Leadership

"None so queer as folk": Gendered expectations and transgressive bodies in leadership

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between the body and leadership through a case study of a transgender leader. The study shows that the leader's body, presumed gender, and gendered appearance are salient markers that employees use to make sense of leaders and leadership, and that this gendered nature of leadership shows the deep roots of gender dichotomies and the heterosexual matrix that permeate our understanding of leadership. These two findings lead us to emphasize the need to queer leadership. All leaders experience gendered restrictions, to some extent, via the social norms and expectations of the way leadership should be performed. The construction of leadership through a transgender body reminds us to stay open to the exploration of performativity, particularly the relationships between bodies, gender, sexuality, and leadership and how *any* body can benefit from queering leadership.

Introduction

Although there is no single and clearly agreed upon definition of leadership (Harding et al., 2011) and new trends in research on diversity and inclusion suggest that any *body* can be a leader (Bowring, 2004), it remains that society often links leadership with particular

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gendered characteristics and embodied subjectivities (Brewis et al., 1997; Ford, 2006; Sinclair, 2005). Gender and diversity scholars suggest that in many countries and contexts, these subjective and embodied markers for what makes a good leader are commonly: white, male, heterosexual, and able-bodied (Acker, 1990; Kenny and Bell, 2011). This is not to say that other subjectivities or bodies cannot or do not lead. It does suggest, however, that current discursive and embodied tendencies have historically and contextually favored a particular leadership aesthetic that favors men and masculinities (Ford, 2006). It is not only men who maintain gender dynamics. As Binns (2008) notes, ''the dominant leadership message is powerful, seducing women as well as men to masculinize their practices in a heroically male world'' (605).

Attempts to understand – and in some cases rationalize – why leadership is gendered range from biological arguments that often cast men as more ''natural'' at leading than women to theories which highlight the socially constructed conditions that favor men in leadership (Billing and Alvesson, 2000). Rather than viewing gender as biologically deterministic, we see it as shaped by and through discursive practices, which construct certain expectations for the way people – both affectively and through their material bodies – *ought* to perform. These mandates permeate leadership studies, popular notions about leadership and follower's expectations for how leaders should perform.

To date, leadership is locked up in a conflation of sex, gender, and sexuality – what Butler (1990) called the heterosexual matrix, defined as ''a hegemonic discursive/epistemological model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality'' (151). As leaders, women are often expected to conform to what stereotypically is seen as feminine behavior (e.g. empathetic, relational, nurturing), and opposite men are expected to display leadership skills that conform with what stereotypically is seen as masculine behavior (e.g. rational, goal oriented, decisive) (Billing and Alvesson, 2000). Leaders who cannot – or will not – conform to these norms are seen as odd and unnatural or heralded as extraordinary (Harding et al., 2011; Muhr, 2011). Several studies, however, show how both men and women struggle with these stereotypes when they cannot achieve a fit within narrow heteronormative categories (e.g. Ford, 2006; Medved, 2009).

To investigate this struggle and its relations to gendered leadership, we present a study of a transgender leader who we call Claire. Claire is classified by the health care system as a biological man but has always felt like a woman. She has lived, worked and led her employees as a woman for the last three years. We explore both Claire's experiences of being a transgender leader, a term that she identifies with, and her employees' responses to her and her leadership style. Studying her employees' reactions can inform about gender expectations of leadership more generally. We seek to highlight the relational dynamics involved in how leaders are constructed within the binaries of natural/unnatural, feminine/masculine, man/woman, and heterosexual/homosexual. Instead of viewing Claire as a special case, we suggest that her struggles to perform leadership are both unique, in that she has publically shared a personal transformation, and shared by male and female top managers in general, insofar as performances of leadership are witnessed and evaluated as gendered.

Rather than theorizing about what it means to be ''queer,'' we wish to queer leadership theory (Warner, 1993). Much of queer theory is aimed at creating a more inclusive work culture (Rottmann, 2006). We agree with this plea, but we aim for an alternative form of critique (Vachhani, 2005), which problematizes that which is taken for granted and assumed

real (Finn and Dell, 1999). Constructions of leadership images that differ from the beautiful, powerful, and controlled are far from rare. We therefore wish to emphasize the general need for leadership images which are blurred, jarred and confusing (see also Thanem, 2011a; Wicks and Rippin 2010). Our primary aim is to mainstream the queer (Parker, 2002) and argue that queering leadership suggests that *all* managers perform leadership according to certain scripts set by the expectations generated by their gendered bodies, which produces limitations to the way leadership is seen as natural/unnatural for a specific leader's body.

This reveals a key tension that this paper seeks to address: gender binaries – reified in the concept of the heterosexual matrix – are difficult for leaders and employees to communicate and to navigate because they appear ''natural'' (Atkinson and Hall, 2009). As such, the paper asks the following two questions: one, what are the perceptions of and expectations around leadership performed by a transgender body? And, two, what can other bodies learn from this, i.e. how can we all move beyond gender dichotomies to queer leadership?

In articulating such questions, we draw on Pullen and Simpson (2009), who explore how managing difference necessitates the ability to move between masculinities and femininities and resist being framed. We want to move beyond gender switching, or the idea that one can shift between either being masculine or feminine (Bruni and Gherardi, 2002), and engage in the exploration of the constant mix, blurring and interruption of masculinity and femininity. The case of a transgender leader allows us to explore what occurs when traditional assumptions about gendered bodies and roles are disrupted (see also Tewksbury, 1993; Schilt and Connell, 2007; Schilt and Westbrook, 2009).The paper unfolds as follows. To begin, we frame our study in the literature of leadership, gender and sexuality. This is followed by a discussion of our methodology, after which we turn our attention to the case-study of Claire. Here we focus on Claire's own story, then on her employees' point of view. In the discussion that follows, we first discuss how the leader's body, presumed gender, and gendered appearance are salient markers that employees use to make sense of leaders and leadership. Second, we explore the deep roots of gender dichotomies that permeate our understanding of leadership. Finally, we conclude the paper by discussing what other bodies can learn from this in the service of queering leadership more generally.

Leadership, gender, and sexuality

Although the main body of leadership is largely unconcerned with the gendered nature of the discipline, more recent trends investigate the discursive construction of leadership which emphasizes its gendered undertones (see among others Billing and Alvesson, 2000; Collinson, 2005; Ford, 2006, 2010; Harding et al., 2011). Common to this body of literature is the critique that although leadership traditionally has been written up as gender neutral and objective, it still reproduces the masculine discourse of ideal leadership (Collinson and Hearn, 1996). In addition to this, the discursive leadership approach also attacks (what otherwise has been the gender approach to leadership) the argument that organizations need to be better at appreciating feminine skills of female leaders in order to embrace a more modern or inclusive organizational culture (e.g. Fletcher, 1994; Helgesen, 1990). Both stances – claiming neutrality and emphasizing the need for feminine values – uphold gender dichotomies as they rest on stereotypical notions of the masculine and feminine, wherein masculine and feminine skills and values are tied together to the male and female sex, respectively (see also Ely and Meyerson, 2000).

Much of this literature draws on Judith Butler's critique of the heterosexual matrix (especially Butler,1990, 1993a, 2004), which acknowledges the ideological presence of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality where society is built on two classes of people: women and men (Lorber, 1998). Here, gender is understood as a binary where "man" is read against "woman", and sex and gender are conflated to mean the same thing and assumed heterosexual. Therefore, sex organs signify both male/masculine and female/feminine in ways, which work to naturalize and reify gendered relations. Notwithstanding cultural differences, this reification envelops bodies when people are largely expected to dress, move, and perform in accordance to the male or female expectations of their historical time and place (Young, 2005).

The heterosexual matrix upholds heterosexual norms when a causal relationship is depicted among sex, gender, and desire so that sexual orientation, preference, and practices are articulated as "natural" insofar as men claim sexual desire for women and vice versa. Within this construction, the binary relationship between masculinity and femininity is asymmetrically designed to keep patriarchal order in place (Acker, 2012; Hearn et al., 1990). Constructions of heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality are also hierarchically organized via compulsory heterosexuality where all other sexualities become "abnormal". These naturalized constructions of sex, gender, and desire are upheld in public, political discourses of work, and professionalism (Ashcraft et al., 2012; Sullivan, 2012).

Rather than the heteronormative view on gender, Butler argues for a performative construction of gender, in which the materiality of "sex" is recognized; yet seen as inveigled in discourses. Performativity suggests that gender is not naturally strong-armed to sex or the biology of bodies, but instead implies that our perceptions of gender categories are developed on the basis of continuous repetition of certain historical contextualized behavior. Through this repetition – and continuous articulation of the norm – gender categories become normalized (Butler, 1993b) and everyone is socialized into a culture with gendered scripts (Butler, 2004). This statement does not imply that there are pre-determined roles laying in wait for the gendered and sexed bodies that can bring them to life. On the contrary, Butler (1988) notes that:

> Gender cannot be understood as a *role* which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,' whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority (528).

Leadership is also embedded within the heterosexual matrix (Binns, 2008) where a hierarchical configuration exists between leaders' biological sex, gender appearance, gender behavior, and presumed sexual desire and behavior. Viewing leadership through Butler's lens of performativity foregrounds the elusive and constructed nature of leadership as well as the power behind the expectations people have around how "men" and "women" as fixed categories perform leadership (Bowring, 2004; Fournier and Smith, 2006). Particularly in the view of feminine leadership studies and some aspects of transformational leadership, men are often expected to be analytical, rational and able to make tough leadership decisions (e.g. Fournier and Smith, 2006; Kerfoot and Knights, 1998). Opposite, women are expected to be cooperative, emotionally receptive, nurturing and intuitive (e.g. Fletcher, 1994; Helgesen, 1990). Within this view, a female leader's body should perform according to female values, that is, exhibit femininity, or even hyperfemininity, in appearance and behaviors (Cherulnik, 1995; Tretheway, 1999).

People who transgress these norms are seen as abnormal or unnatural (c.f. Thanem, 2011b). For instance, women leaders who lead according to the masculine discourse of ideal leadership, that is women leaders who are goal-oriented, tough, decisive, hard-working, rational and competitive (Collinson and Collinson, 1996; Fletcher, 2004), are often seen as more "man then the men" (Pullen and Rhodes, 2008: 21). This coding makes women leaders "unnatural" and sometimes even intimidating (Brewis et al., 1997; Muhr, 2011). As a result, they often strive to legitimize their role as breadwinners both within the organization and outside (Medved, 2009).Their struggles arise in part because gender norms tend to be tightly woven within a heterosexual matrix.

Queering leadership – a budding attempt to question the heterosexual matrix in leadership studies

In order to transgress the heterosexual matrix, a recent tendency (especially in organization studies more generally) has been to draw on queer theory (see for example Harding et al., 2011; Parker, 2002; Steyaert, 2010; Thanem, 2011a; Tyler and Cohen, 2008; Vachhani, 2005). Opposite much gender literature, which often invokes the matrix in order to challenge it, often by investigating male and female experiences to understand their socially constructed nature, queer theory seeks to understand the ubiquity of the matrix, yet transcend its strict boundaries (Atkinson and DePalma, 2009; Butler, 1993b; Eng et al., 2005; Warner, 1993). It does so mainly by investigating bodies that transgress or challenge the heterosexual matrix, such as LGBT people (Epstein, 1994). We realize that studying bodies that transgress the matrix – even for the purpose of illuminating the fluidity of gendered identities – also draws upon and reifies the matrix (Linstead and Brewis, 2004). We do this carefully and we share Baxter and Hughes' (2004) belief that "because dualisms are so familiar, their use can be brought to the service of clarity and explication" (377) (see also Borgerson and Rehn, 2004).

However, whereas organization studies is beginning to examine the lives and experiences of gay and lesbian people in the workplace (see for example Rich et al., 2012; Rumens and Broomfield, 2012; Rumens and Kerfoot, 2009; Rumens, 2008; Ward and Winstanley, 2003), to our knowledge there is little empirical work about transgender individuals (for exceptions see Brewis et al., 1997; Schilt, 2006; Schilt and Connell, 2007; Thanem, 2011a; Thanem and Knights, 2012). Investigating the transgender body as both a transgression from the hetero-sexual matrix and one that is subsumed and managed by it, foregrounds how leadership is inveigled with bodies, bodily experiences and gendered norms.

Transgenderism as a term is used to describe people "who live with a social gender identity that differs from the gender they were assigned at birth...[and]...successfully do masculinity or femininity without having the genitalia that are presumed to follow from their outward appearance" (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009: 443). As most sexual psychology (similar to most organization studies literature) rests upon a dichotomous understanding of gender, there is no common language for a transgender "position", and transgender people are often perceived by society and governing structures such as medical, legal, and governmental establishments to be "in-between" the two socially accepted genders (Warner, 1993). Often coded as a pathology, transgenderism is most often seen as a disordered embodiment that can be "fixed" with therapy and/or an operation (Butler, 2004; Finn and Dell, 1999). Here again we see the persistence of a binary view on gender, where an "in-between" pos-ition is perceived to be undesirable and transgender people are often expected to be able to (and to want to) make a choice about being either female or male (Schilt, 2006). If this choice

cannot or will not be made the person is marked as having a dysphoric identity (Butler, 2004).

Queer theory questions this problematization of the transgender body, and argues that transgenderism is not an ''in-between'', but a fluid gender practice, just like all gender practices (Eng et al., 2005; Epstein, 1994; Warner, 1993). Queer theory identifies the problem as one of narrow and socially constructed – yet reified – labels and not one of abject bodies or practices. For example, Finn and Dell (1999) argue that – instead of being seen as a dysfunction – the transgender body should be seen as a productive performance of different body *possibilities*.

We agree and note that gender categories can just as well be transgressed and questioned as they can be followed and practiced. Queer theory challenges us to rethink gender norms and stereotypes that are often ascribed automatically to leaders and reminds us that we all – leaders included – perform according to the varied, yet limited, socially constructed scripts available, regardless of sexual orientation.

It is important to note that we do not seek to *understand* ''the queer'' in leadership, that is, we do not set out to understand a transgender experience of leadership. Following Ford and Harding (2011), there is no such thing as to truly understand the authentic core of a leader, as such a core does not exist. Rather, we use the case of a transgender leader to draw attention to the boundary natural/unnatural set by the heterosexual matrix that *all* leaders experience. Through this we hope to open up for a much more fluid discussion of leadership as a performative practice.

Methodology

Studies of leadership employ a variety of methodologies ranging from large-scale surveys, classic experiments, in-depth interviews, and case studies. Recently, critically oriented methodological debates about how to best study leadership have suggested that leadership should be explored as socially constructed, performative and relational (e.g. Grint, 2005). Using an in-depth interview approach (Kvale, 1996), we explored a leader's body as performative and relational by interviewing Claire, a transgender leader, and her employees/followers to reflect upon how the leader's body is present and experienced. Interviewing both the leader and followers allows us to explore these questions from multiple vantage points and subjectivities, including our own. Given our emphasis on gender and performativity, we understand that our interactions and understanding of Claire and her employees is implicated in our own subjectivities as female, heterosexual, white academics. We note that the view *from* a body is likely to be different than a view *of* a body, and while stories from both are important, taking the two vantage points together showcases how bodies and leadership are lived, social, and tied up within webs of meaning complete with possibilities for power and resistance (Geertz, 1973; Sinclair, 2004).

One of the authors met Claire while conducting research on gender and leadership among 57 Danish top managers. Claire was interviewed as a participant in this study during the spring of 2010 and later invited to give a public interview at an event where the results from the study were discussed. Claire's struggles as a transgender leader – such as perceptions of feminine/masculine and natural/unnatural – exemplified the common struggles experienced by female managers in general. It was in this context that the authors of this piece came to talk about the importance of the body in leadership positions and to ask Claire if she was willing to participate in this exploration.

The empirical material consists of four interviews with Claire, two long (2 h) interviews, one public interview (45 min), and a follow-up interview over lunch (45 min) as well as four interviews with employees Claire suggested we interview (ca. 1–1.5 h each). All interviews have been recorded and transcribed. In addition to this, the interviewer had lunch with Claire, both at her work place and in a public restaurant and she also observed Claire's participation in the public event mentioned above. The observations thus ranged from formal presentations where the interviewer merely observed, to casual business interactions between Claire and others where topics ranged from professional to personal life and the interviewer was a minor participant in conversations. All these observations added to our knowledge about how Claire is perceived and reacted upon at her workplace as well as in public. Field notes were taken at all these events.

Both Claire and John are pseudonyms, John being Claire's birth name. We respect the fact that Claire only refers to herself as a woman, but the pseudonym John becomes important in the analysis as employees often refer to Claire's former, male name. We have chosen not to name employees, mainly for the sake of anonymity.

All interviews were centered on Claire's change in appearance from a man to a woman and how this affected the relationship between her and her employees. The interviews with the employees asked descriptive questions about Claire's change, how they felt during the change process, and whether it had influenced the way they perceived gender, leadership and the body. The interviews with Claire were more loosely structured as her transgenderism is so central to who she is, that it naturally comes up without having to ask specific questions. The interviews with her (especially the first) were largely steered by the way she told her own story. Still, to make sure that the interviews explored embodied interactions the interviewer asked questions about decisions about clothing, whether she behaves/dresses differently in different occasions, and how clothes and make-up affects her self-perception. To gain insight to whether this has changed her view on – and performance of – leadership, specific questions about her leadership were also posed.

Data included interview transcripts and field notes from observations. Both authors analyzed the data together by doing several close readings. We took a constant comparative approach to reading the data, keeping our primary research questions in mind in order to highlight key themes regarding Claire and her employees perceptions of leadership as well as stories about the body, gender, and sexuality (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Our analytical approach was inductive, yet theoretically sensitive, meaning that we did not approach analysis with pre-defined categories or knowledge of where our data would take us, yet we remained sensitive to certain categories such as leadership, masculinity/femininity, gender, and sexuality (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). This approach was beneficial because it allowed us to explore the texts for interactions, ruptures, insights, and contradictions around the heterosexual matrix, including ways in which Claire and her employees' understandings of leadership, gender, bodies, and sexuality challenged and upheld traditional views on gender and leadership.

The leader body as a site of gendered expectations and transgression

Claire is in her mid 50 s and is a manager in the Danish head quarter of a large international retail corporation. She belongs hierarchically to what can be called the "lower top" of the organization and has approximately 100 employees under her, six of whom are middle managers. There is one managerial level between her and the CEO. Claire is biologically a

man, but lives as a woman. In this paper, we focus on how she came out as transgender at work, how her gender appearance changed and how her employees reacted to this.

"Just call me trans": Claire's gendered body

Claire was born as a biological boy – John – but has known as long as she[1] can remember that "something" was "odd". From the time she was about 5 years old, she secretly dressed up in women clothes, and all through her life she has taken more and more steps toward living as a woman. Approximately two years prior to the first interview she took the "final" step and "came out" as transgender and started dressing as a woman at work. This final step was very important to her, as prior to this she lived two lives: a private life as a woman and a professional life as a man. Beyond the pain of living two lives and feeling like she was a "fake" at work, she was also fearful that her co-workers might happen upon her when she was dressed as a woman. Looking back at the time before she came out at work, she recalls the following:

> I realized that it was important for me to signal to my surroundings who I really was. No, I am not just John, because when I go home from work, I become Claire. And it is not fair to me or my employees that I don't tell the truth. What if I met an employee at the movie theatre or in the supermarket or at a restaurant, who would recognize me as Claire, what problems could that bring? They would think I lived a double life and who could have trust in a person on such a leadership position, who sneaks around in town 'playing woman.'

Claire's fears make clear that she does not view being transgender as a leadership problem. What she believed could cause a leadership problem was the deceit of living a double-life and the risk of losing employees' trust if this were discovered. Before she made the final decision to come out at work she contacted the HR director and explained her wish to become a woman at work and asked about any supporting company policies. Her HR representative was supportive and assured her that nothing contractual would happen to her and that they would try to support her the best they could. She was, however, told to consider the (presumably negative) effects a gender identity change could have on her work relationships. To make the transition as smooth as possible, HR recommended that she undertake her change in small steps. And so she did. Months before telling anyone at work, she started wearing more jewelry, transparent lip gloss or transparent nail polish. She also started wearing more feminine clothes, such as shirts and trousers with colors, patterns or a more feminine cut.

Reactions to employees' announcements that they are transgender and wish to live openly as the gender they identify with can play out in multiple ways including firing or position changes, strong employee reactions, or no reactions at all (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009). Generally, Claire's employees took her change in a very tolerant and accepting manner. She recalls the following scene from the meeting in which she told her middle managers the "news":

> 'There is something I would like to tell you, which I have thought a lot about for many years and I have now reached an age where I think it has become very important to me.' And I could tell that they were 'sitting on pins and needles' so to speak. But as I tell them about my decision, [name omitted] – a very big man – exclaims 'Oh my God, oh my God' several times, and I ask him 'what's wrong,' and then he just says, 'I got so afraid that you were about to tell us that you were quitting your job.'

Relieved by their positive reaction, few weeks later she does the same at a meeting for her boss' team of leaders:

I just said it, and the reaction I got was, 'ah ok, respect for that.' And at that time the only woman in that team of managers had just resigned, so one of the others exclaimed, 'well now that [name omitted] has just resigned, its nice to still have a woman among us.'

Claire takes pleasure in recounting these positive responses, perhaps as a way to mitigate a few of the negative ones. But the feeling we get from both interviews with Claire and her employees as well as spending time with her in the company – such as in the hallways, in the lobby, by the coffee machine, having lunch in the cafeteria – leaves the impression that people generally have accepted her change. Most people know who she is – and she is not unnoticed – but she is met with smiles and casual pleasant small talk, not with odd looks or discomfort.

When her employees are interviewed, the first things they express are a deep respect for what she has done and an admiration of her courage. However, embedded within messages of support are clear articulations of how Claire's body, gender and sexuality distinguish her from others, subtly keeping the notion that the heterosexual matrix is the norm around which all bodies are understood. The following quotes from two of her employees display respect and admiration as well as difference and separation:

Many people have respect for the fact that she dares to do this. It seems somehow like a bigger issue than to come out as gay for example, because that has become almost mainstream by now. But this is something completely new, so in that sense people have shown great respect for daring to do this.

People joked about it a lot in the beginning, but that had probably something to do with their own insecurities about this. Also because they aren't used to something like this. But as time goes by people accept it. And it would be stupid not to. I mean, it is not for fun that she does this. It takes a lot of courage if you ask me, and I have deep respect for the fact that she has been able to do this. Especially at that level in the organization you really have to be a strong person to do something like that.

The supportive responses Claire has received from those around her are positive indicators of a healthy workplace that appears accepting of diversity. Yet deeper reflections also reveal how this acceptance is granted from within a heterosexual matrix. For instance, it is not common to discuss one's heterosexuality as "daring" or to remark that one is not heterosexual just for fun. These remarks both uphold an ideology of normal/abnormal, regardless of the positive intent they communicate. As a reaction to this Claire has stopped trying to answer the question whether she is a man or a woman:

If someone asks whether I'm a man or a woman, I don't know what to answer, so I've gotten used to say that I am "trans".

"Which box can we put her in?": The difficulty of placing Claire

Although all of the employees we interviewed think of themselves as very tolerant and open, and appear to accept Claire's change, they experience difficulties, which we ascribe to the way her body and her leadership style break with the heterosexual matrix. That is, on an ontological level they accept that her being transgender breaks with the heterosexual matrix. However, on an epistemological level, they have difficulties making sense of her, as the

matrix is both pervasive and difficult to think outside of. As one of her employees – who repeatedly referred to Claire as ''he'' in the interview – expresses below, the she/he distinction becomes a sign of the difficulty of placing her linguistically:

> I still say 'he' because it is still difficult for me. But that we say 'Claire' at work now helps a lot. Then it just becomes a habit, it's just Claire. But I still think it is weird to say 'she.'

Although this employee claims to have a lot of respect for Claire and appreciates her for the person she is, the difficulties arise when Claire has to be ''placed'' into a gendered language that only allows for two labels.

Language is not the only tricky signifier. Similarly, her employees experienced difficulties in those instances where her appearance made it difficult to place her as either a man or a woman. This was especially salient during the change period when Claire was encouraged to make the switch in stages. One day she might dress very feminine and the next day very masculine. Employees' struggles to make sense of the fluidity of Claire's gendered appearance are exemplified in the following:

> The transition period – where she wasn't all Claire, but wore pants and more gender-neutral clothes [was odd]. One day she would wear her wig, but some days she would have short hair, no make-up and even stubble. And that was a little weird, kind of a skewed picture. But that she doesn't do anymore. It is only when it is not Claire in front of you that it becomes difficult. But as long as it is Claire's appearance, it is ok. She has kind of been moved over to the 'woman box,' and then it is a little odd, when she changes back. In that case you have to take her up from that box again, but that is difficult as well, because now we call her Claire.

This quote highlights the seemingly natural connections the employee makes between the body and gender. The employee upholds gender binaries by literally claiming that there is a woman box and, presumably, a man box. The quote below follows with the feelings associated with mixed signals.

> I got a bit confused in the beginning because of the mixed signals my boss [Claire] sent. And we talked about it in my group and about the difficulties of not knowing where to place your boss.

A leader's appearance and clothing is a strong signifier to employees, perhaps more so when the leader's gender is called into question. As Brewis, et al. (1997: 1298) argue, ''gender-inappropriate dress illuminates the artificial nature and self-production of gender at the same time as it helps us interrogate the power structures that are founded upon this artificial divide''. The quote below suggests that appearance is far more than aesthetic. It is a strong signifier of gender – and a marker of how one should respond to a leader – as well.

> I was very confused in the period she changed in between John and Claire. I kept calling her Claire, but when the appearance was more John, it was difficult, and then I simply told her that it is a lot easier for us to understand that you are a Claire when you look like a Claire.

Although this ''gender confusion'' was greatest during the transition period, her body still sometimes ''reveals'' that she biologically is a man, as she has to actively repress masculine body language to retain the physical image of Claire. At times, Claire's body seems against her as it fails to uphold the stereotypical images of a woman. An employee here explains:

> Well, I actually never think of her as a man any more. It's only in certain circumstances where her body is still against her, in a way. When she laughs for example, you can feel that she tries to

laugh more controlled now to not laugh as a man. And that must be strenuous, I mean having to repress certain bodily things to not appear to masculine.

It is clear from the above quote that it is not so much Claire's change in gender appearance that is weird for the employees. As long as they can place her firmly in the "woman box" her gender identity doesn't disturb them. Rather it is those instances where they are reminded that she doesn't belong firmly to one category or the other, that it disturbs their fixed conception of the heterosexual matrix. Claire explains these incidences like this:

> Sometimes, I simply don't bother doing all the make up, and I just wear a pair of pants and a blouse, and then no make-up and no wig. When people then ask me why I show up in no make-up, my answer is that sometimes I simply don't have the time. I spend 30–45 minutes on my make-up and sometimes I just need to sleep half an hour more and have to skip the make-up routine. If I have external meetings, I try to have more or less the same appearance, but you guys, who see me everyday, well you will have to live with the fact that I skip it once in a while. 'Well, isn't that odd,' they say. But it is only you, who look at me, who think it is odd. I always look that same to me – when I don't look in the mirror – because I'm the same on the inside. (. . .) And I don't like showing myself like that [masculine], because then I don't appear the way I want to, but I also have to accept the fact that there is an 'everyday' and practicalities that need to add up. And in those instances I have to accept who I am and where I come from and then live with it and get the best out of it.

As this statement makes clear, Claire – like everyone else – is sometimes under time pressure in the morning. However, since her make-up is so essential to keeping up her feminine appearance, not wearing make-up skews how employees make sense of her gender. Although she acts the same, and feels the same, she is experienced differently because of her different appearance. If a biological woman would wear less make-up – or have a deep voice – it would not be so strange, in fact her female employees generally wear a lot less make-up than she does. A biological woman might be called to task for looking unattractive, but Claire is judged because she fails to convince and fails to fit the category "woman", which (according to the heterosexual matrix) is supposed to come with female bodies and femininities.

"Is that John popping up?": The gendered expectations to Claire's leadership

Claire's employees have difficulties making sense of the linguistic placement of Claire as well as her gendered body. Along with this, within the heterosexual matrix, the belief is that gendered bodies come with "natural" behaviors. For instance, female bodies are expected to behave femininely. Gender and leadership scholars note however the pervasive connections between the female body and assumptions about the body's "natural" abilities to lead as a double bind where women are asked to both uphold femininity (which goes against the image of an ideal leader) and to be a strong leader (which goes against the image of a woman). Punishments are doled out for transgressions on either side. An important thing to remember is that for transgender bodies at work, often co-workers will become the monitors of appropriate behavior based on the "new" body/gender appearance of their transgender co-worker. Schilt and Westbrook (2009) note this in their study of transmen (women who transition to live as men) as the transgender man's female co-workers suddenly call upon them to do "masculine" tasks such as carry heavy boxes or reach tall shelves.

Although both Claire and her employees claim that her change in appearance has not changed her person, their stories reveal subtle ways in which they all expect different behaviors and leadership skills from her as a female leader. Thus even a body that transgresses appears to find its way into normative expectations.

To start with Claire, despite claims that she feels like the same person, admits that her female appearance makes her perform more femininities, explaining that the way she feels and the way she looks now correspond better:

> There are many people in my social circles, who say that when I dress like this, my personality changes. I don't feel different, but I think it [the change in behavior that others talk about] happens because I feel much more comfortable and more like me in this role.

It could be that her female appearance provides the external justification for her to act like the woman she has always felt like. She is, however, aware that some of this "authenticity" might come from societal norms about how a woman is supposed to behave:

> I often think about whether I do behave differently. And I am thinking that I am probably also receptive to those role expectations we have to men and women. So at a more unconscious level, I am a woman now and I have to live up to the expectations there is to being a female manager. Now, I have to be beautiful, and shut up until asked.

Her employees also both relate to her as a woman and expect her to behave as one. Generally, Claire talks about how her employees seem to be more willing to ask her for advice, confess to her, and expose their vulnerabilities. This is especially so for the female staff, which now – in Claire's eyes – seems to be more comfortable with her:

> I think it is easier to get especially the female employees to open up. The women talk more personally to me now, whereas I feel that some of the men might have drawn back a little. It is like I have changed teams.

However, this camaraderie and confidentiality sometimes becomes too much for Claire, especially if the personal contacts interfere too much with work:

> There are more who lean against me now. And that is of course a positive declaration of trust. But once in a while I also think it is really annoying. I mean it should be so that if I wasn't here, they could handle things on their own. Of course they are allowed to follow my lead, but they shouldn't always lean against me, they have to be able to do things themselves as well.

She also explains how she needs to be a little tougher in managerial meetings to be heard compared to when her appearance was that of a man's:

> I feel that I am being put into a box. Because now that I am a woman, it is suddenly okay to interrupt me and ignore me. So I sometimes have to make an extra effort to cut through.

In order both to get her opinion heard and to obtain the leadership relationship she had with her employees before the change in gender appearance, she explains how she feels she has to repress some of her femininity and to bring forward more masculine ways of being, which she doesn't enjoy:

> So, I know that to succeed in my leadership role, I have to behave more like the man I don't want to be. And that for me is stepping over a line, I don't feel comfortable with, but I know it is necessary and that's why I do it.

It is clear that her change in gender appearance has changed the expectations her employees have of her as a leader. It has become easier for them to ask her for help and advice, that is, they seek the nurturing and relationship skills, which female leaders are assumed to have. At the same time – and also in line with similar gender stereotypical expectations to the female leader body – she is being passed by and overheard in meetings. Both are things her employees and co-workers didn't do when she had a male leader body and things that interrupt the way she sees herself as a leader.

When asked directly none of the employees we interviewed think she is any different as a boss now compared to before, but they do find her "masculine leadership qualities" difficult to make sense of when they stem from a female body. She has always been seen as a good – but somewhat tough (i.e. stereotypical masculine) – leader. However, whereas this seemed natural to her employees when her body was that of a man's, they very clearly express a difficulty in understanding how her masculine leadership style fits her now female body. Thus, although they engage with her femininity in more personal conversations, they often cannot explain what they see as "masculine" leadership qualities without referring to John. For example it is stressed how "she is just as good at cutting through the bullshit and pushing her own agenda as when she was John". It is even noted – with a certain sense of wonder – by her employees that her leadership style is more masculine than most of the men's. When she is extra tough some of them see it as John "popping up" from behind Claire.

> Once in a while I can see that there is a John behind Claire. John isn't completely gone. In situations where she has to tell people off or where something needs to be decided, then I see something of John. And that is different in relation to how I see Claire. . . . It is mostly body and tone of voice. I mean she gets a bit more 'stiff' and the voice becomes deeper. And that reminds me more of John than of Claire. . . . Its like she uses John as an ace up her sleeve.

This quote makes clear how the employee do not see her as "just Claire", but rather makes sense of her by splitting her up into either a woman or a man. The masculine behavior, which was natural for John does not make sense to the employees in relation to Claire's feminine body. Therefore, they explain it as John that "comes back" and is "used" strategically. The way they obviously make sense of Claire's leadership in the light of her gendered body is also explicit in the below quote where the interviewer has asked another employee whether it is odd that a woman can hold these masculine qualities:

> No, not really, but that is probably because I can't ignore the fact that he genetically is a man. So therefore I don't think it is odd that she has these qualities, but if it was a woman, I would probably think, wow, you're masculine.

The employee does not know whether to see Claire as a man or a woman – note how both "she" and "he" is used in the same sentence – but when asked directly about the leadership competences the employee make sense of Claire as a man, because then her leadership style "fits" the gender.

Claire's story reveals that employees' responses to her have pros and cons. It seems like after the change she has gained access to informal personal discourses at work, which she was excluded from as a man. On an informal level, she enjoys being viewed as a woman. However, at the same time, she also experiences that people expect her to take a different – more submissive and friendly – professional role, something she is much less comfortable with, and something, which contradicts the way she wants to conduct leadership.

Concluding discussion

To study how the gendered body plays a role in the construction of leadership, we set out to explore a case of a transgender leader. As such our study was the perfect opportunity to analyze what Linstead and Pullen (2006) called the practice of gender multiplicity in leadership. Our study is focused on how the discursive constructions that manifest in leader and followers' talk about the leader's transgender body and their experiences around it. We argue that by exploring the transgender leader's body as an interaction we tap into material, embodied performances, which are never simple, fully in one's control, or static. Instead, we suggest that the leader's body is read, interpreted, interacted with, and can shape the leader/follower dynamic.

We offer two primary empirical findings in response to the first research question, "what are the perceptions and expectations around leadership performed by a transgender body?" First, our study suggests that the leader's body, presumed gender, and gendered appearance are salient markers that employees use to make sense of leaders and leadership. In this way, the gendered body in relationship with others is an important, yet largely ignored, element of leadership (for exception, see for example Kenny and Bell, 2011; Sinclair, 2005; the editorial of this special issue). Here, the leader's gendered body becomes a site of negotiated understanding with employees and their expectations for how a gendered body should perform leadership. Second, and interrelated with the first finding, our study shows the deep roots of gender dichotomies that permeate our understanding of leadership making it very difficult for both leaders and followers to make sense of the leader and leadership outside the binaries of the heterosexual matrix. We will discuss these two findings before discussing "what can other bodies learn from this?" in the service of queering leadership more generally.

Leaders and their employees are body conscious

Claire's case offers a unique vantage point from which to study leadership and the body. Her change in bodily appearance shows how significant the body itself is in the production of leadership identities and how these identities are perceived by the self and others. Her colleagues and employees generally accept, support, and even admire her change. Interestingly, however, confusion about her gender identity remains when she and her employees try to make sense of her role as a leader. All participants are struggling with the binary expectations of what it means to be a woman or a man, and what it means to be a female or a male leader.

We suggest that the leader's body is regulated, supported and challenged by employees who rely on the heterosexual matrix to make sense of how leadership should be performed. Employees read their leader's bodies for gender congruency and expect different behaviors to stem from male and female leaders. Our case is unique as it shows not only how it is difficult for employees to relate masculine – and therefore normative ideal – leadership to the female body, but that it is so even though the same person has been perceived as having these competencies when she "was" in a male body. This strongly indicates that appearance produces and controls leadership identity in gendered ways that have not been shown so explicitly before. For instance, her employees respect the fact that Claire has chosen to live as a woman. Yet they read her leadership capabilities, which they saw as natural when she was John, as unnatural when performed by Claire. To make sense of her as a leader they split her up in to two personas, one that possesses the female qualities of Claire, and one, which is allowed to be masculine, strict and authoritarian, that is John.

Claire's transgender body is a living challenge to the gender binary because it is experienced as both man/woman, masculine/feminine. She cannot be said to be one or the other, nor does she wish to be. Instead, she performs a multiplicity; a transgression, which can be described as genderful (Linstead and Pullen, 2006) or by gender excess (Borgerson and Rehn, 2004; Muhr, 2011). In this way, she can't be said to be a man or a woman or masculine or feminine. She performs both genders at once and at times at excessive degrees. Although some gender identity literature – and especially literature on transgender identity – is beginning to discuss this (e.g. Finn and Dell, 1999; Schilt and Westbrook, 2009; Thanem, 2011a), we still have no vocabulary within leadership studies to explain such practices. But by engaging in the experiences of Claire and her employees we hope to open up the leadership discussion for a more fluid understanding of the relationship between leadership and gender. It is in this sense that we wish to queer leadership more generally.

Queering leadership

Claire's case is more than just a firm reminder of the persistent strength of the heterosexual matrix; it also stands as an embodied challenge to it (Linstead and Brewis, 2004). Despite this, we must be clear that the case itself does not provide easy or clear paths for how organizations can begin to queer leadership, something we will try to shed light on here. Our interviews with Claire's employees indicate an inclination to adopt a tolerance for queer bodies rather than a queer understanding of bodies and subjectivities. This distinction, while seemingly small, is consequential.

Tolerance is important and commonly invoked as a way to build community; however, it also might unwittingly uphold the heterosexual matrix. It is often the pesky "nicety" that goes far enough to create an inclusive work environment, but does little to critically question concepts such as inclusion and exclusion (Ashcraft et al., 2012). Instead, tolerance reaffirms boundaries around what is "normal", on the one hand, and what is "different, yet tolerable" on the other. The employees in this case believe they are accepting Claire. However, their language reveals the subtle ways in which they make sense of her within the heterosexual matrix, and therefore, she is the "queer" body at work, one who – because of her difference – deserves tolerance and inclusion. One of Claire's employees epitomizes the double-edged sword of tolerance:

> I have always thought that I was very tolerant, but [when Claire came out] I found out that there might still be things I could work with (...) It surprised me that I wasn't more tolerant. But I have had my limits moved a bit now. The other day I met a very 'manly' woman in a store and before I had probably starred, but now its kind of everyday. So in that way, I'm sure Claire has moved my limits.

Few of us would lament this employee's reflective response about expanding limits as unkind or inappropriate. But closer analysis reveals that this new stage of tolerance is still defined within the heterosexual matrix. A "manly" woman continues to stand outside of the boundaries of "normal." The fact that the employee chooses to treat the "outsider" as part of the "everyday" is not as laudable or revolutionary as simply *seeing* the woman as part of the everyday. Herein lies an important distinction; tolerance, through notions of inclusion and exclusion, highlights that there is an "inside" and an "outside."

Instead of tolerance for queer bodies, queering leadership necessitates a vision of gender fluidity and multiplicity (cf. Eng et al., 2005) as well as a consistent and repetitious challenge

of the idea of boundaries in the first place. Certain bodies, practices, word choices, and social movements can challenge the stability of the heterosexual matrix, particularly as they are a constant reminder of the constructed and limiting nature of the matrix. We use the term "challenge" here purposefully to suggest that the work will never be perfect or complete, but the act of resistance must be constant. This type of *thinking* outside of binaries is difficult, if not, as some argue, impossible (Binns, 2008; Prasad, 2012) and a common popular language for how to do so is lacking from leadership discourse.

We realize that we are arguing for a particular identity politics, one that certainly might be co-opted to purport further instrumental views of gender and leadership. Tyler and Cohen (2008) note a similar concern when they acknowledge that it is possible that adopting a queer perspective on organizations runs the risk of appropriating queer or that the emancipatory agendas behind such work will be taken over by those who wish to subsume and use it. Yet, like Butler (2000), Knights and Kerfoot (2004), Parker (2002), and Tyler and Cohen (2008) we believe that queering leadership, through the spirit of continuous critical questioning, a celebration of the instability of identity categories such as masculine and feminine, and an agenda that includes a continuum of performances, has the potential to thwart attempts to "pin down" queer for instrumental gain.

Queering leadership does therefore not necessarily mean to transgress the matrix altogether, but to begin to break with the repetition of the "normalized" gender categories and in this way offer new ways of thinking and speaking about gendered norms. Claire's case should be seen as an *interruption of gender categories* (see also Muhr, 2008, 2010), that is creating an awareness of how we are socialized into thinking within the matrix and realizing the necessity of challenging these norms. A transgender body, we argue, holds the possibility to interrupt such gendered expectations for heteronormalcy in leadership, in a way that makes it possible for other bodies to perform fluidity too. Because of the way Claire breaks with the repeated style, men and women in Claire's organization (including the HR manager interviewed for this study) are beginning to shift their thoughts, speech, acts, and interactions in ways that disrupt assumptions of "normalcy" in leadership.

In part, the shift we encourage is not to make room for queer leaders, but to queer leadership so that it is possible for any leader to make use of their feminine as well as masculine competencies without being categorized as "soft", "weak", "fake", "bitchy", "unnatural" and so forth – that is to do fluid gender without having to be assigned to an identity category (Sullivan and Kedrowicz, 2012). As Butler argued "the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (Butler, 1988: 520). Such general interruption, we hope, would make it possible for not only Claire, but also all other leadership bodies to be viewed on their merits rather than the normative gendered and embodied expectations that surround them. It would not only – as argued by Finn and Dell (1999) – make it possible for transgender people to perform body possibilities, but for *any* body to do so as well.

Note

1. We refer to Claire as "she", even when we refer to the time when she was called John. This is done out of respect for Claire's wish to be perceived as a woman and also to not confuse the reader.

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