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"I WISH I RADIATED SOME KIND OF GRAMMATICAL WARPING FIELD"
WOUNDING PERFORMATIVES AND DOING NONBINARY GENDER THROUGH LANGUAGE

Ei-binäärisen sukupuolen (*nonbinary gender*) näkyväksi ja kuultavaksi tekemistä rajoittavat länsimainen binäärinen sukupuolen konstruktio ja vallitsevat sukupuolen diskurssit. Lisäksi ei-binääristen ihmisten identiteetin vakautta ja henkistä hyvinvointia uhkaa kielellinen väärinsukupuolittaminen, joka asettaa sukupuolikokemuksen kyseenalaiseksi. Tämän pro gradu -tutkielman tavoitteena on tutkia ei-binäärisen sukupuolen rakentumista ja performatiivisuutta nimeämiskäytäntöjen ja pronominien käytön kautta, ja tarkastella väärinsukupuolittavia kielellisiä tekoja haavoittavina performatiiveina (*wounding performative).*

Tutkielma lähestyy sukupuolta sosiaalisena konstruktiona, jonka merkitys on rakentunut kielellisesti diskursseissa. Vallitseva sukupuolidiskurssi ylläpitää käsitystä dikotomisesta, niin kutsuttuun biologiseen sukupuoleen (*sex*) perustuvasta sukupuolesta (*gender*) ainoana legitiiminä tapana käsittää sukupuoli. Normatiiviset sukupuolen tekemisen, tai sukupuoliperformanssien, tavat ovat diskursiivisesti rakentuneet ja saavat merkityksensä toistoteoissa, ja normit rajaavat vain tietyt performanssit sosiaalisesti luettaviksi. Ei-binäärisen sukupuolen performanssille ei ole normatiivisia odotuksia eikä siten keinoa tulla sosiaalisesti luettavaksi ei-kielellisin keinoin, joten sukupuolta tehdään sosiaalisessa kanssakäymisessä suorilla kielellisillä teoilla.

Tutkielman aineisto koostuu 150 kyselyvastauksesta. Kysely oli suunnattu englantia jokapäiväisessä kanssakäymisessä käyttäville ei-binäärisille ihmisille, ja koostui pääasiassa avoimista kysymyksistä. Aineiston kvalitatiiviseen purkuun käytettiin teema-analyysin työkaluja: kyselyvastauksista tunnistettiin lähiluennalla kysymyskohtaisia teemoja, joihin vastaukset luokiteltiin. Näin noin 63 000 sanan aineistosta pystyttiin tunnistamaan eri teemojen suhteellista vallitsevuutta, ja nostamaan esille merkittäviä poikkeuksia.

Aineiston analyysi osoitti suurta vaihtelevuutta vastaajien kielellisten strategioiden välillä. Sukupuolinimikkeiden (*gender label*) käyttöä ohjasivat vastaajien käsitykset sekä itsestä, nimikkeiden merkityksistä, että ulkopuolisten reaktioista. Nimikkeen valintaan vaikuttivat odotukset siitä, missä tilanteissa nimike on sosiaalisesti luettavissa, ja nimikkeitä vaihdettiin näiden odotusten perusteella. Väärinsukupuolittamisen vaikutukset vastaajiin olivat merkittävät: väärinsukupuolittava kieli koettiin uhkana identiteetille, mitätöivänä, masentavana ja ahdistavana. Väärinsukupuolittavat kielelliset teot näyttäytyivät performatiiveina, jotka keskeyttävät koherentin sosiaalisen identiteetin ylläpitämisen.

Avainsanat: ei-binäärinen sukupuoli, performatiivisuus, queerlingvistiikka, väärinsukupuolittaminen, teema-analyysi

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1 Introduction

The binary gender system is a prevailing construct in Western societies. Like other social constructs, the Western gender binary is engaged in a cycle of linguistic reproduction that shapes our understanding of gender (and, as a distinct but inseparable concept, sexuality) by way of dominant gender discourse. Dominant gender discourse reproduces the idea of an essentialist binary division of strictly two genders, woman and man, and their corresponding sexes, female and male. Discourse, in the Foucauldian sense, does not only speak of objects, but creates them by assigning meaning to them, like assigning the meanings culturally contained in *woman* to genotypically female sexual characteristics, and the contrasted *man* with genotypically male sexual characteristics. The Western dominant binary gender discourse creates a system of legible and illegible, digressive, ways of doing or experiencing gender (Motschenbacher 2010, 14).

This thesis focuses on the liminal spaces of gender discourse. Though discussions of the diversity of gender, including nonbinary gender, have become more mainstream in recent years, they have yet to upset the hegemony of dominant binary gender discourse. In anglophone cultures and contexts, nonbinary genders are often lost in gendered singular third person pronouns (*she*, *he*), kinship terms (*father*, *sister*, *son*), and public address ("*Ladies and gentlemen*, welcome to flight number...") even when a corresponding gender-neutral term would be easily understood (*they*; *parent*, *sibling*, *child*; *passengers*). I will examine survey data from 150 nonbinary respondents in the light of interdisciplinary theory in order to academically discuss why some instances of the use of gendered language are injurious, how dominant gender discourse hinders and/or assists the conceptualization of the non-normatively gendered self, and why the aforementioned matter.

1.1 Research questions

I am writing this thesis in a time when the marginalization nonbinary people face in Finland is more prominent in public discussion than ever before. Having first started work on my thesis in 2015, I have witnessed the discussion increase in academic research as well. Though the topics of gender, and to some extent the multiplicities of gender, have been the subjects of critical academic discussion before, the term *nonbinary [gender]* is rarely found in pre-2015 research. The induction of the label into academia coincides with it becoming established and legitimized in public use, essentially making nonbinary genders speakable to those outside of communities of people of marginalized genders.

Linguistic research on marginalized genders and sexualities has often been sociolinguistic in nature and concerned with ethnographic study and locating group-specific dialects (Cameron & Kulick 2003), with the way groups are spoken *of* being covered more by way of Critical Discourse Analysis. The effects of those ways of speaking on marginalized groups are discussed under the concepts of microaggressions (Sue 2010), identity misclassification and misgendering (McLemore 2015, Kapusta 2016), and cisgenderism (Blumer et. al. 2013), among others, though the effects of dominant gender discourse on nonbinary people have not, to my knowledge, been widely addressed.

I approach this problem and attempt to glean answers from the data through three primary research questions:

1. How does dominant gender discourse affect the labelling practices and conceptualization of nonbinary genders?
2. How does misgendering reference affect respondents?
3. Are lexically gendered words such as *mother* or *sister* appropriated into non-gendered contexts, i.e. used in a way that is not felt to be gendered?

I hypothesize that the data will provide evidence of the following assertions: first, that people of nonbinary genders are to an extent constrained by binary language in verbalizing their gendered experience, or lack thereof. Second, that misgendering is a form of performative wounding language whose power comes from dominant gender discourse, and third, that the use of some lexically gendered words can be informed more by the meanings they have in specific interpersonal relationships, rather than by their denotations. Furthermore, despite the clear barriers binary-bound language presents to the respondents they have access to communities that both have a different understanding of the meanings of certain words, and a collectively shaped vocabulary independent of prescriptive grammars.

1.2 Terminology

Discussing variant genders tends to be fraught with ill- and misunderstanding due to both multiplicities of meaning and to a lack of commonly known meaning. Furthermore, as communities build and rebuild their own lexicons, the labels in use and their generally accepted meanings are in constant flux. Making a choice of which labels and definitions to use in a study such as this is to find a balance between the specificity this discussion requires and an ambiguity that respects the variety of self-definitions under those labels. My approach to terminology is informed both by previous

attempts to define these words in academic contexts by others, and by my own experiences of the real-life usage of this terminology.

In this thesis, *gender* refers to the psycho-social, changeable and innate part of a person's identity that can be named *demiboy*, *woman*, *agender*, *genderflux*, *trans man*, etc. The concept of gender in general is far from being so simple to exhaustively define, as numerous attempts across disciplines and decades demonstrate. It has been approached as a biologically determined social dimension of sex, as a socially learned role, as a feminine or masculine personality or sexuality, and, as further discussed in section 2.3, as a performed norm. Regardless of the mode of its inception, gender refers to the result of that process (or in some cases the process itself). I will avoid using *gender identity* unless some distinction needs to be made, as the term is often criticized for mostly being used when non-cis genders are being discussed and this tendency implies that only cis identities are proper genders, and everything else is less-than. *Cis* is cropped from *cisgender*, used to describe individuals whose gender is what they were assigned at birth, in simplified terms the opposite of *transgender*, from Latin prefix *cis-* "on this side of", *trans-* "on the other side of" (Aultman 2014). *Gender assigned at birth* is the legal gender determined at birth based on the newborn's discernible secondary sexual characteristics, and often erroneously equated with *sex*. *Sex*, as a collection of hormonal, chromosomal, physiological, etc. attributes is far more variable than the two categories of assigned gender generally available in the West (cf. Fausto-Sterling 2000).

Transgender is an umbrella term that refers to individuals whose gender does not match the gender they were assigned at birth (Nuru 2014, 282). *Binary transgender* refers to men assigned female at birth, and to women assigned male at birth. *Binary gender* refers to men and women either cis or trans. Logically following this, *nonbinary* refers to people whose gender does not fit into the binary gender model. *Nonbinary* (*non-binary*, *NB*, *enby*) is an umbrella term that encompasses a multitude of distinct genders, and a gender unto itself. A comprehensive list of which genders fall under the umbrella and which do not cannot be compiled due to aforementioned unpredictable semantic change, and because room should be left for community- and self-definition. Nonbinary is not straightforwardly a subcategory of *transgender* because not all nonbinary people identify as transgender for various reasons (Darwin 2017, 325); therefore, when referring to non-cis genders and people I will use *variant gender* (noun) and *gender variant* (adjective). A further term that evades definition is *queer*, once used as a homophobic slur and reclaimed by activists in the 1980's and 1990's, subsequently adopted into academia (Love 2014, 172). *Queer* in present in some gender labels (*genderqueer*) and used as a signifier of fluid gender and sexuality, sometimes with additional political motivations. I will discuss some further aspects of *queer* in section 2.

Unless otherwise specified, when I discuss "gender", "the gender binary" and related matters in this thesis, I am referring to a Western construction of gender. The universality of the binary gender model is an ethnocentric Western myth (cf. Towle & Morgan 2006). It has been constructed as the only possible, natural state of affairs despite its component parts being far more complicated than the myth would suggest. Cultures that do not follow the binary model have typically been discussed in terms of having a "third gender" – as having the "standard" two genders and a third slot for one or more genders. Though it might be a useful tool in broadening our Western binary framework, when applied to cultural others this way of thinking foregrounds the dominant Western binary and relegates other genders to an ambiguous "Other"-pile (Towle & Morgan 2006, 672). "Third gender" becomes "a junk drawer into which a great non-Western gender miscellany is carelessly dumped" (Towle & Morgan 2006, 676). It is also an attempt to superimpose not only Western categorization, but a Western way of seeing that aspect of personhood called *gender* as naturally dualistic, static and intrapsychic on cultures that emphasize its relationality and fluidity (Blumer et. al. 2013, 267-268). Applying terms like *transgender* to these conceptions of gender should be done carefully if at all, since though it is understandable to attempt to organize an unfamiliar system into familiar categories, doing so comes with the risk of misrepresenting that system and imposing colonizing discourse on it (Towle & Morgan 2006, 680).

2 Theoretical background

This section introduces the broad theoretical background of the thesis. Social constructionism provides the foundation and is built on by poststructuralist viewpoints and expanded with Foucauldian perspectives on discourse. Discourses are the domain of norms and power that shape culturally legible performances of gender. Language is among the tools of performance, with the power to reify and suppress. This array of sociological, philosophical and linguistic theories is merged under Queer linguistics, a critical approach to dominant heteronormative discourses.

2.1 Social constructionism and poststructuralism

In the first sentence on this thesis, I refer to the binary gender system as a "social construct". By defining it as such, I am subscribing to a social constructionist view of reality: that objects and concepts, in this case gender, are made real and given meaning in social interaction. Meanings are negotiated in everyday interactions that are informed by vast histories of such negotiations. There is

not a knowledge or a meaning in our culture that is truly objective, having arisen pure from physical reality, as physical objects and abstract concepts alike are filtered through human perception and language. Ways of understanding the world are historically and culturally relative, which allows our shared perspectives of reality to evolve (Burr 2003, 6).

Social constructionist views entered sociology and other disciplines following Berger and Luckmann's seminal work *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). In it, Berger and Luckmann detail the processes through which knowledge is embedded in society. The building blocks of those processes are the human ability to *objectivate*, to *externalize* and to *internalize*. *Objectivation* refers to the transformation of subjective experience, like thought and perception, into indices available to "extend beyond the face-to-face situation in which they can be directly apprehended" (Berger & Luckmann 1966, 49). A crucial form of objectivation is signification, the production of signs such as language that despite being just one aspect of objectivation is of special importance because "[t]he common objectivations of everyday life are maintained primarily by linguistic signification" (Berger & Luckmann 1966, 51).

Objectivation is possible because of *externalization*, a social mechanism of humans producing themselves and their social reality from internal subjective experience into the shared and external, as a human cannot solely exist as a closed unit of static internality, and "[h]uman being must ongoingly externalize itself in activity" (Berger & Luckmann 1966, 70). Ideas and meanings created and shared in the dialectic of objectivation and externalization are then *internalized*, or "the objectivated social world is retrojected into consciousness in the course of socialization" (Berger & Luckmann 1966, 79) – that is, in order to be a member of society, an individual must, in the course of socialization, accept the objectivated social world as the truth and use the rules and generated meanings of that truth to interpret the world and social interactions. This ensures that meanings are not only generated, but passed on, and membership in society is conditional on the acceptance of that human-produced reality. And the reality an individual must internalize is also a product they have a hand in making (Berger & Luckmann 1966, 122). In essence, individuals learn the rules and common-sense truths of reality and participate in reproducing, and occasionally challenging, them through their own actions. The repetition becomes institutionalized when it is so common-sense its origin is nearly opaque. Languages are institutions, with rules and legitimizing authorities like grammarians and linguists, with a wealth of meanings of human origin that have become simply the way things are done "[a] thing is what it is called, and it could not be called anything else. All institutions appear in the same way, as given, unalterable and self-evident" (Berger & Luckmann 1966, 77).

The gender binary is deeply institutionalized in the Western world, often seen not only as the way things are but as the only way things *can* be. The either-or, oppositional view of gender is present in many aspects of everyday social life and imparted on prospective new members of society from birth, and a transgression from one's assigned binary position has been and to some extent still is a transgression against social order. The knowledges and institutions constructed about and around gender manifest even in basic grammatical rules like gender agreement (*boy – he*, *girl – she*), semantic rules like antonymy (*woman – man*) and synonymy (*girl – lass* but not *girl – lad*), and the essentialist binary equivocation of sex and gender. The binary gender system is embedded in language, and language in turn legitimizes the binary.

The objectivity and taken as a given nature of language and words is addressed in Saussurean structuralism. Saussure suggested that the connection between a spoken sound, the signifier, and the thing it is referring to, the signified, is arbitrary. This observation in and of itself is not revolutionary: the simple fact that different languages use different words, sounds, to refer to the same thing is evidence enough of the tenuous connection between the sound and the object. But Saussure asserted that concepts and categorizations themselves are arbitrary, not just the spoken words assigned to them; we have divided up our world into arbitrary categories with the aid of language through the arbitrary linking of signifiers to signifieds (Burr 2003, 51).

Though arbitrary, the meaning of a sign and the categorization of signs are not random. They are determined by the society we live in. Language constitutes reality and provides us with a framework for reality by being a system in which concepts are defined through being compared with and differentiated from other concepts (Burr 2003, 52). The meanings that are being compared are generated, and regenerated, in social action, not extracted from the concept itself. Using language, speaking, listening, reading and writing, is socially determined and has social effects (Fairclough 1989, 23). And though the assignment of a signifier to a signified is arbitrary, it too can undergo a process like institutionalization and become fixed, resistant to change, allowing people to quite literally speak the same language using words with a common understanding of their meanings (Burr 2003, 52). However, the idea of fixedness conflicts with the fact that word meanings change, and that words can have several concurrent meanings.

Poststructuralist perspectives focus on the conflict in the liminal spaces of systems. That is, rather than starting with the core, the norm, and mapping marginal cases from there, they start with the limit and turn it into the core, replacing the norm. They start with the problem of marginal cases and attempt to make sense of it without defining it through the normative; "the limit is not compared with the core, or balanced with it, or given some kind of tempering role --- [r]ather, the claim is that the

limit is the core" (Williams 2014, 2). This positive disruption has been, for many theorists and adopters of poststructuralist perspectives, a venue for political action. Transposing the limit to the central position allows the marginal to be examined without it being filtered through the lens of the majority.

That is not to say that poststructuralism is at odds with Saussurean structuralism. Both have the same view of the person being a construction of language, as "we can only represent our experiences to ourselves and to others by using the concepts embedded in our language, so that our thoughts, our feelings and how we represent our behaviour are all pre-packaged in language" (Burr 2003, 53). Butler argues that the linguistic construction of the self does not stop there, but that our physical bodies themselves are brought into social reality by language, by being defined within the limits of the culturally legible, with bodies beyond the limit (and therefore undefinable) deemed abjections (Butler 1996, 5). Despite the shared view of humans as constructions of language, the limits in Saussurean structuralism are problematic from a poststructuralist perspective because they create valuations of inclusion and exclusion (Williams 2014, 39).

With its resistance to rigidly defined objective truths, it is challenging to concisely sum up poststructuralism. The following subchapters will explore specific poststructuralist theories in more depth as they relate to the topic of this thesis.

2.2 Discourse, norms and violence

Michel Foucault's works apply poststructuralist perspectives to historical research. Foucault traces genealogies, or "intricate descriptions of the emergence, through history, of forms of power that operate in the present" (Williams 2014, 112), through discontinuities and ruptures in history, focusing on disruptions rather than harmonious continuity. In Foucault's work, power lies largely in *discourses*, a nebulous term with a multitude of field-specific definitions. Mainstream linguistics generally approach *discourse* either as an aspect of language beyond the sentence level, as language in use, or as contexts of utterance such as medical discourse or political discourse (Mills 2004, 8), but in a Foucauldian sense *discourses* are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972, 49). That is, a discourse is not an utterance, or a grouping of utterances, but a system of generated meanings and knowledges that sustains itself through language. For Foucault, the individual is not a fully independent agent when they speak of something and in speaking construct it, but before speaking already restricted and lead by discourses that pre-exist them. Discourses are where and by which truths, common-sense knowledge and norms are constructed, and thus sites of power.

Power is a relationship that, rather than implying a total, irreversible dominance of the oppressor over the victim, entails a force within which can challenge, overthrow or transgress (Mills 2004, 37). Power is not something an individual wields, but something that lies in structures, in their capacity to determine identities and acts, values and norms (Williams 2014, 110). The overcoming of an oppressive or repressive structure built by discourses can bring its own kind of pleasure (ibid.), as Foucault's discussion of the repression of male children's sexuality in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* demonstrates. Though the discourses of sexuality in Victorian times were centred on shame and moral panic, the mere fact that sex was spoken and thought of made it prominent in a new way, and the increased repressive force gave birth to transgression (Foucault 1978, 32). Perhaps counter-intuitively, the repression of sexuality aimed especially at male children produced precisely the action (masturbation) it was intending to suppress, and different types of pleasure arose from shame and secrecy (Mills 2004, 33). The push to codify sexuality created new margins where the non-normative could locate themselves and push back. Still, even though power can be resisted, it is a "net of historical determinations that we have to struggle in and cannot escape, at least not fully" (Williams 2014, 110).

Discourses create categories and objects of different valuations, and Foucault argued that this creation of normatively acceptable and unacceptable ways of doing or being are self-supporting processes. Not only are existing discourses hard to break, the power accumulated in those discourses makes the individual disinclined to transgress in fear of sanctions. Foucault calls this *disciplinary power*; in the simplest terms, disciplinary power ensures that individuals monitor their own behaviour without the need for laws or authorities to surveil them. Disciplinary power is social control that directs individuals to conduct themselves in a normatively acceptable way, a way they learn through operating in a world of discourses and norms. Foucault's genealogies of political power trace the historical development of medical practices and institutions and point to them as notable loci of discursive power (Williams 2014, 19), as well as noting that the emergence of new phenomena in history cannot be explained through the privileged object (Williams 2014, 120). Participation in building normative discourses requires some degree of authority, a legitimacy of being allowed to speak of a matter. Access to meaning-making is, in Foucault's view, based on power.

History of Sexuality is well-known for introducing the idea that the homosexual subject was only created in the late 1800's.

> Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. *(Foucault 1980, 43)*

The claim is that *homosexuality* is a pathologizing term that was born out of the dissemination of "expert" knowledge through publications and conferences, through law and psychiatric practice, through the educational system, and into public consciousness (Green 2010, 321). Perceived same-sex sexual activity turned *action* into a state of *being* that was internalized, and identities were constructed around a category whose creation was determined by codifying normal and abnormal; a category that signified an abject. Though the intent behind sexologists' attempts to name and therefore separate the deviant and perverted from the normal, that separation and negotiation of power relations created a space for a new type of subjectivity (Mills 2003, 33-34).

Though the combination of disciplinary power and motivated power behind discourse paints a grim picture of individual freedom, especially for individuals and groups in abject categories, Green argues that emancipatory power can exist within normative discourses. As stated before, transgression from normative discourse and the deconstruction of them is a space for destabilizing oppressive social order, but Green argues that subjects can have the space to create new emancipatory discourses even within pathologized and otherwise abject categories; that "discursive power has the potential to work in an emancipatory process that promotes new pathways for self-development and life satisfaction that were previously unimaginable" (Green 2014, 325). The example Green presents is of differently self-identified groups of men who report having sex with men (MSM). As cited by Green, Adam (2000) found that MSM's who identified themselves as bisexual or not gay characterized their relationships with other men in terms of sex and sexual activity, whereas gay-identified men had a more varied repertoire of discourses of intimacy and identity to draw from. Bisexual and not-gay MSM distanced themselves from the abject category of *gay*, but in doing so lost access to nuanced discourses available to those who identified with what society deemed abject (Green 2014, 323-324).

The establishment and maintaining of hierarchical relations between categories of gender, sexuality, race, mental and physical ableness is the domain of *structural violence* (Iadicola & Shupe 2012, 387). In Butler's words, abject is the label for "those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life --- the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation" (Butler 1993, 3). Exclusion and abjection are processes central in Foucault's notion of the genealogies of power as well as in producing differently valuated categories in discourse, and also processes the abjected individual may internalize. Ideas of what is acceptable,

normal, good, or true guide structural violence, and the most obvious and easiest to trace of structural violences is the history of legislations that legitimize unequal treatment. Inequality between sexes or genders (the vocabulary in use varies) used to be explicitly written into the laws of several nations, from voting and property rights to the wife being obligated to take the husband's surname. The laws reflected expert knowledges and common-sense beliefs of the woman's and the man's places, and their eventual overturning required broader societal change, and change in expert knowledges.

Mainstream common-sense and expert beliefs about gender continue to materialize as structural violence against gender variant people. In most countries, requirements for legal gender recognition include some degree of medical intervention ranging from a diagnosis to sterilization, and the power to determine when the conditions are sufficiently met is placed in the hands of medical experts (cf. Suess et al. 2014, Tainio 2014). That is not to say that expert opinions or the systems they operate within are inherently malevolent, but structural violence does not require intent to harm and well-meaning acts can be violent (Ray 2011, 9). Further structural issues gender variant people face include discrimination in housing, employment, education and health care, on top of structurally embedded microaggressions present in everyday life (discussed further in section 3.3). A particularly egregious demonstration of the use of power to induce structural violence was reported in the online edition of The New York Times in October 2018. NYT reported that the current United States administration was planning to introduce legislation to legally define gender as "either male or female, unchangeable, and determined by the genitals that a person is born with", a report met with great fear and anger by gender variant US citizens (*The New York Times* 21.10.2018). This has been followed by multiple policies rolling back protections for gender variant people. Notably, this legislation would directly contradict expert knowledges and would seem to be politically and ideologically motivated instead.

2.3 Performatives of gender and language

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is an extension of poststructuralist conceptions of the social world. The theory delves into anti-essentialist notions of identity similarly to how Foucault presents homosexual identity as something that, instead of being an identity that expresses the sexual preferences of the individual self, is the result of changes within Western knowledge (Mills 2003, 31). *Homosexual* was an identity ascribed to sets of acts, and Butler aimed to reverse the process for gender, deconstructing the identity into the acts that it is composed of. Foucault and Butler both de-emphasize the individual subject to a great extent, discussing systems of knowledge, institutions and

practices instead. Though the approach allows their theories to fully engage with structures of power, it has been heavily criticized for seeming to ignore free will and the innate sense of an individual's identity. The issues of identity are discussed further in section 2.4.

Butler first introduced the idea of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble*, published in 1990, and continued to develop the theory throughout the 1990's and early 2000's. Outlined in a single subchapter of the book, Butler presented gender performativity as a theory that would destabilize the concepts of sex and gender by reframing acts that would be interpreted as *expressions* of gender instead as parts of a performance that *do* gender. Gender is a cultural performance that involves the ritualized repetition of conventions, compelled by compulsory heterosexuality, that rather than expressing some inner core or pre-given identity, gender performance creates the illusion of such an essence (Jagger 2008, 21). Such repetitions create the reality of gender but are not separable from preceding performances, or the agents performing – gender is a discursive regime and involves discursive processes similar to those found in Foucauldian discourse theory.

Butler's writing style is infamously dense, and the ideas presented within overwhelmingly abstract. This has contributed to her texts having various, sometimes conflicting interpretations. Performativity has been taken to mean a theatrical performance in which gender is just a role or a costume one can don and doff at will, an act separable from the actor (Butler 1993, ix), a misunderstanding exacerbated by Butler's use of drag as an example of performed gender. Instead, gender performativity is more closely related to the performative utterances of Austinian speech act theory than theatre (Jagger 2008, 21). Performance does not arise from a static source like a script or a stage direction but is an active part of a reiterative and citational practice whose meaning is derived from preceding acts, and which in turn informs future acts (Butler 1993, xii). Why an individual performs gender the way they do, especially when that performance digresses from the person's birth-assigned gender, is never fully addressed by Butler. Motschenbacher suggests that children, when confronted with a gendered subject position, will typically choose the path of least resistance (2010, 15) and in *Bodies That Matter* Butler posits that performances cite "sex" like one could cite law as the legitimizing and meaning-making source, but still the subjective agency in non-conformity remains.

For Butler, the constructive mechanism of the discursive regime of gender extends to biological sex, traditionally seen as natural and pre-given. That is not to say there is no extra-discursive, material reality to bodies – rather, bodies are subject to discursive regimes because it is not possible to think and talk about bodies in a way that is *not* discursively mediated (Motschenbacher 2010, 13). Meanings that are discursively generated are imposed on the body, meanings that do not spontaneously arise from the body's materiality, such as "femaleness" with its array of connotations ascribed to a body

with a certain kind of fat distribution. The connection between the signifier and the signified is here just as arbitrary as in Saussurean semiotics. Bodies that do not "make sense" in terms of binary sex are subject to so-called corrective procedures, from the cosmetic genital surgeries performed on visibly intersex infants to mastectomies performed on gynecomastic cis male persons to the expectation of binary transgender people going through a process of hormone therapy and surgeries to achieve a cis-passing body. Anatomy is purposefully moulded to fit dominant gender discourse (Motschenbacher 2010, 14). Butler sees the body as a "variable boundary --- a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler 1990, 139), not a signifier in itself but a surface on which identification is done, both by the self and by others.

The performance of gender is subject to punitive consequences and regulation (Butler 1990, 172). Regulatory powers operate on gender as they do on other cultural and social norms, and the characterization of gender and the performance of gender as norms implies that a process of normalization is involved (Butler 2004, 41). As Jagger summarizes,

> "Basically, Butler is arguing that gender and gender identities are constructed through relations of power that are inherent in normative constraints that involve the sedimentation of gender norms over time." (2008, 35)

Performances that adhere to norms are deemed coherent and legible, and the further a performance diverges from normalized standards the more illegible it becomes. Some would suggest that the only truly legible performances in most Western contexts are those of a heterosexual cis woman (assigned female at birth, woman, desire towards men) or a heterosexual cis man (assigned male at birth, man, desire toward women) (Motschenbacher 2010, 14), but some divergent ways of doing gender have been normalized and normativized to an extent. Certain performances of male homosexuality, for instance, are highly legible without the explicit verbal statement or demonstration of sexual orientation.

The issue of illegibility arises when there is no norm to reflect performance on, and I argue that such is the case with nonbinary genders. That is not to say that there *should* be a norm or a performative ideal, but it makes the process of doing nonbinary gender rather more complicated. A successful binary performance of gender has a coherence in interaction, the expectation that, for example, a performance of "woman" is read, received and reacted to as such. But because the dominant gender system in the West is binary, there are few occasions where the performance of nonbinary is correctly read as nonbinary. What even constitutes a performance of nonbinary gender? Without a set of gender norms to utilize as a guide, the only feasible answer is that any performance that the subject considers an enactment of their nonbinary identity is a performance of nonbinary gender. A performance

superficially read as a coherent performance of maleness from physiological features to body language to way of dress can be as much a performance of nonbinary as can a performance that is deemed incoherent is terms of the binary system. This approach refutes the meaning of citationality in gender performance because there is no citation that will have the correct meaning in dominant binary gender discourse, as nonbinary genders have no hegemonic models to cite. Therefore, in that discourse, the only way to make a performance of nonbinary gender legible may be to explicitly verbalize it.

Speech act theory inspired *Gender Trouble* and Butler returned to linguistic performatives in *Excitable Speech*. Austinian performatives are utterances that instead of describing the world, change it: they are language as social action (Bucholtz & Hall 2004, 491). Austin's classification distinguishes between *illocutionary* and *perlocutionary* speech acts. Illocutionary acts are performed as the words are spoken, they are acts in and of themselves, whereas perlocutionary acts cause an act to be performed, the utterance is not the action but causes the action. In the former, words and actions are connected by convention, in the latter by consequence (Austin 1984, 107). "I sentence you" is illocutionary when spoken by a judge, in a courtroom, to a defendant, as the judge is not saying that the defendant *will* be sentenced but *is being* sentenced as the words are uttered, and conventions of authority, correct wording, time and place are met. By contrast, while perlocutionary speech acts may be a direct cause of an action, such as that same judge declaring "you will serve your sentence in---" and the sentence being subsequently served, the action does not take place at the moment of utterance but as a consequence of it. Butler, however, rejects the notion that the force of an illocutionary speech act is contained within the moment of utterance, as "[t]he 'moment' in ritual is a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance" (Butler 1996, 3). The force of the speech act extends beyond the authority and intent of the speaker, authority itself is citational and intent does not always determine the act actually performed by an utterance.

Butler approaches linguistic performatives as utterances capable of causing injury both in a broad socio-political sense and on individuals. Butler asserts that as language can sustain a body, construct it and give it meaning, it can also threaten it (Butler 1996, 5). Linguistic violence can be likened to physical violence, as a verbal assault can be likened to a slap in the face, but a slur or other wounding address does not injure in the same way a punch does. After all, words used to name have historicity that constitutes their contemporary meaning, a sedimentation of usages that is carried in language and where injurious force can come from (Butler 1996, 36). Slurs like *faggot* or *tranny* cannot be used without invoking the history of trauma, pathologization and dehumanisation associated with the

words both in the individual's and communal memory, barring specific in-group uses that attempt to reclaim and transform their force. Though intent influences the wounding potential of the word, , the power to harm does not come from the speaking subject but from language. As established in previous sections, discourses are imbued with power and hierarchical structures, and the ability to wound is granted by power in discourse. Speech is preceded by its history and is inescapably citational.

Performatives have the power to construct the subject in ways that lead to chains of ritualistic repetition. The pronouncement at birth of "It's a girl!" starts such a chain of "girling" the infant, citations that constitute the mode of address that brings the person into being (Jagger 2008, 121). This gendered address cites convention and norms that act on the person being named, and prompt them to perform the role as normatively expected (Motschenbacher 2010, 15). Although those citations are imbued with discursive power, the fact that they need to be recited reveals their ability to change and allows some discursive agency to be asserted through divergent recitation, though divergent recitation is accompanied by the threat of illegibility and thus agency is also a site of vulnerability (Jagger 2008, 121). This process of imposing a normative role through naming does not need to be malicious, or indeed intentional at all, but quite like with the individual's role in structural violence,

> "The subject does not wield the discursive power of the performative. Discourse, language itself, first engenders the subject as an effect of language's positing power." (Gerdes 2014, 149)

By functioning as a performative that acts a gender on a person and attempts to constitute their being, gendered address can become associated with trauma much like a slur. For people of marginalized genders, it can come to represent the denial of full personhood, the loss of self-determination, and the medical and legal systems that exert power disproportionately on marginalized groups and individuals.

2.4 *Queer*: Theory, Linguistics and Identity

While the word *queer* has historically been used as a slur against non-normative sexualities and that deployment persists in some contexts to this day, it was reclaimed by activists as a political battle cry in the late 1980's and early 1990's. In their use, *queer* became a catch-all for a range of marginalized sexual orientations, sexual practices, and genders united by an oppressed status that was highlighted during the AIDS crisis (Love 2014, 172). In its most radical conception, *queer* rallied against "the regimes of the normal" (Warner 1993, xxvi as quoted in Love 2014, 172), hegemonic norms of not only gender and sexuality but class, ethnicity, (dis)ability, and other components of social hierarchy.

This use places emphasis on the dismantling of boundaries and binarisms in a way the more diluted use of *queer* lacks. In its narrowest use, *queer* is synonymous with the initialism LGBT(QIA+)[1] and represents more of an umbrella term than a radical political positioning of the self. The former definition was carried on to queer theory (QT), and from there to queer linguistics. Queer theory challenges the notions of essentialist identity categories and is centrally motivated by the deconstruction and blurring of the co-stabilizing binarisms of female vs. male and heterosexual vs. homosexual. The long-term goal of this approach is the recontextualization of dominant discourses which, to the detriment of people who do not meet the heteronormative ideal, shape our understanding of gender and sexuality (Motschenbacher 2013, 520).

QT is by nature anti-normalizing and anti-identitarian (Love 2016, 173), which is why the use of *queer* as an identity category is sometimes challenged especially in non-anglophone countries where the term was adopted by communities through activists, academics, and academic activists as a subversive and deconstructionist identity category without the cultural baggage of the word's history (Rosenberg 2008, 5). The intention of queer theory was never to produce a new identity, but to have *queer* "denote a subject position outside of normalization and the traditional configurations of gender and sexuality" (Green 2010, 325). It is less a fixed referent than a perspective grounded in anti-normative positioning towards gender and sexuality. Anti-normalizing and anti-identitarian approaches do allow for more nuanced subject positions than, for example, gay and lesbian studies. A deconstructionist approach leaves more room within and between identity categories for variability, and for individuals' actions to be defined not merely as products of their identity categories. At the same time staunch anti-identity stances represented by some queer theorists have been met with apprehension by people of marginalized sexual orientations and genders.

For many gender variant readers, Butler's insistence on gender always being ultimately about something external to the subject "devalues their experience of gender identity's profound ontological claim --- that [gender] is precisely about the realness and inalienability of that identity, rather than about anything else" (Stryker & Whittle 2006, 184). It also presents the problem of how political action can be organized under an identity category that is thoroughly destabilized, and indeed why members of a group oppressed because of their identity do not simply identify otherwise. As the focus of many queer theorists lies more in structures than in individuals, the question of what is the compelling force that pushes people toward variant gender identities and gender expressions against the massive force of normative gender discourse is not fully explored, but there must be something

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[1] Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual. The parentheses indicate that the latter part of the initialism is often either added as an afterthought, omitted altogether, or not represented in practice (Oakley 2016, 9).

ontologically compelling in that less-explored space. Though the postmodern view of identity holds that identities are not static and fixed attributes but contextually fluid and constructed through practices (Cameron 2005, 488), the individual's sense of self cannot be excluded as an important element of it (Bucholz & Hall 2005, 587).

Linguistic approaches to gender and sexuality were for a long time bound more of less strictly to identity categories. From "women's language" to various iterations of "gayspeak", early sociolinguistic research seemed driven to describe group-specific dialects as intrinsically linked to identity (gender, sexuality), and to discern differences between groups, like men vs. women, straight men vs. gay men, etc., whereas starting in the 1990's the focus has shifted more toward diversity than difference (Cameron 2005, 482). At that point, group-specific micro-dialects and identity construction through them became more of a norm.

The concept of communities of practice as discussed by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) is one example of looking at language use not as arising from identity, but as individual identity and group identity being constructed in linguistic interaction. In saying that gender should be approached practically they suggest that gender should not be viewed as a static category in research, but as something that is dynamically being constructed in interaction (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992, 462-463). A community of practice -model contrasts with the dual-model approach to gender in linguistic research in its intersectional and contextual take on language use. It accounts for gender's interaction with multiple intersecting identities, especially marginalized ones, in linguistic interaction in various ways in the same way an individual navigates different group memberships (family, workplace, hobby group), deconstructing the idea of monolithic and hegemonic genderlects, or gender-specific ways of language use (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992, 464). This deconstructionist approach is rather queer, as is the Butlerian way gender is framed as a verb.

Queer linguistics (QL) is queer theoretical at its core, and queer theory takes the significance of words and the power of language very seriously (Motschenbacher & Stegu 2013, 519). A queer approach to language data challenges the heteronormative status quo and the gender binary by questioning the use of hegemonic macro-categories like *man* or *woman*, even going so far as to question the assignment of identity labels to patterns of language use altogether as similar linguistic strategies can be employed for different purposes, and individual linguistic interactions only represent a subject position assumed by the speaker, not their entire identity (Motschenbacher 2010, 19). The careful use of labels and identity categories is also because of their potential power: to speak of an object, or a person, is to subject them to the structuring principles of discourse (Motschenbacher 2010, 12). As discussed

previously in this thesis, words have historicity, sediments of meanings that are inescapably cited when they are used because they are embedded in discourse.

Furthermore, all identity categories are inherently problematic from a QL perspective because they carry normative requirements and individuals who do not meet those requirements may be regulated or excluded (Motschenbacher & Stegu 2013, 523). Exclusion does not only happen on hetero- or cisnormative basis, either. The sidelining of transgender and bisexual people from LGBT activism in the 1990's was named *homonormativity,* a term more recently applied to politics that do not contest dominant heteronormative institutions (Motschenbacher & Stegu 2013, 524). Campaigns to legalize same-sex marriage and some LGBT organizations' neoliberal embracing of companies vying for gay consumers ("pink money") are some examples that have been criticized as homonormative as they are seen as assimilationist and as centralizing a very specific way of being gay, lesbian, or bisexual – producing a marginalized subcategory of people who do not fit the norm.

Normative requirements get more tangled when the identity category is new, when it undergoes semantic change, or when several different interpretations coexist. In a paper published over two decades ago, M. Lynne Murphy discusses the different meanings associated with the words *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, *homosexual* and *queer* in a survey. Respondents were asked to determine who would be included under which labels based on sexual history and gender, resulting in group membership under labels *gay*, *lesbian* and *homosexual* receiving far more unanimous definitions than *bisexual* and *queer* (Murphy 1997). The latter two labels had not yet established their meanings, and to some extent still have not; in recent years, bisexuality has been a point of discussion within communities consisting of sexual and gender minorities. Some avoid using the label because its mainstream understanding generally is still "attracted to both men and women" and has gender binarist connotations, while many have adopted and advocate for a definition that leaves room for multiple genders, like "attraction not exclusively to one gender". The disparity between the dominant and the emerging definitions means that group membership does not only depend on sexual history or sexual desire, but on which definition the person judging group membership subscribes to.

Despite its apprehension toward identity categories, QL concedes that using them may be necessary "for certain pragmatic objectives" (Motschenbacher & Stegu 2013, 523). These objectives include situations where a demonstrable power imbalance needs to be addressed and other such political reasons, for example to acknowledge that *woman* and *man* are the dominant mode of gender construction all other constructions are normatively compared to (Motschenbacher 2011, 162). In some cases, labels can be used to the advantage of establishing political movements or fields of research in a strategy called *strategic essentialism*. It refers to the temporary overgeneralization and

the minimization of differences within a certain group that allows for a unified message or purpose (Bucholtz & Hall 2004, 477), with the key word being *temporary*. Ultimately, QL does not argue for the abolishment of gender categories but for them to be approached as contextual and fluid.

Sociolinguistics has long been the primary framework for language and gender and language and sexuality research, and QL can easily be applied to it. In ethnographic studies, a QL approach would prioritize the categories or identities that are co-constructed in that particular interaction rather than start from an *a priori* category to affix linguistic behaviour to (Motschenbacher 2011, 164). When applied to studying the language system, QL eschews structural perspectives in favour of poststructuralist ones: language is seen as a result of processes of discursive materialization (Motschenbacher 2011, 162). Discursive materialization gives language the kind of gender performative potential this thesis is interested in.

3 Previous research

For this section I have collected a number of studies from different disciplines that bridge the gap between the abstract and the empirical. After discussing English and its semantic gaps I will explore microaggressions, misgendering, minority stress and related issues. This section will provide further context for data analysis and for the thesis as a whole.

3.1 Bridging semantic gaps

The shortcomings of standard English lexicon when it comes to gender diversity are obvious, a fundamental among them the lack of gender-indeterminate third person singular pronoun. Though singular *they* is used by native speakers effortlessly ("Someone's at the door for you." "What do *they* want?"), there is still some resistance to using it consciously as a gender-inclusive pronoun. New gender-indeterminate pronouns (neopronouns) such as *xe*, *zie* and *hir* are not widely used or accepted. Contrastively, in Swedish the use of *hen* as a gender-indeterminate singular third person pronoun was legitimized in 2014 when it was added to the official glossary of the Swedish Academy to reflect language change and real-world use.

In English, prescriptive grammarians have bemoaned the allegedly un-grammatical use of *they* as a singular gender-indefinite antecedent since at least the 18th century (Baron 1981, 83), and there have been attempts to introduce an epicene, or gender-neutral, third person singular pronoun at least since

then. Baron's chronological glossary of suggested epicene pronouns starts in 1850 with *ne/nis/nim* an *hiser* and ends in *hir* in 1978. The sources for the glossary vary from columns to editorials to scholarly articles but are primarily from the academic world in general and from linguistic and feminist-oriented publications in particular. Though some sources feature some real-world use to back up their suggested neopronoun (such as *ae*), most seem to have had little actual use. Baron does not speculate as to why epicene pronouns have failed to spread into the mainstream, but one might argue that a prescriptivist, top-down approach to word creation is inevitably less successful than organic language change. Moreover, Baron's study and the examples in it are mostly concerned with providing alternatives for the generic *he* (Baron 1983, 85), and solutions that encompass "both genders", like *hiser*, *him'er*, *himorher* and *heshe*. From a modern and queer perspective, these are not so much gender-indeterminate or gender-neutral but binary-inclusive pronouns.

Baron's study was doubtless restricted by nature of being conducted in the early 1980's. Modern researchers can actually have access to communities either in physical or online spaces that generate and use neopronouns and other non-traditional labelling because they need new lexical tools to communicate their non-traditional identities. Online spaces in particular are fertile ground for communities to come together and develop new linguistic conventions such as pronouns and identity labels (Oakley 2016, Darwin 2017). One such place is Tumblr, a microblogging and social networking site which Oakley characterizes as having "a very active, open, and vocal LGBTQIA community" (Oakley 2016, 2), and as being a platform that encourages the formation of counter-cultures and labelling practices through functions including tagging and blog formatting (Oakley 2016, 1). Oakley found some interesting trends in the sample of 186 blogs selected based on the criteria of using certain LGBTQIA-representative hashtags. Though out of the 72 bloggers who disclosed their pronouns either in their blog bio or "About me" page only two used neopronouns (*ey/em/eir* and *xir/xim/xyr*), the mere fact that they show up in a relatively small sample is a glimpse into what pronouns are actually used by people in real life.

The study also found that while the disclosure of pronouns, various gender labels, and sexual orientation were fairly standard, the disclosure of being cisgender was not. There were also no bloggers publicly identifying themselves heterosexual in the sample (Oakley 2016, 5). These identifiers missing from the sample indicates that extensive self-labelling practices are related to a kind of community of practice of non-cisgender and non-straight bloggers. Oakley notes that from a Foucauldian perspective, the creation and use of identity labels might be seen as "just recycling existing power structures" (Oakley 2016, 11), but also argues that though labels have roots within hegemonic binary discourses, they work to actively make room for identities typically erased or

ignored by those discourses by appropriating hegemonic language; "bloggers construct discourses within hegemonic norms of a power that is intent on pretending that, as a sexual abnormality, they do not exist" (Oakley 2016, 9).

Similarly trying to locate a space between hegemonies, Callis (2014) applies borderland theory to "non-binary sexualities" like *pansexual* and *queer*; sexualities that are "both-and-neither". Callis conceptualizes the borderlands of sexuality as cracks within and between homosexuality and heterosexuality where new terminology springs from. Borderland identities come from hegemonic sexual categories but are something other than them. The cracks in Callis's conception of the borderland also correspond with genders that are not encompassed in binary models of cis and trans, woman and man. Beemyn (2015) found that many younger queer students identify beyond *bisexual* or *transgender* because the labels are too binary or "unable to speak the multiplicities of their lives" (Beemyn 2015, 360). Though it is still bound by hegemonic discourse and working within a language system built on binaries, the creation of new pronouns and labels aims to address these multiplicities.

While the ingroup, or the community of practice involved in coinage, can create or adapt vocabulary that speaks to their experiences, importing that vocabulary to use with the outgroup may come with issues. Darwin (2017) found that some people identifying under the nonbinary umbrella have trouble using their pronouns outside of their gender-variant peer groups simply because *they*, *ze* or *hir* are not accepted as legitimate (Darwin 2017, 330). Using non-traditional pronouns or gender labels also puts the person on the spot to educate members of the outgroup about what gender variance is and about language as a cultural construction, and often in a position to justify their own identity and existence (Darwin 2017, 329-330). An explicit verbal performance of "I am [non-traditional gender label] and my pronoun is [singular they or neopronoun]" may fulfil its conventional requirements for the speaker, but the hearer may call upon the authority of "biological sex" or grammar (in refusing to use singular *they* in particular) to refute the legitimacy of that performance. To the hearer, the conventions established in dominant binary gender discourse make the performance impossible.

3.2 Microaggressions, misgendering and minority stress

In the previous sections, this thesis has established that socially constructed reality contains hierarchies of normalcy, of majority versus minority, and that those hierarchies are upheld in their repetition. In some instances, the perceived hierarchy is so great it becomes cemented in structural violence, either overtly such as in legislation or, at its subtlest, in microaggressions. Microaggressions typically occur on an individual level: as "slights, insults, invalidations, and indignities visited upon

marginalized groups" and individuals by people in their lives, intentionally or not, well-intentioned or not (Sue 2010, xv). The term was coined in the 1970's to refer to the subconsciously racist subtle insults and dismissals experienced by black Americans (Sue 2010, xvi), and has since been extended to apply to the seemingly inconsequential, daily biases people of various marginalized groups face. Microaggressions are "othering" verbal, nonverbal, and environmental cues that can appear in facial expressions, body language, terminology, representation, or remarks (Nordmarken 2014, 129-130).

When directed toward gender variant people, microaggressions arise from the system I have been calling "dominant binary gender discourse" in this thesis, but which can equally be called *cisgenderism*. Cisgenderism is defined as "the ideology that delegitimizes people's own designations of their genders and bodies" (Ansara & Hagerty 2014, 260), prioritizing the assumptions made by external authorities like doctors, and imposing norms of gender being stable, permanent and intrapsychic (Blumer et. al. 2013, 269). Within a cisgenderist system, it is possible for a gender variant person to seek legitimization from authorities by undergoing medical and legal processes, but such legitimization does not necessarily lead to the absence of everyday microaggressions. Aggressors may "other" gender variant people by inquiring about their "real" gender, by sexualizing or fetishizing them, by giving them looks in gendered public bathrooms, by using incorrect pronouns or personal nouns, by giving backhanded compliments like "I would never have known, you look like a real man!", and so on (Nordmarken 2014). Cisgenderism imposes a strong hierarchy of normatively acceptable ways of being or doing gender, and people who diverge from the norms are reminded of their abjectness in covert ways in everyday interaction.

The microaggression of using incorrect pronouns or personal nouns is *misgendering*, and despite being mostly discussed in the context of trans experiences, it also occurs in garden variety sexist language (Ansara & Hagerty 2014, 260). Gendered stereotypes can lead to misgendering in connection to professions, like surgeons being referred to as *he* and nurses as *she* by default when the individual is unknown. This kind of misgendering remains an issue for women in stereotypically male fields (ibid.). The "generic *he*", though fallen somewhat out of favour, is also a misgendering feature of sexist language, and a reflection of sexist social structures and the hierarchies within them.

The experiences gender variant people have with misgendering is naturally more of interest to this thesis. McLemore frames misgendering as identity misclassification, a concept that has typically been defined as "falsely accused deviancy" (McLemore 2015, 52) whose threat to identity comes primarily from the undermining of social status (ibid.). McLemore's study argues that though identity misclassification in the form of misgendering is similar to identity misclassification in its conventional sense in that it is a psychologically disruptive experience that threatens belonging and

coherence needs, disrupts the social identity process, and reflects a failure to have one's social identity verified (McLemore 2015, 51), but misclassification does not need to be a danger to status in order to be psychologically disruptive and threatening. The approach hinges on identity verification, and on the idea that failure to have one's self-views and social identity verified causes negative affect, anxiety, depression, and "a sense of inauthenticity in social relationships" (McLemore 2015, 52). By contrast, Kapusta approaches the ethical concerns of misgendering from the point of view of power relations, of institutional power over self-determination; misgendering is not just an injustice one individual imposes on another, but a linguistic manifestation of oppressive power that restrains self-expression (Kapusta 2016, 504-505).

McLemore and Kapusta approach misgendering from different frames, but there is no reason not to consider them as parts of the same system: misgendering is a manifestation of the dominance of hegemonic binary gender discourse that threatens the coherence of individual and collective identity. Coherence was also discussed earlier in this thesis in the context of gender performance, and its need to maintain coherence in order to be legible. That coherence is interactive, it needs to be verified; threatening identity coherence is an injurious act. McLemore's surveys of "transgender spectrum individuals'" experiences with misgendering found that misgendering was felt to be stigmatizing and caused negative affect, lowered self-esteem, loss of social identity and authenticity whether misgendering was frequent or not (McLemore 2015, 67), but despite the devaluing, othering and marginalizing effect, a higher frequency of misgendering was associated with greater identity importance (McLemore 2015, 69). In other words, the more injury the respondents experienced, the stronger they felt about their identities. To me this could suggest that either respondents who had a strong identity to begin with were more adept at detecting acts rooted in prejudice and stigma, or that constant microaggressions that threaten identity coherence make those respondents double down on their self-determined gender.

The threat of misgendering and other microaggressions contribute to the *minority stress* gender variant people experience. Minority stress refers to the stress marginalized people experience because of the prejudices and discrimination they face that can come from external factors like overt and covert discrimination, the anticipation of this discrimination, or internalized social stigma (McLemore 2015, 69). For gender variant people, using gendered spaces like bathrooms and changing rooms can be a cause of acute distress because of the possibility of verbal or physical confrontation or even being barred from entering those spaces (ibid.). Meyer uses the concept of minority stress to offer a partial explanation of why lesbian, gay and bisexual people have a statistically high prevalence of mental health issues (Meyer 2003, 674), a hypothesis that can easily be extended to apply to gender

variant people as well given the conceptual and discursive entanglement of gender and sexual minorities. Minority stress applies to gender and sexual minorities whether they are "out" or not, as concealment itself is a stressor motivated by external prejudice and/or internalized stigma (Meyer 2003, 675).

The effects of microaggressions, misgendering and minority stress are not universally the same for all gender variant people. Some do not experience misgendering at all, some experience it but do not report any ill effects, and some are affected by constant microaggressions extremely negatively (McLemore 2015, 68). It is also reasonable to assume there is a high degree of variety across location and time, but evidence suggests that the majority of gender variant people do suffer from minority stress, microaggressions and misgendering. There are efforts to provide more gender-inclusive spaces and language in institutions (cf. Beemyn 2015) that reflect some change in what the mainstream can accept gender to be, but increased visibility may also lead to backlash.

4 Methodology: survey design, data collection and analysis method

To achieve the goal of this thesis I designed an online survey with sixteen open-ended questions and a brief section for demographic information. The design of the survey was informed by a pilot I ran in late 2014, though since then the focus of the thesis has shifted and the survey needed to be finessed. The intention of the survey was not to produce generalizable results, but to report results specific to this group of respondents individually, and as a group of persons who may share some experiences due to their variant gender. The purpose of the survey was to map how nonbinary people conceptualize their gender, experience misgendering, and if what theory calls linguistic violence or wounding is, in fact, experienced as violent. This was done by doing a qualitative close reading of all survey data and identifying trends by way of thematic analysis. This method also yielded some quantitative results, which I will introduce in the following sections.

The survey was titled "Thesis survey: Nonbinary naming practices and verbal misgendering" and divided into three sections: demographic info, naming practices, and misgendering, followed by prompts for further relevant additions that did not fit the questions and feedback. The introductory text of the survey outlined my thesis and criteria for respondents. Based on the results of the pilot study, which was open for anyone regardless of language most used in everyday interaction but still had a majority of respondents from anglophone countries, my two criteria were for the respondents to be firstly nonbinary in any of its definitions, and secondly to use English as a primary language of

communication in their everyday lives. These criteria allowed for respondents to identify either as nonbinary or any other label typically grouped under the umbrella of nonbinary, and to either speak English as their first and only language or as one of two or more primary languages. The survey was purposefully designed to have no obligatory questions, though some submissions were excluded from the final data set due to several skipped questions. Demographic information included sections on age (checkbox by age group), gender, pronoun(s), nationality, and first language or languages. The purpose of this section was to provide context both for individual submissions and to the dataset as a whole.

Section two, titled "Naming practices", first asked the respondents explain why they chose to label themselves with the gender label(s) they specified in section 1, or to describe why they chose not to use any label. They were further asked to expand on why choosing a label was necessary for them at all in question 2.2, and if the label they identified with had changed over time, and why, in question 2.3. The following two questions concerned kinship terminology, covering both familial and romantic/sexual intimate relationships. Questions 2.6 and 2.7 examined pronoun use, specifically the change in respondents' pronouns over time, and the relationships and social spaces they disclose their pronouns in. Section 2 overall provided information on the respondents' relationships with a range of typically binary-gendered semantic domains, and with a social reality that necessitates the gendered labelling of the self.

The third section covered misgendering. First, I felt it necessary to find out how the respondents defined misgendering themselves, both to compare it to academic definitions and to contextualize their following answers. Next they were asked to if they got misgendered, where and by whom, then in 3.3 to discuss how misgendering affects them emotionally. Question 3.4 expanded on 3.3 by asking if social setting affected the emotional effect of misgendering, and lastly they were asked for their opinion on what the purpose of calling out misgendering was. This section sought to address the central questions of this thesis, namely the issues of performative utterance and linguistic wounding.

Each section was followed by an "Is there anything you would like to add?" -box, with a further opportunity to provide both general additions and feedback at the end of the survey. Responses to these were largely introspective expansions on themes already being discussed in the questions proper.

The survey was hosted at E-Lomake (https://elomake3.uta.fi/) due to its ease of use. Online distribution allowed for the survey to reach respondents regardless of geographical location. The link to the survey was shared into several small online groups and communities, but, based on submission

timestamps, most respondents found it after it was posted on Tumblr, a microblogging website with a sizeable gender variant userbase. The speed at which submissions accumulated through Tumblr could be attributed to how sharing on the platform works. Each time the link was shared, or "reblogged", the potential number of people reached increased exponentially, and a reblog from a particularly popular blog could lead to a noticeable surge in clicks. The link was accessible for two weeks, during which there were a total of 234 submissions. The data pool was then reduced by first deleting accidental double submissions, insufficient submissions (e.g. form submitted mostly unanswered) and submissions from people who plainly did not fit the respondent criteria (exclusively and explicitly self-identified binary gender, use of English limited). The final dataset of 150 submissions was selected with a random number generator.

The survey's design and sharing platforms served the purpose of this study overall, but some improvements could have been made in hindsight. First and foremost, though I included elaborations and clarifications on several questions in the instructional text accessible by clicking the question mark next to the question, I did not explain this function in the introductory text, assuming it was self-explanatory. Furthermore, the functionality of such instructional text is unreliable at best on mobile devices, which it is safe to assume many respondents use for internet access in general and for browsing Tumblr specifically. This affected some respondents' interpretation of the questions, leading to some less useful answers. Some of the questions could have been split into two or more separate questions, as many respondents only answered the first part but not the latter parts. My intention in multi-part questions was to prompt reflective and introspective answers and allow the respondents to offer fuller narratives, and the introductory text did ask the respondents to take their time in answering, but it also led to incomplete answers. Responses that failed to answer the question or gave an incomplete answer were, however, few and far between when looking at the whole dataset, and some responses that misunderstood the question gave additional insight into the respondent.

One question was specifically brought up in the feedback box at the end of the survey, and in answers to the question. Question 2.5 asked "What does/do your significant other/others call you? Is that what you would like to be called?". This questions should have been more conditionally phrased, such as "If you currently have or have had a significant other or several significant others, what did or do they call you?", since the formulation in the survey first only takes into account current significant others, and second but more important, could be and was taken to assume that romantic and/or sexual relationships were of interest to all respondents. Such an assumption marginalizes and erases people who do not experience romantic and/or sexual attraction. Two asexual and/or aromantic spectrum respondents in the final dataset pointed this out in their answers to the question, and though each set

of questions was preceded by the reminder that any question could be skipped, there is a chance the question discouraged others from filling out the survey. The kinds of partial answers and misunderstood questions described above did not alone rule out a submission from the dataset, as the utility of the submissions was evaluated as a whole, and a single occurrence of partial answer or misunderstood question was not considered crucial.

To achieve a coherent qualitative analysis of this dataset of approximately 63 000 words, I applied some methods of *thematic analysis*. Thematic analysis was a useful way of analysing this dataset because of its flexibility, the ability to examine the perspectives of different respondents and their similarities and differences, and because it allows for the summary of key points in large datasets (Nowell et. al. 2017, 2). It is also a fairly intuitive method for approaching a substantive amount qualitative data in hopes of extracting some quantitative information from it. Before starting to code my dataset, I had already become quite familiar with it while combing through submissions for double submissions and other disqualifying features mentioned above. Having reduced the dataset from 234 submissions to the final 150, I re-familiarized myself with it and made initial notes about possible key themes before starting to code and sort it in earnest, proceeding question by question.

I processed the data in a series of spreadsheets, one sheet with all the submission data and one or more sheets per each question's responses. Responses were copied to the appropriate spreadsheet in the appropriate themed column(s) determined by keywords/codes, and after the entire set of responses to a question had been sorted, I reviewed the coding and themes, refining distinctions and in some instances collapsing redundant themes into each other. Based on my initial close reading of the dataset I knew a large portion of responses to many questions had several themes present, and those responses were sorted into each theme that applied, not just the theme I would have judged as the primary one in the response.

5 Analysis

5.1 Demographic analysis

Table 1: Ages

Age	Number	% of dataset
Under 15	2	1,4%
15-20	47	31,3%
21-25	47	31,3%
26-30	32	21,4%
31-35	12	8%
36-40	7	4,6%
Over 40	3	2%

Table 2: Nationalities

Nationality	Number	% of dataset
USA	86	57,3%
Canada	14	9,3%
UK/Britain	10	6,7%
Finland	10	6,7%
Australian	6	4%
English	5	3,3%
Ireland	4	2,7%
Germany	4	2,7%
Misunderstood/blank	17	11,3%
Other	7	4,7%
Bangladesh	Belgium	Bulgaria
France	Greece	Holland
Mexico		

Table 3: First languages

First language	Number	% of dataset
Ensligh	135	90%
Finnish	8	5,3%
German	4	2,7%
French	3	2%
Other	13	8,7%
Anishinaabe	ASL	Bengali
Bulgarian	Dutch	Greek
Korean	Mandarin	Russian
Spanish	Tagalog	Teochew chinese
Urdu		

In the final dataset, there were respondents from a wide age range, from all around the world and with a variety of gender labels. The most well-represented age groups were ages 15 to 20 and 21 to 25, with 47 submissions each. 32 respondents were 26 to 30 years old, and the remaining 24 submissions comprised of people either under 15 or over 30 years old (Table 1).

82 submissions were from US nationals, 14 Canadian, 10 Finnish, 10 British and 6 Australian, with 25 more nationalities represented. Several specified several nationalities. There was an unexpected number of respondents who either misunderstood the question or wished to prioritize their ethnicity over their nationality, opting to refer to themselves as *white*, *caucasian* or *mixed* instead of or in addition to their nationality. Two respondents also defined themselves as Filipinx[2] American, one as

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[2] Replacing the gendered o/a ending with x to make the term gender-inclusive: *filipinx*, *latinx*, etc.

indigenous American and one Pakistani American (Table 2). Only a handful specified something other than English as one of their first languages (Table 3). First languages were defined as "The language or languages you were primarily exposed to as a child." in the instructional text.

Gender labels had slightly more variation. To my surprise, having expected most respondents to label themselves simply *nonbinary*, only 56 respondents referred to themselves with *nonbinary*, or its other spellings (*NB*, *enby*). 35 were *agender*, 21 *genderqueer* and 10 *genderfluid*, three *bigender*, two *neutrois*, two *transgender* and two declining to pick a label (Table 4). For pronouns, 129 predictably used *they*, 28 chose *he* and 31 *she*. Nine respondents said they had no pronoun preference, eight used *it*, and two chose *e/en/eir*. The rest chose a variety of neopronouns (Table 5). A large number of respondents identified themselves with more than one identity label and named more than one pronoun, often explaining that their use varied contextually.

Table 4: Gender

Label	Number	% of dataset
Nonbinary	56	37,3%
Agender	35	23,3%
Genderqueer	21	14%
Genderfluid	10	6,7%
Bigender	2	1,3%
Not applicable	2	1,3%
Neutrois	2	1,3%
Other	21	14%
Acervusgender	Androgyne	Androgynous
Demiboy	Demigirl	Deminonbinary
Genderfluid	Genderflux	Genderfucked
Libramasculine	Maverique	Nanogirl
Novarian	Nonbinary masculine	Null
Queer	Solarian	Trans
Transgender	Trans man	Two spirit

Table 5: Pronoun

Pronoun	Number	Percentage of dataset
They	129	86%
She	31	20,7%
He	28	18,7%
No preference	9	6%
It	8	5,3%
E/en/eir	2	1,3%
Other	6	4%
Xe/xir	Ze/zir	Xay/xed
Ae/aer	Ey/em/eir	Any neutral

Overall, the demographics follow expected trends. As Tumblr was a primary platform for sharing the survey, the platform's own demographics affect the sample. Almost half of the site's traffic comes from IP addresses registered to the United States, and a quarter of those visits were from the 18 to 24 age group (Statista.com 2019). The relative prevalence of *nonbinary* as either a generic umbrella or

distinct category was also to be expected, though I was surprised at the relatively low number of *transgender*-identified respondents. Likewise, the commonness of *they* was to be anticipated, but the low number of respondents who use neopronouns relative to those who use *he* and/or *she* was not. Context-dependent use of identity labels and pronouns is an interesting aspect of how nonbinary gender is verbally performed, which I will discuss further in the following section.

5.2 Naming practices

> If words like "man" and "woman" didn't carry the weight they do, then sure, I'd be fine without having a label; as things are though, it's important to me. Other cultures and languages make room for people like me, but those things are closed off from me. While I don't want to take from others, I know I deserve to be recognized by my culture and by the people in my life. Labels create that recognition. That's what language is for. The lack of a label also speaks to the inflexibility of English speakers in allowing "new" ideas into their pre-constructed worlds: they don't have to recognize it if it doesn't exist and it can't exist if there's no name for it, if they've "never heard of it before."

Questions about naming practices comprised the second section of the survey. The answers varied in length and content, and I identified several common themes and notable outliers. The following subsections detail those themes, from empowerment through self-naming and community-building to the fear associated with coming out or using a too "out-there" label to identify with.

5.2.1 Degrees of identification

As discussed before, the lexicon of gender-variant identities is constantly changing and many words are difficult to exhaustively define. Definitions, proliferation of new labels, and discussion of them mostly exist in spaces that must first be found – online spaces like Tumblr, discussion forums, sources like the Gender Wiki, as well as physical spaces for and by the community. These discussions seldom reach the mainstream and are not equally available to everyone attempting to name their gendered self. The discovery of new terminology may be eye-opening to many, but also confusing when definitions contradict of overlap, or when the entire concept of "gender" seems vague. With the general messiness of the lexicon and unbalanced access to information in mind, I wanted to know what the reasonings for the respondents' choice of labels were, and if they were able to find labels they felt represented their gender well enough. A failure to find a suitable label is not to be taken as de-legitimizing anyone's gender, but as a reflection of the complexities of both identifying a gendered experience outside the norm and finding a term that adequately represents that experience.

The "Naming practices" -section of the survey opened with the question "In the previous section, I asked you to name your gender. Why do you use that name? If you do not use any specific name, why is that?" Respondents identified with their labels of choice to varying degrees. Over half, 86 respondents, reported that they identified with their label:

1. i don't have a gender, so agender fits.

2. I use genderfluid because I regularly fluctuate between identifying as more specific gender labels, namely demigirl, nonbinary, and female.

3. I use nonbinary because I have never felt like female or male, even from an early age.

Notably, nearly all respondents who named themselves *agender* simply stated they identified with it, or said, like in (1), that the label fit. Similarly, straightforward identification was associated with the use of multiple, sometimes context-dependent labels like in (2), and with highly specific labels, like *two-spirit* (specific to some Native American cultures) or *maverique* ("a gender completely separated from the m/f binary" according to a maverique respondent). The latter two also highlight the variety in the origins of labels in use by nonbinary people, "two-spirit" being an ancient concept with nuanced cultural connotations and *maverique* being a neologism dating only back to 2014 according to some sources.

This contrasts with the indeterminateness present in many respondents' phrasing of their degree of identification with their chosen label. In 24 submissions, respondents expressed some degree of dissatisfaction or unease with the label they specified with turns of phrase like "I haven't found a more specific term that feels accurate", implying that such a term exists but has eluded the respondent. For some there appears to be a need to find a very specific, clearly defined name for their gender, and in the dataset, those respondents who used a single, specific and often slightly obscure label expressed strong identification with it ("[acervusgender] correctly explains my relationship with gender"), whereas there was a lot of variation under the very common *nonbinary*/*non-binary*/*NB*/*enby* label.

Nonbinary and its various spellings were often employed as stand-ins for as-yet unidentified, more specific labels. Still, many also fully identified with *nonbinary*, and ideas of freedom and variety were positively associated with it. The status of the word as a catch-all for not-woman/not-man genders also makes it a placeholder or general vehicle for communicating variant gender to the outgroup.

4. I like 'nonbinary' because it's vague. It gets the point across that I don't fall within the typical western binary of genders, but it leaves it open ended enough that I don't feel boxed in to another set of gender roles or expectations.

5. I continue to use it because it provides me a sense of "variety" which complements my expression of gender and because it has become common enough to be identifiable to people who don't personally identify that way.

6. I feel nonbinary is both a label and isn't. It says what my gender is not, but not what it is. I like the vagueness and the wide variety available to me

Here the idea of defining identity through what it is not also comes up. Defining categories through contrasting them with others is by no means unusual, but I do find it particularly interesting that the two gender labels most prevalent in the dataset are distinguished by *an absence of* or *being outside of*. The meanings ascribed to *agender* and *nonbinary* are negative in the sense that they express a lack of meaning, perhaps because the meanings associated with dominant binary gender discourse are inapplicable to these people's experience. Furthermore, the *queer* in *genderqueer*, the third most prevalent label in the dataset, invokes the fluidity and anti-identitarian politics of queer theory and the ambiguity of "queer"; something loosely defined and dynamic, rather than strictly defined and static.

The difficulties associated with labelling one's gender seem partly affected by the questions of what gender is, what it feels like to have a gendered experience, and how a single word could communicate such a nebulous thing.

7. I don't understand the way other people connect with gender or know what their gender is. For me, gender is like some sort of deep-sea fish: I've been told it exists, but I have no personal frame of reference for it.

8. I do not want to use any specific name for my gender, because I do not think there is one. Gender is a mystery, to me. I guess 'genderless' fits the feeling, but on the other hand it feels incredibly silly to associate such a word to one's gender (it's like calling atheism a religion).

As discussed before in this thesis, "gender" is far from an easy concept to define, especially as a facet of identity. In (8), the paradoxical nature of naming an absence of is also discussed. Is the state of not having a gender indeed a gender, or something else entirely, and who are these labels chosen for? Using an umbrella or placeholder label either because a more suitable label is yet to be found or because gender is not a relatable concept is, in this dataset, done not always for the sake of the self but for others – individuals, groups and society. The following discusses why gender labels are used by the respondents, and what functions they serve.

5.2.2. Labelling for self and others

As the heading suggests, gender labels are deployed both for self-affirmation and to communicate some aspect of the self to others. How the gendered self is communicated to others was touched upon in the "Theoretical background" -section of this study; essentially, gender is done and communicated through performance, and only a few ways of doing gender are culturally legible. I also briefly discussed the problem of such a limited variety of performances being legible and suggested that at least for some performances of nonbinary gender, explicit verbal performance may be the only way to become legible.

This idea did also come up in some of the responses the question 2.2: "For you, what is the purpose of having a name for your gender? Do you wish you did not have to label yourself? Why?". A total of 78 references were made to labels being employed partly or mainly to communicate some aspect of the self or the invalidity of the binary gender system to the outgroup or to the social world at large.

9. I would prefer not to label myself, but in today's society I still feel it is important for me personally to do so.

10. Naming my gender allows me to describe myself to myself in the face of binary society. It also allows me to describe myself to others to try and force myself to be seen by them as I wish to be seen.

11. It would be nice if we could one day phase out gendered language all together because I don't think it's necessary, but for now it's important to have language that distinguishes non-cisgendered identities.

12. strategic essentialism, such as naming a non-normative gender, is useful in gaining recognition for oppressed groups. It would be nice to love in a genderless society in which the label had no meaning, but that's not here.

These answers included implicit and explicit references to the importance of language that challenges binary hegemony, like (10), and to strategic essentialism. As discussed in section 2.4, strategic essentialism is a conscious choice in political action to foster group identity by highlighting shared traits central to the action and minimizing non-essential differences, allowing for more coherent and unified message and goals. Though these society-wide concerns regarding labelling were prevalent, almost a third of the submissions also mentioned a need for a simple designation in interpersonal relationships.

13. I've had people ask what I am. Boy? No. Girl? No. Then what? And it's very handy to have a simple word to give them

14. Having a name for it is largely for other peoples benefit. It's easier to say "I'm trans", than non binary, and easier to say "non-binary" than give the full and frank answer.

Being able to answer the "Then *what* are you?" -question emerged as significant on levels from the whole of society and language all the way to introspective self-determination. In (14), the respondent also references identifying themselves to others somewhat strategically: presumably, as simply *trans* to outgroups, as *non-binary* to the ingroup, and without a label to select people. This kind of strategy of calibrating the disclosure of label to either the receiver's supposed frame of reference or to their own level of comfort in a social situation was fairly common in the dataset, especially with respondents who assigned themselves multiple labels. Equally as common as mentioning societal norms as a factor in label use was stating that the network of labels is vital for peer support and community.

15. The purpose of labeling my gender is so I have something to call myself and find people like myself with.

16. The purpose of having a name for my gender is both political and a way of garnering community.

17. I think having a label helps me find people like me, helps me find some sort of community, to feel a togetherness that I don't have when I'm in a very cis environment.

Despite the majority mentioning community in a primarily positive sense, some touched upon the anxiety of not meeting some implicit norms associated with their chosen label, of "not being [label] enough". This anxiety seems closely linked with the variety of definitions and labels under the nonbinary umbrella, and the concept of gender itself:

18. But it's a little confusing to have so many names being discussed for different types of being nonbinary, like now I just feel worried that I don't have enough traits of certain community factions in order to qualify as real.

Again, struggling to identify a suitable label has more to do with a wealth of labels with overlapping definitions than with the validity of the struggling person's gender. These concerns are in line with what was discussed in 2.4 regarding identity categories and norms; that categories become inherently normativized, and normativization begets exclusion. With emerging identity categories, these norms have not yet become cemented but are on their way to becoming established. Still, while the unease expressed by some respondents regarding normative expectations should not be ignored, a clear majority of submissions emphasized how important finding even a somewhat accurate label was for them personally.

19. But seeing that there is a name for how I feel shows that other people feel the same way and I am not alone.

20. I personally just want something that I can connect to. Something that explains me to myself, more than anything.

21. having a name for my gender makes me feel more valid in it.

Responses to this question overwhelmingly exhibited how validating finding the language to express variant gender was to those who have struggled with feelings of abnormality and exclusion. The sentiments expressed in (19), (20), and (21) fit under the idea of if there is a word for it, it is real, and this idea lends credence to gender as a social construct and highlights how important labels can be even when those labels stem from an exclusionary binary system.

5.2.3 Changes in label use

The third question in "Naming practices" was "Are there any other names you have used to verbalize your gender before? Why do you think they have changed?". In asking which labels respondents may have previously used, my interest was not in which labels has been in use but in the reasons why the change in label use occurred. Commonly, the respondents' gender label use changed because of some combination of introspection and access to new information, such as giving a name to their feeling of otherness or not fitting in their assigned gender after finding out that genders outside of the binary exist.

22. I used to consider myself a girl because I didn't know there was another option.

23. I struggled with my gender for a long time, mostly because I didn't even know there was something Beyond our binary, I didn't even hear the word transgender till I was 14. As a result I called myself "a tomboy" and it kind of became the expression of who I was when it came to gender.

24. I just used "trans" for a long while. Partly because that's the only term I had when I first realised I wasn't a guy, and partly because it took me a while to fully understand how I felt.

25. Before I found out about nb identities I thought I had to be a cis girl because I didnt want to transition and live as a man.

Responses (22) through (25) clearly communicate that the respondents knew they did not identify with their assigned gender but did not know they had options, either beyond their assigned gender or beyond the gender binary. As discussed before, access to gender variant terminology is not equal to all, and recognition of the existence of nonbinary genders has broken into the mainstream only recently. Even realizing their gender is not what they were assigned at birth does not mean they had access to language that would represent it. In total, 30 responses mentioned access to new information or vocabulary in one way or another. Most were first introduced to gender variant terminology through supercategories like *transgender* (or the archaic *transsexual*) or *nonbinary* like in (26) and (27).

26. I started out with "transsexual" because it was basically the first one I was exposed to. Quickly changed to transgender, which felt much more accurate.

27. I used to fluctuate between non-binary and genderless. I got introduced to all of this via the term non-binary, so that was kind of an easy way to start off.

In a total of 78 responses, access to gender variant terminology and definitions led to respondents changing labels through introspection. It appears that realizing one's gender does not align with one's assigned gender is the first step, and the following steps often feature trying out different labels, seeing how they feel, and switching when they come across something more appropriate or their perception of their gender changes like in (28).

28. I've used many different words to describe my gender, and they've changed as I've changed. And as I've learned more and more about other identities and labels.

29. I used to say I was non-binary, until I saw that most people who identified as non-binary around me use they/them pronouns which doesnt fit me entirely. I still feel slightly female, slightly gender-ambiguous, and because of that agender fits more. Its also because of my lack of care to pronoun reinforcement that agender fits best.

30. male, transmasc, genderless... gender is mad fluid & my journey just began less than ten years ago so my own feelings plus learning new terms/information it's all in motion

Response (29) features not only knowledge of terminology and definitions, but also some normative expectations associated with them. Though nonbinary is typically felt to be a rather broad category that, as the dataset shows, encompasses a multitude of distinct genders and pronoun uses, this respondent has taken cues from their environment as to what is (normatively) expected of individuals under certain labels. This would suggest that in the groups this respondent interacts with, some of these gender labels are starting to be more strictly and normatively defined than they are in their general use. By contrast, (30) exhibits a more relaxed attitude towards labels and gender in general; to this respondent, gender does not appear to be as permanent as dominant binary gender discourse or the normative "wrong body"-model trans narrative would suggest.

Interestingly, external feedback to label use was identified as a factor in label change by nearly as many respondents as access to new information was (26 and 30 in total, respectively). As noted in the previous section, label and pronoun use are often not just for the self, but to help communicate one's identity to others. With some labels, a lack of recognition or hostile reactions discourage people from using them.

31. I used genderqueer at one point, but I stopped, because it requires the same amount of explanation as non-binary, but with the added bonus of people judging me for the "queer" part.

32. I used to use genderqueer a lot but I feel like that word has now been associated strongly with a certain kind of skinny masculinity that I don't want to be a part of. A lot of people under 25 years old also seem to have a huge issue with the word queer.

33. Before, i used gendervoid, because that also describes my gender: void of gender, genderless, etc etc. The reason for the change is for equal parts simplicity and avoiding harassment for "mogai"[3] words.

34. i used masculine agender before, but now i stick with agender and trans man cause that's easier for others to understand.

Responses (31) and (32) were among the half a dozen submissions that mentioned an aversion to using *genderqueer* because *queer* is still understood as a slur by some, which, in addition to being arguably opaquer in meaning that *nonbinary*, makes it hard to use to explain yourself to others. Using a maybe-slur like *queer* is more likely to be challenged than verified in some anglophone contexts. Issues of being challenged are also mentioned in (33). Some spaces and people are openly hostile towards gender variant label use, especially towards more unusual labels, as made evident by both mainstream and niche reactions to Facebook making dozens of different gender labels available for users to assign their profile (cf. *The Daily Mail 13*.2.2014, *The Christian Post* 14.2.2014). Even if the reaction is not hostile, the hearer simply not understanding what a label means puts the speaker into the position of having to educate them and taking the risk of entering a debate on whether or not their identity is real.

Some situational label-switching was associated with gender fluidity, i.e. the person's gender identity (and often expression) fluctuating between categories, but some was to more effectively communicate the idea underlying a potentially unfamiliar gender label. Though this question was intended to find out about temporal changes, these situational changes illustrate some of the strategies nonbinary people use to navigate a cisgenderist world and to make themselves legible.

35. I sometimes use agender, gender-neutral, third-gender, or other-gender when trying to explain my gender to other people. But I pretty much exclusively stick to non-binary when I am thinking about myself to myself.

36. When I'm feeling obstinate, I draw in a new box on forms that ask whether I'm male or female, and write "Other." Other times I check "female" because I know that the box is interested in how the world perceives me, not my complex treatise on gender as a construct.

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[3] Community-defined: "Marginalized Orientations, Gender identities, And Intersex", this term is controversial and has negative connotations for many.

37. i've just gone with my assigned gender name when pushed (legal/formal forms etc), but sometimes i answer which ever (anonymous questionnaires etc)

The respondent in (35) draws a distinction between what her actual gender is, and which labels she uses to more effectively communicate it to others who might be more readily able to understand *third-gender* than *nonbinary*. In (36), the respondent reports sometimes physically changing a categorization their identity does not fit into, and sometimes making a guess about what the form is actually asking – in different contexts, a form asking you to check one of two genders may be asking about legal gender, or reproductive organs and genitalia, or social gender, or actual gender. Response (37) seems to apply similar reasoning, assuming legal and formal documents ask about legal gender whereas anonymous surveys and the like may be interested in the respondent's actual gender. These strategies are some ways nonbinary and other gender variant people navigate the world: by anticipating which labels will be accepted in which situations, when to push for recognition, and when to misgender themselves.

5.2.4 Issues of kinship

A great portion of English kinship terminology is gendered, whether referring to familial or romantic/sexual relationships. The respondents' relationships with this terminology was covered by two separate questions, one for each type of relationship, and what I was most interested in was whether the respondents preferred having gendered or neutral terms used of them. There were, however, also some other interesting findings. Question 2.4 was about familial relationships: "What does your childhood family call you? (E.g. sister/brother/sibling/other, son/daughter/child/other) What do you want them to call you?". The instructional text elaborated: "Here, "childhood family" refers to the family you were born or adopted into and spent your childhood in, or any kind of fostering or caregiving relationship you were in as a child and consider family."

First of all, out of 150 respondents, 107 reported being referred to by the wrong pronouns, personal nouns, or gendered names by at least a part of their families, i.e. being misgendered. This number includes the 32 respondents who have not told their families about their gender and/or their pronoun, kinship term and name preferences. Potential conflict, lack of support, and lack of understanding were cited as reasons for staying closeted:

38. My family does not know, and I think it might be best that way in order to avoid conflict.

39. Daughter/granddaughter. Unfortunately I am not out as trans to my family, so I am still misgendered. They would not be supportive of my transition, if I told them.

Only 35 respondents said they were called by the correctly gendered/neutral terms by some or all of their family. Among this group, it was more common to be correctly gendered by siblings than by parents or other elder relatives.

40. My mother usually calls me her "youngest" when introducing or speaking about me (as this sidesteps having to use gendered language completely), and my sister usually calls me her sibling.

41. With the exception of my middle sister, who is so supportive and understanding, the rest of my family still call me by my dead name[4] and use female pronouns for me. While this doesn't necessarily bother me it itself, since I look and sound like a girl I know it's just easier for cis people. But it really hurts to hear your own mother say 'No, you're lying to yourself. You will always be a girl and I will never call you by your chosen name!'

42. My family has a hard time using my pronouns, especially my parents. They still use 'daughter' instead of 'child' like I've asked. My sister does pretty well at remembering to call me 'sibling' though.

43. My brother calls me his sibling, but I'd also be ok with sibster. I encourage my parents to refer to me as their kid or their eldest, but they're a lot slower on the uptake.

The effects of misgendering will be discussed further later in this thesis, but in these responses, (41) expresses being hurt by their mother's misgendering of them, while (42) and (43) express some understanding towards their parents' difficulty in adapting to a new way of referring to their child. Overall, respondents expected their siblings and younger immediate family to adapt to using correct words quicker than their parents or grandparents; three mentioned not trying to explain the situation to their grandparents at all. Approximately half of the responses described the respondents' reactions to misgendering unprompted.

Though a majority, 81, of the respondents said they would like to be called by gender-neutral terms (*child, sibling*) or their chosen name by their family, 13 stated they preferred gendered terms. This group includes both those who like to be called gendered terms that correspond with their gender assigned at birth or would feel strange not being called by those terms, and those who want to be called by binary gendered terms other than what would be associated with their assigned gender (an assigned female at birth person preferring to be called *son* and *brother* for example).

44. My parents call me daughter. I'm not out to them as non-binary, and I don't think they would understand. Honestly, I think I'd feel weird to being called anything else simply because I'm too used to it now.

---

[4] Refers to name given at birth, as opposed to self-chosen name. As a verb, "to deadname" is the offensive act of referring to a gender variant person by a wrongly gendered name they no longer use, or have metaphorically buried; equivalent to misgendering.

45. My family calls me sister/daughter etc.; I'm not properly out to any of them. I guess I'm fine with these labels since they're what I've used my whole life, and I'm kind of sentimental about them. I wouldn't mind being called by neutral words instead though.

46. daughter, sister. I like these labels, as I still very much have an affinity for my more feminine qualities and the shared relationship I have with other women.

47. my mum calls me her son, or her child. it took a long time for her to accept my masculine side, so hearing her call me "son" always makes me feel all gooey and nice.

Instances where respondents explicitly said they liked gendered terms that aligned with their assigned gender, like (46), and where there is some positive sentimentality attached to them, and (45) were particularly interesting to me. The fact that not a single respondent mentioned liking or being sentimental about being referred to with a gendered term like *woman*, *man*, *lady*, *sir* that aligned with their assigned gender but some had a degree of affinity to these gendered words that are associated with a particular relationship is something that could be explored further with a larger sample. I would guess that to some, a gendered kinship term that has been used of them all their lives before they realized they were gender variant could have more meaning as a signifier of a particular relationship than as a signifier of gender. These respondents being outliers in my dataset means this is speculation, but I felt it interesting enough to warrant some discussion.

The remaining submissions, 21, specified no preference about gendered versus neutral kinship terms, or said they did not mind being referred to with gendered kinship terms that aligned with their assigned gender.

48. i don't mind them calling me sister and daughter because to me, someone can be a sister and still not have a gender. i don't have a strong association to words like sister and gender because i've always been without gender and almost always been someone's sibling, so in my mind clearly sister is not gendered. even though i know other people think it is.

49. [My family still calls me] sister and daughter, but they use my correct pronouns. I have told them I am comfortable with sister and daughter for now but it may change.

Respondents in this group were either closeted, had no preference when it came to forms of gendered address in general, or simply stated the terms their families called them and that it was "fine" or did not "bother" them. Response (48) describes a disconnect between general and personal meanings of gendered words, prioritizing the respondent's own relationship with them. This approach was common among respondents who identified themselves with some label communicating a lack of gender (*agender*, *genderless*, *null*, etc.). Response (49) also demonstrates how relationships to different gendered signifiers may vary: they have a specific gender-neutral pronoun they are to be called (*they*), but they are okay with being referred to with words that conventionally signify a binary

gender. This is somewhat similar to what I discussed in connection with response (45) and (46): there is relationality in the appropriate use of gendered words, and in what meanings those words carry.

The question about kinship terms in romantic/sexual relationships was unfortunately less successfully formulated than other questions. 48 respondents simply stated the question "What does/do your significant other/others call you? Is that what you want to be called?" did not apply to them, either because they were not currently in such a relationship or because they did not enter romantic/sexual relationships in general. In addition, 13 respondents misunderstood the question, reporting the pronouns and gender labels their significant other referred to them by instead of kinship terms like the instructional question clarified: "E.g. partner, SO, girl-/boyfriend." This clarification should have been included in the question proper.

Out of the submissions that responded in the intended way, 50 said they were or would like to be referred to with gender neutral terms only.

50. Don't have a significant other, but if I did, I'd like them to call me a partner/ s.o/ dear /whatever neutral terms there are for a romantic partner.

51. Spouse and datemate.

52. Partner. And yes I quite like the ambiguity. Are we partners in crime or small town sheriffs? You may never know.

53. my significant other will refer to me as their partner, enbyfriend, loved one, significant other, and other such genderneutral terms.

All of these respondents reported being happy with being referred to with these terms. This is in contrast to the groups called by both gendered and neutral terms, 16 submission, and only gendered terms, 13 submission, though in both groups the respondents were primarily happy with the labels their significant others referred to them with.

54. They refer to me "the girlfriend" or "the partner" I'm pretty cool [with] both.

55. Girlfriend, and I am comfortable with that.

56. They did call me girlfriend or boyfriend depending on the situation. I'm fine with either.

Again, response (56) implies a situationality that has been discussed in connection with other labels as well. In (54) and (55), too, gendered terms are not taken to be hurtful or misgendering in this context of use. This is representative of how almost no linguistic preferencs can be claimed to apply to nonbinary people universally. A total of 8 respondents were, however, somewhat unhappy with being referred to with gendered terms by their significant others.

57. He calls me princess, and babe. I'm okay with babe, that's what I call him, but I'm not sure about princess.

58. My husband calls me his wife, but I don't know if I want to change that either, more for his sake. He's not terribly keen on the whole idea.

59. I am a girlfriend, fiancée, and soon to be wife. I like fiancée because it is only one e away from the male version. I think I would prefer to a partner/spouse than a wife though.

In these responses, as with those regarding familial kinship term use, the respondents express understanding of people in their lives, and their difficulty in adapting. In (58), the respondent considers their husband's feelings about change in gendered terminology over their own wish, and (57) and (59) express uncertainty about having gendered words used of them and a preference for neutral terms. An ambivalence or uncertainty about specific linguistic choices at different points in time appears common across the dataset.

One especially noteworthy theme in the group called by both gendered and neutral words was the respondent's descriptions about why their partners were not always able to correctly gender them or not gender them in certain situations.

60. My husband calls me his wife, as he works in an industry that is not exactly the most "politically correct" and it makes life easier for him to do so. I will note, however, that he asked me if it was okay to do so - it is an unfortunate necessity still in today's societal climate that there are times where I must use gendered titles (such as in this case, or anything to do with the government, where there is no gender neutral option and I am forced to use "Mrs")

61. My boyfriend calls me his partner, or girlfriend to people he thinks might not understand immediately and is only talking to for a short time. He has my permission to do this, if I wasn't okay with it he wouldn't do that.

Response (60) notes that though their husband has permission to use misgendering terms of them and the situations he does that in are understandable, it is an unfortunate situation and something "today's societal climate" forces them both to do. In (61), there is again the expectation that some labels do not communicate the right idea to everyone, and labels are strategically switched when situation calls for it, as was discussed in connection to gender label switching in 5.2.2 and 5.2.3.

5.2.5 Pronoun use, disclosure, and safety

As with changes in label use, my interest in changes with pronoun use was to find out why changes occurred, not what the changes were. As with some other two-part questions, some respondents left the latter part of "Have your pronouns changed over time? Why?" unanswered. Most did however,

and the themes were similar to those present in gender label changes: pronouns were switched due to new information or insight, or because there was a need to use a more generally recognized pronoun.

The clear majority, 120 respondents, said they had only used pronouns aligned with their birth-assigned gender before switching.

62. Yes, they have. I originally used the she/her pronouns I was assigned at birth, but now use they/them to reflect my agender identity.

63. Yes, because I began exploring my gender and found that the pronouns I'd been assigned at birth did not fit.

64. [---] now I mostly just wish I radiated some kind of grammatical warping field to restructure people's sentences to not use any pronouns for me at all, because even they/them doesn't feel quite right, but lacking that, I'll go with they/them.

Responses (62) and (63) present a straightforward progression of exploration of gender variant identity to gender-neutral pronoun use. Response (64) expresses some complication to that progression in that though the respondent's true preference is not to use pronouns at all, they accept *they* as a compromise. This is similar to respondents who were not quite happy with their chosen gender label but used it as an approximation.

Out of the 23 respondents who reported having used neopronouns before, 13 explicitly stated they were motivated to switch because their pronouns were not recognized or accepted.

65. I started off using e/em/eir because it was the first I'd ever heard of, and I grew quite attached to it as a symbol of my awakening, sorta? But anxiety over transphobia has led me to just go with 'whatever's most accepted right now', and currently that's a singular "they". [---]

66. Before transition, I used female pronouns, and right after I used ze/zir. Eventually due to ease of use I switched to singular they.

67. yes! after using she/her for several years, i dabbled in several different pronouns, including but not limited to: he/him, xe/xem/xir, ey/em/eir, they/them/their, it/its, etc. in the end, they/them suited me best irt what society would accept, but it/its makes me happiest.

Again, this is similar to what I found in the context of gender labels. Response (65) references transphobia as a motivation, not unlike the respondent in (33) who was afraid of being harassed because of "MOGAI words". Both (66) and (67) imply or state that using *they* is easier, the latter mentioning societal acceptance. General society and local communities do not allow or take part in these respondents' linguistic identity construction or performance because it is deemed "too weird", in one respondent's words, or a linguistic performance is simply not legible as such.

The follow-up question to pronoun change was "In what situations do you disclose your pronouns? How does the social setting affect your choice?". Disclosure of pronouns effectively equals to coming out of the closet – in that sense, pronoun disclosure is an important linguistically performative tool, because while it does not outright state "My gender is [label]", it communicates that the speaker's gender may not be what they would conventionally be perceived as. Because there is no visual performance of nonbinary gender that is reliably legible in most situations, the performance must be done by other means.

In 91 submissions, that performance could only be done with safe people and in safe contexts. "Safe" means that there is an expectation that variant gender is accepted as valid and people's pronouns are respected, and suggests that out of those safe contexts, there is an anticipation of rejection and disrespect.

68. I always disclose my preferred pronouns to fellow nb people, as well as any other trans people or trans allies. A setting that doesn't support trans people does not lead to this, or any situation that includes a majority of cis/binary people. I'm very afraid of being asked about it because my identity is personal to me and being interrogated makes me extremely uncomfortable

69. In LGBT circles I usually disclose immediately, and people often ask too. On the internet, I also write them down on bios and descriptions. In places and conversations where I am unsure of whether the people present are understanding of non-binary genders I have to gauge the situation before I correct people on pronouns. (i.e. it took me a month to disclose pronouns to the people at work)

70. i only disclose my pronouns when i'm absolutely sure no one will spew exorsexist, "they is only for multiple people", garbage at me

71. I only say it online and to close friends who I can trust

Other gender variant people were most reliably mentioned as safe, with close friends and online spaces not far behind. The fear expressed in (68) of being asked about their identity after disclosing their pronouns reflects Darwin's findings, discussed in section 3.1 in this thesis, about nonbinary people's externally imposed role as educators to anyone, any time. As with gender labels, responses (69) and (70) reference a careful evaluation of which situations are safe to disclose their pronouns in. The reference to online spaces in (71) recalls Oakley's discussion of Tumblr as having an open and accepting community for gender variant people (in section 3.1 of this thesis). Online spaces also allow for an anonymity that can be vital to some.

26 submissions explicitly discussed fear in connection to pronoun disclosure. This was fear of rejection, dismissal, and harassment, as well as material consequences like physical violence, or loss of housing or employment.

72. I have only disclosed my pronouns to my significant other. I want to avoid confrontation.

73. To close friends only. I live in a region which is very unfriendly to LGBTQIA+ to the point where I keep an eye on thing when I'm out with my fiance, just in case someone decides to get nasty.

74. [---] The social setting absolutely affects this - out in public when some says "ma'am" or "ladies" I typically let it go, because I a) don't have the time or energy to correct every single person and give a lecture, and b) you can never be entirely certain if a stranger will react negatively or sometimes even violently. Though being misgendered is an awful experience, sometimes it is safer to let it happen and say nothing

75. Online exclusively. Conservative politics make being open offline dangerous.

76. Literally only online, where it cannot affect my chances of losing housing or being turned away a job.

The role fear has in coming out or engaging in explicit linguistic performance, and in submitting to norms imposed by dominant gender discourses should not be trivialized and will be explored more in the "Discussion" section of this thesis. Despite the negative affects governing pronoun use and disclosure, they can be associated with positive affect and gender euphoria:

77. [---] More often I experience the opposite end, gender euphoria, when someone surprises me with gender neutral language or sorts me in a nonbinary or queer way.

5.3 Misgendering

I find misgendering to be distressing and alienating in a way I find hard to articulate. Imagine if someone constantly referred to you by your sibling's name, regardless of your dissimilarity to said sibling and all the times you've told them otherwise – it's like that. It's frustrating and despairing in a way you can't escape. It's suffocating.

The third section of the survey concerned misgendering. Based on my own life experiences and McLemore's study (discussed in section 3.2 of this thesis) I could anticipate major themes before coding the responses, but the prevalence of some themes was unexpected. As a whole, this section explores how misgendering as a concept has varying definitions, how misgendering affects respondents and what situational variation there is to those effects, and when and why to disrupt misgendering speech.

5.3.1 Defining misgendering

Misgendering was discussed in section 3.2 of this thesis as "a manifestation of the dominance of hegemonic binary gender discourse that threatens the coherence of individual and collective identity".

The concept was discussed as a structural, systemic issue that operates through individuals regardless of intent, either through linguistic or other acts. Asking the question "How do you define misgendering?", I expected the responses to be homogenous in theme, and was surprised by some of the variation.

Fittingly for the topic of this thesis, 130 submissions straightforwardly defined *misgendering* as verbal acts.

1. Being called the wrong pronouns or gender

2. Misgendering is when someone calls a person by a gender to which they do not identify, often maliciously.

3. Using the wrong pronoun, using gendered words, either to me individually or collectively to a group I'm a part of.

4. People using incorrect terminology when referring to me.

It is fair to assume that by "calling someone a gender", responses (1) and (2) mean using gendered lexical items, like 39). Response (4) gives a broader definition that also includes gender neutral terminology. In some instances, the use of gender-neutral words may be effectively misgendering; Ansara and Hegarty caution against *degendering*, using neutral terminology when talking about binary transgender people when cis people would have been discussed in gendered terms, even though the transgender person's preference of gendered language is known (Ansara & Hegarty 2014, 261). This is an outlier event that highlights the complexity of discussing misgendering.

Near-equal numbers of submissions included behaviour or treatment (21 submissions) and thought or assumption (22 submissions) in their definitions. These themes were far less prevalent than misgendering as verbal act, possibly because misgendering is easiest to discuss in terms of clear acts, like word choice, than in terms of subtle gestures or the ingrained human tendency to place others into familiar categories.

5. In proper terms, not treating someone as their correct gender. As it relates to me, someone not treating me as a girl.

6. [---] Misgendering can be very clear but also very subtle - e.g. you can assign (a) gender to someone without directly stating it, but it can be felt in the way you interact with someone or which group of people you align them with (talking about women as if that person is a woman,...)

7. Assuming a gender. 1) Assuming that a person has a gender in the first place. 2) Assuming a person's gender wrongly.

8. Being called by a gender I am not, and also generally thought of as a gender I am not. (I know I cannot control people's thoughts, nor do I want to, but it bothers me that people may default think of me as a 'woman.')

Response (6) mentions a further, less obvious way to linguistically misgender: using language that subtly assumes the hearer's gender without using incorrectly gendered words of them outright. The idea of "not treating someone as their correct gender" in (5) covers a wide range of acts from subtle to obvious. Response (8) concedes that they cannot prevent people from thinking of them in a misgendering way, but it bothers them regardless. Though to what extent a thought can be called an act is debatable, it can certainly be said to be a manifestation of the dominant binary gender discourse. Response (7) takes the idea further, implying that assuming all people have a gender in the terms the assumer thinks of gender is a kind of misgendering as, firstly, some people do not think of themselves as having a gender and find gendering attempts repulsive, and second, as discussed in section 1.2 of this thesis, gender systems vary in different cultures.

Examples (5) through (7) do not mention intent, but nearly half of the submissions did. The unexpected finding I referred in the introduction to this section was that 24 respondents defined *misgendering* exclusively as an act done deliberately.

9. someone knowingly using the wrong pronoun to reference you.

10. When someone who has been asked to use a specific set of pronouns for me does not do that, and especially does not attempt to do so. And: when someone is studiously presenting the binary and gets deliberately called opposite their presented gender.

11. Anyone who intentionally uses the wrong name, pronouns, or titles

12. For me, it is deliberate disregard for the lense I have asked you to see me through.

13. Purposefully calling someone by pronouns they have explicitly said they prefer not to be called; i.e. using binary pronouns when they have asked to be called xe/xir, they/them, hir/co. Not knowing someone's preferred pronouns is not their fault.

Response (13) expresses understanding of accidental misgendering, stating that not knowing someone's pronouns is not their (the person misgendering) fault. In (12), intentionality is especially emphasized and given a somewhat malicious motivation, and (11) seems to communicate that it is worse not to even attempt to use correct pronouns than to try and occasionally fail. Response (10) also features the problem of the relationship between visual and linguistic gender performance, as the person perceived as clearly presenting (or performing) binary may actually be nonbinary, since some nonbinary people do present in a superficially coherently binary way.

I would interpret the 24 respondents' insistence on misgendering requiring intent as being caused primarily by their own response to it, but also by the disconnect between the intent and effect of

misgendering. Misgendering is generally agreed to be a violent act, and some do not think unintended violence should be considered violence. However, as this discussion is operating under the assertion that misgendering is a manifestation of hegemonic discourse, not just the isolated acts of individuals, and structural violence does not require intent, it would be fair to say that inadvertent misgendering is still misgendering, even when some degree of violence is integral to the definition of misgendering. A total of 40 submissions agreed with this, stating that intent behind misgendering did not matter.

14. Misgendering is willingly or not, giving someone a gender identity based on a person's preconceptions of what gender they think the someone presents as.

15. Referring to a person by an incorrect gender, intentionally or not, or using incorrect pronouns to refer to that person.

16. Behaving in a way that implies you think a person is a different gender to how they identify, whether or not you're aware of how they identify. Can include gendered language, gendered pronouns, use of a gendered name, pointing someone to a gendered toilet. By 'gendered' I mean something the person being misgendered considers gendered. I'm not sure if cases where you've been asked to use the wrong pronouns for safety count. Is it not misgendering, or is it just consensual misgendering?

Responses (14) and (15) both mention that will and intent do not matter, and (16) goes further and ponders consensual misgendering. In the framework of misgendering equalling structural violence, the question becomes whether or not violence is violence if it is consensual. However, when misgendering is done because there is no other option (such as in filling paperwork that requires one of two gender options to be picked), or when safety is at stake, the act of misgendering is done because of a coercive system. Similar to how the respondents reported evaluating the safety of a given situation before disclosing their pronouns or using certain gender labels, misgendering can be done to protect the person being misgendered even though the act in itself is hurtful.

5.3.2 Affective impact

The effects misgendering had on the respondents were categorizable as no effect, mild effect and severe effect. Mild and severe effect were further divided into 10 subcategories. The primary finding was that in the dataset, only 10 respondents reported no effect from misgendering when asked "Does being misgendered or having to misgender yourself affect you emotionally? How?".

17. [---] When someone misgenders me by accident, I usually just feel like they are incompetent. Like really? Even by your silly cishet standards I look male. You can't even get my pronouns right? If someone does it on purpose, it just lets me know important information about them. They are an asshole, don't trust them [---]

18. Not really, since I identify as feminine part of the time.

19. Not really because I don't have the emotional energy to fight for it so I may as well not care

For the respondent in (17), misgendering does not have a negative effect on him but rather the person who misgendered him. Response (18) was one of the respondents with fluid gender identity who had less of a chance of being misgendered or being affected by it because of their fluidity. Response (19) expresses some of the exhaustion toward a restrictive gender discourse that was present in many questions' responses; microaggressions and erasure by dominant discourse can be draining to encounter daily.

A total of 53 responses mentioned effects I categorized as mild. Some subjective interpretation was necessary, for example "feeling conflicted" could have a range of intensities but I judged this instance to fall under mild effect.

20. It's tiring and frustrating, but I also have grown comfortable enough in my own identity that I know occasional misgendering in order to save myself emotional stress doesn't make me any less non-binary.

21. It does, as sometimes I feel conflicted about hiding a fundamental part of who I am to maintain safety/peace

22. When I am misgendered, I always have to take a step back. I don't feel connected when I'm misgendered, like the person speaking to me isn't really speaking to the real me.

23. It pretty much just annoys or angers me at this point.

Responses (20) through (22) mention or allude to identity, to misgendering connecting to a possible threat to identity, or occurring because the identity must be concealed, or being disconnected from social identity because of misgendering. Annoyance or frustration was mentioned in a total of 16 submissions, and anger in five. Other mild effects were discomfort, emotional drain, feeling upset, and sadness.

Severe effects were mentioned in 87 submissions. The distinction between mild and severe could be made based on individual word choices in most cases, but I judged some responses to be expressing severe effects when taken as a whole.

24. Yes. A lot. It just makes me doubt if I have a right to exist, whether i'm really right about myself, and this sort of hopelessness that it'll ever get better. Intentional misgendering usually comes with a grab bag of other insults and the general horror of public shame and ABSOLUTE TERROR that the situation will escalate to violence. [---] It still makes me feel self hate, just in a billion bitesize packages that can stack up just as bad if it happens too much. And every time it also sets off that same panic reflex that the situation will escalate [---]

25. Yes, it does. It feels like a slap in the face. Like the person is rejecting a part of me that is intrinsic. It hurts.

26. it honestly breaks me, I've cried from misgendering many times

27. Causes a spike in anxiety and depression symptoms.

28. God yes. It's frustrating, it's alienating, it HURTS, it feels like this constant balancing act between "do I want to make a fuss and possibly risk being treated differently" and "do I want to keep my mouth shut and let people see me as something I'm not." [---]

Different levels of threat to identity, like in (25), (26) and (28), were mentioned in 46 submissions. Misgendering was experienced as invalidating, delegitimizing and erasing, and identity disruption was clearly the dominant theme across the dataset. In the terms McLemore used, misgendering is a psychologically disruptive experience that threatens social identity, and belonging and coherence needs (McLemore 2015, 51). In a performativity framework, misgendering language is a performative that attempts to enact a conflicting gender on someone: a wounding performative. Closely related to identity disruption were isolation and exclusion, expressed in 11 submissions, and shame with six mentions. Considering the effects of minority stress discussed in section 3.2, it is not surprising that 28 respondents reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other kinds of severe distress as a reaction to misgendering.

5.3.4 Situational variation

Questions 3.2 and 3.4 of the survey asked the respondents to describe the situations they get misgendered, when, and by whom, and in which situations they were likely to correct (or "call out") a misgendering act. Unlike with most other questions, there was no single theme more prevalent than all others.

49 respondents stated they were misgendered by everyone or by most. Many reported being misgendered by everyone but select groups, like friends or online communities.

29. Every day, and by everyone I interact with (even the people I'm out to!)

30. All the time, and by pretty much by everyone. Most of it is associated with how language is used (metaphors, old saying, etc.), which to me is pretty harmless. But then there are things like bureaucratic misgendering and situations in general where one does not feel safe enough to talk because of an imbalance in power relations (like a workplace environment etc.). I guess for me the most annoying situations are when a form has only the options male and female.

31. I am constantly misgendered, by strangers and shop clerks (who call me "miss," or "dear"), by acquaintances, by cis/het friends, by my music students, and by my family with the exception of my sister. It happens on a daily basis, whenever people interact with me.

This group encounter these microaggressions on a daily basis in a variety of situations, in some cases regardless of being closeted or not like (29). Response (30) also points to linguistic convention outside of gendered lexical items, and the issue of considering if a situation is safe enough to request not to be misgendered. Hierarchies mentioned in (30) are a factor in misgendering in institutional settings, which 39 respondents reported happening to them. Institutions include schools, workplaces, hospitals, and other private and public institutions.

32. Customers, so I don't correct them. People who just learned it and are adjusting generally catch on and correct themselves but I'll usually throw in a correction if they slip up.

33. I am continually misgendered at work because I am not out as non-binary...which means everyone I interact with in the workplace. By the GP/Doctors, despite continually mentioning it, it being on my notes, and me being rather tetchy about it. [---]

34. often by teachers and extended family members

Being misgendered by family and friends was slightly more common than being misgendered by strangers (54 and 50 mentions respectively), though seeing as many consider an act misgendering only if there is intent, it is possible that misgendering done by strangers is underreported here.

35. Mostly it's my mom forgetting. She's trying, but I know she still doesn't really get this whole "gender is for people who aren't me" thing

36. It happens with my friends from high school because they've gotten used to referring to me when I wasn't out.

37. it happens with strangers who don't know me. it happens when friends get it wrong - this is usually fine as they are all excellent and can deal with the mistake.

38. Most often I'm misgendered by strangers that make an assumption about my gender based on my appearance. Sometimes I'm misgendered by family members who are aware that I'm nonbinary but have known me most of my life as "female" and are still adjusting to the change in pronouns (I try to show some patience in this case).

39. Usually when I am in another room and they think I can't hear them, and almost exclusively by family.

In the case of misgendering by friends and family, many respondents expressed understanding like responses (35) to (38), acknowledging that wrongly-gendered language may be difficult to shake off. Unfortunate situations with families, like in (39), were a common theme throughout the dataset and across most questions, which may be a reflection of the relatively young median age of the respondents – or simply a generational divide.

The responses to question 3.4, "If you do get misgendered, is there a difference in your reaction to misgendering depending on the setting?" also varied greatly. Additionally, there were two different

interpretations of this question. The majority interpreted the question as asking if the situation affects their decision to correct or not correct a misgendering act. The rest interpreted it as intended: is there a difference to how they feel about being misgendered depending on the situation. The ambiguity of the question was a failing in survey design on one level, but the responses it yielded are relevant regardless.

Calling out misgendering acts appeared not to be done easily, as 28 respondents reported they would not correct misgendering "in real life", outside of online spaces. Very few respondents said they do or would correct a misgendering act by a stranger, in their school or job, or by their families because they did not see a reason to do so – either it would be ignored or reacted to with hostility. 36 stated their decision to insist on being correctly gendered was highly situational:

> 40. If I judge the situation as safe, and if I have the emotional stamina to do so, I will correct the person or people doing the misgendering. If I do not judge the situation as safe, I will endure the misgendering.

> 41. Yeah, if it's majority queer and expect it to be understood, I would correct them. I won't correct cis people.

> 42. Intent matters; if someone misgenders me on purpose then I know they are unkind, someone I would not want to know. But I accept a lot of misgendering from strangers, as well as forgetful colleagues and service-users, because it would be too much to constantly correct them. It hurts a bit, sometimes, but I've chosen to accept it rather than fight. Some friends misgender me. It's hard not to feel disrespected. [---]

Again, safety and the expected response are evaluated, like in (40) and (41), before respondents insist on their identity being verified, but in some occasions, like described in (42), the hurt of misgendering is accepted as a fact of a particular interaction. Still, misgendering is something to be "endured". Only two respondents said they correct strangers, and 20 said misgendering has little to no emotional effect on them when done by strangers.

There was a clear division in how respondents were affected by misgendering depending on the source: 20 stated the situation or person made no difference to their reaction, and 17 said misgendering felt worse when done by friends or people they are out to.

> 43. Depending on the person's awareness yes. Most people simply don't know and I understand that. If someone does know and misgenders, or does so intentionally, it would be worse.

> 44. It hurts a lot more from the few people who do know my pronouns. This is the reason I don't tell many people

In response (44), intent requires knowledge, and intentional misgendering equals knowingly causing harm; the misgendering act goes from an unmotivated structural violence to a personal, directed

attack. Choosing to misgender, or not being motivated to try to remember not to misgender, disregards the person's own designation and the interactional coherence they have requested respect for.

6 Discussion

This section summarizes the main themes found in the dataset and explores major findings further, and evaluates the level of success in answering the questions this thesis set out to address.

6.1 Strategies in labelling practices

The base assertions of this thesis is that gender is a social construct that has been naturalized and institutionalized through dominant discourses to the extent that the binary model is the only fully legitimized way of perceiving gender in a Western context, and that these facts both affect language and are enforced by the language system. The first research question was: How does dominant gender discourse affect the naming practices and conceptualization of nonbinary genders? The underlying assumption in this question is that dominant binary gender discourse poses some challenges to the conceptualization of nonbinary genders and to naming them because English lexicon is structured around opposing dichotomies like *man-woman*, *trans-cis*, *straight-gay*, etc., leading to complications when it comes to discussing or naming identities that are either in-between, liminal or completely outside of normative constructions of gender.

The processes of word formation themselves were beyond the scope of this study, the focus being on how those pre-existing and often community-defined labels are used and why. The primary motivation for chosen gender labels in this dataset was introspection: respondents had familiarized themselves with different labels and their definitions to varying degrees and chosen one or several that best applied to their experience of their gender. The degree of familiarity was dependent on access to information, as not all had the same access to the same information at similar points in their lives. Most respondents expressed having found a label or labels they identified with, while others said they had tried several but had yet to find one that feels accurate. The feelings of rightness correlated slightly with the type of label in use: *agender* was the label most strongly identified with, as were some rare labels only a single respondent assigned themselves (like *maverique* and *two-spirit*), and multiple-label identities. *Nonbinary*, being the prevalent label in the dataset, was both strongly identified with and used as a placeholder for a better term.

Both new information and a shift in gender experience led to changes in label use, but a change in reaction to external feedback was nearly as common as change due to new information. The challenges in naming and labelling practices varied from metaphysical questions of what gender is and feels like to mundane harassment. A portion of respondents had difficulties choosing a gender label because they could not comprehend what gender actually is and what it feels like to have, do, or be a certain gender; what do you name an absence of gendered feeling or experience? Most of these respondents labelled themselves *agender*, and many were indifferent about which pronouns and gendered terms were applied to them. The majority of the dataset was comprised of individuals who had a strong connection to their gender and its name, some of whom had needed to give up their chosen label because of the outgroup's negative or aggressive reactions to it. This includes use of the word *queer* in *genderqueer*, which some both in the ingroup and the outgroup consider a slur. Systematic lack of understanding of their chosen label had also led many respondents to switch to one that is more easily understood, i.e. more communicative. The communicative functions of labels were considered both generally and on a case-by-case basis, with respondents evaluating which gender to do depending on expected outcome.

Situationality was a major factor in label use. The reasons nonbinary genders were labelled had broad, interconnected variation from the personal importance of naming a nebulous feeling of "otherness", to finding peers and support through labels, to having a word with which to explain oneself to others, and to making nonbinary genders more recognized in society at large by naming them and using the labels. Respondents reported adapting label use to perceived expectations in a given situation: using a more commonly known or transparent umbrella term with the outgroup, and more specific labels with the ingroup. Many ingroups are comparable communities of practice, as there is a general understanding of gender variance and an acceptance of neopronouns and atypical gender labels, and participants are free to do their gender and have their identities verified by others. These spaces are safe, and many others are not.

Verification and lack thereof was a prevalent theme in responses on familial kinship terminology, as only 35 respondents got correctly gendered by their childhood families. Among those who were typically misgendered by their families, the responses expressed both understanding of the difficulty of adjusting to a new set of terms, and hurt because of being fundamentally misunderstood, dismissed or rejected by people who are expected to care for them. Those who preferred gendered terms were a minority, but an interesting one at that. Most among this group preferred to be called by terms that

aligned with the binary gender they were not assigned at birth as a verification of them not being their assigned gender, but a small group preferred terms that aligned with their birth-assigned gender.

Kinship terminology of romantic/sexual relationships exhibited similar themes. Though most respondents preferred gender-neutral monikers, some wanted to be referred to by binary gendered terms, including terms that aligned with their assigned gender. As with familial terms, I suggest an affinity for assigned-gender terminology like *son* or *wife* in these specific instances is because the terms signify that particular relationship instead of signifying gender, and non-assigned-gender terminology serves to signal a distance from assigned gender. The research question of whether or not gendered lexical items can be used in a non-gendered way cannot be confidently answered based on this small a percentage of the responses. In the scope of this thesis these findings are speculation instead of conclusions and could be a venue for further research.

Themes like those found regarding label use and change were present in pronoun use and change. The main motivation for switching pronouns was what felt appropriate and representative, but how well the respondents' pronouns were accepted as legitimate by others was also a significant concern. 13 respondents stated explicitly they had changed their pronouns from neopronouns to more commonly recognized ones like *they* specifically because of negative reactions or lack of understanding. Both of these reactions factored into when and to whom respondents chose to disclose their pronouns, which in many cases effectively equals coming out as gender variant. As discussed before, nonbinary people cannot "disclose" their gender by performing it in the way binary transgender (or cisgender for that matter) people can because there is no prototype or set of norms for performing nonbinary gender, so the performance often takes the form of an explicit performative utterance like interrupting incorrect pronoun use – this is the situation in which, in most cases, nonbinary gender is performed in a way that is expected to be legible and reacted to with respect to the coherence of social identity.

6.2 Misgendering as wounding performatives

Misgendering was defined earlier in this thesis as psychologically disruptive identity misclassification, as but a linguistic manifestation of oppressive power that restrains self-expression, and a combination of both. What a misgendering act functions as is a wounding performative: an utterance that attempts to enact an incorrect gender on someone, to overwrite the person's own performance. Misgendering acts can cite the authority of "biological sex", as its connection to gender is still reified by dominant gender discourse despite expert opinion contradicting the link, and thus

claim a stronger conventional relationship than the one self-identification has. The respondents had some contradictory ideas about what constitutes misgendering to them, but the vast majority defined it as verbal acts that could be either intentional or not.

Although a larger portion of respondents concluded that intent had no effect on whether or not an act was misgendering, an unexpected number excluded inadvertent acts from the definition. I posited that the 24 respondents who defined misgendering only as intentional or maliciously intentional acts did so because misgendering is generally agreed to be hurtful or violent, and ascribing someone a violent act when they had no intent to be violent seems unfair. However, as a manifestation of structural violence, misgendering can happen and be hurtful regardless of the individual's intent. This is not to say the respondents who regarded only intentional acts misgendering were wrong; I merely find this interpretation interesting and think it could be researched more. Respondents further defined misgendering as behaviour, treatment, acts, assumptions, and thought, one asserting that assuming someone has a gender at all is misgendering. Most definitions stayed in the realm of the observable: language and gender-coded acts, and subtle gendered treatment.

Regardless of differences in definitions, the respondents' subjective experiences of misgendering were more relevant to this thesis, and those experiences answer my research question and largely confirmed my hypothesis. Misgendering had a negative impact on nearly all respondents, varying from mild annoyance or frustration to depressive spirals, thoughts of self-harm, and identity disruption. The few situational differences in that effect were misgendering having no effect when done by strangers and the effect being worse when done by a friend or some other person aware of their gender and what it entails linguistically. Failure to do their best not to misgender is almost an intentional slight, disregard, or dismissal that adds to the negative impact of the microaggression.

Most respondents were misgendered by everyone except select groups or individuals, common among them being safe online communities. Online communities were also the place respondents would most reliably correct a misgendering act, partly because of the safety of anonymity. Overall, outwardly reacting to misgendering was, again, dependant on the perceived safety of the situation. Respondents were afraid of the physical, financial, social and emotional ramifications insisting on identity verification could have for them, and would in many situations strategically misgender themselves or allow themselves to be misgendered to avoid those consequences. This fear of consequences also applied to gender label and pronoun choice, and despite visual performance not being the focus of the survey or this study, many also discussed fear of presenting themselves in a comfortably gendered or ungendered way.

Much of that fear was the fear of exclusion and identity disruption. Misgendering done by others and the concealment of the true self were presented as threats to identity; these acts made respondents feel like they were lying to themselves or others, or like they were "faking it" and "not really trans", or like they were invalidated, erased, or invisible. In essence, misgendering made a third of the respondents feel less real, less in control of their own selves, and more marginalized. The harm done by casually cisgenderist language was evident in the dataset and should not be dismissed as "just words" because language and discourse shape our social reality and can be used as a performative tool when others are not available.

7 Conclusion and closing remarks

Doing nonbinary gender through language takes many forms, with some people employing all-neutral terminology, some mixing neutral with gendered and some being mostly indifferent to any and all linguistic gender markers. For many, their gender is labelled merely because society requires them to call themselves something, since a state of not having a gender is almost inconceivable to Western dominant gender discourse. For others, a name to call themselves means knowing themselves and making what them and their gender real. However, with names and categories come norms, and though these labels are comparatively new, there are already some signs of labels becoming exclusive, and of ever-stricter lines being drawn between identities.

Misgendering threatens the coherence of identity by imposing the expectation of normative performance incongruent with the person's actual gender. For most respondents, verbal misgendering is an act on the person and their identity that reminds them of their marginalized, erased space they occupy in a cisgenderist, binary system that attempts to make sense of gender variance through pathologization. Some have grown numb to microaggressions, and a few were never much affected at all; to them, gender is such a vague concept it has become entirely meaningless, and the signifier and the signified lose their tenuous connection.

The topic of misgendering could also be approached strictly from a sociological point of view through affect theory, especially by applying Sara Ahmed's concept of "sticky affects". Linguistic politeness theory has been applied to the linguistic construction of gender, but not to nonbinary people and misgendering specifically; in that framework, misgendering constitutes a face-threatening act. The linguistic construction of nonbinary identity and performing nonbinary linguistically could be approached through (virtual) ethnographies, and special attention should be paid to people

marginalized in typical nonbinary representation. Furthermore, considering that English is the *lingua franca* of online platforms where gender label creation, discussion and definition takes place, the translation or transposing of that language and those labels into non-anglophone contexts would be especially interesting for research. The creation and redefinition of gender labels is an ongoing process that occasionally breaks into the mainstream for a moment, often as an object of ridicule or outrage, but language change is inevitable, and communities engaged in the process of redrawing and renaming the maps of gendered experiences are the force behind some major changes to come.

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