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Belonging beyond the binary: the positive experiences of visible non-binary and genderqueer individuals in the workplace.

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**Belonging beyond the binary: the positive experiences of visible non-binary
and genderqueer individuals in the workplace.**

Abstract

Purpose: The number of people identifying as non-binary and genderqueer (NBGQ) is rapidly increasing but the literature offers scant guidance for organisations aiming to offer these workers an inclusive environment in which they feel that they belong. This study explores how the positive experiences of NBGQ individuals contribute to their sense of belonging in the workplace.

Methodology: In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants, exploring their positive experiences of belonging at work and the data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Findings: Three higher-order themes were created: Allowing Authenticity; Social Support; and Creating Inclusive Culture. Findings from this study suggest that NBGQ authenticity, perceived colleague social support and the proactive creation of inclusive organisational cultures interact to develop a sense of belonging for NBGQ individuals in the workplace.

Originality: Empirical studies on the experiences of non-binary people at work are almost non-existent. Existing research predominantly explores the negative experiences of NBGQ individuals as a subset of a transgender demographic. This article focuses specifically on the experiences of NBGQ workers and thus contributes to filling this gap in the literature.

Introduction

The number of visible non-binary and genderqueer (NBGQ) people is growing. Considering that between 2017 and 2022, higher education in the UK saw a 500% increase in the number of students who identify outside of the gender binary (Higher Education Statistic Agency, 2022), organisations need to prepare for the next generation of NBGQ people to enter the workforce.

NBGQ people have a higher risk of mental health issues, potentially because they navigate a binary-centred society (Matsuno & Budge, 2017) and organisations could play a pivotal role in promoting psychological well-being amongst this population. Social relationships play a fundamental role in psychological well-being (Ryff, 2014) and flourishing at work (Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2019). Employee flourishing is highly important for organisations as workplace flourishing appears to reduce turnover intentions and increase job performance and organisational citizenship behaviours (Redelinguys et al., 2019). Flourishing relies on employees having positive relationships (Agenor et al., 2017; Seligman, 2011) and the belongingness hypothesis (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) suggests that stable relationships involving frequent interaction with affective concern and minimal conflict fulfil a person's need to belong.

Transgender and Gender Nonconforming (TGNC) individuals are almost three times more likely to experience workplace discrimination and harassment than cisgendered co-workers (Waite, 2021). Organisations risk issues with employer branding, recruitment, job performance, retention, and litigation if they cannot build inclusive environments that are safe for TGNC people (Beauregard et al., 2018). Fostering a sense of inclusion amongst NBGQ people at work appears a reasonable avenue for mitigating this risk as inclusion reduces turnover intentions and increases organisational identification, attachment and job satisfaction (Acquavita et al., 2009; Avery et al., 2008).

Whilst some NBGQ policy guidance for organisations exists, there is scant peer-reviewed literature exploring the experiences and psychological needs of NBGQ people

(McCann et al., 2021; Richards et al., 2016), and none identifies NBGQ needs for belongingness. This qualitative study will therefore identify how organisations in the UK can support NBGQ people to feel a sense of belonging at work.

NBGQ Identities

Gender identity refers to one’s internal sense of being a female, woman or girl; a male, man or boy; a blend of either; or something else (Bethea & McCollum, 2013). Cultures which historically recognised and accepted visible gender-nonconforming people declined due to colonialism and westernisation (Herdt, 1996; Nanda, 1999) and today, *cisgender* people, that is, people whose gender identity and gender expression align with their sex assigned at birth (APA, 2015), make up the majority of the population.

Psychologists are encouraged to view gender as a nonbinary construct and to be aware of various gender identities that may not align with a person’s assigned birth sex, termed *transgender* (trans; APA, 2015). *Gender non-conforming* refers to people whose gender expression or identity contradicts societal gender norms connected to their assigned birth sex (including NBGQ identities). People who identify as *non-binary* consider their gender as something in-between or outside of the male-female binary (Davidson, 2016). Finally, people who identify as *genderqueer* might reject the binary view of gender altogether, may not associate with having a gender (*agender*) or might think of themselves as moving between genders (*genderfluid*) (APA, 2015).

In this paper we will refer to gender non-conforming, non-binary, or genderqueer identities as NBGQ. Whilst NBGQ identities are considered trans identities, not all NBGQ people identify as trans (Valentine, 2016), because trans identities still operate within a binary system (Davidson, 2007). Therefore, this study will refer to people whose gender identity is male or female and is different from their assigned sex at birth as transgender or trans. When discussed together, trans and NBGQ people or identities will be referred to as TNBGQ.

Impact of Diverse Gender Identities at Work

Evidence shows that workplaces are often not considered safe or supportive places amongst trans and NBGQ people (Beauregard et al., 2018). TNBGQ employees experience more workplace discrimination than other LGBTQ identities (Mallory et al., 2011). Many people consider TNBGQ identity as a psychological disorder (Anderson, 2022) and display negative attitudes and prejudice towards TNBGQ people. Unsupportive responses from managers and colleagues can result in anxiety, depression, internalised stigma, and loss of confidence (Chope & Strom, 2008; Mizock & Mueser, 2014). Unsurprisingly, then, only 6% of NBGQ people report that they always feel comfortable self-disclosing their gender identity at work, and 52% say that they never feel comfortable (Valentine, 2016).

TNBGQ well-being can be improved by being out in the workplace, and opportunities for support are reduced when TNBGQ identities are concealed (Cancela et al., 2022). Identity concealment is associated with lowered psychological well-being (Rood et al., 2017) and reduced positive work outcomes, such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Newheiser et al., 2017). It is therefore incumbent on organisations to create environments in which TNBGQ people can be open about their identities.

There is scant research that explores the experience of NBGQ people at work, and existing studies subsume NBGQ participants into transgender populations (Kollen & Rumens, 2022; Matsuno & Budge, 2017). NBGQ employees might experience prejudice and discrimination similar to that experienced by trans people, but may also face unique challenges, such as invalidation (Johnson et al., 2020): where trans employees might disclose their transition from one gender to another, NBGQ disclosure reveals a gender identity that breaks the common understanding of gender, one that is not always understood or admitted (Hennekam & Kollen, 2023). Where trans people, who are perceived to have exchanged one set of traditional gender roles and norms for another (Schilt & Connell, 2007), NBGQ people are more likely to experience microaggressions similar to those that bisexuals face because they identify outside of the binary system (Israel & Mohr, 2004; Ross et al., 2010).

One such microaggression is erasure, where others minimise or deny the existence of NBGQ identity. Erasure is a form of social exclusion, which impairs self-regulation, decreases happiness and causes other deleterious cognitive issues (Baumeister et al., 2005; Blackhart et al., 2006; DeWall et al., 2009; Sjøstad et al., 2021). The resulting sense of thwarted belonging diminishes the person's resources for maximum functioning (Baumeister et al., 2007), thus likely impairing their ability to perform and thrive at work.

The present study

While organisational focus on equality and inclusion initiatives has increased, it is apparent that NBGQ people continue to be the victim of stigma, marginalisation and discrimination at work (McCann et al., 2021). Much of the research conducted in this area groups NBGQ people with trans people, who may be relieved of gender-related distress after transitioning as a result of experiencing congruence between their gender and their environment (Matsuno & Budge, 2017). Given the apparent non-existence of evidence for the psychosocial needs of NBGQ to foster their sense of belonging at work, there is clearly a need for careful empirical research which examines this topic. Therefore, this study asks the question: what helps NBGQ people to feel a sense of belonging at work?

Method

Design

The purpose of this study was to understand what helps NBGQ people to belong at work, aiming to uncover the meaning participants derived from their interactions with others (Willig, 2013). Qualitative methods are considered to be particularly suitable for research with stigmatised groups (Stutterheim & Ratcliffe, 2021; Corlett et al., 2021). The researchers' relativist ontological position is grounded in the view that there is no one single reality, rather that each person's reality is influenced and constructed by their individual and social experiences (Willig, 2013). Therefore, a qualitative, phenomenological epistemological approach was deemed most appropriate for the study and an Interpretive Phenomenological

Belonging beyond the binary 5

Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996) design was selected. IPA aims to understand the participant's view of the phenomenon from an insider's perspective. It uses an individual's personal account to produce a subjective view, and the researcher is positioned as an active agent, within the research. IPA is a helpful research design for both understanding individual experiences and discussing differences, communalities and interconnectivity across groups. For that reason IPA was considered suitable for this study, given its aim to capture individuals' subjective experience of belonging in the workplace as well as to identify general themes across all participants' narratives.

Recruitment

Purposeful sampling was used in the first instance to recruit participants, an approach that allows for a close match between the participants and the research aims and improves the trustworthiness of data (Campbell et al., 2020). Due to the challenges of recruiting from this small and marginalised group, snowball sampling methods were used to recruit further participants. Marginalised groups are known to be difficult to recruit in part because the overall size of the population, in part because of a fear of mistreatment based on poor research practices in the past (Vincent, 2018) and because of a desire to keep hidden for self-preservation (Austin, 2016). Two participants were approached due to displaying They/Them pronouns on their LinkedIn profiles. Two participants emailed the researcher after seeing the researcher's social media post advertising the study. The final participant was referred to the study by another participant. IPA aims to understand the specificities of each participant's account of their experiences. This takes time and a smaller sample size allows for a richer examination of both the individual and the group themes (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Smaller samples are also considered not only suitable but necessary for collecting the in-depth data needed to identify new insights with underexplored topics (Boddy, 2016; Corlett et al., 2021). The number of participants in this study is in line with the recommended participant numbers in IPA (Flowers et al., 2008) and it is similar to

the sample size of other recent papers exploring the experiences of similar hard to reach populations (eg Mills et al., 2023; Roberts et al., 2022; Xiang et al., 2023).

Participants

This research focused exclusively on the positive experiences of belonging as a NBGQ person at work. Change is most transformational when it builds on what is working well (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) and it was thought that we would generate more useful insights to encourage not only the absence of ill-health, but a focus on workplace flourishing if we focused on positive experiences of belonging for NBGQ workers. As such, participants were only included in the study if they identified as non-binary or genderqueer, were out at work, and could share positive workplace experiences. Five participants were recruited, and to maintain anonymity of participants, each participant was asked to share a little bit about themselves, their working environment, how they describe their gender identity and a bit about their journey to identifying as non-binary:

Morgan (they/them), is from the UK and worked in talent acquisition for a recruitment agency. They describe their gender identity as non-binary, which to them means they don't recognise themselves as male or female, and they came out at work 1 year ago.

Jay (them/them), is in their 30s, is from the UK, described themselves as Brown and with Indian heritage. Jay came out two years ago after they started in a senior HR position at a startup. They described their gender identity as genderfluid or genderqueer because their gender changes constantly. Jay also mentioned that they identify as being a member of the trans community and the neuordivergent community because they are Autistic and have ADHD.

Kit (they/them), moved from Canada to the UK three years prior and was working in Design for a digital product. They said that they started identifying as genderqueer in their mid-twenties however they also go by non-binary at work because people understand that term more. To Kit, non-binary means that their gender is in-between the traditional gender binary, and genderqueer is a rejection of gender rules and norms.

Belonging beyond the binary 7

Ash (they/them) lives in South Eastern England, runs a local LGBTQ+ charity and has a part-time job cleaning for a local school. They began identifying as genderfluid about a year ago and recently changed to identifying as non-binary. To them, non-binary breaks the binary system of male/female or feminine masculine. Ash also mentioned that they are disabled.

August (they/them) is a parent and works in admissions at a University in the UK. August said that they see themselves as being between genders and began identifying as non-binary two to three years ago.

Procedure

Once ethical approval was obtained from X University *[masked for review]* the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews, lasting 60 to 90 minutes, online via Zoom with each participant. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim using transcription software (Otter.ai, 2022) and checked for accuracy. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the researchers the flexibility to adapt to the flow of each individual interview, but a predetermined interview discussion guide was used, with questions that were based on themes within the existing literature and which would generate data to answer the specific research question. The questions covered participants' gender identity, their experiences of belonging, and the impact that belonging has had on them. Questions included 'could you tell me about a specific time when you felt you belonged at work', 'What was it about that experience that made you feel you belonged?', 'Are there any other things that people do at work that make you feel you belong?', and 'What impact has your feeling belonging at work/outside of work had on you?' . Follow-up questions were used (for example, 'tell me a bit more about that') to elicit richer data (Willig, 2013).

Data Analysis

The data were analysed according to the IPA steps advised by Smith et al. (2009). First the researchers re-listened to the interview to immerse in the participant's voice and imagine it on subsequent readings. Second, semantic content and language was analysed to develop codes. Third, the researchers sequentially developed initial themes that were used in step four to establish a set of themes for the interview, each with a supporting quote. Steps one to four were repeated for each interview, and were conducted one week apart to reduce the likelihood of interpreting each interview through the lens of the previous. The researchers then began identifying patterns across each interview to generate a final set of themes. The data analysis was conducted principally by the first researcher but the two researchers discussed the themes regularly throughout the process. As the first author is non-binary, they kept a journal throughout the period of the research in which they noted down any personal thoughts and feelings that were generated by the research, aiming to avoid their personal experiences influencing their interpretation of the data. In addition, the two authors discussed their personal responses to the research throughout (known as researcher reflexivity).

The study aimed to explore the lived experience of the participants and therefore was not seeking generalisability. Instead, the trustworthiness of the research was assured by adherence to a rigorous process of data analysis, including close collaboration between authors at all stages of the process, ongoing researcher reflexivity and transparency.

Findings

Allowing Authenticity

All participants described being afforded opportunities to express their gender identity and show up as their full selves at work as a core aspect of belonging. We developed three subthemes to this theme: participants felt enabled and empowered to be their authentic selves at work when they themselves owned their identity, when others

Belonging beyond the binary 9

accepted their identity and when the organisational structures acknowledged their identity by offering them options that allowed them to make authentic choices.

Owning Their Identity

Almost all participants described becoming comfortable with their identity in terms of self-acceptance and self-expression. Kit and Jay explicitly mentioned how therapy and self-reflection helped them to identify and be recognised as NBGQ. Kit explains:

I think over time, it's just been a process of like, if I remove my own sort of fears and shame around being a queer person in society, then I'll probably be more free to show up at work in that way too... There's a lot of personal work that needs to go on there.

Kit's words suggest that to give themselves the freedom to be authentic with others, they had to work to accept themselves by reducing feelings of shame and fear. Whilst Jay and Kit described their shame as their "own", it sounds as though they took on fear and shame that society instilled in them. Jay explained that their journey involved "unlearning my own transphobia and my own queerphobia" and "recognising the heteronormative conditioning that I've been raised with". In turn, it sounds like fear and shame became psychological barriers to being authentic with others. However, by recognising their role in taking on fear and shame, participants gave themselves the power to unlearn these feelings:

That was also liberating because I've often spent time looking at other people being like, 'Oh, I wish those people would be more supportive.'... But it was finally having complete control over it. This isn't about the people and how other people feel; This is about how I feel and whether I accept myself, and support myself. (Jay)

This process sounded like an adaptive one that enabled participants to visibly identify as NBGQ with reduced concern for others' opinions. Ash explained that by settling into the idea that "I probably am non-binary," they have been able to "sit with myself more comfortably"

and own their identity, regardless of what others might think, “I am who I am, you like it, or you don’t like it”.

Acceptance from others

Participants found that colleagues’ responses to their gender identity helped them to be authentic. It was striking to hear the participants repeatedly say that colleagues “allowed” them to be who they were. August describes how this feels:

Suddenly, gender isn’t an issue. It feels like I can be a member of that team or social group, or whatever, and the only expectation is that I am me and what I am is allowed and seen.

Similarly, Ash said, “just to be accepted felt like okay, I’m allowed to be here, I am a part of the community however I identify”. There were multiple ways participants felt that others accepted their identity. Morgan described acceptance as the lack of invalidation and confrontation:

You always worry, I think, in these situations, there’s going to be a big deal, or you’re going to get backlash, or people are going to, you know, confront you about why you need to do these things. But to go through the process and have no conflict or problems is just nice’ (Morgan)

Kit measured acceptance through people’s body language saying, “you can tell that they’re very comfortable, and they’re fully seeing you... they don’t seem uncomfortable in any way about it”; conversely, “certain awkwardness or discomfort can be palpable”.

Participants were alert to the risk of discrimination, so each experience of acceptance was a relief that reinforced participants’ confidence in allowing themselves to be authentic.

Having the Choice

Four participants described how their organisation allowed for authenticity by recognising the existence of NBGQ identities through making “certain things an available choice” (Ash). Morgan, August and Ash shared the importance of having gender-neutral options in paperwork because it demonstrates an awareness that not all people identify as male or female:

Everywhere it's like the system...heteronormativity cisnormativity is just the assumed default... Having part of that system change, to not only allow for another gender identity but to show that other gender identities can exist, relieves that pressure... it feels like you're not wading through treacle anymore. (August)

August's description implies that these system changes removed their perception that they were expected to conform or be something they are not. However, what allowed participants to fully express their identities was when their organisations created a “non-gendered environment” with “none of that binary code” (Morgan) and provided facilities “that make you feel like you belong in that environment” (Ash). Participants shared examples, including gender-neutral bathrooms, inclusive language in employee communication efforts, non-gendered benefits and not segregating social activities based on gender.

Gender-neutral options showed that organisations recognised NBGQ identities and allowed the participants to experience congruence between their identity and their environment.

Social Support

This theme describes the ways in which colleagues increased the sense of belonging for the participants by supporting them and demonstrating concern for their well-being. We developed three subthemes. The participants felt supported when colleagues affirmed their gender through using gender-neutral language, offered emotional and instrumental support, and chose to educate themselves on gender identity.

Gender Affirmation

When colleagues used gender-neutral terminology, it appeared to demonstrate to participants that their colleagues respected and cared for them:

They respect my pronouns. They respect my name change, you know, [...] I just want people to respect me for who I am. (Jay)

Language is kind of the bottom line of it, isn't it? [...] So [when] people use the right language we know that they understand our state (Morgan).

Participants communicated that whilst they understood that it might not come naturally, at first, for others to use non-gendered language, making a concerted effort to do so demonstrated that colleagues care which made them feel that they belonged.

Emotional and Instrumental Support

Participants described feeling cared for when colleagues provided support. Ash emphasised how colleagues showed an "openness about what I experience on a daily basis" when Ash shared moments of gender dysphoria or discrimination that occurred outside of work. What mattered to Ash was that colleagues "listened and [although] they didn't get it in terms of my experience, they got it from a general sense of 'that must have upset you, how are you feeling?'". A willingness to hear their challenges seemed to help Ash feel supported.

Jay gave an example of a colleague who made them "feel great and like I belonged" by liking "every single post I put on LinkedIn that was part of my activism". This acknowledgement helped Jay feel their advocating for minority groups' rights was valued and encouraged. Kit and August described how their colleagues encouraged the widespread use of correct pronouns. Kit explained:

I could tell during conversations that that information [they/them pronouns] had actively been passed around the organisation, too, without me ever having to ask

Belonging beyond the binary 13

each person one-on-one. People would start to correct themselves when I had never even told them.

Kit said this made them feel "welcomed" and like "the work wasn't all on" them.

Colleagues' Self-Education

Most participants said that they felt cared for when colleagues chose to educate themselves on gender identity. Jay was grateful to those who did "their own research" to understand gender identity because it felt "inappropriate" and "painful" when people would "ask the genderqueer person about being genderqueer".

When colleagues educated themselves, they relieved participants of this burden and increased empathy. August and Ash echoed the sentiment that it was fantastic when people showed "gentle curiosity" (Ash) and an interest in learning more about gender identity:

I think that was really kind of those people to want to kind of expand their horizons.

I've got a vested interest in doing so. The fact that somebody who doesn't have a vested interest in doing so is still committing to taking that step is just incredible.

(August)

Creating Inclusive Culture

The final theme explores how participants themselves and other people in the organisation provided opportunities for authenticity, social support and belonging by creating inclusive cultures. The participants found that organisations could build inclusive cultures through diversity and representation, through education that promotes empathy and understanding and through ensuring respect.

Diversity and Representation

Kit and Jay shared that diversity and representation helped them to feel that their organisation was a place where anyone could belong. Kit mentioned feeling "drawn to going to places where I feel like something about it feels like people are either queer or alternative"

because that is where they “feel most able to be myself”. They said that when they had their first queer manager, it gave them “a sense of inclusion right away”. Jay echoed the importance of having diverse workplaces “from the board level down” by saying:

It’s homogenous boards and leadership teams which are the reason that people don’t feel like they belong. Because they are setting the agenda, they’re setting the rules, they’re sending out comms, they’re creating policy for lived experiences that they can’t understand.

Kit also shared the impact of “representation” of NBGQ people; they said that it showed them “what was possible”. Seeing others like them succeed enabled them to believe that there are organisations where it is not only safe to be themselves but where they can also thrive.

Promoting Empathy & Understanding

Three participants provided examples of how education built empathy and understanding for NBGQ people, and helped to create an inclusive culture. Two participants organised this training themselves. Morgan brought in an external provider to “explain to my business” what it means to identify as non-binary and give some examples of “famous peoples stories”. Morgan wanted the training to share “a bit of context and make it [gender identity] a little bit more consumable” for people, so they would recognise that non-binary people are “just like everyone else” to help others understand them and empathise with their needs.

Jay and Kit felt that education made their organisations inclusive for all. Jay designed and delivered “anti-isms training” to their business leaders and spoke with them about anti-racism and LGBTQIA+ issues to create alignment on “how we’re going to talk about things as a company” helping to provide leaders with the tools they needed to understand and empathise with NBGQ employees and support them.

Belonging beyond the binary 15

Kit's manager coordinated the co-creation of a library of "queer media" as a way for employees to "share personal experiences" and generate a widespread "understanding of queer culture". These educational attempts helped to create environments in which NBGQ people could show up as their authentic selves at work.

Ensuring Respect

Three participants described how their organisation proactively took a bottom-up approach to build inclusive cultures. Kit and Jay spoke about how their companies hired people based on an alignment of values:

Two of the values were respect and fairness and they felt so intrinsic to me. This was before I understood my gender fully, but I knew that I was with people that valued respect and fairness and inclusion... And then we recruited for those values. (Jay)

This approach seemed to lead to a diverse organisation that allowed people to be themselves. Kit valued being amongst people who "would have been that way [inclusive] even if I wasn't there: it very clearly wasn't really about me." Rather than wanting special treatment, participants wanted to work for or with people who demonstrated respect for others, no matter their gender identity. Ash simply said: "If the stakeholders or other organisations can't meet those values, I don't work with them."

Discussion

This study explored the factors that help non-binary people to belong at work.

Based on the narratives of five NBGQ workers we developed three themes. A sense of belonging occurs when NBGQ individuals can authentically express their gender identities at work; when employees demonstrate care and concern for their NBGQ colleagues, and support them to be authentic at work; and when inclusive cultures are created. The findings suggest that the factors that allow NBGQ workers to belong align with those that have been found to enable LGBT workers to belong, but additionally, and uniquely for this group,

NBGQ people can be supported through identity validation. This can be shown through informal interactions, organisational culture that encourages inclusive language and organisational practices such as gender-neutral bathrooms.

The Role of Authenticity in Belonging

Across all participants’ accounts, the ability to show up as their authentic selves contributed to their sense of belonging at work. Whether defined as a facilitative coping mechanism or components of authenticity, self-knowledge and unbiased processing or action have been shown in previous research to have the most impact on authenticity within various demographic groups including trans workers (Budge et al., 2017) and LGBT employees (Fletcher & Everly, 2021). The current research offers support for this finding with NBGQ individuals who reported experiencing greater authenticity when they allow themselves to identify as NBGQ. Whilst people with minority or stigmatised identities may prefer to hide or conceal their true identity for fear of negative interpersonal consequences (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014), reduced self-disclosure is associated with lower levels of belonging; a relationship which is explained by feelings of inauthenticity (Newheiser et al., 2017).

Acceptance and self-disclosure may be an important step NBGQ individuals take to begin experiencing a sense of belonging at work and colleagues can support this by validating and accepting NBGQ individuals’ identity. Whilst a lot of the findings from this study resonate with the experiences of LGBT employees, the issue of identity invalidation (Hennekam & Kollen, 2023; Johnson et al., 2020) is particularly significant for the NBGQ community and may be unique to them. As a generality, society views gender in binary terms: male and female, and this normative sex and gender binarism persists in academic scholarship too (Kollen & Rumens, 2022). LGBT workers conform to the binary definition of gender, even though they do not conform to all societal expectations of people in those categories. NBGQ people do not fall into this binary conceptualisation and therefore are at risk of identity invalidation – when others don’t admit or acknowledge their gender. Other

Belonging beyond the binary 17

studies have found colleagues of non-binary people to invalidate their identity (Johnson et al., 2020); the participants in this study described more positive experiences, that by not questioning their identity, colleagues allowed participants to continue to be themselves at work. This is an important finding and a useful reminder that the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people are not homogenous.

Aligning with the theory that authenticity occurs when congruence exists between the self and the environment (van den Bosch & Taris, 2014; Schmader & Sedikides, 2018), our participants described have the option to be authentic when policy, environmental and social options were congruent with their gender identity. When NBGQ people cannot choose gender-neutral options (for example, gender-neutral bathrooms, or check boxes on forms), it forces them to misgender themselves, which is linked with lower levels of felt authenticity (McLemore, 2015).

The Role of Social Support in Belonging

The importance of positive relationships has been widely demonstrated in previous research (Disner et al, 2010; Huppert & So, 2013; Seligman, 2011). The belongingness hypothesis (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) holds that the need to belong is satisfied when interpersonal relationships are positive, involve minimal conflict, and demonstrate affective concern. Social support has been identified in previous research as a mechanism through which trans people have experienced a sense of belonging (Huffman et al., 2021; McCann et al., 2021) and this study show that NBGQ people can be helped to belong in the same way, as colleagues who showed care and concern for the participants well-being helped them to feel as though they belonged.

The Role of Inclusive Culture in Belonging

The final theme was seeing or making proactive attempts to build an inclusive culture. Participants felt that the organisation naturally had a greater understanding and empathy for NBGQ people when there was greater representation. This finding resonates

with research by Perales et al. (2022), who found that trans employees experience significantly greater well-being when they perceive being among colleagues who are like them.

The study also found that a diverse workforce, even when that diversity does not include specific NBGQ representation, makes a positive difference to participants' feelings of belonging. The tangible positive impact of a diverse organisation has been shown before. Kyaw et al. (2022) showed that a company is more likely to adopt LGBT-supportive policies when its board is gender-diverse, regardless of the specific LGBT representation on the board. Conversely, when an organisation is homogeneous, employees are more inclined to assume prejudicial beliefs that are exclusionary of others (Avery, 2011; McKay & Avery, 2015). Other research also found that organisational cultural norms and expectations (Lee, 2022; Ozturk & Tatli, 2016) and the degree of representation in the employee population influence decisions related to identity disclosure and authenticity at work. Thus diversity is an antecedent of inclusive organisational culture (Cunningham, 2015), which influences belonging through enabling authenticity. The participants in this study explained that when an organisation has diverse people, the cultural norms and expectations become less dominated by heteronormativity and cisnormativity, allowing them to show up as their authentic selves in ways that others accept.

A positive bi-directional relationship identified in this study is that between an inclusive culture and social support, each of which were reported by participants to increase the other. Our participants highlighted that educational activities often led to an enhanced interest in colleagues choosing to learn about gender identity. Such attempts were perceived to develop empathy and understanding of the unique experiences of NBGQ employees. This echoes findings from Cancela et al. (2022), that suggest that inclusive organisations may influence belonging by increasing the likelihood that colleagues offer TNBQ individuals social support, and that colleagues who offer participants social support were considered more inclusive.

Organisational support practices such as adequate training on gender identity and guidance for managers have been shown in previous research to help LGBTQ employees to feel more authentic at work (Fletcher & Everly, 2021) and again in this study we see that such practices have a similar positive impact on NBGQ employees. It seems that when colleagues are exposed to real-life examples of challenges that NBGQ people face, it helps them respect NBGQ people's psychosocial needs and understand how they might support those individuals to be authentic at work.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study highlight how authenticity, social support and inclusive cultures all enable NBGQ people to belong at work. Each of these factors has practical implications for organisations. Regarding supporting NBGQ employees to develop authenticity at work, employers can ensure gender-neutral bathrooms, policies, reward systems, and social activities. Doing so will reduce instances of NBGQ self-misgendering and increase opportunities for gender expression, both of which will increase feelings of authenticity. Additionally colleagues of NBGQ individuals may also support them to be authentic at work by being mindful of creating a psychologically-safe workplace, being careful not to make inappropriate jokes, being aware of and trying to minimise potential biases and prejudices, and not invalidating or minimising the identity or experiences of others.

Colleagues can influence NBGQ people's sense of belonging at work by making an effort to learn about and affirm NBGQ people, asking people what pronouns they use rather than assuming based on gender expression, making an effort to use preferred names and pronouns, and correcting oneself after using incorrect pronouns. Colleagues can provide additional support by encouraging others to affirm NBGQ colleagues' identities and listening to their experiences non-judgmentally.

Finally, organisations can increase the likelihood of NBGQ authenticity and social support by proactively building inclusive cultures. HR teams can promote internal inclusivity

initiatives and reduce gender-related bias in promotions to build an employer brand that attracts diverse candidates. Lastly, organisations can increase the likelihood of co-worker and manager social support by providing training and resources that build awareness of how to support NBGQ individuals with their unique challenges.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As with any research, readers should consider several limitations to this study. Firstly, the inclusion criteria may have biased the sample in terms of racial identity, social economic status or other diversity characteristics. Most of the participants were assigned the female gender at birth, resulting in a somewhat homogenous group. Whilst homogeneity is arguably important within IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008), future research might look to replicate the study by sourcing NBGQ participants assigned the male gender at birth. Future research could also explore the experience of managers and colleagues in supporting NBGQ people at work.

Conclusion

This study puts forward an interpretation of the positive experiences of NBGQ individuals who feel a sense of belonging in the workplace, presenting a contemporary contribution to the scant existing literature on this topic. The findings expand on previous research on LGBTQ well-being, authenticity and belonging in the workplace, finding significant overlaps between the antecedents of belonging for LGBT employees and those of the NBGQ participants in this study. The role of authenticity, social support, and proactive inclusive culture in developing a sense of belonging were highlighted by providing participants the opportunity to share their positive experiences but the importance of colleagues validating NBGQ workers' gender identity is perhaps unique to this group. This study also provides a deeper understanding how authenticity, social support, and proactive inclusive culture interact, and what organisations could do to leverage these findings to foster a sense of belonging amongst NBGQ individuals at work.

Belonging beyond the binary 21

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

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and Inclusion

Belonging beyond the binary 31

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion