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# Diversity and inclusion practitioners and non-binary employees in the UK: a Bourdieusian analysis

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how diversity and inclusion practitioners in the UK can challenge and/or reproduce the marginalisation of non-binary employees in organisations. Using Bourdieu's notions of habitus, doxa and illusio, this article unpacks practitioners' perspectives and approaches toward non-binary equality issues at work. The analysis focuses on examining the relational and situated nature of their organisational roles, and the influence of the wider social order as it relates to non-binary people. Interview data is organised around three main themes that develop this article's principal contributions: incrementalism, problematisation of gender fluidity, and solidaristic inclusion. While incrementalism and problematisation of gender fluidity indicate an underlying status-quo bias that reproduce gender identity inequalities that affect non-binary employees, solidaristic inclusion offers the promise of transformational change. The conclusion outlines practical implications for IHRM scholars and practitioners.

## KEYWORDS

Bourdieu; diversity and inclusion practitioners; non-binary employees; gender binary; habitus; doxa; illusio

## Introduction

Diversity and inclusion practitioners can face significant challenges as they address the complexities of change work that aims to tackle inequalities in organisations (Kirton et al., 2007). Negotiating with multiple stakeholders with pluralistic interests can lead them to deploy language pragmatically to meet the oft-contradictory needs and demands of different organisational groups, the outcomes of which can potentially reproduce normative assumptions that sustain extant inequalities (Ahmed, 2007a). Additionally, diversity and inclusion practitioners can be complicit in instigating limited organisational change, resulting in their own co-optation (Swan & Fox, 2010). As Ahmed (2007b, 2012) notes,

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organisational documentation, reports, and formal agendas for change can stand in for 'progress' toward eradicating inequalities within organisations, which can mean that diversity and inclusion practitioners lose grip on the opportunities for addressing structural inequality, leaving them feeling isolated, dejected, and thwarted. Furthermore, diversity and inclusion careers are commonly considered less legitimate than those linked to core commercial activities of organisations (Tatlö, & Özbilgin, 2009). The absence of a structured educational pathway into diversity and inclusion careers, and the paucity of professional credentials that could cohere the practice more clearly, exacerbate recognition and legitimacy deficits, which can diminish the standing and influence of this group of practitioners continually (Tatli, 2011).

Considering the above, one abiding concern is that diversity and inclusion practitioners can reproduce existing inequalities in organisations (Kirton & Greene, 2009; Tatli, 2011). Our study builds on the critical literature on diversity and inclusion, in particular the stream of research that questions the unequal distribution of material and symbolic benefits across organisational stakeholders, and problematises differential access to power and resources at work (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012; Zanoni et al., 2010). Thus, eschewing the view of diversity and inclusion practitioners as unproblematic proponents of progressive change, this article examines how these practitioners can contest and entrench existing imbalances and power relations that reproduce inequalities within organisations (Zanoni & Janssens, 2004). Crucially, very little is known about how diversity and inclusion practitioners have grappled with inequalities affecting non-binary employees, who represent one of the least researched minority groups in the workplace (Dray et al., 2020; Knutson et al., 2019).

Acknowledging the rapidly developing lexicon of gender diversity in some societies, it is important at this juncture to clarify our use of terminology. Richards et al. (2016, 95) remark that 'some people have a gender which is neither male nor female and may identify as both male and female at one time, as different genders at different times, as no gender at all, or dispute the very idea of only two genders'. Gender-diverse people have deployed a wide range of identity categories (e.g. androgynous, agender, bigender, mixed gender, genderfluid, genderfuck, gender neutral, genderless, pangender, third gender, etc.), of which non-binary and genderqueer have emerged as umbrella terms to denote an individual's break with the gender binary (e.g. men/women, masculine/feminine) (ibid.). Accordingly, we use the term non-binary to refer to people who identify outside of a normative gender binary that organises and regulates gender in and outside organisations. Additionally, we mobilise the term cisgender to describe the way in which gender is normatively aligned with the sex assigned to an individual at birth. As Calás et al.

(1996) observe, within feminist theorizing there is a broad spectrum of conceptions around gender and sex, as some feminist theories of gender and sex assume these to be relatively stable while others underscore their instability and contextual contingency. In this article, we subscribe to the view that sex and gender are socially constructed and historically patterned (Halberstam, 2018), and that constructions of gender reproduced through the gender binary can have an adverse impact on non-binary employees (Abe & Oldridge, 2019; Dray et al., 2020).

This article contributes to the literature on diversity, inclusion, and non-binary employees by providing empirical insights drawn from interviews with diversity and inclusion practitioners in the UK who are responsible for addressing non-binary workplace equality. As the interview data demonstrates, these practitioners can position themselves as being progressive on tackling inequalities (see also Oswick & Noon, 2014), but progress being made on eradicating gender inequalities affecting non-binary employees can be piecemeal, contingent, and limited in scope. As such, this article asks the following research question: How do diversity and inclusion practitioners address gender identity inequalities that adversely impact on non-binary employees in organisations? To address this question, we deploy Bourdieu's (1977, 1998) notions of habitus, doxa, and *illusio* for our analysis of how diversity and inclusion practitioners can contest and/or reproduce inequalities that restrict how non-binary employees are able to identify and work openly as gender-diverse people. Theoretically, our article develops a Bourdieusian analysis that illuminates how diversity and inclusion practitioners are positioned in non-binary workplace equality in terms of incrementalism, problematising gender fluidity and solidaristic inclusion.

This article is organised as follows. In the next section, we review the organisational literature on diversity and inclusion in relation to non-binary employees, before outlining the theoretical framework that highlights the conceptual gains of using Bourdieu's sociological theory, in particular the notions of habitus, doxa and *illusio*. We discuss the study's methodology followed by the presentation of the empirical data. These sections demonstrate how diversity and inclusion practitioners articulate organisational commitment for safeguarding and valuing non-binary employees, exhibiting a high degree of self-conviction they are engaging in progressive practice. They show also how these practitioners can reproduce normative gender inequalities that are harmful to non-binary employees, limiting how these employees may identify and participate fully in organisational life. The concluding discussion details the study's principal contributions to the extant scholarly knowledge.

## Diversity, inclusion and non-binary employees

Organisational research on non-binary employees is rare, despite the importance of this minority group as a key constituent of workplace gender diversity. Moreover, organisational scholars have tended to use the term ‘transgender’ or ‘trans’ to refer to non-binary people and those who identify as gender non-conforming (Davidson, 2007, Halberstam, 2018; Williams, 2014). This approach is unhelpful as there is enormous gender variability in how gender-diverse people identify and live their lives in relation to the gender binary, with some trans people transitioning across the binary, some seeking to destabilise it (Halberstam, 2018), while non-binary people break from the gender binary altogether. As such, non-binary people encounter distinct forms of gender-based discrimination that relate to how they identify beyond the gender binary, which diverge from the experiences of gender-based discrimination articulated by many trans people (Matsuno & Budge, 2017; Monro, 2019). For example, Nadal et al. (2016) argue that non-binary people are particularly vulnerable to microaggressions, as they are heavily penalised for dis-identifying with the gender binary. Indeed, research shows that non-binary people can be stigmatised by both cis- and transpeople who subscribe to the normative regulation of gender as a binary, demonstrating both the variation in gender-based discrimination and the heightened vulnerability of non-binary people to persecution from cis- and transpeople (Worthen, 2021).

In the workplace, feminist and trans organisational scholarship has consistently shown how the gender binary is reproduced and sustained over time, with negative effects for cis- and trans employees (Köllen & Rumens, 2022). Research has demonstrated how HR systems, policies, and practices often pre-suppose that employees have a stable and recognisable gender that can be easily identified and slotted into binaristic gender categories (Hennekam & Köllen, 2023). Thus, non-binary employees can represent a ‘double threat’ to the prevailing normative gender binary in the workplace, not only because they seek to dis-identify with the gender assigned to them at birth, but also their presence within the organisation may be understood as having a destabilising effect, insofar as the assumed stability of gender is undermined (Boncori et al., 2019). Research indicates that employees who do not identify within the gender binary can expect to experience greater marginalisation, discrimination, and persecution from work colleagues as well as from HR processes and practices that do not recognise gender non-conforming employees (Abe & Oldridge, 2019; Ozturk & Tatli, 2016). Emerging scholarship has started to shed light on how cisgender employees can struggle to relate to non-binary employees because of their non-normative

relationship with the gender binary (Beauregard et al., 2018). Non-binary people may be misunderstood and misidentified as trans (Knutson et al., 2019). Yet, unlike some trans employees, non-binary employees cannot use passing (e.g. to pass as cisgender) as a viable strategy of identity management to evade discrimination (Bates et al., 2021), which potentially increases their vulnerability to workplace discrimination. For example, in Timming (2019), 211 managers were presented with photographs of potential job applicants displaying a continuum of gender non-conformity, which revealed how non-binary people were singled out as particularly unsuitable. Similarly, in Taylor and Fasoli (2022), non-binary employees were viewed as being less appropriate than transwomen for employment in managerial roles, as they were assumed to lack competence and morality. Dray et al. (2020) demonstrated that non-binary employees whose assigned birth sex was male were given lower ratings for likability and perceived job performance as compared with transwomen, who were in turn rated lower than cismen. Experimental studies highlight persistent and problematic forms of gender-based discrimination that potentially limit the careers and work lives of non-binary employees in organisations. The necessity for in-depth qualitative research that can delve deeply into the workplace experiences of non-binary employees is thus compelling (Bates et al., 2021). Likewise, not enough is known about the perspectives of and actions taken by employers and other organisational agents, such as diversity and inclusion practitioners, to improve the work lives of non-binary employees. As such, this study aims to add to this understudied research domain, demonstrating how diversity and inclusion practitioners can challenge and reproduce existing normative constructions of gender that impinge negatively on the work lives of non-binary employees.

### **Theoretical framework**

HRM scholarship has increasingly become attuned to deriving theoretical insights from the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly in the field of diversity and inclusion research (Al Ariss et al., 2013; Fernando & Cohen, 2016; Joy et al., 2020; Ozbilgin & Tatli, 2005; Tatli, 2011). Bourdieu's concepts offer a relational and critical focus (Everett, 2002), which links individual action to structural realities, situated within wider socio-historical forces (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). A Bourdieusian framework considers the issues associated with diversity and inclusion practitioners' approach to non-binary employees' challenges not simply as an individual-level deficit of understanding, but a manifestation of deeper and wider structural problems embodied by these actors. Furthermore, Bourdieusian sociological theory's noted capacity to excavate layers of

misrecognition and nonrecognition (Calhoun, 1999) can reveal more fully than current research how diversity and inclusion practitioners can misrecognise inequality as equality or fail to recognise the inequalities affecting non-binary employees.

One salient notion from Bourdieu's sociology is habitus, which is a 'system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception' (Bourdieu, 1977, 86). In this sense, habitus informs and frames emotions and thoughts, shaping how groups of individuals, in this case, diversity and inclusion practitioners, (re)-act toward organisational and social structures. Furthermore, habitus is historical, figuring as 'the active presence of the whole past of which it is a product' (Bourdieu, 1993, 56). Habitus develops as an accumulated property within people as they interact with social settings over time and learn to submit to the norms and rules of the social order to achieve their own legitimacy. Finally, habitus is quasi-automatic. To survive and thrive in the social world, individuals develop a refined 'feel of the game', whose important stakes they understand implicitly (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Accordingly, the notion of habitus can help reveal how equality and diversity practitioners' perspectives on non-binary employees may be informed by their professional enculturation regarding possible policies and practices, their social position and circumstances/histories, as well as the prevailing approaches to gender non-binarity within organisations, the practitioner community, and the wider social order.

Another Bourdieusian concept we utilise is doxa, which is formed through the repeated exposure to and experiences of a familiar world (Bourdieu, 2000). Bourdieu (1977, 164) remarks: 'when there is a quasi-perfect correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of organization (as in ancient societies) the natural and social world appears as self-evident. This experience we shall call doxa.' Individuals can naturalise or normalise what may be open, flexible, and fluid into rigid or immutable facts. Beliefs about sex and gender may be a prime example of such doxa, from which it may be very difficult to break free. Bourdieu (1990, 130–131) points out, 'if the social world tends to be perceived as evident and to be grasped ... with a doxic modality, this is because the dispositions of agents ... are essentially the product of an internalization of the structures of the social world. As perceptual dispositions tend to be adjusted to position, agents, even the most disadvantaged, tend to perceive the world as natural'. Understood as such, exploring individuals' doxic stance can illuminate diversity and inclusion practitioners' dispositions toward non-binary employees. As such, some inequalities can remain legitimate and even invisible in the



eyes of the individuals tasked to challenge them, due to their misrecognition that certain phenomena are 'natural' and 'normal', and thus governed by forces outside of any possible social contestation or power struggles.

Finally, we mobilise Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* to examine the extent and form of diversity and inclusion practitioners' commitment toward advancing the workplace equality of non-binary employees. In line with Bourdieu's game trope, which signifies the power struggles inherent to all practices in the social sphere, *illusio* is the interest in playing the game. That is, *illusio* refers to precisely how an individual has been 'caught up in and by the game' (Bourdieu, 1998, 76–77). When actors think any game is worth playing, they must consider expending valued resources such as effort, time, and money, and potentially risk their own distinctions such as power, status, and position. All of this can shape in what ways they will engage with the game (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As the issue of equality for non-binary people is marked by controversy and competing views about how and whether gender can be understood to be (un)stable, diversity and inclusion practitioners' role in advancing workplace equality for non-binary employees potentially opens them to criticism and attack, which in turn may influence their commitment to that end. As such, the concept of *illusio* is a valuable analytical category to examine how this occurs in action.

## Methodology

### *Sample*

Our research was conducted upon the receipt of ethics approval from the first author's institution, followed by the collection of signed informed consent forms from the participants. A combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling approaches was deployed to recruit participants who had experience of engaging with gender-based workplace inequalities affecting non-binary employees. As part of a purposive sampling strategy, we sent out 'cold emails' to diversity and inclusion practitioners we identified through organisational websites, as well as using LinkedIn and author networks. Cold calls have previously been utilised as an effective recruitment approach in relation to otherwise difficult-to-access practitioners in the field (Kirton & Greene, 2019). Our sample of 24 participants comprised mainly of diversity and inclusion practitioners based in private sector and charitable organisations, but we also recruited two participants from trade unions, and two from an equality charity. The sample of diversity and inclusion practitioners were employed in an array of organisations within accounting, banking, consulting, engineering, film and television, finance, higher education, insurance, law, museum, retail, and travel



industries. The levels of seniority varied, with participants holding a range of positions from diversity and inclusion advisor to global head of diversity and inclusion. Two study participants identified as transmen, while the other participants were cisgender. We acknowledge this as a limitation of our sample, but we reiterate that the role of cisgender people in the advancement of non-binary workplace equality is an important focal point, not least for understanding how cisgender diversity and inclusion practitioners can fail to recognise non-binary gender inequality. [Table A1](#) in the appendix offers participant details.

Conducting research on a sensitive topic area has unique challenges, particularly as regards the need to maintain anonymity and confidentiality (Lancaster, 2017). Some of our study participants were acutely aware of the current firestorms in debates about trans rights and gender non-conforming people in UK society and elsewhere, with some experiencing backlash against their progressive solutions to non-binary gender equality problems. One participant sought a priori assurances that our research would not adopt a 'reactionary' position against trans and non-binary people. Other participants asked for additional steps to be taken to protect their anonymity. To illustrate, one participant had a distinctive job title, which identified their name upon conducting a google search. Therefore, where necessary, we made minor changes to some of the job titles to secure the anonymity and privacy of our participants.

### **Interview process**

We followed a semi-structured interviewing approach, which allowed richly detailed data to emerge as part of an unrestrained, free-flowing, and flexible mode of exchange (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Each interview spanned from about 50 min to one and a half hours in length, taking place either in person (mostly in participants' offices or meeting rooms in their organisations) or *via* a conference/telephone call. Our initial interest was to explore the dynamics of developing diversity and inclusion policy in relation to trans employees broadly construed, which also included non-binary employees. [Table A2](#) in the appendix provides a sample of the principal interview questions. Notably, some interviewees often used the terms 'transgender' and 'non-binary' in ways that showed how they categorised them differently in their minds, and they had somewhat differentiated views and perspectives regarding the diversity and inclusion of transgender vs. non-binary employees. As our study aims to understand diversity and inclusion practitioners' stance toward non-binary employees, our analysis centred on data that related to how our participants considered non-binary employees as a target group of diversity and inclusion workplace practice.

## **Data analysis**

We utilised thematic analysis as our chosen method to interrogate the interview data (Boyatzis, 1998). Owing to its theoretical flexibility and its capacity to generate nuanced analysis of rich data, thematic analysis is particularly appropriate for explorative qualitative inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data analysis process involved repeated readings of the interview transcripts to identify key patterns that could be turned into themes. While we had some a priori understandings based on Bourdieu's theory and our knowledge of the literature, we took a flexible approach regarding our own theoretical position and existing empirical knowledge to remain alert to emergent themes within the data. Multiple readings produced a series of codes, which through a process of careful elimination of redundant and overlapping codes resulted in a final list of codes, which in turn were grouped together into distinct categories that formed the sub-themes. Looking at the relations among the sub-themes facilitated the transformation of sub-themes into the broader thematic categories. [Table A3](#) in the appendix provides details of our thematic process as well as exemplar quotes, demonstrating the transparency and efficacy of the data analysis (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021).

## **Findings and analysis**

The findings and analysis section comprises three parts, organised around our three main emergent themes: incrementalism, problematisation of gender fluidity, and solidaristic inclusion.

### **Incrementalism**

Study participants indicated a strong preference for adopting an incremental approach for seeking change, where the full range of change efforts, particularly those that would challenge the binary understandings of gender, were not considered plausible or viable. As a result, rather than championing breakthrough ideas and practices to destabilise the gender binary, practitioners tended to seek small wins, in the hope that over time these gains could add up to large-scale change that would result in the inclusion of gender non-conforming employees. Incrementalism was justified on several fronts. Among the participants, there appeared to be a strong doxic submission to the status quo, as they considered that the normative status of the gender binary, which was the 'common sense' reality for cisgender employees, would take a long time to eradicate. This belief was coupled with the fear that trying to change people's beliefs about the stability of the gender binary may undermine their current status. In general, study participants discussed making a trade-off between the scale and success of change efforts, as one practitioner articulated as follows:

There's a balance between making things inclusive and making sure people still understand things. (Diversity and Inclusivity Advisor, Law)

Some diversity and inclusion practitioners made a virtue out of the slow speed of pursuing non-binary workplace equality by constructing 'reactive' diversity and inclusion measures as 'positive' evidence of responsive organisational action in the face of emerging demands from 'new' intra-organisational stakeholders, such as non-binary employees. Indeed, some participants shared the belief that even the 'best practice' organisations were late to the game, which some then utilised as a sign that reactive behaviour was the only realistic option in the context of information poverty relating to non-binary workplace equality:

I just think that in terms of how the D&I agenda is progressing it's just an area where a number of organisations haven't got to. And I think when I was developing our guidance that was a reaction to cases that we'd already had, so to kind of consolidate our learning, and then thinking actually we've had a handful of cases, we're only going to get more, we need to educate ourselves and then it's kind of thinking so what's the next step on from that. (Inclusion Lead, Accounting)

Some participants referred to their accumulated career experiences as a testament to how the genesis, diffusion, and widespread adoption of diversity ideas could be a slow-burning process, which needed to follow its own natural trajectory. It appeared some participants developed an occupational habitus, accumulated through their careers as they worked across different organisations, wherein they were inculcated with the sense that change could only sustain itself along its 'natural' developmental path, implying not only that change could not be sped up, but maybe more importantly the 'natural pace' of change is slow. Characterising change as an organic process with its own logic, some participants believed the slow reversal of the status quo in other domains of diversity and inclusion meant that it would be unrealistic to expect transformative changes in quick succession in the domain of non-binary workplace equality:

Change I think has been more social, hasn't it, with the non-binary identity just sort of emerging, 'cause like I said, I've worked in equality and diversity for 15 years now and it's probably been the last two to three years that non-binary started to emerge as an identity... So it's sort of growing incrementally ... and I'm sure it will continue to change, won't it. (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Higher Education)

Participants also pointed to sensationalistic media accounts, some of which depicted non-binary celebrities as fashionable. Some participants worried about the trivialising of non-binary people in the media, as well as the potential for organisational stakeholders to sensationalise non-binary people. These concerns structured some participants reasoning for a slow process of dispelling non-binary stereotypes:

And we know for centuries there has been trans, non-binary people. It's nothing new. The problem is the press have made it a new thing; they're calling it a new fad which then causes a lot of nervousness. (Global Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Insurance)

Furthermore, one practitioner related the need for incrementalism to the technical nature of their organisation and the capacity of workers to take on board 'extra things' such as non-binary workplace equality:

We're not a big bang kind of business, you know, we need to be mindful that some of our staff are very technical and they're very focused on projects and how much capability do they have for 'extra things'... But yeah, our approach is very much gradual and how do we engage people and also have a feedback loop so we can make sure we're pitching it at the right level. (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Engineering)

The incremental approach also speaks to the low level of priority and urgency organisations place on the diversity and inclusion imperative as opposed to the day-to-day business. In that context, inclusion, and more so the inclusion of non-binary employees appears as an addendum rather than a core mission for the organisation, as 'extra things', as articulated in the above quotation. Finally, some participants suggested the small wins approach was the only viable strategy regarding non-binary workplace equality as many employees occupy a position of cisgender privilege:

I always think that there are a group of individuals who don't actually really engage ... and they don't really care, and I think that they're always the hardest nut to crack with anything related to inclusion and diversity. Often they're in departments where there are a large number of contractors so I'm thinking, you know, we have a systems office which are predominantly white male, middle-aged, they're never really at events that we run, they're never the types to sign up to training ... they're always the blocker I think. (Head of Inclusion and Diversity, Banking)

What was particularly striking in participant accounts of small wins was the strength of their commitment to and investment in this strategy. Such full endorsement of the illusion of incrementalism signalled the acquisition of a professional habitus, based on the internalisation of the prevailing professional norms that informed diversity and inclusion practice. A case in point is the extent to which diversity and inclusion practitioners operate within the framework of binary thinking in their vision of change: either incremental or radical change, instead of both at the same time as fluidly interdependent. Not surprisingly, the dominance of binary thinking in modern Western organisations leads to ever greater limitations when such practitioners engage with an area of diversity and inclusion that poses a challenge to gender binarity, as we explore in the next section.

### ***Problematization of gender fluidity***

Some participants suggested that the discomfort with non-binary employees related to discomfort caused by fluidity. These participants underscored the struggles experienced by cisgender employees with understanding how non-binary people understand gender as fluid and identify beyond the gender binary. Cisgender employees were expected to understand transgender identities more readily, based on the assumption that they would have been exposed to media accounts and public conversations about issues such as gender reassignment, and some of the more positive media accounts of transgender people who have transitioned across the binary. By contrast, some participants contemplated how the normative status of a gender binary that normalises cisgender identities can be difficult to undo and challenge:

I think most people still think of gender as a very binary thing, so I think that they know that T exists but then probably outside of that they'd be quite confused. Yeah, they'd find it uncomfortable ... It's fluidity. People like certainty. (Head of Inclusion and Diversity, Banking)

Accordingly, non-binary workplace equality was constructed by participants as an ongoing equality project, which appeared to lag behind the advancement of trans equality in some organisations. In this way, two levels of doxic effects influenced the practices of diversity and inclusion practitioners in organisations. On one level, the normativity associated with cisgender people in the workplace was a limiting factor for the scope and ambition of change efforts undertaken by practitioners. On another level, study participants' taken-for-granted assumptions about cisgender employees' capacity and limited knowledge about non-binary people appeared to foreclose opportunities to engage with non-binary issues.

Some participants linked the acceptance of marginalised gender non-conforming employees to some cisgender employees' compassion for people who had experienced profound pain and suffering from living their lives within or beyond the normative strictures of the gender binary. In this view, a hierarchy of disadvantage within the category of gender non-conforming people was apparent, evidenced in the different levels of recognition and understanding accorded to specific gender non-conforming people. Participants remarked that the challenges confronting non-binary employees living outside the gender binary were sometimes downplayed and underestimated by organisational actors, which hindered their ability to persuade them otherwise:

I guess the confusion with non-binary is that it's like bisexuality compared to being gay, when you see someone who feels they were born in the wrong body, and they've suffered hideous mental anguish until they transitioned and then compare that to someone who just doesn't feel very male or female ... so it's hard

work to communicate that non-binary has its own challenges. (Diversity and Inclusion Advisor, Consulting)

Some participants discussed how organisational spaces such as toilets and restroom facilities had become focal points for non-binary workplace equality. Here, while some participants questioned the stability of the gender binary, they appeared not to question the stability of biological sex in the same way. There was broad support among participants for gender-neutral toilets that could be used by non-binary employees, but such views cannot be taken to mean that cisgender participants interrogate their own cisgender privilege. Notably, while participants could be very critical of cisgender employees' habitual ways of understanding the world through a gender binary, some remained non-reflexive of their own habitus as cisgender people. In some conversations, participants created hypothetical scenarios that exposed their own cisgendered views about who should access single-sex toilets:

We have a non-binary person and they use the gender neutral but we will, I'm sure, end up with somebody who presents in a way which is different to their gender identity use ... I mean to put it into the crudest terms, we could have a male who presents as female use ... hang on, where am I going with this? Use a washroom which doesn't match their gender expression. Yes, that's what I'm concerned with. (Diversity Lead, Law)

This interview extract demonstrates how some practitioners articulated their own confusion around how to resolve the issue of toilet facilities for gender non-conforming employees. In this quote, the concern regarding a potential mismatch between gender and assigned birth sex, which can be pertinent in the case of some trans and non-binary people, is structured by a belief that assumes gender-designated toilets should be used by employees whose gender corresponds accordingly. While non-binary employees are associated with 'appropriate' gender-neutral toilets, other gender non-conforming employees are constructed as potential 'problems' if they do not use the 'appropriate' toilet facilities.

### ***Solidaristic inclusion***

Although the themes of incrementalism and problematisation of gender fluidity indicate a constrained path of progress on non-binary workplace equality, study findings also provided evidence of a proactive and collective approach to the recognition of non-binary workplace equality, which we term solidaristic inclusion. In the data the rights of non-binary employees based on a sense of the dynamics of social injustice were at play, where doxic submission to the status quo can be broken. Some participants expressed an interest in 'playing the game' differently, to use

the Bourdieusian metaphor, which involved a more personalised stance. This in turn helped them to transcend the professional *illusio* of incrementalism, allowing them to eschew conformity, and make more open and far-reaching, even if still strategically calculative, arguments for change. As one participant put it:

I take a very personal approach I suppose, you know, I live a number of protected characteristics, I've been the victim in the workplace ... I care about it so my change agency comes from personal passion, which I believe makes me more effective than someone who simply does it because it's their job ... I come from an activist background, that is how I've developed my skills and knowledge. If you describe yourself as an activist in this environment, the environment will close down around you. So yes, I'm an activist, [but] I am very... corporate and collaborative in my outward face in the organisation to enable me to get into those conversations. Because basically a black woman preaching at these people will just put up a wall, so you have to get them to feel that... my entire approach is getting other people to feel it's their idea and that they are moving to where they wanna get to and I just happen to be helping them. (Director of Diversity and Inclusion, Higher Education)

Indeed, a few of the participants linked the strength of their commitment to securing tangible improvements to the work lives of non-binary employees to their political views and identities:

I don't recall any diversity issue ever being taken up by the political right in this horrible, polarising, vicious way, but it makes me think, this is it, this is the reason I'm doing this job, and if I didn't think we could get real equality for everyone, what would be the point of me doing this job? All this politicization fires me up more to prove all the detractors and the haters how wrong they are. (Diversity and inclusion manager, Banking)

For some participants, then, the right-wing politicisation of trans and non-binary people's rights corresponded to a critical juncture that re-invigorated their professional responsibility to seeking more meaningful change. Their stark awareness of the political tenor of the gender identity debates alerted them to the need to overcome their doxic submission to the binary-gendered organisational order.

## Concluding discussion

In this article, we have sought to examine how diversity and inclusion practitioners can address gender inequalities that adversely impact on non-binary employees in organisations. Non-binary people represent a group of gender non-conforming individuals who are particularly vulnerable to gender-based discrimination in and outside the workplace (Dray et al., 2020; Nadal et al., 2016). To date, there is a paucity of organisational research that has examined the experiences of non-binary employees, but also the perspectives and actions of employers and other organisational agents responsible for



improving the work lives of non-binary employees. This article has taken steps to address this knowledge gap in regard to the perspectives and actions of UK diversity and inclusion practitioners, and in so doing makes the following contributions to the extant research.

### ***Contributions to research and theory***

One empirical contribution this study makes concerns how diversity and inclusion practitioners can hold views and perspectives on non-binary workplace equality that limit the actions they take in that equality domain. Previous scholarship has shown how diversity and inclusion practitioners can experience limited agency and conditional access to power and status in their work lives, which can impede how they advance equality agendas (Kirton et al., 2007; Tatli, 2011). Our research aligns with study findings in this area, as our data attests to the view that practitioners are situated in a web of organisational relations that can constrain the type and scope of action they can pursue in regard to non-binary workplace equality. However, prior research has tended to paint diversity and inclusion practitioners as wanting to ‘do good,’ knowing what is necessary for transformative change, but also having to fit in and compromise with the dominant organisational culture (Kirton et al., 2007; Tatli & Ozbilgin, 2009). Extending this research, our study data shows how diversity and inclusion practitioners can hold cisgender views and perspectives and have knowledge gaps that may create additional barriers for advancing non-binary workplace equality. Study participants shared a belief in the value of small wins, informed by views on non-binary workplace equality such as its controversial nature, and the inability of cisgender workers to grasp non-binary workplace issues, as well as their own lack of reflexivity as cisgender practitioners. For example, diversity and inclusion practitioners favoured ‘realistic’ actions, which included using rainbow lanyards, inviting transgender and non-binary speakers to diversity events, and providing gender identity resources on company intranets. The moderacy of such interventions shaped how advancements in non-binary workplace equality are incremental and justified as such, even if they have very limited positive impact on non-binary employees.

Another empirical contribution this article makes is the insight it provides on how diversity and inclusion professionals can share an occupational habitus that overvalues the illusion of incrementalism as the most ‘legitimate’ strategy for non-binary workplace equality. One implication is that the gender binary remains intact and cisgender privilege remains largely unchallenged. For non-binary employees, the potential consequences of this are severe, evidenced in the struggles they encounter living and working beyond the gender binary (Bates et al., 2021). As well, this article demonstrates how diversity and inclusion practitioners can problematise

gender fluidity, by way of imagining scenarios in which it can exert potentially disruptive effects on, for example, cisgender people being able to access workplace toilets. Even though participants may articulate their support for non-binary employees to live beyond the gender binary at work, they can also exhibit a doxic submission to biologically essentialist ideas about what constitutes an ‘appropriate’ alignment between gender and sex assigned at birth, which determines who can access ‘appropriate’ gender-designated toilet facilities. Yet, debates on sex and gender are much more multidimensional and nuanced in both feminist social science and biology (Calás et al., 1996; Fausto-Sterling, 2018). Still, there is some evidence to indicate that diversity and inclusion practitioners can advance non-binary workplace equality through solidaristic connections with non-binary employees. The demonstration of empathy that is bound up with some participants’ political views bears testimony to the potential of diversity and inclusion practitioners to make a positive impact to that end.

The theoretical contribution of this article concerns how it deploys constructs (*habitus*, *doxa* and *illusio*) from Bourdieu’s sociology to advance HRM research on non-binary workplace equality. Similar Bourdieusian interventions are already underway in the HRM domain, evident in scholarship on migrant workers (Al Ariss et al., 2013; Fernando & Cohen, 2016; Joy et al., 2020). This strand of research, to which we add our own study findings, has shown how diversity and inclusion issues are shaped by the interplay of agentic actions embedded within a structure of inequalities; and marginalised work lives and careers are intimately connected to contexts within which they are played out. In this article, the conceptual gains we derive from Bourdieu are illustrated in [Figure A1](#) in the appendix, whereby non/binarism can be conceptualised as an organising principle in relation to the study’s core concepts and key themes. [Figure A1](#) is informed by both theory and empirical data - in particular, one of our most surprising study findings regarding the sense of tightness and rigidity that runs as an undercurrent in the narratives and frames of reference of many of our participants. Rigidity operated as the organising principle of the *doxa* that shaped the *illusio* (i.e. how they related to diversity and inclusion as a change effort); and *habitus* (i.e. their embodied sense of what it is to be a diversity and equality practitioner). In other words, binarism was deeply present not only in the doxic understanding of how organisations function and the *illusio* of what organisational change looks like, but also in participants’ *habitus* in relation to the possibilities of their agency. It was evident that binarism is the dominant logic in how some participants framed gender fluidity as a problem. Further binarism was also present in practitioners’ formulations of the ‘natural’ trajectory of change as incremental rather than large scale, which restricted their capacity to envisage incrementalism and

radicalism as fluidly inter-connected facets of a change process. Yet, our data also reveal the possibility of developing alternative visions that break away from a doxic relation to diversity and equality action, as evidenced by participant accounts that emphasised solidaristic inclusion, in the cases where the habitus of the practitioner incorporated alternative frames of references associated with a sense of communalism and passion, and a greater level of fluidity. This appeared to allow them to break from the rigidity of an occupational *illusio*. Thus, this article underlines how centring fluidity as an organising principle is needed if non-binary workplace equality is to become a meaningful reality for employees, and for alleviating the tightness and rigidity in equality, diversity and inclusion scholarship and organisational practice.

### ***Practical implications***

This article emphasises the need for reflexive HRM practice among diversity and inclusion practitioners in policy-making and day-to-day diversity work (see also Kornau et al., 2022). For reflexive practice, it is important that diversity and inclusion practitioners pay attention to their positionality in change processes, how they may unwittingly embody the social structures that govern restrictive forms of non-binary workplace equality. Reflexive professional practice can help diversity and inclusion practitioners to foster context- and politics-sensitive policies and practices to counter the marginalisation and exclusion of non-binary employees in organisations, but the voices, perspectives and experiences of non-binary employees are crucial in this process (see Beauregard et al., 2018). Additionally, it is critical that diversity and inclusion practitioners engage more with cisgender and transgender employees to undertake allyship behaviours in the form of active mentoring and sponsorship of non-binary employees (see Fletcher & Marvell, 2023). As Tatli et al. (2015) suggest, consequential equalities work can also utilise insights and build capacity by means of extra-organisational resources. Thus, diversity and inclusion practitioners could utilise practical knowhow offered by specialist consultancies, unions, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual plus (LGBTQIA+) charities, and policy bodies to enhance their practice and sharpen their toolkits. As well, organisations need to respond to societal debates proactively to promote workplace equality aims (Ozturk & Tatli, 2018), as wider social norms, values and expectations shape change options pursued by diversity and inclusion practitioners. A multipronged approach to change is likely the best means of pushing for meaningful equality gains for non-binary employees, who remain a profoundly stigmatised and vulnerable group of people in contemporary workplaces.

### **Limitations and future directions for research**

Rounding off, we call for more qualitative research that focuses directly on how diversity and inclusion practitioners are implicated in the destabilisation and reproduction of the gender binary in the workplace. We did not explore how non-binary employees grapple with diversity and inclusion policy and practice that concern them, which is a limitation of our study. We thus invite further research about non-binary employees themselves. As well, our sample did not include a non-binary participant. Again, we call for research that includes non-binary diversity and inclusion practitioners to understand how they can act as change agents in non-binary equality. Finally, our research was focused on the UK context, despite interviewing participants from global organisations. The positions and perspectives on non-binary equality particularly and gender non-conformity more generally will vary from one country to another and between host organisations and subsidiaries, reflecting the complexities of diversity and inclusion dynamics globally (Ahmad et al., 2023; Ozturk et al., 2015). Thus, future research on non-binary diversity and inclusion policy and practice must be undertaken in a wider range of cultural contexts and cross-national organisational settings.

### **Disclosure statement**

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

### **Data availability statement**

Due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data is not available.

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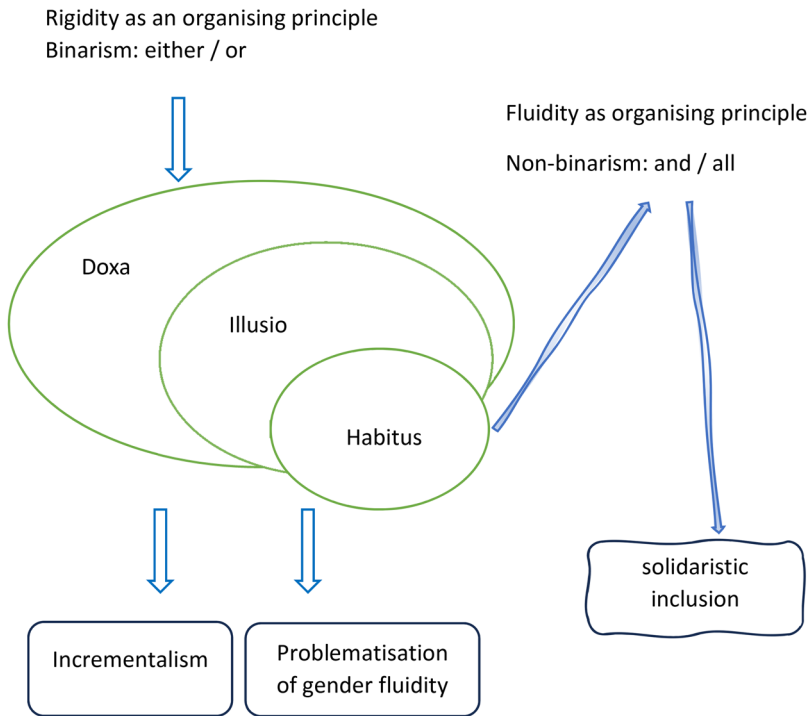
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## Appendix



**Figure A1.** Non/Binarism as an organising principle in relation to the core concepts and key themes.

**Table A1.** Participant details.

Participant	Gender identity	Position	Organisation
1	Ciswoman	Diversity & Inclusivity Advisor	Law
2	Ciswoman	Director of Diversity & Inclusion	Higher Education
3	Cisman	Diversity & Inclusion Manager	Museum
4	Cisman	Diversity Lead	Law
5	Cisman	Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Manager	Engineering
6	Ciswoman	Head of Diversity & Inclusion, EMEA	Law
7	Cisman	Global Diversity Manager	Law
8	Ciswoman	Diversity and Inclusion Lead	Film and Television
9	Ciswoman	Inclusion Lead	Accounting
10	Transman	Diversity and Inclusion Executive	Retail
11	Cisman	Global Diversity and Inclusion Manager	Insurance
12	Ciswoman	Global Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Manager	Consulting
13	Cisman	Diversity Manager	Retail
14	Ciswoman	Head of Diversity and Inclusion, EMEA	Insurance
15	Cisman	HR Business Partner (D&I responsibility)	Finance
16	Ciswoman	Diversity & Inclusion Advisor	Finance
17	Ciswoman	Head of Inclusion & Diversity	Banking
18	Cisman	Global Head of Inclusion & Diversity	Travel
19	Ciswoman	Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Manager	Higher Education
20	Ciswoman	Diversity & Inclusion Manager	Banking
21	Ciswoman	Senior Research Officer	Charity
22	Ciswoman	Digital Engagement and Workplace Resources Officer	Charity
23	Transman	LGBT+ Committee Member	Union
24	Ciswoman	LGBT+ Committee Member	Union

**Table A2.** Semi-structured interview content.

Question category	Sample questions
<i>Participant background, experience, and work role</i>	<p>Can you please give me some information on your educational background?</p> <p>Can you briefly talk about your career experiences to date please?</p> <p>Can you tell me about your motivation to be a diversity and inclusion practitioner?</p> <p>What is your job role in this organisation? (What is your job title precisely? Do you manage anyone? Are you a senior manager? Do you hold a budget?)</p> <p>Can you please tell me about the key elements of your work operationally and strategically?</p>
<i>D&amp;I policy and practice on gender identity minorities</i>	<p>What do you think diversity and inclusion mean in the case of gender identity minorities?</p> <p>What are the main issue areas within the workplace transgender policy space?</p> <p>What is the understanding of transgender policy in your organisation? In workplaces generally?</p> <p>What kind of challenges do you encounter when seeking positive change in support of gender identity minorities in your organisation?</p> <p>What are the various worries and tensions when working with different organisational stakeholders around gender identity issues?</p> <p>How do you navigate barriers to change as you seek to generate greater equality?</p> <p>What were the risks that you considered when you first looked at developing transgender policy? (Did any of them materialise? How did you or how do you address them?)</p> <p>What resources and ideas do you use to communicate the legitimacy of gender identity policies? (Who is the hardest sell when it comes to legitimacy? Why?)</p> <p>What are the most important elements of a legitimate, well-functioning gender identity policy at work?</p> <p>What do you pay attention to most personally in your practice when you develop gender identity policy initiatives?</p>



**Table A3.** Data structure.

<i>Exemplar quotes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>	<i>Main themes</i>
<p>Gender binary is the toughest part of the change conversation, and I think the emotions run high in some quarters. There's always confusion and quite a bit of division, so it's a uniquely difficult issue to talk about. Nobody wants these ideas shoved down their throats. Galloping change can alienate a lot of the people who you need for change to work long-term ... that big giant leap you attempt can mean going back a hundred steps, if you antagonise a lot of people.</p> <p>It's fascinating how gender diversity's unfolding, and it's got all these additional layers now that we didn't realise before, but I think it's the sort of evolution that you respond to as it goes on, because we don't quite know what it is yet.</p> <p>Gender is one of the most basic things in life, it takes a lot of courage to question that, you know, all the boundaries we've built up around gender identity are so strong, it goes very deep, you simply can't rush change.</p> <p>Our people are overworked ... even with issues that you and I would consider straightforward, it's a big task to get their attention, so our comms needs to make sure they can cope with the changes.</p> <p>I think non-binary is the final frontier, that's where all the questions get jumbled up, which is when my job gets very tricky, compared to when I am giving the example of a transman in the office, which is pretty much a comfort zone by contrast.</p> <p>The transition journey is medically lifechanging, if you're taking those risks with your health, that can bring out instant support and empathy in your colleagues, but you don't have the same immediate response with non-binary.</p> <p>For many of our women employees, biology is a hard limit when it comes to single-sex spaces. What we try and explain is that we do respect biology as a fact of nature, we have no issues with that, but we ask for allowances to be made in the spirit of mutual collegiality, emphasising respect for each other whether we are binary or non-binary.</p> <p>There's no point in saying, 'We've got these new gender-inclusive bathrooms,' and then people have an argument over the sink, you know, ... if you're not engaging other colleagues who might have concerns, we've got to be mindful of that, you're then putting them in a position where staff are feeling that it's their responsibility for the change and it's not.</p> <p>There's probably a minority of women, and men as well, it's not only women, who will always have an issue with single-sex toilets being open to non-binary employees ... perhaps a bad experience with the opposite sex in the past or it's something else personal, but the perception of threat will keep the single-sex space issue alive.</p> <p>I have a personal interest in the gender identity space because I have got a lot of friends who are trans or non-binary so I have a vested interest.</p> <p>As a gay man, I used to be pre-occupied with my own masculinity. It was horrendous how I used to internalise homophobia, and that's the background I come from that's helping me see through the negativity about non-binary.</p> <p>I'm a strong equalities champion of transgender and non-binary people. The values of my profession guide what I do. Anything else would be the height of hypocrisy.</p>	<p>Inherent complexity of challenging gender binary</p> <p>Keeping the whole workforce on one's side during the change process</p> <p>Legitimacy of reactive approaches in "new" diversity and inclusion strands</p> <p>Necessity of slow change in dismantling the social fact of gender binary</p> <p>Insufficiency of the workforce bandwidth to take in non-binary ideas at pace</p> <p>Supposed awkwardness of non-binary</p> <p>Perceptions of less workforce sympathy with non-binary</p> <p>Primacy of biology in the setting of spatial boundaries</p> <p>Non-responsibility of cis-people over space use</p> <p>Articulation of spatial crossings as an insuperable hazard</p>	<p>Incrementalism</p> <p>Problematisation of gender fluidity</p>
<p>Feeling of fellowship through personal connections</p> <p>Motivation for inclusivity through a shared sense of disadvantage</p> <p>Linking pursuit of justice to professional identity</p>	<p>Solidaristic inclusion</p>	