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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The construction of safe space: empowerment and the perception of vulnerability at Anglican Foundation Universities in England

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ABSTRACT

Young adults in university environments are increasingly exploring gender variant identities and challenging binary constructions. Knowledge about the lived experiences of trans and non-binary young people in higher education, however, is partial. Our research into Anglican Foundation Universities in England begins to address this lacuna. In particular, chaplains may find themselves acting as a bridge between the equality, diversity and inclusivity policies of universities and the Anglican Church's official rejection of both same-sex marriage and the writing of new liturgies for trans folk; this may be especially the case for queer students who have personal connections with the Christian faith. We argue there is a need for deeper reflection on the notion of safe space and the cis-construction of trans and non-binary folk as vulnerable and we ask whether protection and vulnerability discourses create contradictions that undermine agency and positive visibility of trans and non-binary young people. This article adds to research in the field by bringing together religious and gendered identities at UK universities; it draws on interviews with trans and non-binary folk to explore experiences of chaplaincies and campus spaces.

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Introduction

In this article, we tease out the ways in which higher education institutions both encourage and discourage opportunities for young people to explore and express their gender identity. Rainbow lanyards, banners and other symbols of LGBTQ+ inclusion are readily seen on many university campuses; nevertheless, the experiences of gender nonconforming young people in higher education are diverse and include both positive and negative encounters. In addition, if gender nonconforming young people also have a Christian faith or come from a family with a Christian faith, they may be grappling with mixed messages regarding the compatibility of their religion and their gender identity.

Our research, based at York St John University, UK, was funded by the Church Universities Fund, which stipulated that the research should enhance the presence of chaplaincy at Anglican Foundation Universities. Whilst this was a condition of the funding, we were not restricted in our ability to critique current practice or recommend changes, nor were we required to agree with Anglican teaching on sexuality and gender. Hence, our funding bid set out our intention to explore the ways in which chaplains negotiate the apparent tension between the inclusive ethos of a university and the less inclusive religious institution that they represent. Given the negative

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messages from the Anglican Church about gender and sexuality, such as the guidance issued by the House of Bishops that continues to insist that marriage is between 'one man and one woman' (Church of England, 2014), we were interested in how Anglican chaplains may be called upon to support and create safe space for trans and non-binary people with a faith. University policies on equality, diversity and inclusion conflict with the official position of the Anglican Church, and its chaplains are at the nexus where these institutional positions meet.

In England, Anglican Foundation Universities are educational institutions originally founded by the Anglican Church to increase access to education; initially operating as teacher training colleges, they have developed over time into universities. Consequently, UK-based Anglican Foundation Universities no longer require staff or students to hold Christian beliefs (students and staff may even be unaware of the Anglican foundation), and the universities are bound by the 2010 Equality Act, which includes protection from discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender reassignment. Religious institutions, such as the Church of England (the 'mother church' of the global Anglican Communion), however, are granted exemptions under the Act, for example, from providing same-sex civil partnerships in their buildings (Equality Act, 2010). Furthermore, at the 2022 Lambeth Conference attended by bishops from the global Anglican Communion, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, reaffirmed that the Church's position on marriage had not changed (Welby et al., 2022).

Our aim was to hear the voices of trans and non-binary folk and make practical recommendations leading to greater inclusion (McIntosh & Jagger, 2021). During the research process, we discovered a complex entanglement of discourses surrounding the concept of 'safe space'. In the remainder of this article, we explore more deeply what and who drives the construction of safe space and whether there are unintended restrictions placed on the visibility and agency of trans young people. First, we discuss the meanings behind conceptions of space as safe and highlight the research that troubles the contrasting notions of safe and unsafe. Secondly, we chart the three aspects of our project that provided data relevant to this article: a survey of LGBTQIA+ students, semi-structured interviews with trans folk and chaplains, displays on university campuses for trans and non-binary folk to share their stories. Thirdly, we discuss the discourse of vulnerability that underpins the ways in which liberal universities conceive of trans folk and of inclusivity, thereby inadvertently increasing invisibility and reducing agency, an issue that became apparent with the use of displays during our project. Fourthly, we draw on our research data to expand on the ways in which young trans folk negotiate spaces perceived as safe/unsafe in agential ways and to reflect on the work of university chaplaincies aiming to be places of safety for young people. Finally, we conclude that universities need to trouble the safe/unsafe conception of space and the vulnerability discourse that informs policies, practices and concerns about reputational damage; they need, instead, to co-create space with trans and non-binary folk.

Semiotics of safe space

The idea that space can be bounded and made safe was borne out of the feminist movement of the 1970s and is now a concept that underpins policy-making in many universities (see Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019; Roestone Collective, 2014). 'Safe space' is a phrase that finds purchase in the debate amongst feminists about women's safety and is increasingly invoked as part of a trans-hostile discourse, often self-named 'gender critical' (see, for example, Stock, 2021). Research by Lewis et al. (2015) proposes, based on interviews with women engaging in women-only spaces, that feeling 'safe from' allows a feeling of 'safe to', which frames safe space in terms of the ability to express subjectivity. The discussion around gendered safe space has taken place alongside the struggle over gender definitions; this crucible seems to have reified certain feminist positions (and there is dispute over whether these positions are indeed feminist), meaning that trans-exclusionary definitions permeate the discussion over what is required for the safety of women (Browne, 2009). Whilst 'ameliorative feminism' (defining gender as a class) provides an escape from exclusionary definitions

(see Jenkins, 2016), inclusive feminism still needs to be attuned to problems of homogenizing definitions; a safe space for cis women, no matter how inclusive the gender politics, may not mean the same 'safety-from' and 'safety-to' for trans women (or trans men and non-binary folks).

Safe space is created through discursive practices, and James Scott (1990) describes how the separation of public and hidden transcripts draws boundaries around spaces making them safe for self-expression. For those groups subject to hegemonies, hidden and private transcripts are a safe way of resisting the effects of dominant discourses and practices. Applying Scott's framework, the purpose of safe space for trans and non-binary individuals may be to fully express dissent and/or identity that challenges the dominant ideology. The creation of such space is a matter of work, according to Scott, and often requires the wresting of spaces from places where the public transcript is played out; for example, places where trans people of faith can deconstruct doctrine out of earshot of religious leaders (Hartal, 2018). Hence, we argue that trans and non-binary young people on campus do require safe spaces where there is no hindrance to discussion or to exploring a range of practices. The point Scott is making is that such space needs to be carved out: it is not empty social space awaiting occupation. In our research, we have identified that supportive chaplains are part of this carving out process: creating space in the chaplaincy and establishing sign-posting practices that further enhance the safe space credentials of some local churches; although, work needs to be continuously carried out to ensure that language and practices in churches are considered 'safe' by trans and non-binary young people. Scott allows for the possibility that this labour is undertaken by members of the dominant group (cis/het folk) who are enlightened and pro-active, but we trouble the process of creating safe space and the power imbalance it reveals. Furthermore, Scott's discussion leads us to question the types of safe space protocols being established: the more unmediated a space is for oppressed group expression, the more powerful the challenge to the hegemony; conversely, mediated spaces can lack political power. On-campus spaces within the purviews of the Student Union (SU) or chaplaincies, and off-campus spaces such as 'inclusive' churches, are, we suggest, highly mediated and frequently operate from a politically liberal assumption of equality that obscures power imbalances (Hartal, 2018). The conundrum is that such mediation comes from a desire to be supportive and inclusive of trans and non-binary students; however, our research encounters suggest that creating safe space can be (unhelpfully) attached to constructed vulnerability of trans and non-binary students. Moreover, the use of (in)visibility as a criterion for the building of safe space when articulated with vulnerability can close access to public space: to be an agent of social change most often requires visibility.

Furthermore, the concept of safe space used in educational settings is problematized by researchers. For example, Fox and Ore (2010) note that the notion of safety underpinning the construction of safe spaces is frequently drawn from White, patriarchal and privileged experiences that equate safety with an unrealistic feeling of comfort; instead, they suggest a focus on safer spaces where intersectional struggles and *discomfort* are navigated. Similarly, Flensner and Von der Lippe (2019) critique the discourse of safe space in religious education suggesting that the term is sometimes used without understanding which specific threats and potential harms are being mitigated. Moreover, the term 'safe space' has been widely used, but without a substantial theoretical discussion about how such spaces are conceived and by whom (Barrett, 2010). Stengel and Weems (2010) propose that constructions of safe space rely on control and power, while Allen et al. (2022) reveal a multitude of ways in which a space can be simultaneously both safe and unsafe; thus, they call for a queering of the binary conception of safe and unsafe that undoes their perception as mutually exclusive opposites and accepts the reality of their coexistence. Hence, there is a contradiction inherent in the construction of safe space: at the same time as emphasizing differences and reproducing conditions of fearfulness, designated spaces, as Scott (1990) describes, can allow full expression of identity (Roestone Collective, 2014). Nevertheless, Stengel and Weems (2010) argue that safe space discourse masks the origins and causes of fear; this chimes with our encounters with campus authorities who express fear that hostility will be stirred up if trans people become visible in public space. The process of protection stops short of interrogating the basis of such fear and the ethics of

a proxy fear, that is, fear expressed by cisgendered people on behalf of trans people (Hartal, 2018). Moreover, universities may be risk averse, concerned not to be seen to facilitate practices that might be harmful to trans students, suggesting that there is a lack of confidence in policies designed to make campuses safe spaces. Sara Ahmed (2016) recognizes this tendency for institutions to fear reputational damage in the context of wider diversity and inclusion:

Indeed so often just talking about sexism as well as racism is heard as damaging the institution. If talking about sexism and racism is heard as damaging institutions, we need to damage institutions. And the institutional response often takes the form of damage limitation. This is so often how diversity takes institutional form: damage limitation. *(Ahmed, p. 140)*

Applying this argument to trans and non-binary students, campus authorities should excavate the reasoning behind protective practices. If campus authorities are not confident that trans and non-binary young people can express themselves publicly without hostility, we argue that the focus should be placed on the problematic nature of campus space, rather than 'protecting' those who are perceived as vulnerable, which is a practice that stymies agency of trans people themselves.

Methodology

Our project, based at York St John University in the UK, is a mixed-methods study involving three stages of data collection at Anglican Foundation Universities in England: a survey of LGBTQIA+ students and staff; displays at three universities designed to gather experiences, comments and stories from trans and non-binary students; and a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with trans and non-binary students and staff, university chaplains, and two trans priests. This article draws on a thematic analysis of survey comments and the interview transcripts, as well as reflecting on the unexpected challenges that arose in relation to the displays. The culmination of our project was the production of a report with recommendations for university chaplaincies, and others working in education, to enhance their understanding, engagement, welcome and inclusion of trans and non-binary folk. Prior to the completion of the report, we invited participants who had agreed to be interviewed to a working group to scrutinize the narrative to ensure a faithful representation of the information shared with us and, further, to ensure the recommendations were practical, effective and beneficial. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the working group was held online; participants were sent a draft of the report and invited to send reflections via email and/or attend the working group. Eight participants joined online: four chaplains and four trans folks. Reflections received via email and online were overwhelmingly positive with a few queries for clarification that were refined in the final report. Endorsements from participants praised our approach to co-production.

The survey

Our survey was made available for twelve months using Qualtrics software and advertised through LGBTQ+ university networks, via postcards, newsletters and on social media. So as not to exclude any staff or students who are gender fluid, and given the likelihood that some young people may be gender questioning, the survey was open to all who identify as LGBTQIA+ and are working or studying at an Anglican Foundation University in England. The survey contained free-text boxes for hybrid and fluid self-identification and for more detailed reflection on experiences in higher education, as well as scope for commenting on faith and the chaplaincy, if this was relevant to the participant. By capturing survey responses, we were able to explore the ways trans and non-binary encounters and support requirements might differ from other groups under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella. Whilst we requested participants from Anglican Foundation Universities, 23 of the 70 responses received were from staff and students at other UK universities, demonstrating the potential of widening the research. Of the 70 responses received, 43 were undergraduate and postgraduate students, and more than half the total number of respondents were under 25. Given that the

proportion of trans people in the general population is small, the number of responses from this group is relatively high ($n = 12$). The survey attracted 10 non-binary respondents. Thematic analysis of the survey responses sought to identify whether there were patterns of experience of exclusion and inclusion, whether there were positive and/or negative encounters with support services and chaplaincies, and whether there were challenges relating to gender identity and faith.

Participation through displays

A key aim of our project was to increase visibility and raise awareness on campus of trans and non-binary folk and their experiences. Display boards were erected in three participating universities creating an opportunity for trans and non-binary students to contribute thoughts, feelings and stories about their lives at university and beyond (the displays were chronologically after the survey and interviews, so not part of those discussions). During two significant periods (Trans Day of Remembrance and LGBT+ History Month), we enlisted the cooperation of library and Student Union representatives to set up displays inviting input: writing, pictures, poems and so on. To ensure there was provision for discrete involvement as well as that which was publicly visible (which could be anonymous, pseudonymous, or named, as chosen by the contributor), we provided a box for those who preferred to share privately. The displays attracted contributions ranging from political comments to personal experiences, and these formed part of the narrative in our report. While we were not able to analyse the effects for cis or trans folk of seeing the displays, this could be explored in future research. We did reflect on the keenness with which trans folk filled the displays and the nervousness of gatekeepers with whom we negotiated the physical space for the displays, as will be discussed further below.

The interviews

We provided a section on the survey for anyone willing to be interviewed to leave contact details. We interviewed three trans and/or non-binary people – a current student, a recent graduate who now works in a chaplaincy setting and a former student now working in a university – about their experiences of studying at higher education institutions and whether and how the chaplaincy is part of their support on campus. In addition, drawing on York St John University's membership of the Cathedrals Group of Universities – a collaboration of church-founded universities in the UK – we made direct contact with chaplaincies at Anglican Foundation Universities in England to request participants willing to be interviewed about their role on campus and any engagement they may have had with trans and/or non-binary folk. Fourteen chaplains and chaplain assistants volunteered to be interviewed and this helped us to build a picture of their practices in supporting trans and non-binary people. Whilst chaplains serve the whole university community of staff and students, here we draw specifically on aspects of the interviews that relate to the support of young people (usually undergraduate students, and typically between the ages of 18 and 21). We were interested in how chaplaincy space is constructed as a proxy for church space in some cases, and how Church of England doctrinal debates about gender and sexuality impacted on the participants' perception of safety. As well as teasing out supportive practices, we discussed gaps in knowledge and ways in which chaplaincies could do more to work with trans and non-binary students and staff. We also interviewed the two trans priests whom we had consulted prior to submission of the project proposal; they are both public figures and well known for their active role in Church discussions about the ambivalent welcome for trans people. These interviews with priests were foundational as we sought to understand the nuances and discursive practices involved in naming and creating safe spaces. Interviews were semi-structured, in locations chosen by the interviewees, recorded with permission and transcribed for thematic analysis; the theme of safe space recurred frequently and discourse analysis was used to interpret the varied meanings of this concept.

Limitations and ongoing ethical considerations of the research

We paid attention to the work of researchers such as Johnston (2018) and Henrickson et al. (2020) developing ethical guidance aimed at cisgendered researchers. There were challenges in reaching larger numbers of trans people in this project, given that the proportion of students who identify as trans is small, coupled with caution about telling their stories and the emotional labour involved. Our focus on UK-based Anglican Foundation Universities was an important parameter, though we recognize that other types of universities will offer different contexts for experiences of trans and non-binary students. Our intention, therefore, is to undertake further research on a wider and larger scale. The methodological challenges in our research are as illuminating as the stories shared with us. The resistance by the overseers of campus spaces to the use of display boards to amplify trans and non-binary voices alerted us to hidden dynamics within well-meaning practices, such as ownership of space, and reputational concerns. There are, then, further ethical issues that arise when interactions with gatekeepers themselves become part of the data under consideration, as discussed by Cuthbert et al. (2022); nevertheless, the ways in which gatekeepers exert control over epistemology, physical space and institutional reputation reveal the importance of including interactions with gatekeepers in the analysis (Ahmed, 2000; Cuthbert et al., 2022; Hartal, 2018). Hence, the discussion below is borne out of our reflection on the research process itself as much as from the survey and the interviews.

How vulnerability discourses generate safe space

During our research, we became aware of the vulnerability discourse that complicates the creation of safe space. Doris Andrea Dirks (2016) suggests that there is a problem with vulnerability discourses in US university policies designed to address discrimination against trans students. She finds that policies and practices were based on a protective approach that presupposes vulnerability of trans people and as such may undermine the anti-discrimination such policies intend. Trans students, Dirks (2016) argues, are framed in terms of vulnerability, disability and resourcefulness. Such discourses translate into discursive practices, most specifically in identifying which spaces are safe and which are not.

Moreover, for Dirks, actions taken in protective mode may have unintended consequences. One of our interviewees, a trans man who had previously been a student, expressed concern about the construction of protected spaces. Scott's (1990) reference to mediated space is applicable here: speaking of a particular university, our interviewee argues that such space mediated by university authorities is unsafe because of visibility:

Safe space. Again, people have these ideas from the top. What's a good idea. They've actually set up some separate accommodation for people who fall into the LGBT category if they want to ... feel they're safe. And I'm thinking that's the very worst thing you can do, because if somebody who is anti-gay or anti-trans finds out, you're all there together ... With the best of intentions.

The assumptions underpinning these messages are that trans people seek safe space, but responses such as providing protected halls of residence articulate visibility with vulnerability: a combination that conversely creates an unsafe space; Hartal's (2018) research also explores this conundrum.

Further, Dirks (2016) suggests that the characteristic of vulnerability given to trans people is an extension of the constructed stereotype of feminine weakness; in the same way that cis women are the subject of social and political conversations around protection, trans people are similarly framed. Thus, Julia Serano (2016) argues that feminist theory is required to understand the way trans women are mistreated, which she terms 'transmisogyny', whereas those taking a so-called 'gender critical' position leverage the vulnerability tropes to claim the need for safe spaces away from trans folk. As Serano states: '[A] popular reason used to justify trans-woman-exclusion is cissexual woman's fears that we will somehow make women-only spaces unsafe' (p. 241). Yet Dirks' proposal that vulnerability discourses applied to cis women and trans people are connected troubles the public debate

over perceived threats trans people pose to women's safe space. Whilst Dirks' research acknowledges the systemic discrimination and levels of harassment faced by trans young people on campuses (as our research does), she argues that discourse generating vulnerability, with the offer of protection and accommodation as a response, is a form of 'genderism' (p. 380); that is, trans people are viewed as presenting gender problems or issues that require resolving on their behalf. Indeed, Shon Faye (2021) highlights this construal stating: 'Typically, trans people are lumped together as "the transgender issue", dismissing and erasing the complexity of trans lives, reducing them to a set of stereotypes on which various social anxieties can be brought to bear' (p. xiv). To conceive of safe space as part of a response to the vulnerability discourse is, therefore, problematic; it contributes to the framing of trans people as discursively vulnerable and, as Dirks (2016) states, the 'fearful subject' (p. 381).

As an alternative, Dirks' research identifies a discourse of resourcefulness applied to trans young people, recognizing trans people as agents of change, with political voices, who have the wherewithal to enter public space to define how requirements should be met. The resourcefulness discourse is less likely to appear in university policy documents, even though what is required is systemic and cultural change that supports the flourishing of trans people in ways that are not articulated with the vulnerable trans subject. That is, while feeling afraid reduces a person's capacity for growth, safe (or safer) spaces enable trans folk to thrive (Hope & Hall, 2018; Linander et al., 2019); however, such spaces are frequently understood, or rather misunderstood, Hartal (2018) argues, as spaces where 'fragile' queer folk are 'protected' by those in positions of power. As we outline in the discussion below, the resistance from student leaders and from staff to our request to erect displays in public spaces, with the purpose of encouraging engagement with trans and non-binary students, is an example of discursively created vulnerability. In this exchange during our research, public campus space was framed as unsafe for trans students and, therefore, not accessible to the public trans voice: the net result of the entanglements of vulnerability, protection and perceived need to mediate space is the creation of the passive, non-political trans person. This undoubtedly well-intentioned emphasis on protecting the vulnerable subject necessarily conceives public space as unsafe; a problematic admission (underpinning fears of institutional reputational damage; see Ahmed, 2000) that cuts across efforts to ensure campus cultures is based on principles of social equality and justice. To sum up this argument, trans people may have requirements (including being free from harassment and prejudice) that need systemic and cultural change but layering on to these requirements the twin discourses of vulnerability and (un)safe space produces a power imbalance and renders the trans person a discursively passive recipient of protection, when many may be active public and political agents.

Young people negotiating spaces of safety and visibility

Knowledge of LGBTQ+ student experiences at UK universities is limited by the inconsistency of reporting systems across the higher education sector (Grimwood, 2017). Where studies do exist, the focus on gender and sexuality does not often delve into questions of faith (see Hafford Letchfield et al., 2017 for a review of international studies, and Smith et al., 2022 for a review of UK research) and yet, if religious beliefs are 'non-affirming', they may cause emotional trauma (Wolff et al., 2017). Furthermore, inconsistencies in support and welcome for trans students on UK campuses can reduce the potential for flourishing (Storrie & Rohleder, 2018). In the National Union of Students survey (NUS, 2014) only 20% of trans and non-binary respondents reported feeling safe in the university environment (50% had contemplated leaving their course compared to 25% of cisgendered students), while Stonewall's survey of British universities found that 60% of trans respondents had experienced discrimination (Bachmann & Gooch, 2018). Both the NUS and Stonewall reports include respondents' comments raising concerns that Christian societies and events are not welcoming of LGBTQ+ folk.

Responses to our survey supplied us with touchstone themes adding to and verifying the findings of the research noted above. Seven out of the 12 trans respondents stated that they had experienced

identity-related issues at university; comments offered highlighted institutional and bureaucratic requirements, such as accommodating name-changes more easily, and making changes to the physical space, such as non-gender specific toilets (these issues are also noted in other research; see Bachmann & Gooch, 2018; Bonner-Thompson et al., 2021; Lawrence & McKendry, 2019; Mearns et al., 2020; NUS, 2014). We highlight here three themes raised in our survey that are pertinent to discursive practices that attempt to create safe space. Several responses pointed to the importance of visible signs around campus that marked space as safe – such as posters, leaflets and rainbow lanyards – a view confirmed in an interview with a trans person who sought out such visible indications of inclusivity on campus (and consonant with research by Allen et al., 2020). More specifically, our research highlighted the importance of trans and non-binary imagery, signalling space where identities were not conflated under the LGBTQIA+ banner. Such semiotically charged signs are useful indicators and are intended to be read as safe space. For instance, Palkki and Caldwell (2018) found that in school settings, spaces without an outward sign of support were deemed not safe. Nevertheless, such signs are not infallible markers of inclusion, even though for some of our respondents, the presence of rainbows, flags, and posters contributed to raising the levels of visibility of trans people. The question we ask is how collective, anonymous visibility providing a general sense of safety is separated from individual visibility and agency. Visible signs may be read as markers of safe space; however, protective practices based on assumptions of vulnerability belie a lack of confidence in what signs can deliver.

The second theme of note is the perception of university chaplaincy, experienced as welcoming, affirming and accepting. However, one survey respondent noted the weight of the Christian framework and an accompanying fear that only a single version of the 'truth' is acceptable; similarly, another inferred that they were guarded with chaplaincy because they assumed they would be subjected to judgement. Hence, the positive descriptions of chaplaincy mirror the intentions that are described in the interviews with chaplains with caveats around whether the Christian faith of the chaplain (and an awareness of Christian doctrines and beliefs) introduces judgement or the suspicion of being judged; this negative perception is a key area that chaplains attempt to address.

Significant for perceptions of the safeness of Christian communities is the wide range of sexualities of young people identifying as trans (only 3 out of 12 identified as heterosexual in the survey). Given the efforts of university chaplains to identify 'safe' churches, this requires a sophisticated understanding of what is meant by inclusion. The Church of England, for example, remains doctrinally bound to heterosexuality as a God-given norm but is potentially more accommodating of gender variance (though this is by no means unambivalent). Our interviews with two Church of England priests who are trans revealed the significant barriers for trans people. The implications for trans students who are seeking belonging in worshipping communities are that their sexuality and their trans identity are two fronts that require negotiation. The survey also revealed that trans young people often do not see gender as binary, and our interviews with trans priests suggest this is a generational difference: the landscape, language and possibilities open to young people could only have been dreamed of by previous generations. Hence, the growing range of sexual and gender identities challenges Christian models of binary gender and heterosexuality; some trans folk may identify as non-binary and/or be more fluid in their understanding of their own sexuality. Amongst the non-binary respondents who answered the question about sexuality, none identified as heterosexual; thus, they may come across significant barriers in 'fitting in' to a Christian framework, because they trouble heteronormative and binary representations. Further discussion is needed to understand the extent to which non-binary identities challenge Christian (or Anglican) doctrine differently from trans people who identify with a gender.

Using display boards in public space on campus as part of our methodology propelled us to think more deeply about how safe space is constituted and mediated for trans students. As Scott's (1990) theoretical discussion suggests, where public and private transcripts take place is an indication of where power and ownership of space lie. Furthermore, research by Allen et al. (2022) analyses the ways in which objects themselves disrupt heteronormative spaces and become part of the relative

safety of a space through human interaction with them. Our display boards were a method of carving out space for trans and non-binary people's voices, to amplify experiences and struggles in a public way, thus, raising awareness and challenging norms of discretion and suppression. We were keen to be informed by trans and non-binary folk who act as agents of change and who look for public opportunities to challenge, share and speak. Though these displays were low-key, there was significant resistance from the overseers of the spaces we wanted to occupy; resistance to the notion that trans and non-binary folk would contribute so publicly (by writing on a board or pinning up a poem, for example), even when doing so anonymously. Student Union representatives were highly protective of the trans and non-binary community and initially objected to such a visible call for contributions, despite the agency lying with any potential contributors. Considered alongside Dirks (2016) policy discourse analysis and Hartal's (2018) analysis of the ways in which LGBT spaces are framed and controlled, this objection to visibility seems to be an example of the vulnerability discourse being propagated on campus by student bodies who seek to protect a marginalized group. Furthermore, the concerned opposition we encountered demonstrates that the SU building, where we sited the first display, is not considered 'safe space': the opposition revolved around the dual risks of 'outing' contributors and of exposing their contributions to trolling and abuse (there are times when parts of the SU building are unsupervised and the display boards could be defaced). There were worries, therefore, about policing the space to prevent backlash and to protect reputational damage (Ahmed, 2000). After several conversations with members of the SU in which we negotiated safety, ethics and discourses of vulnerability, the boards remained in place for a month. While a couple of negative additions needed to be erased, many revealing and positive comments were added; this confirmed our hypothesis that trans and non-binary students are keen to take advantage of the opportunity to share their stories openly. Moreover, an initially reluctant SU representative was surprised and pleased by the overall positive outcome and has expressed a wish to repeat the exercise on a larger scale.

Part of the concern above may reflect the nature of Student Unions as physical spaces where alcohol is consumed and exclusionary behaviour becomes less inhibited. In this respect, bars are predominately constructed and perceived as heteronormative, patriarchal spaces where racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia are likely to occur; thus, Storrie and Rohleder (2018) note that queer folk are wary of spaces and events with alcohol. However, when we subsequently placed a smaller display in the library space during LGBT+ History Month, again questions were raised about the public nature of the display and the potential for exposing vulnerable individuals. It is apparent, therefore, that the fear of a public and open opportunity to witness and amplify the voices of trans people is an admission that there are inherent dangers in campus spaces. Rather than tackling the character of the space, there is a tendency to set a protective boundary around trans and non-binary people. The unintended consequence of this approach to safeguarding is that trans and non-binary voices are silenced or mediated through compliant channels. Hence, there remains a lack of nuanced recognition of the agency of marginalized groups, of their ability to speak for themselves and challenge hegemonic forces (Dirks, 2016), while overprotection can have the inadvertent effects of restricting access to power for trans and non-binary folk, maintaining invisibility and sustaining genderism.

One of the major lessons learnt from our interviews is that trans and non-binary folk do not necessarily fall into neat categories. For example, binary gender might not always be what the trans person is exploring nor is there always an affiliation with a trans label. Trans people may choose to switch their used names for various reasons; thus, being alert to an individual's uses, including an awareness of their 'dead' name usage (if they use it) is crucial to understanding the purpose it serves. Furthermore, some trans people aim to live in 'stealth' (meaning an eschewal of trans identity whilst keeping a trans history private), as one interviewee explained to us. To carry the trans label is a political as well as a personal act, accruing meaning relating to safety and vulnerability; it is described by a trans non-binary interviewee as both a privilege and a burden, but they emphasize that not all trans people will be public about their identity. These insights may help us understand

the challenges in the research process; engagement with trans people for research requires an understanding of how the label is understood by individuals, and for some it is a label that recedes into a biographical past. Furthermore, as Cisneros and Bracho (2019) discuss, trans folk may also be negotiating intersectional oppressions relating to race, class, sexuality (and, we add, religion) which inform their decisions about when, where and how to be visible as trans.

Thus, one of our interviewees expressed doubt as to whether a top-down policy-based strategy can establish a cultural change that makes campus a safe space for trans people:

One of my arguments is that it's all very well saying that you're now safe in the university because you've got these procedures, but not everybody is OK about it and actually if you're 'out' in the university, you're then probably going to be 'out', out there, isn't it? Because it's not closed, is it? So, it's a very, very complicated area.

The notion that the university is a closed safe space is contested here, as the boundaries are porous. However, a second interviewee indicated that they managed their trans identity in separate spheres, altering pronouns and name use according to whether they were on campus, with family or with different groups of friends. There is a high level of agency exercised for this trans young person and their decision-making was based on their own sense of which spaces felt safe and which did not.

The fluidity built into the life of this second interviewee has made us question the practice of having pronouns announced in meetings, attached to online profiles and added to email signatures. We acknowledge that the intention is to signal gender-inclusive safe space; however, the interviewee who challenged the policy-writing process also stated that being asked to declare preferred pronouns is problematic, since it does not allow fluidity, uncertainty, privacy, or changeability according to context. In other words, in a meeting where pronouns are announced, in that moment, a person is required to make a definitive choice and declare it; this is a form of 'outing' and attempts to mitigate this by making pronoun announcements optional still favours those for whom pronouns are settled and public, whilst creating a potentially unsafe space for others. Discussions with trans people participating in our research brought to the surface the discomfort a public declaration of pronoun choice might engender for those whose identity is not fixed.

Chaplains

Campus chaplaincies are well placed to provide a space where young people can seek support and/or talk about personal matters, including explorations of sexuality and gender. We were interested in how chaplains, in proactive attempts to create safe space, managed doctrinal positions of the Church. Our interviewees indicated that chaplains feel relatively free to disagree with Church doctrine and the majority agreed that inclusivity of gender and sexuality variance is a matter of social justice. However, variations in theological positions of chaplaincy staff and volunteers, we argue, have an impact on how safe the chaplaincy space feels for trans and non-binary students. One chaplain, with a mixture of optimism and tension, describes the current situation thus:

We go on Pride in a dog collar, you know ... so many churches are doing that now. It's going to come, it's going to come, in the Church of England. It's just terribly slow. But it's interesting isn't it that in the university, it's explicit, it promotes that inclusivity. You know, then, as a chaplain I'm in the position of where do I sit with my conscience in this?

Clearly, individual chaplains are examining their own positionings with candour and with the understanding that they represent a religious institution that is ambivalent in its messages. Consequently, there is consensus amongst our interviewees regarding the indispensability of gathering local knowledge of worshipping communities considered 'safe space' and those considered 'unsafe'; such judgements are based on personal knowledge and relational cues. One chaplain emphasized the need to use personal contacts when drawing up a list of local churches suitable for signposting: 'somewhere where we have a connection, where we know one of the clergy ... which can be really important in times of crisis'. Styles of worship and theological positioning are also used

as guides to safe church space, pointing to certain discursive constructions that serve as shorthand, such as welcoming practices. Interestingly, research on Christian cultures and their impact on discriminatory practices in the US hints at safe space discourse being more aligned to Catholic communities than evangelical Protestant ones (Nie & Price, 2021). Hence, the conundrum one chaplain identified was that informal, exciting worship styles are attractive to young people, but that such worship environments are sometimes aligned with doctrines and beliefs that are exclusionary and potentially harmful. Lively, charismatic churches that appeal to a younger base (such as the Christian student population) tend to be evangelical, and, thus, are often perceived to favour non-inclusive beliefs. A further consideration is that there is the potential for LGBTQIA+ students of faith to anticipate positive receptions at local churches leaving them unprepared for negative encounters. According to one chaplain: 'The Church is perceived as nasty. The opposite is also true. People assume they're going into a friendly welcoming environment to everyone, there'll be a welcome for them as LGBT, and just go. There isn't. And [they] are quite shocked and hurt by that'. When asked if they often found themselves picking up the pieces, the chaplain's reply was emphatic: 'Yes, very much. Yes'. Another chaplain described the negative impact of persons finding themselves in churches that do not support their identity: 'Actually, a lot of [students who talk to me] have been in those kind of evangelical churches and something's happened to them, where their confidentiality has been abused or they've been told stuff they've found really hurtful'. Likewise, a further interviewee outlines the high stakes of not understanding the local church landscape: 'I also know of some extremely damaging, one or two, one in particular, church that has damaged people'. As one chaplain explained, evangelicals in the diocese (bishops and individual churches) discuss matters of sexuality without reference to gender variance rendering the position on trans persons opaque.

Some traditional church spaces, such as local cathedrals, were identified as being welcoming for LGBTQIA+ people; one chaplain described this as 'odd', meaning it may be an unexpected conclusion given the formal forms of worship offered. Part of the construction of the safe environment in this cathedral setting was, however, based on invisibility: 'the Cathedral is quite safe, partly because, you wouldn't know it but there's some very elderly both male and female same sex couples who have been together for like hundreds of years. So, you know, you wouldn't think that, but it is. It is a safe space'. The safety is in the avoidance of public gaze, similar to the assumption of campus authorities that invisibility is necessary for safety; not only is there a perceived safety attached to invisibility, but the social distance kept is also construed as protection for trans students (and LGBTQIA+ students more generally). The two chaplains reporting that they signpost LGBTQIA+ students to their respective city's cathedrals consider these as friendly places, but only because there is a tendency to avoid conversations about personal lives; hence, safe space is being discursively constructed by keeping rigid public/private boundaries. We of course acknowledge the importance of space where a trans person is confident that no personal boundaries will be breached; however, this construct of safe space seems also to preclude safety in visibility and reproduces conditions that generate vulnerability for marginalized groups. Arguing that political action and voice is an important part of constructing one's identity, Sonia Kruks (2006) draws on Hannah Arendt's notion of space as a measure of social and political freedom. We might, therefore, argue that not having access to public/political space damages the integrity of a person's sense of self; for Arendt, Kruks (2006) argues, access to this type of space constitutes freedom. As we found in our attempt to provide a public space for trans and non-binary students to share experiences and stories, the commitment to protection of those framed as vulnerable overrides the imperative to have access to public space and claim visibility. In this sense, we argue that such safety regimes are counter-productive and damaging to subjectivity. Furthermore, the above stories highlight assumptions that signposting is based on avoidance of potentially hostile space, and yet, young people may understand the evangelical positioning, for example, and still choose to engage with such churches. Indeed, one chaplain described how several LGBTQIA+ young people chose to engage with a local church and openly challenge non-inclusive messages. Some chaplains are, therefore, supporting the

resourcefulness discourse and acknowledging the political role young LGBTQIA+ people may choose to play.

Dioceses present varied landscapes in terms of inclusive attitudes, and some are considered welcoming of LGBTQIA+ people. One caveat we highlight is how 'inclusive' is being defined. One chaplain stated that their diocese is inclusive, except for the issue of women priests, which remains contentious. We contend that the Church's inability to fully resolve the issue of women and the priesthood is fundamentally related to continued debates about sexuality and gender variance: if female priests are excluded from parishes within a diocese, it cannot claim to be inclusive.

Conclusion

Our reflections on safe space for trans and non-binary young people highlight the need for a deeper understanding of how safe space is conceived and mediated. In keeping with research by Fox and Ore (2010) and Allen et al. (2020, 2022) the notion of safe space needs to be problematized to incorporate discomfort and inconsistency. Young people are more fluid, more experimental and more resourceful than vulnerability discourses allow. There is, we argue, greater potential in co-construction of safe space in a process that foregrounds the agency of trans young people and their choices around visibility and expressing a public and political self (Cisneros & Bracho, 2019; Hartal, 2018). Many institutions have developed procedures for changing names and asserted the right of all to use the bathrooms of the gender with which they identify, but this is an insufficient response: non-binary persons do not identify with a male or female gender; transitioning students may become reluctant to speak in seminars if anxious that their voice does not match their gender identity; and trans men may still be in need of period products, which are mostly located in the women's toilets. The argument we present above is that those who oversee space should resist reaching for protective approaches that mean trans and non-binary people's agency is stymied. Equally, space is needed for private exploration and expression; in this respect, campuses can be experienced as safe and unsafe at the same time (Allen et al., 2020, 2022). Universities need to rethink what is meant by 'safe space' and how to balance fears for minorities with an honest appraisal of whether reputational damage is a driver towards over-protection (Ahmed, 2000).

Our research reveals that the rainbow emblem may not provide enough signalling for trans and non-binary young people: use of specific trans and non-binary flags and imagery is an important part of the semiotic landscape. Similarly, discursive practices intended to create safe space need to be more thoughtfully applied. Specifically, our research highlights that the practice of declaring pronouns is not always helpful or safe; we recognize that the desire to be inclusive underpins practices such as this, but it is crucial that they are formed in consultation with trans and non-binary people. This last point is the most important recommendation arising from our research: universities need to establish policy and practices in conversation with trans and non-binary folk and resist the inclination to act on their behalf or to frame those identifying as trans and/or non-binary as presenting issues. We echo Dirks (2016) and Hartal's (2018) call for approaches that create gender inclusive, intersectional and agential spaces, rather than approaches that attempt to solve the constructed problem of the presence of trans people. As Shon Faye (2021) argues, trans people are not 'the issue' and universities need to reorient their policies to make the cisheteronormative character of campus space the issue to be resolved.

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