

British Academy of Management Conference 2023

Disrupting gender transgressions: an identity work perspective of trans* experience and practices of gender

Ali Rostron

University of Liverpool Management School

a.rostron@liverpool.ac.uk

Abstract: In this paper I both build on existing studies of trans* experience, and seek to disrupt some of the normative thinking that is emerging around trans* lives and what it means to identify and to live as trans*. In particular I wish to (re-)challenge ideas of gender transgression and doing and undoing gender. First I answer calls to include more diverse experiences of trans* lives and identities and more trans* voices by drawing on my own life as a female with gender dysphoria who has chosen not to transition. Second, I apply an identity work perspective which, I argue, is a powerful theoretical tool for examining trans* identity and trans* experience and practice of gender, but which has so far been underused in this field. By examining a mundane event of me going shopping in a department store I analyse how I do gender moment by moment, and the processes of identity work involved. In doing so I reveal the diverse and complex ways in which gender is commonly organised and experienced, and offer new insight into the variegated nature of trans* people beyond normative accounts of trans* lives.

Key words: Identity work, gender identity, transgender, gender, autoethnography

Word Count: 6988 excluding references

Introduction¹

This year's conference theme is "disruptive sustainability". In recent years gender has been a key target within Management and Organisational Studies for disrupting norms, practices and ways of organising, and creating more sustainable alternatives. Within this field, people who identify as trans* have increasingly been drawn on as examples of transgressing, resisting, disrupting and reconfiguring gender in ways that create, or demand, new possibilities of gender expression, challenging or undoing normative constructs such as gender binary or the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993) and new ways of thinking and organising (de Souza & Parker, 2022; O'Shea, 2018; Rumens et al., 2019).

In this paper I both build on existing studies of trans* experience and seek to disrupt some of the normative thinking that is emerging around trans* lives and what it means to identify and to live as trans*. In particular I wish to (re-)challenge ideas of gender transgression and doing and undoing gender. I do this in two ways. First I answer calls to include more diverse

¹ I am extremely grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their very useful, extensive and constructive suggestions for further developing the paper. Time and word constraints have meant that I have not been able to action many of them but they will be invaluable for revising the paper for a journal submission.

experiences of trans* lives and identities and more trans* voices (Darwin, 2020; de Souza & Parker, 2022; Garrison, 2018; O'Shea, 2019) by drawing on my own life as a female with gender dysphoria who has chosen not to transition. Second, I apply an identity work perspective which, I argue, is a powerful theoretical tool for examining trans* identity and trans* experience and practice of gender, but which has so far been underused in this field. I examine a mundane event – me going shopping in a department store – to analyse how I do gender moment by moment, and the processes of identity work involved. In doing so I reveal the diverse and complex ways in which gender is commonly organised and experienced, and offer new insight into the variegated nature of trans* people beyond normative accounts of trans* lives.

Trans* people and gender

‘Transgender’ is a contested category (Darwin, 2020) which is variously used to both include a wide variety of gender identities such as transsexual, transvestite, non-binary or queer, and also to distinguish a particular kind of transgender identity – one who identifies and lives as the opposite sex – from those others. For this reason I use the term trans* to denote an umbrella category (Ladwig, 2022) defined as anyone who has ‘a self-image or identity, not traditionally associated with their biological maleness or femaleness’ (Davis, 2009, p.109).

Studies of trans* people within MOS have been predicated on the need to include minority experiences of organisations (Dray et al., 2020; Muhr & Sullivan, 2013; Priola et al., 2014; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016) but also that trans* people have special insight into gender. Trans* people who transition are uniquely placed to offer insight into experiences of living as and being treated as both male and female (Jones, 2020; Schilt, 2006; Schilt & Connell, 2007). In seeking to live in non-conforming ways trans* people are often held up as uniquely having to ‘do’ gender (Garfinkel, 1967) as they actively craft femininity or masculinity and negotiate new social relationships (Schilt & Connell, 2007) in contrast to the majority who are assumed to naturally conform to gender expectations (de Souza & Parker, 2022; Martinez et al., 2017; Muhr et al., 2016; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016); and that the ways in which they ‘transgress’ gender norms offer new insight into the complex, nuanced and situated ways in which bodies are gendered and organised (Muhr & Sullivan, 2013; Muhr et al., 2016; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016).

Trans* people have also been studied in the context of new possibilities of organising. It is argued that trans* people challenge the gender binary, in which social life is perceived and organised as either male or female, because they ‘cannot be said to be one or the other’ (Muhr et al., 2016, p.53) and often do not see themselves as either (Darwin, 2020; Garrison, 2018; O'Shea, 2018; O'Shea, 2020b). De Souza and Parker (2022) draw on the experiences of people who identify as non-binary to argue for ‘transorganizing’ or ‘thinking *with* trans’ which might create new categories and language to describe non-binary lived experience and disrupt and dissolve boundaries between different identities. Both De Souza and Parker (2022) and Rumens et al (2019) also argue that ‘thinking with trans’ or ‘queering’ needs to be used not to distinguish trans* experience from the norm, but to problematise heteronormative practices themselves.

Trans* lives within MOS is still a relatively nascent and emerging field, and the attention paid to trans* people is uneven. Most studies still focus on trans* people who identify as and seek to live as the opposite sex (Darwin, 2020; de Souza & Parker, 2022; Garrison, 2018) and

the majority of studies are of male-to-female trans* people (Jeanes & Janes, 2021). Unsurprisingly, there are very few studies by someone identifying as trans* themselves (de Souza & Parker, 2022). O'Shea, a notable exception, argues that 'more voices need to be heard from to reflect the diversity of lives, identities and experiences of the 'transgender umbrella' (2020b, p.8) and also notes the particular difficulties of writing personal accounts: '[official accounts] are about us but fundamentally not ours, yet the latter may be dismissed as vanity projects particularly if they do not cleave to official analysis and tropes' (O'Shea, 2019, p.41). This sentiment is also reflected in studies of trans* people who feel they do not conform sufficiently to normative trans experience and narratives (Darwin, 2020; Garrison, 2018).

However, I also wish to highlight two more problematic aspects of much of the extant MOS literature on trans* people. The first is the risk of overplaying trans* experience and underplaying that of non-trans* people². For example, accounts of trans* people's careful regulation of their bodies, dress and behaviour, and their adjustments in response to different social contexts often discount how all employees regulate their work and professional selves to some degree, particularly women who have to negotiate an impossible balance between being acceptably feminine and acceptably (masculinely) professional (Brewis et al., 1997; Eveline, 2005; Sinclair, 2013). Gender itself is a performance of constructing oneself as an acceptable version of masculinity or femininity and concealing that which does not conform (Brewis et al., 1997; Horrocks, 1994). Indeed, a recent study by Strubel and Guswami (2022) found that non-trans* women placed more importance on clothing as part of gender performance than either transwomen or transmen, and thus that they may be as aware of their working at gender as trans* people. Care also needs to be taken not to overestimate the ability – or desire – of trans* people to challenge or undo the gender binary. Some trans* people desire live and be accepted as the opposite sex (Davis, 2009; Muhr et al., 2016; Schilt, 2006) and for others transition has made workplace life and acceptance easier than being non-conforming in their original sex (Jeanes & Janes, 2021; Schilt, 2006; Schilt & Connell, 2007).

A second issue is failing to carefully distinguish between sex and gender as distinct concepts. Sex is material and biological and based on species reproduction. Society is organised according to a sex binary (West & Zimmerman, 1987) which is then reinforced discursively through gender in order to organise and enforce social roles and expectations of either sex (Brewis et al., 1997). Such gender expectations lead to the assumption that there is a close correlation between sex and gender, and that one determines the other. A necklace is for girls and therefore someone who wears a necklace is a girl (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender is therefore generally understood by gender scholars as a social construction; however, I do not follow scholars such as Butler (1990; 1993) who argue that sex is also a social construction, except in the broadest sense of what we choose to notice, recognise, ascribe social importance to and 'make matter' (Barad, 2007). Sex as the organisation of species for reproduction is consistently empirically observable and identifiable. However, when, how and why sex is made to matter within social relations and organisation, as opposed to gender expression or gender identity, are important questions to engage with, both for understanding the experiences of trans* people and for developing policies that enable trans* people to have 'liveable lives' (Butler, 2004; O'Shea, 2018). Trans* people themselves have different

² I use 'non-trans*' rather than 'cis' because cis is usually used in opposition to transgender, which, as I have already explained, is itself a contested term. I therefore deliberately refer to anyone who does not identify as trans* as non-trans*.

feelings about and relationships with their sexed bodies and not all trans* people choose to undergo medical procedures to physically alter their bodies.

Trans* identity and identity work

Although ‘gender identity’ is a common term within the trans* lexicon there have been very few studies of trans* people within the field of identity studies, or which use identity as a theoretical tool rather than an ascribed characteristic. Indeed, trans* studies sometimes adopt definitions of gender identity which do not reflect scholarly understandings of identity as reflexive, multiple, constructed within relations of power and not helpfully described as ‘authentic’ (Brown, 2022). For example, Collins et al (2015) adopt a commonly used definition of gender identity of ‘one’s innate, intrinsic self-identification as a male, female, or another gender. This gender identity may not necessarily match that assigned to them at birth.’ Elsewhere Darwin (2020) uses identity work narrowly to refer to coming to terms with one’s gender identity. However, I argue that identity theory, and especially that of identity work, can be a valuable tool for examining and making sense of the experiences of trans* people and their responses to the social organisation of gender.

Identity work conceptualises ‘the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social-identities which pertain to them in the various milieu in which they live their lives’ (Watson, 2008, p.129). Identity work therefore focuses attention on identity as an ongoing dynamic between the self and the social, and as a process rather than a state, and the dynamic as one of tension, or ‘struggle’ between the individual’s sense of self and social expectations of them at any given moment and context. It expresses that process as being ‘mutually constitutive’, with the self being both constrained by social effects and having (differing degrees of) agency to shape and influence how it is expressed within those social contexts. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) usefully summarise identity work as the process of continually ‘forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising’ self-identity in the context of ongoing challenges or confirmations posed by identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 262).

Adopting an identity work perspective helps to illuminate a number of important aspects of trans* experience which will be explored and illustrated in this paper. Rather than focusing on ‘gender identity’ as something fixed and innate, it conceptualises it as the ongoing struggle to sustain a self-concept which is not supported by heteronormative and gendered social contexts and expectations. Identity work can further draw attention to how the nature of that process and degree of struggle changes according to different social contexts and social expectations of the trans* person as, for example, a professional, partner, customer, citizen, or member of a trans* community. It also helps to explain the importance many trans* people and their supporters place on their own self-identity being socially recognised and acknowledged by others (Devor, 2004; Martinez et al., 2017; Narendran et al., 2021). Relatedly, identity work can highlight both how trans* people’s gendered concept of themselves is constituted through the social environment constitution of gender and gendered bodies, and how they may also seek to influence how others see and treat them.

The case of me

I am a middle-aged female and have experienced strong feelings of gender dysphoria all my life. As a young child I remember feeling that I was really a boy, and had I heard of the

phrase 'born in the wrong body' I would have said that described what I felt. These feelings became more intense during puberty. In my early twenties I came out as gay (I am uncomfortable describing myself as a lesbian) and in my early thirties I seriously considered whether to formally transition. However, I have never actually tried to transition, and am now reasonably certain that I won't do so, partly because I have been able to manage my dysphoria through dressing and presenting as a man, and partly because I also believe that I am not and cannot ever be or become a male: I will remain female irrespective of what hormone treatment or surgery I undergo. This is not a belief shared by all trans* people but it is not a belief I have chosen, any more than I chose whether or not to believe in god. Meanwhile, my gender dysphoria still exists and despite my belief that I am female, I still desire to be seen as male.

I offer myself as a case for studying trans* experience and the organisation of gender for several reasons. I contribute to the very small body of scholars who write from personal experience of identifying and living as trans*. My own life as trans* also helps to add to 'the diversity of lives, identities and experiences of the "transgender umbrella"' (O'Shea, 2020a, p.8): as a female desiring to be male; of being trans* without transitioning; and as someone who acknowledges a distinction between their sex and their gendered self-concept, and their inability to change sex (the latter being more commonly associated with criticisms of trans* lives and trans*activism). My case therefore offers a very particular and understudied trans* experience. Read as identity work, I experience strong and painful dissonance between my self-concept and the socially gendered expectations of me as a female. I also recognise my strong desire to be male as an unachievable fantasy, but I nevertheless present, perform and live as male as much as possible. Identity work is the attempt to maintain the desired self, but in my case my desired self is also a fantasy and I am constantly aware of my attempts at a male performance. I seek recognition and acknowledgement of my performance and am happy when strangers mistake me for male, but I cannot ask friends, family and colleagues to call me male. I also remain constantly aware, and in some fear, of being called out, or of having to out myself as female (for example, using public toilets, or being asked to share one's pronouns). I experience my situation as a 'fractured self', unable to be the self I desire to be, but nevertheless with the agency to perform that desired self whilst knowing it to be unachievable.

Methodology: Constructing an autoethnographical vignette

In this paper I seek to create an evocative text (Ellis, 2004) of a common and mundane experience: going clothes shopping. I describe an occasion which is especially memorable, but which also reflects my experience of gender and its organisation more widely. In presenting this vignette I have endeavoured to capture and convey some of the concrete actions, dialogues and emotions that remembering it evokes (Herrmann et al., 2013). As I describe this particular occasion of going clothes shopping I also interweave my reflections on these actions, dialogues and emotions, and fold in layers of further memories. Thus I present my autoethnographical account as a dialogue between past and present, self-as-trans* and self-as-researcher.

Despite increasing recognition (Sambrook, 2015) autoethnography may still be considered an extreme form of qualitative research, especially in a field such as MOS where the positive paradigm continues to dominate (Pratt, 2009; Pratt et al., 2019). As such it is subject to criticism and distrust, which needs to be confronted. These include accusations of a lack of rigor, without standardised methods and language (Boyle & Parry, 2007; Clough, 2000; Ford

& Harding, 2008); a reliance on personal memory and recall (Chang, 2008; Winkler, 2014); narcissism, self-indulgence and vanity projects (O'Shea, 2019; Sparkes, 2002); and a lack of critical distance between the researcher and the researched, when the author is both (Winkler, 2013).

I justify my use of autoethnography for the study of trans* experience of gender and its organisation on three grounds. First, as I have previously argued, the field of trans* studies remains relatively nascent within MOS, and offering the particular example of my own experience answers calls for greater diversity of trans* voices. Autoethnography pays attention to the particular self, but it also seeks to connect it to wider cultural, political and structural practices and discourses, and to illuminate the relationships between each (Boyle & Parry, 2007). Through my subjective and personal account of a mundane occasion I seek to surface what may be little spoken about or hidden (Grant & Zeeman, 2012; Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012; Pullen et al., 2017) but which may have wider relevance for understanding both gender and trans* lives.

Second, I am deliberately drawing on a lived experience of gender with which I am deeply familiar (Winkler, 2014). Rather than attempting to establish sufficient distance from the phenomenon being studied, and to keep one's own experience separate from the interpretation of others', as an autoethnographer I aim to get as close as possible to the phenomenon of trans* experience of gender. Rather than asserting boundaries between subject and researcher, I purposively engage in boundary crossing (Hansson & Dybbroe, 2012; Winkler, 2013): as subject, researcher, trans*, and female.

Third, autoethnography allows the possibility of developing a process view of how individuals make sense of themselves and their experiences (Winkler, 2013). As qualitative researchers we recognise that accounts of lived experience may be cued and informed by different social contexts (Alvesson, 2003; van Manen, 1997). The adoption of multiple roles (as subject, researcher, trans*, and female) offers the possibility of catching and observing myself in the process of making sense of and accounting for my experiences. Allied with the lens of identity work, I seek to catch myself in moments of making sense of and negotiating tensions between who I understand myself to be, who I desire to be and how I am seen.

Going shopping: A vignette in five parts

Part 1: Getting dressed. *It's a Saturday morning. My partner wants some new work outfits, so we're going shopping. I dress with this in mind: I will be on show so I need to choose carefully. I stare at myself in the mirror, checking myself. Do my hips and thighs show in these jeans? Shirt in or out? I imagine the mirrors in the store reflecting myself back at me. This is ok, I feel good. I think I look male.*

I dress to be seen by others. The mirror is a crucial part of my getting dressed: even if I choose clothes I wear regularly I still always check how I look this time, and I am often aware of minute differences. The same pair of jeans might create a satisfyingly straight profile or seem to accentuate the bulge of my thighs. I assume that others will see myself as I do, and I need to satisfy myself that my body looks sufficiently male before I am comfortable going out. This includes paying close attention to the rules of masculine dress: for example, when I wear a tie with a suit I always tie a proper Windsor knot and make sure the tip of the tie just rests above my belt. I am also more or less aware that in engaging in such a careful

and deliberate performance of male dress, I accentuate how different I am from a man getting dressed.

Read as identity work, I am carefully and deliberately preparing myself to be recognised as a man. My identity work includes satisfying myself that I look sufficiently male and that I cannot see any trace of the female body I am aware of under my clothes: I need to recognise the reflection of myself in the mirror as male. It also includes identifying and interpreting what others will recognise as male. In order to gain recognition I make sure I conform to normative gender expectations, and these then inform my self-concept of feeling male by doing masculinity 'properly'. That is, my performance of masculinity cannot afford to be ambiguous or transgressive. At the same time, I also recognise my fractured self and the gap between what I desire to be and my sexed body. I am conscious of the work I undertake to present and to perform as male, because I am not.

Part 2: Entering the store. *We park and walk to the store entrance. The manikins flank our way in, blank-faced, elegant and impossibly proportioned, frozen in their perfection. I run my eye along them and pause at the one male one. Nice cargos, how would they work on me?*

Clothes stores are gendered spaces. The manikins guarding the entrance to this store also reflect its gendered organisation. They are differentiated as male and female in their body shape and poses as well as dress, and by having many more female manikins. Clothes and shopping for them are a utility for men, and an enjoyable experience for women; the store is primarily for women and the much smaller men's section is usually located at the back of the store, or upstairs. I am aware of crossing a threshold as I enter a store. The manikins, and then the women's clothes I first pass all ask me: which are you? Are these for you or not? What is your role here? My attention to the male manikin is partly a deliberate affirmation to myself that this is my role and interest here. But it also reflects my constant attention to my own masculine performance: could I look male in these clothes?

Entering a space such as a clothes store prompts identity work because it is overtly organised by gender, and also reinforces the gender binary by differentiating men and women according to dress and social role. This particular kind of gendered space supports my self-concept of being male: I neither look like, nor wish to look like any of the female images, therefore I am not female but male.

Part 3: Going round the store. *We walk round the store. My partner leads the way and I follow, a couple of steps behind. She holds up a top against herself and I nod and agree it looks nice. She hands it to me to carry while she continues looking. I glance around but don't see anything I can suggest, so I continue to wait to approve what she picks. We head to the changing rooms and I hand over the clothes to her.*

Going round the store I play a typically male role to a female partner shopping. Couples all over the store are accomplishing the same performance, the men following the women, playing no active part in the considering and selection of clothes. I enjoy this aspect of shopping. I want to be helpful to my partner and I am also pleased to know that I am comfortably and naturally reflecting what men are doing. Read as identity work, I am performing maleness and recognising my performance in other men, which reinforces my own recognition of myself as male. In this moment I experience congruence between my

self-concept and social context. My sexed body is not important to my self-concept; my performance of maleness alongside other men is what matters.

Part 4: The men's section. *While my partner is in the changing rooms I wander over to the men's section, which is right at the back of the store. On my way I snatch a glance at myself in a mirror: I look ok, I think, I'll pass. I look for the cargos the manikin was wearing. They're still nice close up, I think they would suit me but I don't want to try them on. I don't need them and we're not here for me today. I head back to the changing rooms. Outside, two men are checking their phones. I get mine out and find a message from my partner: Come and look.*

Going into the men's section of a clothes store is to cross another threshold. Of course, women are in this section, with male partners and without, shopping for men, but I want to shop for myself and I want to be taken as a male to do so. At the same time, I am also uncomfortable that I enjoy shopping for clothes; it doesn't feel like a male characteristic and I feel my own performance of masculinity is undermined by being here at all. My wander round the men's section is therefore quick and half-hearted, especially once I have found the cargo trousers. And behind the reasons I give myself, there is also another reason why I don't pursue them further. I don't want to try them on because I don't want to have to face the challenge of the changing rooms.

While performing maleness in a female space supported my self-concept, entering a male space threatened it and prompted more intense identity work. My self-concept relied on being recognised as a man rather than a woman shopping for a man (or indeed a woman shopping for herself). However, I felt less confident in my performance as a man in a male space which females could legitimately enter, rather than an exclusively male space where my presence itself would signify maleness. I also felt less confident being on my own rather than with my partner; whereas with her we could be read heteronormatively as a couple performing complementary masculinity and femininity, on my own I felt under greater scrutiny. Although I received no signals from anyone that I was not recognised as a man, the nature and context of this particular gendered space and my presence in it informed my interpretation of how I would be read by others. My self-concept was also threatened by my failure to conform to normative masculinity and made me question the authenticity of my own performance: would a man be here on his own at all? Thus I questioned not only my desire to be male, but my performance of the fantasy of being male.

Part 5: The changing rooms. *I walk into the changing rooms. Men's to the left, Women's to the right. I hesitate and then turn right. As I walk down the corridor of cubicles a store assistant calls out: Excuse me, this is the ladies, you can't go in there. I hesitate, turn and walk out again, briefly raise my hand in acknowledgement to the assistant and stand just outside. From inside comes my partner's voice, angry: She's a woman! Another assistant is also nudging the one who asked me to leave: it's not a man! The assistant comes over to me, full of apologies. I walk back into the changing rooms and turn right again.*

I do not use men's changing rooms or public toilets, because I acknowledge that my body remains female, and that it does not belong in some male spaces that are based on sexed bodies. I would feel uncomfortable entering private male spaces, and also anxious for my own safety as a female in such spaces (and especially a female trying to pass as male). However, I also feel intense discomfort having to 'out' myself as female by choosing women's changing rooms or toilets. Often this involves having to declare my right to be

there: Yes, I am a woman, it's ok. It is embarrassing to have attention drawn to me, and to deal with the embarrassment of the other person when they realise their mistake. This particular occasion was unusual. When I was challenged I accepted the appellation of male, complied with it and walked out. I don't know why I did it. I felt pleasure that I had been recognised as male, awkwardness that, as a presumed male, I had been trespassing in a female space, and anxiety that this male appellation needed to be corrected. When I was recognised as female I felt embarrassed to have fooled or confused the assistant. I also felt cross with her. In that moment I wanted her to have seen through my male performance, my disguise, and recognised me as a woman.

Reading this episode as identity work reveals the 'fractured self' at the heart of my gender dysphoria, and the struggle I experience between my female sexed body and male gender identity. Certain gendered spaces make my sexed body more salient because I interpret them – and have learned socially to interpret them – as based on sex and places where sex matters. Changing rooms and toilets are both spaces where sexed bodies are (more) likely to be revealed. Although I could enter such male spaces as a man without revealing my body, I choose not to, and while I rationalise it in terms of privacy and safety, I really do it for no other reason that it feels wrong. By entering such female spaces I am disclosing my female sexed body, which causes me discomfort; but I also then require others to recognise me as female. Yet, such recognition also causes me discomfort, and I am also reassured when I am not recognised as female. In moments such as these I am made aware that my fantasy of being a man is indeed fantasy, and not socially sustainable, but that nevertheless I still desire it.

Discussion

For trans* people, who have 'a self-image or identity, not traditionally associated with their biological maleness or femaleness' (Davis, 2009, p.109), gender is likely to be a highly salient feature of their identity work, which makes the identity work of trans* people a valuable lens with which to examine how gender is organised and experienced. In this paper I have presented an evocative text (Ellis, 2004) of a mundane occasion, that of going clothes shopping. By presenting my own experience of such an occasion, and by paying detailed attention to my experience moment by moment, as both subject and researcher, and as female bodied and trans* person through the lens of identity work, I aim to uncover some of the hidden or taken-for-granted ways in which gender is organised, ascribed and performed. From my analysis I draw attention to three areas of insight: the complexity and multiplicity of doing and undoing gender; power effects in the organisation of gender; and the nature of trans* experience of gender.

Doing gender and being gendered is an ongoing process. It is not new to say that experiences and perceptions of oneself and gender are situational and mediated by context (Muhr et al., 2016). However, through my autoethnographical account and analysis I demonstrate how one body is differently experienced, perceived, managed and policed not just on particular occasions but moment by moment. In the store I moved through gendered spaces where my body was subject to differing levels of attention and different assumptions about its meaning and its belongingness. Entering the store I received clear signals of how male and female bodies should look, dress and behave, but I was free to move through both male and female sections unquestioned and unchallenged, despite not conforming to such expectations, and whether I was perceived as a male in the women's section or a female in the men's. However, when I entered the women's changing rooms my presence was challenged because

by dressing as male the attendant assumed that I must also be male-bodied (West & Zimmerman, 1987). When I was called out (by my partner) and recognised (by the other attendant) as female I was immediately granted access. My dressing as male was irrelevant; what mattered was my female body, although I also infer that it mattered that I became *recognisable* as female having been named as such.

However, read as my identity work and the struggle to maintain congruence between my self-concept and my social context, my autoethnographical account reveals a much more complex and dynamic doing and undoing of gender. It is not only situated context which both determines and makes gender and/or sex more or less salient: my moment by moment interpretation of situated context and the ways in which others perceive me informs my interpretation of myself and my success in performing gender. That is, my self-concept of desiring to be male, and what it means to live and perform as a man, is continually informed, strengthened and challenged by the identity regulation of situated gender norms constituting maleness and femaleness, and *my interpretation of such gender norms*, mediated through what I have been socially conditioned to understand as male and female. When I dressed I chose clothes which I felt would be unambiguously male (shirt and jeans), and I paid attention to parts of my body which I thought might reveal my female shape. I felt more male when I was satisfied that I looked male; I also assumed that my interpretation of looking male would be shared by others and was therefore confident I could trust my own appearance. Being called out as a man in the changing rooms was therefore not only embarrassing but also pleasurable: I had succeeded in passing. When I entered the store, and walked around with my partner, my self-concept of desiring maleness was reinforced: I was in a space that was designed for women and I did not feel that it was designed for me. My discomfort confirmed my interpretation of maleness as not liking shopping. I was also comfortable performing a male role to my female partner, carrying clothes and being a supportive but passive shopper. However, undertaking my own shopping in the men's section threatened my self-concept of desiring maleness. I was aware both of no longer being accompanied by a woman, whose presence could explain my presence as the reluctant man, and my own active interest in shopping for myself. These created uncertainty about not only whether I was appropriately performing maleness, but whether I truly desired to be male. I was continually measuring myself against an imaginary standard of maleness not just in terms of my outward appearance but my own feelings and desires. My identity work thus relies not only on recognition of my gender identity by others (Devor, 2004; Narendran et al., 2021) but in being able to recognise it myself.

An identity work perspective also enables further insight into the nature of power effects in the organisation of gender, and especially the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993) or heteronormativity. Butler argues that sex, gender and sexuality are socially organised as a tripartite system as consistent binaries, so that sex is layered and conflated with appropriate gendered expression and sexuality. This not only restricts the ways in which males and females are permitted to present and behave, but also serves to render many bodies as abnormal, deviant or unintelligible to others or even to themselves (de Souza & Parker, 2022; Muhr et al., 2016; O'Shea, 2018; Rumens, 2017). The heterosexual matrix is therefore often discussed in terms of power effects which constrain and oppress trans* people.

My autoethnographic account of gender suggests that the heterosexual matrix and the ways in which it is used to organise and interpret gender is more complex and nuanced than often described. I was not entirely powerless within the heterosexual matrix. In fact I deliberately relied on the matrix to convince others that my sexed body conformed with my gender

expression. I took pleasure in feeling that I passed and in being recognised as male, and I drew on the matrix and my conformity with it to assure myself of the consistency of my desire to be male and thus my self-identity. Heteronormativity was an important regulator of my self-identity, but I actively drew on it to support my identity work. As a trans* person I was not transgressing or challenging the heterosexual matrix so much as reinforcing it. As a female I have no idea what it means to be or to live as a man except through societal norms of maleness and masculinity. I did not want to be recognised as a female challenging heteronormativity but as a conforming male, and I tried to avoid situations where I would be exposed as a non-conforming female. I therefore offer a more nuanced consideration of trans* experience as a case of transgressing, resisting, disrupting and reconfiguring gender. In one sense, of course, I do transgress gender norms, as a woman who presents as a man. Rather than disrupting or reconfiguring the heterosexual matrix, I rely on it to achieve my own performance of being a man and to sustain my identity work. Although some trans* people such as O'Shea (2018; 2020b) feel neither male nor female and that heteronormativity does not recognise them, other people like me cannot escape the gender binary and we continue to live and work within it.

Finally, analysis of my autoethnographic account of going clothes shopping, read as identity work, reveals new insight into understanding trans* people and their experience of gender. Firstly my account complements both larger scale, thematic studies of trans* people, and autobiographical accounts of trans lives (Davis, 2009; O'Shea, 2018; O'Shea, 2019, 2020b) by offering an autoethnographic account of a single occasion, moment by moment. In doing so I reveal the complex ways in which I, as a trans* person with 'a self-image or identity, not traditionally associated with their biological maleness or femaleness' (Davis, 2009, p.109) do and undo, and am constructed and undone by gender. Gender identity is not certain, fixed or homogenous, but a dynamic and ongoing accomplishment of identity work. In my case I also reveal how actively performing a gender 'not traditionally associated with their biological maleness or femaleness' (Davis, 2009, p.109) requires constant work and a heightened awareness of gender norms and the extent to which I conform to them. My gender identity remains provisional and fragile.

Second, I offer an account of a trans* life which is not part of normative trans* discourse, as a female experiencing gender dysphoria and who wishes to live and be recognised as a man, but who nevertheless acknowledges the sexed body as material reality. I characterise this as a 'fractured self': I am unable to be the self I desire to be (male), but nevertheless with the agency to perform that desired male self, whilst knowing it to be ultimately unachievable and whilst being prepared to be (correctly) called out as female bodied. In doing so I answer calls for studies and accounts of trans* lives to better reflect the diversity of the trans* umbrella (O'Shea, 2020b). Trans* people are not homogenous and make different sense of dissonance between sexed bodies and gender identity. We do all trans* lives a disservice by not acknowledging and reflecting such diversity.

Conclusions and Implications

In this paper I have presented an autoethnographical account of a mundane event of going shopping in a department store, and used identity work theory to analyse how I do gender moment by moment, and the processes of identity work involved. I have revealed both the diverse and complex ways in which gender is commonly organised and experienced, and the particular ways in which I, as a trans* person, continually form, repair, maintain, strengthen and or revise (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) my gendered self-identity.

The paper makes two contributions. First, it demonstrates the value of identity work theory as a way of examining and understanding the nature of the lives and experiences of trans* people and their relationships with gender. Examining my experience of shopping as identity work has revealed a rich and nuanced picture of how my own gender identity is formed, repaired, maintained, strengthened and revised moment by moment, and how I undertook identity work as I passed through different gendered spaces within one department store. Identity work has highlighted my gender identity as a trans* person as fragile and provisional, dependent on recognition by others and myself. It has also suggested an important concept of the ‘fractured self’ in which the individual knowingly seeks to sustain an unachievable fantasy.

Second, I have offered some insight into the ordinary and daily life of one trans* person, and into a trans* life which does not reflect normative trans* discourses. Through analysing my own gender identity work I have also offered some important caveats to common assumptions that trans* people transgress, resist, disrupt and reconfigure gender, by demonstrating how my own gender identity work is dependent on replicating gender norms in order to be recognised. I have also highlighted the importance of carefully differentiating between sex and gender: my own gender identity is constrained by my sexed body.

How might gender be organised in order for trans* people to live a more liveable life (Butler, 2004; O'Shea, 2018)? Personally I struggle to identify ways in which gender might be organised differently that would make my own life more liveable. As I have demonstrated in this paper, my own gender identity and self-concept is sustained and disrupted, confirmed and threatened moment by moment by gender norms and the gender binary. I have agency to make the gender binary work for me; I also acknowledge the sex binary and my need, as a female body, for certain segregated spaces. Ironically, the one thing that has made my life slightly less comfortable are policies designed to support trans* people such as declaring and checking pronouns and asking me what my gender identity is rather than my sex. My liveable life depends on not having to confront the dissonance between my sexed body and my gender identity: I neither wish to declare myself as male (or non-binary) nor acknowledge myself as female. This implies a particular recommendation to those seeking to design policies and practices to support trans* people: to acknowledge and recognise the diversity of experience and needs and not to adopt a monolithic “trans” approach.

References

- Alvesson, M. (2003). Beyond neopositivists, romantics and localists: A reflexive approach to interviews in organisational research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 28(1), 13-33.
- Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (2002). Identity regulation as organisational control: Producing the appropriate individual. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39(5), 619-644.
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.
- Boyle, M., & Parry, K. (2007). Telling the whole story: The case for Organizational Autoethnography. *Culture and Organization*, 13(3), 185-190.

- Brewis, J., Hampton, M. P., & Linstead, S. (1997). Unpacking Priscilla: Subjectivity and identity in the organisation of gendered appearance. *Human Relations*, 50(10), 1275-1304.
- Brown, A. D. (2022). Identities in and around organizations: Towards an identity work perspective. *Human Relations*, 75(8), 1205–1237.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. Routledge.
- Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography as methods*. Left Coast Press.
- Clough, P. (2000). Comments on setting criteria for experimental writing. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(278-291).
- Collins, J. C., McFadden, C., Rocco, T. S., & Mathis, M. L. (2015). The problem of transgender marginalization and exclusion: Critical action for Human Resource Development. *Human Resource Development Review*, 14(2), 205-226.
- Darwin, H. (2020). Challenging the Cisgender/Transgender Binary: Nonbinary People and the Transgender Label. *Gender & Society*, 34(3), 357– 380.
- Davis, D. (2009). Transgender Issues in the Workplace: HRD's Newest Challenge/Opportunity. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 11(1), 109-120.
- de Souza, E. M., & Parker, M. (2022). Practices of freedom and the disruption of binary genders: Thinking with trans. *Organization*, 29(1), 67-82.
- Devor, A. H. (2004). Witnessing and mirroring: A fourteen stagwe model of transsexual identity formation. . *Journal of Lesbian and Gay Psychotherapy*, 8(1-2), 41-67.
- Dray, K. K., Smith, V. R. E., Kostecki, T. P., Sabat, I. I., & Thomson, C. R. (2020). Moving beyond the gender binary: Examining workplace perceptions of nonbinary and transgender employees. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 27, 1181–1191.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. Alta Mira Press.

- Eveline, J. (2005). Gendering feminised and masculinised identities. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 18(6), 641-658.
- Ford, J., & Harding, N. (2008). Fear and loathing in Harrogate, or a study of a conference. *Organization*, 15(2), 233-250.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Prentice Hall.
- Garrison, S. (2018). On the limits of “trans enough”: Authenticating trans identity narratives. *Gender & Society*, 32(5), 613–637.
- Grant, A. J., & Zeeman, L. (2012). Whose story is it anyway? An autoethnography concerning narrative identity. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(36), 1-12.
- Hansson, B., & Dybbroe, B. (2012). Autoethnography and psychodynamics in interrelational spaces of the research process. *Journal of Research Practice*, 8(2), 1-15.
- Herrmann, A. F., Barnhill, J. A., & Poole, M. C. (2013). Ragged edges in the fractured future: a co-authored organizational autoethnography. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 2(1), 57-75.
- Horrocks, R. (1994). *Masculinity in Crisis*. Macmillan.
- Jeanes, E., & Janes, K. (2021). Trans men doing gender at work. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 28, 1237–1259.
- Jones, S. E. (2020). Negotiating Transgender Identity at Work: A Movement to Theorize a Transgender Standpoint Epistemology. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 34(2), 251– 278.
- Ladwig, R. C. (2022). Proposing the safe and brave space for organisational environment: including trans* and gender diverse employees in institutional gender diversification. *Gender in Management*, 37(6), 751-762.
- Learmonth, M., & Humphreys, M. (2012). Autoethnography and academic identity: glimpsing business school doppelgangers. *Organization*, 19(1), 99-117.
- Martinez, L. R., Sawyer, K. B., Thoroughgood, C. N., Ruggs, E. N., & Smith, N. A. (2017). The importance of being “Me”: The relation between authentic identity expression and transgender employees’ work-related attitudes and experiences. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 102(2), 215–226.

- Muhr, S. L., & Sullivan, K. R. (2013). "None so queer as folk": Gendered expectations and transgressive bodies in leadership. *Leadership*, 9(3), 416-435.
- Muhr, S. L., Sullivan, K. R., & Rich, C. (2016). Situated transgressiveness: Exploring one transwoman's lived experiences across three situated contexts. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 23(1), 52-70.
- Narendran, R., Reveley, J., & Almeida, S. (2021). Countering transphobic stigma: Identity work by self-employed Keralan transpeople. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 18, 1220–1236.
- O'Shea, S. C. (2018). This girl's life: An autoethnography. *Organization*, 25(1), 3-20.
- O'Shea, S. C. (2019). My dysphoria blues: Or why I cannot write an autoethnography. *Management Learning*, 50(1), 38-49.
- O'Shea, S. C. (2020a). 'I, Robot?' Or how transgender subjects are dehumanised. *Culture and Organization*, 26(1), 1-13.
- O'Shea, S. C. (2020b). Working at gender? An autoethnography. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 27, 1438–1449.
- Pratt, M. G. (2009). For the lack of a boilerplate: Tips on writing up (and reviewing) qualitative research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 52(5), 856-862.
<https://doi.org/10.5465/AMJ.2009.44632557>
- Pratt, M. G., Kaplan, S., & Whittington, R. (2019). Editorial Essay: The Tumult over Transparency: Decoupling Transparency from Replication in Establishing Trustworthy Qualitative Research. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 65(1), 1-19.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839219887663>
- Priola, V., Lasio, D., De Simone, S., & Serri, F. (2014). The Sound of Silence. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Discrimination in 'Inclusive Organizations'. *British Journal of Management*, 25, 488–502.
- Pullen, A., Rhodes, C., & Thanem, T. (2017). Affective politics in gendered organizations: Affirmative notes on becoming-woman. *Organization*, 24(1), 105-123.
- Rumens, N. (2017). Queering lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities in human resource development and management education contexts. *Management Learning*, 48(2), 227-242.

- Rumens, N., de Souza, E. M., & Brewis, J. (2019). Queering Queer Theory in Management and Organization Studies: Notes toward queering Heterosexuality. *Organization Studies*, 40(4), 593-612.
- Sambrook, S. (2015). In (re) search of the self: autoethnography in HRD research. In M. Saunders & P. Tosey (Eds.), *Handbook of Research Methods on Human Resource Development* (pp. 92-107). Edward-Elgar.
- Schilt, K. (2006). Just One of the Guys? How Transmen Make Gender Visible at Work. *Gender & Society*, 20(4), 465-490.
- Schilt, K., & Connell, C. (2007). Do Workplace Gender Transitions Make Gender Trouble? *Gender, Work and Organization*, 14(6), 596-618.
- Schilt, K., & Westbrook, L. (2009). Doing gender, doing heteronormativity: "Gender normals," transgender people, and the social maintenance of heterosexuality. *Gender & Society*, 23(4), 440-464.
- Sinclair, A. (2013). Can I really be me? The challenges for women leaders constructing authenticity. In D. Ladkin & C. Spiller (Eds.), *Authentic Leadership: Clashes, convergences and coalescences* (pp. 239-251). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Sparkes, A. C. (2002). Autoethnography: self-indulgence or something more? In A. P. Bochner & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature and Aesthetics* (pp. 209-232). Altamira Press.
- Strübel, J., & Goswami, S. (2022). Clothing and self concept in cisgender and transgender individuals. *Gender Issues*, 39, 387–408.
- Thanem, T., & Wallenberg, L. (2016). Just doing gender? Transvestism and the power of underdoing gender in everyday life and work. *Organization*, 23(2), 250-271.
- van Manen, M. (1997). *Researching Lived Experience* (2nd ed.). The Althouse Press.
- Watson, T. J. (2008). Managing identity: Identity work, personal predicaments and structural circumstances. *Organization* 15(1), 121-143.
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society*, 1(2), 125-151.
- Winkler, I. (2013). Moments of identity formation and reformation: a day in the working life of an academic. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 2(2), 191-209.

Winkler, I. (2014). Being me whilst learning Danish. A story of narrative identity work during the process of learning a foreign language. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*, 9(4), 290-307.