He, She or They – Does it matter in the workplace?

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Author biography

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Abstract

This study examines non-binary people's experience in the workplace with a special focus on the way they experience leadership. Five participants were interviewed and confronted with a hypothetical scenario in which they had to decide whether or not they would take a leadership position. The findings suggest that the non-binary gender identity and colleagues' attitude towards it affected their decision and in some cases would cause the participants to decline the leadership position. Difficulties navigating the workplace as a non-binary person are also discussed. It is concluded that having a non-binary gender identity complicates not only work life, but most of a person's daily life. However, more research is needed in order to clearly distinguish what the most pressing issues are.

Keywords: gender identity, gender roles, authenticity, leadership.

Introduction

For many people, non-binary genders may be a new phenomenon. The term "non-binary gender" points to any gender that is neither male nor female. It can be a combination of both or something completely outside those categories. While non-binary (NB) people may experience the world very differently than binary (cisgendered) people do, there has been virtually no research into that unique experience. Non-binary gender identities tend not to be taken very seriously as it is a foreign concept to many, and they are often not legally recognised (Tritt, 2018). It is for this reason that many NB people are still not out, meaning that they are not open about their gender identity towards other people. The society we live in is by definition very much gendered; we base many of our social constructs on being either male or female. Fiske, Haslam and Fiske (1991) found that the most prevalent factors leading

to a person confusing two other people were gender and personal relationship. This means that gender is a primary factor we use when categorising people, underlining how very important gender is to us. Seeing as we only truly recognise two genders, it is perhaps not surprising that NB genders are far from being seen as a legitimate construct.

However, to make progress regarding this issue, research into NB is essential (Vargo, 2011). The lack of research into NB people is a cause for concern when taking into consideration the findings from Baum and colleagues (Baum et al., 2012) showing the difficulties they face. In their survey, they found that 27% of straight, cisgendered male youth reporting being "very happy", while only 4% of gender-expansive (NB and transgender) youth gave the same response. Additionally, it was found that only 5% of gender-expansive youth reported "definitely fitting in" in their community while 30% reported "definitely not fitting in". In contrast, roughly a third of straight, cisgendered youth (both male and female) responded that they were "definitely fitting in". Harrison, Grant and Herman (2011) showed that transgender and NB people are twice as likely to be unemployed than the general population. Vargo (2011) also reports that gender-expansive people often experience more psychiatric disorder, substance abuse, and alcoholism.

Considering the fact that these were the results of the few pieces of research that have looked further into the lives of NB people, it seems to be important to learn more about the causes and effects of these findings. Therefore, this paper seeks to find out more about the consequences of having a NB gender identity and focuses on the workplace as this is a large part of one's daily life. There is also a special focus on leadership as this can shed light on NB people's sense of confidence and comfort within the workplace.

For clarity's sake, when terms relating to binary genders (man, woman, men, women) are mentioned in this paper, unless otherwise specified, this refers to cisgendered men and women, or in other words, people whose gender identity is the same as their biological sex. The following section will define and explore some of the terms associated with these concepts.

Gender and sex

In the context of this paper gender is considered a spectrum ranging from masculinity to femininity on which everyone has a place that can change over time; thus, it is not a binary concept (Baum et al., 2012). This place on the spectrum often, but not always, correlates with a person's biological sex. A person's (biological) sex is binary; it is either male or female, determined by the sex organs they have. The only exception to this rule are hermaphrodites, who are born with both sex organs. A person's sex can be different from a person's gender.

Gender roles

The roles we have in our lives are heavily related to gender and the way in which it is expressed. When examing Eagly and Karau's (2002) theoretical article on role congruity theory, one could say that gender is something we do, not something we are. This view is further backed up by West and Zimmerman (1987) as well as by Richards and colleagues (Richards et al., 2016), who see gender as something that is embedded in interaction. A gender role can then be defined as the way in which we express the gender we identify with through (social) behaviour, appearance, and thinking style, for example; and is culturally dependant and can change over time.

Gender roles are related to authenticity, which by Hallam, Olsson, Bowes and Toumbourou (2006) is defined as being able to consistently express oneself congruently with one's own ethical values and innate talents and desires.

Gender roles are also different from gender stereotypes or norms, which include descriptive and prescriptive aspects of one's being. Heilman (2001) makes the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive processes but refers to both concepts as stereotypes. The current paper considers gender stereotypes a description of what a certain person should look and act based on certain characteristics, in this case gender (e.g., "women have long hair" or "men like sports"). Norms, then, are a set of prescriptions that different groups of people must adhere to based on certain characteristics (e.g., "men must be strong" or "women must not be sexually promiscuous"). Thus, gender stereotypes and norms refer to the way we traditionally view the two binary genders; they have to do with views from the extrinsic world. Gender roles are more intrinsic and personal; they refer to the way we choose to

express our gender and are influenced by the aforementioned extrinsic processes. In this research, gender and gender roles are presented as a unified theme as they are so heavily related to one another that making them into separate themes would negatively impact the cohesiveness of the paper.

Leadership

In the context of this paper leadership refers to organizational leadership, which refers to the ability to influence individuals within an organization toward the achievement of a vision or set of goals. This definition was adapted from Robbins and Judge (2001).

Naturally, gender affects work life and leadership. This interaction is complex and multifaceted, but luckily it has been researched extensively.

To clarify what aspects of gender relevant for leadership, Goktepe and Schneider (1989) found that sex is not a predictor for leader emergence, but gender roles ("gender role orientation" in their words) are; in that the masculine gender role was strongly associated with leader emergence. The findings of Fiske and colleagues (Fiske et al., 1991) show that because gender is so important to us, it is a primary influence on leadership and can help determine not only who emerges as a leader, but it can also influence how a leader's competence and performance is perceived by followers.

More depth into this notion can be found through role congruity theory, which is a leading theory created by Eagly and Karau (2002). The theory proposes that people have different "roles" that they play in their life, and others have assumptions about these roles as a result of societal influence. When the assumptions about one role (e.g., gender norms/stereotypes) are incongruent with the assumptions about another role (e.g., being a leader), the person is less likely to be seen as a successful occupant of one of these roles. This view was also asserted by Schein (1973) and Appelbaum, Audet and Miller (2003). The male gender role fits the socially constructed idea of a leader, which makes men appear to be more successful occupants of a leadership role, and the reverse effect can be seen in women.

Social identity theory (SIT) cannot be overlooked when considering these issues. Originally created by Tajfel and Turner (1979), SIT states that parts of our identity are determined by the social groups we belong to. In the group context, we see our own

group as the in-group and other groups and the people belonging to them out-groups. Intergroup communication can be challenging as out-groups are frequently placed in a negative light by the in-group. Within an organization, social identities may help newcomers feel comfortable, but can also be a source of conflict (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

It has been found that women encounter sexual discrimination in several forms in the workplace, making it especially difficult for them to obtain a leadership position (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). This problem is also referred to as the glass ceiling-effect, which continues to be a relevant issue in the workplace (Vial, Napier & Brescoll, 2016). Moreover, Ridgeway (2001) confirms that women are indeed at a disadvantage when trying to get into leadership positions, but ascribes this phenomenon to the theory that men are seen as having greater status. Being a man is more "desirable" and this works to the disadvantage of women.

Fletcher (2004) asserts that women might in fact be better fit to be leaders in today's culture. For instance, they tend to put more focus on mutual co-operation rather than strictly hierarchical leadership. However, she also theorises that when men engage in more "feminine" leadership behaviours, they are perceived as being innovative leaders, whereas the same behaviour in women is unconsciously associated with motherly behaviour. Interestingly enough, Daher and Guillaume (2016) found that leader effectiveness tends to be rated higher when the leader is more prototypical. For example, women with directive leadership styles are considered more effective because their demeanour is perceived as being prototypical for a leader. But, it is unclear how NB people are viewed in terms of leadership.

In summary, previous research makes clear that NB people seem more likely to have problems finding their way in life. There is no research on NB people in the workplace, but the vast amount of literature on gender and work life shows that women tend to encounter more difficulties than men do, and that men are by default seen as better leaders than women. For NB people, this poses an extra challenge; not only do they face difficulties because of their gender identity, but also have to face the same gender-related issues we all do.

Method

To address the research question of how a NB gender identity shapes an individual's leadership experiences, this research employed an inductive qualitative approach, which is appropriate for new and under-developed research topics (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). The research aims to find out how having a NB gender identity affects one's experience of work life. It also intends to clarify what effect a NB gender identity has on one's desire to lead.

Study participants and the interview process

Five people (P1 to P5) took part in the study contacted through a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling. All participants except for P5 were people the author was at least vaguely acquainted with through their studies. P5 was found through another person acquainted with the author. The participants were all contacted through Facebook. As it is extremely challenging to find NB participants, these sampling methods were considered adequate. Participants were aged 20–23 years and their gender identity and nationality are described in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant age (at time of interview), gender identity, preferred and nationality

PARTICIPANT ID	AGE	GENDER IDENTITY	PREFERRED PRONOUNS	NATIONALITY
p1	22	Genderqueer	They/them	Dutch
p2	21	Genderfluid/gender non-conforming	She/her	Dutch
p3	20	Non-binary	They/them	Dutch
p4	20	Genderqueer/non-binary	They/them or she/her	Dutch
p5	23	Bigender: female and genderqueer/maverique	They/them	British

All participants have completed or are currently in the process of completing a university education. Four participants are still students, not yet having had full-time work; but they have part-time jobs in restaurants, warehouses, and stores.

One participant (P5) does have a full-time job in the medical sector. All are biologically female.

The research was carried out through one-on-one interviews via Skype or Google Hangouts, according to each participant's preference. Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to read through an information sheet, after which they signed a consent form. An interview consisting of 19 questions and a hypothetical scenario (see below) were created beforehand. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed professionally. One interview recording included poor audio quality, thus the transcript includes some gaps. However, notes were taken during all interviews and in this case, the researcher's notes complemented the transcript. Notes were taken throughout all interviews in order to have a record of the participants' demeanour and body language in case anything stood out, and to have an alternative source of information in case the audio recordings were insufficient. The participants were aware of the notetaking and consented to it taking place.

The original scenario proposes that the participant has been working for the same company for a number of years and is offered a promotion to a more managerial position. The participant will receive a raise but also have more responsibilities and administrative tasks. Their colleagues know about their gender identity and most show an accepting attitude, but some do not.

First, the participants were asked about their age, education and work experience. They were then asked about the nature, origin and effect of their gender identity before going into the scenario and the questions about how they would respond to the hypothetical job offer and why they would respond in this manner. In each interview, the scenario was adapted in order to gain more detailed responses. This meant that the attitudes and opinions or various groups within the organization, namely upper management, Human Resources (HR), or future followers, would change to be more hostile or accommodating. The participants were also asked what they would do if they were not open about their gender identity at work.

Data analysis

Data were analysed in NVivo using the template analysis method (King, 1998). Three themes (see below) were identified before starting the analysis based on the central constructs within the research. Throughout the analysis, additional themes were added and the hierarchy and structure of themes and their sub-themes was changed according to the narrative told by the data.

Findings

The three themes identified in the analysis were leadership, gender, and gender roles (a sub-theme to gender identity).

Leadership

After reading the original scenario, all participants except for P1 said that they would probably accept the job offer. The major factors in making this decision were generally the increasing salary, career progression, the fact that they already have experience working for the company, and confidence in taking on a leadership role.

P1 immediately brought up the influence of the opinions of their future followers and upper management:

> *"Of course if the people that work under you don't like you then they start to raise complaints about you […] and that puts your position in jeopardy".*

The participant would therefore consider it important to be supported by upper management and would prefer to speak to them as well as to their potential followers before deciding whether or not to take the position.

Changing aspects of the scenario such as the opinions of certain groups of people within the organization, or the amount of openness the participants handled around their gender identity also changed the responses. Generally speaking, participants felt comfortable taking the leadership position only when there was what they considered an adequate level of acceptance towards their gender identity.

P4 was the only participant that would take the position in any case. A hostile upper management would make them feel uncomfortable but they feel that their gender

identity is irrelevant to the work they do. In the case of a more hostile team, they would be uncomfortable but this would not necessarily stop them as they would be hierarchically a level above the team.

These findings show that participants mostly expected people in the workplace to be professional; that their performance should come before their gender identity, not the other way around. P2 felt that if her team were unaccepting towards her gender identity, it should be possible for her and her team to remain professional and leave personal issues out of the work dynamic. However, if the team were more openly hostile and HR were unwilling to support her as well, she would lean towards leaving the company all-together.

Speaking about leadership style and experience, most participants reported not having much experience but did generally feel comfortable taking on a leadership position, provided that they have enough knowledge and experience for the position in question. The participants had a rather people-focused leadership style, putting the emphasis on communication and mutual cooperation. Participants P2 and P3 both reported lacking assertiveness while P4 and P1 described themselves as being fairly assertive leaders.

In terms of the influence their gender identity had on the way the participants' experience leadership, P1, P2, and P5 noted that they were more aware of the mental health and personal experience of the people around them, including possible followers. Another participant, P5 mentions that as a leader, they specifically focus on providing a good role model for their followers; if they have a positive experience with a NB leader, this might change the way they look at NB people in general.

Further, P3 reported having difficulty identifying the influence of their gender identity on their leadership skills and experience:

> *"I always think (…) where do I separate (…) gender and personality and how do they influence each other, so I'm never sure if I'm just a shy or a careful person or if because I always feel like I was hiding something that I've become like a more shy and careful person".*

Gender and gender roles

The importance of gender roles is mentioned by P2:

> "…people do see me that way, as being gender fluid, and (…) with some people that comes first, (…) mostly with people who don't have any experience of that yet".

Thus, according to her, gender comes first and she comes second. Related to this statement was another observation; she mentions that she would probably hesitate to take the position more if her team were mostly older men, because in her experience they are more difficult to work with, especially if you are a non-stereotypically feminine woman. Additionally, in terms of upper management, P2 says this could present the biggest problem. Her gender identity has influenced the way she interacts with authority figures, so if she were to be unsure of the opinions of the people higher up, she would sooner quit than talk to them because she would not expect them to understand or support her.

P5 discusses the influence a hostile attitude towards their gender identity on their choice to take or turn down the job offer:

> "I would have to think about would changing my position mean that I have to feel less confident in my gender identity, and probably take up a position I'm comfortable with anyway, like I'm not struggling salary wise… I'd probably prefer to stay in a less senior position if that means that I'm having less issues".

However, they also said it might be a motivating factor that would drive them to try and prove themselves. Either way, a hostile attitude from any direction would affect their decision.

The scenario asked about what the participants would do if they were out at work, which they would generally not be in the current situation. P1 reports that if they were not out in the interview scenario, they would not have any doubts about taking the position.

Reasons for not taking the position that were not related to gender identity were not feeling comfortable with the job itself, not liking the people in the team, and a sexist work environment. The sexist work environment was related to the fact that the participants are biologically female.

For P3, the fact that they were out as NB in the scenario as well as the fact that this was supported by at least a part of the people at work is important. This would make them feel more comfortable because their primary concern would be whether or not to come out at work. If upper management were accepting of their gender identity but the team's attitude was leaning towards negative, however, they would not take the position because it would make it unpleasant to do the work itself. They do emphasise that this would only be the case if the team's attitude were clearly negative and P3 would see no possibility to change their opinions.

Fitting into the workplace

A dominant theme throughout the interviews was the difficulties the participants experienced fitting into a society that puts a strong emphasis on gender. This leads them to often feel misunderstood. As told by P4:

> *"If you're non-binary or gender queer or whatever people won't be able to understand because what you're going through is such […] a unique experience you won't understand, and of course they can try to understand but they will never get to the 100 percent. Some people are supportive and some people are not, which makes it more painful…"*

Because of these feelings of being misunderstood and unsupported, the participants expressed difficulties disclosing their gender identities to others. As a result, none of the participants were out at work. The reasoning they gave for this was similar: their gender identity could be a point of friction and it was better not to risk creating tension. One participant (P3) expresses that at work, it is not necessary to be out, even though they consider their gender identity as a very important part of their being. This view was shared by the other participants. While they ideally would want to work in an environment where they can be out and supported, they are aware that this might not be possible. Further, P1, P3 and P4 saw it in their future to work in academic environments related to topics such as anthropology and gender studies, which they felt would be more accepting environments, but of course it is not certain that they will actually find work in those industries.

In more general terms, P1 says that their gender identity

"does affect work because of course a lot of people just don't agree with it, […] I might want a job in education so people don't necessarily want you around their kids".

But, P5 notes that their gender identity influences their work life in another way:

"I would (…) want to make our workplace very welcoming in that way [towards NB people] because maybe it's on my mind a little bit more (…) because it applies to me specifically".

In general, the participants agree that a NB gender identity complicates daily life, and with that work life. While they might feel relatively confident in their leadership skills, the views others have on their gender identities might discourage them from taking on a leadership position, or make this decision rather complicated. Additionally, their biological sex and gender roles also influence this already complex decision.

Discussion and implications for the workplace

The result of society's views that NB genders are illegitimate (Tritt, 2018) is that the participants are hesitant to be open about their gender identity, which leads them to often not be fully authentic. This lack of authenticity can then lead to decreased well-being (Hallam et al., 2006). Tying these findings back to these of Baum et al. (2012) and Harrison et al. (2011), it becomes clear that the lack of authenticity as a result of society's inability to accept NB genders as a concept could be a major factor in NB people's feelings of depression and not fitting in. This inevitably affects not only their personal lives, but also the work lives of NB people.

It is then not surprising that none of the participants were out at work, with P2 directly mentioning that they are afraid to be judged if they did come out at work. In the scenario, the participants were hypothetically out at work. Participants made it clear that they expect a certain degree of professionalism in the workplace, but this does not mean that there will not be any judgment. The research on gender norms and stereotypes shows how easy it is for people to have expectations of others without being conscious of it (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Heilman, 2001). According to Fiske and colleagues (Fiske et al., 1991), people primarily use gender as a way to categorise others. This is interesting when thinking about something P2 said.

They mentioned that with some people "the gender comes first and I come second". If gender comes first, and NB genders are generally received with scepticism, this would naturally reflect negatively on NB people.

Eagly and Karau (2002) found that when there is role incongruity, the person in question is more likely to be seen as a competent occupant of one of the roles that are incongruent with each other. This seems to reflect what P2 said: it is difficult to be taken seriously as a leader if you are a non-stereotypical biological woman in a leadership position. P2's gender role is already different from the norms and stereotypes attached to her biological sex, so there is incongruity between the way she is expected to look and behave (her role as a biological woman) and the way she actually looks and behaves (her gender role). However, Daher and Guillaume (2016) report that leaders are seen as more effective when they show a more prototypical (i.e., directive) leadership style. This leadership style shows classically male characteristics, and while P2 is not a prototypically feminine biological woman, she does report having a team-oriented and people-focused leadership style. She does not see herself as a natural leader but does consider herself a good leader. In contrast, P4 reports having a more directive leadership style, and they do consider themselves a natural leader. Additionally, P4 will sometimes be mistaken for a man, which shows that perhaps it is their gender role in combination with their leadership style that makes them a natural leader.

According to Fiske et al. (1991), we use gender as a primary means of categorising other people. It can thus be said that because society only recognises the two binary genders, those are the two main categories we use when mentally organising the people we know. This might mean that when people do not necessarily belong in either of those two categories, this is upsetting because it is dissonant with the methods we all use to make sense of the world. We could still use a person's biological sex as a way to categorise people and we probably do, but the concept of NB people could be particularly difficult to get used to because it is incongruent with the way we feel things ought to be.

Ashforth and Mael (1989) note that finding a social identity through belonging to an in-group within the workplace helps socialisation. Non-binary people

might have difficulties doing this as their general social group based on gender is hugely unconventional and thus only fits within a very specific group. Thus, the nonconforming nature of a significant part of their social identity could cause mental distress. Moreover, because NB people express their gender differently than conventionally accepted, they might automatically be placed in the out-group by colleagues, leaving more space for conflict. Humans are predisposed to forming different groups; this is certainly not solvable, but conflict could be avoided by focusing on similarities rather than differences. This could be especially true for NB people as they generally tend to feel as though they are outcasts. Therefore, teambuilding exercises aimed to find similar aspects of individuals' identities and work with those instead of their differences might be of enormous value, not only for NB people, but for their colleagues as well.

The difficulties NB people experience seem to be deeply rooted in our society and the way we make sense of the world and of other people. While the increasing exposure of NB gender identities might signal the start of a movement towards a more gender neutral society, the experiences of the participants in this study signify that this shift, if indeed happening, is only just commencing. In the workplace, it is important for NB people to feel as though they are accepted for who they are. Awareness and tolerance building would contribute to this, but practical changes such as adding a NB option on application forms or adding gender neutral bathrooms might also have a positive impact.

Limitations and implications for future research

The relatively low number of participants might have affected the reliability of the study. If more research about NB people were to be done, it would be desirable to find a larger sample of participants. The participants for this study were rather similar: all were biological women between the ages of 20 and 23 that were either still at university or had just finished university. This could have decreased the validity of this study as the sample is not very generalisable. In future studies, it might be interesting to look at older NB people and NB people that are biologically male. Another limitation of this study was that most participants did not have much leadership experience. This might make it difficult for them to envision themselves as a leader and to understand leadership in general. Again, this should be taken into account in future research.

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