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## **Gender transitions at work – How do employees with a newly-assumed gender identity renegotiate their work identity?**

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Track 8: Identity

### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines how a change in an employee's non work identity influences their work identity through the prism of employees that have to renegotiate their work identity with a newly-assumed gender identity. Through in-depth interviews with transgender employees in Ireland, we discuss the strategies for identity work put in place by this community and whether or not these strategies have helped them reconnect their nonwork identity with their work identity. Our results show that transgender employees' identity works were expressed through coming out, planning and coordinating their transition, and passing. However, we discuss how passing has its limitation for the expression of a transgender employee's work identity and how gender transitions in the workplace are a way of highlighting the diversity and equality climate of organizations for all employees.

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## **Introduction**

Since July 2015 and the approval of the Gender Recognition Act, an estimate of 297 people have been issued with gender recognition certs in Ireland (Ni Aodha, 2019). Through the passing of this act, Ireland became the fourth country in the world to give people the right to self-declare their gender. The Republic of Ireland is considered to be one of the safest countries in Europe for the transgender community. However, coming out as transgender can be a very difficult process that is mostly social. Coming out as transgender represents a risk of rejection by friends and family as well as a risk of being discriminated against in a work context (Bochting & Coleman, 2016; Öztürk & Tatli, 2016; Connell, 2007). In a survey commissioned by TENI (Transgender Equality Network Ireland) in 2012, almost four-fifths of Ireland's population of transgender people had admitted to thinking of taking their own lives. This figure stresses the need to understand the challenges that transgender individuals face when they are negotiating their identity within various aspects of their lives. This paper will first provide a brief overview of the literature on identity work and how a personal identity transition can overlap on work identity. The paper then moves forward with an explanation on the research methodology before exploring the initial findings of the analysis which includes coming out at work; renegotiating identities at work; and playing the part. The paper concludes with a discussion and the contribution of the paper to theory and practice.

## **Literature Review**

Identity at work focuses on who a person is at work and how they are defined within that context (Alvesson, 2001; Brown, 2004; Buche, 2006; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Svenningsson & Aleson, 2003; Swann, Johnson & Bossn, 2009; Walsh & Gendon 2008). In Social Identity Theory, identity is defined as a concept that is relative to an individual's social and contextual environment (Tajfel, 1974). Indeed, identity is divided into two entities. The first one being the self-concept, that is to say, the totality of a person's thoughts and feelings in reference to oneself as an object (Rosenberg, 1995). The second one is the identity as a part of the self "which we are known by others" (Altheide, 2000) – the cultural self. Identity is built on interactions and is socially lived, which means individuals experience different types of identities relevant to their social context. Work being a social context, identity at work is a component of an individual's identity in that context (Alvesson, 2001; Brown, 2004; Buche, 2006; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Svenningsson & Aleson, 2003; Swann, Johnson & Bosson, 2009; Walsh & Gendon 2008). Identity at work plays a critical role in the development of a personal identity. Work has a growing impact on an individual since people spend a considerable amount of time and energy at work (Gini, 1998). Not only does it allow people to meet their basic needs but it also provides one of the most critical social context in which people negotiate their identity (Gini, 1998; Philipson, 2001). Therefore, work is an important social context in which identity can be observed and developed.

To develop the coherence between the self-concept and the cultural self as explained in Social Identity Theory, the construction of an identity has to be a public process that involves both "the identity announcement" made by the individual claiming an identity and "the identity placement" made by others who endorse the claimed identity. To establish one's identity, a "coincidence of placements and announcements" has to occur (Stone, 1981). For instance, transgender employees, when starting their gender transition, correct their internal identity asymmetry between their self-concept and work self by coming out at work.

Identity, as defined by Social Identity theory, implies that there needs to be some sort of coherence between a role and a manifested behavior, leaving behaviors exposed to evaluation in the social environment in which they occur. Therefore, for identity to be validated, people tend to put emphasis on the roles they consider to be representatives of themselves (Rothbard & Edwards, 2003). The workplace being a context in which people negotiate identity, this process of negotiation and regulation is referred to as identity work (Ashworth, 2001; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Beech, 2008; Rounds, 2006; Svenningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008). Strategies for identity work refer to the actual decisions and actions taken for regulating identity and realigning the self-concept to the cultural self (Kornberger & Brown, 2007; Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006; Rothbard & Edwards, 2003) in a work context.

Researchers talk about cross-domain identity transitions in the context of identity transitions that occur when an individual's established identity at work must be adapted to be integrated with a change in a nonwork identity. Cross-domain identity transitions have been studied by Ladge, Clair and Greenberg (2002) through the perspective of women at work who were going through their first pregnancy. In their study, the researchers show how, in becoming a mother for the first time, women begin a process of investing in a new or altered non-work identity that has implications for an existing work identity. Pregnant women and first-time mothers choose different adaptation strategies that are also influenced by their organizational context. Thus, employees that are going through cross-domain identity transitions strategize, renegotiate their identity at work. The work place becomes a context in which not only work identity transitions are observable but also personal identity transitions and the strategies that accompany them.

### **Contextualization**

To establish one's identity, a "coincidence of placements and announcements" has to occur between our self-concept and cultural self (Stone, 1981; Rosenberg, 1995; Altheide, 2000). Social identities and rules are in the foreground of an individual's sense of who they are (Ridgeway, 2009). For instance, individuals confront the problem of coordinating their behavior with another in the context of both a primary person frame (gender, ethnicity, or age) and an institutional, social frame (family, university, work etc.). Thus, gender is one of our culture's two or three primary frames for organizing social relations (Ridgeway, 1997; 2007; 2009). Individuals frame and are framed by gender. It is a characteristic taken into account when constructing one's identity. Individuals are expected to enact their gender role according to social conventions in order to become legitimate actors (West & Fenstermaker, 1995) making gender the management of conduct based on one's assigned sex category.

The workplace has been demonstrated as a crucial site for the reproduction of gender (Connell, 2010). Ideally, workers are only judged on their skills, but the contemporary business organization is structured in unequal and hierarchical terms assigned along binary classifications of gender (Pringle, 2008). Indeed, men and women face very different relationships to employment and advancement (Acker, 1990; Britton, 2004; Valian, 1999; Williams, 1995) as employers often fail to distance themselves from their binary gender schemas when it comes to hiring and promotion decisions. Therefore, gendered expectations are deeply embedded in the workplace (Acker, 1990; Britton, 2004; Gherardi, 1995; Padavic and Reslin, 2002; Valian, 1999; Williams, 1995). Researchers such as Schilt & Connell (2007) have pointed out that while the discriminatory binary mechanisms linked to gender are usually hidden in the workplace, gender transitions can unveil them. Indeed, Griggs (1998) has shown

that becoming a woman at work can mean that transwomen face the risk of losing high powered positions because they are seen as no longer suited for them. While becoming a man, on the other hand can allow transmen to become more valued workers (Schilt, 2006).

*Gender* is a construct based on socially accepted ideals of what it means to be male and female (Unger & Crawford, 1993) while *transgender* is an umbrella term that refers to individuals whose gender presentation is so different from ideals for the sex assigned to them at birth that it defies traditional notions of what it means to be male or female. It encompasses identities such as transmen (or Female-to-Male, FtM), transwomen (or Male-to-Female, MtF) and non-binary (Denny et al, 2007; Freinberg, 1996) and is contrasted with being cisgender, or having a traditional gender presentation. In other words, a transgender identity is defined as seeing oneself as “from outside the boundaries of gender, beyond the constructed male vs female” (Stone, 1981).

However, when it comes to gender transitions and being transgender at work, research has demonstrated that instead of defying traditional notions of what it means to be male or female and undoing gender (Butler, 2000), 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 (Schilt & Connell, 2007). Indeed, one of the organizational challenges that poses transition is that the associated gender fluidity to the varying degrees of transition create tension, anxiety, confusion and uncertainty in the organization as these employees do not readily fit into conventional gender categories (Öztürk & Tatli, 2016). As gendered behavioral expectations for men and women can vary greatly depending on organizational cultures and organizational contexts (Britton, 2004; Connell, 1995; Salzinger, 2003) transgender workers must develop a sense of how to facilitate same-gender and cross-gender interactions as new men and women in their specific workplace (Schilt & Connell, 2007). Not meeting gender expectations can result in gender harassment, ostracization and loss of advancement possibilities (Miller, 1997; Talbot, 2002; Valian, 1999). There is a gap in research in the management literature as to how transgender employees, who are employees who are undergoing a gender transition in their nonwork identity at first, have to renegotiate their newly-assumed gender identity with their existing work identity. Such research explores how nonwork identities and work identities are intertwined by understanding the strategies for identity work of transgender individuals. Moreover, by focusing on the transgender community in organizations, this work unveils how the binary perceptions of gender influence interactions in workplace not only for transgender employees but for all other employees.

Therefore, this paper will focus on how employees with a newly-assumed gender identity renegotiate their existing work identity and explore the strategies for coming out as transgender in the workplace.

## **Method**

The researchers chose an interpretivist approach to qualitative analysis given the explorative nature of the research question and topic. Regarding the population studied, the transgender community offers an extreme context of transition which scholars have demonstrated provides a ground for theory building since the dynamics being studied are more visible (Eisenhard, 1989; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kauffmann, 2006).

This research has been conducted with 10 transgender individuals (5 transwomen, 3 transmen and 2 non-binary participants) based in county Dublin, Ireland. The interviewees were chosen on the condition that they had come out as transgender at work. Participants were identified using a snowball sampling technique. The number of participants was set when hitting saturation point.

All the interviews were conducted in person in a university meeting room. The interviews ranged from one hour and a half to two hours and a half. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and later coded on Nvivo12 by using a thematic analysis (see appendix for coding table). Transgender participants were asked about their coming-out experience, transition journey at work and the interactions they had with the Human Resources department, their managers, and co-workers via semi-structured interviews.

## **Main Findings**

### 1) Coming out at work – the first step towards the renegotiation of work identity for transgender employees

Coming-out represents the acknowledgment to oneself, and then to others, of persistent transgender feelings. The developmental task to be mastered in this event is the resolution of confusion and the achievement of self-acceptance (Bochting & Coleman, 2016). Such acknowledgment is challenging because the individual risks abandonment and can feel more isolated through rejection by taking on a stigmatized identity. The response from others is critical. If it is positive, it challenges the individual's low self-esteem. If it is negative, it confirms feelings of alienation, aloneness, fear, confusion, shame and being defective (Bochting & Coleman, 2016). Coming-out at work adds another fear which is to lose one's job and one's socioeconomic status. Moreover, transgender individuals face a risk of discrimination that will be taken into account when they are evaluated in their work tasks and responsibilities. Disclosing a change in their nonwork identity might affect their work identity however, coming-out at work is seen as the first step towards the correction of their internal identity asymmetry within the transgender employee's work identity.

What are the strategies for coming-out as transgender at work?

#### a) Choosing between coming out as transgender or disclosure disconnect

Riley was training to become a primary teacher in another European country when they found out that they were non-binary. They decided to ask for guidance as to how to introduce themselves to students to a faculty member that was considered to be a mentor. They pointed out that, at first, the faculty member didn't understand what they meant by non-binary. Riley was presenting as female before but wished to take on a more gender-neutral appearance that laid more on the male side of the gender spectrum without fully transitioning either. Because of their work environment, Riley was forced to practice disclosure disconnect by hiding the fact that they are non-binary. The faculty member pointed out the fact that if Riley wanted to be accepted, they needed to fully transition, meaning that Riley had to fall within the binary representation of gender. Their work identity, in order to be accepted, had to be binary while Riley's nonwork identity is non-binary.

For example, one of the participants, Maeve, was looking for a job when she started her transition. She went to multiple interviews, applying with her old name because it was the name

that her previous work experience was linked to. She went to the job interviews wearing makeup and female clothes. She recalls that she got cut off of the interview process. In order for her to avoid discrimination, she later on chose not to reveal this part of her identity and practiced disclosure disconnect. By doing so, she was able to find a job. However, this strategy does not help with the resolution of internal identity asymmetries for transgender individuals and in the long run they end up coming-out. Indeed, Maeve later on transitioned at work:

*“I worked there for a few months as a queer and people were obviously noticing that I was wearing makeup. They were keeping this for themselves. During some periodic review of employees, evaluation, I was told that I am the best engineer they’ve ever had so I decided it was a good moment to transition and I announced it.”*

Thus, by affirming herself in her work identity as a great engineer first, she secured her position and decided that her risk of getting fired when announcing her transition had decreased. Such strategy suggests that some transgender employees strategize on the timing of their coming-out.

- b) Rectifying disclosure disconnect - when a change in a nonwork identity can no longer be hidden from a work identity.

All the participants first came out in their nonwork identity (personal interactions). Friends or family members were the first group of peers to be notified of their will to transition. By finding support in these groups, transgender individuals can then come out in other social contexts, such as work. Coming out being the first step to the acknowledgment of one’s gender identity, the next step that follows coming out in the transition process is Exploration (Bochting & Coleman, 2016).

*“I was meant to transition in the office in 2007. I had already arranged everything with them, end of November before. I went to see the manager and pulled out a photography of Lisa and he said who’s this? And I said ‘Me’ and he was like ‘Oh’. I said ‘Look, I am going to be going on hormones at some point and I don’t think macho truck drivers are the place to be working’. He looked at me and said ‘you’re very good at what you do, will you stay?’ I agreed that I would come in as Lisa and the staff would be told and all of this.”*

Lisa was about to start her hormone treatment. She thought her organization and the nature of her work, as it was considered by society to be a male environment, would not fit to her newly-assumed identity and that she would not be able to renegotiate her work identity. Her manager gave her his support on the basis that she was a good employee, meaning that he was aware that her gender transition did not have an impact on her skills.

However, the stress and fear that is connected to coming out at work in order to really enter the Exploration stage in the transition process seems to have led to the decision of quitting their job for one of the participants. When asked if it was only because of the fear of his co-workers’ reaction that he had chosen to quit, James mentioned that he also needed to have that time for himself and focus on his transition. Indeed, transgender individuals who are undergoing transition experience challenges outside of work that can spill-over the work context. The transition period can represent a significative investment of financial capital, time, energy and emotion that can potentially have disruptive consequences for their career (Pepper & Lorah, 2008).

Thus, our research findings suggest that transgender employees come out at work when they can no longer delay the start of their exploration phase as they have already come out in other life domains.

c) Voicing one's gender transition: strategies for coming out at work

Most of the participants mentioned meeting up with their manager on a one on one basis in order to disclose their will to transition as a strategy for coming out. The reaction from the managers were overly positive and supportive – apart from Maeve's experience when she disclosed her transition during the interview process. Participants indicated that they chose to unveil their nonwork identity to their work identity by first consulting with management, that is to say, with a person that was above their work position in their organization hierarchy. The strategy for successfully coming out at work seemed to take the shape of a meeting with the employee's manager.

Maeve, however, chose in her previous work position to start her transition by experimenting with her appearance without coming out at work and notifying management.

*“I started experimenting by wearing some bits of mascara, bits of makeup. I started to go to work with a purse and not a bag pack.”*

She was also starting her transition process on her own outside of the work domain and recognized that it was not the best strategy for her.

*“Even my first attempts with transitioning like what I did with my former company... I would have probably have heard if I had gone to support groups that this wasn't very a good way to do this.”*

She tried to complain about some sexual harassment that she had received from one of her co-workers after she had been presenting with some more feminine features (items of clothing and makeup). She was unable to find the support that she needed because of the legal frame in which she was operating in in her company.

It is not possible to know whether Maeve's former company would have been more supportive if she had come out to them first but it is clear that the legal status through which she was under did not help her get justice. However, while the majority of the participants pointed out that their managers had been initially receptive to their coming out, some participants started facing a more disguised type of discrimination. Thus, the overly positive initial reaction from management, in some cases, may have been explained by the fact that some of the managers knew that they would be repressed by the law if they had fired their employee on the basis that they are transgender.

2) Renegotiating work identity for transgender employees during the Exploration phase

In order to ease their transition process at work during the Exploration phase, transgender individuals plan their transition at work by turning to managers and HR for support.

a) Readjusting work identity through planning and coordinating the employee's transition journey



In some cases, the strategy to transition in the workplace was negotiated with the employee's managers and HR department. For Eva, remaining in her job position but switching to another service in the same organization was the strategy chosen for renegotiating her work identity by HR. Eva's strategy to renegotiate her work identity was to leave her former workplace environment in which she presented as male and work in a new environment, within the same company but this time presenting as her newly assumed female identity. It was the opportunity for her to start over.

Another HR and management strategy exposed by one of the participants, Liam, was the following:

*"She said (the manager) 'personally I think the next step is to speak to HR' so she said 'If you want to say to HR yourself you can do so. Or if you'd like, I could go to HR on your behalf to let them know and then they can come to you on whatever you want to do'. So I was like 'Yeah that would be great'. And then she said 'Okay, if you want we can speak to the head of the department that I work in just to let her know, let the team know. Or whatever you want to do'. So we just really decided 'Yeah let's speak to HR'. We spoke to the team, well the boss actually did that on my behalf."*

Liam chose to accompany his manager to establish a strategy on how they could facilitate the renegotiation of his work identity. His manager made sure she asked Liam about how he wanted to proceed. Liam's transition in the office was successful because the organizational culture exhibited in his organization facilitated his transition process. He was able to remain in the same job position and work in the same service. By providing some diversity training and coordinating his transition with HR, his organization was able to ease the renegotiation of his work identity.

b) Selecting the domains in which work identity can be renegotiated

Another strategy regarding the Exploration phase of transgender employees was exhibited by Lisa. It was mentioned earlier that when she notified her manager about her gender transition and her preoccupation of how working as a woman in a male environment could become an issue, her manager was supportive and told her she could come out as Lisa in the office.

*"We agreed that I would come in as Lisa and the staff would be told and all of this. That kind of worked to a point and then all of the sudden, I had to work on the phones in male mode until Christmas of that following year and I had to go out and see clients in male mode but I could work as Lisa in the office. It worked up until March until a co-worker had some problems with it..."*

However, her manager regulated her work identity. It was okay for her to renegotiate her work identity in the office but not when it came to customers. The HR strategy in her case was to separate her work identity from her nonwork identity depending on who she was interacting with. At first it was something that Lisa thought would be temporary but as she faced some discrimination from certain co-workers, she ended up confronting her manager about it. Lisa ended up being pushed out of her job even though her manager was at first supportive. Therefore, what happened to Lisa suggests that it could be easier for transgender employees to transition in the office if their Exploration phase is shortened. The fact that Lisa was not allowed

by her organization to come out in every domain of her work identity failed to let her find acceptance and remain employed.

c) Overcoming attempts of discrimination with the support of management

The discrimination that comes from exhibiting traits of gender fluidity has been experienced by Bailey, a non-binary participant that tends to fall on the female side of the gender spectrum. Bailey works in the maintenance department of a school and came out to his manager who identifies as a Lesbian. When discussing his physical appearance, Baily mentioned an incident regarding a dressing-code policy that was put in place after their boss saw them appearing a bit “*flamboyant*”. However, even if their boss put in place this directive that Baily felt was aimed at them, Bailey’s manager defended them and said she would take the fall for them if they got in trouble for expressing their gender identity. Bailey was able to negotiate their work identity because of the organizational context they were in.

3) Playing the part: renegotiating work identity through “passing”

Presenting in the right gender identity after having planned their transition with managers and HR seemed to be the most successful strategy for identity work.

a) “Passing” through physical appearance

When it comes to work identity, transgender employees fall into the binary perceptions of gender in the workplace and adopt the physical appearance of the gender category they came out in. The ambiguity that is linked to their gender identity is not always accepted by their work peers. Work identity is seen as binary.

*“The thing is people are very willing to accept trans women that look like a cisgender woman. If you look like a cisgender we can accept you. They accept Laverne Cox (transgender actress) because she is pretty. So we accept that. They have a harder time accepting somebody who looks like a man trying to be a woman. So I think they accept me less because I am six foot two and I have a large lower jaw and all these odds and ends. I think they accept me less but I’ve tried to explain for a long time to a lot of people, a lot of it face to face, that if you don’t like me and want me to go away, because we are always going to have trans, we’ve always existed.”*

Allison, who is an independent artist worker still found rejection from her own work community as she faced the comments of many fellow workers who were questioning her authenticity as a trans woman because she did not exhibit the classic traits of how society sees femininity.

Maeve on the other end actually identifies as non-binary but wants to use female pronouns. For her, presenting as female is not a choice but a necessity so she is not mis-gendered. It is a strategy for renegotiating her work identity and be placed in the right gender category. She insists on the fact that transitioning is mainly social.

*“It’s actually easier for other people to cope by swapping on one single day. It’s again something that we do for people around us so they are not confused, they don’t have to think about this too much. It is based on the assumption that when you see someone in a skirt it’s most likely a female. It’s supposed to help them use the ‘she’. People don’t understand that a lot of the things that we do, pretty much the transition itself, is a social transition. It is not for us. It is for people around us. »*

Riley explains how for them, appearing as non-binary is a challenge because it does not fall under society's conception of gender. For them, passing seems to be the only solution. They will however insist on getting the right pronouns once they feel comfortable in their work context, that is to say, once their work identity is established and their nonwork identity can be disclosed so they can renegotiate it by educating others on non-binary issues.

Thus, taking on the physical traits that are usually assigned to the binary classification of gender seems to be a strategy for transgender employees to renegotiate their work identity and be placed in the right category by their co-workers. It is seen as a strategy which goal is identity validation and acceptance.

b) "Passing" through interactions with co-workers

Passing not only refers to the physical appearance but also to the interactions transgender individuals have with their peers. Indeed, Schilt & Connell (2007) demonstrated that transgender employees had to renegotiate their interactional styles at work in order to fit in their gender category. They noticed that they changed their interactional style in order to meet their personal ideas of how men and women should act but that there were some cases in which it resulted from the implicit or explicit pressure from co-workers.

Maeve, being the only participant in our data sample who has come out four years ago and remained in the same organization for three years, testified of how problematic the binary conception of genders that were in place in her work environment.

*"At some point they started to see me as a woman and they started treating me like a woman so suddenly my design choices were supposed to be questioned, the quality of my coding was to be questioned, the codes that I produced needed to be extended and tested before they were approved to the main code base. I was starting to be micromanaged. I had to prove every design choice or code that I made. I had to prove that I am not wrong and it was assumed that I was wrong. When I was making some educated guesses I had to prove that I was not wrong. I was always challenged and at some point people who were usually coming and asked me for advice started to lecture me about how I am supposed to do things. At some point I decided that after a year of being treated this way this was too much and I quit."*

Once Maeve started being accepted as a woman at work, she started experiencing the discrimination that women go through within organizations. To her, this was not a result of transphobia but a result of pure sexism. At the time of the interview, she was still struggling to find a new job because she felt that now the interest in her profile as a potential employee had decreased because a female name was attached to it. She was offered low entry job positions compared to her CV and experience.

She insisted on the fact that she is not less qualified now because she transitioned. Because she is now considered as a woman, she is not to be trusted in her work environment. While she used to be praised when she was exhibiting female traits of management when she was presenting as a man, these traits are now considered irrelevant now that she is a woman.

Thus, the way that Maeve was managed as an employee changed as she transitioned and her identity as a woman got validated. However, as the gender in her work identity got renegotiated through her interactions with her co-workers, the binary pressure that was put onto her made

her face the discrimination that women face in the workplace. She failed to renegotiate her work identity as a skilled employee when she transitioned in the eyes of her co-workers. Her work identity was being limited to her identity as a woman. The only strategy for her was to quit her job. According to Maeve's experience, passing on an interactional level is a strategy that can be forced onto her by her work peers.

### **Discussion:**

The first step towards the renegotiation of transgender employee's work identity with their newly-assumed gender identity is to come out at work. Coming-out at work represents a risk of exclusion, marginalization and stigmatization. In order to avoid discrimination, transgender individuals often prefer to keep this part of their identity hidden (Whittle et al, 2007). They might be out in their nonwork identity while remaining in the closet in another domain such as their work identity. Ragins (2008) talks about how being out in one life domain and closeted in another tends to create "disclosure disconnect". Transgender individuals are self-strategizing to survive threats of disclosure in a work organization that they feel will not be supportive of their gender transition. Even though disclosure disconnect represents the divergence between a transgender employee's nonwork identity and work identity, it is a strategy that allows them to regulate their work identity on the short term. However, the findings suggest that the transgender employees eventually have to come out. It was implied that coming out usually happens when transgender employees feel like they cannot conceal their gender identity from their work identity any longer. Indeed, after having come out in other domains than the work domain, the findings reflected that the participants entered the exploration stage of their transition journey (Bochting & Coleman, 2016). Exploration is seen as the stage of learning as much as possible about expressing one's transgender identity and testing one's gender identity. It can imply physical changes such as taking hormones and exploring one's physical appearance through clothing. The findings suggest that for a transgender individual who has come out in their nonwork identity and has looked into entering the exploration stage, concealing one's gender transition becomes harder and harder to maintain. It usually activates the need to correct the transgender employee's internal identity asymmetry by realigning their work identity with their nonwork identity. Especially if they are about to undergo hormone treatments. Our analysis suggests that in order to renegotiate their work identity and enter the exploration stage of their transition, transgender employees have to come out about their will to transition at work. They can no longer live in disclosure disconnect.

Affirming one's knowledge and technical skills as a worker in their work identity seemed to be important before coming out. The responses from the participants, however, describe different ways of coming out at work. From the most successful transition stories reflected in the findings, the best strategy to come out was to disclose the will to transition to the managers and the HR department of the organization. The findings suggested that in those meetings, the employee would disclose their will to transition. Once this is done, employees could initiate their exploration phase in the work domain. In this phase, transgender individuals test their identity and experiment with gender (Bochting & Coleman, 2016). However, it can be a challenge for organizations because the gender fluidity that is brought by the varying degrees of transition, for instance, having a feminine voice and presenting as male before the start of hormone treatments for transmen, can create tension, anxiety, confusion and uncertainty in organization as these employees do not readily fit into conventional gender categories (Özturl & Tatli, 2016). According to the participants, planning their transition journey in the workplace

with their managers and the HR department seemed to be the most successful strategy for renegotiating the work identity of transgender employees. What made it successful in particular was the opportunity to “start over” with their newly-assumed identity with the symbolic action of leaving work and coming back with their new name and presenting in their right gender identity. However, such planning can be interpreted as a way to shorten the exploration phase in order to help the transgender employee’s co-workers cope with the change and grant the desired identity re-alignment to the transgender employee. The need to shorten the exploration phase of transgender individuals in the workplace shows that there is a real challenge for organizations when it comes to accepting the expression of gender fluidity.

If we look at gender as a social product, it means that there is a possibility of de-gendering the social world (Lorber, 2005), un-gendering one’s self (Bornstein, 1994) or undoing gender altogether (Butler, 2004). The assumption would be that by coming out and transitioning at work, transgender employees challenge the perception of gender. However, we saw with the example of Lisa, Maeve, Bailey or even Riley that the workplace does not necessarily call for the acceptance of gender fluidity. To renegotiate their work identity, transgender employees have to do gender in “their new social identity in a way that fits with both gendered workplace expectations and their personal gender ideologies” (Schilt & Connell, 2007). Instead of undoing gender (Butler, 2004), transgender employees are redoing gender (Schilt & Connell, 2007). This practice is referred as “passing” and can be seen as a strategy for renegotiating their work identity. The organizational context most often constraints transgender employees to take on a work identity that recreates the binary perception of gender. Our study shows that presenting as the newly-assumed gender identity highlighted the binary perceptions of gender that operate in the workplace and in work identity through the act of passing. The findings suggest that passing is seen as a strategy for finding acceptance in the renegotiation of work identity. However, our non-binary participants implied that passing annihilates the gender ambiguity that is a feature of their transgender identity. Stone (1981) defined transgender identities as “from outside the boundaries of gender, beyond the constructed male vs female”. However, in the workplace, it seems that the transgender identity cannot go “beyond the constructed male vs female” (Stone, 1981) as it falls back into binary perceptions of gender. While accepting the ambiguity that is part of their identity is a feature of Identity Integration (Bochting & Coleman, 2016) – the final stage of the transgender transition journey, transgender employees have a hard time negotiating this part of their identity in their work identity. The reproduction of the binary perception of gender for transgender individuals in their work identity also highlights the gender inequalities faced within organizations, especially for women, which is what suggested one of the participants. Therefore, our findings can illustrate how gender identity transitions give light to the gender discrimination that can face employees in the workplace (Schilt and Connell, 2007).

### **Contributions:**

#### 1) Theoretical

This study proves that gender transitions are cross domain transitions (Ladge, Clair and Greenberg, 2012). Indeed, gender transitions have an impact across all the individual’s life domains. Our research unveils the strategies for identity work for transgender employees. These strategies have been understudied in the management literature (Ozturk and Tatli, 2016).

Moreover, by looking at the concept of identity transitions in nonwork identities, our research provides ground for how nonwork identities are intertwined with work identity. It contributes to the field of knowledge of strategies for identity work in work identity (Pratt et al, 2006; Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Svenningsson & Aleson, 2003). Furthermore, our work explores how transgender employees strategize to correct internal identity asymmetries in the workplace. Our study contributes to the understanding of employees' well-being at work in order to avoid tension, anxieties and strained interpersonal relationships (Meister et al, 2014).

Our findings also highlight how the workplace contributes to the reproduction of the binary perceptions of gender (Schilt & Connell, 2007). Such findings show that transgender employees have a hard time distancing their work identity from their gender identity. This demonstrates that work identity is heavily gendered. This issue in organizations does not only apply to transgender employees but to all the employees. It contributes to the field of gender and equality studies in organizations.

## 2) Practical

Our work helps HR managers and managers develop diversity and equality policies for transgender employees to ease their transition in the work place (Ozturk & Tatli, 2016). Indeed, our research, by exploring which strategies transgender employees put in place to renegotiate their work identity, shows that transgender employees have a better chance of finding acceptance if their workplace environment is supportive and accompanies them with their transition. It puts emphasis on the role HR has towards the inclusion of minorities within the workplace. Furthermore, the findings in this study that relate to the pressure from co-workers that transgender employees feel to reenact the binary perceptions of gender might alert managers in their own practice and help them correct this type of pressure so employees can transcend gender issues.

This work highlights the equality and diversity climate in organizations which provides a ground for organizations to work towards an organizational culture that will challenge the binary perceptions of gender for co-workers to facilitate gender equality amongst all employees.

## 3) Method

Our work contributes to the observation of the hidden mechanisms of gender discrimination in organizations through the consideration of transgender employees as gender experts. The study of transgender individuals provides grounds for studying the gender perceptions of an individual's social context, how gender is expressed and evaluated (Butler, 2000; Schilt and Connell, 2007).

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## APPENDIX

Table 1: Characteristics of interview participants

<b>Name (modified for confidentiality purposes)</b>	<b>Gender identity</b>	<b>Pronouns used</b>	<b>Work occupation</b>
Eva	Trans woman	She, her	Retail employee
Maeve	Trans woman, queer	She, her	Software engineer
Allison	Trans woman	She, her	Artist
James	Trans man	He, his	Former medic now actor
Niall	Trans man	He, his	Performing arts teacher
Liam	Trans man	He, his	Administrative employee
Riley	Non-Binary	They, their, them	Primary school teacher
Bailey	Non-Binary	They, their, them	Maintenance employee
Jessie	Trans woman	She, her	Hospital administration employee

<b>1<sup>st</sup> level analysis</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> level analysis</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> level analysis</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Discussion</b>
Internal Identity Asymmetry	Before coming out at work	Disclosure disconnect	Pre coming out phase at work	Participants do not feel ready to start their transition yet either because they haven't come to terms with being transgender or because they don't think their work environment will be supportive
Coming out to managers	Coming out at work	Transgender employee's identity renegotiation	Acknowledgment of the identity change	Participants decide to come out at work because they can no longer hide their will to transition
Doing it alone			Transition period	Participants in order to have their newly-assumed gender identity accepted have to fit within the binary perceptions of gender. It is extremely difficult to navigate their gender fluidity in the workplace as it is something that is not quite yet understood and depends on the culture of their organization.
Passing physically				
Passing through interactions				
Navigating gender fluidity	Transition process	Organizational context	Transition period	Some participants have had the opportunity to be supported by their organization while some participants failed to integrate because of their organizational environment
Diversity training				
Failure to integrate employee				
Accompaniment in the gender transition process	Gender transition HR policies	Organizational context	Transition period	Participants evaluate how their relationship with their coworkers has evolved. Coworkers are either perceived as supportive, non-supportive or having a hard time navigating their own gender bias.
Reproduction of binary perceptions of gender				
Transphobia				
Support of the transgender identity	Reactions from coworkers	Organizational context	Transition period	Participants evaluate how their relationship with their coworkers has evolved. Coworkers are either perceived as supportive, non-supportive or having a hard time navigating their own gender bias.
Being treated as a man at work				
Being treated as a woman at work				
Relationship with coworkers once the identity transition has been integrated	Work identity evolution	Organizational context	Identity Integration	Participants are experiencing the perks and advantages linked to their gender transition regarding their work identity. Transmen seem to have an easier experience compared to transwomen.

Job termination				In that case, the participants' identity transition has been rejected by their work environment
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