



# Trans employees, transitioning, and job satisfaction



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## ABSTRACT

While trans employees have become more widely recognized in society, our understanding of their work experiences remains underdeveloped. In the current study, we investigate whether transitioning is associated with job satisfaction in England, Wales and Scotland. Using longitudinal data collected before and after sex reassignment surgery associations between job satisfaction and mental health/life satisfaction are examined for trans men and women. The estimations suggest that employees experience higher job satisfaction, mental health and life satisfaction after sex reassignment surgery than before. In addition, the estimations suggest that after sex reassignment surgery, the associations between job satisfaction and mental health/life satisfaction are stronger than before. Moreover, the estimations suggest that employees not only experience higher job satisfaction after sex reassignment surgery, but also during transitioning. The results suggest that, firms should not treat transitioning employees in a biased way, since their transition might entail positive personal and workplace advancements.

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## 1. Introduction

The term trans is an umbrella label that includes many different self-identifications (Riggle, Rostosky, McCants, & Pascale-Hague, 2011). These self-identifications may be linked to biological sex, sexual experiences, gender, gender roles, gender performance or the transition process (Riggle et al., 2011). However, the term trans is traditionally associated with individuals whose gender identity, expression or behavior are different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth (Budge et al., 2013; Riggle et al., 2011). The most reversible physical acknowledgment a trans person can make is cross-dressing (Bevan, 2015). At the other end of the scale, i.e. complete transition, is sex reassignment surgery. Between these lies a spectrum of alternatives, including hormone therapy, voice therapy, and breast enlargement or mastectomy (Bevan, 2015).

Current review studies suggest that trans people from the European Union, the United States and Australia are frequently subjected to rejection from their own families and communities and experience violations of human and political rights in housing, healthcare, education, employment, and legal systems (Bevan, 2015; Trevor & Boddy, 2013; Grant et al., 2011; Morton, 2008; Whittle, Turner, Al-Alami, Rundall, & Thom, 2007). In addition, it is often observed that trans people face higher unemployment and lower incomes, are victims of discrimination, and face higher poverty and homelessness than non-trans people (Bevan, 2015; Grant et al., 2011; Morton, 2008; Whittle et al., 2007). With such an array of negative societal reaction, it is not surprising that trans people are thought to face higher levels of self-rejection, depression and self-harming than non-trans people (Bevan, 2015; Gijs & Brewaeys, 2007).

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In the international literature, studies do highlight the fact that firms are struggling to deal with trans employees cases due to lack of knowledge and training on the issue (Ozturk & Tatli, 2015; Whittle, Turner, Combs, & Rhodes, 2008; Whittle et al., 2007). As a result, some trans employees describe a variety of adverse experiences such as exclusions, insults, discomforts, and embarrassment on the part of employers, co-workers and customers (McPhail, McNulty, & Hutchings, 2016; Ozturk & Tatli, 2015; Whittle et al., 2008; Whittle et al., 2007). Moreover, there are cases of discriminatory treatments against trans employees in hiring, promotion, training and wage settings (Köllen, 2016; Ozturk & Tatli, 2015; Whittle et al., 2008; Whittle et al., 2007).

The scope of this study is to examine whether gender transition is associated with job satisfaction and to thus evaluate how transitioning affects trans employees' workplace experiences. In particular, a number of relations are examined using longitudinal data for individuals in England, Wales and Scotland before and after their sex reassignment surgery for a number of variables, such as mental health, and life satisfaction. Given the fact that workplace studies for transitioning employees are scarce in the international literature, this study will examine the workplace functioning of an unexamined group of employees: men who have become women, and women who have become men through sex reassignment surgery.

The UK is considered a tolerant region when it comes to trans people (ILGA Europe, 2015). Indeed, based on the 2015 Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of LGBTI People in Europe (ILGA Europe, 2015) the UK is the highest ranked country out of 49 others in relation to higher positive advances and lower negative trends against LGBTI people. The UK is one of the few countries to enable individuals to acquire the preferred sex (men, women) for all purposes under law, once they have received a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, and to be recognized as the legal sex opposite to the one ascribed to them at birth without undergoing sex reassignment surgery (Rundall, 2010; Whittle et al., 2008). Moreover, based on the UK Equality Act 2010, which protects individuals from gender reassignment discrimination, people do not need to have undergone any specific treatment or surgery to change from their birth sex to their preferred gender. However, the current law as it stands makes no mention or allowance for people who do not fit into the male or female group. Genderqueer, non-binary and non-gender identities are very much left out in the cold, and this can cause significant problems in people's lives.

Regardless of the potentially transphobic environment, the UK and the US have a growing population of trans individuals who start their transition in order to shape a sense of self-identity (Bevan, 2015; Hines & Sanger, 2010). Rundall (2010) suggests that the great majority of UK trans employees feel that they are accepted by all or most of their work-team. The study suggests that, after having reached the point of passing, many do not experience the bullying and harassment to which they were subjected before, and that colleagues become more comfortable around them and much friendlier (Rundall, 2010). However, the same study suggests that, while in most cases the reason for these employees changing jobs is personal choice, there are cases where employees become redundant because firms do not want a trans person to be the public face of the company (Rundall, 2010). In addition, based on a sample examined by Whittle et al. (2007) UK trans seem to have higher average educational levels and are over-represented in senior occupation classes compared with the UK national average. Current studies from the US utilizing trans employees suggest that gender transition is a worthy experience in terms of positive emotions and hopes for the future (Budge et al., 2013). Moreover, in the US, Brewster, Velez, Mennicke, and Tebbe (2014) investigate trans employees and find that a large proportion of them believe that gender transition is beneficial. The same study finds that feelings of happiness and relief after transition are cited by trans employees, with many using words such as 'fulfilling', 'free' and 'empowering' to describe their post-transition emotions (Brewster et al., 2014). Some trans employees report feeling supported in their transition, most often by their co-workers while some even wish they had transitioned earlier (Brewster et al., 2014). Based on these patterns, Brewster et al. (2014) suggest that assumptions that workplace gender transitions will be uniformly stressful or negative are often part of a monolithically bleak portrait that misses the nuanced experiences of many employees. However, both Brewster et al. (2014) and Budge et al. (2013) highlight some emotional hardships during the gender transition period.

Our study will provide insights into an important issue, particularly given the fact that employees' job satisfaction may provide a number of insights into important labor market behaviors, such as turnover and productivity (Linley, Maltby, Wood, Osborne, & Hurling, 2009; Pavot & Diener, 2008). The outcomes of our research could well be important for firms, as long as organizational performance can be affected by workplace job satisfaction through the positive and/or negative behaviors of employees (Spector, 2008; Mount, Iliès, & Johnson, 2006). If transition entails higher job satisfaction, then this pattern might be important for workplace supportive policies towards transitioning employees. Happy employees are crucial to an organization's success, and thus firms should be interested in knowing how an employee might function by the time he/she has completed the gender transition (Spector, 2008; Mount et al., 2006). As noted by McPhail et al. (2016) and Ozturk and Tatli (2015), research and practice should pay attention to the unique workplace lived experiences and evaluations of LGBTI employees, such as happiness or dissatisfaction, given that this group now makes up an important part of the global talent pool (Day & Greene, 2008).

## 2. Theoretical framework

Mental health is a state of mind characterized by emotional well-being, and good behavioral adjustment, ability to cope with stresses and sadness of life, the fulfilment of goals and potential, and a sense of connection to others (WHO, 2014). Individuals with gender dysphoria may suffer from a constant feeling of mental health discomfort related to their anatomic sex and their deep-rooted belief of belonging to the opposite gender (Gijs & Brewaeys, 2007; Green, 2005; De Cuypere et al., 2005). Transition has traditionally been utilized to refer to people who undergo medical intervention, such as gender reassignment surgery (Budge, Orovecz, & Thai, 2015) to release gender discomfort (Moreno-Perez & de Antonio, 2012; Johansson, Sundbom, Hojerback, & Bodlund, 2010; Gijs & Brewaeys, 2007). Current literature suggests that sex reassignment surgical outcomes have a positive impact on psychological outcomes (Johansson et al., 2010). However, physical transformation is just one segment of the gender

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