



Human Resources and Organizations

## About the relation between transgender people and the organizations: new subjects for studies on organizational diversity

*Da Relação Entre Pessoas Transgêneras e a Organização: novos sujeitos para os estudos  
sobre diversidade organizacional*

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### Abstract

The “Organizational Diversity” field concentrates studies on the experiences of groups that are different from the archetypical male, white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied and western worker. When analysing the studies regarding gender relations, however, one perceives their concentration on the dynamics between men and women localized in developed western countries. Transgender persons are persons whose identity and/or gender expression differs from what is socially attributed to their bodies, breaking with the heteronormative logic. In Brazil, where only the bodies within this discourse are legitimate, this group is systematically excluded from a myriad of spaces including the formal job market. Therefore, the experiences of these people at and with work are invisible to organizational diversity’s theory and practice. To explore this issue, this study analyses the perceptions that the transgender person maintains about their relations (1) with their professional history, (2) with other people in their work environment, and (3) with organizational policies and practices. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were made with six transgender persons that work in organizations. From these narratives, it was found that the person’s level of passing usually influences their relations and that the ignorance regarding transgenderity permeates all three domains of relations. The conclusions are: (1) the relations with work are marked by opportunity restrictions; (2) the relations in the job hold the person responsible for their on intelligibility and safety; and (3) the relations with the organization vary according to the way it faces transgenderity and its own voice systems.

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**Keywords:** Organizational diversity; Gender relations; Transgender people

### Resumo

O campo “Diversidade nas Organizações” concentra estudos sobre vivências de grupos diferentes do trabalhador arquetípico homem, branco, heterossexual, cisgênero, capacitado, ocidental. Analisando-se os estudos sobre as relações de gênero, contudo, percebe-se sua concentração na dinâmica entre homens e mulheres e em países ocidentais desenvolvidos. Pessoas transgêneras são pessoas cuja identidade e/ou expressão de gênero difere do esperado socialmente a partir de seu corpo, rompendo com a lógica heteronormativa. No Brasil, onde apenas os corpos dentro desse discurso são legítimos, esse grupo é sistematicamente excluído de diversos espaços, incluindo o mercado de trabalho formal. Assim, temos que as vivências dessas pessoas com e no trabalho são invisibilizadas na teoria e prática da diversidade organizacional. Para explorar essa problemática, este estudo analisa as percepções que a pessoa transgênera mantém sobre suas relações [1] com sua história profissional, [2] com as outras pessoas no ambiente de trabalho e [3] com as políticas e práticas da organização. Realizaram-se entrevistas presenciais semiestruturadas com seis pessoas transgêneras que trabalham em organizações. A partir das narrativas obtidas, constatou-se que o nível de passabilidade da pessoa geralmente

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influencia suas relações e que a ignorância sobre a transgeneridade permeia os três âmbitos de relações. Conclui-se que [1] as relações com o trabalho são marcadas pela restrição de oportunidades; [2] as relações no emprego entregam à pessoa a responsabilidade pela própria inteligibilidade e segurança; e [3] as relações com a organização variam de acordo com a maneira como esta encara a transgeneridade e os sistemas de voz.

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*Palavras-chave:* Diversidade nas Organizações; Relações de gênero; Pessoas transgêneras

## Introduction

Equal treatment for the different groups that make up organizations became a subject of study in Human Resources Management in the 1970s. With the increase in the number of women, immigrants, elderly and intellectuals employees (Martinez, 2013), the typical worker studied since the dawn of management as a discipline could no longer be seen as “a worker without body, without sex and without emotions [. . .] but a man” (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007, p. 208). Studies on Workplace Diversity thus aim to break with “the concept of a worker as being a white male” which “has permeated the academic field of management and organizational studies” (Carrieri, Diniz, Sousa, & Menezes, 2013, p. 287). This is done by identifying and studying groups of workers with ‘diverse’ characteristics, different from those of the archetypal “white, western, heterosexual, middle/high class, able-bodied, male” worker (Nkomo & Cox, 1999, p. 351).

Studies on gender dynamics in organizations focus mostly on relations between women and men (Martinez, 2013, pp. 38–39; Nkomo & Cox, 1999). Transgender people, the focus of this study, are often forgotten under the category of “diversity”.

Transgender people are those whose gender identity or expression is different from the one typically associated with their assigned sex at birth (Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011, p. 181). When an individual is born, society interprets their body as belonging to a particular gender – in Brazilian society, female or male – and socializes them in accordance with the customs seen as pertaining to that body – respectively, femininity or masculinity. In other words, a person is assigned a gender according to their body. Transgenders do not identify with the gender they were assigned or with the way society expects them to express such gender through clothes, gestures, mannerisms, and others characteristics (Grant et al., 2011, p. 180).

The way transgender people understand and express their gender, therefore, breaks with the binary logic – also called heteronormativity –, which deterministically links body, sex, gender identity and gender expression, i.e., vagina/female/woman/femininity and penis/male/man/masculinity (Souza & Carrieri, 2015). Historically, western societies in general and their organizations in particular have only perceived as legitimate those bodies that adhere to this dichotomous gender schema (Souza & Carrieri, 2015, p. 2; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016, p. 2). Brazilian society is no different (Souza & Carrieri, 2015, p. 4). Consequently, transgender people constantly face structural prejudice and discrimination (expressed through the term transphobia) in

all sectors of society for not fitting into dominant gender discourses (Grant et al., 2011; Mitchell & Howarth, 2009). The way discrimination acts as an obstacle to the entry and permanence of transgender people in the formal labor market is of special concern in this study, as it spurs the overwhelming majority of transgenders into informal economic activities (Souza & Carrieri, 2015, p. 7). Therefore, the number of transgender employees in Brazilian organizations – especially private companies – is small (Souza & Carrieri, 2015; TV Brasil Central, 2014). Adding to this the almost complete lack of studies focusing on this population in the work environment, I conclude that their experiences and relationships at work are erased by the theory and practice of organizational diversity (Souza & Carrieri, 2015, p. 1; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016, p. 3). In addition, the few studies about transgender people in organizations are limited to developed western countries, which do not capture the particular experiences of Brazilian context.

In an effort to address these issues, I propose the following questions: what perceptions do transgenders have of their relations (1) with work, (2) with others in the workplace, and (3) with the organization?

To answer this question, this study heard six transgender individuals and sought to analyze through their narratives:

- (1) Their relationship with their professional history.
- (2) Their relationship with other individuals in the work environment (manager, colleagues, clients).
- (3) Their relationship with the organization’s policies and practices.

In order to complete this task, the next section will outline the relevant concepts to understand diversity management, transgender people, and their position in the labor market. The following section will focus on the methodological approach employed. Finally, the collected narratives will be exposed and analyzed, followed by final considerations.

## Theoretical framework

### *Diversity management*

There is no consensus as to the meaning of diversity in the field of Organizational Diversity (Martinez, 2013, p. 10). However, three central ideas are found in most definitions: *difference*, *divergence* and *identity* (Cox, 2001, p. 3; McGrath, Berdahl, & Arrow, 1995, p. 22; Thomas, 2004, p. 3).

Scholars also diverge on *which* differences constitute diversity. Authors can be divided into two groups (Nkomo, 1995): those who put forward comprehensive definitions of diversity and those who focus on specific traits. The first group sees diversity as “all the possible ways in which members of a working group can differentiate themselves” (Nkomo, 1995, p. 248), including field of work, expertise, values, and cognitive capacity, in addition to sociocultural categories such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical condition, and education. Authors in the second group restrict diversity to sociocultural categories, arguing that “the main problems [regarding diversity] arise due to the discrimination and exclusion of cultural subgroups from traditional organizations” (Nkomo, 1995, p. 248), and not due to psychological or organizational differences. Furthermore, sociocultural categories may obfuscate the latter, so that “members of subordinate groups are silenced in groups in that the group does not fully use or reflect the ability, values and lifestyles of these members” (McGrath et al., 1995, p. 30).

Both traditions share the premise that the workforce is diverse. Therefore, how can we attain as many positive results from diversity as possible? After all, unless managed efficiently and effectively, differences among organization members may lead to various problems for the group and its members, ranging from difficulties in communication to harassment and discrimination (Cox, 2001, pp. 4–5; Martinez, 2013, p. 44; McGrath et al., 1995, p. 25). When managed well, however, the variety of skills, attitudes and knowledge brought by a heterogeneous group may optimize problem solving and decision making in organizations (Cox, 2001, pp. 6–7; McGrath et al., 1995, p. 25). This set of diverse experiences also promotes innovation and creativity (Cox, 2001, p. 7).

Diversity is well managed when organizations create a “comprehensive management process to develop an *environment that works for all employees*” (Thomas, 1991, p. 10). In practice, however, the different paradigms that give rise to diversity management processes are diverse and often ineffective (Thomas & Ely, 2002).

The dominant and most traditional paradigm is *discrimination and justice*, which manages diversity through assimilation, seeking equal opportunity and fair treatment by denying differences (Thomas & Ely, 2002, pp. 38–44). Under this paradigm, organizations restrict their role to complying with the relevant legislation and protecting human rights, and do not leverage diversity to its advantage (Cox, 2001, p. 4). In this approach, the various experiences undergone by each group within the organization remain unidentified (Thomas & Ely, 2002, p. 40).

The diversification of the consumer market brought along the second paradigm, based on companies pushing “for *access to – and legitimacy with – a more diverse clientele by matching the demographics of the organization to those of critical consumer or constituent groups.*” (Thomas & Ely, 2002, p. 44). Organizations working under this paradigm, however, do not integrate diversity into their culture, as “diverse people” are only assigned to certain specific positions and communication between “diverse” and “non-diverse” employees is deficient (Thomas & Ely, 2002, p. 46).

The third and most recent paradigm, called *learning and efficiency*, brings the best of both previous paradigms by combining equal opportunities to all with the recognition of cultural differences and their importance, so as to allow organizations to integrate the different perspectives and approaches brought by different groups into their skillset (Thomas & Ely, 2002, pp. 48–51). It is the most efficient way of managing diversity: by promoting differences and learning with them, organizations can create a safe environment where everyone can apply their full potential at work and enhance its *modus operandi* through different *inputs* (Thomas & Ely, 2002, p. 50).

The main path for organizations to migrate from the first two paradigms to the third is voice, “the say employees have in matters of concern to them in their organization” (Armstrong, 2012, p. 419). This relation of talking and listening generates valuable *inputs* to management decisions (Thomas & Ely, 2002, pp. 52–53) and fosters, among employees, the feeling that integration is appreciated (Martinez, 2013, pp. 77–78). An environment in which people have a voice can give room for expression, change, and the affirmation of identity. However, if there is no structure that gives voice to minority groups, they tend to remain silent for fear of retaliation and to preserve and conserve the group (Bell, Özbilgin, Beauregard, & Sürgevil, 2011, pp. 132–139). As a result of this silence, experiences are erased and prejudice and discrimination take place, often leading to a decrease in work performance and even resignations or dismissals (Bell et al., 2011, pp. 134–139; Martinez, 2013, p. 79).

When analyzing diversity management in Brazil through the aforementioned concepts, it appears that the average Brazilian company is yet to achieve the discrimination and justice paradigm. The demographic makeup of companies usually falls short of that of Brazilian society: we see a very homogeneous organizational landscape within a very diverse society (Instituto Ethos, 2010). Additionally, legislation implementing hiring quotas for people with disabilities, the only of its kind aimed at including a minority group in organizations, faces obstacles both in achieving compliance – the basic goal of this paradigm – as well as in actually integrating this group (Martinez, 2013, p. 38). It is in this context of unmanaged diversity that the transgender people surveyed by this study work.

### *Transgender people*

#### *Who are they?*

As defined in the introduction, transgender people are those whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is socially expected of them based on how their body is interpreted at birth (Grant et al., 2011, pp. 180–181).

To fully grasp this definition and the sub-concepts *gender identity*, *gender expression* and *body*, it is necessary a brief review of the evolution of the concepts of gender and sex in western societies. Historically, body and gender were considered as one “essence”, meaning that a person’s genital organs determined their gender, or, in other words, that gender is *biologically defined* (Butler, 1986, p. 35). Consequently, only two binary and opposite body/gender pairs were said to exist: vagina/woman and penis/man. The imposition of heterosexuality as the only

legitimate sexual orientation was also implicit in this heteronormative discourse.

The feminist movement broke with this essentialism through the notion that one is not born a certain gender, but rather *becomes* gendered through socialization processes seen as proper to one's body (Butler, 1986, p. 35). The body, boxed into sexual categories dividing biological and anatomic phenomena as female or male, is linked to certain socially and culturally constructed components of 'woman' or 'man' gender identity. From this connection, one learns different mannerisms, clothes, body traits, or occupations pertaining to a particular gender in a particular culture. In Brazilian culture, that entails a feminine gender expression for women and a masculine one for men. In face of such gender socialization, it is up to the individual to read the cultural history ascribed to their body and to *perform* it in accordance with their *interpretation* of these rules (Butler, 1986, p. 48).

Transgenders do not follow the determinism assumed by heteronormative discourse, either because *they do not identify themselves* with the gender ascribed to their body or *do not express themselves* the way society expects (Connell, 2010, p. 32). Consequently, transgender is used as an umbrella term for all forms of gender that do not fit in the heteronormative relationship vagina/female/woman/femininity and penis/male/man/masculinity (Souza & Carrieri, 2015). It is worth mentioning that transgender identities pertain to gender, not sexuality (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016, p. 5). In this way, there are transgender individuals of different sexual orientations – including heterosexual.

Therefore, there are many possible gender identities and expressions. Below, I define the two identities featuring among our research subjects: transsexual and non-binary.

Transsexuals are “people whose gender identity is different from their assigned sex at birth” (Grant et al., 2011, p. 181). Individuals who identify themselves as transsexual usually seek gender reassignment treatments, which may or may not include sex reassignment surgery (Mitchell & Howarth, 2009). Transsexual women (or trans women) are people whose body is read as male and whose gender identity is woman. They usually go through treatments to acquire characteristics typical of the female sex and adopt names, clothes and mannerisms seen as female. A transsexual man (or trans man), in turn, is one whose body is read as female and whose gender identity is man. They seek to acquire characteristics that are typical of the male sex and use names, clothes and mannerisms seen as male.

Non-binary (or *genderqueer*) is a term used to refer to people who (1) do not identify themselves entirely with either genders man or woman, (2) who identify themselves with a combination of both, (3) who do not identify with either of them, and/or (4) who express themselves differently from what is socially expected of the gender assigned to them at birth (Grant et al., 2011, p. 180). There are also numerous identities under the term “non-binary,” just as there are multiple gender identities and expressions between the two binary genders. In Brazil, the most well-known non-binary identity is *travesti*. They identify with feminine names and pronouns and express characteristics socially understood as feminine, whether through esthetic

procedures or the use of hormones, clothes, or mannerisms. However, they do not wish to remove their penis, nor do they identify as women (Kulick, 1998, p. 6). Other non-binary identities are still relatively unknown – whether in or outside Brazil – as they are very recent and relatively unexplored by the literature (Kuper, Nussbaum, & Mustanski, 2012). Due to this lack of formal conceptualization, the non-binary interviewee will state their own identity in the research results.

#### *Where do they work?*

In Brazil, the majority of transgenders work in prostitution on due to the lack of opportunities within the formal economy (Souza & Carrieri, 2015; TV Brasil Central, 2014). Transgenders outside prostitution usually work as entrepreneurs in the cosmetic sector or as public servants – legislation protects public servants from dismissal, though transgenders still face constant prejudice and discrimination in this context (Souza & Carrieri, 2015; TV Brasil Central, 2014).

It is thus very rare to find transgender employees in Brazilian companies, especially in the private sector. A reason for their absence is their low qualification (Souza & Carrieri, 2015, p. 7). Indeed, as transgender people suffer violence at schools and universities (Grant et al., 2011, p. 3), it is common for them to leave formal education. However, even when qualification is not an issue, they rarely get responses from delivered *résumés* (Souza & Carrieri, 2015, p. 7).

The possibility of changing one's legal name to a social name – the name adopted by transgenders to fit with their identity – is not regulated by statute in Brazilian law (TV Brasil Central, 2014). Considering the conservatism of the Brazilian judiciary, this process can be very difficult and time-consuming (Souza & Carrieri, 2015, p. 9). All situations that require disclosing one's legal name – such as a *résumé* or a work card<sup>1</sup> – make transgenders identities visible, and often lead to exclusion (TV Brasil Central, 2014).

Sometimes, transgender people may try to conceal their identity as a way of avoiding transphobia, passing as a non-transgender (or cisgender) person (Connell, 2010; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016). Though this strategy certainly helps in gaining entrance into the labor market, it creates a burden on both employer and employee, “as the cognitive and emotional resources needed for work are misdirected into laborious efforts to pass [*as cisgender*]” (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016, p. 17). On the other hand, there are usually no incentives for transgender people to disclose their identity at a work environment, as this commonly results in being dismissed (Souza & Carrieri, 2015, p. 8).

#### **Methodology**

This study aims to understand a relatively unexplored field, and can thus be labeled an exploratory research (Malhotra, 2001). It also analyzes individually perceived relationships.

<sup>1</sup> A document issued by the Ministry of Labor that registers a person's contracted jobs.

Consequently, the adopted approach must take into account the subjectivity of perception and the complexity and depth of perceived relations. Qualitative approaches pursue these goals by focusing on insights brought by subjects on the phenomena studied and by covering their complexity through the density of the descriptions provided (Bittencourt, 2016, pp. 134, 142), making it well suited for studying experiences.

In order to operationalize the qualitative and exploratory aspects of this study, the data collection instrument of choice were semi-structured interviews. With open-ended questions that help make interviews more flexible, this method fosters expression and social contextualization from the interviewee's point of view in depth and *in loco* (Bittencourt, 2016, p. 143). It also allows the studied group to actively take part in collectively constructing the research and the exchange of knowledge between researcher and subject (Soares & Ferreira, 2006, pp. 96–98).

The development of the interview was carried out in two stages. First, departing from the research objective and the reviewed literature, I proposed several variables that may influence transgenders' construal of their perceptions and relations to (1) work, (2) other workers and (3) the organization. After the drafting process, I outlined nine analytical categories, eight based on the literature, and one partially proposed by myself to allow new patterns to emerge:

- I. Subject's relation with their professional history
  1. Choice of work – possible influences of transgender identity, such as educational level, as this group is commonly driven away from learning environments (Grant et al., 2011, p. 3), and chances of discrimination in that specific organization or sector (Souza & Carrieri, 2015).
  2. Recruitment and selection – the level of prejudice and discrimination in companies tends to block the entry of transgenders during résumé analyses or interviews (Souza & Carrieri, 2015, p. 7).
  3. Gender transition – may have positive or negative impacts on one's career depending on the environment (Grant et al., 2011, pp. 59, 63).
- II. Subject's relations with others in the workplace (manager, colleagues, customers)
  4. Identity expression – process and possible impacts of expression or repression in work relations (Connell, 2010, p. 40; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016).
  5. Reaction of others to transgender identity – given their socialization within heteronormative discourses, how do people understand and respect transgender identities? (Connell, 2010, p. 42; Muhr & Sullivan, 2013, pp. 424–426).
  6. Relationship with the manager – possible biases in performance assessment (Connell, 2010, p. 47; McGrath et al., 1995, p. 30).
  7. Prejudice and discrimination (Connell, 2010, p. 48; Souza & Carrieri, 2015).
- III. Subject's relationship with the organization's policies and practices

8. Diversity management – measured through Thomas and Ely (2002)'s paradigms, the voice system (McGrath et al., 1995, p. 30) and specific policies and practices for transgender people/LGBT+/diversity (Bell et al., 2011).
9. Mutual impact – influence of transgender identities in company policies and practices and their effects on transgender identity and expression (Connell, 2010, p. 50; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016, p. 6).

Through relatively open-ended questions drawn from these categories, subjects were encouraged to develop narratives regarding their history, events and situations that portray the relationships analyzed. Narrative, as used in this context, indicates the result of the objective conditions one is subjected to plus the way one experiences and narrates them (Barros & Lopes, 2014, p. 42). Subjects' experiences is captured through their subjectivity, as the latter expresses a unique reality often invisible to those outside.

The sample was selected using the snowball method (Souza & Carrieri, 2015, p. 5). To participate in the study, one had to (1) self-identify as transgender and (2) currently work within a formal organization, regardless of the employment relationship. I began my search in events organized by pro-LGBT+ collectives – an acronym indicating people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other gender and sexuality minorities. Leonardo and Gabriel were introduced to me by the 'Nós Diversos' collective from Sorocaba (SP). At the Jundiáí (SP) collective 'CUME' I met Escorpiano and Flor. Leonardo, in turn, introduced me to Ivan. I met Nicholas in a LGBT+ Facebook group. Table 1 shows a summary of each participant's demographic traits.

I conducted a test interview in order to evaluate both script and interviewer, as this was my first experience in this role. Therefore, I carried out a total of seven interviews (Table 2).

In person interviews were adopted to enrich communication (Robbins, 2005). The audios from all interviews were recorded and (except for the test interview) transcribed for further analysis. Complementing the interviews, notes were taken on non-verbal information and insights had during or after the meetings, or during transcription.

Analyses were conducted with the premise that a researcher must thoroughly analyze the relationship between the subjects' perception and their concrete situation not in order to verify facts but to analyze what narratives mean for their authors (Barros & Lopes, 2014, p. 55). To extract as much insight from interviews as possible, the reports were divided into the nine analytical categories above and their respective indicators. The discovery of new relevant variables was an open possibility. In fact, four aspects were found that relate in complex ways with organizations: religion, identity construction, and the roles of the State and the family. Their analysis, however, was left unpursued because of the scope of this research. In the next section, the interviews are analyzed into the categories outlined above and compared to the theoretical framework employed. A conscious effort was employed to maximize subjects' voice and their subjective manner of describing their objective reality.

Table 1  
Demographic traits of research subjects.

Name	Age	Gender identity	Organization	Location	Position
Gabriel	25	Trans man	Parents' diner	Sorocaba	Clerk
Leonardo.	20	Trans man	Small company of aluminum-made products	Sorocaba	Production
Escorpiano	18	Trans man	Submarine sandwich chain	Jundiaí	Manager
Nicholas	22	<i>Genderfluid</i> (non-binary)	Multinational database company	São Paulo	Intern
Flor	44	Trans woman	Private university	Jundiaí	Professor
Ivan	30	Trans man	Technical support multinational company	São Paulo	Analyst

Note: developed by the author. Respondents' names were altered in order to preserve their identities.

Table 2  
Summary of the data collection stage.

Name	Date	Location	Duration	Medium	Recording device
Lu (test)	April 9	–	20 min	Remotely/skype	Amolto Call Recorder
Gabriel	April 13	Sorocaba	89 min	In person	iPad/Voice Record Pro
Leonardo	April 13	Sorocaba	80 min	In person	iPad/Voice Record Pro
Escorpiano	April 18	Jundiaí	25 min	In person	iPad/Voice Record Pro
Nicholas	April 19	São Paulo	50 min	In person	Moto G/Easy Voice Recorder
Flor	April 23	São Paulo	105 min	In person	iPad/Voice Record Pro
Ivan	April 24	São Paulo	37 min	In person	Moto G/Easy Voice Recorder
		Total	406 min		

Note: developed by the author. Respondents' names were altered in order to preserve their identities.

## Results

### *Relationship with work*

When considering their choice of work and hiring and admission processes, the word employed most often by respondents is *passability*, *the degree to which others take a transgender person as cisgender*. In practice, the higher a transgender person's passability, the less likely they are to suffer transphobia: if one's gender expression allows them to be seen by others as cisgender, they will not be subject to the prejudice and discrimination aimed at transgender people, increasing their chances of entering and remaining in the formal labor market. Two aspects affect passability: one's name and one's appearance.

Gabriel recounts his professional history as follows:

Let's say it's pretty much not even started yet. And, like, my parents have a small business and I've worked practically my entire life with them. It's all a matter of . . . both helping them and not having to face the embarrassment of submitting a work card with a name that doesn't represent myself. (Gabriel)

For respondents, one's name is a crucial aspect regarding passability and discrimination in admission processes. A transgender person has a lower passability if their *documents show a name other than their social name*, which makes their transgender status immediately recognizable by others. Escorpiano recounts how recruiters readily recognized him as transgender after reading his legal name (and not his social name) in his résumé:

It's not like they said it to my face, but you can tell. You know? You're sure to notice. Because talking on the phone

is one thing. "Oh, please, come in for an interview, we need [*more people*]". (Escorpiano)

Escorpiano's remarks regarding naming-related obstacles are supported by the literature, according to which name-changing processes can be very time-consuming (Souza & Carrieri, 2015). There is a general perception among interviewees that such change would proceed much faster if no gender replacement were involved – e.g. from a "male" name to another "male" name. Furthermore, changing is costly, giving passability a class dimension.

Another factor involved in passability is appearance, highlighted in Ivan's narrative:

I feel privileged because my genetics adhered very well to my [*gender*] transition. So people, unfortunately – I know many people respect me because I pass, not because they understand. (Ivan)

Ivan's gender expression is consciously presented so to maximize his chances of passing. This concern derives from his acknowledgment that others respect him as a cisgender man (which is how they perceive him), and not as a transgender individual.

Leonardo's professional history shows the opposite experience: not passing. Before joining the company where he works today, he underwent several selection processes using his legal ("female") name. However, especially through clothes and mannerisms, he already expressed his gender in a way seen by society as masculine.

Oh, my job interviews were a failure, you know? Every job interview I went to, [*at an*] agency, I'd sit down, my voice was still high-pitched, and the woman with a list in her hand, she'd call for me as "Isabela", and then I had to raise my hand.

Right then she'd look at me with a look [*that said*] "what are you doing here?" Then after we did the interview, she'd say I'd hear back from them in a week, and this happened several times and no one called back. (Leonardo)

The fact that "dressing as male", i.e., having an appearance socially seen as masculine, while at the same time using a "female" name not only precluded him from being hired, but also subjected him to discrimination in selection processes.

Then when I walked in there, a guy asked me: "Are you a man or a woman?" Then I said . . . I didn't know what I had to say. Because . . . my records say Isabela. I said, "but do you want me to say how I'd like to be called?" He said "No, I'm asking if you're a man or a woman, not whatever you're fantasizing in your head". Then I said "oh, it's Isabela." [. . .] I left there crying. I was very embarrassed, he spoke out loud and close to everyone. (Leonardo)

The enormous impact of passing on hiring shows that a transgender person's abilities can be undermined by transphobia, something confirmed by the literature (Grant et al., 2011, p. 51; Souza & Carrieri, 2015). Respondents perceive selection processes as free from passability barriers only in cases where applicants have a high bargaining power due to an outstanding résumé or when competing in a niche market.

The third analytical category in this section concerns gender transition. The narratives collected define it as the process through which a transgender person assumes their gender identity to themselves and society, and adjusts their gender expression to match how they see themselves. For highlighting one's transgender identity (or reducing their passability), the effect of transitioning will depend on their environment's acceptance to it.

Graduated as a chemical engineer, Flor treated her transition as "an engineering project" (Flor):

A period that was like, ok, this is it, I'm transgender, so I will prepare my path to enable my transition [. . .] but mainly focusing on my employability. (Flor)

When she decided to disclose her gender to society and express herself the way she felt more comfortable, Flor had three different jobs: at a school, a pre-college preparatory course, and the university where she currently works.

So there were three models: a company, where everyone learned [about my transition] in May of last year. A school at Jundiaí where I was closer to teachers, students, and staff. Another company was [*a pre-college preparatory course*], where only the owners knew. And at the university, no one knew. (Flor)

This strategy allowed Flor to measure the impact of transitioning in her career. The consequences came shortly after the announcement:

And, you see, there was 100% of correlation. Because on the [date I disclosed my transition], the two companies whose owners found out fired me on the same day. And at the university, where nobody knew, I'm still employed. (Flor)

Flor had expected dismissals, given the fact that transgender people usually lose their jobs after publicly disclosing their identity (Grant et al., 2011, p. 59; Souza & Carrieri, 2015, p. 8). However, she did not expect them to happen immediately. As she had agreed with her employers she would not disclose her identity at work until the next term of the school year – she had already been expressing her femininity in her private life –, she believed her dismissal would only happen after transitioning.

Ivan, in turn, suffered discrimination at work for months before being dismissed. He disclosed his identity and began hormonal treatment while working in a *hardware* company in Curitiba-PR:

It was very complicated because I was hired as Patricia and then I, well. . . progressively let Ivan's identity out, which up until then was something inside me. Locked. And it was like hell, because I was forced to use the female bathroom, though my voice had already changed. (Ivan)

On the other hand, gender transition will not harm a person's career if their environment supports diversity.

I went to my boss and said, "look, this is what's going on: I'm answering the phone and people are asking me to repeat my name. Can I tell them the name I'd like to be called?" Then he said, "But what name do you like being called, in fact, what is your name?" and I said, "My name is Leonardo." He said, "You should have said so before. There is no problem at all. When you answer the phone, just say Leonardo." (Leonardo)

As his employers were open to diversity, Leonardo's name change, as part of his gender transition, did not affect his career. The relevance of personal values when dealing with transgender people will be addressed again in the section on relationships with organizations.

### *Relations at work*

Each interviewee expresses their transgender identity at work in different ways, and comprehends such expression in different ways. Still, they all connect expression to a sense of security: in a place where one feels safe, one is more likely to perform their transgender identity.

Gabriel, a sales clerk, says most customers recognize him as a cisgender man. "It is more a matter of friendship than seller-customer", he says, adding he is out only to older customers and those closer to him. This restraint, according to Gabriel, is due to the "troubles" conservative society may have with transgender people. Leonardo also protects his identity not only to avoid embarrassing situations and discrimination, but for his own safety and physical integrity.

For me it's no privilege being called cis[gender], but I blend myself in, and so I keep doing well. And I don't – if someone comes up and says "listen, are you trans or cis?", I'm going to say I'm trans. My in-laws don't know, but if they ask, I'll say "oh, I'm trans", because I do say it. I know martial arts, I know how to defend myself. Because otherwise I'd lie. (Leonardo)

The fear that expressing one's identity may lead to transphobia is based on numerous and recurring episodes of discrimination. The literature considers this to be the main reason for minorities to hide their identity in work environments (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016, p. 24). The idea that others would hardly understand or take one's gender identity seriously also features in interviewees' testimonies:

[People] don't understand if I explain. And I would have to spend a time I don't have in there to sit down and explain it to someone, you know? (Nicholas)

This assumption (that they will not be understood) makes sense given their relationships with others are marked by a widespread lack of knowledge regarding transgender identities. They are often the first direct contact that any of their colleagues, managers or clients have with someone that does not conform to heteronormative standards.

Most students, the only contact they have with the idea of a trans, a *travesti*, is the image they create, that he's seen in a porn magazine or website or a Danilo Gentili joke, or what he's seen on the street, walking by someone working in prostitution. That's the contact the person has. So they only have prejudices, only previous conceptions. (Flor)

When others become aware of their transgender identity, there are two common reactions. Some people show curiosity regarding transgenerity and show a desire to respect it, even though they sometimes do not know exactly how to do so. Due to his passing as a cisgender man, Ivan says people are surprised when he discloses his transgender identity, an astonishment expressed in questions such as: "but what do you mean? Huh. . . How is it? What are you on? What happened? How did you get like that?" (Ivan). The questions are many and often highly personal, even though asked in a work context, another fact described in the literature (Grant et al., 2011, p. 56). However, when transgender individuals feel safe, they will likely be open to explanations. According to Escorpiano:

The staff here, I was the first trans they met. The first trans man. And they were curious, wondering how is that-not asking something offensive, but really just curious, you know? To try and understand. I think that's cool, when someone comes up to me, regardless of who it is, and want to learn a little bit more, I open up to them, I don't see any problem. (Escorpiano)

In fact, some subjects see these questions as opportunities for education. Flor tells us that, throughout her years expressing herself as a woman in her private life, she learned the main questions people have regarding transgender identities and published online a series of short instructional videos to answer them. When disclosing her identity publicly, she published this instruction manual, this "guidelines for dealing with Flor" (Flor) as a source of basic information for understanding the process she was going through.

However, people's reactions are often transphobic. All research subjects have undergone episodes of transphobia in

and out of the workplace, often involving verbal and physical violence.

[When I began taking hormones], people noticed I was different. One day, I was leaving the female bathroom and I was attacked by some guy in the cafeteria. The guy punched me, called me a pervert, and stuff. He was fired, of course. But, you see, the company at no time thought that was transphobic, because to them [it was like] "oh, it's just a misunderstanding, it happens". (Ivan)

In treating systemic violence as an isolated episode, the company fails to prevent future violence. Unable to quit his job, but trying to avoid that environment at any costs, Ivan began calling in sick to work, to the point of dismissal (to his great relief). His behavior is also mentioned in the literature: silenced individuals who cannot hope for a less hostile environment tend to lose productivity at work and leave the organization (Bell et al., 2011, pp. 134, 139).

Transphobia is present even in environments more open to diversity. Nicholas, whose company is structurally pro-diversity, is recurrently bothered by jokes. Due to difficulties in reacting and the fear of formally reporting these jokes, Nicholas feels cornered.

Usually I'm all by myself, because every time everyone thinks it's just a joke. And the people who don't think it's a joke don't have the courage to speak up, because they also don't want to create any discomfort. And. . . then I don't say anything either, nobody is saying anything, everybody's laughing as if nothing had happened, and then people come talk to me in private: "Hey, I don't think that was cool." But nobody stands up for me at the time these things happen. And neither do I. (Nicholas)

For Nicholas, this lack of support increases their hopelessness in improving their environment and contributes to their feeling of non-belongingness. When third parties or Human Resources professionals are supportive, however, transgenders' perception of their environment is usually the opposite. Gabriel recounts an episode at the start of his transition:

One of the clients asked my name, I introduced myself and all, and she [called me a] "she". I said, "It's not 'she', it's 'he'." "No, it's 'she'", she insisted. Then, as I turned my back, I felt she was laughing at me, you know? And this shook me up [ . . . ] And then I went into the kitchen and started to cry. My mother got out of there and practically squabbled with her. (Gabriel)

Ivan, in turn, when narrating the only transphobia episode he suffered in his current job, highlights the role played by peers and Human Resources staff in creating a discrimination-free environment:

[A colleague] made a joke, like. . . You know, looking at me up and down and saying, "Oh, come on". [ . . . ] I wouldn't have said anything, but there were others that went ahead and told it to my trainer and she said "how come you didn't tell me about this?" But just a day later, the HR boss came



along. He said, “Look, I came here personally to resolve this. Because this should never happen”. (Ivan)

The engagement of the organization as a whole in creating an environment free of prejudice and discrimination fosters commitment to the organization and is seen by subjects as a sign of concern with respecting diversity.

#### *Relationship with the organization*

The ignorance regarding transgenerity not only permeates the relations transgender people keep with others in their work environment, but also with the organization itself. Besides, the average Brazilian company still underperforms regarding diversity issues. The result is that transphobia creates and maintains difficulties for transgender people in entering and remaining in the formal labor market.

The discrimination and justice paradigm appears above in Ivan’s narrative. By silencing Ivan’s identity inside the organization, the company purports to assimilate him into dominant cisgender identities. The literature states that companies in this paradigm adhere strictly to legislation (Cox, 2001, p. 4), but, as there is barely any legislation ensuring transgender rights, attempts to assimilate them into heteronormativity are made freely. Erasing difference in that manner, as the literature predicts (Thomas & Ely, 2002, p. 40), blinded the company to Ivan’s experiences at work, including cases of transphobia treated as a joke or chance.

The companies in which part of the research subjects work fit the learning and efficiency paradigm, according to which diversity is treated with meritocracy and fairness (Thomas & Ely, 2002, pp. 48–51). In addition to recognizing Leonardo’s transgender identity, his manager always saw his work in a meritocratic fashion:

I went there [to the interview] and they welcomed me very well. I told them of my condition, I said, “Look, I dress as man and I don’t intend to stop because of my job”. And what my boss said was: “Don’t worry, that’s not a problem at all. As long as you show professionalism [and] ability, everything is fine. (Leonardo)

Leonardo considers the fair treatment he receives an advantage of his work environment and a factor of retention:

I don’t get paid much, but it’s rare for me to get into a place where I’ll be respected like I’m respected there. (Leonardo)

Organizations in this paradigm listen to people’s experiences and seek to learn from them, incorporating them into the organization’s knowledge (Thomas & Ely, 2002, pp. 48–51). In a context of widespread lack of knowledge regarding transgender identities, significant prejudice, and a lack of laws regulating their situations, there are rarely any internal policies implemented a priori. It is up to transgender employees to teach their organizations.

He [the owner of the company] told me he had never heard about people who don’t get along with their body, who see themselves in the opposite [gender]. And he said that was

new to him, but that he’d had no difficulty [in dealing with it]. (Leonardo)

Unaware of how to deal with transgender people, the owner of Leonardo’s organization always sought to learn the right way to address him and made sure to pass this knowledge along to other employees. Ivan, who works in a more structured company, helped create the policies and practices on how to deal with transgender individuals in his company:

The HR came to me and said, “Send us the social name law”.<sup>2</sup> I sent them everything. They studied it, analyzed it. I know of a kid there from another sector who is also being addressed by their social name. Thanks to the law I sent them. And the kid hadn’t even asked, because he probably was, like in my—was just starting treatment. (Ivan)

To learn from transgenders, it is crucial that organizations give them voice. Not only does receiving the organization’s attention make a person feel valued and integrated (Martinez, 2013, pp. 77–78), it also makes the environment more receptive for transgender individuals in general. Gabriel, whose parents were against his transsexuality in the beginning, says that nowadays his parents would employ another transgender person, and had treated a *travesti* customer “very well” (Gabriel). Flor, in turn, believes that the people she interacts with are slowly changing their views of transgenders in general:

A student at the university, a teacher – when they go to work somewhere else and meet another trans person, he’ll look at them in another way. Say something like: “Gee, maybe this trans person isn’t like Flor because they had no opportunities, if they did perhaps they’d do the same”. (Flor)

Another result that concerns the relationship of transgender persons with organizations is the fact that heteronormativity is the dominant discourse in the corporate environment, suppressing non-heteronormative expressions seen as unintelligible. In this context, being non-binary is particularly difficult. Nicholas identifies himself as *genderfluid*, and defines their expression in the following way: “One day I want to look like a girl, the other day I want people to see me as if I were a boy” (Nicholas). This conceptual and linguistic decoupling with heteronormative discourse makes non-binary identities incomprehensible – even for transsexual people. The fact that these identities are still quite recent in society and academia (Kuper et al., 2012, p. 7) worsens this problem.

I can’t be so *fluid*, I need to be more like a cis woman. I get this internal pressure with myself. There are days when I wake up and say: “I’ll put on some makeup”, and then I say: “I hate wearing makeup”. It sucks. (Nicholas)

Due to their desire to stay and rise within the company, Nicholas feels the need to adapt to behaviors expected of cisgender women in that environment, even if it results in a gender expression incompatible with the one they identify with.

<sup>2</sup> Legislation granting transgender individuals the right to be addressed in accordance with their chosen name.

Nicholas sees heteronormativity as the limit of the voice system in their organization – which includes a specific leadership for LGBT+ individuals, an anonymous mechanism for reporting abuse, among other resources.

For example, if I said, “I don’t think women need to shave and they can wear whatever dress they want”. Everyone would say, “Oh, gee, that’s gross. How can you go meet a client with hairy legs?” But... I think if I felt attacked, so to speak, I think that [*would be heard*]. (Nicholas)

The literature reports that even though organizations may tolerate different gender identities, they do little to actually break with heteronormativity (Muhr & Sullivan, 2013, p. 430). A voice channel that purports to be *really* inclusive for *all* gender identities, therefore, needs to overcome normative definitions and work with criticism of the system as a whole.

### Final considerations

This article examined transgender people’s perceptions on their relations with and at work, and with the organization through six semi-structured interviews with transgender individuals currently employed in organizations.

The analysis of the narratives collected shows that transgenders people’s relationships with work suffer from many restricted opportunities. Difficulties being hired – making some jobs “the only option” for some people – and difficulties staying employed – often leading to dismissals upon transitioning – burden their careers. Recurring transphobia and the importance of passing also show that respect is usually reserved to cisgender people, and extended to transgender people only when they are perceived as cis.

Relationships with colleagues and managers, in turn, are marked by the widespread ignorance regarding transgender identities. As there is no formal education on gender, it is up to transgender people to justify themselves. If they happen to be outgoing and good at teaching, they may go as far as developing learning materials. Otherwise, they will likely hide themselves. The personal character of these relations leaves transgenders at the mercy of others’ personal values. If someone is intolerant to diversity, it is up to transgenders to deal with transphobia, often alone.

Relations with the organization are also characterized by the same ignorance. Rarely are there policies and practices focused on transgenders. Coupled with the lack of specific legislation, the group is subjected to a myriad of possible treatments. Most organizations see transgender identities as an obstacle to hiring and retention. Others seek to assimilate them into the cisgender norm, denying them rights such as using their social name or their preferred bathroom. Some companies, however, treat them with meritocracy and fairness. This last paradigm is associated with the presence of a voice system that allows companies to learn from transgenders. Organizations that listen to employees commonly develop policies and practices from this relationship and become better environments for transgenders in general.

### Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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