

Names as a trans technology: Exploring the naming practices of trans youth in Australia, Ireland and Canada

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Abstract: Children are often given a name based in some part on the sex they were assigned at birth. For trans youth, their given name does not always reflect their gender and so an aspect of their transition often includes changing their name. Drawing on interviews with trans youth in Australia, Ireland and Canada, I explore how trans youths' naming practices offer insight into the ways that they express their desire for intelligibility and safety, while simultaneously navigating gender norms and a new sense of identity. In this paper, I engage with trans studies and critical child studies to argue that naming practices are a trans technology that trans youth use to strategically navigate gender. For some trans youth, chosen first names are described as way to be seen as one of the two societally recognized genders (man or woman), and for others, their chosen first name reflects their resistance to cisnormativity and naming practices that adhere to binary gender norms.

Keywords: trans, youth, naming practices, Australia, Ireland, Canada

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1. Introduction

One of the first ways some trans youth narrate their gender is through the process of choosing a first name. Children are often given a first name based in some part on the sex they were assigned at birth. Sex is typically assigned by a doctor at the time of birth based on the appearance of external genitalia, whereas gender refers to a combination of a person's felt sense of identity and gender expression. For trans youth, their given name does not always reflect their gender and so an aspect of their transition often includes changing their first name. Trans people may also change their first name as a way to assert agency and claim an identity, even if their given name does not betray their felt sense of gender. Because of their age, trans youths' relationships to and negotiation of naming is particularly complex: these young people are often still dependent on the very families who named them.

My research adds to the growing number of studies that explore the complex daily lives of trans youth. Trans youths' narratives about their naming practices offer a way to further understand how they signify their identities, navigate various contexts, and negotiate relationships with peers and family. In this paper, I engage with trans studies and critical child studies to argue that naming practices are a trans technology that trans youth use to strategically navigate gender. Trans technologies are tools and strategies that trans people use to navigate cisnormativity and trans oppressive systems and structures in society (Haimson et al. 2020). Trans technologies name the creative apparatuses that trans people use to increase their safety, resources, and access. Trans technologies are also a pathway for trans people to feel a sense of agency, to disrupt norms, to exert creativity, and to find joy in being trans. For some trans youth, first names are described as way to be seen as one of the two societally recognized genders (man or woman), and for others, their first name reflects their resistance to cisnormativity¹ and naming practices that adhere to binary gender norms. Some trans youth are doing both at the same time. Names as

¹ Cisnormativity is the assumption that all individuals are cisgender and denies the existence of trans people (Bauer et al. 2009).

a trans technology are about subverting the binary as an essentialist structure and finding joy in that creative process.

2. Literature review

Although research about naming practices is a relatively contemporary field of study (Palsson 2014), it is clear that gender plays an important role in naming practices (Connell 2010; Pilcher 2017). Names are culturally universal (Alford 1988) and are used to designate individual identities (Finch 2008; Elias 1991). Western cultural norms dictate that parents should give a newborn baby a legibly gendered forename based on the sex they were assigned at birth (Alford 1988; Lieberson et al. 2000; Pilcher 2017). For example, research in the United States reports that the majority of parents give their children forenames regarded as female-appropriate or male-appropriate names based on their assigned sex at birth (Herbert and Aylene 2014; Lieberson et al. 2000). Messerschmidt (2009) argues that names then come to be part of the ways that children ‘do’ their gender, and how gender becomes tied to the sex one is assigned at birth. Forenames then come to stand in for ones’ assigned sex at birth and reinforce a child’s gender.

Forenames are part of what Shilling (2008:15) calls the ‘body pedagogy’ of an individual and supports how they ‘do’ their gender and assert their belonging and membership to a sex category. Building on this research, Pilcher uses Connell’s (2009:107) term ‘contradictory embodiment’ to describe ‘when normative expectations about the coincidence of bodies, sex category, gender, and forenames are breached’ (2017:814). For example, when someone has a forename that does not easily correspond to their legible gender and adhere to normative gendered naming practices, a person’s gender identity may be challenged. This is especially the case for some trans and nonbinary people.

Research has also explored how forenames are not only based on ones’ sex assigned at birth, but are also important ‘embodied processes of racial and ethnic honouring and identification’ (Pilcher 2017:814).

Forenames offer a way for parents to express cultural belonging, ethnic identification and honour one's heritage (Edwards & Caballero 2008; Fryer and Levitt 2003). These naming practices are typically gendered (Fryer & Levitt 2003; Sue & Telles 2007). Naming practices are also impacted by a desire to express or represent one's affiliation to a specific group or ones' desire to distance themselves from an affiliation to a particular group (Khosravi 2011). For example, Khosravi (2011) found that some Muslims living in Sweden change their first name to what participants described as a more neutral European name to help them integrate into society. Naming research has also studied the impact of the mispronunciation of first names on students in high education (Pilcher 2022). Naming practices in Western society are inflected by colonization and white supremacy, reinforcing cisnormativity in naming practices and pressuring racialized parents to assimilate (Khosravi 2011; Sinclair-Palm 2016; Sinclair-Palm & Chokly 2023; Sinclair-Palm 2023; Sue & Telles 2007).

Names and naming practices sometimes arise as important ways that trans people navigate gender norms in Western society (Connell 2010; Schilt 2006). There has been some research that explores how trans adults choose first names. For example, in a recent study in the United States about trans adults' process of choosing a name, researchers found that participants emphasized the importance of honouring family heritage and used the practice of choosing a new name similar to their birth name (Obasi et al. 2019). Connell (2010) also finds that in their negotiation of gendered interactions at work, trans people's chosen first names are sometimes questioned or not respected. Research has also documented how choosing a new first name can provide trans people with the possibility of expressing their gender and identity in new ways (Pollitt et al. 2019; Sevelius 2013; Pamfile et al. 2024).

Trans youth often use a new first name socially, before changing it legally because they face a number of barriers to legally changing their first name and to provide opportunities to experience using the first name (Tan 2022; Vance 2018). First, the financial cost of changing one's first name in Canada, Australia and Ireland is a barrier for

many trans youth. Second, some trans youth do not legally change their first name because the applications typically require parental permission and so they fear social stigma and family rejection. Third, trans youth also face barriers related to the formal (and sometimes medical) documents needed to apply for a name change, the difficult process of changing identity documents after getting a legal name change, and having to engage with the government about their trans identity. These are all additional factors that complicate trans youths' naming practices and access to legally changing their first name in Canada, Australia and Ireland.

Since 2020, there has been a rise in the number of anti-trans bills proposed in Canada, the United States and in the United Kingdom (Abreu et al. 2022; Carbonaro 2023; Levesque et al. 2021; Mason & Hamilton 2024; Trans Legislation Tracker 2023). Many of these policies seek to limit trans youths' ability to use their name at school and to stop educators from using trans youths' chosen first names. Recent research about trans youth highlights the importance of using the chosen name of a trans person (McLemore 2015; Pollitt et al. 2019; Russell et al. 2018). Using a trans person's first name is a matter of dignity, respect and safety. Studies find that trans people experience reduced depression, suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviour when people use their name (Gaskins & McClain 2021; Pampati et al. 2021; Russell et al. 2018). Although this research is important, these studies often approach the topic of trans youths' naming practices from a deficit model and fail to capture the complex ways trans youth choose, navigate and relate to their names. Victim narratives about trans youth 'depoliticize youth once again, creating safe, sanitized images that conform with white middle-class standards of visibility and value' (Driver 2008:5). My research resists these victim narratives, and instead seeks to explore the complexity of trans youths' naming practices.

My research also builds on studies that have explored the way language sometimes fails trans youths' ability to narrate the complexity of their gender, names, and identity (Connell 2010; Noble 2006; Sinclair-Palm & Chokly 2023). First names are a way to express

individuality and can be an important part of one's identity, and the narrativizing of one's changing identity (Elias 1991; Emmelhainz 2012; Pilcher 2016). I am interested in the creative strategies trans youth draw on to describe who they are and to avoid being misnamed (Hillier et al. 2020; Meadow 2018; Sinclair-Palm 2017; Sinclair-Palm & Chokly 2023). Much of the literature about trans youth describes them as a white, gender-conforming, homogeneous population and pays little attention to trans youths' multiple and intersecting identities (Jourian 2015).

3. Theoretical Framework

Forenames are often used by others to determine one's gender. Kessler and McKenna (1978) and West and Zimmerman (1987) offer frameworks for thinking about how people 'do' their gender and the ways that gender is both a socially constructed category and something that others read on individuals based on their behaviour, clothing, and practices. Westbrook and Schilt (2014) build on these social theories about gender to explore how individuals are dependent on the other for gender recognition. They use the term gender determination to describe how 'people can be recognized as a member of the gender category with which they identify if their identity claim is accepted as legitimate by other people determining their gender' (Westbrook & Schilt 2014:33). The intelligibility of one's gender can vary depending on context and community, and is highly dependent on the other person's understanding, knowledge and relationship to gender. Connell (2012) uses the concept of contradictory embodiment to describe how embodiment and narratives about trans experience are shaped by the dissonance between how trans youth are perceived by others and how trans youth perceive themselves.

For Butler (1990; 2001; 2004), recognition and intelligibility are important to understanding how people navigate gender norms and tell stories about themselves. They argue that 'gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of

substance, of a natural sort of being' (1990:33). Gender does not exist prior to subject formation but is rather achieved in and through its repetition: gender is a part of becoming a subject and gender shapes the subject. Butler finds that although recognition from others may be important to a liveable life, 'the terms by which [one is] recognized [may] make life unliveable' (Butler 2004:4). This demand for legibility is wrapped up the history and ongoing role of colonialism, nationalism, racism, and cisnormativity. For trans youth, narrating and navigating their gender cannot be removed from these systems of power that insist that people have a consistent and legible gender.

Children are the foundation of much of the research and theories about gender, and early scientific theories about gender argued that the sex and gender of a child can be altered and are malleable (Gill-Peterson 2018). These beliefs about the plasticity of children, and in turn, their gender, are used as a tool to perpetuate the erasure of trans people and as a way to deny trans children rights and autonomy (Gill-Peterson 2018). Trans studies scholars have traced how these transphobic, racist, classist and ableist beliefs about young trans people are still used to gatekeep access to knowledge, resources, and rights (Clare 2013; Gill-Peterson 2018; Salamon 2018; Johnstone 2019; Pyne 2020; Stanley 2021; Ashley 2022). Trans people have written about their strategic navigation of this gatekeeping (Seburn et al. 2019; Spade 2006) and how this gatekeeping is tied to the intelligibility of a young trans person's gender. Trans youths' process of choosing a first name provides a glimpse into the ways that they are expressing their agency, describing their gender, and navigating cisnormativity.

4. Methodology

The data for this paper were collected from two research projects, both with a focus on young trans peoples' experiences of choosing a first name. In 2014, I interviewed 10 young trans people ages 15–25 years old in Canada and in 2019, I expanded the project and conducted interviews with young trans people in Australia and Ireland. I recruited participants through local LGBT centres and existing

contacts. I conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom with 15 young trans people ages 16–28 years old in Australia and 13 young trans people ages 16–28 years old in Ireland. Participants did not need to have legally changed their first name to be part of the study, and less than half of the trans youth interviewed had. Consent was obtained from a copy of a signed form that was emailed to me prior to the interview and verbal consent was provided prior to the start of the interview. I refer to participants in the study by the pronouns they told me they use. Participants had the choice of using their first name or choosing a pseudonym to be used in the project².

The purpose of the interviews was to solicit rich, nuanced stories about renaming from trans youth to get a sense of how identity is negotiated and shifts over time. These locations were selected because I had existing relationships with scholars and community members in those places. These countries have a similar history and ongoing culture of colonialism, and both have had an increase in social awareness about young trans people and political shifts regarding trans rights.

Interviews were analysed through inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involved a process of moving back and forth between the data, the initial codes developed by the principal investigator and research assistants, and research about names and young trans people to explore patterns in the data. In this paper, I focus on stories about how trans youth navigated their gender when choosing a first name. I am not reporting on generalizable conclusions about how young trans people understand and choose their first names, but I do hope to add to the conversations about young trans people's relationship to gender, names, and agency.

² In this paper I do not state whether I am referring to a participant by using their first name or a pseudonym. This practice provides an added layer of anonymization and supports the idea that the name someone wants to be called does not need to be legally recognized to be respected.

5. Findings

Through my analysis of the interviews, I found two themes that highlight the ways trans youth use naming practices as a trans technology to navigate gender and subvert the gender binary as an essentialist structure. The first theme addresses how young trans people are using first names to disrupt the gender binary. For example, a number of participants spoke about wanting a gender-neutral first name and their strategies for avoiding gender norms and gender assumptions based on their first name. The second theme I will discuss, explores how trans youth are choosing first names that exploit the gender binary in order to increase the possibility of being treated with respect and to navigate transmisogyny. Transmisogyny was coined by Julia Serano (2007) and refers to the intersecting oppressions and discriminations of transphobia and misogyny. For example, some trans women described that they felt the need to choose a feminine name even if their gender does not feel reflected in their first name. Within this discussion, trans youth also noted the importance of people using their name as a way to feel a greater sense of gender authenticity. In this analysis, I also note how some trans youth are using both of these strategies at the same time.

Disrupting the gender binary

In Western society, forenames are often associated with either boys or girls. Parents typically give their child a forename that corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth, and this cisnormative practice is what often leads trans people to change their name. In my interviews with young trans people, they described how gender was an important factor in their process of choosing a first name and that they often looked for a name that reflected their gender identity.

Some of the trans youth I spoke with identify as genderqueer, gender fluid or nonbinary, and in their process of choosing a first name that reflected their gender, they sometimes disrupted the gender binary by choosing a gender-neutral name. For example, Jamie described the

naming choices that felt available to them in their search for a first name:

Example (1)

I wanted something that was less feminine, either kind of like a gender-neutral name that kind of could be male or female type thing. You know, I went with Jamie obviously or Alex or you know that style thing or I was also thinking about like making up a new name type thing, so it doesn't have any gender association because it's you know Leaf or whatever.

Jamie highlights how some first names are seen as gender-neutral in Western society and that they also considered the option of choosing a first name without any gender connotations.

In Charli's naming process, they also sought to find ways to represent their gender and struggled because of the ways that the gender binary influences the associations people have to particular first names. Charli described this challenge and their strategies for navigating gender:

Example (2)

Maybe I think it was around like June, July, maybe last year, and so I started going by Charlie, I started with like the E on the end. And then I was like 'nah.' I wanted it with without the E because I felt like it was more firm and a bit more me. And I like it, because Charli, it means like strong man and I'm gender fluid. And it's a bit of a like gender fuck and I really like that. I like that you know just the name Charli is very like, it's seen as one of those things that can be like for boys and girls, so for me being gender fluid, I really like it. It really fits me.

Charli's strategy was to adapt the first name they began using to make it more aligned with their gender. They found pleasure in choosing a first name that fit with their gender, but their description of the meaning of the name complicates their insistence that it reflects their gender fluidity. One way to understand Charli's decision is in recogniz-

ing the pleasure of creating confusion and disrupting gender norms associated with names. The sound and spelling of the name Charli is also important to their relationship to the name and might be a way that they are expressing playfulness, marking difference, being intentionally disruptive, and doing in group signalling to other trans folks. Charli tells multiple stories about the meaning and gender associated with their name, and this complexity allows them various stories to explain how they chose their name.

Similarly, Leighton spoke about wanting a first name that was ‘masculine slash gender neutral.’ Leighton knew they did not want the feminine first name they were given at birth, and wanted to find something that better characterized their gender. Leighton did not want others to make assumptions about their gender that would make them feel trapped: ‘I just didn’t want people to like see me or see my name and then immediately put me in a box that I have to fight to get out of. The most neutral, it could be the more I think it just made my life easier.’ This is a common sentiment among the nonbinary participants I spoke with. For some trans youth, first names feel like a trap or a gender container that does not allow for them to be recognized as the gender they identify with or for their gender to shift over time.

In choosing a first name, Palace spoke about their desire to find a name that didn’t announce their gender. In response to assumptions people often make about the relationship between gender and names, they wanted a first name that wouldn’t hint at what theirs is:

Example (3)

When I heard Palace, I was like, “that’s not a name, that’s what I want.” I really liked the idea of having something that’s like not a name, because then there’s no already associated gender role. And I think it was important so that nobody had any sort of preconceived ideas about who a Palace would be or what a Palace would look like or act like or think like or what their gender would be, especially written on paper, because they’d be like “Palace...” and then have no idea who was going to walk through the door. And I like that.

Palace found joy in their creative process of choosing a first name that captures the way they feel about gender as a concept. Some people feel trapped in the assumptions people make about them because of their name, and Palace offers a strategy to escape these gender norms.

Trans youth also spoke about how their disruptions of normative gender naming practices were sometimes met with confusion. Some participants explained how friends and family members felt like the name they had chosen did not match their gender identity. For example, Eli described how their friends asked them ‘why, if you’re non-binary, why did you choose the name Eli, which is a boy’s name like it’s a masculine name.’ Eli didn’t expect to be questioned about this and explained to these people that ‘the fact that it’s masculine like is okay, for me. A name doesn’t equal gender and that gender expression is different from gender identity. The name Eli is a part of my gender expression which is like, for me, is more masculine leaning as well.’ Eli chose a first name that aligned with their nonbinary gender but the community perception of their name failed to recognize the complexity of their gender. Their desire to have their gender intelligible, or for their friends to find their name a clear reflection of their gender, is challenged by the messy gender associations people have with names and the way that most names are seen as for a girl or a boy.

Navigating transmisogyny

In my first interview with Beryl, they began by telling me about how their first name reflected both their ties to their culture as Irish and Chinese, and was a name they choose to strategically navigate gender-based violence and discrimination. Although a more feminine first name does not reflect their gender identity, Beryl chose what they described as a ‘traditionally feminine name’ to provide them less trans visibility and more protection from transphobia. Beryl was well aware of the violence and discrimination that trans women face and strategically choose a name that they hoped would allow them greater recognition as a woman: ‘The name Beryl is more distinctly feminine and as a trans person, especially a trans feminine spectrum person,

I'm probably going to experience more violence than other people.' Beryl's story demonstrates how even though they may not feel like a woman, they have to perform femininity through their first name in order to avoid discrimination. While it may be important for some trans people to define themselves, social norms and the policing of gender restrict how trans youth like Beryl use language to describe themselves.

Like Beryl, Zoe was aware of the ways that trans feminine people are treated and so they strategically chose a feminine first name despite not always identifying as a woman:

Example (4)

I wanted, well, as I mentioned I wanted... the fact that it is inherently effeminate is pretty big because even though I identify as genderqueer, I wanted to get like far away from male as I could. I just spent so long being there, male, I was just done with it, and yet here I am... Male is kind of like my go to for I don't care. And female is for really, I care about it. So, it needed to be something that was inherently female so that it could show that I was actually trying to present as female.

Genderqueer is an identity that reflects Zoe's gender identity as someone who is neither a man nor a woman, and is thus outside of the gender binary. Zoe's gender expression changes depending on how they are feeling on a particular day, but it was important for Zoe to have a first name that allowed the possibility of being read as a woman. Choosing a feminine name provided Zoe and Beryl a tool for navigating their gender and the transmisogyny they might face.

Another participant named Lily also referenced how choosing a feminine first name was a strategy for making sure that other people read her as a woman: 'I didn't want any ambiguity about [my name]. Like, if someone tells their name is Lily, you're almost always going to assume that's a woman. There's less of an excuse for me to get misgendered then.' Similar to Lily, Tamara also used their first name as a litmus test for who would be accepting of their chosen gender. She

explained how when they first started introducing herself using her first name, that people didn't always believe that was her name:

Example (5)

But they like almost didn't believe me when I told them. You know? Which was like... so a lot of my early introducing to people was like, negative and it's like, it wasn't even like that much people actively going "ugh, as if your name is a girl's name," it was more just people going, "excuse me? what? huh?" And it's like, it's not an uncommon name, the problem you're having is that you have decided that I am not a woman, but I have a woman's name."

Tamara went on to describe how when she first encountered this kind of transmisogyny, she lacked confidence and thought that the resistance she was met with was because other people couldn't hear her say her first name. She responds to this situation differently now:

Example (6)

And I also have the confidence now. Because, like, I know what my voice sounds like, I know that there are things that make people clock me. And I'm like, but that's a them problem, so now, if someone like, has a problem, I'm just like "what?" Like if I say my name is Tamara and they get "excuse me?" I go, "you heard me!" Not always that rude, but like. If someone has that same sort of discomfort, I now put them – I'm like, "No, this is all on you," like I used to be very insecure and be like, "oh I'm not like performing femininity well enough," but now I'm like "no actually, fuck you, like, I'll tell you what my name is, and you'll listen. And I'll tell you everything else about me and you'll listen," like.

Tamara's relation to the harassment and discrimination she faced has shifted and she no longer puts up with people's resistance to calling her by her name.

For some trans youth, it can take time to get used to being called a new first name. For example, Beryl explains the conflicting experience of using a new name:

Example (7)

We're still battling internalized transphobia and cis-sexism and all these things because when it comes to trans people, often we still feel that our genders are not authentic and this is something from my own research and experiences. And so hearing our names, even though they are affirming our experiences at present, it may still sound a little bit weird to us because you can still hear that voice in the back of my head saying "oh you're still a boy and this name is unnatural."

Faced with uncertainty, social norms and the work of gender transitioning, Beryl doubts the story of their first name and gender. The 'realness' of their gender is challenged through their relationship to their new first name. For Beryl, the repetition of their first name invited them into feeling more comfortable in their identity as a feminine person named Beryl: 'It felt really fake initially but hearing it in a positive manner was a lot more affirming, which solidified this feels okay.' For Beryl, their first name, and possibly their gender, became more real through repetition and when others offered them recognition.

Robert also spoke about some of the challenges they faced when choosing a new first name and starting to use that name. As part of their naming process, Robert worried about how others would perceive them based on their gender and first name.

Example (8)

I think there were a few things. I was really sort of scared of like being too masculine. I came out as gay when I was 16 or 17, as a lesbian, and I was always really hyper aware of being too masculine. And so, it's weird to think now, but I was, you know, very much like, girly. I think there was a lot of sort of internalized homophobia and I think probably as well, I knew that I wanted to be masculine. It was just, it was sort of a battle in my mind. I was terrified of having like this masculine sort of identity. Even though I was coming out as trans and sort of saying, yeah, like, I do want to be more masculine, but I was like, ah, but not that, you know,

not too much. At the time the name Robert felt too masculine. It felt very like, “That’s a boy kind of name” and I wasn’t ready for that sort of transition myself and I was also really worried about how my friends and family would sort of react like. I felt like I had to sort of ease them into it. Which I didn’t even end up doing, but it was in my head that I was going to do that.

Parents and friends of trans people often speak about the struggle to address trans people by their new first name (Wahlig 2015), yet we rarely hear trans people narrate their own struggle to address themselves with a new first name. Siobhan remembers how ‘it took a long time for [her] to take on the name’ because she felt like she ‘wasn’t really worthy of it.’ When she chose her first name, she was a ‘beefy, five-foot seven dude’ and her ‘voice wasn’t really doing the part.’ She felt like a ‘farce’ and needed to ‘earn’ her name. Reflecting on this process, Siobhan explains how she ‘didn’t really know how hard it was to internalize a name for one’s self’ and found that repetition helped her form an attachment to her name: ‘You see it more places, you use it with more people. And suddenly you get an affinity, and you start to attach to that name.’ Siobhan felt like her body and gender presentation conflicted with her new first name and needed the help of others to feel secure and confident with her name. The process of naming and having a name repeated, whether it be by others or in documentation, makes the name and therefore the gender identity more real. This iterative process is the technology of trans naming practices.

Trans youth also spoke to me about how they use different first names in different contexts. Depending on their assessment of possible risks, the way they wanted to be understood, and their relationship to the people in a particular space, trans youth made decisions about which first name to use in each space or community they entered. Lukah offered an eloquent discussion of this in his interview.

Example (9)

And I think that names should... Not from a logistical point of view, but from a personality kind of point of view, I think the

names are too stagnant and too stuck in place, and I think that we should all be able to have like two or three aliases that we want to go by separate things. And I use it to compartmentalize my life. Even before I was trans, I would use different names to compartmentalize my life. Because my name was really long, it had multiple nicknames. So in church spaces, I would be one name, in school spaces I'd be another, in family spaces I'd be another. And I could kind of keep how I presented myself, like a church it was more formal compared to school, based on my name. And it was all the same name in the end.

This was not an uncommon strategy among the trans youth I spoke with. For some these multiple first names reflected their expression and creativity, and for others it was about intimacy and relationships.

Zoe uses multiple and different first names, depending on who they are with. For example, at university, Zoe often spends time in the Centre for Women and Trans People. When new people enter the space there is a common practice of going around the circle of people in the room and stating one's name and preferred pronoun. Zoe told me about a time when they introduced themselves to a new person stating: 'Hi my name is Nicky or Zoe, and you can use male or female pronouns.' This introduction confused the new person, who was left wondering which name to use. Zoe explained how their gender identity changes, and their first names and preferred pronouns reflect that fluidity:

Example (10)

It's dependent on how I'm feeling, how I'm presenting, and frankly I'm fine with them using both. But if I am presenting [in a feminine way], please use Zoe. That's pretty much how it is. If I'm presenting I do like to be referred to in my female name. But for the most part I'll either be presenting as male or gender neutral so I really don't care otherwise.

Zoe's gender is symbolized through their preferred first name and pronoun and is dependent on 'if [she is] not passing or if [she is] not even trying to.' Similar to Bornstein's (1994) discussion of gender,

Zoe locates gender expression and identity as a feeling; ‘If I’m not trying, it’s not really how I’m feeling.’ Zoe’s daily decision of whether to look like a woman also insists on the social construction of gender. For Zoe, gender is both fluid and rigid, and their naming practices demonstrate how they strategically communicate this complexity.

6. Discussion

Stories from trans youth expose the complex ways they refuse the gender binary and navigate transphobia in their naming process. Traditional naming conventions insist that one’s gender assigned at birth neatly correspond with the first name you are given. Trans youth understand how naming practices within cisnormativity function in Western society, and use this knowledge to strategically navigate this oppressive gender system. For some trans youth, this meant that they chose a more feminine first name so that their gender and humanity was less likely to be questioned and threatened. While other trans youth chose a first name that either had no gender associations or was associated with both girls and boys.

In their narratives about naming practices, trans youth demonstrate Butler’s (2004) analysis of the ways that gender is important to how we understand our gender and the complex ways people navigate intelligibility. Trans youth expose how one’s first name can provide recognition and intelligibility, and are important to how trans youth express their gender and navigate gender norms. Forenames are like a story trans youth tell about their gender and who they are, and yet are in some ways dependent on others for recognition. Simultaneously, first names are a compromise for trans youth, and act as a tool for avoiding conflict, misrecognition, transmisogyny, and violence.

Trans youth tell stories about refusing the limitations of the gender binary in their naming practices, and also narrate how they skilfully navigate the oppressive enactments of the gender binary. Too often trans people who adhere to normative gender practices are cast as reproducing rather than challenging gender norms. This misunderstanding has consequences, and denies trans youth both the know-

ledge they have about gender oppression and their strategic navigation of gender violence. Choosing a legibly gendered first name is a technology that acknowledges the gender binary and yet recognizes that when safety and survival is at stake, you cannot always refuse these normative naming practices.

Some trans youth chose a first name that they thought would be less perceived as a gendered name, and for some, this was because they felt less worried about the violence or discrimination they would face because of their resistance to normative naming practices. In other instances, trans youth who strategically chose a less gendered first name, thought it would be easier for their friends and family to adjust to their new name and gender by selecting a first name that wasn't too feminine or too masculine.

Forenames often signal to others how we want to be perceived and yet we cannot always predict what gender associations people have with particular names. Forenames, like gender, rely on the other for recognition. The repetition of a new first name helps trans youth feel like it is their name, and that they deserve to be called that name. Reflecting Butler's (2004) argument about gender as a repetition of behaviours and actions, names too become something that is facilitated by the other.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have drawn on trans studies and child studies to explore how trans youths' narratives about naming expose the strategic ways they navigate oppressive normative naming practices and make compromises about how they incorporate their gender identity into their first name. Naming practices are a trans technology that trans youth use to strategically navigate gender, and their narratives about their naming practices demonstrate their agency, creativity, and the strategic ways they navigate cisnormativity and transphobia. These narratives offer insight into how young trans people navigate their desire for recognition and negotiate the role of their first name given at birth in the story of their gender and self. Some trans people identify within

the gender binary, while others understand their gender to be outside of the binary, while still others want to throw away the idea of gender. Trans youths' narratives about their naming practices demonstrate the ways they are thinking about gender beyond the binary and conceptualizing a more fluid understanding of gender. Trans youth are increasingly bringing new language to describe their genders, disrupting binary understandings of gender and expanding social awareness about the complexity of gender. The trans technology of naming is not just supporting trans people, it is also shaping larger discourses about gender.

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