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# Trailblazing the gender revolution? Young people's understandings of gender diversity through generation and social change

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## ABSTRACT

Against a backdrop of increasing cultural visibility of people who identify across, between or beyond the categories of male and female, young people have been positioned within the wider social imaginary as radical trailblazers for a new, progressive gender order. This paper provides original insights that empirically ground and interrogate such claims. Drawing on findings from focus group interviews held with 136 young people (aged 16–24) in the UK, the paper demonstrates how young people's understandings and narrations of gender diversity both support and contest linear progress narratives. We show how young people position their acceptance of gender diversity in contradistinction to older generations. However, this narrative of generational progress was undermined and complicated by tensions and ambiguities within young people's talk. Our findings suggest that, alongside being accepting of gender diversity, young people also experience confusion and misunderstanding which may mean that they are more comfortable with stable and binary forms of gender diversity. Moreover, some young people express ideological resistance to gender diversity, informed by wider debates around 'identity politics'. Overall, we stress the importance of situating young people's gender talk amidst multiple discursive constellations through which increasingly politicised struggles around the meanings of 'gender' are currently playing out.

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## Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a rapid discursive proliferation of gendered terms and identities across much of the Global North, with a dramatic rise in the cultural visibility of people who identify across, between or beyond the categories of male and female. *Time Magazine* declared a 'Transgender Tipping Point' in 2014, and the *Financial Times* summed up 2015 as 'Year in a word: Trans: Gender discussion becomes a fluid, "non binary" affair'. Increasing social awareness of gender diversity has been accompanied by moves towards greater legal protection for the citizenship rights of gender diverse

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people in many national contexts,<sup>1</sup> and public bodies, including educational institutions, are increasingly implementing policies recognising gender diverse students (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2018; National Education Union 2019). Counter-discourses resisting this so-called 'gender ideology' have also emerged (Butler 2019), related to the rise of the alt-right and virulent forms of anti-feminism and misogyny (Banet-Weiser 2018), but also to 'gender critical' feminism that argues that gender diversity is a threat to women's rights (Hines 2019). As Corredor (2019, 618) argues, there is currently an intense and complex 'tug-of-war [for] ontological and political control over the term "gender"'.

Young people have been especially implicated in these debates, interpellated within media and public discourse as trailblazers for 'radical' change in how gender is understood and lived. Western media outlets regularly pronounce that young people are rejecting traditional gender labels (The Guardian 2016) and leading a 'Gender Revolution' (National Geographic 2017), with the embrace of non-binary gender identities by celebrities such as Miley Cyrus and Sam Smith cited as evidence of greater openness among younger generations (Ritschel 2020). Such claims are not completely unfounded. Recent academic work suggests that traditional gender identities and expressions are being less rigidly experienced by young people in the West. In interviews with US college students aged 18–30, Risman (2017, 2018) argues that what seems to be new about this generation is the significant amount of young people who 'reject not only the cultural meanings of gendered selves at the individual level but the assumption that sex and gender need to be correlated at all' (2017, 225). It is these 'gender rebels' that Risman calls a uniquely 'Millennial phenomenon', although she highlights that many young people also held more traditional views or had more pragmatic and ambivalent orientations, effectively 'straddling' different understandings of gender.

In England, research by Renold et al. (2017) also indicate a shift in how young people think and talk about gender, including an expanded vocabulary and greater awareness of non-traditional gender identities. In their research with teenagers (aged 13–19), they note how a commitment to gender diversity and the rights of sexual minorities was an important part of young people's identities. However, they also found that despite expressing these ideals, young people's everyday experiences continued to be characterised by regulatory gender norms and a rigid gender binary. As such, their research 'emphasise[s] both change *and* continuity of how gender mediates children and young people's lives and experiences' (2017, 39). Indeed, scholarship has long demonstrated how young people's gendered subjectivities are constrained and shaped by power relations circulating within different spaces and communities, and the ways in which adherence to (and transgression of) gendered norms are actively policed (Hall 2020; Nayak and Kehily 2008; Renold 2005, Paechter 2012). This body of literature also identifies how factors such as class, ethnicity, religion and place mediate these processes (Archer 2003; Ward et al. 2017; Ingram 2018; Paechter 2007; Roberts 2018). Moreover, there is evidence demonstrating the continued prevalence of transphobia, including within schools (Stonewall 2017).

In complicating claims of a 'liberation' of young people from hegemonic gender norms, this scholarship echoes arguments made elsewhere in the field of youth studies that there is a tendency for young people to be romanticised within the wider social imagination as revolutionary 'agents of change' (Threadgold 2019, 7; see also Miles 2015). Whilst this is traditionally manifest in a preoccupation with young people's engagement with politics and protest, we can also see how the figuring of youth as vanguards of social change is

present in current discussions in which young people are positioned as ‘trailblazers’ of changing – and more progressive – attitudes towards, and practices of, gender.

Altogether this scholarship suggests that celebratory pronouncements of young people’s gender radicalism demand both caution and further exploration. Taking this as its starting point, this paper draws on focus group data with young people in the UK to explore how participants understand and negotiate wider discourses of gender diversity and social change. In doing so it extends recent research exploring young people’s engagement with wider debates around gender diversity conducted in different national contexts and using different methods (Risman 2018) and with a much younger cohort (Renold et al 2017). Whilst our findings demonstrate the central presence of discourse of generational change in young people’s accounts, we also identify contradictions and tensions which are obscured by romanticised notions of youth’s radicalism, a key contribution of this paper. We also argue for the importance of situating young people’s gender talk within multiple discursive constellations through which struggles around the meanings of ‘gender’ are currently playing out. Before presenting our analysis, we introduce the study.

## Methods

This paper emerges from the ESRC-funded project ‘Living Gender in Diverse Times’. The project explores how young people (aged 16–24) across the UK experience, express and understand ‘gender’ amidst the rapid discursive proliferation of gendered terms and identities. We draw upon data collected through 19 focus groups (total participants  $n = 136$ ) during 2018–2019. Focus groups were deployed as a way of exploring how meanings around ‘gender’ come to be formed in and through group interaction (rather than solely through individual accounts) (Morgan 1997; Allen et al. 2015).

Focus groups were held in five locations throughout the UK: South-East England ( $n = 3$ ), North-West England ( $n = 5$ ), Yorkshire and the Humber ( $n = 3$ ), Scotland ( $n = 4$ ) and Wales ( $n = 4$ ). Recruiting through a range of institutional settings, focus groups were comprised of a mix of university groups ( $n = 3$ ), youth groups ( $n = 6$ ), sixth form groups ( $n = 3$ ) and further education college groups ( $n = 6$ ). These encompassed young people in both rural and urban locations, young people from across the socioeconomic spectrum, disabled young people, and black and ethnic minority youth.

The focus groups varied in size, with an average of seven participants per group, and all lasted for around one hour. In most cases, participants were already known to each other. The focus groups loosely followed a topic guide of general questions and discussion topics. In addition, we used question cards (Figure 1) as prompts for further discussion

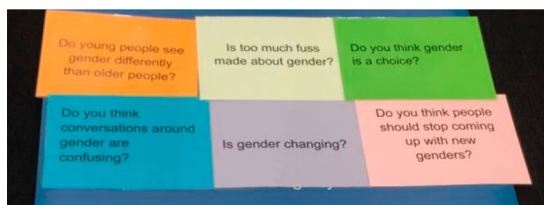


Figure 1. Question cards.

which included questions relating to current debates around gender diversity. All participants chose their own pseudonyms.

Focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed and coded thematically. Drawing on a critical feminist, poststructuralist approach to discourse concerned the operation of power in everyday sense-making (Gill 1996), our analysis sought to identify key patterns within and across focus groups. Broad themes were identified and then subject to a much more fine-grained analysis, including identifying common interpretive repertoires (Potter and Weatherall 1987). These can be understood as 'a recognisable routine of arguments, descriptions and evaluations distinguished by familiar clichés, common places, tropes and characterisations of actors and situations' (Edley and Wetherell 2001, 443) that are repeated across the data.

The theme of 'generations' emerged strongly across the data set. Within this, we identified four interpretive repertoires (IR) in young people's talk through which assertions of generational difference in regard to gender diversity were reproduced, complicated or resisted. These structure the remainder of this paper. We begin by exploring how generational difference and social change emerged as a key locus for young people making sense of gender diversity. This manifest in the IR of young people as progressive and accepting. We then examine three IRs in young people's talk that express different kinds of ambiguity or resistance to gender diversity, and discuss how these complicated narratives of generational progress. The IRs discussed here were found across the diversity of focus groups – so, for example, we found similar discourses in a private all-boys sixth form college as in a youth group for socio-economically 'disadvantaged' youth. Therefore, in this paper, our analysis does not extend to 'race', gender, class, geographical or age differences between participants, although we do of course see value in this as a site for future exploration. We also acknowledge that the specific research context of the focus group setting likely played a part in muting these differences, shaping what was deemed permissible to say amongst peers (Allen et al. 2015).

Epistemologically, we have tried to retain a sense of the *interactivity* of the focus groups in our analysis and presentation of the data, (Morgan 1997). We view young people's 'talk' not simply as straightforward 'facts' about how they understand and experience gender diversity, but as actively shaped by the discursive environments in which they are located. This includes not only families, peer groups, institutions and the media, but an increasingly politicised climate of discussions around gender and identity, where, as discussed above, there is both cultural visibility and seeming permissibility of gender diversity *and* simultaneous resistance to this.

### ***Generational difference and narratives of progress: youth as progressive***

One of the common interpretive repertoires that emerged in focus groups was that of generational difference, whereby young people often positioned themselves in contradistinction with older generations: namely as a more progressive and accepting generation. It is important to state that discussions around generation were not always or necessarily 'naturally occurring', but were sometimes informed by the prompt cards (Figure 1). One card ('Do young people see gender differently to older people') generated significant discussion and consensus, at least initially. This was often identified by participants as presenting the most straightforward answer ('That one seemed like quite a simple answer,

I feel like yeah they do' – Fiona, 22, Wales), with generational differences in attitudes to gender taking on a status of 'common-sense'.

Participants commonly positioned themselves, and younger generations in general, as more liberal, 'open-minded' and accepting of gender diversity. In contrast, older generations were commonly described as holding 'traditional', 'conservative' or 'backward' outlooks. In the extract below, Grace B's assertion that young people do not care about gender ('you are who you are') is reinforced by Clara:

**GRACE B (16):** Younger generations we don't really care, we're like 'you are who you are ...'

**CLARA (17):** Yeah if someone said 'I'm trans' I'd brush it off, but my grandad would think about it more ...

(South-East)

In another focus group, below, participants made similar distinctions, with Zach referring to a 'stark divide' between an 'old mindset' and 'newer' generations who are 'very pro gender neutral'. Jenny uses extreme case formulations (Pomerantz 1986; Potter 1996) to strengthen her claim of generational tolerance, whereby non-normative gender identities are as accepted by younger people as being an alien or a unicorn:

**ZACH (18):** Today I saw a [Facebook] post it was a mother saying that she just had a son and if her son ever asked to dress up in female clothes ... that it was not happening, she wouldn't let him do it. I just looked through the comments and there is a very stark divide between people who are very pro that, saying 'yes, you have a son you want them to grow up a son.' That's your old mindset. And then there's the newer generations who are very pro gender neutral, 'let them be what they want to be'.

**JENNY(16):** I feel like the older generation doesn't like to hear about it as much. We don't really care. Like if you want to be an alien, then be an alien or a unicorn. But older people they just don't get along with that.

(Yorkshire and Humber)

These responses reflect a liberal humanist position, common across the data set, in which individuality and choice regarding gender identity was emphasised and – at least on the surface – celebrated. Similar to research by Renold et al. (2017), notions of generational difference were often narrated through a discourse of linear progress. In this sense, participants' accounts initially echoed the broader cultural narratives around youth discussed at the start of this paper. These also reflect the ways in which youth have historically come to stand for modernity, futurity and progressive social change (Harris 2004; Miles 2015; Threadgold 2019).

It is important to stress that participants were generally sympathetic towards, and defensive of, older generations. Many keenly asserted that older people's views were borne of naivety and limited experience, rather than intolerance. Below, Kjartan defends his mothers' views as stemming from a lack of exposure, rather than 'malevolence' towards non-normative gender identities:

**KJARTAN (16):** My mum, she doesn't really understand about transgender. Why would she be? She doesn't [*sic*] have any exposure in her childhood ... it's always been the binary idea for her ... it's not really her being malevolent towards the community, it's just a lack of understanding.

(North-West)



Participants commonly explained generational differences as emerging from both changing cultural norms around gender and sexuality, and to greater cultural visibility of different genders. Popular culture and social media were frequently identified as providing young people with cultural resources that were not available to older generations:

- MARK (18):** Yeah, I think a lot of young people are more kind of open to understanding and accepting, like, what other genders, and stuff like that. Whereas I feel older people are kind of a wee bit more old-fashioned, and aren't ...
- INTERVIEWER:** Yeah. Is that everyone else's kind of experience?
- NIKKI (23):** I think it's more of like a lack of information than anything else. Because I think we've grown up with social media, the internet, stuff on TV, we've grown up with kind of like, okay, it is normal, and there are lots of different genders. Whereas, older generation, they don't have that sort of ...
- SARA (19):** They just have a female and a male.
- NIKKI:** Yeah, they don't have the benefit of, like, having those conversations, and growing up around different types of people. So, I don't think it's necessarily their fault, and I think they do get a lot of, like, stick for not being, like, open. But I think it's more like, that the information is just not out there enough for them.

(Scotland)

This relational production of themselves (and other young people) as knowledgeable and tolerant of gender diversity worked not only through positioning themselves as distinct from older generations but also to young children. In these instances, the figure of 'the child' emerged as one who lacks the maturity to understand emerging vocabularies and expressions around gender, and thus may be confused by them. Moreover, whilst social media and celebrity culture were generally seen to facilitate awareness and tolerance of non-normative gender identities, some participants saw this as presenting risks to younger children:

- INTERVIEWER:** What do you think about celebrities doing this, being more fluid with gender or being non-binary and saying these things. What do you think about that?
- DORRIS (16):** It's good in a way. Because people who genuinely feel like transgender kids and stuff, have someone to look up to and stuff like that ... [but] then it could be a bad thing because they could be making people think, "Well, I should be like this. I should be different," if they're not wanting to be like that. Because children tend to look up to celebrities and copy stuff that they do. If they're a man wanted to be a woman, but the child didn't, it might make them think, "Oh, I have to do that," something like that.
- NATASHA (16):** Yeah. I think that's what's made it a lot more common these days, because people get influenced by famous people's behaviour.

(Wales)

This discourse of childhood susceptibility echoes other research whereby young people position themselves as mature and critical consumers of media through locating younger children as vulnerable to (negative) influence (Mendick et al. 2018).

While most participants constructed their generation as more progressive and tolerant than older generations, in a few instances this was contested, or at least tempered, by assertions of a lack of tolerance or understanding among the young. For example, Damien (North West) stated, 'I think young people are more responsive to change and



more open to like gender revolution type thing ... But I still think there are some people from less liberal viewpoints'. Similar caveats were made in another focus group of university students. In the excerpt below Amanda initially challenges the notion of clearly demarcated, generation-based attitudes, stating that 'liberal' views are not 'exclusive to our generation'. Yet we also see generational framings reinstated through a discourse of social progress:

**AMANDA (23):** But also I think in terms of generational shifts between young people being liberal and old people conservative, I don't think that's exclusive to our generation, I think young people are always more liberal and become more conservative as we get older. So a lot of young people today that are viewed as liberal will be viewed as conservative later on. I've seen things in terms of stuff like cousin marriage and stuff, which I find kind of disgusting, but I imagine in 50 years it'll probably be accepted.  
(Yorkshire and Humber)

Thus whilst participants initially celebrated the principle of people being able to identify between, across and beyond the gender binary, this belied important tensions and contradictions. As we go on to discuss, claims of acceptance and tolerance were undermined by instances of confusion surrounding gender and, in some cases, an inability to recognise gender diverse subjectivities.

### *Misunderstanding in new gendered landscapes: gender diversity as confusing*

Despite participants' discursive positioning of older generations as less tolerant or knowledgeable of gender diversity, young people themselves often expressed confusion around the proliferation of terms and categories surrounding gender. In some focus groups, young people directly sought clarification from the researchers regarding the meaning of particular terms (typically those denoting subjectivities outwith the binary, such as 'non-binary', 'gender queer' or 'gender fluid'). More often, they directed these questions to their peers, as in this exchange:

**MAKENA (16):** What's non-binary?

**JOHN B (16):** You don't identify as anything.

**GAVIN (19):** So if you use pronouns, like them, they

(North-West)

However, in some instances, the young people turned to technology to help clarify their confusion:

**ZHARAH (16):** Mate, could you search up ... I don't know what inter-sex means.

**CLARA (17):** [searching on her phone] Okay, well, okay so in terms of gender, so there's ... oh my God I get so confused [...] Okay, there's inter-sex, hermaphrodite, gender-neutral-

**GRACE B (16):** Hermaphrodite means you're both doesn't it?

(South-East)

Young people's confusion came into particularly sharp relief when we discussed Facebook's decision in 2014 to give users extensive options (currently around 72) when selecting their gender. This was often met by disbelief and astonishment:

- BROWN LIGHTNING (23):** 72 genders!
- MHAIRI (24):** I know, that's mental.
- AILSA (17):** I was thinking that, like, how is that possible.
- MHAIRI:** As long as they can back up what the gender is, and like, explain it to somebody. Cannae just go about pulling oot genders fae fresh air!

(Scotland)

Here Mhairi's initial disbelief gives way to an assertion that if all of these genders can be properly 'justified', then she would be more willing to countenance it. However, the consensus in the focus group shifts as Ruaridh and Green Brigade join in, insisting on the fundamental validity of self-identification and the necessity of educating oneself:

- RUARIDH (24):** Yeah, but obviously, if there's 72 genders out there, then that's what there is.
- MHAIRI:** That's what there is.
- RUARIDH:** You can't exactly say somebody isn't something, you know.
- GREEN BRIGADE (16):** Like, it might be mind-boggling, or like hard to get yer mind roon, there is 72 genders. But there is, there's a reason behind every one of them. And if you like, get to know them, then I'm sure it wouldn't be that confusing.

In other focus groups, the sense of disbelief and confusion remained unresolved:

- MISS (21):** I'm thinking of publishing a dictionary. I think I'd become a millionaire for all these different terms.
- SAUL (18):** I think you would make millions to be honest. For instance, for myself ... I'm confused. I'm being as abrupt as I can. I'm confused. I don't understand. I can understand people being transgender but I don't understand how in a sense. It may seem to some people that you're a big ignorant but it's not. It's just I don't understand where this is coming from, and where this is generated from. I think it also comes back to knowledge and education because they've just been sprung up with not any education around it. Sometimes they're expecting people to just understand on the spot. They don't. It takes human beings time to understand.
- MISS:** I remember my friends saying ... so when they went to first year uni they were very taken by ... they would pretend they knew what they meant ...
- INTERVIEWER:** How would people pretend to know?
- MISS:** If I say "Oh, I'm non binary." I have no clue what that means. I have absolutely no idea. I hear people going "Oh yeah, yeah, one of my other friends is like that as well." They'll babble on for a bit then they'll go "Oh wait, I've actually no clue." [...]
- SAUL:** I would 100% agree with that.

(Scotland)

Here, Saul positions his confusion as distinct from 'ignorance' – he shows an understanding and awareness of gender diversity ('I can understand people *being* transgender') but admits he still struggles to make sense of it ('I don't understand *how* ... I don't understand where this is generated from'). Being 'aware' and yet still experiencing confusion was expressed by other participants, such as Kjartan (North-West) who said: 'I respect and understand there are people like that. I just didn't understand how it works. ... but I respect if that's the decision they want to make'.

This sense of confusion was often related to what participants see as the recent and rapid discursive proliferation of terms and concepts related to gender diversity. Just as Saul (above) spoke of how ‘they’ve just sprung up’, Andy (aged 17, South-East), said ‘it’s just exploded’ and ‘I just think the impact of it is just happening all at once’. In the above extract, Miss used humour to mark her own confusion as not unique, joking that a dictionary of gender terminology would be popular. There is suggestion of a performance of understanding here – young people may feel pressure to appear *au fait* with the ‘right’ terminology, particularly in settings such as universities. However, we see how cracks and fissures often appear in these performances, as young people struggle to articulate exactly what these terms might mean.

Importantly, in most cases the confusion young people expressed about gender diversity was not accompanied by *hostility* towards it. Whilst some participants voiced annoyance at the idea of having to ‘learn’ new gender terms, they often took responsibility for ‘not knowing enough’ and expressed concern around this. For example, Alya (aged 19, Wales) said: ‘I genuinely cannot understand that there’s 72, *like I understand that obviously I don’t know enough*, but I can’t get my head around that’. Similarly, Clara (aged 17, South-East) said ‘like I don’t know non-binary and all that stuff because I don’t have enough of an understanding, so I don’t wanna come across as ignorant, and like offend someone’. This level of self-responsibilisation for ‘getting it right’ was not expected of older generations; perhaps due to the ways in which participants saw themselves as having a multitude of cultural resources available to them that older generations did not. This quote from Clara also points to how young people’s confusion was also closely linked to an anxiety around hurting someone’s feelings by getting things wrong. Whilst, as we discuss below, the issue of causing offence around gender was a fraught one, more often, participants expressed genuine concern that they would cause distress to someone else due to their own confusion.

### *Resisting gender diversity: biological determinism and the gender binary*

A minority of participants appeared more resistant to the idea of gender diversity. One way this manifest was through the assertion of a gender binary, although these tended to remain ‘outlier’ voices and were unable to garner consensus within the groups. For example Rafay (aged 16, South-East) very firmly asserted there was only ‘male’ and ‘female’, but was aware how contentious this view was: ‘Like if you say that there’s only two genders, and you know you’re right, or like there’s only two sexes, the other persons gonna get offended, when you’re just speaking through facts and you know biology.’ Rafay’s contributions tended to be met with silence or shared looks amongst some of the other participants, some of whom identified as non-binary.

Other young people held firm to a binary understanding of gender, but were able to accommodate trans people within this. This view tended to garner more consensus, as in this extract below:

**KATHRYN (16):** I think that there’s two genders and that’s it. But people think that there’s different types of genders but I think you’re either male or female and if you want to ... Like if you feel like you’re a female inside then, fair enough, you can be transgender but you’re either a girl or a boy.

**AINSLEY (17):** I agree with that.

**JENNY (16):** Yeah, I agree.

(Yorkshire and Humber)

Here Kathryn is able to reinforce a binary gender system, yet still be 'inclusive' of transgender people provided they clearly fit into one box or another. The necessity of being *one thing or the other* came up even more explicitly in some groups, such as in this discussion, where the idea of gender fluidity was met with scorn:

**JACQUES (16):** Gender fluid is stupid, like you can't wake up one day, like, I fancy being a woman today. The next day, no, now I'm a man [...] you can't do that, that's ridiculous.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay, I'm sensing ... Does everybody agree with that?

[multiple assenting voices]

**JACQUES:** Yeah, I just don't understand how you could wake up one morning and be like ... Like I get why you can't be bothered doing your make-up and all that, but I never fancy being a man today. I think it's stupid that people think they can just change gender and their name day to day. It's ridiculous.

(Wales)

Here, Jacques being unable to personally relate to gender fluidity leads to her asserting that it is 'stupid' and 'ridiculous'. Gender fluidity is seen as something frivolous (a decision made on a whim), yet also seen as taking something understandable (not wanting to do your make-up) 'too far' by turning that into a new gender subjectivity. This mirrors a common thread in 'gender critical' feminist discourse – where gender diverse subjectivities are trivialised or diminished through framing them as overly-extreme (and sometimes pathological) responses to restrictive gender norms (e.g. Jeffreys 2014).

Binary gender was also reinforced through insisting on the necessity of a 'full' 'sex change' (meaning genital surgery). For example, in the following extract, Barry (aged 17, North-West) indicates her acceptance of trans people was contingent on them undergoing a very particular kind of medical transition:

**BARRY:** I accept people if they've like had a sex change and then identify as the opposite sex. If you've got a sex change then that's what you are. I'll accept you for that but if you haven't had a sex change and you say you've got a female that hasn't had a sex change and they're identifying as a man, you're a female.

This reflects a common discourse where to be 'properly' trans (and therefore to be 'acceptable') requires a particular level of surgical intervention (Pearce 2018). However, the notion that a 'sex change' is a thing that is possible was contested almost immediately by John A, who asserts the importance of 'biology':

**JOHN A (17):** You can change it but I feel like you are still ... Say I was a man and I wanted to change to a woman. I was born as a man so whether or not I've changed it.

**GEORGE B (17):** You're not though.

**JOHN A:** No but you feel like you're a woman, which is fair enough, but I feel at the same time you was born a man. Obviously say you've changed, fair enough you're a woman, but you was born with a penis so you still, whether its gone now ... you were still born as a man.

**GEORGE B:** Those that have the sex change class themselves as what they are after they got it so you can't really say that they're a man. You're not going to contradict them.

(North-West)

Here, John A reinforces binary gender to an even greater extent by reproducing discourses around the fundamental immutability of 'natal sex', although we can also see traces of his discomfort here, as evident in his small concessions ('fair enough'). However, we can also see how George B immediately challenges John A by affirming the even greater immutability and legitimacy of self-identification. This mirrors Ruaridh's challenge that we saw in the previous section, highlighting self-identification as an important discursive strategy young people have to draw upon.

Some participants also showed resistance to gender diversity by suggesting it was merely a fashion trend. For example:

**HAZEL B (21):** It's becoming more of a like ... it might not be, it's just my opinion, but I see it more as more like a label for them, more like a fashion accessory type thing, like oh, I am this, I am that, just to be different.

**LOTUS (20):** Like I'm special, kind of thing.

**EMILY (19):** And put it on their social media.

(Wales)

Interestingly, gender diversity is presented both as 'fashion' (implying homogeneity) but also a desire to be 'different'. These are not necessarily incompatible impulses if we understand pressures (particularly on social media platforms, as Emily suggests) to cultivate 'unique' personal brands. In either case, doubt is cast on the 'authenticity' of those with gender diverse subjectivities; positioned as influenced by societal factors, and by implication, less 'real'. This 'gender as fashion' was seen to be 'getting out of hand':

**HAZEL B:** To me it's a bit over the top. I get like there's female, male, trans, like non-binary, I accept that, I live with that [...] but then when I'm seeing long lists, I'm just like, it's getting to a point now where I'm like, there's not that need, like I don't feel like it's needed.

Similar 'acceptable limits' to gender diversity were emphasised in other groups as participants attempted to restrict what they saw as the unnecessary proliferation of labels and terms. This exchange exemplified many of these discussions:

**DORRIS (16):** I think transgender is becoming, like, normal, because, like, if you want to change you can and there's nothing wrong with it, if it's genuinely something you really want to do. But there's some that are just ...

**JANE (17):** There's just getting too many of them and it's getting out of hand.

**DORRIS:** Yeah, people seem to be coming up with new ones all the time.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay, so perhaps transgender is more acceptable now or ...  
[multiple assenting voices]

**DORRIS:** There should be, like, transgender added and stuff, so, like, a few.

**JACQUES:** I couldn't imagine there would be more than five. I can't think of any more than five.

(Wales)

Here, and across the focus groups ‘transgender’ (or more accurately, a particular understanding of transgender) was generally permitted as an acceptable addition to the list as it was seen as something ‘genuine’ – as opposed to gender subjectivities that were more fluid, less binary or less familiar.

### *Identity politics and hierarchies of ‘need’: gender as ‘frivolous’*

In this final section, we explore the theme of frivolity that emerged in some focus groups, where gender identity and diversity were constructed as trivial concerns. This repertoire manifested itself in different ways, but with the same effect: that of marginalising gender as an important aspect of identity and political claim-making.

One of the main means by which this was expressed was through associating matters of gender identity with privilege. In one focus group of university students, participants referenced Abraham Maslow’s (1954) ‘Hierarchy of Needs’ – a psychological theory of five basic human needs (physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation). According to this model, often presented in a pyramid, certain needs need to be satisfied first before moving to ‘higher’ pursuits (such as ‘self-actualisation’). Maslow’s model has been heavily criticised (Rose 1999). Yet here it operates as a device through which to position gender identity as part of Maslow’s self-actualisation, and thus something one could worry about only once more fundamental needs were met:

- SINEAD (24):** So it’s like the more your needs are met, the more you can worry about your identity.
- JEFF (18):** Yeah, it’s kind of like- from the hierarchy of something like, I don’t know what was ...
- INTERVIEWER:** Maslow’s hierarchy?
- SINEAD:** Maslow’s triangle.
- JEFF:** Yeah because now practically most of our needs are already met. And everyone gets food, and shelter, and at least able to find relationships.
- MARIO (19):** You always hear about this position, as in it’s something bad, as “Oh people are living too good, that’s why they’re sort of thinking about gender.” ... I think it’s a very weird perspective. Because people think that having all of their needs met is somehow bad. And you should instead go find some more needs to meet, instead of reflect[ing] on yourself.
- SELINA (21):** No, I think it’s more complicated than that ... It’s definitely a western privilege to have all of this possible. Like the rise of identity politics is not the same in Lebanon, or whatever, in Sub Saharan African. You don’t have this, you can’t just identify as non-binary and have people call you a different pronoun ... it does have to do with our needs being met. It doesn’t mean that is a bad thing, it just means that this is the reason this is happening. Do you not agree?
- MARIO:** Sure, yeah. I also think there is too much fuss about gender in the sense that ... I think there certainly exists some people who sort of clutter up and make too much fuss about gender.

(Yorkshire and Humber)

There is notable contestation between participants, with Mario challenging the idea that self-reflection is not worthwhile. Selina asserts that ‘it doesn’t mean it’s a bad thing’, suggesting a level of agreement. However, we also see how matters of identity become collapsed into ‘identity politics’, itself constructed as a ‘Western privilege’ that is not available to all. Mario concedes saying that some people ‘make too much fuss

about gender' (echoing sentiments discussed earlier in which gender diverse subjectivities were viewed sceptically) and consensus is thus reinstated.

This repertoire arose in another focus group with quite a different demographic make-up (young people not in education, work or training). Even more explicit here was the sense that debates around gender identity were unique to Western, Anglo-American societies that were at the end of an evolutionary trajectory. However this wasn't necessarily seen as positive or progressive but was underlined by a sense of dismay:

**CHRIS (24):** We've raced ahead. We were already way more evolved than like most of the world, that's just a fact. Now we've taken this extra jump forward and the rest of them are just kind of looking at us like are they for real, do they actually believe this stuff?

(Scotland)

Not only does the universalising of access to 'basic needs' in the West negate the significant incidence of food poverty and homelessness in countries such as the UK (Trussell Trust 2019; Shelter 2018), these statements also deny the presence of trans and gender diverse identities and politics in the Majority World (e.g. Tabengwa and Nicol 2013; Munhazim 2019), thereby serving as colonising discourses themselves. The rhetorical effect of mobilising these discourses of human need is that the right to claim non-binary identities (or expect that others will respect your pronouns) becomes constructed as a luxurious excess borne of Western privilege.

In another focus group composed of a diverse mix of working- and middle-class young people, the repertoire of gender as frivolous emerged in a somewhat different way. These participants were much more attuned to the fact that poverty and homelessness were still rife in the UK. Indeed, for these young people important and basic needs *were* actually going unmet. However, they were concerned that the current focus on gender identity was distracting from this. One participant, Salvador – who spoke frequently about wealth inequality – claimed that gender was 'really, really trivial', and suggested that discussions around 'safe spaces' and the Gender Recognition Act were covering up the violence of austerity:

**SALVADOR (16):** Talking about gender, I just feel by slapping a label on yourself and trying to ... I mean, people who feel insignificant in the eyes of society sometimes do that to gain awareness, in my opinion, and it takes away from bigger problems, I'm not saying it isn't a problem and people don't feel like they're heard and people don't agree with these labels, obviously that's a problem and that's something that we need to fix, but at this point in time trying to fix those problems before perhaps bigger problems that affect more people is less of an issue. I'm perfectly okay to have this conversation down the line when world poverty is fixed and when everybody gets three decent meals a day, then we can discuss what gender people define themselves as, but at this point in time there are a lot more important things that the government need to focus on, not taking away from the importance of somebody feeling comfortable ... I just feel like, so far gender is really, really, trivial and I feel like it's quite insulting to some people in poverty, that you're focusing on putting safe spaces for people but they can't even get a meal on the table ... There's a Gender Recognition Act going on, and that covers up austerity and things that the government at this moment in time are doing to actually deepen poverty.

(South-East)



For Salvador, conversations around gender recognition and identity are not completely unimportant but can be had only once people had enough food to eat. Thinking about gender is thus positioned not simply as a luxury but a troubling diversion from 'more important' matters. We argue that the rhetorical strategies enacted by Salvador and other participants must be understood within a wider context – signalled earlier – in which gender has become increasingly politicised. This coincides with a broader scepticism towards so-called 'identity politics', not only from the Right but also by parts of the Left, where gender, race, disability and sexuality are constructed as extraneous distractions from the 'real struggle' against class-based injustice (Basell and Emejulu 2017). Attention to how resistance to gender diversity is manifest in communities across the political spectrum is essential to understanding the broader discursive landscape in which young people's gender talk takes place.

## Conclusion

As other youth scholars have argued, young people are often positioned within media and public discourse (and sometimes within Youth Studies) as revolutionary figures and progressive agents of social change (Miles 2015; Threadgold 2019). Whilst this often manifests in relation to protest and social movements, more recently such framings of youth have emerged in wider conversations about gender diversity. Youth are increasingly interpellated as radical 'trailblazers' for an apparently new and expansive gender order. Analysing data from focus groups with 136 young people in the UK, this paper provides original insights that empirically ground and interrogate such claims. In analysing young people's talk, we have called attention to the tensions and contradictions that emerge as young people both construct and complicate narratives of generational progress and social change in how gender is practiced and understood.

We have shown that young people do, in many ways, express tolerant and open attitudes towards gender diversity and commitments to autonomy and self-determination. This is expressed through assertions of generational difference and progressive temporality, as young people see themselves as *distinct* from older generations in their beliefs about, and attitudes towards, gender. However, we have also demonstrated how young people's talk is threaded through with confusion and misunderstanding, as the veneer of 'acceptance' does not always translate into confidence about what new terms and identities mean or how they work in practice. Further, our findings show that particular expressions of diversity – namely binary, medicalised, and 'stable' trans subjectivities – garner more acceptability than those that are more fluid and which trouble the man/woman dichotomy. A small proportion of young people had some 'ideological' resistance to gender diversity in that it was informed by politicised sentiment – although notably, their objections were not necessarily to gender diversity in and of itself, but to the suggestion that it be prioritised over things perceived as more pressing. We also highlighted that such resistance does not only come from the Right, but can be moored in the seemingly 'socially progressive' discourses of the Left.

By locating the repertoires drawn on by participants in a broader context, our analysis emphasises how young people's talk about gender must be viewed as both reflecting and constituting a proliferation of discourses around gender diversity, some of which may be diametrically opposed. Young people's gender talk should also be seen as shaped by (and

shaping) wider discourses, particularly those embedded in neoliberal and consumerist constructions of the individual. The participants in our study held a deep commitment to self-actualisation as a fundamental right, and whilst this reflects a laudable principle of liberal humanism, the imperative to 'be who you are' cannot be divorced from the need to produce and account for an 'authentic' individual self under neoliberal governmentality, and to 'self-responsibilise' accordingly (Anderson 2018). We have also seen how 'progressive' ideas have proven co-optable by capital and incorporated into the status quo (Banet-Wesier 2018).

We stress the need to reject positivist interpretations of our data not least because, currently, the stakes are high: whilst much progress has been made with regards to citizenship rights around gender and sexual diversity, we are mindful of backlashes and retreats on both a global and national level, as conservative forces coalesce and mobilise against gender justice. As Threadgold (2019) has argued, the 'figure of youth' can easily be 'invoked as an affective proxy for the future, a figure of hope' as 'there is a moral imperative that if young people are 'good', then the future will be 'good'' (2019: 8). We are conscious of the ways in which research with young people such as this may be mobilised in particular directions by actors with very different conceptions of what a 'good future' may be; either to argue that young people are not drinking the 'kool aid' of 'gender ideology', as often suggested by those arguing from a gender critical feminist perspective or conversely, that the 'kids are alright' and that we are moving to a future in which gender non-conformity becomes not only acceptable but unremarkable.

We ourselves are not neutral actors in these debates: as youth scholars we have an explicit political commitments to gender equality and trans rights. As a team, we have struggled with how to present the data in a way that is ethical and with integrity, but ultimately must stress that young people, like us all, are situated in a historical epoch in which established ideas about gender and personhood are rubbing against not new but *newly-visible* subjectivities and ways of knowing and being. It is perhaps thus no surprise that young people conceive of their generation as unique with regards to gender diversity – but also that tensions and sticking points characterise their narratives, as they find themselves having to navigate the confluence of diverse, contradictory and highly-politicised gender currents.

## Note

1. We recognise, however, that these citizenship rights remain precarious and incomplete, as for example, in the UK, the Conservative government has recently rejected calls to issue Gender Recognition certificates on the basis of self-identification instead of medical diagnosis (BBC, 2020). We also acknowledge that in many parts of the world, gender diversity is defacto or outright criminalized (ILGA, 2019).

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