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What's the Story? Exploring Online Narratives of Non-binary Gender Identities

Abstract:

Currently, people with non-binary gender identities – those who identify as either both genders or neither - are gaining more social visibility, suggesting that changes in social understandings of gender are now underway. Facebook, for example, has recently introduced a range of non-binary gender options for user profile pages; indeterminate and 'third gender' identities are now legally recognised in a number of countries, including Australia, Germany, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, New Zealand and Thailand; and the term 'cisgender', which refers to those whose self identity matches the gender and biological sex assigned to them at birth, has now entered the Oxford English Dictionary. Typical spaces where personal narratives concerning non-binary gender identities are generated and shared are Internet blogs and online discussion forums. However, as yet these narratives have not been explored and non-binary gender identities remain largely under researched within the social sciences. This paper begins to address this gap through the presentation of some initial research findings from a qualitative study of online non-binary gender identity narratives. It explores some key themes within and across the narratives of younger and older generation non-binary people produced within a sample of blogs and forums, and draws out their implications for the development of further research.

Introduction:

While transgender people who transition across the gender binary are increasingly gaining social recognition, people with non-binary gender identities – those who identify as either both genders or neither - are now also gaining more social

1

visibility. The introduction of non-binary gender options for profile pages on Facebook; the legal recognition of 'third' and indeterminate gender in countries such as Australia, Germany, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, New Zealand and Thailand; and the recent inclusion in the Oxford English Dictionary of the term 'cisgender', which refers to those whose self identity matches the gender and biological sex assigned to them at birth, all suggest that changes in social understandings of gender currently underway. Alongside this, the results of surveys being carried out across LGBT communities are also suggesting that the number of people claiming non-binary gender identities is increasing (Balarajan, 2011; Trans Media Watch, 2010; Kuper, *et al.* 2012) However, despite these developments, there is a noticeable shortage of research on the lives and experiences of people with non-binary gender identities, with existing studies of trans lives focussing largely on trans men and women who transition within the gender binary . In a world where binary gender has been a near universal norm, how non-binary gender identities are currently being understood, negotiated and lived is, then, in need of research. In this paper my aim is to contribute to the development of this research area by presenting some initial findings drawn from a qualitative research project concerning non-binary gender identities. The paper explores some key themes within and across narratives produced by younger and older generation non-binary people in Internet blogs and forums, and draws out their implications for the development of further research. The paper is organised across four sections. The first part of the paper outlines current understandings of non-binary gender identities, including a brief overview of how non-binary gender is being presented within mainstream and popular media, and also addressed within existing academic research. The second section of paper discusses the research process and then moves on to present and discuss the initial research findings in the third section. A summary of the findings and suggestions for further research are outlined in the concluding forth section of the paper.

Non-binary gender identities

The term non-binary gender operates as an umbrella term to refer to a range of identities and expressions of gender that do not within the sex/gender binary, and which typically involve identifying as either a blend of both genders or as neither. Non-binary gender identities thus vary in experience and kind. The most well known identity terms or 'labels' used to describe the various identities under the umbrella of non-binary gender are genderqueer, agender, non-gender, neutrois, gender fluid, gender neutral, bi-gender, demi-gender, and also the term 'non-binary'. Non-binary gender identities do not include intersex, though some intersex people may identify as being non-binary, and while non-binary gender identities are not dependent on gaining any kind of medical diagnosis, some people do experience various levels of body dysphoria and so may seek hormone treatment and/or surgeries to alter their bodies. Many manage and express their identities through various kinds of clothing and/or styles self-presentation, whilst some do not feel the need to outwardly convey their identities in this way. There is also variation among non-binary gender people concerning the use of gender neutral pronouns, with some preferring to use pronouns such as 'they', 'them' and 'their', or 'zie' and 'hir', and others either having no particular preference, or as preferring binary gender pronouns for ease in everyday situations. Current research is suggesting that among non-binary people there are higher numbers of people designated female at birth compared to those who had been designated male (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011).

In both mainstream and popular media, non-binary gender identities tend to be presented as new identities emerging through new forms of gender experience in younger generations, particularly teenagers and/or adults in their twenties. While non-binary gender identities are acknowledged as diverse, in the ways outlined above, the dominant image of a non-binary person is that they are young, white, were assigned female at birth, are of slim build, and are androgynous and 'stylish' in their physical presentation. It is well documented, however, that non-binary gender identities do not always fit this image and are not in fact new, but rather, have long histories (Herdt, 2012). This is particularly the case in some non-Western cultures. Those most well known are the Hijra in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan (Monro, 2005; Khan, *et al.,* 2009), the kathoey in Thailand, commonly referred to in the popular media as 'lady boys' (Winter, 2002) and the travesti in Brazil (Kulick, 1998).

In Western societies, in particular the US and the UK, non-binary gender has also been at the heart of queer theory and queer activist movements of the 1990s. During this time, however, it was generally referred to as either genderqueer or third gender, and was subsumed under the broader umbrella of 'transgender' which also included transsexuals, drag kings, drag queens, cross dressers, third gender, butch lesbians and other non-conforming gender identities. One of the main aims of queer politics and scholarship throughout the 1990s was to deconstruct and subvert the binaries of heteronormative sex/gender and hetero/homo sexuality (Butler, 1990). In this process non-binary gender experience was both highly revered and politicised, a move that was also reinforced in the effort to combat the transphobia of some radical feminists, who argued that trans communities were reinforcing the gender binary and perpetuating gender stereotypes that were harmful to women (Raymond, 1980; Jeffreys, 1997, 2014). Since the early 1990s much research in the area of trans identities has shown these particular arguments to be empirically unfounded and conceptually problematic through highlighting the pervasiveness of non-binary gender experience and self perception within trans communities (see for example, Bornstein, 1994; Hines & Sanger, 2010; Monro, 2007; Serano, 2007; Girshick, 2008). Although these histories show how the experience of non-binary gender is not new, the current increase in the number of people 'coming out' and claiming a non-binary gender identity suggests that a larger 'movement' is now forming (see also Girshick, 2008), raising the question of how non-binary gender is being defined, understood and experienced within this particular context. The discussion in this paper addresses this question and, further, attends to the somewhat limited notion of non-binary gender diversity, by exploring some key themes within and across narratives produced by younger and older generation non-binary people in Internet forums and blogs.

The research background

Using Internet Blogs and Forums: rationale

While research interviews are still considered to be the gold standard within most approaches to qualitative research, a focus on narratives drawn from Internet blogs and forums, as explored within this paper, was adopted for two particular reasons. First, many commentators have observed how the Internet has played a significant role in the growth and visibility of both global and local trans communities (Whittle, 1998; Shapiro, 2004). Prior to the Internet, trans people had limited access to one another and also helpful information. Unless (or until) they approached the few existing trans support organisations and networks, which provided information and contacts through club meetings and paper based magazines, they largely learned about others similar to themselves through medical text books and sensationalised stories within the mainstream press and television (Stone, 1991). The Internet - from the early days of days of message boards and list serves, though to present day blogs, forums and social media platforms - has enabled trans people to connect with each other socially, gain support, educate and learn from one another, and form strong political ties and activist movements (Shapiro, 2015; Whittle, 1998).

Second, (and related to the first point) the research presented here is concerned to engage with current debates concerning the significance of Web 2.0 technology (e.g. social media) in the context of sociological research (Savage & Burrows, 2007; Beer and Burrows, 2007, 2010, 2013; Arora, 2012). This technology facilitates more interactive forms of engagement and user experience whereby people can interact, share and co-create. Blogs, for example, now routinely encourage comment and feedback and can be followed, and individual blog posts can also be re-blogged and embedded or mashed up in the blogs of others. YouTube, which enables users to upload videos and also follow and comment on those uploaded by others, similarly enables sharing and embedding within blogs and other web pages. Social networking platforms such as Facebook add to these technologies and enable immediate and real time communication between users. Through these technologies sociological sensibilities are becoming more mainstream as more people are becoming 'prosumers' (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) - interactively both producing and consuming vast amounts of sociological 'data'. For example, capturing events, opinions and experiences and re-presenting them online through Storify, Pin-Interest and tumblr , and writing and curating blogs around particular interests or

communities (for an in-depth discussion see, Beer and Burrows, 2007, 2010, 2013). Carrying out Internet searches on non-binary gender reveals all of these processes taking place. For example, there are critical discussions about non-binary gender identities and issues, the sharing of non-binary gender experience through various informal discussions and structured questionnaires, and also meaning making and community building all taking place in online spaces, particularly in blogs and forums. Data on non-binary gender, then, such as identity narratives and significant dialogue regarding social understandings and experiences of non-binary gender identities, is already being produced (and consumed) by non-binary gender people themselves, thus providing strong alternative data sources to that generated via research interviews.

Collecting data from blogs and forums and thus adopting an 'unobtrusive' research approach (Lee, 2000) has significant advantages over interviews for a number of reasons. Data drawn from these online contexts, for example, is unsolicited and 'naturalistic' and so geared towards the concerns and interests of communities themselves, rather than those of the researcher (Mann and Stewart, 2000; Hine, 2013). Indeed, as Hine (2011:3) observes, 'Often these unobtrusive uses of Internet-derived data allow researchers to access something much closer to the experience of everyday life than we ever encounter in interview settings.' The approach is also advantageous when researching hard to access groups and populations (Kozinets. 2015), and also sensitive issues, where 'it can be a considerable imposition to ask respondents to recite their situation for the researchers' benefit' (Hine, 2011:3). Research carried out on blogs and forums has also highlighted how they often contain 'self-narratives' of the quality generally sought within research interviews (Hookway, 2008; Flick, 2009), and how anonymity online facilities authentic and meaningful interactions (Hookway, 2008; Orgrad, 2005;2009; Herring *et al.*, 2005). Further advantages include how data drawn from blogs and forums are already transcribed and, in the case of forums, a particular benefit is the opportunity to observe social interaction, using approaches such as discourse analysis (Page, 2013). Finally, both forums and blogs offer possibilities for longitudinal analysis (Orgrad, 2005; Snee, 2008), though this is particularly the case in relation to forums, as Wesolowski (2014: 4) observes:

'threads running on forums and message boards retain all of their posts and can be added on to after an indeterminate amount of time has passed. In many cases, the average member cannot completely delete or erase a post or thread. In the end, this creates a useful database of archived discussions for future unobtrusive qualitative analysis'.

Researching Blogs and Forums: methodology

Blogs and forums both have specific characteristics that are different in kind. Blogs are usually sole authored and contain a series of posts which are presented in reverse chronological order - that is, the latest post is always shown first, and they have the facility for readers to comment and give feedback on individual posts, though bloggers can turn this option off if they wish. Blogs can thus be characterised as 'live' conversational items - written by one person but 'nurtured' and co-constructed through the engagement of others (Herring *et al.*, 2005; Peterson, 2011). For example, people may comment on individual posts within the blog, or refer to particular posts or the blog itself in their own blogs (Hookway, 2008). Blogs also tend to fall into a variety of different types or genres, such as personal journals, online diaries, filters (blogs with links to external content such as topics of interest to the author), and notebooks (blogs with a mixture of both personal and other content of social interest) (Blood, 2002). There are also support group and community blogs (Krishnamurty, 2002) and career and commercial blogs (Hoffman, 2010). Blogs tend to be written by people for individual purposes, such as to explore a personal issue or to help them get through difficult times, often through the process of writing itself or via support from readers (Serfaty, 2004; Orgrad, 2005; Snee, 2008). Some blogs are also designed to include posts and materials to educate and inform others, to aid community building, or for social networking and publicising ones work and ideas, such as academic blogs, for example (Wakeford & Cohen, 2008).

While recent years has witnessed a proliferation of blogs on the Internet (Kozinets, 2015), finding blogs to include in the research was not as easy as first expected. This was not because there were too few of them, but, rather, because there were so

many, with a significant number tending to be embedded within a mass of other blogs. A particular difficulty was that many of the procedures for finding blogs as discussed in journal articles are no longer possible, as blog searching software and even blogging sites themselves are sometimes no longer available (Orgrad, 2005). The fast pace of change in relation to material on the Internet also became apparent as some blogs that were found in the search had been dropped by authors, who had either disappeared or had moved on to engage in microblogging activities, such as Twitter. Some bloggers left 'notes' on the blog pages, for example, informing the reader that they no longer post on the blog, and advising them of their Twitter contact details. In the search for blogs to include it was also found that the majority did not really fit the 'online diary' genre described within academic articles (see Blood, 2002), and that most seemed to be more community and information based than personal and individual. Given these issues, a sample of blogs were finally selected on the grounds that they represented the typical range of blogs found through Google searches on non-binary gender, and that they had at least two or more blogs post within them. The blogs were primarily gathered through Google's blog searching tool, 'blogsearch', and also through links to other bloggers from within some individual blogs. The process was not, therefore, systematic, but it was effective, resulting in ten blogs in the research sample. All of the bogs were publicly available online and none were tagged as private or subject to restricted access.

Compared to blogs, forums are more explicitly interactive spaces that encourage dialogue and conversation, and tend to be focused around community groups or a central issue or theme. They are generally overseen and maintained by a single moderator, or a group of moderators, and may operate as either closed forums, where access and/or participation is restricted to members only, or open forums, where they can be accessed by anyone -though some require membership in order to post messages. Typically, they are constructed and organised through lists of discussion topics, starting with 'sticky' topics on specific issues for members to discuss, which tend to be placed in a static section at the top of the forum discussion page, followed by a series of subject threads, initiated at the behest of individual users/members. The order of user/members initiated threads change with forum use, where new and 'hot' topics (those attracting a lot of conversation) appear at the

top of the list, while older posts or those that have 'died' (are no longer attracting contributions) gradually sink to the bottom of the list (Wesolowski, 2014). Forums have been shown to be important sources of communication, support, and virtual friendships for many people (Rheingold, 1993; Shapiro, 2004; 2015). Much research has highlighted, in particular, their significance for people managing illness. Orgrad (2005), for example, explores the significance that online forums can have for women experiencing breast cancer, while Armstrong *et al*., (2012) examine identity construction in online forums concerned with diabetes. Other research, however, has revealed how online forums serve a broad range of shared-interest groups and marginalised groups and communities, and how they are continuing to operate as socially significant sources for 'self-help', support and advice (see, for example, Murthy *et al*., 2013; Williams & Copes, 2005; Gavin *et al*., 2008; Kozinets, 2015).

Finding forums to use within the research was a fairly straightforward process compared to finding blogs, largely because there are relatively few forums specifically geared towards non-binary gender. The forums, like the blogs, were initially identified through the standard Google search tool, and of these five were finally selected. They were chosen on the grounds that were active, had a significant number of users and, as in the case of the blogs, were fully public - that is they were not closed or private forums, or subject to any restrictions on access, they could be viewed by anyone.

It is well documented that there are no firm guidelines in relation to ethical issues in carrying out research online (Orgrad, 2005; Hine, 2013). However, there does seem to be growing consensus that usual ethical procedures, such as gaining informed consent, is not required when using online data that is public and freely accessible, particularly in relation to blogs and forums (Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011; Rodham & Gavin, 2006; Hine, 2013). Wilkinson & Thelwall (2011: 387), for example, state that when using blogs, forums and social networking sites that are open to the public, 'the text authors should not be asked for consent nor informed of the participation of their texts. Normally, however, steps should be taken to ensure that text authors are anonymous in academic publications even when their texts and identities are already public'. Given this, and also the sensitive nature of some of the content that

can be found in online spaces, the blogs, forums and individual posters discussed in this paper have all been given psuedonyms, even though posters tend to use psuedonyms themselves, in order for anonymity to be preserved.

The data drawn from the blogs and forums was collected between November 2014 and June 2015. The organisation of the blogs and forums for analysis was done through the qualitative software program Nvivo, where forum and blog pages were imported and the content coded. A thematic approach was then adopted in analysing the data in order to generate a thematic description of key features across the whole data set. As Braun and Clark (2006: 83) observe, this thematic approach is particularly useful in the context of under researched areas as it can provide a detailed overview of the topic being explored. The analysis of the data utilises a social constructionist approach (Burger & Luckman, 1991; Burr, 2003) which broadly views identities as produced through social discourses (Foucault, 1988), narratives (Plummer, 1995; Squire& Tamboukou, 2013) and social interaction (Goffman, 1959), and thus as 'active, processual engagements with the social world' rather than finished 'products' (Lawler, 2014: 10).

The aim of the analysis which is presented in the following section, is to draw attention to issues of non-binary gender diversity that go beyond the surface of 'personal difference', as presented in mainstream and other popular media (discussed above). It explores the significance of generational differences in the narratives of self-recognition and identity, as produced in online forums and blogs , and draws out their implications for the development of further research. In this paper, the data is drawn from three blogs and one forum within the general sample discussed above.

Self-recognition and identity: diversity and generation in non-binary gender identity narratives

In both the mainstream media and some community based web resources, the presentation of non-binary gender experience is somewhat silent in relation to

issues of diversity. When it is referred to it tends to present diversity as rooted within and expressed through the range of different 'labels' or identity descriptors currently in use, and/or a range of otherwise personal differences and preferences. As yet, there is next to no attention given to how issues such as birth gender, ethnicity, class, age, generation, and disability may intersect with and shape non-binary gender experience. Further, information sources and media presentations offer limited discussion of the relationship between previous life experiences and identities, and the personal recognition of non-binary gender experience and identity where, for the most part, it is suggested that non-binary gender people have simply always been that way (see, for example, Hesse, 2014). While these limitations may be due to the infancy of the current non-binary gender movement, and also the general absence of older non-binary gender people within current representations and discussions, issues surrounding diversity can nonetheless be identified within many non-binary gender online spaces, such as blogs and forums. In the research informing this paper, age and generation, birth gender and previous life experience and identity were particularly visible in the data and formed significant interrelated themes. These permeated themes based on current understandings of diversity, such as non-binary gender labels and terms. To facilitate illustration of the significance of these themes, the following analytical discussion juxtaposes the accounts of younger and older non-binary gender people who post on the blogs and forums (hereafter termed 'posters'). Younger posters are defined as those in their teens up to age twenty-nine, and older posters as aged thirty and over. Of the younger posters, approximately 60% were assigned female at birth, although approximately 30% did not reveal their birth gender in their posts or profiles. In contrast, approximately 75% of the older posters could be identified as having been assigned male at birth. While the over representation of those assigned female at birth among younger posters, supports the findings of Beemyn and Rankin (2011), and the over representation of those assigned male at birth within the older groups supports the survey findings of Kuper, *et al.* (2012), this difference has not yet been qualitatively explored.

Younger posters (teens – 29): personal identity recognition

Individual and community blogs and discussion forums regularly feature personal narratives of non-binary gender identities, which typically include journeys of self recognition and self understanding. At first sight, the identity narratives of younger posters tend to mirror traditional gender binary identified trans narratives insofar as many employ well known tropes such as 'having known all along', feeling different during childhood and adolescence, and not feeling comfortable in the gender they were assigned at birth (Prosser, 1998). As one blogger, Peyton, describes:

At first, I didn't get that everyone around me was male or female. I didn't know words like "transgender" and "cisgender". I didn't know about the gender binary. But I knew I wasn't a girl or a boy … My mom, my teachers, my grandparents told me to stop being silly– everyone had to be a girl or a boy. My dad took it upon himself to teach me that women can be/do ANYTHING they want … I shut up about my gender for a few years. I tried to be a girl– not by wearing dresses and behaving in a stereotypically feminine way, but by allowing people to call me a girl, a daughter, a sister. Then I tried to be a boy. Then a girl. Then a boy. Honestly, I think I sorta buried what I knew. (Blog D, Peyton)

The stories of self-recognition, however, do have one specific difference, which typically involves the negotiation of various non-binary gender labels and terms and a concern with where the authors 'fit' within these. In many ways this is unsurprising given the attention given to these in information sources and the mainstream media and, further, as this is also reflected in 'gender questionnaires' that are posted on forums and blogs to facilitate the sharing of experience and stimulate discussion. These are adapted from similar transgender questionnaires that are also posted on transsexual/transgender forums and blogs. They are made up of a variety of open ended questions about non-binary gender identification and experience, and are designed to encourage responders to provide mini narratives

about how they define and understand their identity and also their experiences and perceptions in particular areas of their lives. Within these, questions that concern non-binary gender identification tend to focus on how the responder identifies in relation to existing labels and terms, how they understand and define the labels and how long they have identified that way. The extracts below, many of which are drawn from Blog A, which has over a hundred completed questionnaires on the site, illustrate some of the typical responses to such questions:

Calling myself gender fluid is a rather recent development in my life. I think it's been about a month now since I've adopted the label, but I've been this way as far back as I can remember. I called it different things at different points in my life, but none of the other terms felt right so I gave up trying to find words for it until recently. (Blog A, Skyler)

I have known, or at least speculated, questioned and researched, for about two years now. I sort of started out by thinking gender neutral when I didn't know much about any of the terms and identities that existed, but that still didn't completely sit right with me, and so then a little over half a year ago I came across the term gender fluid and started to read about it and I felt it fit me quite well - better than "just" gender neutral. (Blog A, Mert)

For many posters, such as Mert and Skyler above, the negotiation of labels and terms is a positive and empowering experience that enables them to exercise agency and self-determination and creates a sense of belonging. Thus, the terms and labels are positive 'cultural resources' in their ongoing constructions of the self (Plummer, 1995). Of further significance, however, is how their explicit negotiation also militates against producing an essentialist narrative of the self, which would otherwise be suggested through the trope of having 'always been' a non-binary gender person, as illustrated for example, in Skyler's narrative, 'but I've been this way as far back as I can remember'. While these narratives, then, borrow their form from conventional binary gender trans narratives - based on the notion of identity discovery, they differ in their suggestion of self determination, purposeful identity construction, and the possibility of change.

The narratives and accounts of the younger posters show that among the labels and terms used the most popular used for self-definition are genderqueer and gender fluid. However, many who use these suggest that they are used for ease, as people are familiar with them, but that they do not fully capture how they experience themselves. Many recount how due to this they have a tendency to adopt more than one term or label when describing themselves to others. Gray, for example, writes:

I can describe myself in several ways: I'm a non-girl; an androgyne; a feminine boy; an FtA or even FtM; queer or genderqueer or transmasculine. I want to look more masculine to be able to look like a feminine boy/androgyne being. I'm not a girl, but I'm not totally in the gender binary, either. (Blog A, Gray)

Here, Gray suggests that the terms and labels are somewhat slippery and so different terms may be used at different times. Others, however, decide to avoid using specific labels altogether on the grounds that they don't fully capture the sense of self they are meant to describe and because they can also be confining, as Racan explains:

I refer to myself as a non-binary trans* person. I never get more specific about it than that … For a while I was stuck on the idea of figuring out what my exact label was, I thought it would help me feel more settled in my gender and maybe less dysphoric, and I thought it would give me a sense of belonging. Now, I feel like that was a really one dimensional way of thinking about and trying to explore my gender. I'm glad I never picked one or tried to squeeze myself into one because I don't think I would have had to wrestle with my gender as much or explore it as deeply as I have. (Blog A, Racan)

Whilst many of the younger posters suggest they approach the variety of non-binary gender labels and terms positively, and enjoy their negotiation, for some this is a continuing source of discomfort and confusion. As the following extracts from Saran and Loda illustrate:

I'm having a bit of trouble putting a name on my gender. I fluctuate between female and agender quite often, so I feel that gender fluid is the best term, but everywhere

defines gender fluid as fluctuating between male and female. Is it still possible for me to use that label, or would terms like bigender or demigirl make more sense? (Blog B, Saran)

Can I be a bigender demiboy? Like, a demiboy whose other gender portion is a girl? Am I still non-binary? or maybe my other gender is engirl? I feel so unconfident in my gender identity.(Blog B, Loda)

For some, then, the broad array of identity labels under the umbrella of non-binary gender generated a sense of uncertainty in terms of self-understanding and also pressure to 'figure out' where they should place themselves. Thus, while the labels and terms can be a resource for agency and self-determination, as is viewed by many activists, this is not guaranteed for all and they can easily become restrictive, exclusionary, and sites for gender policing or other forms of social and cultural regulation (Butler, 1990). Some scholars, however, advocate an explosion or proliferation of gender categories - a move towards gender pluralism (see, for example, Bem, 1995 and Monro, 2007), in order to resolve gender inequalities and create opportunities for gender expression. This is seen as being preferable to the 'degendering' impulse within feminism and queer theory, where the aim is to deconstruct and eliminate the gender binary (Lorber, 2000). The discussion above, which shows the younger posters are committed to and/or engaged in creating multiple gender identity options, and also refusing them, suggests that the personal narratives of people with non-binary gender identities would be a useful avenue for further research in relation to existing debates, particularly as this would provide a strong empirical dimension to current discussions.

Older posters (30+): personal identity recognition

In contrast to the narratives of younger posters, where they establish their non-binary gender identities through the negotiation of current labels and terms, older posters tend to describe their journey toward personal recognition through a reconstruction of their past histories, experience of bodily and social limitations, and the possibilities for self identity that they discovered along the way. Teal, for

example recounts their particular journey at length, highlighting how they had initially identified as a binary trans woman, and the role that deep reflection and learning had played within the process of their identity shift:

Understanding, really understanding and connecting with my soul required me to unpack years of socialisation and assumptions then reassemble myself, piece by piece... In doing this I realised that I had access to all of the gendered qualities and experiences that I desired if I let go of binary thinking and an illogical need to conform or fit with the expectations of others. This was a simple but quite profound learning which has led me to passionately advocate a non-binary identity as it seems to me to provide the greatest amplitude of human experience available to any of us ... I started down the path buying into the popular story line of binary transformation, however I put down this book when I realised that I could and should write my own story. (Forum B, Teal)

For Teal, it was beginning the transition from male to female that led to their current identification as a non-binary gender person, where the process of engaging with the gender binary on a physical and psychological level led to a transformation in self understanding. Whilst the younger posters drew on the various terms and labels to actively construct their identities, Teal suggests that their process was one of deconstruction followed by reconstruction, as they 'unpacked' their previous self and then 'reassembled' themselves anew. For others, the journey towards non-binary gender recognition occurred some time after going through the full transition process. This is illustrated through the following forum post by Switch, who is questioning their current identity and writes for some feedback on their experience:

I've noticed lately a desire in myself to make sure my friends know that I'm transgender and that I transitioned from male to female ... This coincides with an increasing sense of the non-binary nature of my gender identity ... I find that I want my social contacts to be aware and to acknowledge that I used to live as a man and to understand those experiences. This also contrasts from what I hear from a lot of binary trans women who seem to need to leave the whole male experience behind them. I wonder if this interest is perhaps a way of expressing my (non-binary)

gender to the world ... Or maybe it has nothing to do with being non-binary ... Can anyone relate to all this? (Forum B, Switch)

For Switch, the experience of physically transitioning did not result in the sense of identity that they previously expected and they were currently unsure how to make sense of their emerging non-binary gender experience. However, both Switch and Teal each highlight that for them, the process of developing non-binary gender identities has not resulted from reaching inside for an internal 'essential' truth of their gender but, rather, through engaging with past experience, their physical bodies and the relationships with people around them. Significantly, their accounts also highlight how these experiences have led them to question the value of the gender binary in their aim to live fulfilling lives where they could be true to themselves rather than fitting in with the expectations of others. For many this experience, and coming to identify as non-binary post transition, is enabling them to live a more 'authentic life'. This is illustrated in the following extracts from Krupe and Rayde:

Eventually became very clear to me that to seek an authentic life is to recognise my own humanity - all of it. For decades I denied being a woman, now that I live in the body I so crave, I should discard and deny all I was before? I am more than my endocrine balance sheet. I tried to leave my male side behind when I began to transition, but it preferred that my world was not as complex as it seems to have turned out but, what are you going to do? To live authentically is to accept conditions as they are. (Forum B, Krupe)

Well my gender sense is that I am a gender fluid MAAB Non-binary who oscillates around androgyne in presentation ... I have fundamentally shifted in my understanding of my gender and in my journey. Along the way I realised that I was not MTF, managed to keep my marriage, family, friends and career together while progressively moving towards a more nuanced and honest understanding and presentation of me. (Forum B, Rayde)

For many of the older posters, particularly those who had previously transitioned, this definition of living an 'authentic' and honest life, and coming to identify as non-

binary is considered a source of tension between themselves and binary gender identified trans people. For example, many recount how some binary identified trans people see non-binary gender as inauthentic, and caused simply through a failure to 'pass', while they themselves present their non-binary post transition experience as being applicable to all trans people and more 'authentic' than trans identities formed around a binary gender identification. Lane for instance, writes:

If anyone has been born into any binary gender, then with even a short experience of that gender and the socialisation that necessarily follows, how can anyone describe themselves as binary trans. Surely you carry your experience with you even if you choose to reframe and assert a new (non birth) gender identity. If this hypothesis has merit then aren't all trans folk, by definition, therefore non binary? (Forum B, Lane)

Many of the older poster's narratives of experience either refer or allude to this issue on a regular basis and on occasions, discussions about the differences between binary and non-binary trans experiences are also initiated by forum users. This suggests that the issue of 'authenticity' and also trans community 'belonging' are significant factors in how older non-binary gender people may shape, convey and live out their identities. The extracts from Lane, Krupe and Rayde above, for example, indicate that the notion of 'authenticity' is a useful discursive resource in their reconstruction of their identities as it supports both a positive understanding and presentation of their non-binary gender identities and militates against more stigmatising images and perceptions. While discussions about trans authenticity have occurred within academic debates (see, for example, Prosser, 1998; Bornstein, 1994; Yeadon-Lee, 2009), the impact of similar discussions within trans communities in relation to both binary and non-binary articulations of identity, and also broader community relationships, is worthy of further and more detailed research.

Ways in which non-binary gender identities can be understood and viewed positively is a recurring theme within the identity narratives of the older posters. A number reflect on how the increasing visibility and activism of younger non-binary

gender people has enabled them to understand their non-binary gender identities in more positive ways, and also offer the potential for a much improved future, as suggested by Rane, Dinon and Kody:

The young generation has had it with bullying, stereotyping, conforming, bigotry and intolerance … that old way of thinking is going to become more and more distasteful, and repellant to the young people of trans that seek us, that want our advice and our wisdom, but not our rigidity … They will be open to presentations that are nonconforming, for nonconforming is in sync with their young paradynes. It will be "cool". It will be seen as courageous and daring. Not stupid and weird. (Forum B, Rane)

I was browsing blogs using keyword "non binary". Wow, there are thousands of young people out there who are non-binary, so many I couldn't see the end of the pages listed. Like a new generation of youth who aren't afraid to be themselves, and share with the world. I found it very moving, and to me exciting. I've always thought many more people had non-binary feelings than will admit it, and its nice to see the pure honesty in these young people, expressing themselves. (Forum B, Dinon)

It is nice to see young people expressing themselves. They know who they are, they don't accept the old concepts. They are making their own paths, their own version of the (community). Redefining what gender is, redefining their own freedoms of choice. (Forum B, Kody)

As these extracts illustrate, for older posters, the younger generation of non-binary gender people are viewed positively due to how they are transforming understandings and images of non-binary gender in more positive and progressive ways. They are thus seen as offering a new set of discursive resources and frameworks through which they could then also recast their identities in new ways, such as being 'cool', 'courageous', 'daring' and 'exciting'. As with the notion of 'authenticity', discussed above, this facilitates resistance to negative perceptions such as being 'stupid and weird'. The identity accounts of older non-binary people littered across the forum, together with the discourses being used within them and not least their interactional exchanges with younger non-binary people within the

forums themselves, suggest that engagement with the new understandings being propagated are also facilitating a sense of agency and the right to engage in self determination. However, for some, there is frustration that the younger generation has little appreciation of the longevity of non-binary gender experience and so tend to assume complete newness of their experiences and 'reinvent old wheels', as Sky explains:

The recorded non-binary data is always said to be slim. When in fact, it is absurdly large ... Most of the same non-binary information, though already answered on page 2+ of any number of forums, blogs, or Facebook pages, non-binary people have to restate answers more frequently. So much so that each year the new huge influx sometimes seems to bring up mostly resolved concerns. Sometimes renaming things. I was very confused when I went to other forums and found different jargon and them reinventing perspectives found elsewhere. Like genderqueer vs non-binary (androgyne) I've seen at least 15 times, repeated every year practically in some forums, blogs, and such. (Forum B, Sky)

For Sky, while the new and younger non-binary gender movement is making some positive gains it is sometimes at the expense of older generations, who have found that many of the online spaces they have engaged with over significant periods of time, and the terms or 'jargon' they have been using, are changing in ways they can not keep up with. The term 'non-binary' itself, for example, refers to experience that has previously been termed 'androgyne' in some forums and blogging spaces. The negotiation of new terms and labels under the umbrella of non-binary gender, then, is met by some with some resistance. While a few of the older posters use the terms genderqueer and gender fluid to refer to themselves, most tend to position themselves simply as having non-binary gender identities and, unlike the younger posters, do not spend time negotiating their fit with the various identity terms and labels available. Where the range of identity options are discussed they are treated by the older posters largely with bemusement, where the general consensus is that the terms and labels are confusing and unhelpful in aiding an understanding of their non-binary gender experience. Similar to the younger posters, for example, they observe was how they could 'fit' a number of terms and thus question their value:

The trouble with these terms is that so many of us fit none, some or other terms. I guess that is why I like FTX, MTX or M2ME. (Forum B, Storm)

Labels are just labels and we may identify one way one day and another way the next. Confused? Right now I'm not. I am me. Tomorrow may be different. (Forum B, Zia)

The umbrella term nonbinary fits, but genderqueer fits to, so does non-binary male to female. Anyone's head hurting? (Forum B, Rane)

For others, however, the newer terms and labels are more deeply problematic insofar as not only do they do not adequately reflect their sense of self, but they create a sense of 'outsiderness', as Lakin explains:

Sometimes I feel like sort of an imposter among non-binaries. ... For me, the non-binary part is more of a political statement and declaration of gender freedom than part of my actual identity. It's there because I recognise I deviate from the standard trans narrative in some ways, and because I often feel the outsider among groups of other MTFs. But I've never wavered in my identity as a woman. I've only wavered in my identity as an MTF, if that makes any sense. (Forum B, Lakin)

For Lakin, as for some other older posters, the new terms and labels being negotiated can feel threatening, both to their own sense of self and also to their sense of 'belonging' within the non-binary gender community. Like the younger posters, the broad array of labels and terms, then, are seen as a 'mixed blessing'. Thus, while they are seen to provide interesting discussion points, as being thought provoking, and also useful resources in understanding and describing their identities, they are also experienced as unable to fully represent their sense of selfhood and also as unnecessarily exclusionary and restrictive (Butler, 1990).

Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to stimulate new research in the area of non-binary gender identities, and draw attention to issues of non-binary gender diversity that

go beyond those presented in mainstream and other popular media. In these spaces, diversity is reduced to differences in self identification, represented through a vast array of non-binary gender identity terms and 'labels', and the dominant image of a non-binary person is that they are young, white, were assigned female at birth, are of slim build, and are androgynous and 'stylish' in their physical presentation. This paper has begun the work of addressing this issue by presenting some initial research findings drawn from a qualitative research project concerning non-binary gender identities. The findings that have been presented highlight the significance of generational differences in the narratives of self-recognition and identity that are being produced online in the context of forums and blogs.

The younger and older non-binary posters have been seen to generate different personal narratives around their journeys of self-recognition, and also their negotiation of the non-binary terms and labels currently used to indicate diversity of identity and experience. The personal narratives of younger poster's self recognition and identification as non-binary gender have been shown to mirror the form typically found within traditional binary gender trans narratives. For example, the narratives describe the experience of birth gender discomfort and some sense of being non-binary gender from an early age. However, their negotiation and use of available non-binary gender terms and labels have been seen to constitute significant discursive resources. These militated against an essentialist account of the self and also enabled the posters to turn their recognition stories into constructionist tales of self-determination, agency and belonging. However, as the discussion showed, this is not achieved by all. Many find the terms and labels confusing, creating a sense of uncertainty and a pressure to 'fit' their identities into existing categories of understanding. These findings suggest that a useful avenue for further research would be to explore non-binary gender narratives in relation to existing debates concerning gender pluralism and degendering (Bem, 2005, Monro, date; Lobber, date), particularly as this would provide a strong empirical dimension to current discussions.

Whilst the younger posters utilise the various terms and labels to engage in self determination and actively construct their identities, the older posters have been

seen to draw largely on their past histories as binary gender trans people, or as having once started a conventional binary gender transitioning process. For them, recognition of themselves as being non-binary largely came about by default rather than by design, as they had found that transitioning did not enable them fully to express who they are. The discussion has showed that for the majority of the older posters, being non-binary is a material matter, facilitated by their post transition bodies and gender histories, as well as their subjective identification. In their view, their non-binary gender experiences and identities are thus more 'authentic' than those of binary gender trans people, who they claim see non-binary gender as 'inauthentic' and simply rooted in a failure to 'pass'. The construction of 'authenticity' has been shown in the discussion to be a significant discursive resource in their narratives, aiding the construction of a positive identity, and militating against other perceptions and identity constructions that can be stigmatising. The issue of 'authenticity' as a discursive resource for identity construction would, then, be useful to explore further, particularly in relation to both binary and non-binary articulations of identity and also broader community relationships within trans communities. Other key features that have been highlighted in the discussion of older poster's narratives include how the discourses and activities of younger generations of non-binary people furnish them with additional discursive resources and interpretive frameworks through which to reconstruct their non-binary identities more positively. However, despite these favourable gains some are finding the new terminology, labels and understandings somewhat confusing and as a result can feel alienated and displaced from their communities. As in the case of the younger posters, further research into the negative as well as the more positive experiences of gender pluralism would be a fruitful avenue of research.

The significance of generation and generational relationships within non-binary communities, only lightly explored within this paper, also requires more in-depth research, and particularly in relation to birth gender. As was highlighted, in the data drawn from the forums and blogs there is a higher number of people assigned female at birth in the younger age group, and a higher number of people assigned male at birth in the older age group. While the question of whether these

characteristics are specific to online non-binary gender communities would be an interesting question to explore, a more significant line of enquiry would be to examine the intersection of generation and birth gender more fully, exploring the role of the body, age, personal history and relationships in both personal and social processes of identity construction.

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