Subverting transphobia and challenging ignorance: The interactive construction of resistant identity in a community of practice of transgender youth

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, I present two moments of interaction emerging from a focus group between young people who are members of a community of practice: a support group for transgender youth and their parents. Using discourse analysis, I demonstrate how the young people work collaboratively to construct a mutual identity which foregrounds their shared experience of transgender issues and minimises differences between them. I argue that they do this to actively challenge and resist the discrimination they experience due to transphobia and ignorance, which includes attempts to ‘other’ them. I show how the young people ascribe themselves agency by subverting the heteronormative ideologies which inform this othering, thus constructing an active, resistant, and validated mutual identity rather than a victimised, submissive, or othered one. This identity work tells us much about the hugely important role played by support groups in helping young people to construct a positive persona in the face of transphobic discrimination.

KEYWORDS: community of practice; transgender; youth; identity; transphobia

INTRODUCTION
This paper adds to the growing body of research using discourse analysis to explore transgender identity by focusing on the interactive construction of identity amongst British trans youth – those whose gender identity does not match that assigned to them at birth. I take here what Cameron (2005) refers to as a postmodern approach to the study of language and gender; in line with the aims of queer linguistics and following Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity, I focus not on locating differences between those of different genders but instead on how gender is constructed as a social identity. To do this, I engage here in discourse analysis of a community of practice (CoP) of trans youth’s interaction, revealing how they produce a shared sense of identity through their talk and providing evidence of the salience of transphobia and the impact it can have on their lives. In positioning this group as a CoP, I demonstrate the effectiveness of Eckert and McConnell-Ginet’s (1992) sociolinguistic
model for explaining how a group of people with varied life experiences – in this case, differing ages, gender identities, stages of transition and ethnicities – can maintain a sense of shared identity. In examining the interaction of a marginalised group, I also show that opposition as a discursive strategy is key to the construction of a validated identity.

Due to the prevalence of cisnormativity, or cisgenderism, whereby trans experiences and identities are othered and gender is perceived to be fixed at birth (Kennedy 2013), trans people continue to be discriminated against. This is evident from research into media representations; Baker (2014) found, for example, that trans people tend to be cast as ‘victims or villains [in British newspapers], as involved in transient relationships or sex scandals, as the object of jokes about their appearance of sexual organs and as attention-seeking freakish objects’ (2014: 233). Zottola (2018) similarly finds tabloid newspapers in the UK using negative and offensive language to refer to trans experience. Gupta (2018) shows how British tabloid newspapers misgendered Lucy Meadows, a schoolteacher whose transition was picked up by the press and who later took her own life, by using male pronouns to refer to her and reprinting the transphobic commentary of others. As Gupta (2018: 45) argues, these are ‘emerging strategies for the production and reproduction of transphobia in news texts’; trans people regularly see themselves belittled, demonised, and mocked in the UK press.

Whilst we should be wary of assuming that being trans necessarily leads to some sort of inherent ‘victim’ status, since this can reinforce cisnormative ideals (Formby 2015, McCormack 2019), there is nonetheless evidence that trans youth are a potentially vulnerable group (see for example McDermott and Roan 2016). Trans people are particularly likely to be reliant on institutionalised forms of legitimacy, such as medical diagnoses of dysphoria and legal recognition of their identifying gender, and for young people this presents a specific problem. If they cannot access adults who will provide appropriate information and support, they are unlikely to be able to articulate their feelings or seek out help (Holman and Goldberg 2006). When combined with the evident dominance of transphobic discourse in the media, it is clear that young people who identify as trans or outside of the gender binary may have many hurdles to overcome. In the case study which follows, I analyse young people’s negotiation of these challenges in their everyday lives.
THEORETICAL APPROACH

I draw in this study on the concept of the community of practice (CoP), introduced to sociolinguistics by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) but first established by Lave and Wenger (1991) as a theory of learning. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet present the CoP as an alternative to the traditional sociolinguistic ‘speech community’ model; whereas the speech community focuses on supposedly homogenised groups of speakers categorised demographically, the CoP considers how individuals’ interaction together produces social groupings (see Bucholtz 1999). This approach enables an understanding of identity construction as it emerges through regular interaction between groups of people. It is essentially a site where speakers develop mutual ways of doing things – or ‘practices’ – which, over time, come to index (Ochs 1992) a shared sense of group membership.

Importantly, this shared identity can be understood at both a local level, where it may be negotiated through day-to-day practice, but also on a broader level, where it ‘both feeds, and is structured by, larger social constructs and discourses’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2007: 28). In Eckert’s (2000) seminal study in a Detroit high school, for example, students tended to gather in CoPs with whom they shared similar ideas of their future prospects and values; those who saw further education at university level and potentially leaving the area as their goal (the Jocks), and those who were disinterested in school and felt more rooted in their local community (the Burnouts). The practices emerging from these CoPs linked to the identities relevant to each; the Jocks engaged in broadly middle-class pursuits (including school-based extra-curricular activities, such as football and cheerleading, and a greater use of standard linguistic forms), whereas the Burnouts developed shared practices which indexed their rejection of the school system (such as skipping class and smoking cannabis, and a greater use of non-standard linguistic forms). When people come together because of some shared experience, hobby, or an identification with a broad social category such as social class, then, their interaction and the discourse it produces may be understood through the lens of the CoP model.

In the analysis below, I focus on how five young people’s interaction allows them to produce a shared sense of identity as members of their CoP. To conduct this analysis, I make use of Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) concept of positionality. Bucholtz and Hall emphasise that ‘identity’ concerns more than simply one’s attachment or orientation to cultural demographic categories, conceiving instead of identity as also
encompassing roles and categories that emerge through interaction on a local level. In this sense, when speakers engage together as a CoP, their use and development of shared practices allows them to position themselves in line with what is meaningful in that group context – this includes being a particular type of person or having a persona which is salient within the CoP. These identity positions feed from and into relevant categories on a broader level, too; when people with a shared orientation to a cultural category come together as a CoP, they are likely to work together to make sense of their position in the world in relation to that category.

In this study, I consider young people’s engagement in a trans support group. Their shared identification as trans, it will be shown, leads to them having had similar experiences outside of the support group – many of which, unfortunately, have been negative and rooted in transphobia. Their jointly constructed identity, as members of the group, is therefore informed by these shared experiences and a reaction to the broader cultural category of ‘transgender’. This is not to say that this shared identity is rigid or that there is just one version of it; indeed, CoPs are organic, and undergo constant renegotiation of what is legitimate practice within them (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2005: 583). This is very relevant to the group considered here; there are differences between them, as will be outlined later, and they do not always agree – yet they negotiate those differences to create a supportive environment and a mutual sense of what it means to be them, together, as young trans people in a cisgender world.

A growing body of work into trans identity construction exists within sociolinguistics, though studies focused explicitly on trans youth have to date been based on language use in online contexts (e.g. Dame 2013, Jones 2019). Other research has been focused on adults. Zimman’s (2014, 2019) crucial work in this area offers insight into the linguistic means by which trans people can articulate their own self-identification. He points out that this identification is often politicised by virtue of trans people existing in a world which discriminates against them; trans identity is often a form of ‘resistance to normative structures of genital-based gender assignment’ (2019: 148). This is particularly clear in data analysed by Zimman (2014), which comes from an online forum for trans men and shows how the cultural obsession with defining genitalia as either ‘female’ or ‘male’ can be disrupted and subverted through linguistic means. In his data, ‘female’ body parts can be linguistically refashioned and relabelled in such a way that trans men can use them
too (e.g. referring to one’s vagina as a ‘boy cunt’), which ‘works to construct trans men as male-bodied despite the powerful discourses that insist otherwise.’ (29)

These ‘powerful discourses’ are also articulated in Borba and Milani’s (2017) account of interactions occurring between clinicians and patients in a Brazilian gender identity clinic. They show how being trans in this context is linked to pathology, with the notion of trans as a disorder more dominant than trans as an identity. Their analysis demonstrates how particular ideas of what is an ‘authentic’ way of feeling and existing as a trans person are privileged, as well as how these ideas are fundamentally rooted in cisgenderism. The data analysed by Borba and Milani reveals clinicians’ prejudices against trans patients who do not fit their preconceived ideas about authentic gender; this includes a trans woman who is described by a psychiatrist as not feminine enough, and who subsequently begins wearing makeup and engaging in stereotypically feminised practices in order to be judged ‘authentic’. Given the gate-keeping role that professionals in gender identity clinics hold, whereby they decide whether their patients should receive treatment or not, their notion of what is legitimate evidently has the power to shape trans people’s identities.

These studies in trans identity construction take a critical position, challenging ideologies which privilege and normalise cisgenderism. In this sense, they are informed by queer theory and thus represent work in queer linguistics. Queer linguistics aims to reveal and problematise the dominant cultural ideologies of heteronormativity and essentialist, binary gender through linguistic analysis (Motschenbacher & Stegu 2013). In this paper, I too take this approach. My intention, in analysing how a group of young trans people negotiate their identity as trans, is to reveal the problematic and damaging nature of the gender ideologies shaping their shared experiences. The young people in this study experience transphobia as part of their everyday lives; this influences their identity construction, yet they respond to it in such a way that they produce a validated sense of self. Far from being victims, then, I show that they are agentive, empowered individuals challenging discrimination.

**METHODOLOGY**

In order to analyse the identity construction that occurred between the members of this CoP, I needed to gain insight into their typical interaction and shared practices, and to understand the *meaning* of those shared practices. I did this through
ethnography, which involves a researcher trying to ‘enter the life-world’ of their subjects as a participant observer (Rampton et al 2015: 15) with the aim of understanding practices from their perspective. I met the young people in late 2014, explaining my research aims and leaving information for them to discuss. They agreed to me conducting fieldwork with them, which I did between January and April 2015.

The CoP was a support group for young people who were trans or questioning their gender, and their parents. The group was based in the North of England in a historically working-class town with a population of approximately 250,000 people. The town was known for being conservative; far-right groups such as the British National Party and the English Defence League had enjoyed political success there. The young people had all experienced discrimination and abuse due to their gender identity, and the group was a much-needed safe space for this reason. It was run on a voluntary basis by two cisgender youth workers who were employed by the local authority to run an LGBT youth group.

The group met monthly for two hours on a mid-week evening, in a building funded and managed by the local council. There were twelve young people in the group, the youngest of whom was 15 and the oldest 20. Not all young people brought their parents, as not all were accepting of their gender identity, but most were ‘out’ to their parents as trans. Typically, the first hour of the session was spent with both parents and young people, sitting around a table in one of two rooms. The lead youth worker, David, would ask if anyone had anything to share, and the young people (or sometimes a parent) would volunteer information about relevant events or milestones. During one session, for instance, a parent said her son received a letter from his school using his birth name and female pronouns, and she asked for advice on how to approach this. The second hour would be spent separately; one youth worker stayed with the parents, and another moved to a different room with the young people (as did I). In this space, the youths often shared their experiences with each other, and the atmosphere was collaborative and supportive.

Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in this context was difficult because, as a cisgender person who was not a youth worker, there was no clear role for me to take. I was unable to participate much, as a result, spending my time simply observing their interactions. Because the group met only once per month, and because I was aware the young people might feel unable to disclose anything highly personal in my
presence, I tended not to stay for the full two hours and therefore had less time with the group than I would have liked. However, I had previously spent time with around half the young people during an earlier fieldwork project with the LGBT group they also attended (Jones 2016, Jones 2018), and their familiarity with me helped others to accept my presence. Five of the young people agreed to take part in an audio-recorded focus group, which I arranged and led during the second half of a session. This involved three young trans men: Kyle (19), Dan (17), and Zack (15). There were also two young trans women: Ashleigh (20), and Bella (19). All of the young people came from working-class backgrounds, and all except Bella, who was of mixed ethnicity, were white. I compiled a list of questions approved by David in advance, such as ‘who are good role models for young trans people?’ and ‘what words have you heard used to talk about trans people?’ My aim was to encourage the young people to speak openly about their views and experiences, without feeling that they had to divulge personal details; I hoped to gain relatively spontaneous speech which would reveal the key aspects of their identity construction in relation to that particular context. The young people gave their written consent ahead of the recording taking place; for those under 16, either David (as the responsible adult) or their parents also gave their consent.

The data below are comprised of two moments of interaction from this focus group. These extracts have been chosen as moments reflecting salient themes observed during my fieldwork, namely the ways in which the youths oriented to the broader category of ‘transgender’ and their shared experiences of transphobia. In my analysis, I focus on the linguistic means by which they take stances, aligning themselves with (or against) particular identity categories, arguments, ideas, and so on (Jaffe 2009). This includes grammatical constructions (such as the expression of modality), lexical choices (such as trans-specific terminology) and discourse features. The stances the young people took towards the people, actions and opinions described in their talk were collaboratively constructed within their interaction; in this way, they indexed a shared sense of identity in terms of what it meant to be a member of the CoP and in relation to the broader ideologies informing their positionalities.

ANALYSIS
Two extracts are analysed here. The first, in which the group talked about questions they have typically been asked by cisgender people, occurred 20 minutes into the
hour-long recording, and the second occurred 10 minutes later. The two interactions are transcribed and analysed below.

**Extract 1: ‘when did you have your sex change?’**

In response to a question I asked the group regarding comments or questions they were asked about being trans, Dan (D) recalled being asked ‘have you got a dick?’ – that which I identify in line 1 as ‘the genitalia question’ (L):

1. L so there’s - so there’s sensitive questions so there’s - there’s the genitalia question
2. D yeah
3. L an insensitive question
4. D yeah but there’s- then there’s questions of the people that (.) don’t understand at all
5. and they ask so when did you have your sex change (. ) [@I got] that before.
6. Z when are you having it
7. D yeah
8. B and no it’s like yeah I’m just gonna book an appointment for next week just so you
   can take me out
9. D yea:h
10. K when did you decide
11. D yeah how long have you known
12. K I got that from a doctor [as well]
13. D [how did] you know
14. B I decided when I [saw] a right nice pair of shoes I wanted to wear and have an
15. D [yeah]
16. B excuse to wear them [@(2)]
17. D [@(2)]
18. L [you got that from a doctor?]?
19. B [that was sarcasm by the way]
20. K yeah some of the doctors were (.) made redundant so some new doctors were
21. coming in (.) so: (.) we- I went in to have in- testosterone injections so I went
22. in and (.) sh- she were a new doctor (.) and she wanted to know why I was taking
23. testosterone (.) just out of curiosity
24. D yeah
25. K and I said oh (.) I’m transgender (.) and she were like o:h right then so when did you
26. de - decide that
27. D (.) yeah
28. K so I was I- [I didn’t decide]
29. D (.) [but I’ve had that] like (.) once someone asked me why I was taking them
30. (.) someone actually asked me how long I had to take them for because then the- they
31. just they don’t know why I’m taking them [I could] just be a cis male that’s having
32. L [mhm]
33. D (.) problems with my hormones and I need a bit of a testosterone boost and stuff like
34.
that [so] I mean there is (. ) many reasons why other people take testosterone and

K [mmm]

D stuff like that [but-]

B [same] with transgender women as well cause some women need to
take hormones because they've [not ] developed properly or something/

D [yeah] /yeah stuff like

B 'cause I know a girl who's cisgender and she's still young so it's not menopausal or

L (@anything@) [like that] (. ) but uh she's got a problem wi' like her boobs and like (. )

B basically she never started puberty so she needed that boost to actually [make her]

D [yeah]

B (. ) not look (. ) like so much like a little girl and she wanted to actually look 22.

In the accounts given here, the young people detail moments where questions have rendered them ‘other’. Dan describes such questioners as ‘the people that don’t understand at all’ (line 4), his use of the definite article ‘the’ indicating a definable body of individuals from whom he receives many questions. By not understanding at all, which he emphasises, Dan ascribes them total ignorance regarding trans issues, a status diametrically opposed to those in this CoP. Indeed, the young people’s identity work which follows allows them to position themselves in opposition to this ignorance, implying their expertise and experience and affirming their shared identification as members of a trans CoP. This joint construction facilitates their production of a persona which challenges the implication that they are somehow unusual or odd.

This is evident from Dan’s first reported question ‘when did you have your sex change?’ (line 5). The phrase ‘sex change’ may be considered old-fashioned and inaccurate, often referring specifically to an operation that only some trans people undergo and reducing trans identity to genitalia; guidelines now recommend the terms ‘transition’ or ‘reassignment’ to refer to medical interventions (e.g. GLAAD n.d.). Dan’s laughter immediately after stating ‘sex change’ indicates that the phrase is remarkable, as does his uptake on Zack’s supportive utterance ‘when are you having it’ (line 6). Both examples of reported speech ask about the timing of this surgical procedure, with ‘when’ being used; Dan is asked when he had the surgery, in the past tense, and Zack is asked when he will have it, in the future tense. This reflects their different life stages – Dan was 19 and had been receiving medical intervention for several years, whereas Zack was 15 and had only just had his first appointment to
discuss hormone treatment\textsuperscript{vi}. However, both questions – through their use of the interrogative adverb – reveal the assumption that they would have surgery. This is despite the considerable variation in both gender expression and decisions made regarding medical intervention that exists among trans people, reflecting essentialist assumptions of a coherent and static link between sex and gender.

Bella’s subsequent input is largely sarcastic, highlighting the impropriety of these questions. She puts forward a mocking response to Zack’s question: ‘I’m just gonna book an appointment for next week just so you can take me out’ (lines 8-9). Bella’s utterance, importantly, highlights the difficulty of obtaining medical support to enable transition\textsuperscript{vii}, especially as a teenager; the adverb ‘just’ in line 8 allows her to ironically position the sort of surgery being implied by the questioner as easy to organise. Her turn therefore mocks the person asking the question for their ignorance regarding the complexities of gender reassignment surgery. Bella’s turn is also interesting, however, as she implies that the hypothetical person asking Zack’s question (‘you’, line 8) would be able to date her after she had surgery. This alludes to the heteronormative assumption that any sexual relationship between a woman and a man would require genitalia normatively assigned as ‘female’ (vagina) and ‘male’ (penis), ironically highlighting the assumptions of those ignorant to trans experience.

In response to the question from Kyle in line 11 (‘when did you decide’), Bella provides another mocking response: ‘I decided when I saw a right nice pair of shoes I wanted to wear’ (line 15). Here, she implies that by having a ‘sex change’ she could wear women’s shoes. The humour here is driven by the stereotype that women like shoes, as Bella jokes that she would only have the legitimacy to wear them (shown by the lexical choice ‘excuse’, line 17) if her body conformed to gendered norms for women (i.e. by undergoing surgery). In this moment, desiring shoes becomes symbolic for being female; Bella draws on the essentialist assumption that, as somebody who is female, she loves shoes, but also challenges the idea that for her to hold this female identity she would need to modify her body in some way. Her laughter, and Dan’s (line 18), demonstrates that this is intended as a joke, but its ideological underpinnings enable her to position those asking questions such as ‘when did you decide’ as naïve to the complexities of gender identity.

In line 19, I signal to Kyle that he should take the floor, and he returns to his narrative (started in line 13) of when a doctor asked when he decided he was transgender ‘just out of curiosity’. To be curious about something would typically
imply it was unusual or intriguing, both attributes of the odd or other. The verb ‘decide’ (line 27) also implies being trans is a choice, and is therefore constructed rather than essential. Kyle takes a clear stance in rejection of this in line 28, stating ‘I didn’t decide’, positioning his trans status as a fact of himself rather than a result of his agency. Given the continued stigmatisation of trans people as dysphoric, threatening, or somehow false in their realisation of their own gender identity, it is unsurprising that Kyle engages in this authenticating move to claim an inherent gender. By including this question amongst those asked by ‘the people that don’t understand at all’, he destabilises it and reduces its relevance to his identity.

This tactic of reducing the relevance of these face-threatening questions is also shown towards the end of this extract. In line 30, Dan expresses incredulity (shown through the adverb ‘actually’) that somebody was ignorant of the fact that hormone therapies are typically life-long: ‘someone actually asked me how long I had to take them for’. However, this knowledge would be unfamiliar to those without experience of transition, which may be why he then reframes his utterance: ‘they don’t know why I’m taking them I could just be a cis male that’s having problems with my hormones’ (lines 32-34). Dan offers some understanding for this ignorance, at this point, on the basis that the person in question might reasonably have not known he was trans. Importantly, he positions this as not because the treatment is quite specialist, but because his presentation is normatively masculine. In turn, this allows him to engage in authenticating work in relation to his own gender identity.

This turn also offers an alternative reason for individuals receiving hormone treatment: Dan states there are ‘many reasons’ why people take testosterone (line 35), as they might simply need a ‘boost’ in the hormone (line 34). This is taken up by Bella, who states ‘some women need to take hormones because they’ve not developed properly’ (lines 38-39). She tells a story of a cisgender girl who ‘never started puberty’ (line 45), giving an example of one of the ‘many reasons’ put forward by Dan for individuals taking hormones, allowing her to emphasise that cisgender women may also need assistance in acquiring normatively gendered bodies (underlined here by her mention of breasts, or ‘boobs’ (line 45), an important symbol of both sexualised and biological femininity). Bella repeats Dan’s lexical choice of ‘boost’ in line 45, reinforcing the interactive work being done to position hormone therapy within a broader medical frame rather than a specifically transgender frame. In this moment, Bella and Dan subvert the very notion that this particular medical
intervention is unusual by highlighting that it may also be experienced by cisgender people. They therefore shift from their earlier tactic of undermining questions regarding surgery by positioning them as ignorant, towards offering an alternative, neutral reading of hormone therapy. Both tactics enable them to challenge this othering by cooperatively and collectively positioning themselves as knowledgeable and non-other, working together to validate their experience as trans people.

Extract 2: ‘just use they’
The extract below is an example of metalinguistic commentary; immediately preceding it, the question ‘are there any words or sayings about trans people that you don’t like?’ had been asked. Zack suggested the use of the pronoun ‘it’:

1  Z  o:r a- sometimes it's like it (.) like they're classing you as (.) it (.) and it's like
2  (. ) they're trying to make you out to be like (. ) an object or summat
3  L  mhm
4  Z  and it (.) just makes me feel like shit because (.) they're calling you it it's just
5  like I'm a person
6  D  mmm
7  Z  I'm just like everyone else (.) might be different in different ways but everyone is
8  D  mmm
9  Z  [so-]
10 A  [I don't] know if like it is just people struggle to think of like gender-neutral pronouns
11 'cause I (. ) I've like been (.) talking to people who - they were referring to someone
12 who was (.) agender as it and I were saying (.) just use they
13 D  [mmm]
14 Z  [yeah] or them
15 B  if it's easy enough to for them to use it it's e- it's (.) [it's a] - it's just a (.) water off
16 D  [yea:h ]
17 B  a duck's back if you just say they
18 Z  I think right (.) if someone (.) for example calls me it (.) they could just change it to
19 he 'cause it's still the same [num]ber of letters/
20 D  [sa:] /same syllables. yeah
21 L  [mhm]
22 D  [it's] just it's silly
23 Z  so it's not [a d-] it's not [hard to:] just go he.
24 D  [as the-]
25 L  [mhm]
26 D  yeah
27 A  I think sometimes I think it's just: (.) a cha- [a cha- an] attempt at not [offend]ing you
28 Z  [ignorance]
29 D  [yeah]
As in Extract 1, the young people engage in interactional work to position themselves as comparatively well-informed. Whereas in the previous extract they focused on people’s lack of knowledge about transitioning, however, here they focus on a lack of linguistic knowledge. Typically, they are less forgiving in this moment, revealing that while the medical side of transition may be relatively misunderstood, they deem the use of pronouns to be ‘not hard’ to get right (line 23). Again, their identity work allows them to subvert the notion of otherness being applied to them. They also draw here on what Zimman (2019: 159) describes as an ‘enormously significant’ strategy of trans self-identification:

Asking others to change the pronouns they use is often a milestone of a person’s transition, and being “pronounced” correctly (to use the community’s own language) marks the moment in which a gender identity leaves the mind of a trans person and enters a new reality on the lips of an interlocutor.

The importance of using pronouns for oneself which differ to those used historically, which align with one’s gender identity rather than that assigned to a person at birth, cannot be underestimated. This perhaps helps to explain the young people’s overall refusal here to accept incorrect ‘pronouning’ from others.

Zack introduces pronouns in line 1, claiming ‘they’re classing you as it and it’s like they’re trying to make you out to be like an object’. Zack’s perception that this positions trans people as ‘an object’ (line 2) relates to the typical use of ‘it’ to refer to a thing, hence making him feel ‘like shit’ (line 4): it dehumanises him. Zack’s own pronoun use here is telling; he uses the third-person pronoun ‘they’ to refer a mass of people who use this transphobic language, and the second-person ‘you’ as a generic pronoun, used in an inclusive way to indicate a shared experience between himself and other trans people. His use of ‘trying to’ (line 2) is also significant; it frames what ‘they’ do by using transphobic language as a mere attempt at othering, positioning himself as rejecting it despite the fact that this dehumanising language is distressing. In shifting to the first person to share his own personal experience, he argues ‘I’m a person’ (line 5), contradicting the reference to him as a thing and
therefore re-humanising him. Zack continues in line 7 by stating ‘I’m just like everyone else…might be different in different ways but everyone is’. Zack emphasises his humanness here by aligning himself with ‘everyone else’ (all other persons), and then both alludes to his gender identity by acknowledging that he ‘might be different’ and pointing out that ‘everyone is’. He therefore argues that there is no homogeneity between all people, but all people are humans anyway. This is a powerful stance to take in relation to his own identity, explicitly rejecting heteronormative assumptions of essential gender.

Zack directly apportions blame to those people (‘they’) who make him feel ‘like shit’, whereas Ashleigh takes a different stance in this extract. She puts forward a possible excuse for those who say ‘it’: ‘I don’t know if like it is just people struggle to think of like gender-neutral pronouns’ (line 10). Ashleigh’s interpretation of the reason for the use of ‘it’ frames the act as not deliberately transphobic, expressed through the minimising adverb ‘just’ in conjunction with the verb ‘struggle’. This is juxtaposed with Ashleigh’s use of the relatively high-register, technical lexis of ‘gender-neutral pronouns’, positioning herself as well-informed and expert in this regard. She thus constructs an opposition between herself and those with less knowledge of non-binary terms of address, before offering a brief anecdote of ‘people’ (line 11) referring to an agender (non-binary) person as ‘it’. In response, she quotes herself as saying ‘just use they’ (line 12), a stance which is reinforced by Zack in line 14 (‘yeah or them’). In doing so, Ashleigh assigns herself the role of educator, articulating agency in a situation whereby trans people were being othered. It is telling that none of the participants expressed unfamiliarity with Ashleigh’s use of the term ‘agender’ (line 12); technical terminology of this nature was a shared resource of the CoP and its use may facilitate the indexing of a shared identity. Of course, any admission articulated by a participant that they did not know the meaning of this word would likely result in a loss of face – and therefore legitimacy as a CoP member – and this might also explain why nobody queried the meaning of this particular term.

Ashleigh’s use of the adverb ‘just’ (in ‘just use they’, line 12) is also significant, implying that gender-neutral pronouns are uncomplicated. Bella then co-constructs this stance, repeating ‘just’: ‘if it’s easy enough…for them to use it…it’s just…water off a duck’s back if you just say they’ (lines 15-17). Bella’s repeated use of the adverb ‘just’ mirrors Ashleigh’s positioning of ‘they’, as does the adjective ‘easy’ and the idiom ‘water off a duck’s back’

Throughout this exchange, Dan
frequently back-channels, expressing support and agreement; combined, the three interlocutors construct the use of incorrect pronouns as something which can easily be re-learnt. This implies that a speaker using ‘it’ to describe a trans person would be doing so not due to transphobia, but instead out of ignorance, reflecting the overall stance taken in Extract 1.

This changes, however, with Zack’s turn in line 18: ‘I think right…if someone…for example calls me it…they could just change it to he ‘cause it’s still the same number of letters…so it’s not hard to just go he.’ His use of the discourse marker ‘right’, in conjunction with the stance marker ‘I think’, signals that he is about to make a new evaluation. Indeed, the remainder of his utterance marks an alternative stance to Ashleigh’s empathy for those using inappropriate terminology, instead showing contempt for their ignorance. Reinforcing Bella’s argument that it is easy to use pronouns correctly, Zack presents a frustrated stance based on his argument that ‘it’s not hard’ (line 23), a stance in contrast to Ashleigh’s suggestion that it might be a ‘struggle’. Zack’s declarative voice allows him to position those who say ‘it’ as ignorant, and his earlier point that ‘it’s still the same number of letters’ (line 19) additionally positions these people as lazy. The effect of this is to frame the use of ‘it’ not as a mistake (which could be forgiven) but as an agentive act.

Ashleigh attempts to neutralise this stance by positioning, again, those using incorrect pronouns as mistaken rather than transphobic: ‘I think sometimes…it’s just…an attempt at not offending you but…it’s just done exactly the opposite of what they want’ (lines 27-30). She clearly positions ‘them’ as a separate group from the collective ‘you’ that is used here, thus supporting the group-constructed identity work taking place in this moment whereby the members are proving themselves to be distinct to (and more knowledgeable than) this unspecified group of others. However, in her use of the phrase ‘attempt at not offending’, she again takes an empathetic stance by framing those who say ‘it’ as at least trying to use the correct language but being uninformed about which pronoun is least offensive. This is a generous interpretation, given that the context of this conversation is the use of ‘it’ instead of the use of ‘they’ – when the latter pronoun may be used for people or things, and the former only for things. Ashleigh’s stance that people do not wish to offend is clear, too, from her claim that this is ‘the opposite of what they want’. Dan responds with affirmative minimal responses throughout, indicating his agreement, and later positions people as ‘not doing it right [and] being a bit offensive’ (line 35). His
hedging (‘a bit’) reduces the extent to which a person saying ‘it’ would be transphobic, thus supporting Ashleigh’s characterisation, though it is notable that his role throughout this interaction is largely supportive via minimal responses and he therefore appears to show agreement with both perspectives.

That there are these competing interpretations is extremely interesting. It may be that the varying opinions reflect the differing experiences of the group members; Ashleigh had not yet come out to her family, and her visual presentation outside of the group was largely in line with heteronormative expectations of masculinity. Perhaps as a result of this, throughout the recording she did not speak of her own personal experiences of transphobia. In contrast, Zack was ambiguous in his presentation, having come out as transmasculine but continuing to show visual cues which were normatively feminine. His experience had included this form of othering, and he reported at a later point in this focus group feeling frightened by the transphobia he had received (such as when using public toilets).

These differing experiences are likely to have impacted on each of these young people and led to their contrasting interpretations but, importantly, they do not prevent them from working collaboratively in the construction of a shared, CoP identity. Both agree there is some ignorance here, yet whilst Ashleigh offers a sympathetic explanation for it, Zack articulates more frustration. Though they do not entirely agree, neither party take up the opportunity to express this disagreement more forcefully or insist that the other concur with them. Instead, they both make use of the explicit stance marker ‘I think’ (Zack in line 18, and Ashleigh in line 27), using the first-person pronoun ‘I’ to distinguish this as their own personal evaluation. Zack appears to acquiesce somewhat towards the end of this section, too, in positioning those who use the pronoun ‘it’ as ignorant (line 28) shifting from his earlier claim that their aim was to deliberately objectify and dehumanise. This stance shift may reveal a desire to find a common ground, to articulate an identity appropriate to that moment, and to emphasise that which he and Ashleigh agree on over that which they do not. As a CoP of individuals varied in age, experience, and gender identity, it is not surprising that differences in opinion exist. It is significant, however, that they are ultimately articulated in a respectful way, and that a form of agreement is found, since this helps to maintain the safe space of the group. It is apparent that the shared identity – and what it means to be a member of this CoP – shifts and is actively negotiated through
the interaction itself; this demonstrates that, as argued by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), identities are not static, but emergent in discourse.

DISCUSSION
The shared practices of this group enable their construction of a mutual identity, which hinges on their identification with the cultural category ‘transgender’. They use trans-specific terminology to jointly position themselves as knowledgeable about what it means to be trans. They also work collaboratively to produce their discourse, co-constructing stances or mirroring one another’s lexical choices, and use humour and laughter to demonstrate a shared understanding of sarcasm. Through these shared practices, they collaboratively construct their identity as members of this CoP, and in turn work together to produce a locally salient version of ‘transgender’. This is not done uniformly, and there is variation between them – a point I return to below – but they take a joint approach to negotiating their own lives as trans youth. Clearly, the focus group recording was a very specific interactive context which was not typical of the young people’s talk together. However, as members of a CoP set up to support one another through the experience of being trans, the topic of conversation that I recorded here was very familiar to them and did reflect their usual interactions. My presence, as a researcher with whom the young people were fairly familiar, will undoubtedly have impacted on their talk together, but the collaborative way in which they constructed their responses to these questions certainly reflects their mutual engagement in the shared practice of the support group (as I witnessed during my ethnographic fieldwork).

Positionality is central to the analysis above, and I have shown how the idea of being in opposition to something might be fundamental to the construction of a shared identity. This has, of course, been found elsewhere; Bucholtz (1999) refers to negative identity practices – actions speakers engage in to distance themselves from particular opposed identities – in her account of a CoP of high school girls. She found they avoided ‘cool’ expressions and used Latinate vocabulary, for example, to articulate their difference from their fashionable peers and to position themselves positively as ‘nerds’. In Jones’s (2012) research with older British lesbians, too, the women were found to explicitly reject practices associated with an overtly feminine identity, allowing them to index the positively evaluated ‘butch’ identity that they shared. Similarly, the above data shows the support group members constructing an identity
directly opposed to those with less insight into trans experience, who they position as ignorant and whose discourse they frame as othering. By engaging in negative identity practices, these young people – who are so often not heard and not taken seriously – can present themselves as experts. In turn, they can normalise that which is positioned as odd or unusual (whether medical treatment or pronoun use), discursively subverting the otherness ascribed to them. As in Zimman’s (2014) analysis, the data above suggests that trans people may be particularly likely to construct their identity as trans in a way which is in resistant to cisgender norms. In the case of the young people in the current study, they also refuse to accept the positioning of ‘other’ or the identity position of ‘victim’, instead mutually constructing an active sense of self which resists this discrimination.

By looking at stance taking and positionality in this data, it is therefore evident that identity construction is intrinsically tied up with other people. To develop a coherent sense of who we are as individuals, we must have a sense of where we belong in the world. Most often, as is the case here, we gain a sense of belonging by dividing the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Yuval-Davies 2011). The analysis here demonstrates that it is possible – and important – for members of a CoP to collaboratively construct a mutual identity irrespective of actual differences in experience or disagreements that exist between them. The respect these young people show one another, of course, reflects the context of this non-hierarchical CoP as a support group, and the reasons underlying their construction of a resistant, agentive identity. Indeed, the young people had the tools to construct their resistant identity partly thanks to the support group, which – despite being run by cisgender volunteers rather than those with their own trans experience – brought them together and offered them information. The language the young people used demonstrates their understanding and knowledge of the options available to them; it is clear they gained agency and a sense of pride and validation in themselves through the group. The group was therefore extremely important to their personal development in a society where mainstream understanding of trans experience continues to be lacking, and where trans people continue to be discriminated against.

It is generally agreed amongst psychiatrists that someone with a trans identity that emerges from puberty will experience this into adulthood (de Vries and Leibowitz 2017: 68), and it is therefore particularly important that adolescents have access to forms of specialist support. Homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, self-
harm and suicide all impact on trans youth disproportionately to other young people (Holman and Goldberg 2006), and youth groups and support groups can play a critical role in reducing the likelihood of this. It is therefore distressing to know that, at the time of writing, this particular support group no longer exists due to funding cuts and subsequent staff redundancies: the volunteers that ran the group are no longer employed by the local authority. This reflects a significant loss to young trans people (and their families) in the local community; not only did the group give them this sense of validation, the youth workers acted as their advocates to ensure they were being treated fairly in their schools, colleges, and workplaces. This study therefore acts as evidence of the essential need for increased and continued provision for the support of young people who are trans and non-binary. Furthermore, it is clear that more education is needed for those professionals who may encounter trans youth, including – as illustrated by Kyle in Extract 1 – the illegitimating nature of questions regarding a ‘decision’ to be trans. Future scholarly work must continue to address these issues by working with professional and governing bodies to demonstrate the real impact of transphobic discrimination on young people’s identities and lives.

**TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS**

The method of transcription used here is adapted from Jefferson (2004).

- self- interruption or false start

( ) pause of less than 1 second

(2) timed pause

. end of intonation unit; falling intonation

? end of intonation unit; rising intonation

<i>italics</i> transcriber comment

: lengthening of sound

{@word@} laughing quality

**REFERENCES**


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1 The group was advertised for ‘transgender’ youth, rather than the more inclusive ‘trans and non-binary’. Ryan (2016) makes the point that the use of ‘trans’ as an umbrella term often works to exclude those who do not identify as either female or male, and it may be the case in this context that this constrained the identities the youths felt able to express.
Pseudonyms are used throughout, and the town in which the young people were resident is not given here to protect their anonymity.

Too often, transgender people’s lives are spoken and written about by cisgender people with no personal experience of the issues, who take up space that should be occupied by trans people themselves. I am extremely wary of continuing this trend. However, it is my intention to act as advocate for these young people; the data was elicited with their enthusiasm at having the opportunity to be heard by an audience they could not otherwise reach, and indeed I was invited to conduct the research having previously worked with the LGBT group they were attached to. I strive in my analysis to share their perspective and honour their voices.

I base this on the areas where they lived, their education, and their prospects and expectations for future employment.

Please see appendix for transcription conventions

Children may be prescribed hormones which suppress the bodily changes that otherwise occur in puberty, such as menstruation and genital growth. The aim is ‘to suspend the irreversible physical development of strongly undesired sex characteristics’, through what are colloquially known as puberty blockers, giving ‘younger people an opportunity to receive care without having to wait until adulthood for medical gender affirmative treatment’ (de Vries and Leibowitz 2017: 66).

In 2015, the average waiting time in England between being referred to a Gender Identity Clinic and having an initial appointment with them was 47 weeks (UK Transgender Info 2015: 4).

Ironically, this idiom usually refers to criticism that has no impact. In this context, however, it is synonymous with ‘easy’.