

Trans experiences of a university campus in northern England

Abstract

The spatial experiences of transgender and other gender variant ('trans') people still occupy the margins of geography, especially compared to the amount of work on lesbian and gay lives. Though research on trans geographies in both educational and health settings is expanding, most literatures still stem from a U.S. perspective. This article explores findings of a project about the experiences of trans people studying and/or working on a specific university campus in northern England. Our findings demonstrate how particular spaces of the university campus can become entangled with interactions that enable misrecognition and micro-aggressions.

Key words

Trans geographies, feminist geographies, northern England, higher education, university campus, qualitative interviews

1 INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on three spaces of a specific university campus in northern England to highlight the multiple ways in which transphobia emerges and is sustained, spatially. Only in the past decade have transpeople been granted legal protection from discrimination, inequality and exclusion, with much of this attributable to *Press For Change* and similar advocacy groups (Mitchell and Howarth, 2009). There remains no Census data on the trans population in England, Wales and Scotland but estimates suggest legal changes like the Gender Recognition Act (2004) cushion between 65,000-300,000 people. The National Union of Students posits that of the 4000 lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people who detailed their experiences of UK higher education, only 20.6% felt ‘completely safe’ on campus whilst a third had suffered bullying and 56% considered ‘dropping out’ (Acciari, 2014).

There remains little research on the ways in which trans people negotiate university spaces, explicitly, but a growing body of work is unravelling how trans people can come to suffer exclusion in or from numerous other environments. Doan’s (2010: 635) ‘tyranny of gender’ has been influential:

The exercise of power which is cruelly or harshly administered [when] trans and gender variant people experience the gendered division of space as a special kind of tyranny that arises when people dare to challenge the hegemonic expectations for appropriately gendered behaviour in western society. The gendered expectations are artefact of the patriarchal dichotomisation of gender and have profound and painful consequences for many individuals. [...] The tyranny of gender intrudes on every aspect of the spaces in which we live and constrains the behaviour that we display.

Trans bodies have regularly been used to articulate gender ‘fluidity’ but this applies to *all* bodies and trans identities can be just as fixed or fluid as cisgender people’s (Cornwell, 2014). Johnston (2015) explains that this is why it is crucial to explore the lived realities of trans lives. Similarly,

Rosenberg and Oswin (2015) attest that both queer and trans geographies have begun to grapple not just with what trans bodies can teach us about gender but diversity *within* the trans community, acknowledging trans studies as U.S. Anglo-centric whilst being mindful of post-colonial perspectives to help grasp gendered histories and cultures outside the west (Ahmed, 2000; Edelman, 2014; Tuck and Yang, 2012).

Namaste's (1996) critique of 'gaybashing' was amongst the earliest work to account for the impacts of varying subjective positions pertaining to gender in the context of sexualised space(s) (see, also, Namaste, 2000). Later, Browne (2004) proposed the term 'genderism' to illustrate the hostilities faced by trans people in sex-segregated bathrooms. Hines (2006; 2010) has also been central in highlighting multiplicity in how trans people experience places, like public bathrooms, in different ways. Nash (2010) delimited the subfield of trans geographies whilst, more recently, Johnston (2018) explores how gender variance can be transformative of places to reveal how marginalisation unfolds and can be tackled (see, also, Stryker, 2006; Stryker and Whittle, 2009). It is important to note that trans-exclusion can occur from within LGBT groups as well as outside them. For instance, Ghaziani (2008) notes that trans-exclusion is often situated within a premise of trans people as undermining sexual minorities' rights, as 'invading community spaces and [being] rendered different by virtue of their lack of adherence to the gender dichotomy' (in Waling and Roffee, 2017: 305). In other words, whilst many lesbians, bisexuals and gay men support inclusion of diverse queer identities, others can feel threatened by the presence of identities and/or bodies that do not adhere to normative gender scripts. Abiding to a modified heteronormative approach allows many lesbians and gay men, in particular, to render their identities 'normal' in a society that actively works to disempower them (Duggan, 2003; Oswin, 2008). Appreciating these nuances within LGBT and trans communities is useful in light of the hostile terrain of trans politics *external to* queer lives such as lasting

biphobia, homophobia and transphobia that can still wield damage on even the most ‘normal’ queer lives (Brown, 2012).

Universities often provide young people an opportunity to experiment with and/or realise their gender and/or sexual identities away from ‘home’ or ‘school’ constraints, the beginnings of a queer trajectory for many people (Alvarez and Schneider, 2008; Marine and Nicolazzo, 2014). However, there remains little exploration of the experiences of both trans students *and* staff, explicitly, within British higher education (Formby, 2015). Literatures on trans lives are usually based in the U.S. (Pryor, 2015; Ullman, 2018) or situated alongside ‘sexual minorities’ (Ellis, 2008). We counter these limits by highlighting how trans lives are lived out and felt across three spaces of a British university campus: bathrooms, halls and spaces of teaching, learning and socialising. The article clarifies how these spaces, together with the interactions occurring within them, enable misrecognition and micro-aggressions.

1.1 Our study

The data analysed in the paper is part of a project that aims to understand how social and spatial relations are constructed, contested and reimagined on a university campus in northern England. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted between March 2017 and June 2018. Participants include academic and administrative staff as well as postgraduate and undergraduate students. Agender (1), female (2), trans female (2), female-aligned (1), trans men (3), non-binary (4) and gender non-conforming (2) people are represented within our dataset. Participants also identified as bisexual (4), gay (1), pansexual (5) and queer (5). All but two people identified as ‘white-British or mixed white-British’ whilst one ‘British Pakistani’ and one ‘Chinese’ persons also contributed. The participants were aged between 18-33 years. Each interview took place in private offices on campus or in nearby cafes and lasted from around forty-five minutes to well over an hour.

Each of the authors conducted interviews. As cisgender people, we do not share the same experiences of stigma and oppression as trans people but as members of the LGBT community, we contend that we are not as different from our participants as some may assume (see, for example, Smith, 2006). All interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and analysed to identify key themes. In this paper, we present our analysis of data relative to three spaces on campus that trans people have particular difficulty negotiating on a day-to-day basis.

2 BATHROOMS

Bathrooms are troubling for trans people as they usually reinforce the gender binary (Browne, 2006; Cavanagh, 2011; Overall, 2007; Penner, 2012). Extending Foucault's (2004) 'docile bodies' to gender, Bender-Baird (2016: 984) contend that sex-segregated bathrooms are 'not neutral but, rather, are where power is enacted'. She also suggests sex-segregated bathrooms act as technologies of disciplinary power that uphold the binary by funnelling people into men's or women's spaces through three kinds of disciplinary power: first, division of space into (gendered) functions; second, panoptic design that encourages surveillance; and third, production of docile, 'appropriately gendered' bodies. There is evidence of each kind of power in the experiences of participants who contributed to our study.

On our campus, access to all gender facilities is geographically uneven and depends on a building's age. In the examples that follow, we see the importance of providing all gender facilities (toilets and changing rooms) with appropriate signage indicating the inappropriateness of challenging people about their bathroom presence based on perceived gender. The examples highlight how diverse trans identities and bathrooms are entangled in complex ways according to how certain bodies occupy a given space:

Hannah: It certainly is a lot easier being a binary trans person I think because that clearly signals I am in the right place. I mean [...] pre-transition, the facilities in my building were all

gender neutral, all of them. Which was great... because I didn't have to think about that every time.

As Hannah clarifies, limited access to all gender facilities works to force people into gendered spaces but as a non-binary person, they understand themselves as privileged in being able to 'fit' gendered expectations by appearance. Hannah often manages to use women's bathrooms without provoking suspicion. By contrast, both Rebecca and Alex detail discomfort:

Rebecca: There are disabled toilets everywhere but a lot of able-bodied trans and non-binary people feel awkward about using disabled toilets because technically, the label on it isn't for us because we're able-bodied. I mean, in the past, I have not had a problem at all with using disabled toilets just because I know that sometimes I need a gender-neutral space.

Alex: Yes, that's really recent and, like, I know in the student union there's like, the disabled toilet is like a gender-neutral toilet, I kind of feel guilty using it, I feel like, I don't want to walk outside and there's somebody actually disabled waiting to use the toilet... like, in my department, there's no neutral or anything. And, like, normally I don't feel bothered about it, but some days looking at the sign going in, it's like the worst thing ever.

Interviewer: What toilet do you choose to use?

Alex: I just normally use the women's toilet.

Whilst Hannah's gender identity is stabilised in gendered bathrooms, the male/female designation still acts as a relentless reminder of the tyranny of gender. Furthermore, Rebecca and Alex highlight how a lack of all gender facilities can leave people in the difficult position of being viewed as negatively impacting others' needs; what Jake posited as a situation of 'elevating the needs of one minority by encroaching on the space of another. Simply labelling accessible toilets as gender-neutral does not create 'safe space' for trans bodies.

In short, we see the production of docile, 'appropriately gendered' bodies that Bender-Baird (2016) refer to and an interrelated lack of access to all gender facilities. Both of these

issues are daily realities for those living outside binary expectations. Confronted by a built environment that denies existence, with bathrooms which facilitate policing, trans people can engage in situational docility, wherein bodies are adjusted to comply with gendered norms. We echo a need to transform bathrooms into all-gender spaces to circumvent a need for situational docility.

3 STUDENT ACCOMODATION

Trans experiences of student halls (university-affiliated or private) were mixed but less positive than spaces of learning, research and conviviality. Self-surveillance and censorship were stressed as necessary within residential spaces and trans students often described a ‘pot luck’ process that determined the flatmates they ended up living with. Irrespective of whether or not flatmates were trans-aware, participants detailed heightened feelings of ‘the gaze’ in residential accommodation and reacted accordingly:

Jake: I just felt so hyper aware of my presentation... the way I spoke and the way that people were seeing me. Because I reckon most trans people agree, you kind of know when people are reading you as the correct gender or not even if they don’t outwardly use the wrong pronouns. You can just get this feeling. It’s really hard to describe... but you just kind of know if people are reading you as male or female when you’re speaking to them... the first few weeks, trying to work out if people... when I left the room... what pronouns were people going to be using and it was anxiety-inducing.

Jake summarises the (hyper)awareness he felt in managing self presentation whilst living with new people. This hypervigilance is similar to that experienced in bathrooms but differs in that residential space requires a more *consistent* preservation of gendered codes and behaviours than those demanded in the use of bathrooms. Anxiety was the main emotion felt in instances where a hostile gaze was anticipated. Such feelings were described as ‘being seen’ *only* for their

gender, feeling ‘on show’, or ‘held representative’ of all trans people; exacerbated in situations requiring movement to another address or at times of mixity with new flatmates:

Alex: They just think I’m a girl.

Interviewer: Okay.

Alex: I think also, like, during Fresher’s [the annual celebratory first week of term for university entrants] I went out with them a couple of times. [...] I’ve pushed myself out a bit. But yes, it’s like...

Interviewer: What is the weird feeling that you mentioned in respects of getting pushed into the girls?

Alex: It’s like, I don’t feel like a girl so being part of the girls is, like, really weird and I feel almost like I’ve disguised myself or something... I feel sneaky. I feel like I’m lying or something and also, it brings up a feeling like, when I said I was part of the LGBT society, I was worried that they would start thinking I was, like, going to perv on them or something. Like, they think you fancy everybody. So, I think there’s, like, I don’t know how to put it... So when they’re trying to make you part of... like one of the girls, you feel like it’s wrong and you feel like “No, you don’t want me.”

Alex describes how he has participated in difficult conversations about the sensitive use of gendered language with flatmates. He also explains that because he is still usually treated as female, he has distanced himself from the friendship circle shared by his cisgender peers. Presence, within his residence – and interactions with flatmates who lack understanding of gender diversity – give rise to feelings of being untrue to oneself: as ‘disguised’, ‘sneaky’, ‘lying’. He also articulates well-documented tropes of queerness being felt as perversion, a remnant of decades of prejudice levelled at gender and sexual minorities alike (Bell, 1995).

Further accommodations guidance may be helpful in circumventing awkward situations in which a trans person feels unable to express their identity with those with whom they reside. An example of one such scenario is provided by Jane:

Jane: One of my flatmates was an extreme Christian and she didn't appreciate me coming out and didn't really like me much. So she would deadname me a lot. I was not her fan but I just ignored her. I avoided her like the plague. [...] The other ones moved out eventually so it ended up being just me and her... We had a few disputes... not like very confrontational. Just passive aggressive.

Interviewer: thinking in terms of yourself or other trans people, y'know, in student halls... Are there any other issues we should be made aware of?

Jane: Er no. Not that I can think of. One of my flatmates – friends even – are incredibly supportive to the point where they had a little tea party when he got on T which is cute. I can't think of anything else.

Jane highlights the 'passive aggressive' tension existing between herself and a flatmate after 'coming out' as trans but also clarifies the support of her peers which mirror what Andrucki and Kaplan (2018) describe in the context of trans home spaces – a 'tea party' in celebration of the beginnings of Jane's gender transition and a materialising of queerness through 'T' party gatherings and objects, furnishings and décor that murky gendered norms.

Andrucki and Kaplan situate their work in the U.S. and in lieu of the increased depiction of trans people in television and film, stressing how 'homonormativity' (communicated through topics like marriage rights) regularly inflects the construction of different queer spaces. However, they also suggest most research still overwhelmingly centres on public spaces such as bathrooms (Doan, 2007; 2010). Singh *et al.* (2013) question how 'the gaze' is felt by trans people and suggests this is crucial in tackling a painful erasure of trans lives that can occur in and through space. Some of their participants stressed a need to invoke invisibility, strategically,

to lessen the impacts of transphobia on their lives. Where participants diverged from gendered norms, many felt hypervisible and detailed a constant scrutiny of the body to match male/female norms. This often manifest as a feeling of observation, causing participants to monitor their own and others' reactions; a hypervigilance resulting in self scrutiny of presentation in efforts to sustain a 'coherent' gender-based narrative. These tensions on campus relate explicitly to the availability of our third space of focus in this article – spaces of teaching, learning and socialising.

4 SPACES OF TEACHING, LEARNING AND SOCIALISING

Experiencing invisibility in queer and/or trans communities because of stereotypes is common and can serve as a barrier to recognition which is then later felt as an erasure:

Kurt: when I legally changed my name and I got a new card, some stuff is still wrong because they can't match up the system. So my email has still got the wrong initials. And it's really frustrating because everybody knows how university emails are generated so I say what my name is and then people look at my email and go, "well, why is your email address different?" [...] And I see that every day and I'm like, that is a microaggression and it's something that I just have to kind of let go.

Kurt posits that disjointed systems and processes often curtail involvement in participatory spaces – such as convivial or activist groups, academic networks, conferences and other events. Student support teams, for instance, can authorise a change of email for a student undergoing a gender transition but the design of digital infrastructures on campus means that the user i.d. at the 'back end' of an email address continues to show former initials ('deadname') during the use of photocopiers, printers or the writing of documents on the campus' network. This is a bigger issue of the sex/gender logic that structures most computing algorithms rather than a challenge specific to the campus per se but Kurt suggested this is a micro-aggression that curtails full

participation whilst impacting wellbeing (Bivens, 2017). Storrie and Rohleder (2018) suggest similar, contending that the repeated mention of a deadname can convey hostility whilst perpetuating heteronormativity; combining into an oppression damaging to both physical and mental health. It is in such instances that LGBT groups have been underlined as crucial for the inclusion of trans people in campus culture.

Beyond the digital barriers to spaces of teaching, learning and socialising, participants felt that the existing LGBT network provides a welcoming space in which to converse about the challenges confronting them. This network provides support, together with convivial space for the formation of friendship and/or sexual and romantic relationships. However, postgraduates did not feel the LGBT network was as welcoming as it could be for trans people and saw the group as being of more benefit to younger undergraduates. Kurt explained that younger undergraduates tended to be more interested in frequenting the ‘meat market of gay bars’ rather than the alternative ‘queer nights’ he favoured. Blake makes a similar point:

Blake: I know there’s the society [LGBT network] ... but I feel a bit awkward because I haven’t been to any. So it might not be but it sounds forced. Like, it would be stilted. Like, “hi, you’re another trans person and we have to be friends.” So I don’t know anyone else that’s trans and I’d love to, but I don’t really see anyone, raising any issues. Even within the society, on the Facebook page, it just seems to be like, “we’ve got this event.” And that’s it. No one’s really talking about anything and you do feel quite alone I guess. [...] There isn’t anything else and we have no talks and I feel every student here should have some kind of talk on pronouns. Y’know, in the introductory thing where they talk about meningitis and everything.

Blake highlights how a lack of visibility makes him feel ‘alone’ and ‘invalidated’, suggesting the university might change induction events and welcome materials to increase representation of trans, non-binary and those of other marginalised genders. An ‘ally’ programme may also be useful whilst other participants contended that seeing more LGBT ‘successes’ might improve

their sense of belonging *to* – and thus, involvement *in* – teaching, learning and social spaces (see, also, Garvey and Drezner, 2013). Several people wished to draw attention to what they perceived as a lack of current provision on campus in these respects:

Kurt: I guess that's the other thing. Boards that sort of have, say, the university newsfeed that no one reads. That's all very... sort of... straight and sanitised. So when it's LGBT history month, they don't even put that up on the board or if it's Black history month, they also don't put it up there on the screens that flash news. I'm like, that's a really simple thing that you could do. Have as one of your six revolving news stories that nobody cares about... one of them being that. I'm not saying that people would necessarily read it but it would subtly be there all the time. Whereas instead, you get the banner outside the Student Union that says, "LGBT history month" or 'Black history month'.

Kurt was among the participants who argued that LGBT representation is currently restricted to a series of ad hoc events like Pride and 'LGBT history month', ignoring much queer news, events and information that could be showcased on a rolling basis.

In short, we see signs of trans students and staff attempting to get recognition for who they are on campus without exacerbating stereotypes, especially in relation to the body *within* different spaces of the campus that are discursively coded as binary male/female. Participants often discussed how this dilemma also has a community aspect as their image becomes – or does not become – part of what queer and/or trans people 'look like' and individual decisions become more politically fraught.

5 CONCLUSIONS

We have highlighted how entanglements of different spaces with gender can silence, marginalise and exclude those who do not fit within the male/female binary. Most of these strategies centre around presentation of the body, 'passing' and avoidance of hostility. The

tyranny of gender bolsters norms and expectations of stereotypical male/female expression that shape, and are shaped by, different places on campus. It is important to note that not all trans people have the same experiences. For example, staff, postgraduates, undergraduates, non-binary and binary trans people experience the campus in varied ways – and these experiences are made meaningful in and through place. Whilst our research has highlighted multiple challenges faced by trans students and staff, it is also important to recognise that these are not particular to spaces of higher education but also taint, experiences of urban spaces, for example.

The misgendering and microaggressions described in this paper highlight a need to reflect on available support channels for trans people *specific* to different campuses, specific student compositions and the particular cultures that then develop from these. Universities offer space to challenge lasting stigma by bettering gender inclusive policies, facilities and services, increasing education and encouraging individuals to ‘live as themselves’. Doan’s (2010) tyranny of gender emphasises a shared struggle that impacts *all* people (cis and trans). Changes in and to taught content, improved name change processes and the tracking of gender transitions in both students and staff, as well as diversified recruitment, are all strategies that could support universities in building spaces welcoming of all genders.

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