

Do Workplace Gender Transitions Make Gender Trouble?

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This article examines what happens when an employee makes the transition from one recognized gender category to another and remains in the same job. Drawing on in-depth interviews with transmen and transwomen in Texas and California, we illustrate how a new social gender identity is interactionally achieved in these open workplace transitions. While transgender people often are represented as purposefully adopting hyper-feminine or masculine gender identities post-transition, we find that our respondents strive to craft alternative femininities and masculinities. However, regardless of their personal gender ideologies, their men and women co-workers often enlist their transitioning colleague into gender rituals designed to repatriate them into a rigid gender binary. This enlistment limits the political possibilities of making gender trouble in the workplace, as transgender people have little leeway for resistance if they wish to maintain job security and friendly workplace relationships.

Keywords: gender and work; transsexual; transgender employment; gender trouble; doing gender

Introduction

Gendered expectations for workers are deeply embedded in workplace structures (Acker, 1990; Britton, 2004; Gherardi, 1995; Padavic and Reskin, 2002; Valian, 1999; Williams, 1995). Employers often bring their gender schemas about men and women's abilities to bear on hiring and promotion decisions, leading men and women to face very different relationships to employment and advancement (Acker, 1990; Britton, 2004; Valian, 1999; Williams, 1995). However, when an employer hires a man to do a 'man's job,' he or she typically does not expect this man to announce that he intends to become a woman and remain in the same job. Open workplace gender transitions — situations in which an employee undergoes a 'sex

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change' and remains in the same job — present an interesting challenge to this gendered division of labour. While the varied mechanisms that hold occupational sex segregation in place often are hidden, gender transitions can throw them into high relief. Becoming women at work, for example, can mean that transwomen lose high powered positions they are seen as no longer suited for (Griggs, 1998). On the other hand, becoming men can make transmen more valued workers than they were as women (Schilt, 2006). Beyond illuminating deeply naturalized gendered workplace hierarchies, however, these open transitions also have the potential to make workplace 'gender trouble' (Butler, 1990), as transsexual/transgender people denaturalize the assumed connection between gender identity, genitals and chromosomal makeup when they 'cross over' at work.¹

This article considers the impact of open gender transitions on binary conceptions of gender within the context of the workplace. Drawing on in-depth interviews, we illustrate how transsexual/transgender people and their co-workers socially negotiate gender identity during the transformative process of open workplace transitions. As gendered behavioural expectations for men and women can vary greatly depending on organizational cultures and occupational contexts (Britton, 2004; Connell, 1995; Salzinger, 2003), transmen and transwomen must develop a sense of how to facilitate same-gender and cross-gender interactions as new men or new women in their specific workplaces. In this renegotiation process, some of the interviewees in our study adopt what can be termed 'alternative' femininities and masculinities — gender identities that strive to combat gender and sexual inequality. However, regardless of their personal commitments to addressing sexism in the workplace, many transmen and transwomen are enlisted post-transition into workplace interactions that reproduce deeply held cultural beliefs about men and women's 'natural' abilities and interests. We argue that the strength of these enlistments, and the lack of viable alternative interactional scripts in the context of the workplace, limit the political possibilities of open workplace transitions. Rather than 'undoing gender' (Butler, 2004) in the workplace, then, individuals who cross over at work find themselves either anchored to their birth gender through challenges to the authenticity of their destination gender, or firmly repatriated into 'the other side' of the gender binary.²

After laying out our research methodology, we provide an overview of the two theoretical approaches to the social construction of gender that frame this article: the doing gender approach (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and gender performativity theory (Butler, 1990). Both bodies of theory rely on theoretical conceptions of a transgender subject to suggest ways that gender binaries and hierarchical gender arrangements that devalue femininity can be challenged. Drawing on our interview data with transgender workers, we show the importance of keeping focused on transgender/transsexual people's actual lives, as well as the interactional contexts in which they exist, when theorizing how to undo gender.

Putting our focus on the context of the workplace, we examine how our interviewees negotiate cross-gender and same-gender workplace interactions after their open workplace transitions. Rather than causing gender trouble, transmen and transwomen report that their co-workers either hold them accountable to their birth gender, or repatriate them into the 'other side' of the gender binary. Even when our interviewees want to challenge this rigid binary thinking about gender, they can feel pressured to downplay their opposition because of their need to maintain steady employment. In the conclusion we argue that the potential of transgender/transsexual people to undo gender at work can be constrained by their real-life need to keep their jobs, as well as the slow-to-change gendered organizational cultures of most workplaces.

Methods

This research was conducted with 28 transsexual/transgender people in Los Angeles, California and Austin, Texas between 2003 and 2005. Both cities have vibrant transgender communities, as well as recently adopted citywide employment protections for transgender workers. Seventeen interviewees came from the first author's study of the workplace experiences of transmen in southern California and 11 interviewees came from the second author's study of transwomen's workplace experiences in Austin, Texas. The interviewees were recruited from transgender activist groups, transgender support group meetings, transgender list-serves and personal contacts. All the interviews were conducted either in the interviewees' offices or homes, the interviewees' friends' homes, or at local cafés. The interviews ranged from two to four hours. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and later coded for analytic purposes. The characteristics of the interviewees are summarized in Table 1.

In both studies, transsexual/transgender people's experiences at work both before and after their gender transition were examined via semi-structured interviews. In addition to their own personal sense of how their workplace experiences changed, the interviewees also were asked about the reactions of their co-workers and employers. This type of self-report data on interactional events presents a limited perspective, as we were not able to check the interviewees' perceptions with observational methods, such as participant observation. As workplace transitions are sensitive events, many interviewees also were uncomfortable with the idea of their co-workers being interviewed about their perceptions of the transition process. However, while observational data and co-worker interviews would have been a useful addition to this study, we do not feel that our reliance on self-report data is a fatal flaw of this research project. As Garfinkel (1967) argues, transgender/transsexual people can be considered 'practical methodologists' in regard to

Table 1: Sample characteristics for sample (N = 28)

| Pseudonym | Race/ethnicity | Sexual identity | Approx. no. of years working as destination gender | Occupation |
|---------------------|--------------------|-----------------|--|-------------------------|
| Transmen (n = 17) | | | | |
| Aaron | Black/white | Queer | 5 | Semi-professional |
| Christopher | Asian | Pansexual | 3 | Semi-professional |
| Colin | White | Queer | 1 | Lower professional |
| David | White | Bisexual | 2 | Higher professional |
| Douglas | White | Gay | 5 | Semi-professional |
| Elliott | White | Bisexual | 1 | Retail/customer service |
| Jack | Latino | Queer | 1 | Semi-professional |
| Jake | White | Queer | 9 | Higher professional |
| Keith | Black | Heterosexual | 1 | Blue-collar |
| Kelly | White | Bisexual | 2 | Semi-professional |
| Ken | Asian/white | Queer | 0.5 | Semi-professional |
| Paul | White | Heterosexual | 2 | Semi-professional |
| Preston | White | Bisexual | 2 | Blue-collar |
| Riley | White | Dates women | 1 | Lower professional |
| Simon | White | Bisexual | 2 | Semi-professional |
| Thomas | Latino | Queer | 13 | Higher professional |
| Trevor | White | Gay/queer | 6 | Semi-professional |
| Transwomen (n = 11) | | | | |
| Agape | White | Queer | 4 | Higher professional |
| Brenda | White | Bisexual | 4 | Blue-collar |
| Carolina | Puerto Rican/white | Queer | 4 | Higher professional |
| Ellen | White | Queer | 9 | Retail/customer service |
| Jackie | Latina | Queer | 8 | Retail/customer service |
| Kasey | White | Heterosexual | 3 | Lower professional |
| Katie | White | Bisexual | 0.5 | Lower professional |
| Kirsten | Latina | Heterosexual | 5 | Retail/customer service |
| Lana | White | Heterosexual | 6 | Semi-professional |
| Laura | Native Amer/White | Unknown | 3 | Lower professional |
| Layla | White | Bisexual | 8 | Semi-professional |

how gender 'works,' as they are forced to negotiate social identities as new men or new women. This negotiation process carries a deep awareness of gendered nuances in interactions, meaning that transmen and transwomen often clearly recognize differences in treatment 'before and after' — especially as changes in treatment often mean a gain of privilege (for transmen) or a loss of privilege (for transwomen).

Doing/performing gender and the possibilities of gender trouble

In 'Doing gender,' West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that while individuals have many different social identities that are constantly adopted, dropped, or made more salient in certain contexts, 'we are always women or men' (1987, p. 15). Emphasizing this omni-relevance of gender, West and Zimmerman make the case that individuals are always doing gender, as gender is a social process that is constantly negotiated, rather than something innate to men or women.

They posit that 'participants in interaction organize their various and manifold activities to reflect or express gender, and they are disposed to perceive the behavior of others in similar light' (1987, p. 4). As everyone is accountable to gendered expectations, gender inequality is socially produced and maintained in interactions, as men continually do dominance while women do deference. Yet, while doing gender, and thus doing inequality, is an active process, they argue, drawing on the ethnomethodological theory of Harold Garfinkel (1967), that this interactional work becomes obscured by incorrigible propositions about gender that position masculinity and femininity as binary opposites that occur as natural offshoots of biology (that is, chromosomes and genitals).

West and Zimmerman's conception of doing gender shares a great deal with Butler's theorization of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler draws on post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theories rather than sociological theories of symbolic interaction to frame her argument. Arguing against conceptions of gender as the result of a priori internal essences, she frames masculinity and femininity as citational — or, as Prosser paraphrases it, 'culturally intelligible stylized act[s]' (1998, p. 32) that are given meaning only through their constant repetition. Emphasizing the necessity of social norms to provide meaning to gender, Butler notes in *Undoing Gender*,

One only determines 'one's own' sense of gender to the extent that social norms exist that support and enable that act of claiming gender for oneself. One is dependent on this 'outside' to lay claims to what is one's own. (Butler, 2004, p. 7)

With this emphasis on social norms, Butler, like West and Zimmerman, positions gender as an overarching system that restricts possibilities of gender expressions for men and women at the same time as it provides necessary structure for a 'livable life' (Butler, 2004, p. 8).

Seeing gender as a social product or a citation for which there is no original opens up the possibility of de-gendering the social world (Lorber, 2005), ungendering one's self (Bornstein, 1994), or undoing gender altogether (Butler, 2004). Envisioning how gender could be done differently in ways that alleviate inequality and remove restrictions on gender expressions requires a serious reconsideration of binary thinking on gender. As Gherardi notes:

If we are to escape the gender trap, if we are to free ourselves of the idea that there exist two and only two types of individuals, if we are to ensure that social differentiation is no longer based on sexual differentiation, we must destabilize all thought which dichotomizes (either male or female) and hierarchies (male as one, as the norm, and female as the other, the second sex). (1995, p. 4)

However, while some practical suggestions about how to de-emphasize the social importance of gender have been offered (Lorber, 2005), challenging binary thinking about gender often remains located in the realm of theoretical possibilities of the gender crossing of transgender people.

In theoretical conceptions of gender performativity and doing gender, what can be referred to as the 'transgender subject,' a person who gender crosses in some way, plays a central role. In 'Doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987), how Agnes — a young woman who was born male — learns to *do* femininity without a biological claim to womanhood is used to illustrate the everyday social production of gender.

Butler, in contrast, uses male-bodied individuals who perform femininity in drag productions as a concrete example of gender performativity (Butler, 1990, 1993). As she notes, 'drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself — as well as its contingency' (Butler, 1990, p. 130). Interestingly, Agnes and Butler's drag performers can be seen as at odds with one another in their theoretical deployment. While drag performers can be seen as purposefully playing with gender, or even purposefully challenging binary views on gender, Agnes, like many individuals who can be classified as 'transsexuals', seeks 'very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, to *be*' (Prosser, 1998, p. 35, emphasis in text). What these concepts share, however, is representing fixed, allegorical representations of transgender subjects — subjects who are removed from actual, lived social contexts.

It is not, of course, that these theories do not talk about real people. In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler uses the drag performers showcased in Jennie Livingston's film, *Paris is Burning* (1990), as concrete examples of the performativity of both sex and gender. However, as Prosser (1998) and Namaste

(2000) have argued, these real people are reduced to mere allegory in Butler's work. And, in talking about the political possibilities of gender crossing in *Paris is Burning*, 'Butler's essay locates transgressive value in that which makes the [transgender] subject's real life most unsafe' (Prosser, 1998, p. 49) — living in between officially sanctioned gender categories. Agnes, too, was an actual person who sought sexual reassignment surgery at the University of California, Los Angeles in the 1950s. Immortalized in the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967), however, she ceases to have agency, complexity, or materiality as her life is used to form the theoretical backbone of West and Zimmerman's work. In these frameworks, then, the materiality of the transgender subject (Prosser, 1998) and the importance of social context (Namaste, 2000) is elided.

An empirical question that emerges from these theoretical conceptions is whether transgender subjects can purposefully, or as an unintended consequence of their decision to gender cross, actually undo gender? Until recently this question could be asked only rhetorically, as individuals who gender crossed were 'encouraged' by medical and psychological personnel to 'pass' in their destination gender (that is, not to reveal their gender transition) (Bolin, 1988; Bornstein, 1994; Stone, 1991). With the rise in transgender activism in the last 15 years (Califia, 1997; Frye, 2000; Green, 2004; Whittle, 2002), people who gender cross are increasingly opting to openly identify as transgender or transsexual.

This type of visibility, for those who can do so safely, carries potential benefits, such as educating the general public about transgender lives in an effort to gain wider legal protections. For some individuals, publicly gender crossing also is a way to break down the gender binary, as it challenges the basis of the categories of man and woman (Bornstein, 1994; Stone, 1991). In the same way as politically motivated drag performances can reveal the ways in which gender binaries are performative citations with no essential basis (Butler, 1990; Rupp and Taylor, 2004), visibly gender crossing could conceivably disrupt the assumed natural connection between genitals and gender identity. Additionally, these open transitions could challenge binary oppositions of gender, opening up possibilities for a continuum of gender identities.

Open workplace transitions — the focus of this article — offer a new interactional context for examining the question of whether transgender people make gender trouble for binary views on gender. In these transitions, individuals undergo gender changes while remaining in the same job. These transitions bring gendered practices and interactions in the workplace — an organizational context that is heavily gendered (Acker, 1990; Britton, 2004; Williams, 1995) — into sharp focus, as transsexual/transgender people are actively violating the assumed naturalness and permanency of gender (Garfinkel, 1967) under the gaze of co-workers and supervisors.

These open workplace transitions are not necessarily motivated by a political desire for visibility. Rather, for many individuals, undergoing a gender

transition is a way to make life more livable; staying in the same job during this process can provide welcome stability to a life that is in physical and emotional transition on many levels. Additionally, transgender/transsexual people can avoid losing any of their job history — a common sacrifice that accompanies the decision to find a new job where one's gender transition is unknown. Rather, co-workers can neutralize the transformative potential of open workplace transitions by encouraging transgender people to conform to rigid stereotypes of how men and women 'just are'.

This challenge theoretically could lead to an undoing of gender inequality in the workplace, as co-workers and employers could begin to rethink their stereotypes about gender, work performance, and 'natural' abilities. However, as we demonstrate in this article, even when transsexual/transgender people openly challenge what they view as sexist gender dynamics in the workplace, or attempt to introduce co-workers to a continuum of gender identities, the theoretical possibilities of undoing gender at work via open workplace transitions are not always born out. Rather, co-workers often neutralize the transformative potential of open workplace transitions, as they actively enlist transgender people to conforming to rigid stereotypes of how men and women 'just are'. By repatriating transgender and transsexual people into the gender binary, co-workers repair the potential trouble to their naturalized attitudes about gender — demonstrating, we argue, that in the gendered context of the workplace, the theoretical potential of gender crossing does not necessarily translate into an undoing of gender.

Analysis

Workplaces are not gender-neutral locations filled with bodies, but rather complex sites in which gender expectations are embedded in workplace structures and reproduced in interactions (Acker, 1990; Britton, 2004; Williams, 1995). Gendered behavioural expectations for men and women vary greatly depending on organizational cultures and occupational contexts (Connell, 1995; Salzinger, 2003). While there is always some personal leeway in how to do gender, workers face pressures to conform to specific gender expectations for their workplaces. Not meeting these expectations can result in gender harassment, ostracization and loss of advancement possibilities (Miller, 1997; Rhode, 1997; Talbot, 2002; Valian, 1999).

In undertaking an open workplace transition, transgender people face the task of doing gender in their new social identity in a way that fits with both gendered workplace expectations and their personal gender ideologies. In the next two sections, we outline how interviewees see their transitions impacting on cross-gender interactions, interactions with co-workers who do not share their destination gender, and same-gender interactions, interactions with co-workers who do share their destination gender. Rather than

challenging binary views on gender, we demonstrate that these renegotiations often push transmen and transwomen towards reproducing workplace gender hierarchies that privilege masculinity and devalue femininity, thereby reaffirming their co-workers' belief in the naturalness of the gender binary in the workplace.

Negotiating cross-gender interactions

While doing gender reinforces socially constructed differences between men and women (West and Zimmerman, 1987), it also reproduces notions of a natural connection between men or between women. This presumption of a natural connection between people of the same gender can create specific behavioural expectations, such as demands for men in all-male groups to talk about sports and sex, or women in all-female groups to talk about romance and menstrual cycles. Even though transmen, for example, may not have felt that they fit into all-women interactions at work prior to their transition, they still were often included in this female bonding based on their birth gender. Once transitions are officially announced, however, both transmen and transwomen can find themselves struggling — in what are now cross-gender relationships — to negotiate new gender boundaries and new interactional styles, and challenges to the authenticity of their destination gender.

New gender boundaries. After the public announcement of their gender transition in the workplace, both transmen and transwomen describe the erection of new cross-gender boundaries in workplace interactions. As transmen increasingly develop a masculine appearance, many find that they are less frequently included in 'girl talk' at work — generally conversations about appearance and dress, menstruation and romantic interests. For transmen who describe themselves as 'always already men' (Rubin, 2003) despite being born with a female body, these new boundaries are a relief. Illustrating this type of reaction, Aaron says:

Even when I was living as a female, I never did get the way women interacted. And I was always on the outside of that, so I never really felt like one of them.

For Paul, who transitioned while working in one of the 'women's professions' (nursing and teaching), these new boundaries signaled a welcomed end to being held accountable to stereotypical feminine interactional expectations, such as noticing new hairstyles or offering compliments about hair and clothing — interactions he describes as not coming to him naturally.

Some transwomen also express relief about the cessation of gendered expectations to participate in stereotypically masculine interactions. Laura, who transitioned in a professional job, notes that her actual interactions with

men changed little with her transition. When working as a man, he — at the time — had removed himself from ‘guy talk’; generally conversations about cars, sports, and the sexual objectification of women, as participating in these types of interactions did not fit with his personal sense of being a woman, despite having a male body. Now that she has made her feminine identity public at work, she feels that men in her workplace have a new interpretative frame for understanding these boundaries. ‘I think they understand a little more why I could have cared less who won the football game!’

Rather than challenging their ideas about the permanency of gender, interviewees felt that co-workers reincorporated their pre-transition interactions into an understanding of ‘being transgender’ and the innateness of gendered interests. In other words, Laura’s lack of interest in football and Paul’s lack of participation in the feminine niceties were re-evaluated as proof that transgender people are somehow trapped in the wrong body, a situation that is made right through a gender transition.

Not all interviewees felt a sense of relief at the creation or sudden acceptance of cross-gender boundaries. For some transmen who formerly identified as queer, bisexual or lesbian women, these new boundaries create a sense of sadness and exclusion. Describing this feeling, Elliott, who transitioned in a retail job, says:

It’s just like a little bit more of a wall there [with women] because I am not one of the girls anymore.... Like [women] have to get to know me better before they can be really relaxed with me.... I grew up surrounded by women and now to have women be kind of leery of me, it’s a very strange thing.

Transmen who are saddened by their perceptions of a new distance between themselves and women in the workplace still try to be respectful of these boundaries. This acceptance, however, does little to challenge notions of the gender binary; rather, conceding a loss of participation in ‘women’s space’ reifies divisions between men and women as natural. Yet, showing the importance of context in theorizing the potential of gender crossing to undo gender, transmen who seek to have masculine social identities at work have few other options, as most workplaces do not provide accepted interactional scripts for men who want to be just one of the girls. In order to keep social relationships smooth during the turmoil of an open workplace transition, then, transsexual/transgender people can hesitate to create additional challenges to gendered workplace expectations, as they desire to retain steady and comfortable employment.

In some cases, these new cross-gender boundaries can translate into workplace penalties. Agape, who transitioned in a high-tech company, remembers her boss worrying that taking oestrogen would adversely affect her programming abilities. She says:

I think he just doesn't really have that high of an opinion of women. I think it's just he, he thinks fire and aggression is what gets things done.... And I guess he sees women as being more passive, and was worried my productivity would decrease.

Lana faced a similar situation. As a man, Lana co-owned a professional business, a company she describes as a 'real boys' club,' with three other men. While they began their business as close friends, the friendship did not survive the announcement that Lana — he at the time — intended to become a woman. Moving from being a hegemonically masculine man who did not outwardly acknowledge his inner feminine gender identity, Lana's transition disrupted the homosocial bonds of the company's power elite. After multiple expressions of their discomfort about both the transition and having a woman as a business partner, Lana was forced out of the company. Underlining the gendered aspect of these drastic new boundaries, she recalls that during the negotiations to buy her shares of the company:

The only thing I remember [my business partner] saying in the entire three days was, 'How can you expect to run a company when all you're going to be thinking about is nail polish?'

As this comment suggests, Lana's partners locate their challenge to her in terms of gendered expectations that women cannot be serious business partners because they are too concerned with frivolities of appearance. Her transition does not undo gendered expectations, but rather is reincorporated into a workplace gender hierarchy that disadvantages and devalues women and femininity.

Interactional styles. Open workplace gender transitions reveal the gender dynamics behind what are considered workplace-appropriate cross-gender interactions. Both transmen and transwomen recount their sudden realization that changing gender at work requires a renegotiation of once comfortable interactional styles. In some cases, transmen and transwomen make personal decisions about changing cross-gender interactions in an effort to meet their personal ideals of how men and women should act — such as the case of Preston, who transitioned from woman to man in a blue-collar job. When working as a woman, Preston — who publicly identified as a lesbian — describes frequently engaging in joking, sexualized banter with both men and women in her dyke-friendly workplace. However, after his transition, he suddenly felt uncomfortable engaging in similar conversations:

I used to flirt a lot as a lesbian! It was easy for me to flirt... Since I have transitioned, a lot of the stuff that I could say as a dyke is so inappropriate! [laughs]. There is this one woman at work ... she is just really straight. Very much. I used to tease her about ... switching sides.... And if I say that now

[as a man], it is just like so fucking inappropriate. There is no way for me to find a justification for that, even though that is the history of our relationship. It is the history of how we have interacted with one another.... [It] could be perceived wrong. Even though my motive for it hasn't changed, but it is still inappropriate.

Preston's sense of discomfort with this interactional style translates into adopting a policing role toward sexualized banter at work. His co-workers were surprised at his behavioural changes, as he used to engage in the same type of behaviour he now critiques. However, for him, this type of behavioural change was necessary, as he did not want to enact a form of masculinity that can be construed as sexist. As he gains cultural competency in the variety of ways men and women interact, he might feel more leeway to adopt different interactional styles, as some men in his workplace did engage in sexualized banter with women. At the onset of transition, however, many transmen err on the side of caution by policing their behaviour, as — even with legal protections for gender identity in the workplace — they can feel vulnerable as openly transgender employees.

Other changes to cross-gender interactional styles can be a result of implicit or explicit pressure from co-workers. Ellen, who transitioned from man to woman in a customer service job, describes implicit pressure to tone down stereotypically masculine styles of interaction:

There is one thing that really drives me crazy — when I'm asked for my opinion on a subject [from men], I have to remember — 'Do not express it as firmly as I actually believe'.

While she personally does not wish to change, she realizes that muting opinions and emotions is the predominant interactional style for women in her workplace. She continues:

At work I tend not to trumpet my own horn very much, and the workplace environment demands that [women keep quiet]. I don't know if that's anything about me as transgender. I think that's just being a woman.

While this change to her interactional style does reproduce men doing dominance and women doing deference (West and Zimmerman, 1987), Ellen, like Preston, feels she needs to make these concessions in order to gain a feminine social identity at work and to keep friendly relationships with her co-workers.

Pressures to change cross-gender interactional styles also can be explicit. Several transmen describe women in their workplaces enlisting them into what can be termed 'gender rituals' (Goffman, 1977), stereotypical interactions that are typically played out between heterosexual men and women. After the announcement of their transition from woman to man, transmen recount women raising expectations that they will now, as men, do any

requisite heavy lifting around the workplace, such as changing office water bottles, moving furniture, or carrying heavy boxes. Interestingly, this change in behavioural expectations occurs almost immediately after the transition announcement. The change was so rapid that many transmen were, at first, not sure how to make sense of these new expectations. Kelly, who transitioned in a semi-professional job, notes:

Before [transition] no one ever asked me to do anything really and then [after], this one teacher, she's like, 'Can you hang this up? Can you move this for me?' ... Like if anything needed to be done in this room, it was me. Like she was just, 'Male — okay, you do it'. That took some adjusting. I thought she was picking on me for a while. And then I realized that she just, she just assumes that I'm gonna do all that stuff.

Ken describes a similar experience in his semi-professional workplace. While his co-workers were slow to adopt masculine pronouns with him, women did enlist him in performing masculine-coded duties in the workplace immediately after his transition announcement, such as carrying heavy items to the basement and unloading boxes.

For some transmen, being enlisted into these masculine gender rituals is exciting, as it gives them access to chivalrous behaviour they were sanctioned for when they performed them as masculine women. For others, this enlistment is viewed as blatant sexism. Describing this reaction, Trevor says:

[In one job] I had a supervisor who kept asking me to move fucking furniture and to do electronic equipment. And I would have to explain to her all the time. This would happen several times a day because it was a new program and we were setting up the office. There was furniture that needed to be moved but I have a hand disability, so I can't do it. I had already told her that like four or five times. And in the meanwhile, there were a couple of big, strong women who were much bigger and stronger than I was. But [my supervisor] asked me. I am kind of a little guy! I pointed out to her [assuming a man should do heavy lifting] is a really sexist assumption.

While this enlisting signals a certain level of social validation for his masculine social identity, it conflicts with his physical abilities as well as his personal gender ideology. Trevor's frustration comes from this supervisor's constant slippage into gender rituals that position women as frail and men as able. Even when he challenges what he sees as a sexism assumption, however, she continues to make the requests, illustrating how gendered workplace assumptions come to be naturalized. In other words, his attempt to undo this kind of gendered interaction has little impact on workplace ideas about what tasks are appropriate for men and women.

Challenges to authenticity. A small number of both transmen and transwomen experienced explicit challenges to the authenticity of their destination gender in cross-gender interactions. Kirsten transitioned from man to woman in a retail setting that was predominantly staffed by women and gay men. She found that once she began to transition, her friendly relationship with a colleague, a gay man, ended: 'We used to laugh and joke together on the floor all the time. But he totally changed'. As a drag performer, her colleague appeared to be threatened by Kirsten's decision to become a woman. Kirsten notes that while her co-worker had adopted facial surgery and had breast augmentation to enhance his drag performances, he thought transition 'was wrong, and [said] he would never do that'. He began to critique her appearance and behaviour after her transition.

[He would say], 'Sometimes you look a little thrown together, and I think you need to work on that ... and you need to build relationships with [co-workers] at the counter because they're saying that you're real bossy.'

This co-worker's response is unsurprising — there is a history of competitive border wars between gay men who do drag and transwomen (Perkins, 1983; Rupp and Taylor, 2004). In the case of Kirsten, her co-worker's animosity precludes her from becoming a woman at work, as he is continually referencing her birth gender. Additionally, he challenges her feminine authenticity by suggesting she retains too many masculine traits — assertiveness that is suddenly labelled as 'bossy' once she gains a feminine social identity. Located within this challenge, again, is explicit pressure for Kirsten to conform to a particular type of femininity to fit into her specific workplace.

For transmen, challenges to the authenticity of their masculinity were less explicit. Typically, it came in the form of feminine advice. Jake, who transitioned in a professional job, recounts his irritation at a woman he worked with who began to offer unsolicited advice about hysterectomies after he announced his transition. While this advice might have been well intentioned, he read it as an attempt to connect with him on a level of bodily sameness, a move that disregarded his transman identity. In this context, this type of advice can take on a mother/daughter dynamic that is uncomfortable and unwanted by many transmen.

Paul encountered similar advice at work from women who were concerned about his decision to pursue chest surgery — a procedure that requires a complete mastectomy. Attempting to relate to him as woman, these colleagues encouraged him not to 'cut off his breasts', a decision they saw as mutilation of healthy tissue. This type of reaction from women appears to be located in body identity, as these women co-workers make sense of transmen's surgical choices through the lens of something shared — a female body by birth.

Women, then, react with consternation to transgender body modification from their own position of feeling 'appropriately' gendered, or not trapped in the wrong body. However, while these reactions from women negate

transmen's masculine social identities on some level, they also keep them anchored in a binary view of gender: transmen are still women rather than really men.

Negotiating same-gender interactions

In crossing over at work, transmen and transwomen must grapple with a new same-gender reference group. Fitting into same-gender groups is particularly salient in these types of open workplace transitions, as transmen and transwomen eventually must gain access to same-gender sanctuaries in the workplace: the men's room and the women's room respectively. People in these new same-gender reference groups, men for transmen and women for transwomen, might be expected to offer opposition to their transitioning colleague, as they do not have a biological claim to these gendered spaces. Yet, our interviewees generally report being included in same-gender spaces and interactions, and, in some cases, being taken on as gender apprentices. As with cross-gender interactions, these renegotiated interactions do not disrupt binary views on gender, but rather repatriate transmen and transwomen into us versus them enactments of masculinity and femininity.

Inclusion in same-gender spaces. Attempting to gain access to same-gender spaces in the workplace, such as bathrooms and locker rooms, can create a great deal of anxiety for people transitioning at work. In transsexual/transgender autobiographies, bathroom horror stories abound, such as Kate Bornstein's (1994) description of being forced to use a women's room that was under construction and several floors away from her desk when she transitioned at IBM. However, while negotiating these spaces can take finesse, most transmen and transwomen in this study describe being included in same-gender spaces at work.

For transmen, this inclusion often came by direct invitation from men. Keith, who transitioned in a blue-collar job, waited to move into the men's locker room until he had been taking testosterone for several months and felt that he passed as a man. Elliott took a similar approach at his retail job. Eventually men in their workplaces began to ask Keith and Elliott when they were going to start using the locker room, signalling that they were open to this change. Once in the locker room, men also went out of their way to make Keith and Elliott feel comfortable by including them in locker room social interactions. Douglas and Trevor had similar experiences when they began to use the men's room in their social services jobs. Both of them worked predominantly with gay men who explicitly encouraged them to feel comfortable using the men's restroom. Douglas' co-workers even held a mock ceremony in which they presented him with his own key to the men's room.

Transwomen also describe their inclusion in same-gender workplace spaces positively. Carolina notes that she eats lunch with the 'girls' at work now, as she is included in this woman space. Agape describes her excitement at her new ability to interact with women in the bathroom, saying, 'It's so nice to be able chat in the bathroom — it's so nice! I never realized I was missing that because I never had it before!' However, this same-gender inclusion was not so readily available for all transwomen. Jackie recalls an initial coldness toward her on the part of other women at work. Eventually she found acceptance by befriending one socially influential woman. She says of the process:

It's like a waterfall. It took one person to get through ... and then the rest came forward. You know, at every workplace there are 'the girls', you know, the social clique.... As soon as [one woman] started being nice to me, the rest followed.

Interactional styles. Open workplace transitions bring with them opportunities for engaging in same-gender interactions as new men or new women. In describing their relationships with other women in the workplace post-transition, transwomen express a new sense of freedom. When they were working as men, many transwomen had very stereotypically masculine workplace personas, as do many pre-transition transwomen (Griggs, 1998). Achieving these personas meant that they did not acknowledge their personal sense of relating more to women and 'women's interests' than to men and 'men's interests'. As women, however, they now are able to openly express interest in feminine things that they often denied when they were working as men. Describing this new freedom, Laura, who transitioned in a professional job, notes:

I got a bigger field of friends in this building. And of course, they're all female, because we all have lots of talk about. You know, I have grandchildren that range from two and up, so you know, we can talk about kids, we can talk about babies, you know, just about anything any other woman would talk about is what I'm knowledgeable and like to talk about. I like to cook, I like to sew. So it makes it pretty easy.

Prior to her transition, she did not, as a man, attempt the same types of interactions with women, as she worried these interactions would be seen as inappropriate, or she would be labelled as an atypical or gay man.

Illustrating the greater leeway for women to admit interest in activities coded as masculine (Thorne, 1993), transmen do not recount having to hide their preference for masculinity — indeed, most transmen in this study describe themselves as embodying this preference in their personal appearance. Yet, many transmen recount men explicitly engaging them in 'guy talk' immediately after their announcement of their impending transition. Kelly,

who transitioned in a semi-professional workplace where men were the minority, says:

I definitely notice that the guys ... they will say stuff to me that I know they wouldn't have said before [when I was working as a woman].... And like one guy, he never talked to me before. I think he was uncomfortable [that I was a lesbian].... Recently we were talking and he was talking about his girlfriend and he's like, 'I go home and work it [have sex] for exercise'. And I know he would never have said that to me before.

Jake describes a similar enlisting into what can be described as masculine gender rituals. In his professional workplace, he recounts making few changes in his interactional style with men in his workplace. However, he notes:

One of the funny things that happened that was gender specific was that a lot of my male colleagues, at least at first, started kind of like slapping me on the back [laughs]. But I think it was with more force than they probably slapped each other on the back.... And it was not that I had gained access to 'male privilege' but they were trying to affirm to me that they saw me as a male.... That they were going to try to be supportive and that was the way they were going to be supportive of me as a guy, or something of the sort [laughs]. Slapping me on the back.

As he remarks, he does not take this backslapping as a signal that these men have forgotten his birth gender. Rather, he interprets these actions as a kind of social validation performance his colleagues are acting out in an attempt to signal acceptance. The awkwardness of these backslaps illustrates his colleagues' own hyperawareness of trying to casually do gender man to man. As Jake actively cultivates a transman identity, he, like Kelly, is uncomfortable with this incorporation, as he perceives it as intended to gloss over his life history. Yet, while he is able to disrupt this incorporation momentarily by mentioning things from his life as a woman, such as when he was a Girl Scout, he notes that men in his workplace appear more comfortable trying to relate to him as 'just a guy' rather than a transman with a female history.

Gender apprenticing. Rather than challenging the authenticity of transmen and transwomen's destination gender, some same-gender colleagues took their transitioning colleague on as what can be described as a gender apprentice. For transmen, this form of apprenticing typically came from heterosexual men who sought to socialize them into how to be a man. Colin, who transitioned in a professional workplace, remembers being stopped by the director of his office the first day he came to work in a tie. 'He's like, "Oh no, no, no. That's not a good tie. Come here!" And he showed me how to tie a Windsor

knot.' In this situation, his older colleague adopts Colin as a younger protégé, teaching him 'masculine' knowledge — how to tie a Windsor knot — that typically is handed down from father to son.

Simon, who transitioned in the 'women's professions', also encountered apprenticing from the father of one of the children he worked with, as well as from his brother-in-law. While some transmen appreciate this form of apprenticing, others chafe at it, as it coerces them into hegemonic performances of masculinity that do not fit with their personal identity projects. This pressure from men in the workplace to do gender as men in the 'right' way suggests, as well, that co-workers may have more anxiety about appropriate gender performances than the person who is actually transitioning.

While transwomen describe less frequent occurrences of gender apprenticing, they are, in contrast to transmen, typically appreciative of these apprenticing efforts of women they work with. This gender difference in reactions may be a result of the different reactions to gender crossing. In other words, as women, pre-transition transmen have more leeway for adopting masculine appearances and behaviour, which gives them more experience with masculinity when they transition. As men, on the other hand, pre-transition transwomen face severe social sanctions for expressing interest in feminine styles and behaviour. This difference, an adult version of the 'tomboy/sissy' dynamic (Thorne, 1993), means that transwomen have little experience with how to do femininity once they become women, and are appreciative of women's efforts to socialize them. Describing this reaction, Laura, who transitioned in a professional job, recounts how moved she was when a woman at her work took her shopping for make-up:

I've had other women here help me with make-up.... There's a lady here who said, 'Oh, let me do it! I can show you simple things'. I said, 'Ok!' and we went shopping, that kind of thing.... I forgot how it was brought up — but somebody said, 'You know, Crystal loves to do makeup'. And I said, 'I'm gonna have to get a hold of her and see what her ideas are'. And that is how it began. And so — I paid for lunch and we ran out to Target or someplace and picked out a few things that would work. And she taught me how to put it on.

Laura initiates her own apprenticing by directly approaching her colleague for make-up advice. This apprenticing allows her to develop more confidence in her feminine appearance. While other transwomen describe being 'allowed' to engage in 'girl talk' about children, romance, and fashion, they do not recount such strong incorporation into their destination gender by women as transmen do from men. As with the previous examples in this section, men appear more invested in including transmen as just one of the guys than women are in incorporating transwomen into the world of women at work. In both cases, however, this kind of gender apprenticing reinforces strongly held cultural beliefs about how men and women should act and

look. Even when transmen attempt to create new ways to be a man at work, they often are socially repatriated into the gender binary as men — showing again the difficulty of undoing gender in the context of the workplace.

Discussion

In this article we consider the impact of open gender transitions on binary conceptions of gender in the context of the workplace. While transsexuals often are represented as being gender overachievers (Garfinkel, 1967; Kando, 1973; Raymond, 1979), this article shows that in open workplace transitions, co-workers, rather than transmen and transwomen, can overdo and reinforce gender. This over-doing of gender typically occurs when co-workers attempt to demonstrate their acceptance of their transitioning colleague. Men slap transmen on the back and engage them in 'guy talk,' while women begin to ask transmen to do heavy lifting. Co-workers also try to teach transmen how to be men, or begin to hold transwomen accountable to restrictive standards of appropriate work femininity.

As everyone re-negotiates the meaning of gender and sexual difference made visible by open workplace transitions, binary thinking about gender is often upheld and the resulting gender hierarchies interwoven with heteronormativity and sexism are reproduced. Transmen and transwomen can be frustrated by the rigid gender expectations placed upon them by co-workers. For some transwomen, facing the devaluation of femininity in the workplace is detrimental to their careers, as they are rejected from powerful homosocial men's networks or classified as less able workers. The reactions transmen and transwomen describe to their gender transitions suggest that co-workers may face more anxieties about how to properly do gender in open workplace transitions than their transitioning colleague. Rather than causing gender trouble, however, these anxieties result in a reinforcement of binary views on gender through the reproduction of gendered hierarchies that disadvantage women and rigid adherence to the 'right' way to do gender.

Some challenges to the authenticity of transmen and transwomen's destination genders do arise. In the case of transmen, women may be more likely than men to have concerns about the transition, or to see the transition as inauthentic, as they believe they share something — a female body by birth — with transmen. Operating from this frame of similarity, women may have more qualms about bodily transformation as they can imagine a similar transformation of their own body.

Demonstrating how shared birth gender may impact on reactions to surgery, transwomen also face workplace resistance to their transition predominantly from heterosexual men at work. Transwomen have noted that biological men have a visceral reaction to the news of their 'sex change,' as they can vividly imagine the removal of their own penis (Griggs, 1998).

Transwomen also are viewed as giving up male privilege, particularly if they were hegemonically masculine prior to transition. From this place of being the same, heterosexual men may have difficulty justifying why a man would want to move to a lower gender status, and remove his penis; the literal signifier of patriarchal dominance.

Transmen, on the other hand, are moving up the gender hierarchy. Women, then, may balk at what they perceive as gaining gender privilege. Exemplifying this attitude, several transmen noted that some women in their workplaces made comments that transmen were — now as men — going to benefit from the ‘good ole boys’ network’. Even with this challenge, however, the gender binary is upheld; transitioning individuals are simply returned to the ‘reality’ of their birth gender (women trying to be men, men acting like women) rather than being viewed as a third gender, or being repatriated into the ‘other side’ of the binary.

Co-workers who shared the destination gender of transgender people offered less resistance to the transition, and in fact did work to incorporate their colleague into being one of the guys or one of the girls.³ Heterosexual men might be expected to bar transmen from becoming men at work, as this move could challenge their own claim to masculinity. However, transmen describe heterosexual men going out of their way to incorporate them into all-male interactions.

Looking at the behaviour of heterosexual men co-workers from the perspective of the social construction of masculinity, and the dovetailing of doing gender and doing heterosexuality, these incorporation responses in are not entirely surprising. While these men may not see their transman colleague as really a man, they recognize that in this particular context — the workplace — this identity is being socially validated. And, as their colleague begins to look like a man with hormone therapy, raising oppositions to their masculinity becomes problematic. Transmen noted that heterosexual men asked them questions about the physical aspects of their transition when it was first announced at work, such as ‘Are you gonna grow a dick?’ But as they began to look like men with the use of hormone therapy, they are enlisted into ‘guy talk’ about sex with women and working out. As homophobia governs men’s interactions with one another (Connell, 1995; Messner, 1997), men appear to realize that showing a continued interest in the genitalia of someone who looks like a man can render them suspect to other co-workers. To avoid charges of homosexuality, it is easier for heterosexual men to ‘forget’ about the transition and try to relate to transmen on the level just being a guy.

These reactions show that in open workplace transitions, co-workers, transmen and transwomen all are renegotiating and managing gender and sexual difference. Yet, within this identity work, these data suggest there is little initial challenge in the workplace to naturalized attitudes about the immutability of gender, binary views about the complimentary nature of masculinity and femininity, or gendered workplace hierarchies. In other

words, the mere introduction of a visibly transgender subject does not result in an undoing of gender or the creation of gender alternatives, such as a third gender category or a gender continuum (Bornstein, 1994; Garber, 1992).

We are not suggesting that gender crossing has no potential to create social change within rigid gender hierarchies. However, we argue that in theorizing about the potential of the transgender gender subject for causing gender trouble, the materiality and subjectivity of transgender people must be taken into account, as well as the context in which gender crossing occurs. As Prosser (1998) notes, a desire to challenge the gender system does not inherently underlie all gender transitions. And, as we show in this article, even when transsexual/transgender people do seek to challenge gender inequality and binary views on gender, their potential impact is limited by the context of the workplace.

Transgender workers — a vulnerable population economically — must balance political desires to shake up gender with job security. Retaining job security can mean participating in existing workplace gender structures of doing dominance for men and doing deference for women. As transgender workers settle into their new gender at work, they may have more leeway for creating gender trouble. However, organizational cultures are slow to change, even with direct confrontation or legal reforms, making the documentation of this type of workplace transformation difficult.⁴

In conclusion, we suggest that theoretical conceptions about the transformative potential of gender performances that are not in line with birth gender (Butler, 1990, 2004) should pay close attention to context, as well as the way in which these performances are socially interpreted. While intentional gender trouble performances can have political possibilities, such as in certain drag performances (Rupp and Taylor, 2004), they also can — as in the context of the workplace — be repatriated into a binary, or dismissed as inauthentic.

Notes

1. The term 'transgender' has become an umbrella term for a variety of gender identities (Green, 2004). 'Transsexuals', individuals who transition from one recognized gender category to another, can be placed under the transgender rubric. However, some individuals in this study prefer to identify as transsexual rather than transgender. Our use of 'transsexual/transgender' in this article is an effort to allow them to maintain their subjectivity, rather than choosing a label for them. We also employ the terms 'transwomen' and 'transmen,' as these terms — though not representative of specific identities — allow us a less cumbersome way to talk about gender differences between the collectives of our interviewees.
2. We use the term 'destination gender' to refer to social gender identity transsexual/transgender people seek to attain with their transition. In other words, the destination gender for transmen is male, while the destination gender for transwomen is female. The destination gender is in opposition to what we term 'birth gender', the gender transsexual/transgender people are assigned at birth.

3. These receptive responses are not par for the course for transgender people who openly transition at work. Legal cases and news stories about transgender employment demonstrates that transwomen can face strong opposition from women colleagues, as transmen can face from men colleagues (Schilt, 2006). These 'gender guarding' reactions typically occur, however, when management has not officially sanctioned an open workplace transition, which was not a factor for the transmen and transwomen in our study.
4. Showing how workplace transformation is possible, several Fortune 500 companies, such as IBM and General Motors, have begun to cover transition-related costs on health insurance (Buchanan, 2007). This type of change in organizational policy is a direct result of transgender activism from employees in these companies. However, these policies do not necessarily change cultural schemas about gender embedded in workplace structures and interactions.

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