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Shaping an ethical approach to trans research: Some reflections from my doctoral project

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Abstract

From 2016 to 2019, I conducted my doctoral project research on trans and gender-diverse experiences in Norway, focussing on the impact of a new law on gender recognition through which the previous sterilisation requirement for legal gender change was overturned. Over the course of this research, I have been exploring what it means to be an ethical feminist scholar and working to foster what I feel is a more ethical approach to research on trans individuals. In this article, I outline what I have found to be essential theoretical and methodological considerations to ethical trans research. I apply these to my own doctoral research process to demonstrate the importance of trans-focussed research, reflecting on the challenges I faced when writing my thesis.

Keywords

Trans studies, gender studies, ethics, trans, feminist research, transfeminism.

From 2016 to 2019, I conducted my doctoral project research on trans and gender-diverse experiences in Norway, focussing on the impact of a new law on gender recognition through which the previous sterilisation requirement for legal gender change was overturned. Over the course of this research, I have been exploring what it means to be an ethical feminist scholar and working to develop what I feel is a more ethical approach to research on trans¹ individuals. The project has provided me with a great many opportunities to confer with others in academia and a wide variety of texts by feminist scholars, which have challenged me to reconsider my role in knowledge production and dissemination. I have become aware of ethical issues with my research and have had to explore various approaches to address them. This process has proven highly valuable for me as a person and scholar, as I have striven to continually recognise the unique opportunity I have to contribute to the burgeoning collection of trans-specific research and the responsibility that comes with that. The following presents an overview of the methodological foundation I have laid for the development of my work, with reflections on my own experiences at a trans-identifying scholar.

Ethics, positionality, and reflexivity: A framework

Feminist and queer studies, and in particular trans studies, have been flourishing with an ever-increasing focus on ethical standards of representation. Nonetheless, I feel what counts as ethical is too seldom considered with sufficient judiciousness, and such oversight can contribute to the lopsided power dynamics of the researcher/subject dyad. Though it is often arguably inadvertent, the researcher's 're'-presentation of the subject can serve to further disempower the subject (Gorman-Murray, Johnston & Waitt, 2016, p. 98). As is generally the case, personal interpretations, fuelled by personal experiences, lead to particular conclusions. However, the 'personal' is always political, and feminist research is no exception. When it comes to scientifically-approved research, the one who conducts and publishes is likely privileged — via symbolic capital, for example — and therefore susceptible to drawing unconscious conclusions within a privilege-based framework. One who has socio-economic clout is more likely to produce and publish work along pre-defined avenues of institutional visibility.

In this way, 'knowledge' is born — socio-culturally-driven interpretations of the world are repeatedly produced until they become commonplace and seemingly unquestionable. Acceptable versions of reality disproportionately reflect the perspectives of those with the most cultural capital, rendering alternative versions of reality as 'Other'. Without even meaning to, a researcher, even a feminist/queer one, who neglects to maintain a critically reflexive approach about their role in research production, contributes to the same system of normativisation that they set out to disrupt (Browne, 2006).

In response to this tendency, the conceptual practice of reflexivity has been growing steadily for many decades as largely a product of feminist and queer studies. My own investigation into this practice takes me back to the late 1980s, with the work of Sandra Harding (1989) and Donna Haraway (1988). Harding and Haraway's approaches stem from an eloquently argued response to the fixation of (social) science on the inherently knowable. They call for a feminist perspective so as to foster a critical take on so-called objectivity in scientific research, thus deactivating universalising claims to truth (to be expanded upon

¹ I use the term 'trans' to describe the experience, embodiment and/or identity of gender non-normativity, diversity and/or fluidity.

below). Reflexivity, in its application, is employed through a continual self-awareness, a sense of accountability to the knowledge produced. The feminist researcher should, without exception, strive to uncover and counter the power relations at play in the research process. The questions should always be: How is the derived 'knowledge' situated along a historical trajectory of privilege and visibility, and how can its distortive consequences be avoided? What can be posited as 'truth' and 'data', if — as feminist thinking contends — the subjects we study are tenuous and perpetually becoming (Browne & Nash, 2010, p. 1)?

Furthermore, Jane Elliott (2005, pp. 154-155) has written about how reflexivity requires one to be 'explicit about the operation of power in the process of researching and representing people', as a means of avoiding a 'crisis of representation'. Elliott (*ibid*, p. 155) goes on to explain that 'reflexive awareness' is done through an honest, thoughtful and analytic account of how the researcher's own biography has impacted upon the collection and analysis of data. Another way to define reflexivity is as 'a strategy for situating knowledges ... a means of avoiding the false neutrality and universality of so much academic knowledge' (Rose, 1997, p. 306). This presumed neutrality, I believe, is what can seriously undermine the positive impact of our work, as it operates as an underground conduit for privileged perspectives to flow onward without notice. It is a difficult task to counter this neutrality without also countering our ultimate goal of sharing what we see as pivotal knowledge. Donna Haraway describes this hurdle which feminist researchers face as a 'necessary multiple desire' — we strive to account for our privilege whilst making a claim to truth (1988, p. 579).

Reflexivity is an encapsulating process, I have found, and an endless one at that. I have never stopped, nor do I ever expect to stop, looking back on and critiquing the claims I have made — some reflections on which I will expand upon next. After all, as Kim V.L. England (1994, p. 82) writes, research requires a 'self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher'. The reflexive approach is not only about how one thinks about their own work, however; it extends into considering how one's work will be received, and possibly codified, by the scientific community (Moss, 1995, p. 445). Will it contribute to destabilising harmful notions about the research issue/group? Or will it reinforce them? These are questions I have carried with me throughout my doctoral project, as I find myself wondering what exactly I can or should produce for the larger trans and feminist studies community. I am compelled to ask myself again and again: what sort of voices am I strengthening or diminishing? What direction am I helping current and future research move in? What subjects and issues am I claiming to be worthy of attention, and in what ways? What sort of ideas am I helping to produce about what it means to be trans?

Positionality

With these questions in mind, it is important to consider my own positionality as a researcher on trans issues within the Norwegian context. I am a trans man in his mid-thirties, and I 'pass' as a man and appear cisgendered almost all the time, though my typically female anatomy precludes or complicates participation in certain spaces. I use the term 'queer' (or sometimes 'gay') to identify myself sexuality-wise, and I am partnered with another person who identifies and 'passes' as a man. I am white, middle-class, well-educated, and able-bodied². English is my native tongue, and though I can read and write Norwegian well, I struggle to

² With the exception of an invisibly disability — namely, auditory processing disorder, which impacts my ability to distinguish between sounds and to absorb and retain oral information.

understand it when it is spoken, or to speak it well myself. I grew up in a conservative country but do not identify actively with that nationality, though I recognise and appreciate how this particular upbringing influences my view of the world.

As is evident, I am greatly privileged in many ways. Moreover, I have not experienced extensive discrimination on the basis of being trans or queer in Norway³. Thanks in large part to my privileges of race, nationality, able-bodied-ness, apparent gender-normativity (my 'passing'), the fact that I have transitioned to masculine rather than to feminine⁴, and many other things I am likely not even aware of, my trans-ness has not hindered access to a life of quality for me as much as it undoubtedly has for many others. For example, at this moment of writing I am still registered as legally female in Norway, and while this has raised the occasional curious question at the pharmacy or in immigration situations (such as applying for a new residency permit), it cannot be denied that my personal history protects me from the extensive prejudice and obstacles experienced by so many others, including some of those whom I interviewed for this project.

However, simply stating one's identity markers is not enough for reflexivity; only by investigating their significance in one's research can detrimental effects be allayed (Gill, 1998, p. 32, cited in Elliott, 2005, p. 158). This is pertinent to all steps in the research project but perhaps particularly so when it comes to my analysis of the interviews I collected for my doctoral project. For example, when seeking to understand how we as researchers are crafting the narratives (and lives) from interview data, we must first maintain awareness of the angle from which we approach this data. Mauthner and Doucet offer a voice-centred relational method which calls for a 'reader-response' (1998, p. 126). 'Reader-response' means that the researcher reads the interview transcript with the intention of assessing one's own response to it. Elliott (2005, p. 158) recommends this step be taken first, since, as Mauthner and Doucet propose (1998, p. 127), it helps highlight the boundary between the participant's own narrative and that of the researcher. Similarly, Hollway and Jefferson write that the researcher, in the initial stages of analysis, should ask themselves: What do I notice and why do I notice that? (2000, p. 55). What stands out and embeds itself into the mind from the start speaks volumes to the researcher's perspective, pointing to possible emotional obstacles to analysing with sufficient self-awareness. This is the pivotal moment for engaging reflexivity.

In our work as researchers, we weigh and sift experiences, make choices regarding what is significant, what is trivial, what to include, and what to exclude. We do not simply chronicle 'what happened next', but place the 'next' in meaningful context.

By doing so we craft narratives, and we write lives (Richardson, 1990, pp. 10-11).

As much as possible, these narratives need to reflect the complexities of the participant's experiences. The participant is a 'multiple subject', who has an assemblage of positions with varying power (Madge, 1993, p. 296). One must be careful, in Richardson's (1990, pp. 25-26) terms, to not cast the interview participants into a 'collective story' by implying the trans person's inevitable submission to conformative pressure. This collective story is one which I became aware of early on, one which seems to pervade research on trans lives and experiences. It is not moreover always a matter of casting all trans people as downfallen, but

³ I have experienced a great deal of discrimination in my home country, particularly from my family, however, which is in its own way as detrimental if not more so than experiencing it from social and legal institutions. Nonetheless, I do not feel it necessary to reflect on that here.

⁴ Trans women and feminine-identifying trans people are, at least in the Western context, nearly always faced with greater discrimination than trans men and masculine-identifying trans people (Stryker & Bettcher, 2016).

at times regarding some trans experiences, situations or lives as better off, or conversely worse off, than others. These assumptions are based on personal interpretations of what the gendered landscape looks like — assumptions which are, as it is inevitably so, informed by personal experiences within a particular framework of interpretation.

Reflecting on my reflexivity

While my engagement in ethical feminist research has been constant throughout my doctoral research project, my understanding of what it means to practice an ethical approach has been strengthening significantly. Looking back now, I can see that when I decided to begin conducting my research, I did not adequately consider the impact of my particular background on how I would conduct and interpret the interview data. It was not until I was amidst the first round of interview analyses that I began to recognise the impact of this short-sightedness, as will be expanded upon below. It feels uncomfortable now to realise how uncritical I was and how much I was perhaps even participating to some degree in the normativity I was intending to challenge. However, I am of course relieved to have become aware of this bias and to have done so with enough time to work to overcome it to, I believe, a considerable degree. With that said, I do not claim to be an expert on reflexivity, or even necessarily fantastic at it, though I do feel that over these years I have managed to become adept at it. Part of developing an ethical approach for me has been recognising my own convictions and detecting how they may have seeped into my analyses. This is, it goes without saying, an ongoing endeavour. Like many things that require an awareness of self, it is an endless process that requires looking inward and outward at the same time.

A salient example of this evolving reflexivity is that, in the beginning of my project, it started to dawn on me how much my confidence about my research had rested on the fact that I shared a similar minority status with the intended subjects⁵. I was a trans researcher interviewing trans people on trans issues to make conclusions about trans lives as they were shaped by trans rights. And this, along with my long and heavy involvement in trans-related activism, led me to believe that I would be somehow endowed with a particular intuition or perspective that would enrich the interviews and analysis in a unique way when compared to cisgender people. I assumed that I could maybe even tap into a special knowledge base of experience, shared only by us trans folk, to fill data gaps and draw logical assumptions. I expected it must be an advantage for my work that I too have experienced being misgendered throughout life. It meant that I could offer a degree of empathy, insight and elaboration not available to those outside our little circle. Of course, there were plenty differences between us as trans individuals, but as a relatively clever guy, surely it is easy enough to aptly represent the diversity of my subjects. No problem.

However, I figured wrong.

It is not to say that whatever degree of shared experience I have has offered no guidance in my data collection and analysis, because it undoubtedly has done so. I believe I embody a degree of sensitivity unique to those of us who have enduringly and painfully failed to live up to the gender norms constantly thrust upon us. In other words, it's not just a matter of cognitive awareness of what being trans means or could mean that has streamlined my research; it is also a matter of emotional awareness, which has, I would argue, worked as a

⁵ I attribute some of this short-sightedness to the fact that I had not studied gender studies before beginning my PhD; most of my involvement with gender-related studies was as an activist and artist, and for me this offered a rather different approach to tackling trans issues. I learned a lot of lessons about bias very quickly once I started my doctoral research.

sort of sixth sense when it came to deciding what leads to pursue.

Nonetheless, I began to see that I was sometimes cornering myself and my work by relying too much on an imagined commonality. I was committing what Gorman-Murray, Johnston and Waitt (2016, p. 100) term ‘credibility fallacy’, an assumption that a shared minority status can only serve to strengthen the research process. I was neglecting to consider how such intimate knowledge about being trans might in fact hinder the process, since my own experience was after all just that: mine and only mine. While I was of course aware of this on a cognitive level, undertaking a reflective approach as described above allowed me to see that I had inadvertently been forgoing sufficient objectivity. Such a lack of critical reflection was rendering my approach and interpretations susceptible to a bias towards my own personal/political agenda or assumptions, thereby undoing any afforded benefits. Ultimately, in other words, I could end up further oppressing those whom I sought to represent — an ironic twist in a project with empowerment as the bottom line.

Moreover, on this note, I had to actively become aware of my political standpoint as a trans person, activist, and academic. When it concerns my own life choices, I have long been more ideologically aligned with the radical side — while admittedly somewhat liberalist in practice. I believe in the constructedness of gender and the inexorable damage gender norms inflict. I held this conviction so strongly that, when I began the project, my goal was to show how the law on gender recognition was still failing ‘us’ (the perceived trans collective). I thought the research project could be my magnum opus — a nerd’s ‘bash back’ at the cis- and hetero-normative system. Needless to say, I do not have the same mindset anymore. It has become much more nuanced and balanced, and for that I am glad. The means by which I have shifted my mindset is presented next.

Developing an approach

In collecting, analysing and discussing my research material, I have sought a methodological approach which contributes to growing efforts to destigmatise and legitimise gender/sex non-normativity. Such an approach needs to be able to both recognise and celebrate the messiness inherent to identity construction. Being trans is particularly messy — it is an embodiment in flux, a shifting experience, a way of living, surviving and being, a call to something beyond the anticipated, a rupture in social acceptability, an enduring failure to be quantifiable. Though beautiful and powerful in many ways, its embodiment is currently, and perhaps inescapably, confined to the margins of what it means to be socio-culturally regarded as human. Moreover, attempts to capture moments of self-determination are often obscured by overarching cultural narratives on what it means to be empowered. Any approach, therefore, comes with an implicit caveat that compels one to consider both the precarity of the subject’s life as well as their own power to shape it.

The following outlines the methodological approach I have developed and applied during the research process, which encompasses feminist takes on knowledge production and research, in tandem with transfeminist understandings of identity, embodiment and experience.

Feminist approach to knowledge production and research

In recent decades, there has been an increasing interest in academic research to examine the processes and devices by which knowledge is generated and disseminated. This academic turn owes its emergence to postmodern feminist scholars who directed sociological attention to the pitfalls of presumed objectivity (see Haraway, 1988). Particularly in the early stages,

appeals were made by scholars fed up with patriarchal claims to ‘truth’ remaining unchallenged:

In an analytic article or in the prose of a research report, evocative phrases are censored, as is the author’s voice, the pronouns of the life-world are replaced by *the*, and the values and experiences are denied. For these procedures the rationale is science. The aim is objectivity. But objectivity is often a masculine elan that permits celebrating the disregard of the subject matter while projecting the subjectivity of men who rule. I speak here not against science but against the ruling science of positivism... Creating a discourse for the subject’s experience involves finding new ways of both writing and speaking (Paget, 1990, p. 148; emphasis in original).

Feminist scholarship has sought to redress the positivist inclinations of conventional modes of social science research by introducing compelling arguments for more ‘methodological mindfulness’ (Sprague, 2016, p. 30). Such mindfulness centres on the ability to step outside the proverbial box of traditional social science by giving ample attention to how knowledge is produced and the implications it carries. This is a response to what is called upon by the ‘feminist methodologies of ignorance’ that are ‘born out of the realization that we cannot fully understand the complex practices of knowledge production and the variety of features that account for why something is known, without also understanding the practices that account for *not* knowing’ (Tuana & Sullivan, 2006, p. vii; emphasis in original).

Such an approach challenges what John Law calls the Euro-American assumptions of ‘in-hereness’ and ‘out-thereness’, a ‘method assemblage [which] enacts — or seeks to enact, or understands itself as constituted in — a reality that is independent, prior, singular and definite’ (2004, p. 131). To this effect, Law warns against adopting what is too often misguidedly regarded as a ‘healthy research life’ when conducting research, a practice of upholding traditional scientific approaches and interpretations as the sole valid means of acquiring information (2004, p. 9). In particular, he contends, we as researchers must come to recognise the role of our methods in co-constructing reality. The result of research is neither fact nor fiction, but rather a narrative with the appearance of truth. This is because the researcher is motivated by specific perspectives, infused by subjugated and critical knowledges (Rose, 1997, p. 308). The notion of the objective, external researcher and the disconnected subject of study is always counterproductive, perhaps especially so when investigating queer- and trans-related issues (Gorman-Murray, Johnston & Waitt, 2016).

Said another way, data is not collected ‘in a social vacuum’, as Robyn Dowling points out (2000, p. 25). It is a joint project (see Mishler, 1986) between the researcher and the subject, guided by a multitude of largely-obscure variables. Feminist research has both the capacity and responsibility to ‘dismantle the smokescreen surrounding the canons of neopositivist research — impartiality and objectivist neutrality — which supposedly prevent the researcher from contaminating the data’ (England, 1994, p. 81). Simply put, it all boils down to this: to research gender is to do gender (McDowell, 1992). Feminist approaches position the subject of study at the centre of inquiry with a view to confront knowledges which seems to include the subject but really acts to exclude it (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 4). To do this is to become both the insider and the outsider, to defy convention and straddle the researcher/researched line (Minh-ha, 1991, p. 218). Accordingly, it is not enough to present one’s methods and methodologies in describing how one arrived at certain conclusions; one must also carefully unfold the myriad processes involved. Doing so opens a space to readers for multiple interpretations, as it humbly rejects the presumed certainty of the researcher’s findings. As Sprague (2016) reminds us, a feminist approach calls for actively shifting from

sociological conventions of positivist epistemology towards a critical, transparent, reflective and ultimately empowering approach. Gillian Rose (1997, p. 319) builds on this:

We cannot know everything, nor can we survey power as if we can fully understand, control or redistribute it. What we may be able to do is something rather more modest but, perhaps, rather more radical: to inscribe into our research practices some absences and fallibilities while recognizing that the significance of this does not rest entirely in our own hands.

Entwined in this approach is the desire to avoid committing epistemic injustice (Aultman, 2018). This requires maintaining an awareness of my positionality and the way it colours my research, whilst leaving open a space for ‘ordinary’ everyday experiences to be understood as knowledge in and of themselves — a feat made possible through an affective intelligence (Aultman, 2018, p. 23). What I mean by this is that, as the researcher, I have learnt that I must be careful not to inadvertently misconstrue moments of enacted agency as meaningless reflexes to external pressures. The phenomenon of gender infiltrates so much of our lives that it is not always immediately obvious how we are negotiating its barriers or responding to its demands. It would accordingly follow that I must not blindly regard all acts which seem to be negotiations as conscious strategies of resistance. Therefore, I have worked on how to best interpret the stories shared by interview participants and understand how legal recognition has contributed to these stories, as described below.

Lens of interpretation

Unearthing how trans subjectivities are formed necessitates a deconstructive analytical approach. For this, I have leaned on a postmodern interpretation of power, enacted through a queer theoretical lens. Power, in this way, is constitutive, fluid and ever-shifting (Foucault, 1978). Such is the foundation for queer theory, which challenges the normative social orderings of subjectivities and identities by exposing the power relations which produce them (Browne & Nash, 2010, p. 5). This rendering reveals the inherent instability of identity and brings to the fore the contextuality that guides the individual’s subjective shaping. Gender, in this light, is understood as a governing tool that excludes or includes different bodies, experiences and identities. Queer theory proves quite useful in examining social regulation and the production of subjectivity, as it marks the historicity of cultural norms, thereby evoking critical questions about common-sense ideas. Through this power-oriented lens, the parameters of liveability can be traced and contested.

However, I have tried to be careful with the queer lens, as its employment can put my research at risk of being swallowed up by deconstructivist relativism. It is important to find a balance between the constructedness of identity and the materiality of its implications for liveability. To discount the materiality of social structures negates the possibility for reorganising these structures in restitutive ways (Holmwood, 2000). It is a privilege, I have learnt, to be able to theorise over a cup of coffee about the instability and intrinsic falseness of identity markers and social groups (Waugh, 1992), as there are so many others struggling endlessly through everyday encounters with identity- and group-based discrimination. Joey Sprague (2016, p. 42) offers the salient example of the gender binary to clarify this point of theory-reality tension, saying that while the essentialist dichotomy of gender (and sex) is a rich source of passionate scholarly debate, it should not deflect ground-level efforts to continue addressing the lived realities of women and trans people who must contend with the tenable consequences of gender-binary norms. Gayatri Spivak reiterates this point: ‘[I]t is absolutely on target to take a stand against the discourses of essentialism, ...[but] strategically

we cannot' (1984/5, p. 184, cited in Fraser, M. 1999, p. 5).

This concern reflects the broader debate on poststructuralism⁶ and its use as a framework for analysing social inequality, such as that which is gender-based. At the centre of the debate is the argument that it is counterproductive to take a constructivist stance when considering social issues, because social issues such as inequality and erasure are themselves undeniably experienced and thus real. Poststructuralism is sequestered to the theory realm; efforts to translate its principles into practice could result in a blindly ironic reproduction of existing power dynamics. It is therefore unhelpful to speak of fluidity, constructedness and related poststructuralist conceptualisations without careful consideration of the material impacts current socio-cultural understandings have on people, especially those most currently vulnerable. J. Jack Halberstam (quoted in Nataf, 1996, p. 57) writes:

The end of identity in this gender fiction does not mean a limitless and boundless shifting of positions and forms... It further hints at the inevitable exclusivity of any claim to identity and refuses the respectability of being named, identified, known.

Hines (2007, p. 83) seconds this perspective: his research on trans narratives and modes of identity construction has indicated a 'tension between the conceptualisation of identity as fluid and the subjective investment in identity'.

For this reason, there has been pushback within feminist scholarship against queer methods and methodologies (see Brim & Ghaziani, 2016). Queer is seen as antithetical to research given its anti-foundationalism (McCann, 2016). Tey Meadow (2016, p. 319) cites Browne and Nash's interpretation of queer as 'fluid, unstable and perpetually becoming' (2010, p. 1) to argue that such an interpretation makes the endeavour of 'fashion[ing] a concrete methodology or indeed anything resembling a coherent subject' seem impossible. And, indeed, many a scholar has resisted queer approaches on these grounds, arguing that a subject must be established if there is to be any meaningful work done in response to subjugation. Seidman summarises this point nicely (1993, p. 133):

This very refusal to anchor experience in identifications ends up, ironically, denying differences by either submerging them in an undifferentiated oppositional mass or by blocking the development of individual and social differences through the disciplining compulsory imperative to remain undifferentiated.

I agree that, if left unchecked, a queer approach to research could operate to invisibilise or misrepresent those whom it purports to understand better. In an interview with Sarah Ahmed (2016, p. 490), Judith Butler acknowledges the growing criticism by some trans people around the application of the term 'queer' when describing the struggles they face, since it can operate as a tool of exclusion:

If 'queer' means that we are generally people whose gender and sexuality is 'unfixed' then what room is there in a queer movement for those who understand themselves as requiring — and wanting — a clear gender category within a binary frame? Or what room is there for people who require a gender designation that is more or less unequivocal in order to function well and to be relieved of certain forms of social ostracism?

The experiences of being gendered — as becomes repeatedly demonstrated in my (and countless others') research analyses and discussions — shape one's life in undeniably real

⁶ Also, scholars like S. Benhabib & Nicholson (1995) and P. Waugh (1992) see postmodernism as not fully free of 'patriarchal metanarratives', but E. Grosz (1994) and A.A. Jardine (1985) argue that the best way to dismantle patriarchal systems of thought is for feminist scholars to immerse themselves in it and find strategies for moving beyond it (see M. Fraser 2012, p. 5).

ways. It is therefore not helpful to denounce gender categories as meaningless constructions, not only because it diminishes people's experiences of themselves, but because it also demeans those who adhere to gender categories (see Rubin, 2003). The discussion does not have to be — or, rather, should not be — reduced to 'either-or'. To wit, it is not simply a matter of those who manage to escape gender's grip versus those who succumb to it, just as it is not a matter of those who fail gender norms versus those who successfully uphold them. There needs to be a space for understanding the complexity inherent to trans experiences without invoking a hierarchy of authority.

This is a lesson that I have learnt over the course of my doctoral project. As discussed previously, I personally identify and practice along the more radical lines of trans politics, as I interpret trans equality to be ultimately achievable through complete deconstruction of gender. In the beginning of my project, this coloured my process of data analysis by encouraging me to distinguish between those who adhere to the binary and those who do not as those who are still trapped and those who have escaped, respectively. My doctoral research, as I have been describing above, has opened me to another understanding, one which negates this hierarchising tendency and rather regards these different positionalities and desires — from the radical to the liberal — to be all equally legitimate modes of identity negotiation and survival.

Trans as a deconstructive tool

A central issue that Sølve Holm describes in their dissertation, *Fleshing out the self* (2017), is that the subject of trans becomes a tool for exposing the instability of cisnormativity. While they agree that trans can prove fruitful in this effort, they explain that trans people become a sort of show pony for some feminist or queer research, as arguments on the constructedness of gender returns time and again to the case of trans (Namaste, 2009, 2000; Raun, 2014). Meanwhile, cisnormative bodies and experiences remain relatively untouched. This is problematic not only because it ignores the constructedness of (cis)genderism, but also because it situates trans in the realm of subversion, thereby devaluing those who seek to embody more socially-normative gender identities (Katri, 2017). The onus is put, in other words, on trans people to continually negate cisnormativity by engaging in consciously subversive acts; failure to fail gender becomes stigmatised (MacDonald, 1998; Hines, 2010). One's endeavour to simply claim liveability can be easily considered secondary from an uncritically queer or feminist perspective. Ensuing analysis and discussion on trans narratives, such as those collected in interviews, would in this way focus on whether or not the subject's identity and experiences challenged gender norms. In doing this, the researcher appropriates the story being told and discounts social-psychological experiences by relaying it within a framework of prevailing cultural beliefs around gender (Rubin, 2003, p. 163). Such a rendering 'results in an instrumentalised and truncated reading of trans [which] forecloses a more complex and diverse understanding of trans and fails to include a critical reflection about who gets to speak for trans identity' (Raun, 2014, p. 15). By the same token, in moments where one is seen to perform gender according to hegemonic norms, the act may be uncritically interpreted as acquiescence to conformative pressure. The dichotomisation of conscious subversion versus unconscious conformity reifies cisnormativity as the default status.

In response to this, trans scholars have increasingly as of late called for a shift in focus from the macrolevel to the micro (Holm, 2017, p. 118), lending to a growing schism between queer and trans methodologies. Such a move reflects the emergent framework on

trans ethical research, which emphasises, among other things, careful consideration of who is speaking and for whom. Tobias Raun, a trans and media scholar, argues that trans-specific research should be a dialogical process that allows the story to breathe, instead of an endeavour to draw finalising conclusions (2014; see also Frank, 2010). No researcher has the whole story, Raun explains (2014, p. 19); therefore, the researcher must not only leave room for alternative interpretations but also keep the experiences of the subject at the centre. To do ethical trans research and analysis is to give significant weight to the ‘embodied experience of the speaking subject’ (Stryker, 2006, p. 12). This becomes a difficult task in moments when, for example, the subject describes experiences which are contrary to how we ourselves (as researchers) understand the phenomenon (Rubin, 2003).

In the next subsection, I discuss how trans studies and feminist studies can work together, via trans feminism, to produce a valuable approach.

Trans studies, gender studies and transfeminism

Trans studies took shape in the 1990s as a response to the perceived shortcoming of gender studies⁷ to adequately represent trans issues. Though gender studies at this time was an innovative field which sought to challenge applications of gender in all disciplines (Pylkkinen, 2015; van der Sanden, 2006; Hesse-Biber, 2004), it proved divisive on the matter of transgender due to what has been perceived as a low trans-literacy rate amongst many gender studies scholars (Enke, 2012, p. 2). Advocates for a separate approach argued that gender studies were too often contributing to the uncritically pathological and reductive information distributed on trans and gender-nonconforming people. Eventually, there was enough pressure by factions employing anti-trans techniques for some scholars to break away from the field and create a more specialised one — hence the birth of trans studies (Stryker & Currah, 2014). It expanded the scope from a traditional focus on women and sexuality to the extensive diversity of gender identity, expression, and experience. As Susan Stryker, one of the renowned founders of trans studies, wrote in 2004, ‘[T]ransgender studies is following its own trajectory and has the potential to address emerging problems in the critical study of gender and sexuality, identity, embodiment, and desire in ways that gay, lesbian, and queer studies have not always successfully managed’ (p. 214).

In the broader sense of academic research, trans studies shifts trans people to the position of the subject of knowledge, not just the object. Such an approach lies in stark opposition to the traditional medico-juridical approach in which gender-nonconformity is examined through a positivist lens of deviance, informed by pathologising and criminalising notions of citizenship, embodiment, and personhood. The task of trans studies, as Stryker and Currah (2014, p. 5) write, is to understand,

historically significant shifts in attitude...and the new forms of sociality that have emerged from them. It seeks as well to re-evaluate prior understandings of gender, sex, sexuality, embodiment, and identity, in light of recent transgender phenomena, from critical perspectives informed by and in dialogue with transgender practices and knowledge formations.

Through this approach, modes of knowledge production are scrutinised and reshaped by putting forth methodological queries that demand, namely, transparency and reflexivity. Gender, as a tool for drawing definitive conclusions in research, is gutted and unravelled, and the assumptions which its reductive use has led to are brought to the fore. This allows for a

⁷ Also referred to as LGBT studies, feminist studies, gay and lesbian studies, and women’s studies.

collaborative analysis of the ‘textual violence’ (Stone, 1992) that has fuelled contemporary (mis)understandings of trans.

Given the topic of my research, it is logical to assume that much of the scholarship and methodology I employ is borrowed from the field of trans studies, and it is of course true that this field has guided my research immensely. Namely, I have sought to strike a balance between personal experiences and institutionalised power dynamics by underlining both agency and subjugation when considering how trans subjectivities are created. This means balancing a focus on everyday life experiences, modes of embodiment, and negotiations of identity, with a focus on the disciplining of bodies and the regulation of identity categories. In other words, I give due consideration to the multiple dynamics in play in the process of intersubjectivity.

However, while trans studies theoretically fosters an emphasised focus on trans experiences, identities and embodiments, in practice there tends to be an inordinate amount of attention paid to the most transgressive modes of gendering (Enke, 2012, p. 5). In practice, it means using the concept ‘transgender’ to refer primarily or exclusively to those who trans (‘cross’) from one side of the gender/sex binary to the other. While these more obvious examples of transgender are important to examine, placing so much emphasis on them can be ultimately restrictive. A. Finn Enke (2012, pp. 5-6, emphases in original) explains:

[L]imiting the definition of transgender this way may perpetuate the marginalization of trans by reinforcing the misconception that ‘trans’ describes a very small number of visible people who (by definition) are not everywhere. It may constrict itself by requiring certain conformities of people who would take up the name. And, most dangerously, restricting trans to its MTF and FTM manifestations may inhibit alliances by signalling investments in the *relative* normativities and privileges accorded to ‘less’ gender-transgressive phenomena (e.g., being a feminist, being a lesbian, being a masculine woman); such investments avoid and sometimes actively refuse the possibility that trans issues *are* feminist issues and are *within*, not beyond, the scope of feminism.

For this reason, I have sought to shape my perspective to one which understands all people as being gendered⁸ via cisnormativity⁹, with differences being based on the ways in which the gendering is enacted and/or experienced, and the implications it has for the individual’s sense of self. It is best done by combining the trans studies’ focus on non-normatively gendered experiences and the role of social structures in shaping subjectivities with feminist groundwork on multiple differences of embodied personhood and the intersectionality of compounding oppressions (Stryker & Bettcher, 2016, p. 8). Together, the result is transfeminism, which, in its epistemological form, works to highlight the material effects of trans subjugation by examining the different factors which interact with (trans)gender. Transfeminism is the ‘intersection of feminism and trans activism’ and calls for ‘an expansion and deepening of intersectional feminism through a critique of the gender essentialism and unacknowledged transphobia within mainstream feminist discourses on sex’ (Garriga-López, 2019, pp. 1619-21). The purpose is to advance social efforts towards equality and empowerment. It challenges feminist scholarship to forgo tendencies to congeal

⁸ Refer to Gayle Salamon’s riveting book, *Assuming a body: Transgender and the rhetorics of materiality* (2011), for an in-depth discussion on how all people experience a disjuncture between how one experiences their own gender and how one feels they are perceivable. Reconciling this difference is a challenge faced by every person, no matter how they identify.

⁹ Refer to the Context section for an elaboration on cisnormativity.

gender categories in such a way that invisibilises certain axes of oppression¹⁰ as well as trans scholarship to expand the concept of trans to proactively include all transgressions of gender norms. Therefore, feminism and trans researchers can find a common ground for establishing a coalition, which, as J. Jack Halberstam (2005) points out, is ultimately beneficial for everyone.

Transfeminism takes as its starting point the feminist underpinnings of gender as being made through ‘complex social and technical manipulations that naturalize some while abjecting others’ (Enke, 2012, p. 1). Gender intersects with other social factors (such as class, race and nationality), and shapes how bodies, identities and experiences are given meaning. Feminist and trans scholars agree — gender can be ‘trouble’:

Gender may trouble every imaginable social relation and fuel every imaginable social hierarchy; it may also threaten to undo itself and us with it, even as gender scholars simultaneously practice, undo, and reinvest in gender. (Enke, 2012, p. 1)

Where transfeminism breaks away from feminism is the intensity and direction of focus on transgender. It has developed within trans studies as a new approach to conducting and analysing trans-specific research. Though trans studies has found a home in gender studies, in the sense of being accepted as a (sub)field of study, discussion on trans, Enke (2012) points out, tends to be periphery to discussion on women, leaving links between trans and women largely untouched (see also Stryker, Currah & Moore, 2008).

While the subjects of study are typically trans, transfeminism puts gender at the centre of analysis and discussion. It prioritises an interpretation of gender as being one which implicates everyone; it is not so much the degree to which one is gendered but rather the way in which one experiences the effects of gender that distinguishes gender identity groups. It is because of this that trans studies scholar Paisley Currah (2016, p. 2) describes transfeminism as ‘third wave feminism’, noting its

refusal to accede to the ontological priority of any particular group; its capacity to make visible the effects of power on vastly different scales, from the molecular to the global; and its general rejection of traditional political forms (the nation, the party, legal institutions¹¹) in favor of situating resistance in cultural moments and provisional events.

In other words, the propensity of feminist and trans studies to draw lines around identity groups in such a way that precludes the possibility to see the interlinks between different experiences of oppression is confronted by transfeminism.

The transfeminist perspective has been crucial in my research. It has long been my conviction that the goal of trans-specific research should be to demonstrate how we are all trans — in the sense that we all perform/experience/embody gender transgressions at some, or maybe many, points in our lives — whilst acknowledging how the consequences of such transgressions are experienced differently at gender’s intersections with other social factors.

Additionally, I have sought in my paper to demonstrate that (cis)genderism is a

¹⁰ For example, the (typically inadvertent) exclusion of trans women, especially trans women of colour, from discussion.

¹¹ In eschewing “legal institutions” as arbiters of livelihood, transfeminism, in my reading of it (in the writings of Currah and others), does not negate the importance of law as a short-term solution to issues of recognition and protection. Rather, it understands legal institutions as limited in their capacity to attend to the needs of all those whom it purports to represent and therefore inadequate for broad, lasting transformation regarding gender equality. Therefore, while changing the law at this time is necessary, ultimately Transfeminists must forge another way forward, one which is built on resisting the reductive processes inherent to law and other regulatory institutions.

normativising standard that holds us all in its grip by convincing us of its unquestionable authenticity, not unlike the dancing shadows of Plato's cave wall. The cisgender/trans gender binary on which so much advocacy and scholarship relies may no longer serve the purpose it once did. In fact, it may operate to obscure more than it exposes (Currah, 2016, p. 3), as it implies that the struggles faced by trans people are unique to being trans, rather than variations in manifestation of the same gender norms. Nonetheless, as discussed above, it remains crucial to recognise and understand the material implications of cisnormativity.

Concluding notes

Over the course of my doctoral project on trans experiences in Norway following the 2016 law on gender recognition, I have worked to develop an ethically-sound approach and position. As the field of Trans Studies is relatively new and dynamically evolving, constructing a methodological framework has proven to be both challenging and invigorating for me as a trans-identifying scholar. By examining my positionality and some of the struggles in my research, I apply the theory and practices I have learnt to offer an overview of what I believe to be an ethical transfeminist approach to conducting research on trans people.

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Conflicts of interest

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