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Non-binary individuals, visibility and legitimacy at work: future crafting inclusive organisations in times of inclusion hysteresis

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ABSTRACT

Non-binary gender identity is central to political and organisational progress towards and backlash against the inclusion of non-binary individuals. We conceptualised the tension between progress and backlash and coined the term, inclusion hysteresis, to frame this period of tension. Drawing on a dramaturgical approach, we studied the experiences of 30 non-binary individuals at work. We identified how non-binary individuals' experiences are shaped by their counter-narratives for inclusion and dominant narratives of backlash, fuelled by populist campaigns of moral panics, phobias, and exclusion. We offer a theoretical extension by revealing how to overcome inclusion hysteresis through future crafting. We make a practical contribution by operationalising future crafting to help HR professionals overcome populist dominant narratives and design inclusive organisational practices and routines with non-binary individuals, drawing on their counter-narratives of inclusion.

KEYWORDS

Non-binary; gender identity; Goffman; visibility; legitimacy; HRM; inclusion; hysteresis

Introduction

While social movements promote equality and inclusion for historically disadvantaged groups (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2021), there is also a growing backlash against demands for social justice. The struggle for visibility and legitimacy manifests between interfield struggles of proponents of 'woke' (demands for social justice for historically disadvantaged communities) and 'anti-woke' (resistance and backlash against social justice demands) agendas. 'Anti-wokeism' is spreading in the political field and academic circles (e.g. Foss & Klein 2022; Wright, 2022), undermining the progress made toward accommodating demands for inclusion (Thomason et al., 2023). In this

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paper, we explore the demands for inclusion among non-binary individuals, an umbrella term encompassing a spectrum of gender identities that do not conform to the traditional dichotomy of male or female. Some transgender and gender non-conforming individuals identify as non-binary. A transgender individual is a person whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Gender nonconforming pertains to behaviours and expressions that diverge from the conventional expectations and norms associated with one's perceived gender. Some transgender and gender non-conforming individuals may adopt a binary gender identity, while others may choose a non-binary gender identity.

While there has been considerable progress towards the recognition and visibility of non-binary individuals, there are setbacks, backlash and resistance. In line with Bourdieu (1997/2000) we frame this historical context as hysteresis, which signifies a tension between progress for social justice and pressures to uphold tradition. Hysteresis in social sciences refers to moments in history where there is slow progress due to social inertia (Atkinson, 2013; Özbilgin & Erbil, 2024a). Hysteresis exists between the demands for inclusion in counter-narratives (i.e. narratives that demand inclusion of marginalised outsiders, such as non-binary individuals) and the dominant narratives (i.e. narratives of exclusion by dominant groups) against these demands for inclusion. Pierre Bourdieu (1997/2000) identifies moments where there is a disjuncture between the recognition of embodied rights of disadvantaged groups and ongoing practices of exclusion as hysteresis. The concept of hysteresis captures the tensions between the social justice demands of non-binary individuals and exclusionary dominant traditional narratives. Hysteresis is an aversive state as organisations must embrace changes in the moral landscape and break away from routine and tradition to survive (Graham, 2020). In this paper, we address the question: How do non-binary individuals negotiate their visibility and legitimacy in the context of inclusion hysteresis? We conceptualise the tension between progress and backlash as hysteresis and coin the term, *inclusion hysteresis*, to frame this period of tension for and against inclusion of non-binary individuals. We explore inclusion hysteresis as the struggle between orthodox (dominant, i.e. binary identity) and heterodox (counter, i.e. non-binary identity) narratives (Bourdieu, 1997/2000) on the legitimacy and visibility of non-binary individuals at work and offer strategies for future crafting HRM practices for inclusion of non-binary workers. Future crafting is a policy approach which does not rely on the flawed assumptions and practices of the past but crafts a policy to capture the normative expectations of future generations for inclusion as central principles (Özbilgin, 2023a).

We draw on Goffman's (1956) stage theory of visibility and Dowling and Pfeffer's (1975) theory of legitimacy. Our theoretical framework thus integrates Goffman's stage theory and Dowling and Pfeffer's legitimacy theory to explore how non-binary individuals manage visibility and legitimacy in organisational settings. Based on a Goffmanian theorisation, which considers social settings as a theatrical stage, we explore individual narratives as attempts at managing how they perform and present themselves and how others perceive them (Goffman, 1956). In particular, we explore visibility with a frontstage, a place where individuals present themselves to the world, and the backstage. In this intimate private place, individuals can be themselves without the fear of being observed and judged. Focusing on front and backstage performances and narratives, we can identify tensions between people's private lives, public appearances, hopes and experiences. We draw on Dowling and Pfeffer's (1975) theory of organisational legitimacy to account for how individuals become accepted at work. With regard to links between the theoretical approach/analysis and future crafting, the frontstage/backstage distinction of the dramaturgical approach produced the dominant narratives and the counter-narratives.

It is reported that some multinational organisations are leading the inclusion of non-binary individuals as part of their diversity and inclusion practices and progressive human resource management (HRM) activities (Fletcher & Marvell, 2021). The inclusion of non-binary individuals is concerned with creating a welcoming environment for individuals of various gender identities beyond the traditional binary categories, including some transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2024b). However, the inclusion efforts remain patchy and weak as they are generally not central priorities for diversity and inclusion interventions in organisations (cf. OECD, 2022; CIPD, 2023). Due to their marginalised and stigmatised status, non-binary individuals may find it difficult to affect the design of policies that may help their inclusion (Fletcher, 2021). In this paper, we explore inclusion hysteresis as the struggle between orthodox (dominant, i.e. binary identity) and heterodox (counter, i.e. non-binary identity) narratives (Bourdieu, 1997/2000) on the legitimacy and visibility of non-binary individuals at work and offer strategies for future crafting HRM practices for inclusion of non-binary workers. Future crafting is a policy approach which does not rely on the flawed assumptions and practices of the past but crafts a policy to capture the normative expectations of future generations for inclusion as central principles (Özbilgin, 2023a).

The proportion of individuals identifying as transgender, gender-variable, or non-binary in the overall population stands at two per cent (Statista,

2023). However, small numbers may be partly due to a lack of safety and security. Even if non-binary individuals cannot come out en masse in their workplaces, organisations are likely to have non-binary clients, customers, service users or family members of workers. Globally, nonbinary gender identity is legally recognised in 16 countries and certain states within the USA (Our World in Data, 2023). Due to their supportive legislative frameworks, Germany and Sweden have the highest proportion of self-identified non-binary individuals (Ipsos, 2021). The UK presents as a country with an unsupportive legal approach to recognising non-binary identity. The national petition for recognition of non-binary identity was rejected after parliamentary debate (UK Parliament, 2023). As a result, a recent report by the CIPD (2023) showed that non-binary individuals are twice as likely to feel psychologically unsafe compared to cis-gender heterosexual individuals at work in the UK.

Recent studies report that organisational efforts to include non-binary individuals have not gained momentum (Hennekam & Ladge, 2022). There remains a disjuncture between inclusion in legal rights and what happens in organisational settings. Regarding transgender and non-binary individuals, the Diva Survey (DIVA 2021) reported that one-third of non-binary individuals were not open about their gender identity in the workplace in the UK. Most of those open about their gender identity would disclose this to their close circle of work colleagues. Due to widespread stigmatisation, non-binary individuals remain marginalised and discriminated against at work. Goryunova et al. (2021) point out that non-binary individuals in the US face workplace discrimination due to rigid gender normativity and cissexism. Cissexism is the ideological assertion that cisgender identities, conforming to the sex assigned at birth, possess inherent superiority and authenticity over non-binary identities (Sumerau et al., 2016). The cissexist ideology negatively impacts non-binary and other gender-non-conforming individuals' work experiences, manifesting in constrained support and acknowledgement of their rights within the workplace (Hennekam & Köllen, 2023).

A historical perspective could shed light on the systemic bias that non-binary individuals face in institutional contexts, including the workplace (Nadal et al., 2014). Systemic bias refers to how specific social systems or institutions exhibit historically naturalised prejudices against certain groups, resulting in unjustified inequalities. These biases arise from various factors, including uneven cultural norms, structural inequalities, and historical exclusion. Unlike individual biases, systemic biases are embedded in the core structure of institutions such as education, employment, and the criminal justice system (Baykut et al., 2022). Systemic biases manifest as disproportionate representation or limited

access to services. Non-binary individuals may encounter systemic bias in institutional contexts, such as binary norms, dress codes, and legal documents requiring binary gender classification (Dray et al., 2020). Many societies do not recognise non-binary individuals as having a separate gender identity, leading to discrimination and exclusion in crucial areas such as education, employment, health, and housing. Thus, fundamental systemic biases of social institutions may perpetuate these inequalities and injustices. Addressing systemic biases is necessary to include non-binary individuals in the workplace (Austin et al., 2016). Early attempts at combating systemic bias through policy changes include the implementation of gender-neutral pronouns, the recognition of non-binary gender markers in legal documents, and inclusive workplace initiatives that promote gender neutrality (Human Rights Campaign, 2016).

In this paper, we use dramaturgy, a novel and a useful approach not commonly utilised in HRM research, to explore the narratives and counter-narratives that elucidate non-binary workers' experiences within the context of inclusion hysteresis. We present three dominant and counter-narrative pairs that lead to social dramas for non-binary individuals. Social dramas are negative outcomes that people experience in the context of where they work and live (Greenhalgh et al., 2022). We identify three paired narratives, the clash of which leads to inclusion hysteresis: (1) Non-binary gender identity is a threat to biological gender versus diversity in gender identity is a fundamental human condition; (2) identity demands of non-binary individuals for recognition and visibility are not legitimate versus identity demands of non-binary individuals are legitimate, and (3) non-binary identity is a personal and private concern, not an organisational concern versus non-binary identity is a personal and political claim and an organisational concern for inclusion. The inclusion hysteresis leads to interconnected social dramas, such as exclusion, harassment, discrimination, and devaluation that non-binary individuals commonly experience, as outlined in the literature review. The counter-narratives of non-binary individuals show how they acknowledge and sometimes reflexively challenge the dominant narratives through which they are discriminated against, excluded and ignored.

The empirical contribution of the paper is the identification of paired narratives shaping inclusion hysteresis. Our theoretical contribution is the extension of the concept of hysteresis to account for and operationalise the inclusion of nonbinary individuals. Empirically we illustrate specific areas where non-binary individuals face challenges and where organisations can intervene. By understanding these narratives, employers can craft targeted inclusion policies that address the unique needs of non-binary employees, thus fostering a more inclusive and supportive

work environment. We draw on these narratives for designing inclusive organisations and discuss how the inclusion hysteresis could be overcome through future crafting of human resources policies through inclusive design. The practical contribution is a framework and blueprint for HR professionals for overcoming the inclusion hysteresis.

Theories of visibility and legitimacy: the inclusion of non-binary individuals in context

Practices and theories of equality, diversity and inclusion are normatively interconnected (Jakob Sadeh & Mair, 2023). Syed & Özbilgin (2009) explain that diversity and inclusion strategies of organisations are nested in macro, meso and micro-level relations of power and emerge from the historical struggles of disadvantaged groups for legitimacy. We mobilise two theoretical lenses to frame the inclusion and backlash of non-binary individuals: visibility and legitimacy. When there are demands for social and organisational inclusion of non-binary individuals, there is often inclusion hysteresis that slows down progress. Inclusion hysteresis emerges at the interplay of dominant narrative and counter-narrative pairings (Table 1). We draw on Erving Goffman's (1956) stage theory to highlight the significance of visibility for non-binary individuals. The stage theory suggests a Goffmanian gap between the backstage and the frontstage. Visibility of non-binary individuals may bring their backstage intimate private selves to the public frontstage where they can ultimately be comfortable without the fear of exclusion. Such convergence between backstage and frontstage is only possible if organisational design recognises and respects demands for visibility.

Designing inclusive organisations with non-binary individuals requires three distinct processes. First, the unique demands of non-binary individuals need to be understood. We explore Dowling and Pfeffer's (1975) legitimacy theory to frame the demands of non-binary individuals for legitimacy and the respective setbacks they face. Second, these demands must be understood as counter-narratives and negotiated in settings with dominant narratives. We explore inclusion hysteresis as tensions at the nexus of dominant narratives and counter-narratives about the inclusion

Table 1. Conceptual framework of non-binary visibility and legitimacy at work in the context of hysteresis.

	Dominant narratives of exclusion	Counter-narratives of inclusion
Legitimacy	Low level of legitimacy for non-binary individuals	High level of legitimacy for non-binary individuals
Visibility	Visibility is limited to the private backstage	Visibility is allowed in the public frontstage
Inclusion hysteresis	Demands for tradition and exclusion	Demands for progress and inclusion

of non-binary individuals. Drawing on the notion of hysteresis allows us to understand the temporary clash between the embodied demands of non-binary individuals and entrenched dominant narratives and practices of exclusion at work. Third, counter-narratives of non-binary individuals could be turned into future designs for organisations to overcome the impasse and inertia for inclusion. We identify possibilities for future crafting HRM policies based on counter-narratives of non-binary individuals for inclusion, which we explore in the conclusion.

Goffman's (1956) stage theory views social interactions as performances, with individuals shaping the impressions others form of them. Stage theory provides a framework for understanding how non-binary individuals navigate social interactions and express their gender identity while managing workplace discrimination (Brickell, 2022). Using Goffmanian framing, Ozbilgin et al. (2023) revealed that passing or coming out experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals emerge and unfold as they encounter supportive or unsupportive institutional contexts, allowing individuals to resist exclusion, backlash, and setbacks through different forms of passing. Non-binary individuals may present or hide their gender identity in a way that reflects their desired states of being and most comfortable selves, often in interaction with societal judgement and expectations rooted in binary gender norms (Hennekam & Ladge, 2022; Lehmann et al., 2021). Non-binary individuals are not the sole arbiters of their social performances and impressions. How they present themselves is always constrained by the often prejudiced and stigmatising impressions that society has of them (Cancela et al., 2022). Discrimination against non-binary individuals at work stifles non-binary individuals' efforts to present their gender identity in a way that reflects their true selves. Binary gender norms and institutional practices may reinforce discrimination, making it difficult for non-binary individuals to find suitable clothing, use gendered bathrooms, and navigate legal documents requiring binary gender classification (Davidson, 2016). These challenges may result in feelings of exclusion and marginalisation.

Accordingly, non-verbal communication has become crucial for non-binary individuals seeking to enhance their workplace visibility (O'Neil, 2023). Non-verbal communication is also essential in social interactions, and stage theory suggests that non-binary individuals may use body images, gestures or other non-verbal communication methods to express their gender identity and indicate their affiliation with the non-binary community (Hardy et al., 2020). Non-binary individuals experience varied degrees of challenges to inclusion, feeling obliged to hide or free to reveal their gender identities as they move between front-stage and backstage performances throughout their lives, interacting with

different social and cultural institutions such as family, friends, law, healthcare, education, and employment (Kamasak et al., 2020). Non-verbal cues they receive from different institutions shape their expectations and forms of communication, guiding non-binary individuals to negotiate their interactions.

Dowling and Pfeffer's (1975) theory of legitimacy posits that organisations support or withdraw the legitimacy of social norms at work. As a microcosm of wider society, organisations may render certain norms illegitimate or not legitimate (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2021). Non-binary individuals' demands for legitimacy are now widely recognised as part of sexual orientation and gender identity equality. The LGBTQ+ movement, which is the umbrella social movement for human rights of sexual orientation and gender identity groups, has UN-level representation, which is promoting equality across all signatory countries (United Nations (UN), 2023). Non-binary individuals are included in the LGBTQ+ movement. Changes in the international normative context, which recognises the human rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, have been ceremonially acknowledged by most multinational organisations. Yet, there are also adversarial contexts where the human rights of LGBTQ+ individuals are not fully established or LGBTQ+ individuals are criminalised (Fitzsimmons et al., 2023; Özbilgin & Erbil, 2023). The reason for this ceremonially progressive approach by multinational organisations is the prediction that the UN's efforts to provide human rights for LGBTQ+ individuals will become widespread internationally. Therefore, they adopt supportive policies to overcome the inclusion hysteresis between progress and tradition.

Methods

Goffman (1956) introduced the concept of dramaturgy as a metaphorical framework that views social interaction as a theatrical performance that draws on different narratives. In this perspective, individuals are actors, and social situations are stages where they perform various roles to manage impressions and shape others' perceptions. Dramaturgy is used to analyse social interactions in various settings, including personal relationships, workplaces, and public spaces. It provides a framework for understanding how individuals present themselves, how they manage others' perceptions, and how social order is maintained through these performances. By viewing social life as a series of performances, dramaturgy offers a nuanced way of understanding social interactions, highlighting the constructed nature of social reality and the strategic behaviour individuals engage in to navigate the social world. We employed dramaturgy to elucidate the prevailing power dynamics and narratives that shape the degree of recognition accorded to non-binary individuals in the

workplace. Dramaturgy is a social science research method frequently used in sociology's subfield of criminology. Dramaturgy enables researchers to interrogate power dynamics that underlie narratives while elucidating causality and motivation through fundamental questions such as who, what, when, where, why, and for whom (Burke, 1969). Due to its emphasis on examining underlying structures and mechanisms that shape social phenomena (Greenhalgh et al., 2022), dramaturgy is highly consistent with the critical realist perspective. The critical realist perspective allows us to understand the deep reasons and structures behind what happens in the social world beyond what meets the eye. It recognises that individual experiences (subjective identity constructs) and the larger social forces (objective social structures) are interconnected at multiple levels of analysis (Özbilgin et al., 2022). Therefore, critical realism bridges and transcends the spurious divide between the subjective experiences of individuals and the objective structures of organisations and society.

Sampling

We conducted an online study to collect data for this study on individuals who self-identify as non-binary. The study was conducted between January and March 2023. Guided by the feedback from peer reviewers, we reinitiated our study online in June 2023 to gather further data. The study generated 30 participants in total. We reached participants through NGOs working on LGBTQ+ and non-binary rights to secure participation. Employing an inclusive convenience sampling technique, we extended our call for participants through global networks, seeking to encompass a wide and diverse respondent range by promoting our study.

We opted for a global sample to explore the international context. We acknowledge that non-binary individuals' gender identity related experiences are globally varied and shaped by local socio-legal and cultural dynamics and traditions. To augment the sample size, we utilised Instagram as a supplementary source, reaching out to users who had included the hashtag #nonbinary in their profile or posts and inviting them to participate in our research. There are limitations to this study. Conducting a study with a global sample has inevitable challenges of aggregating patterns that may undermine granular differences in definitions, experiences, narrations and trajectories of the inclusion and exclusion of non-binary individuals across different contexts.

Our participants were between 22 and 59 years old. Sexual orientation identities exhibited a high degree of diversity, with over half of the sample identifying as pansexual, gay, or bisexual. Participants are located across 11 different countries. The majority identified as working-class or middle-class. Our study included participants from 25 professions, and

one was unemployed. The participants' economic engagement duration spanned from one year to 45 years. The unemployed participant reported surviving with the assistance of their parents. This diverse demographic composition provided a broad perspective on the experiences of non-binary individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds (see [Table 2](#) for details of participant demography).

Study content

Our study consists of three main sections and encompasses 24 open-ended questions that invite non-binary individuals to provide details of their experiences of inclusion and exclusion at work. The first section engages with the participants' processes of identifying and exploring their gender identities. Non-binary individuals are invited to explain their gender identity constructs and relevant experiences. The second section focuses on understanding the participants' experiences of inclusion and exclusion within their workplaces. The third section aims to collect demographic information about participants. Overall the study content focused on fleshing out dominant exclusionary narratives that non-binary individuals encountered at work and counter-narratives that they developed for inclusion.

To ensure the privacy and anonymity of non-binary participants against the risk of harassment and discrimination, we treated the field study data, materials and related information with utmost sensitivity and care. We implemented measures such as anonymising the collected data, omitting identifying information, assigning pseudonyms to each participant by considering gender-neutral names from their cultures, and excluding any details that could reveal their identities. We protected participants from emotional distress by allowing all questions to be optional. We also piloted the study questions with LGBTQ+ individuals in our networks to improve the use of inclusive terms and questions.

Data analysis

We downloaded the study responses to prepare data for analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process, we adopted an abductive approach, with each author reading the data simultaneously and forming codes. Collaborative efforts facilitated compiling a consensual coding list with individual applications and subsequent comparisons. The resultant joint decisions permitted iterative refinements to coding. As Braun and Clarke (2019) suggested, we employed collective coding to enhance our data analysis and to develop a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon we study. By employing the abductive approach, a dynamic interplay between codings and existing literature informed our analysis, culminating

Table 2. Demographic information about participants.

Pseudonym	Degree	Religion/belief	Age	Assigned sex at birth	Gender identity	Sexual orientation	Ethnicity	Socio-economic class	Location	Profession	Economically active (years)
Adrian	Bachelor's degree	Atheist	27	Female	Non-binary	Queer	White	Lower middle class	UK	Culture and Engagement Operations	10
Brett	BS Business	Christian	59	Male	Gender fluid	Pansexual	White	Middle class	UK	Operations executive	45
Clay	BA	Agnostic	28	Male	Non-binary	Bisexual / pansexual	White British	Working class	UK	Marketing Technology Consultant	6
Devin	BA hons media and Culture	Atheist	34	Female	Non-binary (agender)	Queer	White British	Working class	UK	Community manager	16
Elliot	Undergraduate	Agnostic	35	Female	Non-binary	Pansexual	White British	Middle class	UK	Community & Events Manager	10
Gray Harshal	Master's Degree PhD	Atheist Humanity, Spirituality	26 44	Male Female	Non-binary Fluid	Gay Homo romantic, Asexual	White-Irish Assamese	Working class Middle class	UK India	HR Teaching	4 21
Jessie	PhD	Atheist	42	Female	Gender nonconforming	Gay	Caucasian	Middle class	USA	Scholar	21
Luca	High school	Agnostic	50	Female	Non-binary	Lesbian	White European	Lower middle class	Italy	Unemployed	Survived with the help of their parent
Po	Master degree	Pagan beliefs	25	Female	Genderfluid	Bisexual	Italian	Working class	Italy	Customer service representative	0.5
Ryan	Bachelor's degree	Agnostic	35	Female	Non-binary	Bisexual	White European	Working class	UK	HR	10
Zobel	Higher education	Atheist	22	Female	Non-binary	Queer	German	Working poor	Austria	Actor	3
Kairi	Bachelor's degree	Atheist	Not provided	Male	Non-binary	Bisexual	Japanese	Working class	Japan	Talent, model, radio personality	10
Paz	Bachelor's degree	Agnostic	31	Female	Non-binary	Gay	Spanish	Middle class	Spain	Cook	8

(Continued)



Table 2. Continued.

Pseudonym	Degree	Religion/belief	Age	Assigned sex at birth	Gender identity	Sexual orientation	Ethnicity	Socio-economic class	Location	Profession	Economically active (years)
Deniz	Bachelors degree	Atheist	30	Male	Non-binary	Bisexual	Turkish	Working class	Turkey	Dogman	5
Ravello	Master of Arts	Atheist	25	N/A	Non-binary	Bisexual	Caucasian	Working class	Italy	Multidisciplinary designer, DE&I consultant	5
River	Master degree	Atheist	58	Female	Non binary, trans masc	Queer	White	Middle class	USA	Scholar	20+
Engel	Master degree	Agnostic	40	Female		Lesbian	German	Middle class	USA	Manager	13
Umut	Master degree	Atheist	45	Male		Gay	Turkish	Working class	Turkey	Engineer	18
Zuri	Masters Degree	Atheist	27	Male	Agender	Gay	White	Working class	France	Researcher	3
Jordan	BA	Atheist	39	Male	Genderfluid	Gay	Caucasian	Middle class	USA	Administrator	18
Parker	Master degree	Atheist	53	Male	Genderqueer	Queer	White	Middle class	USA	Multimedia designer	25+
Bilge	B.A	Atheist	39	Female	Non-binary	Pansexual/Eosexual	Kurdish & Caucasian & Bulgarian	Middle class	Turkey	Program Coordinator	20
Aspen	PhD	Pagan	38	Male	Non-binary	Bisexual	White	Middle class	UK	Scholar	12
Nova	College	Atheist	26	Male	Non-binary	Queer	White	Middle class	USA	Area manager	20
Ciel	Master degree	Christian	36	Male	Non-binary	Bisexual	White	Middle class	France	Data analyst	12
August	Post-Graduate Certificate	Christian	34	Female	Trans masculine, genderqueer	Gay/Queer	White	Working class	Canada	Consultant	18
Alfie	Master degree	Agnostic	35	Male	Non-binary	Gay	White	Working class	UK	HR	10
Avery	Master degree	Agnostic	25	Female	Nonbinary	Pansexual	Caucasian	Lower middle class	UK	Doctor	1
Juul	Master degree	Atheist	28	Female	Agender	Asexual	White	Upper middle class	Belgium	Researcher	4

in three main themes. Within the context of these thematic frameworks, employing a dramaturgical approach, we discerned dominant and counter-narratives and inclusion hysteresis.

Using a dramaturgical approach, we initially identified dominant and counter-narratives corresponding to each theme (Greenhalgh et al., 2022). We coded narratives that shaped participants' frontstage performances in line with institutional norms as dominant narratives. We coded narratives that reflected participants' backstage expectations, hopes and claims, and narratives where they described their more comfortable selves as counter-narratives. The dramaturgical approach revealed that dominant narratives commonly depicted exclusionary experiences or traditional binary perspectives faced by non-binary individuals. In contrast, counter-narratives offered insights into the progressive and inclusive demands of non-binary individuals. We then examined the hysteresis between the dominant and counter-narratives within each theme. Ultimately, we integrated our findings by formulating conclusions on the wider social contexts that shape the workplace experiences of non-binary individuals. The dramaturgical approach allowed us to illuminate a complex interplay of perspectives and meanings across dominant narratives and counter-narratives (Feldman, 1994). Dominant narratives that illustrate participant experiences and feelings are juxtaposed by counter-narratives that encapsulate participant demands and prospective directions, thus fostering a nuanced understanding of the phenomena under study. See [Table 3](#) for the data structure of the study.

Table 3. Codes, subthemes, and themes.

Codes	Subthemes	Themes	Dominant narrative (DN) Counter-narratives (CN)
'Involvement', 'exclusion', 'belonging', 'mainstreaming' 'Femininity', 'masculinity', 'gentleness', 'effeminateness', 'genderism', 'cisgender'	Inclusion of non-binary individuals Diverse gender roles	Gender identity	DN: Non-binary gender identity is a threat to biological gender CN: Diversity in gender identity is a fundamental human condition
'I/we deserve...;', 'normative', 'organisational politics', 'demands', 'coping vs thriving', 'responsibilities' 'We vs. they', 'anti-discrimination', 'visibility', 'pronouns'	Rights of non-binary individuals Equality on gender identity	Legitimacy	DN: Identity demands of non-binary individuals are not legitimate CN: Non-binary demands are legitimate
'Culture', 'colleagues', 'position', 'power relations' 'Restroom', 'workplace', 'clothing'	Context Space	Concerns	DN: Non-binary identity is a personal and private concern, not an organisational concern CN: Identity is a personal and political claim and an organisational concern for inclusion

To avoid flattening contextual aspects of the data, we introduced and narrated our participants' self-identified demographic qualities such as age, gender identity, location, ethnicity, and work and life stories. We explicated how their demographic qualities interplay with their choices and chances as non-binary individuals at work.

Inclusion hysteresis between dominant narratives against and counter-narratives for the inclusion of non-binary individuals at work

Recognition, visibility and legitimacy of non-binary identity is a recent concern for human resource policies that shape inclusion at work (Davidson, 2016; Schudson & Morgenroth, 2022). Inclusion hysteresis exists between progress towards inclusion and dominant narratives against inclusion. Responses of non-binary individuals reveal that there are dominant narratives resting on old dogma and dated assumptions about gender identity that present barriers to inclusion at work. We investigate three narrative pairings for and against the inclusion of non-binary individuals. For each dominant narrative against the inclusion of non-binary individuals, we present a counter-narrative that non-binary individuals have offered for their inclusion at work. Inclusion hysteresis is explored at the interplay of these contrasting narratives.

Dominant narrative 1: non-binary gender identity is a threat to biological gender

Despite growing international recognition of non-binary identity as an alternative to the male and female gender, there remain significant narratives of resistance to this transformation on two accounts: cultural traditionalism of the Global North and commitment to the gender binary. Regarding cultural traditionalism, it is a truism to state that the gender binary is the dominant narrative that has shaped much of the traditional inclusion policies, with few exceptions (Ozturk & Tatli, 2016; CIPD, 2023). Only in the last two decades have there been legal and social reforms to recognise, legitimate and render visible non-binary identity at organisational, social and national policy levels. These reforms have sought to degender organisational structures, temporal norms (Kamasak et al., 2020) and spatial arrangements to accommodate non-binary individuals and their gender identity needs (Dray et al., 2020). Some of these changes received considerable backlash. For example, proposals for degendering toilets have been pushed back by cultural traditionalists, who considered these changes a denigration of traditions (UK Government,

2003). Juul explained how they experienced traditionalist backlash while using single-sex restrooms as a non-binary person:

Although I don't hide my gender identity, I feel invisible in my workplace because it is structured in a binary way. There are only gendered restrooms, and introducing oneself with pronouns is uncommon. They'll give you a heads-up in the restroom and usually tell you to use the ladies' room. I believe it's due to a lack of knowledge and understanding about this topic [gender identity inclusion], leading them to ignore it completely. (Juul, 28-year-old, asexual, white)

The second stream of objections emanates from those committed to the supposedly binary construction of biological gender. Although contested widely by biologists themselves, discredited biologically deterministic accounts are offered to undermine non-binary identity as being arbitrary and a threat to the supposedly biological gender order (Hopkins & Richardson, 2021). Biologists have widely contested the view that gender is a binary, showing that even at the chromosomal level gender presents a spectrum and that non-binary gender identity is a scientifically sound biological identity category (Özbilgin, 2023a). Furthermore, this dominant narrative of non-binary identity as a threat to biological gender and gender equality has harmed the possibility of crucial solidarity between feminism and the LGBTQ+ movement. Some populist scholars such as Germaine Greer and Richard Dawkins, and public figures such as JK Rowling have resisted the idea of non-binary identity to supposedly protect the normative gender order (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2021). Using their commitment to gender binary as an excuse, they have promulgated populist narratives that undermined and positioned non-binary identity as a threat to gender equality in some cases (Pearce et al., 2020). This dominant narrative serves as a mechanism, stigmatising nonbinary individuals as deviant, leading to their marginalisation within the workplace. One of the participants, Jordan, who holds a managerial position in local government in one of the biggest US cities, referred to their experiences with the narrative that upheld biological gender at work.

Only once, when I wore a dress to the office, a colleague said, 'I do not understand what you are trying to prove here.' I said, 'Just ignore me, I am only doing it for attention' and she left me alone. (Jordan, 39-year-old, gay, Caucasian)

Counter-narrative 1: non-binary identity is a fundamental human condition

Honneth (2001) explains that individuals are driven towards recognition of their humanity and seek work and life experiences that recognise and respect their purpose, freedom, and dignity. Denial of such humanity leads to their dehumanisation (Haslam, 2006). Non-binary individuals in

our sample suggest that their identity is not an anomaly but a fundamental human condition lacking historical recognition. Thus, their claim for recognition demands respect for their human rights, and dignity at work. However, the dominant narratives have denied recognition and led to the dehumanisation of participants. As a result, in line with Ozbilgin et al. (2023), our participants struggled to reconcile their frontstage and backstage performances, feeling obliged to hide their non-binary identity. Furthermore, some participants reported resisting the dictum of the gender binary causing their dehumanisation. Elliot, who also has personal experience with neurodiversity as an autistic individual, explained how they resist the narrow deterministic accounts of gender binary:

I have never felt like I fit into the prescribed 'definitions' of femininity or masculinity. My gender feels nebulous and abstract. When I hear people talk about their experiences as women or men, I do not feel like I can relate - even if they are discussing things that affect me or what I have experienced, like menstruation/pregnancy. They just feel like alien concepts. Understanding myself as non-binary is freeing. I do not feel confined by the limitations of my body or others' perceptions of how I should express myself. (Elliot, 35-year-old, pansexual, white British)

Study participants often referred to how the gender binary presented a dehumanising straightjacket in which they felt an uneasy fit. They often considered their gender in the spectrum and gender performances as gender repertoires rather than dogmatic binary choices. Adrian, who has been employed and out with their gender identity in the legal industry for over ten years, illustrated how they resisted the gender binary, finding it constraining:

Being outside the binary of male or female, my gender identity does not fit within the spectrum of binary gender, as diverse as that is. Instead, my experience of gender is neither male nor female. (Adrian, 27-year-old, queer, white)

The first counter-narrative contests the notion of non-binary gender identity as a threat to gender binary and tradition, positing that non-binary identity has always existed and it does not challenge gender but adds to it another repertoire of gender performances. The inclusion hysteresis emerges between dated dogma based on biologically deterministic narratives and counter-narratives based on the inclusion demands of non-binary individuals. We take forward the non-binary participants' demands for recognition of their gender identity as a future crafting suggestion to discuss in the conclusion.

Dominant narrative 2: identity demands of non-binary individuals are not legitimate

Individuals identifying as having a non-binary identity continue to confront multifaceted risks, including discrimination, victimisation, and stress arising from societal marginalisation, due to a lack of social and

cultural legitimacy. Richards et al. (2016) found that non-binary individuals persistently encounter discriminatory practices within the healthcare system. According to a report by Stonewall (Bachman & Gooch, 2018), around 20 per cent of surveyed students reported that university staff members advised them to hide their non-binary identity to avoid transphobic discrimination. Educational and healthcare institutions are important organisations where people meet traditional structures that fail to offer them legitimacy. Workplaces present additional challenges for non-binary individuals. In national contexts such as Japan, where binary gender norms are strong, despite traditional art forms which allow non-binary identity, non-binary individuals feel the pressure of normative expectations (Dale, 2019). Kaira, who has been modelling for ten years and participated in our research from Japan, stated how their non-binary identity is received only in binary ways in their workplace:

I am a man, but I can be mistaken for a woman because of my appearance and demeanour. [indicating the complex duality of presentation and perception]. So I am also working as a woman there. (Kairi, age not provided, bisexual, Japanese)

With trigger laws in some states in the USA, non-binary identity is further delegitimated with the force of law. Books and other educational materials which contain mentions of non-binary identity are disallowed and banned, discussions of the non-binary identity are similarly monitored, and rare instances of the supportive debate are subjected to punitive measures. For example, Maia Kobabe's book 'Gender Queer', which narrates the experience of coming out as non-binary, was among the most frequently banned books in schools across the USA (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). In such institutional contexts, it is difficult for non-binary individuals to assert their legitimacy on their own. Almost all forms of social equality are won in solidarity with wider social movements. The marginal status of non-binary individuals within the LGBTQ+ movement and the lack of solidarity from other progressive movements feed the dominant narrative that the non-binary identity category is not legitimate. Avery, who has participated in the healthcare system as a medical professional for six years, expressed their tensions with the dominant gender narratives in their encounters with colleagues, treading on eggshells when choosing to disclose their non-binary identity:

I tend to feel out in relationships with colleagues prior to disclosing. [...] I am a doctor, and so my senior consultants tend not to know I'm nonbinary as they are more likely to have more conservative views. (Avery, 25-year-old, pansexual, Caucasian)

Counter-narrative 2: non-binary identity demands are legitimate

Goffman's (1956) notions of frontstage manifested in non-binary individuals' demands for legitimacy. While some participants were able to make their non-binary identity visible on the frontstage, some were unable to express their non-binary identity, keeping it in the private domain. What accounted for disclosing or hiding non-binary identity was the supportive and unsupportive nature of the context. In enlightened and supportive workplaces, participants reported that HRM policies and practices have evolved to acknowledge non-binary identity. Their narratives suggest the significance of the organisational context in overcoming the inclusion hysteresis, i.e. the disjuncture between traditional norms and demands for progress. Clay has worked in the marketing industry for six years and is married with two children. Clay highlighted how their non-binary identity is legitimated through LGBTQ+ support networks and inclusive culture in the workplace, even in the relatively hostile environment in Britain. The participant, however, also highlights the complexity of experiencing legitimacy and illegitimacy as a duality. The work involves many interactions with different positionalities and levels of awareness regarding non-binary identity:

My company is relatively progressive and contemporary. I came out at work a year ago and have been open about my identity. This was after working at the company for a few years, where people knew me as a cis person. I didn't make a big deal about coming out, but that's just my personality. My direct line manager and some of my team are supportive, but I have to work with many people across the business who aren't always as aware or supportive. I have spoken to our LGBTQ+ Employee Resource Group about some of the challenges trans and non-binary people have at work, and they were happy to listen and work with us on improving this. (Clay, 28-year-old, bisexual and pansexual, white British)

Participants often elaborated on how they navigate narratives of legitimacy and illegitimacy in their work. Participants who work in cis-gender and heteronormative workplaces often hide their non-binary identity, passing in line with the normative expectations of their workplaces. Gray, who has been working in the finance sector for four years, has recently disclosed their non-binary identity and explained how the organisational and political context affects their experiences of feeling legitimate and illegitimate, excluded and included at work:

I do not tend to portray my non-binary identity in the workplace due to a large hetero-normative culture in most workplaces. [...] I tend to work in places where I'm comfortable. I worked in downtown Chicago for four years, and I never worried about being discriminated against. Now I work in Kansas, and I'm an anomaly. [...] In a previous sales role, my pronouns on my LinkedIn page were they/them but due to the nature of the role and having to be in contact with mainly straight, older white men, I decided to change it so it was not off-putting. (Gray, 26-year-old, gay, white Irish)

Non-binary individuals negotiate their legitimacy in the context of their organisations and wider social environment. The counter-narrative of legitimacy is evident among all participants. However, they have not always asserted this counter-narrative with the fear of exclusion. The inclusion hysteresis between demands for legitimacy is resisted by narratives of illegitimacy based on tradition and cultural inertia. Like other progressive social movements, the non-binary movement also receives backlash against its claims for legitimacy, presenting a part of its inclusion hysteresis (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2021). The future crafting idea from this counter-narrative is the significance of explicit and subtle forms of legitimacy that workplaces may offer to include non-binary individuals.

Dominant narrative 3: non-binary identity is a personal and private concern, not an organisational concern

There are objections to the institutionalisation of non-binary rights and visibility as an organisational concern. In expressing these objections, individuals may frame non-binary identity as a private and personal matter. However, this argument fails to account for the widespread workplace discrimination and marginalisation experienced by non-binary individuals. Furthermore, considering non-binary identity irrelevant to workplace policy isolates and marginalises individuals. Our participant, Clay, explained that they experienced the pushback that their non-binary identity is unwelcome at work and how they reconciled this internally:

I focus on internal validation: I know who I am, and others' interpretation of me is not very important. (Clay, 28-year-old, bisexual and pansexual, white British)

Pushing non-binary identity outside the scope of workplace policy also leads to the binary marking of jobs and work roles, leading to unjust forms of segregation and discrimination. Po, a customer service representative from Italy, explained how their non-binary status is received in binary ways and how their work role is limited in line with such gendered impressions:

Often other colleagues do not let me do certain jobs because of my assigned gender at birth, and also clients seem to trust my suggestions less because of it. (Po, 25-year-old, bisexual, Italian)

Counter-narrative 3: non-binary identity is an organisational policy concern for inclusion

Bridging the Goffmanian wide divide between frontstage and backstage performances of individuals is often facilitated by human resources and inclusion policies and practices of organisations that allow non-binary individuals to remain their most comfortable selves in the frontstage.

The dominant narrative that non-binary issues are merely personal and private concerns is contested by contemporary inclusion research, which purports that every individual matters in designing organisations which are equitable and inclusive. The dominant narrative of non-binary identity being an individual concern diverts attention from organisational responsibility for inclusion, and individualising responsibility. Our participant August emphasised the importance of organisational inclusive policies for non-binary inclusion:

In my workplace, all the policies and procedures were written to be inclusive (we barely even have a dress code), however, the culture has never changed. Leaders need to be intentional in crafting a workplace culture that supports non-binary people. (August, 34-year-old, gay/queer, white)

Institutionalising non-binary rights and visibility is crucial for the protection and support of non-binary individuals. Individuals and organisations need to familiarise themselves and work towards creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for all individuals, regardless of their gender identity. Many participants were acutely aware of how organisational norms and structures relegated non-binary identity to second-class status at work. Nevertheless, they found such barriers problematic. One participant highlighted the significance of context in making it possible for non-binary identity to be accommodated and included in organisational design:

I have rarely encountered those who do not want to work with me as a higher-level leader. I have been lucky to have been in a position where I create a space for those under me to feel connected and confident. (Nova, 26-year-old, queer, white)

The use of pronouns was a significant concern for all participants. In supportive contexts, participants were able to assert correct pronouns. However, pronouns are mainly a concern for Indo-European languages as other languages, such as Turkic and Altaic ones, are not gendered and do not use gender pronouns similarly. For example, in Turkish, gendered pronouns such as ‘he’ and ‘she’ do not exist. A single pronoun, ‘O’, means he/she/it. The struggle for non-binary individuals working in gendered language contexts is to get their pronouns recognised. Ryan, who has been working for ten years in the technology industry in the UK, explained how they use their gender pronouns to assert their gender identity:

My pronouns are stated in my email signature and next to my name on Slack. Occasionally there is cause for me to mention I’m non-binary if the conversation is relevant (for example, when discussing potential Pride initiatives for later this year). I make no effort to withhold my identity, but I don’t go out of my way to

talk about it either - it's just a part of who I am. (Ryan, 35-year-old, bisexual, white European)

Non-binary identity and its politics have been emerging as a site for social demand for cognitive (use of self-identified pronouns), normative (ways of inclusive treatment and address), temporal (regulation of work and social time in inclusive ways) and spatial (degendering of places such as toilets) changes in organisations. This emergence is evident in changes in legal recognition, cultural shifts and acceptance over the last decade, despite strong backlash and setbacks. Demands for the inclusion of non-binary individuals are met with resistance. Pushback against non-binary demands for cognitive, normative, temporal and spatial inclusion forms a part of the inclusion hysteresis, delaying the inclusion of non-binary individuals. The future crafting idea from this counter-narrative is to consider dimensions of cognitive, normative, temporal and spatial inclusion in crafting organisational policies.

Discussion and conclusions: future crafting to foster inclusion of non-binary individuals

Non-binary individuals are demanding equality and inclusion at work, often in contexts of backlash and resistance against their calls for legitimacy and visibility. We draw on one of the less mobilised Bourdieusian concepts, hysteresis, to frame the tension between demands for progress and pushback from tradition. We coin the term, inclusion hysteresis as the disjuncture between demands of inclusion for non-binary individuals in organisations and the pressure for exclusion based on tradition and backlash against progress. We identified that there has been extensive progress towards inclusion and yet the human rights of non-binary individuals deserve further recognition and legitimacy. Theoretically, we offer an extension to hysteresis by introducing and operationalising inclusion hysteresis to explain how the backlash and resistance to progress remain strong and how the progress towards inclusion unsettles relations of power, fuelling some populist fears and anxieties of change. Our original practical contribution is to provide future crafting for inclusion of non-binary individuals for HR professionals. As Vincent et al. (2024) suggest, responsibility for inclusion is not an individual concern, i.e. something non-binary individuals may muster on their own. Responsibility for inclusion should be cascaded across all organisations and social and national actors. Overcoming the inclusion hysteresis requires multilevel efforts by social movements, legislators, policymakers, organisational actors and other allies (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2021). The added value of this paper is that we flesh out what HR professional may do to overcome the inclusion hysteresis using innovative approaches of dramaturgy and future crafting.

Non-binary individuals suffer from a wide Goffmanian gap between their frontstage and backstage performances. We identified that this is mainly due to a lack of supportive HRM policies that legitimate and make visible non-binary workers in organisations. We identified three dominant narratives that shape exclusionary workplace practices that undermine, discriminate against, or ignore the legitimacy of non-binary individuals' demands for inclusion. Hennekam et al. (2023) note that internalising labour market structures and narratives causes marginalised groups to accept their low stakes in the game. The dominant narratives are important in shaping the rules of the game and enforcing marginalised players to comply without healthy scrutiny. The dominant narratives consider non-binary identity a threat and illegitimate and push the responsibility for inclusion to the non-binary individuals themselves. To secure the inclusion of non-binary individuals at work, HRM discourses and practices should be aligned with the counter-narratives of non-binary individuals and with an evidence-based understanding of non-binary existence, concerns, and demands.

As non-binary-friendly and inclusive HRM policies and practices are new (CIPD, 2023), there is a need for the future crafting of such policies. Future crafting shapes policies based on future generations' norms, not past assumptions and practices (Özbilgin, 2023a). Commonly, organisations use the co-design approach, which invites the voices from margins to contribute to organisations' future policies, instrumentalising inclusion for organisational ends. We suggest that the co-ownership paradigm (Özbilgin, 2023b) could help retain the engagement of marginalised groups as co-owners rather than instrumental guests in the organisation. When crafting inclusive HRM policies, we are fully aware of the complexities of the power-knowledge nexus, through which strong stakeholders may resist change and uphold tradition and inertia. There is constant contestation between traditional beliefs and the need for change in light of new knowledge in organisations (Hennekam & Dumazert, 2023).

Most of our participants in the study reported instances of coping and developing resilience through individual strategies. Evidence of coping and resilience often indicates the absence of thriving and inclusion in organisations (Renn, 2022). Organisations that have inclusive design would facilitate environments of growth, thriving, and development rather than coping. Non-binary individuals spend a considerable amount of energy coping with experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and lack of dignity. Future crafting of inclusive HRM policies may transform organisations' cognitive, normative, spatial, and cultural settings to make them safer and more welcoming places. Drawing on their counter-narratives, HRM policy could recognise non-binary as a fundamental human condition and value their demands for inclusion as legitimate. For this

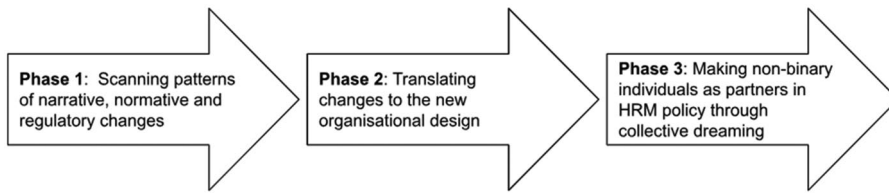


Figure 1. Future crafting HRM policies for inclusion of non-binary individuals.

change to happen, the responsibility for change should move from the person of the non-binary worker to the organisational level (Vincent et al., 2024). Organisations and sectors are more capable of creating inclusive environments through HRM regulation than individuals could do fighting on their own, or states could perform with their blunt legal measures (Thorntwaite & O'Neill, 2023).

As we visualise in Figure 1, future crafting HRM policies has three phases: First, HRM policy should scan patterns of narrative and normative changes for the inclusion of non-binary individuals. Second, HRM policy should capture these changes in new organisational design. The third aspect connects HRM policy with collective dreaming (Sanders & Stappers, 2014), which is to make excluded and disadvantaged workers, e.g. non-binary individuals, partners in the new design. For the third aspect, HRM managers could take reverse mentoring from non-binary workers, understanding their needs and demands and intending to end exclusion. This practice often requires active listening of non-binary voices, providing them with voice and agency in organisational transformation (Booth & Beauregard, 2019). This co-design paradigm could even be supported with the co-ownership (Özbilgin, 2023a) of new organisational design with all workers in mind. For these transformations to be possible, organisations may consider recognising the human rights of non-binary individuals and heed the changes in the international moral landscape for inclusion.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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