

Mini Review

Trans men in the workplace: Reflections on research, method and practice

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Trans gender concerns have become increasingly discussed in recent years. In particular there has been debate over whether cis-gendered and trans women should be considered as equivalents or whether women biologically sexed as female at birth have a right to be treated separately from those who identify as women, regardless of 'at birth' gender and medical transition. The issues of trans men are comparatively muted. In the former, we have two historically disadvantaged groups seeking to determine boundaries of identities and the rights that ensue. But it's perhaps unsurprising that there is no equivalent debate for trans men because in the latter case men have historically been the advantaged sex; indeed in the context of the workplace its reputation for masculinity affords them significant advantages.

Key words: Gender, women, sex, trans men, masculine gender

INTRODUCTION

We can therefore note that whilst being trans has many commonalities in experience, there are substantial differences between trans men and trans women that should be explored separately. No group is homogenous, but trans people are too often considered as a combined unit of analysis in a way that men and women are not. Specifically a clearer understanding of the intersection of 'being trans' and 'being male/female' enables a better understanding of the lived experience. Potentially, whilst trans women are 'becoming other' (as many feminists describe their disadvantaged status), trans men may be 'becoming advantaged' by dint of their status as men, particularly if they 'pass' as men in appearance and gender enactment (Abelson, 2014, Anderson et al., 2018, Berdahl et al., 2018, Connell, 2010, Connell, 2005, Davidson, 2016, Geitenbeek et al., 2018, Halberstam, 2018, Leppel, 2016, Schilt et al., 2009).

Of course, the realities are more complex – being trans is still fraught with challenges, even for trans men. Being trans is in itself is 'other' – hostility and discrimination to trans men and women is well-documented. In "Trans men doing gender at work" we seek to explore these competing narratives of benefit and disadvantage in the context of the workplace. The paper

seeks to understand this by taking a career narrative approach (enabling an analysis of their experiences over time; addressing key moments), giving voice to their accounts of how they were impacted by their experiences and the subsequent career/practice choices they made, and locating these narratives in context to ensure the situated nature of their actions could be understood. It aims to explore the doing of gender to understand what (gendered) actions they enacted, in what circumstances and why. Taken together, this life history inspired approach enabled us to go beyond the enactment of gendered behaviour to understand what lay behind the actions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many of us live and perform our gendered lives more or less unthinkingly (at least to the extent to which they are expressions of our gender). Gender only becomes salient to us when we have cause to consider it. This cannot be so readily claimed for trans men and women for whom gender – and the endeavour involved in securing recognition for their gender – can for many be a daily consciously lived experience, even an ordeal. Their gender performances are more often highly conscious activities and may seek to achieve aims such as living their life as they desire, performing gender to 'fit it', or even hiding it. Gender expression for trans people is negotiated to a greater

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extent than cis-gendered people. This is why we sought to get behind gender expression to understand how, when and why they expressed themselves as they did, and – by implication – whether they felt able to live their lives as they wished.

Broadly the paper concludes, unsurprisingly, that trans men still face discrimination in the workplace. Certain places are safer (e.g., larger organisations where there are robust and supportive HR policies; self-employment), but all forms of employment carry risk. It also identified that the ways in which they expressed gender were often carefully considered, particularly in contexts that were high stake, or that heightened visibility or risk. In such situations they enacted gender in ways that felt safest or most likely to be beneficial even if it was not a true expression of themselves. While we may all ‘put on an act’ in certain situations, for trans men this was a specifically gendered practice.

But our data also gives some support for the view that there may be some benefit from being male at work through, “gaining competency and authority, gaining respect and recognition for hard work, gaining “body privilege,” and gaining economic opportunities and status” Schilt, 2006. In other words, some of our trans men benefited from being men. Interestingly, the trans men who benefited from the “patriarchal dividend” Connell, 2005 were not necessarily those who were undisclosed and/or “passing” unnoticed as trans – indeed one had transitioned in the context of his current workplace – but those who performed in a more traditionally ‘masculine’ sense. Despite being known as trans their masculine expression earned them acceptance and their trans (and therefore not biologically sexed at birth men) status was not a disadvantage. In other words, the strong expression of masculine gender was more significant in their acceptance than their trans status was in troubling it.

These trans men, therefore, rather than challenging masculine tropes somewhat reinforce them. One might speculate that they had achieved their acceptance by conforming to the dominant masculine identity: if you want to join the club you need to fit in. Further it may be that these clearer signals are easier for others to understand and react to. A more gender fluid/hybrid performance would leave people wondering; a prototype masculine performance leaves fewer questions to be answered.

But this also raises some interesting broader questions about masculinity, and its changing nature in society. A growing body of literature suggests masculinity is evolving, perhaps becoming more inclusive and softer, with an acceptance of a greater diversity in what is recognized and valued as masculinity (Anderson et al., 2018). But in the case of trans men, this is not so apparent. Or at least, those that conform to the ‘macho’ masculinity perform well, and those who trouble that identity somehow find themselves less accepted, suggesting the male dividend is only for the traditionally masculine trans men.

The positive inclusivity story here is that being trans is becoming accepted; the less positive one is that more open and diverse forms of masculinity may not yet have secured the same status. Or if they have, you have to be a cis-gendered man to enact these ‘alternative forms’; trans men have to stick with the traditional expressions of masculine gender to secure

the same recognition. It was evident from our study that even the most ‘macho’ of trans men challenged the narrowness of masculine identities and welcomed more freedom to enact a range of masculinities.

For those who see trans men (alongside others, such as gay men) as well-placed to dislodge some of our traditional expectations around gender performance this may be discouraging news. Their reasoning makes sense; trans gender identities are associated with ‘nonconformity’ Halberstam, 2018, so their ‘troubling’ of gender means they are well placed to challenge traditional masculinity with inclusive or hybrid forms. But we have to recognise that the context around them needs to change first, and that many of them may choose to live the more hegemonic forms of masculinity.

LOOKING AHEAD: RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The study was small and in-depth. This enables good insight into the particular cases studied but makes generalisation more difficult. In particular, generalisation across countries and cultures should not be made, although certain themes are likely to be common. Further, to fully understand the behaviours that shape trans experience, a more triangulated approach would be required to understand the perspective of those who have impacted the lived realities of the trans men. This would obviously be fraught with ethical and practical difficulties if seeking to get the view of those immediately impacting the lives of trans men being researched – risking exposure, retaliation or just dishonest responses. But studies – ideally in larger organisations where statistically the likelihood of having trans men (or women) are greater – that capture experiences from a range of perspectives may prove fruitful both in research terms and to inform practice.

Any study also needs to be situated in its context: national culture, first and foremost, but also more specifically the context. Taking the example of work, this means the nature, size and industry of the workplace to name a few factors. To understand the experiences of the individual, consideration need to be given to the duration of their transition, nature (extent of physical/medical transition), whether or not they pass as male and whether not they are disclosed as trans.

CONCLUSION

Our study found many examples of trans naivety as distinct from trans aggression. Although both can be troubling, they need to be tackled separately. Whilst trans aggression is a concern, many more (individuals and organisations) are unsure and fearful of what to do or say. In the UK (the context for this study) a well-known trans-supportive organisation, Stonewall, has recently become mired in controversy for its stance against “gender critical beliefs” (that sex cannot be changed) at the expense of other groups, such as some cis gendered women who see questioning transgender identity as a right to secure their own safety particularly in women-only spaces. Here protected rights and freedom of speech have become entangled in a complex debate resulting in many organisations, including government, considering withdrawing from Stonewall’s diversity scheme. In summary, most people and organisations want to be inclusive, but it’s not always clear what that means

in practice. Better education and understanding, and open discussion are required.

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