

Study highlights challenges facing transgender and non-binary workers

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New research led by the University of East Anglia (UEA) highlights some of the challenges that transgender and non-binary staff can face at work.

The study also shows how their experiences can help us to see ways in which the working context might be changed to create a more inclusive environment that is receptive to more diverse gender identities; for example, through the provision of non-gendered changing and bathroom spaces, and processes that enable people to complete forms and choose pronouns in line with their identity.

The work is published in *Work Employment and Society*.

While there are various examples of good practice and initiatives to make workplaces more inclusive, there is little research that tells the story of employees being trans at work. Trans workers are often subject to discrimination, harassment and violence, despite gender identity being a protected characteristic in many contexts.

This new study looks at how individual experiences combine with organizational culture, processes and working relationships to produce moments where diverse gender identities can be accepted or denied, which can be very damaging for trans workers.

Lead author Dr. David Watson, associate professor in organizational behavior at UEA's Norwich Business School, said, "Our findings are important because trans and non-binary people do not have a strong voice in all workplaces, and where they are not inclusive or welcoming this can lead to significant harms."

The research team, from UEA and the University of Valle d'Aosta in Italy, met with 11 Italian trans workers to hear their stories, which were then analyzed to understand how their experiences challenged binary gender norms and how they could inform the transformation of [workplaces](#) so they become more inclusive, such as providing awareness training for staff that embeds an understanding of gender identity as fluid and constructed.

"Our encounters convey some of the stigma and harms that trans workers can experience, however, we also heard about positive experiences," said co-author associate professor Angelo Benozzo, from the University of Valle d'Aosta.

"Departing from expected gender norms exposes individuals to vulnerabilities, although it may also prompt reflection on the nature of gender, thereby encouraging acceptance in the workplace and reducing vulnerability for others."

The study is based on an understanding of gender that sees gender identity as something that is performative and potentially fluid rather than fixed and given, where cultural expectations of what constitute "acceptable" gender identities shape how people "do" gender, for example through the way they dress.

When the heterosexual model of gender is considered the default gender identity, this concept of heteronormativity reinforces gender binarism—the idea that society only has two genders, male and female; that heterosexuality is expected; and other [gender identities](#) are regarded as less intelligible or even acceptable.

Dr. Watson added, "The desirability of subverting gender norms depends on what those gender norms are, how they constrain or harm individuals and the potential consequences for those who challenge them. Therefore, our research does not point to the need for trans workers themselves to subvert [gender](#) norms, but rather we need to challenge binary [gender norms](#) in the workplace to enable all individuals to freely express their [gender identity](#)."

More information: Trans people in the workplace: possibilities for subverting heteronormativity, *Work Employment and Society* (2023).

Provided by University of East Anglia

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