discursive pressure can be seen for nonbinary youth to choose between taking on the labour of educating others to access a form of care or avoiding such labour at a potential cost of foregoing needed support. G's quote shows how, even in resistance to an educator role, there is a demand for labour, as they must constantly negotiate where, when, and how to engage to protect their well-being.

The first phase of analysis showed how the discursive realities of nonbinary youth conflict with discourses of cisnormativity, which is illustrated in Figure 1. Within this context, participants were often positioned as needing to explain their genders in ways that cisgender people would not be. Without available intelligible gendered subject positions, the participants frequently took up a position as educators to make themselves more culturally intelligible. However, these

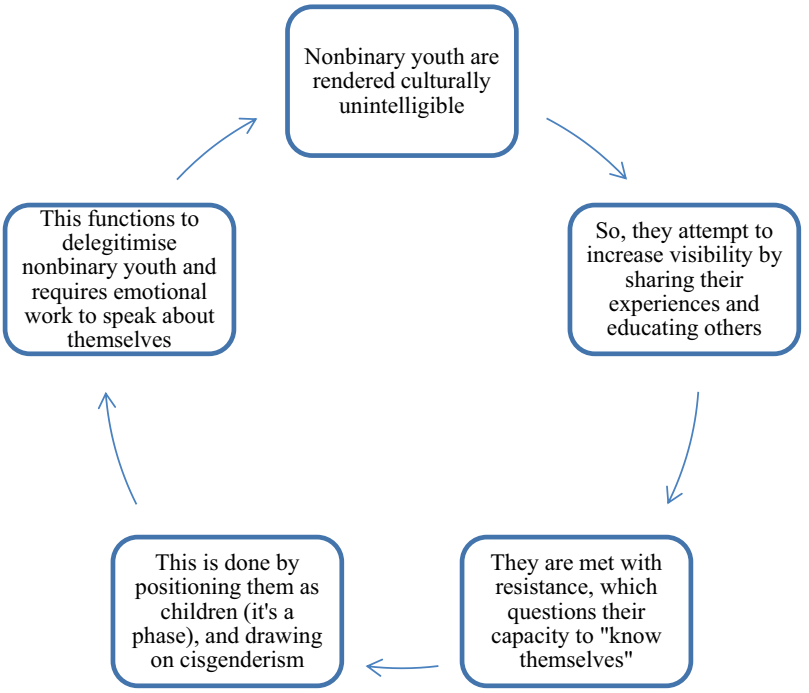

Figure 1. A visual cycle to show how nonbinary youth are delegitimised.

positions simultaneously challenged power dynamics where professionals used their adult positioning of 'being' to delegitimise the participants' gender subjectivities by locating youth in childhood discourses and reinforcing a stable and enduring modernist sense of self (Prout 2011).

Such framing shows how cisnormativity privileges cisgender identities as natural and unquestioned, whilst constructing nonbinary identities as unstable and incoherent. By grouping legitimacy with stability, permanence, and alignment with binary expectations, cisnormative discourses allow professionals to dismiss the participants' claims and demand justification and explanation of their nonbinary gendered subjectivities. Other aspects of selfhood, such as age, mental health, and neurodivergence, were used against the participants to further undermine their legitimacy. Therefore, the analysis answers the research question of how nonbinary youth experience and navigate their gender identities by showing how this is shaped not only by interpersonal encounters but also by structural conditions where cisnormativity regulates the boundaries of what is considered a legitimate gendered subject.

Phase two: I poems

I poems will now be presented to explore how the participants' voiced accounts of the discursive realm of legitimacy were regulated and the

associated impacts. By focusing on the I poems, the diversity within the participants' experiences can be heard, showing how the lived experience of navigating legitimacy as a nonbinary youth is complex and nuanced.

In RW's I poem, voices of confusion and vulnerability were identified, relating to their experience of becoming aware of their gender diversity as a kid. RW highlighted an aspect of age within their I poem and the rejection they experienced due to this:

I was a kid it was a lot of you know
I started to talk about gender
I spoke about gender with the uni GP
I was pushed away
I was told that I didn't belong there
I spent a lot of time with the well-being people
I was a kid
I didn't know where I was
[the fact that] I didn't know where I was in regard to gender was scary

RW drew on a developmental discourse of identity confusion, which shifted to be positioned as a social construction by their GP, as they were told they did not belong due to their identity confusion. Therefore, RW's I poem shows how they navigated and (re)located themselves in the intersecting discourses of legitimacy and identity development by seeking help for their 'confusion', which was rejected, and through voicing their vulnerability of being 'scared'. RW described the confusion as scary, for which they sought help and reassurance from others but were 'pushed away' and told they 'didn't belong there', suggesting a sense of alienation and marginalisation, constructed by a non-accepting institutional context.

Consideration was given to how the voices' confusion and vulnerability were contrapuntal—how they told different stories of RW's experiences (Gilligan et al. 2011). The voices of loss and belonging, vulnerability, and confusion were not in opposition; rather, they were complementary and produced a sense of being 'out of place'. Through these voices, RW articulated an experience of loss, as they were rejected from spaces where they felt they could belong. RW's I poem and the focus on their personal experiences highlight how a discourse of legitimacy that positions nonbinary youth as unable to know themselves perpetuates feelings of confusion. Therefore, when nonbinary youth are delegitimised, they may feel vulnerable and experience a sense of loss of their place in the world as they feel and are told that they do not belong, leading to experiences of confusion.

The next section turns to another aspect of the legitimacy discourse—the emotional work involved in their social positionings as identity educators. Since the participants often described that they were not believed about their genders, to be taken seriously, they were required to become identity educators

and take on the emotional work of educating others to prove the legitimacy of their genders. Em's (19 years old) I poem is presented as they spoke heavily of an educator positioning in their interview:

I do think it is problematic
I think like yeah everything can't happen at once
I think maybe we need to first figure out how to talk about being nonbinary
We need to be able to have these conversations
I have no idea if that would even yeah
I also don't know whether that would cause more problems than it would solve
I guess a lot of like trans and nonbinary and just queer identity comes from having to explain yourself to people
I mean coming out is a whole it's just all about having to explain yourself
We just get to a certain point where it's like
I don't want to do this anymore
I wish like you could just telepathically communicate everything to someone

If we want to see change
We need to be able to have these conversations
Or how are we ever going to reach make any progress
If we're just yelling at each other all of the time
Don't you think we should be educating as well
I've seen this happen a lot online

A commonality between RW's and Em's poems is the importance of readability and recognition from others. For RW, negotiating legitimacy was a vulnerable process that entailed recognition of their gender confusion from their GP. While for Em, negotiating legitimacy required articulating their experiences of being nonbinary to explain themself into being. The pervasiveness of cisgender and binary discourses regulates non-normative subjectivities and the available language for youth, such as Em, impacting both the discursive space for and articulation of nonbinary genders. Through a voice of struggle, Em suggested that it is not easy to speak with others about their experiences, and they relate this to the experiences of 'coming out' for nonbinary people. Em mentioned how the process of 'coming out' perpetuates an experience of a constant need to explain (and justify) themself because of the importance of being read and identified appropriately. Therefore, being recognised is considered a key social experience for identity construction, which was challenging for the participants as nonbinary genders are rendered culturally unintelligible in the UK.

A lack of cultural intelligibility impacted the participants primarily as they were still required/facing demands from others to explain themselves. However, 'others' often lacked frames of reference to hear and understand nonbinary possibilities for gender identities. When Em used 'I', they referenced words such as 'problematic', 'no idea', 'don't know', 'explain yourself', and 'telepathically communicate' to voice their experiences of struggle

regarding their identity educator positioning, as they were unsure about a way forward. Additionally, Em's 'we' statements (interpreted as their collective voice and also referring to nonbinary communities) referred to various needs: 'to talk about being nonbinary', 'to be able to have these conversations', 'to make any progress', and 'be educating'. Individually, Em voiced uncertainty, whereas collectively, Em took on a more confident position to identify the next steps needed to address the issues of legitimacy and educator positionings. Em's collective voice spoke of 'change', 'progress', and 'educating', which contrasts with the 'I' voices of being unsure of how to deal with the problems of explaining nonbinary experiences. There was a sense of responsibility within the collective voice to make progress, 'if we want to see change, we need to . . . '.

Whilst Em's collective 'we' provided strength by drawing on community and solidarity, it also reflects a broader discursive tension for marginalised people: those most excluded are positioned as responsible for creating social change, educating others, and cultivating intelligibility, rather than the (cis) normative structures. Thus, Em's 'we need to' is located within a wider sociocultural expectation that marginalised individuals need to do the work of explaining themselves to a society that does not already accept or accommodate them. A collective voice can therefore be interpreted as both an expression of agency and resilience, and as evidence of the unequal distribution of labour for nonbinary youth claiming legitimacy.

Although the reference to 'we' provided strength to Em by drawing on a collective, the vulnerability of the 'I' began to be silenced, making the uncertainty within Em's voice less speakable. For example, Em's collective voice spoke of a need for difficult conversations to make change and progress: 'If we want to see change [. . .] we need to be able to have these conversations [. . .] or how are we ever going to reach make any progress?' Whereas, using their individual voice, the uncertainty and struggle of the 'collective' became more spoken: 'I have no idea if that would even [. . .] I also don't know whether that would cause more problems than it would solve'. Therefore, the I poems evidence the multivocality of Em's voices to show how they (re)locate themselves within the discursive realms. Furthermore, despite the pressures to engage with dominant discourses and explain gender diversity, Em spoke of times when they used their voice to not engage with such pressures, for example, 'We get to a point where it's like, I don't want to do this anymore'. The discursive positioning of nonbinary youth as identity educators alongside delegitimising youth's capacity to know and be sure of their genders left Em voicing the pressures to articulate their experiences, which did not fit within cisheteronormative or binary gender frameworks. The pressures to make oneself visible, knowable, and intelligible within a society that renders such visibility unintelligible and delegitimises youth's attempts to articulate knowledge of the self resulted in a desire to resist through non-engagement.

The I poems enabled multiple voices to represent participants' experiences whilst recognising how they were mediated by discourses (Thompson, Rickett, and Day 2017). Experiences of struggle left the participants deeply exhausted from a continued expectation of needing to explain and justify their genders and feelings of vulnerability from being constantly questioned about their genders. The participants also used a collective voice as a source of strength, as individually, legitimacy discourses were exhausting and left them feeling vulnerable. This produced a sense of a collective voice that spoke of making change and educating others to increase recognition and cultural intelligibility. Therefore, the participants used their voices collectively to resist expert voices and discourses that sought to question the legitimacy of their genders.

Discussion

This study interviewed 10 nonbinary youth about their experiences of gender regulation. FRDA was used as an analytical framework to explore both discursive constructions and voiced experiences (Thompson, Rickett, and Day 2017), in line with recommendations from trans theory to attend to socially constructed and embodied aspects of gender identity (Nagoshi, Nagoshi, and Brzuzy 2014). Participants constituted their sense of self in relation to a disputed discursive formation of 'legitimacy'. Professional and expert deployment of this discourse drew on developmental ideas about youth and identity to challenge or dismiss the validity of their nonbinary identity, in a manner that demanded considerable emotional work on the part of the young people who were seeking help and support concerning their gender identity. In particular, our analysis has shown how youth felt pressured to explain and explicate themselves, defend their identity, and educate the very professionals from whom they were seeking support. The participants were positioned as identity educators and expected to teach others about nonbinary genders despite their capacity to know themselves being questioned. By creating I poems for the participants, it was possible to hear how they used multiple voices to represent their experiences, but also recognise how they were mediated by discourses (Thompson, Rickett, and Day 2017). Voiced experiences of struggle left the participants deeply exhausted from a continued expectation of needing to explain and justify their genders to others, and feelings of vulnerability from being constantly questioned about their genders. The participants also used a collective voice as a source of strength, as individually, legitimacy discourses were exhausting and left them feeling vulnerable. This produced a sense of a collective voice that spoke of making change and educating others to increase recognition and cultural intelligibility. Therefore, the participants used their voices collectively to resist expert voices and discourses that sought to question the legitimacy of their genders.

The findings support previous research on nonbinary genders, non-normative development, and categorical thinking. For example, Vincent (2020) discussed discourses of legitimacy in their work on nonbinary genders. Critical psychologists, such as O'Dell, Brownlow, and Bertilsdotter Rosqvist (2018), explored how normative developmental trajectories are limiting and not inclusive for a range of youth. And Barker (2018) provided a critique of binary and categorical thinking for gender—and life more broadly (Barker and Iantaffi 2019). The current findings expand nonbinary scholarship by providing new insights into the discursive regulation of nonbinary youth's gender identities, specifically in the areas of healthcare and education, whereby age, mental health, and neurodiversity were mobilised to delegitimate their self-knowledge. Whilst existing research has explored the pathologisation of gender diversity (Ansara and Hegarty 2011) and barriers to gender-affirming care (Clark et al. 2019), our findings expand the field by showing how professionals employ developmental discourses and cisgenderism to question the legitimacy of young people's capacity for understanding their genders. Additionally, our findings contribute to an emerging area on the intersection of nonbinary genders, mental health, and neurodiversity (Kung 2020; Shapira and Granek 2019), showing how psychiatric discourses and autism were weaponised to further question the legitimacy of nonbinary self-identification, positioning such knowledge as a symptom of a disorder rather than a valid identity. Insights into the emotional labour of nonbinary youth are also highlighted through the findings, highlighting the expectations of becoming identity educators for professionals. The impact of navigating misrecognition for gender-diverse people is known (Jacobsen et al. 2023); however, our findings extend this by showing how nonbinary youth are positioned as responsible for educating professionals' lack of knowledge, even in moments of voiced vulnerability. In response, participants described resistance strategies, including disengagement from unsupportive environments and fostering queer-affirming spaces, which aligns with research on resilience and community-building among nonbinary people (Riggs 2019). By foregrounding these discursive struggles and acts of resistance, this study expands our understanding of how nonbinary youth navigate legitimacy, offering a critical perspective on the power relations that shape their access to recognition and care.

Through articulating their nonbinary subjectivities, the participants challenged discourses of childhood, where children are constructed as being passive and having less agency. There are similarities between the participants' negotiations of the legitimacy discursive realm with the broader struggles of the child/adult dichotomy (Tisdall, Kay, and Punch 2012). For example, historically, young people taking on active speaking positions have been framed negatively, for example, children being seen and not heard, students

being quiet in class, not speaking up/back to people (Burman 2016). In Foucauldian terms, the findings provide an example of regulation and discipline, as when the participants spoke about themselves, they were met with resistance that sought to disprove and question the legitimacy of their identities (Foucault 1977). It became emotional work (Ahmed 2013) for the participants to have conversations and articulate a sense of self; therefore, youth may be silenced through not wanting to explain their identities, illustrating the pervasiveness of legitimacy as a discursive pressure.

Given the Listening Guide's focus on contrapuntal voices, part of the analysis is to also listen for silences and voices that are less spoken (Gilligan et al. 2011). The disciplinary forces located in the discursive realm of legitimacy made voices of gender euphoria less speakable for the participants. Gender euphoria encompasses the 'powerfully positive experiences of gender' and therefore recognises the strengths and possibilities that nonbinary people may experience (Beischel, Gauvin, and van Anders 2021, 1). The lack of available language for nonbinary youth to speak about gender euphoria was shown through the participants' I poems, as struggles and difficulties were spoken about more than ease and euphoria, illustrating how positive experiences relating to their genders were less speakable.

Limitations

Despite efforts made to recruit a diverse sample of nonbinary youth, which was done through approaching specific groups, such as faith, disability, and people of colour, the majority of the participants were White, able-bodied, and lived in England; therefore, the overall research reflects a somewhat privileged account of nonbinary regulation. Additionally, the age range criteria were a discussion point in the interview with G, who mentioned that they thought the ages were too low since nonbinary people often experience a social 'delay'. On reflection, across the participants, social and developmental milestones, such as pursuing (a)romantic and or/(a)sexual relationships, were discussed as occurring later than their (assumed cis and binary) peers. Therefore, whilst 'traditional' age markers were purposely used for capturing youth's transitional positioning, a limitation of the research was that a 16-to-21-year age bracket may not be inclusive of nonbinary youth experiences.

Guidance for trans and youth research favours participatory and co-construction approaches, which may have helped both community-focused involvement and subsequently the recruitment of participants (Lawson et al. 2015; Wagaman 2015). Although the focus of the present research stems from the first author's previous research on nonbinary young people's experiences (Ward 2021), the lack of co-construction in areas such as deciding on research questions, developing the interview schedule, and reviewing the analysis was a limitation of the research.

Recommendations & implications

The current research contributes methodologically by providing an example of how feminist and trans-informed research can simultaneously explore the material (personal) and discursive (political) aspects of gender identity. This study, alongside another from the first author's PhD, is the only published research to use FRDA to focus specifically on nonbinary experiences (Ward and Lucas 2023). FRDA was a useful method for the current research, as it provided a framework to further trans recommendations of the importance of using feminist methodologies (Vincent 2018) and disrupting discursive narratives of gender, identity, and development. The discursive practice of discourse analysis is a feminist concern, as power dynamics become obscured, and personal experiences of the participants become lost, further silencing already-marginalised people (Saukko 2000; Thompson, Rickett, and Day 2017). FRDA was a useful way of centralising voice, whilst not losing the discursive contexts from which participants spoke. Methodologies that centralise voice are needed for nonbinary research, as their voices are often discursively silenced by modernist understandings and/or encompassed within wider trans and LGBTQ+ narratives (Bradford and Syed 2019; Worthen 2021).

Future research should continue to use methods that hold space for complexity and fluidity beyond binary understandings to capture the nuances of nonbinary experiences. Continued attempts to recruit diverse samples of nonbinary youth would be another area for further research, for example, focusing specifically on people of colour and disabled nonbinary people. A further area for attention is focusing on where nonbinary youth find spaces, people, and forms of legitimisation, given the pervasiveness of their genders and identities being challenged within the current research.

Conclusion

The current study explored the experiences of 10 nonbinary youth in the UK navigating forms of regulation regarding their gender identities and age. The findings highlighted multiple ways the participants' genders were discursively delegitimised, due to their age, mental health, or neurodivergence, and how the participants were positioned as needing to become educators. The participants voiced personal experiences of struggle and exhaustion from such positioning and used collective voices as a source of strength to make change, provide education, and increase nonbinary recognition. Future research can continue to increase the diversity within nonbinary samples, use methodologies that embrace complexity, and focus on experiences where nonbinary youth are legitimised.

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Notes on contributors

Luke Ward is an accredited counsellor and a senior lecturer in child and adolescent mental health. Luke's research interests focus on gender and sexual identities and LGBTQ+ mental health.

Jane E.M. Callaghan is professor and director of the Centre for Child Wellbeing and Protection, at the University of Stirling. She is a psychologist and interdisciplinary scholar, with interests in childhood and youth, family life, mental health, and domestic abuse.

S. E. Lucas is the programme director for the BA (Hons) Social Work degree at the University of Stirling. Siân has research interests in family life and memory archiving for care experienced people.

ORCID

Luke Ward http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8869-1429
Jane E.M. Callaghan http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5241-3398
S. E. Lucas http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3116-3411

Data availability 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 [TBC] https://doi.org/10.24339/d86636f1-e0ab-40d9-98b8-2592fdab6ad4.

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