



Trans-parency in the workplace: How the experiences of transsexual employees can be improved

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ABSTRACT

Very little research has focused exclusively on the workplace experiences of transsexual employees. Studies that have been done are either qualitative case studies (e.g., Budge, Tebbe, & Howard; 2010; Schilt & Connell, 2007), or aggregate transsexual individuals with lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees (e.g., Irwin, 2002). The current study focuses on this underexamined population and examines general workplace experiences, and both individual and organizational characteristics that influence transsexual employees' job attitudes. Results reveal that organizational supportiveness, transsexual identity centrality, and the degree to which they disclose to individuals outside of work all predict transsexual employees' disclosure behaviors in the workplace. These disclosure behaviors are positively related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and negatively related to job anxiety. These relations are mediated by coworker reactions. This research expands knowledge about diverse employee populations and offers both theory and some of the first large-scale empirical data collected on the workplace experiences of transsexual employees.

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In the past decade, research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) populations has increased with the exception of research that specifically examines transgender individuals. Either these individuals are not included at all in such studies or they are lumped together with the other nonheterosexual individuals and viewed similarly (for example, see Ellis, 1996; Irwin, 2002). While there is evidence that transgender and LGB individuals both experience discrimination, there are important differences between those who identify as transgender (one's psychological identification as male or female) and those who identify as LGB (one's sexual orientation). Transgender is an all-encompassing term that includes anyone who does not conform to the male/female binary (e.g., cross-dressers, drag queens, transsexuals, and gender benders). Included among transgender are transsexual individuals, who feel their gender does not match the sex assigned to them at birth and desire to make their bodies conform to the gender with which they identify. In accordance with previous researchers (Erich, Tittsworth, & Kersten, 2010; Gagne, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997), we define transsexual individuals as including all of the following groups of individuals: those who have had gender reassignment surgery to change from one biological sex to the other, those taking hormones and other medications to help transition their physical body from one sex to the other, those who dress as the gender opposite of their biological sex because they feel that they were born as the wrong sex, and those who desire to be the gender opposite of their biological sex but have not yet taken steps to physically transition. Clearly, these individuals are inherently different from LGB individuals (who are characterized by romantic object choice, not gender identity) and deserve to be studied in their own right. Thus, the purpose of the current study

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is to explore the workplace experiences of transsexual individuals. Specifically, we are interested in examining the utility of disclosing one's transsexual identity as a strategy for improving job attitudes, and the individual- and organization-related factors that impact these disclosure behaviors as well as job attitudes.

This research is important for several reasons. First, while there are no concrete numbers concerning the prevalence of transsexualism in America, it is estimated that transsexual individuals represent somewhere between 1 out of every 500 and 1 out of every 2500 people (Conway, 2001). These estimates are based on the number of gender reassignment surgeries performed each year, thus it is likely that the actual number is higher given that not every transsexual individual opts to have gender reassignment surgery. Second, this population has been grossly understudied, and it is likely that while their experiences may be similar to other minority populations in some respects (e.g., they experience marginalization), they may be different in other ways (e.g., their stigma relates to gender, one of the most fundamental distinctions that our society makes; transsexualism is still considered a mental disorder under DSMIV-R so individuals must admit they have a mental disorder to gain medical coverage).

Third, although the research concerning transsexual employees is extremely sparse, the few studies that have examined this population suggest that, like other minority groups, transsexual employees experience substantial stigmatization in the workplace (Barclay & Scott, 2006; Berry, McGuffee, Rush, & Columbus, 2003; Dietert & Dentice, 2009; Gagne et al., 1997; Irwin, 2002); therefore, greater attention should be given to identify ways to remediate this discrimination. Research concerning disclosure of other stigmas (e.g., sexual orientation) in the workplace has shown that it can be a beneficial strategy with respect to improving job attitudes (Day & Schoenrade, 1997, 2000; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007), so it is possible that this strategy may also be effective for transsexual individuals. Disclosing one's transsexual status in the workplace may be inevitable in some situations (i.e., if one is in the process of transitioning); thus, it is important to understand the outcomes of this behavior. Fourth, it is unclear what psychological factors impact transsexual individuals' experiences in the workplace. It is likely that individual characteristics concerning one's identity influence the effect that stigmatization has in the workplace. Fifth and finally, little is known about what organizational initiatives can be enacted to improve the workplace experiences of transsexual employees. Transsexual individuals are not protected against employment discrimination under federal law, thus it is possible (and likely) that discrimination at work does occur. As seen with other minority groups, discrimination in the workplace may be more interpersonal and subtle in nature; however, its effects are nonetheless deleterious (Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002; King, Shapiro, Hebl, Singletary, & Turner, 2006). Organizational supportiveness has been shown to be effective in improving workplace experiences for other minority groups (Barron and Hebl, 2010; Griffith & Hebl, 2002); thus it is possible that organizations can play a role in improving experiences for transsexual employees.

General experiences of transsexual employees

The small amount of research that has been conducted on transsexual employees focuses almost exclusively on case studies and other qualitative data. Much of this research provides accounts of the experiences that transsexual employees have pre- and post-transition, the responses these individuals receive from others, and the consequences of these experiences and others' reactions. For instance, research has shown that being open about transitioning in the workplace can lead to both challenges and acceptance by coworkers (Schilt & Connell, 2007). A series of interviews by Schilt and Connell (2007) showed that transsexual employees felt that their new cross-gender interactions changed post-transition. For example, some *transmen* (those transitioning from women to men) noted that post-transition, they were no longer included in "girl talk" (i.e., conversations about appearance, romantic interests, and menstruation) with female coworkers and were now expected to do heavy lifting or labor around the office when necessary (e.g., move furniture, hang pictures); while some *transwomen* (e.g., those transitioning from men to women) reported similar changes, such as being excluded from "guy talk" (i.e., conversations about sports, cars, and sexual objectification of women) with male coworkers. These changes in interactions may be the result of coworkers' stereotypes. For instance, coworkers may falsely assume that because one has physically changed their gender identity, they have also changed their interests to stereotypically gender congruent ones (Crocker & Lutsy, 1986). Some transsexuals welcomed this change while others did not. The transsexual individuals also noted that, in an attempt to be accepting of their transition, some coworkers attempt to help them adjust to new gender stereotypes, which led to some discomfort in workplace interactions. For example, transwomen noted that they were coached on how to properly put on makeup by female coworkers. Transmen reported similar gender "appropriate" socialization experiences, such as being shown how to properly knot a tie. Some transmen perceived these types of masculine lessons from male colleagues as over-stepping and tended to perceive it more negatively than did similar gender socialization experienced by transwomen from their female colleagues. In addition to coworker interaction changes, transsexual employees also experience other workplace-related changes as a result of their transition. These changes have been shown to be different for transmen and transwomen. For instance, transmen reported experiencing more positive workplace consequences (i.e., increased salary, authority, and respect) post-transition (compared to pre-transition), possibly due to societal norms that regard men more highly than women (Schilt, 2006; Schilt & Wiswall, 2008).

Although some transmen report advantages in the workplace post-transition, others have noted encountering disadvantages. The qualitative data suggests that barriers often focus on transmen's appearance of youth (e.g., they lack facial hair and tend to be shorter and smaller than biological men; Schilt, 2006). Similarly, transwomen have noted increased workplace penalties such as loss of confidence in their competency from a supervisor and demotion from a high status position post-transition (Schilt & Connell, 2007). Additional case studies and interviews reveal that post-transition (versus pre-transition) transsexuals were subsequently more likely to be on disability and had more difficulty maintaining employment (Lindemalm, Körlin, & Uddenberg, 1986; Sorensen, 1981). Interview accounts suggest that the reason for this may be, in part, that these employees face a number of

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