Doing Extra-Ordinariness: Trans-men's Accomplishment of 'Authenticity' in the Research Interview

Dr Tracey Lee
Senior Lecturer in Sociology
University of Huddersfield
Department of Behavioural Sciences
Ramsden Building
Queensgate
Huddersfield
HD1 3DH
Room R2/40

Tel: + 44 (0)1484 473675
Email: t.lee@hud.ac.uk

Biographical Note:

Tracey Lee is a senior lecturer in Sociology at the University of Huddersfield. Her research interests centre upon qualitative research methodologies and the construction of individual and collective identities in relation to gender, sexuality and organisations. *Address*: University of Huddersfield, Department of Behavioural Sciences, Ramsden Building, Queensgate, Huddersfield, HD1 3DH [email: t.lee@hud.ac.uk].

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Abstract

Discussions concerning transsexual identities consider the self representations of transsexuals as either determined through medical discourses and practices, and thus as constructed and inauthentic or, alternatively, as expressive of an interior and thus 'authentic' essential self. In contrast to each of these arguments, this paper highlights the significance of social interaction to transsexual authenticity and explores specifically, how this can be analytically captured and presented in the context of interview-based research. The paper applies analytic techniques drawn from fine-grain discourse analysis to research interviews carried out with female to male transsexuals. Through this method of analysis transsexual authenticity is treated as neither determined through medical discourses or as interior to the self, but rather as a 'live' interactional accomplishment. By revealing the discursive identity work undertaken by the interviewees, the paper demonstrates a constructionist approach to transsexual authenticity which, contrary to essentialist critiques, succeeds in foregrounding transsexuals as 'constructing subjects'.

Introduction

The question of what status should be accorded to data generated through the research interview is a fundamental one within qualitative research (Silverman, 2001). In research contexts concerned with the identities of transsexuals, however, this takes on particular significance. Throughout the literature in the field, for example, there are a number of tensions concerning the authentic status of transsexuals' self representations and personal identity narratives.[1] The central issue debated extensively by writers is not whether transsexuals are being honest in their self-reports and descriptions but rather, the effects of their positioning in relation to medical discourses and practices, and the hegemonic, normative regimes of gender and sexuality through which these medical discourses and practices operate. For the majority of authors, the *official* medical designation of transsexualism as a 'condition' and processes of clinical evaluation and diagnosis, which are required prior to any hormone treatment and surgery, place transsexuals in what Sandy Stone (1991) terms a 'colonial' position vis-à-vis the medical profession. Thus, an individual cannot simply claim to be transsexual and demand that others recognise her/him as such. In order to *become* transsexual an individual must be clinically authorised to *be* transsexual. This is established through clinical diagnostic criteria which necessitates that the 'right' symptomatic story of a gendered/sexual self is recounted (Prosser, 1998).[2]

Most of the literature concerning transsexualism acknowledges that occupying such a position in relation to medical authority creates particular difficulties, both for transsexuals themselves as it imposes constraints upon their narratives and identities,

and for researchers in terms of how, in view of such constraints, transsexuals' self-representations should be conceptualised within scholarly work (see, *inter alia*, Stone, 1991; Prosser, 1998; Nakamura, 1997). In engaging with these difficulties many authors, utilising a range of social constructionist perspectives within sociology and feminism, tend to dismiss and/or distrust the self-representations and identity narratives of transsexuals. The main argument forwarded is that these are unreliable or always already inauthentic as, in order to both establish their identities and secure medical treatment, transsexuals merely 'mimic' the medical discourses and the hegemonic, normative regimes of gender and sexuality that created the phenomenon of transsexualism in the first place (Hausman, 1995: 143; see also, Raymond, 1994; Billings and Urban, 1996; Shapiro, 1991). Such an argument, however, has increasingly been criticised and challenged, particularly on the grounds that its various social constructionist underpinnings deny agency and, 'overwhelmingly fail to examine how transsexuals are constructing subjects' (Prosser, 1998: 8).

An aim in more recent studies, therefore, has been to counter the over-determined and over-emphasised 'medically constructed transsexual' and develop alternative perspectives which take account of the agency of transsexuals in the establishment of their identities. To accomplish this many authors have now turned to what may be broadly characterised as new 'essentialist' or 'embodiment' perspectives which, through a variety of theoretical frameworks, insist on an embodied and thus autonomous understanding of trans-identity and subjectivity (Prosser, 1998, Stryker, 1998; Rubin, 2003). Within this work researchers have re-centred the self-representations and personal narratives of transsexuals and have sought to show how they reveal both agency and an authenticity of identity that the constructionists' 'top-

down' modes of analyses have obscured. While successful in stimulating empirical research with more agentic approaches than previously, much of this work has a tendency to treat the narratives and accounts drawn from interviews as a transparent and direct pathway to an interior authentic self. The problem here is that this not only overlooks the significance of social interaction to the constitution of identities (see, *inter alia*, Taylor, 1991; Mead, 1934; Hird 2002; Atkinson & Delamont, 2006) but also fails to engage with the well established methodological insight that, 'the discourse of the interview is jointly constructed by interviewer and respondent' (Mishler, 1986: 52).

An issue for researchers carrying out interview-based enquiry into trans-identities, therefore, is how these problems can be avoided and how the dynamic interactional nature of authenticity and identity, so well conceptualised in the theoretical and abstract (see Hird, 2002), can be analytically captured and presented. One way in which this has been approached by some researchers is to treat interview data as a resource and examine accounts for how they shed light on the workings of agency and the interactive processes of identity construction in the lives of those interviewed (Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Garfinkel, 1967; Gagne & Tewksbury, 1997). However, an alternative approach, as yet to be employed in the field, is to treat the interview data as a 'topic' (Rapley, 2001; ten Have, 2004; Roulston, 2006). This approach can be characterised as foregrounding the 'here and now' and examines the ways in which versions of events, selves and identities are created interactively within the interview setting.

This paper aims to explore how an adoption of this latter approach can offer a novel perspective on the issue of authentic trans-identities. To do so analytic techniques drawn from fine-grain discourse analysis are applied to research interviews with female to male transsexuals (trans-men).[3] This method of analysis, inspired by ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, places analytic focus upon the action-oriented, situated, and constructive properties of language use within contexts of social interaction (see, *inter alia,* Wooffitt, 2005; Edwards and Potter, 1992). Thus, as Wooffitt (2005: 18) observes, 'descriptions, anecdotes, stories, comments, accounts – the kinds of linguistic events that occur in interview data – are [treated as] constructions which not only depend upon the context in which they are produced, but will also reflect the functions they have been designed to perform'. In using this method of analysis transsexual authenticity is treated as neither determined through medical discourses, or as interior to the self, but rather as a 'live' interactional *accomplishment* (Widdicombe & Wooffitt 1995; Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). Through detailed analysis the paper shows how this approach facilitates a sensitivity to the kinds of identity-work that transsexuals undertake within talk and social interaction, and offers an alternative constructionist approach to transsexual authenticity which, contrary to essentialist critiques, succeeds in foregrounding transsexuals as 'constructing subjects'.

The Research

The extracts presented are drawn from a collection of one-to-one interviews with sixteen trans-men.[4] The interviews were designed to elicit personal narratives of the interviewees' lives and experiences *as* trans-men and thus questions were loosely

structured and organised around several topical themes including coming to know/understand oneself to be a transsexual and relationships with partners, friends, parents, children and work colleagues during and/or after the gender-reassignment process. Each extract presented is drawn from the first topical theme, coming to know/understand oneself to be a transsexual. This theme was introduced at the beginning of each interview where each interviewee was invited to recount their 'life story' of how they had arrived at their decision to pursue gender-reassignment. As many writers have documented, one significant way that transsexuals establish authentic gendered identities, as indeed do non-transsexuals, is through the use of gender-appropriate language. Garfinkel (1967), Kessler & McKenna (1978) and Hausman (1995: 141-174) for instance, have each highlighted a multiplicity of ways in which gendered 'realness' is discursively achieved such as, for example, where male to female transsexuals refer to 'facial hair growth pattern' rather than a 'beard' (Kessler & McKenna, 1978: 121). Although this kind of 'gendering talk' can be identified across the interviews, the analysis and discussion in this paper focus upon how the interviewees negotiate their authentic status as *individual* trans-men and also as *categorical* members of the 'transsexual community'. This focus is based in a particular and key observation concerning the interview data: that although each had elected to be interviewed on the basis of their self-definition as a transsexual rather than 'transgendered' trans-man[5] each variously, throughout their talk, both distance themselves from, and align themselves with, what is conventionally known about transsexualism.

Work in the area of 'membership categorisation' is most valuable in making sense of this observation (see, *inter alia*, Sacks, 1992; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995; ten

Have, 2004; Edwards, 1998). As Widdicombe (1998: 52-3) notes, 'a reference to a person's social identity is also a reference to their membership of a specific category. In addition, categories are inference-rich such that they don't just provide us with convenient labels, they are also conventionally associated with particular activities and other characteristics.' Whilst, as we shall see, membership categories thus confer intelligibility and legitimacy and so can function as helpful resources in social interaction, they are also potentially problematic in that through affiliation and/or ascription, they can imply conformity and a loss of individuality and authenticity (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995; Widdicombe, 1998). To have found variation in distancing and alignment strategies across the interviewees talk is, therefore, not surprising and has provided a window for analysis into how the tension between individual and categorical authenticity is played out and attended to by the interviewees within the interview setting. Attention to the discursive function of the variations across the talk showed that the interviewees' orientation to their authenticity as trans-men and as category members occurred regularly throughout the interviews. This typically involved the working up of various 'versions' of a 'trans-self' that at the same time were both ordinary and extraordinary, and was largely organised around two distinctive forms of talk: identity category positioning and contrasting oneself with others. The remainder of this paper will, therefore, explore each of these in turn. In order to preserve anonymity all names of the interviewees and any person mentioned by them have been changed. Any personal information pertaining specifically to the interviewees or to others has also been omitted. Details of the transcription conventions are listed in the appendix.

Identity Category Positioning

Additional membership categories

A striking feature of all the interviews is that at the outset, each interviewee responded to the invitation to talk about themselves by orienting their talk to what was particular or distinctive about them. The most common way this was achieved was through the invocation of additional membership categories in the opening descriptions of themselves. As Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995: 71) observe, 'category ascription, or what is conventionally known about a category, can be occasioned, invoked, indexed or made relevant so as to accomplish specific inferential tasks which arise in the course of interaction'. In their invocation by the interviewees, the additional membership categories thus constituted 'resources for social action' through which the current business of the talk – in this case to be particular and/or distinctive in relation to their 'transsexual' category membership – could be performed. One example of this discursive procedure, and the way in which authenticity was subtly negotiated and produced through it, can be seen in Extract One:

Extract One: Eric

Tape starts

01   **T:** so (.) what I've been asking people to do is just (.) talk to me about their

02   ↑life story really (.) sort of starting from whatever place they ↑want to and

03   some people have just started off by telling me a little bit about themselves

04   currently (.) i.e. where they work what work they do and so on (.) and other

05   people have (.) °you know said some different things so it's up to you° (0.5)

06   where you want to <u>begin</u> really?

07   **E:** Okay erm (1.0) I'm fifty two (1.5) erm I'm a (occupation) (1.5) at the local

08   (place of work) (1.0) hh I suppose the thing that makes me (1.0) a <u>minority</u>

09   even among (.) females to <u>males</u> is that <u>I'm married</u> (1.5) erm I'm still married

10   (0.5) we still live together

11   **T:** mm

12   (2.5)

13   **E:** I've been having treatment for about five years (2.0) I live a sort

14   of (0.5) compromised life at the moment (.) where (0.5) erm as far as I'm

15   concerned I'm male (0.5) erm I feel as if I look male (0.5) erm but I'm still my

16   husband's wife (1.0) and his friends will always <u>see</u> (0.5) me as <u>that</u> (.)

17   >although I I think that< (.) PEOPLE THAT KNEW YOU BEFORE (.)

18   always see a woman

19   **T:** mm mm

20   **E:** erm (.) I was talking to Adrian in ((City)) and err he said 'if you had a big

21   black beard they'd still see a woman (.) [because']

22   **T:**   [it's ama]zing isn't it

23   **E:** Yeah it's what they (.) they just think you're an eccentric woman

The first noticeable feature of the extract is that Eric's talk is both 'occasioned' by,
and produced in negotiation with, the interviewer (Rapley, 2000; Potter & Hepburn,
2005; Roulston, 2006). In the first turn of the extract (lines 01-06) for instance, the
interviewer establishes the immediate topic of the talk – Eric's 'life story'- but also,
through her use of the generic term 'people', she orients to and positions Eric as a

particular kind of speaker. In her statements, *'what I've been asking people to do'* and *'some people have just started off by telling me a little bit about themselves currently'*, for example, she establishes the 'interview frame' (Ensink, 2003), positioning herself as the 'interviewer' (whose role is to direct the course of the interview and ask the questions) and Eric as the 'interviewee' (whose role is to be directed by the interviewer and answer the questions posed to him). Significantly, moreover, the statements also make relevant the broader 'social research frame': that 'the interview is not an "autonomous" social occasion, but one within a series of similar occasions [where] [o]ther respondents from the sample will be interviewed as well' (Ensink, 2003: 159). Situated within this frame the generic term 'people' thus further positions Eric as one member of a group of 'female to male transsexuals' who are being interviewed for the research study and, by inference, as a speaker who therefore has a shared 'ordinary' categorical membership status.

The speaking positions produced by the interviewer are taken up by Eric in his subsequent turn (lines 07 - 16). Here, he adopts the speaking position of 'interviewee' as, in offering some brief biographical details, he complies with the interviewer's suggested task. However, in invoking the membership categories *'minority'*, *'females to males'*, *'married'*, *'male'* and *'wife'*, he swiftly carries out some discreet interactional business in relation to the inference of transsexual 'ordinariness'. Thus, in casting himself as a *'minority'* and living a *'compromised life'* post-transition - as by being his *'husband's wife'* he now occupies both male and female gendered social positions - Eric constructs a 'version' of self who is at variance with a key characteristic feature of the category 'female to male transsexual': that members are born-females who, through gender-reassignment, both become and live as men[6]. In so

doing, Eric particularises his category membership as atypical and different to that of other members and so effectively counters the inference of 'ordinariness' generated by the interviewer in her first turn.

The membership categories invoked in the achievement of these actions, however, produce their own inferences. For example, the atypical self description offered by Eric, constructed through the categories *'married'* and *'wife'*, potentially suggests that his membership of the category 'female to male transsexual' is therefore inauthentic and/or that he is 'less of a man' than other category members. As Eric continues his turn through lines 17 – 23 he orients to both of these potential inferences and attends to them through several discursive practices. In line 17, Eric produces a personal, subjective evaluation of his prior talk. Here, through the use of the generic term *'people'*, the pronoun *'you'* and the extreme case formulation *'always'* (Pomerantz, 1986), he refashions his description of how he himself is continuing to be seen as a *'woman'* by particular others into a typical and common problem shared by all trans-men. In so doing, Eric thus works to establish that whilst being *'married'* is particularising of him, being seen as a *'woman'* is not, and so by implication is neither a discreditable nor inauthentic feature of his transsexual self-identification. In lines 20 to 23 Eric continues to undertake some further discursive work towards this accomplishment as he shifts footing (Goffman, 1981) and reports a claim made by *'Adrian in ((City))'*, a well known member of the female to male transsexual community.

As Wilkinson (2000: 450) observes, footing moves, such as those where a speaker quotes the words of another, do not simply reveal speakers' informational sources or

provide hearers with a window into the views and understandings of those reported but rather, are 'a conversational resource used by participants for managing interactional difficulties'. The interactional sequence of Eric's evaluative statement in lines 17-18, '>*although I think that*< *(.)* _*people that knew you before*_ *(.) always see a woman*', and the interviewer's somewhat passive acknowledgment token *('mm mm')*, suggests that one difficulty potentially facing Eric is that his view might be being discounted by the interviewer on the grounds that it is motivated by 'stake and interest' - that in his position, he would say that wouldn't he (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 2004). The footing shift that Eric employs within his talk does indeed display his orientation to this possibility and, in addition, enables him to perform some effective interactional work. Thus, in reporting the view of a well known other, Eric gains some corroboration for his statement and at the same time is able to exhibit his impartiality: that his view is based upon, and informed by, 'community knowledge' rather than personal conjecture. This not only warrants his statement as 'factual', thus 'inoculating' him against the potential to be heard as self interested (Potter, 1996, 2004), but also works as a 'normalising' device (Buttny, 1993) whereby his particular experience of being seen '*as a woman*' is further cast as ordinary. Through the operation of various discursive practices across his talk, Eric can be seen, therefore, to refashion the identity ascribed to him by the interviewer in the first turn and concomitantly attend to the potential inferences of lack of individuality and authenticity that could possibly be attributed to him. In so doing, Eric is able to work up and accomplish a 'particular' and 'distinctive' self-identity as a trans-man who, whilst not conventional, is nonetheless an authentic and otherwise normative category member.

Sub-category membership

As illustrated in the above example, authenticity as an individual trans-man and as a 'transsexual' category member was achieved by some of the interviewees through a construction of particularity and distinctiveness. This was produced via the invocation of membership categories not conventionally associated with the category 'female to male transsexual'. For others, however, alternative resources were transsexual 'sub-categories', particularly 'primary' transsexualism – known as the appearance of 'gender dysphoria' during childhood and adolesence, and 'secondary' transsexualism – known as the appearance of 'gender dysphoria' later on in life. As Tully (1992) observes, both sub-categories have their own particular inferential qualities. In appearing later on in life, 'secondary' transsexualism is characteristically assumed to be acquired, whilst 'primary' transsexualism is 'sometimes referred to as "real", "nuclear", "true" or "core"' and is 'often considered to be partly due to a "biological force"' (Tully: 1992: 4). Such inferences thus have clear implications for the notion of transsexual authenticity. Whilst 'primary' transsexualism suggests a transsexual realness or essence, 'secondary' transsexualism, in being somehow acquired, does not: there is always the possibility that the individual's transsexual identity is the result of some other 'condition' or life event and that the identity may therefore be transitory and unstable. In the interviewees' talk about themselves these categories, their associated inferences and their possible implications for the attribution/non-attribution of authenticity were regularly made relevant and discursively attended to. A typical instance is represented in the following extract:

01   **T:** so err (.) yes I'm just interested in hearing your <u>story</u> really of of how

02   (.) of how you got to where you are today? (.) how it all happened

03   **M:** how it happened (.) well (1.5) to where I <u>am now</u> (.) to the sort of

04   point where I am now I'm (.) thirty nine (.) I don't look it

05   **T:** you don't

06   **M:** I don't huh huh erm (0.5) I'm thirty nine erm (0.5) I'm an

     [occupation]

07   and (.) I ru- I'm managing a [place and type of work]

08   **T:** °right°

09   **M**: erm (2.5) in terms of (0.5) where I am now I've (1.0) I've

10   been living in role (.) for two years (2.0) but fulltime for about (2.5)

11   °eighteen to twenty months I suppose° erm I had the top surgery last (.)

12   May (1.0)

13   **T:** mm

14   and I've been on the hormones for about eighteen to twenty months

15   **T**: °right°

16   **M:** <u>erm</u> (2.5) the bit's leading up (.) <u>erm</u> (1.5) well do you want just a few

17   bits about the childhood

18   **T:** yeah ↑<u>yeah</u> I mean yeah I'd [be interested to know]

19   **M:**   [that's where it <u>starts</u> really]

20   **T:** <u>yeah</u> I mean I'd be interested to know (.) kind of=

21   **M:** =yeah

22   **T:** =you know (.) about your childhood (.) and how you experienced (.)

23   yourself

24   **M:** yes yes it's <u>interesting</u> (2.0) I <u>think</u> what happened (1.5) sort of in (.)

25   >well in adulthood< certainly for <u>me</u> you don't think too much about your

26   childhood

27   **T:** mm

28   **M:** and it's only when you <u>do</u> (.) get into this that you think <u>more</u> about it

29   **T:** mm

30   **M:** erm (1.0) and having talked to a psychotherapist about it that (1.5)

31   and (.) obviously went to see the (.) the con<u>sult</u>ant about it (.) it would

32   have been (1.0) it would have been a primary diag<u>nosis</u> (.) it was

33   <u>scream</u>ing

34   **T:** mm

35   **M:** [you] know

36   **T:** [mm]

37   **M:** and nobody (.) °nobody pi (.) picked it up° (1.0) erm (.) so I <u>gu</u>ess (1.0)

38   probably the earliest memory is ↑<u>five</u> at ↓<u>school</u>

A prominent feature to first be observed is the routine background information that Mark offers in his description of *'to where I <u>am</u> <u>now</u>'* (lines 03 - 14). Whilst seemingly trivial and mundane in character, being *'thirty nine'*, *'living in role (.) for two years'* and the time-line of surgery and hormone treatments, are biographical details that produce some significant effect in terms of Mark's category membership. As noted by Antaki and Widdicombe (1998: 4), the inferential nature of membership categories mean that 'not only do categories imply features, but features imply

categories. That is to say, someone who displays, or can be attributed with a certain set of features, is treatable as a member of the category with which those features are conventionally associated'. Through his biographical details – that it is only recently that his transsexualism has been established and that his life as a man has begun - Mark thus makes available the implication that he has a 'secondary' transsexual membership. However, as he shifts topic in line 16 – 17 and asks the interviewer, *'well do you want just a few bits about the childhood'*, this implication and the possibility that a lack of authenticity could therefore be inferred, are both orientated to and subsequently resisted within his talk.

In relation to the interviewer's previously stated interest to hear Mark's *'story'*, Mark's initiation of the topic *'childhood'* could be seen to simply comply with her request and signal that a traditional retrospective narrative will soon follow (Prosser, 1998). In the situated context of the interaction, however, it has an additional significance in that it enables Mark to attend to the implications of his prior talk. Thus, through the topic *'childhood'* and the statement *'that's where it starts really'* (line 19), Mark invokes a feature characteristically associated with 'primary' rather than 'secondary' transsexualism which, in his evaluative statement *'yes yes it's interesting'* in line 24, he implies has some particular and extraordinary relevance to his own category membership. A noticeable feature of Mark's continuing talk through lines 24 – 26 is that he quickly shifts from evaluating his own personal experience, *'I think what happened (1.5) sort of in (.) well in adulthood certainly for me'*, to produce the generalised assertion, *'you don't think too much about your childhood'*. This somewhat subtle shift does some important discursive work for it locates Mark's adult inattention to his childhood as commonplace among adults. The inference here is that

Mark's particular biography is therefore not necessarily indicative of 'secondary' transsexualism or, moreover, inauthenticity: he transitioned later on in his life simply because, like many adults, he did not *'think too much'* about his childhood experiences.

From this point in the extract Mark then attends to the particular relevance that *'childhood'* has to his category membership (lines 28 – 37). His description of how it has become significant to him since getting *'into this'* (a transsexual trajectory) enables Mark to achieve both a 'primary' category membership and authenticity as an individual trans-man. What is particularly noticeable in how this is accomplished, however, is not simply Mark's self-ascription of 'primary' membership, which is brought off through the statement *'it would have been a primary diag<u>nosis</u>'*. One important discursive feature, for example, is the footing that Mark undertakes as he refers to the *'psychotherapist'* and *'consultant'* (lines 30 – 31). As Potter (1996: 159) observes, 'one way of transforming a description into a fact is to produce the assent of reliable witnesses'. Situated immediately prior to Mark's self-ascription, the *'psychotherapist'* and *'consultant'* thus furnish his claim with professional and authoritative corroboration which, as well as establishing facticity, also functions to protect Mark from any potential undermining and challenge.

Mark's description in lines 32 - 37, of how his (primary) transsexual 'condition' during childhood *'was <u>scream</u>ing'* although *'∘nobody pi (.) picked it up∘'*, constitutes a further important discursive feature. This implies a 'core' and 'essential' transsexualism (Tully, 1992) that, whilst existing all along, has been beyond both his own and, importantly, others' awareness. The interactional business performed by this

description is twofold. First, in displaying a 'classic' feature of 'primary' transsexualism Mark demonstrates his authenticity as a 'primary' category member, providing further corroborative evidence to the factuality of his claim that, *'it would have been a primary diagnosis'*. Second, in his description Mark also orients to questions of personal accountability (Edwards and Potter, 1992). Thus, that his transsexualism was evident (*'screaming'*) during his childhood but was not recognised by the adults around him is cast by Mark to constitute the cause of both his late awareness of his transsexuality and his late transition. The description works, therefore, as a defence against the possible attribution of blame and responsibility. In the context of what would be understood as an unconventional, extraordinary life-trajectory for a 'primary' category member, this then enables Mark to manage the sensitive issue of his individual credibility and authenticity .

Contrasting Oneself with Others

As most studies of trans-identities demonstrate, comparing and contrasting oneself with others, particularly with regard to experiences of gender, is a common feature of transsexual self description (Author, 2001; Prosser, 1998; Hausman, 1995). However, what is most frequently attended to is the way in which transsexuals engage in these processes in relation to non-transsexual others. As yet, little attention has been paid to self-other contrasts more broadly - that is beyond the 'gendering' effects they produce for the speaker/writer - and how they may also operate between transsexuals themselves. Throughout the interviews under discussion here, contrasts with other transsexuals were regular in occurrence. As many discourse analysts have noted, the main discursive function of 'contrast-talk' is that it enables the speaker to present

oneself, or one's membership category, in a more positive and favourable light (Dickerson, 2000; McKinlay & Dunnett, 1998). However, a significant aspect of its situated use across these interviews, as illustrated in the following extract, is that it was also discursively geared to negotiate and establish authenticity at both an individual and categorical level:

Extract Three: Ben

01   **T:** So (.) yeah so what (.) so what I was thinking of doing is (1.0) is just

02   talking a bit about (.) how how you made the decision like what what

03   (1.0) you know what happened in your life really (.) to make you (.) get to the

04   point that you've (.) you know (.) that you've made that decision

05   **B:** mm

06   **T:** to change over

07   **B:** mm (.) erm (1.5) I think it was just a process of elimination↑ (.) I wouldn't

08   say (.) erm (1.0) I I think it started out (1.5) >I mean if you go back< (1.0) to

09   childhood (.) I think it started out at that point it was a very (.) distinct sort

10   of male identity you know (.) you know dressing up (.) as a boy (.)

11   behaving like a boy (.) saying that I was one- I was a boy

12   **T:** mm

13   **B:** err all of that (.) was there (.) and err as as sort of I grew older (.) I think it

14   was more (1.0) a recognition that I wasn't

15   **T:** ri::ght

16   **B:** simply >because it was as simple as it was like< you know (.) you are what

17   you see (1.5) and when I looked in the mirror

18   **T:**mm

19   **B:** and I took off my clothes (.) I wasn't a boy (.) and so I wasn't (.) one of

20   these people who thought that (.) I'd suddenly grow (.) you know (.) a penis

21   one day and (.) you know (.) it would be okay=

22   **T:** =yeah

23   **B:** I I don't (.) I find it a little (.) amusing when people say that

24   **T:** yeah mm mm=

25   **B:** =because I don't know what (.) if they mean that literally or (.) or they want

26   (.) to convey to others their stro- strong sense of identity I mean (.) at the

27   end of the day I (.) I didn't feel that way because I (.) I knew that (.) I knew

28   that's not how things wor[ked] you know

29   **T:**   [mm]

The contrastive category *'these people'* (line 20) not only enables Ben to cast himself

in a favourable light but also manages issues of individual and categorical credibility

and authenticity. Key to this observation is where the contrast is situated and also its

relationship to the surrounding talk. The first feature to note as having particular

import is Ben's first statement *'I think it was just a process of elimination↑'*. Here,

parallels can be drawn with Extract Two above in so far as in this statement Ben both

suggests some extraordinariness of self but at the same time makes available the

question of his status as a transsexual. A *'process of elimination↑'*, for example, does

not imply that Ben has experienced a continuous conviction of being male. Rather, it

suggests that Ben once had a period of unawareness of his transsexualism and that his

decision to pursue gender-reassignment had been preceded by attempts to understand

himself within different identity categories and frameworks. The possibility for the

statement to be heard in this way by the interviewer and, concomitantly, the potential for the question of his authenticity to then be raised, is oriented to by Ben in his continuing talk. This is displayed, in the first instance, in the utterance, *'I wouldn't say (.) erm (1.0) I I think it started out (1.5) >I mean if you go back< (1.0) to childhood (.)'*. This can be seen to constitute what conversation analysts term a 'self-repair' which is broadly understood as a correction of some kind such as a slip of the tongue or a mishearing or misunderstanding. As Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998: 60) note, however, on occasion a repair 'may not reflect an error' but 'may be produced with respect to specific inferential tasks'. In this particular instance, Ben's self-repair can be seen to be oriented to the inference and potential attribution of individual inauthenticity. This is evident through lines 09 – 13, where Ben breaks from his explanation of how his decision to transition arose through *'a process of elimination↑'* to describe his identity during his childhood.

The significance of this description can again be highlighted by drawing on the analytical tools of conversation analysis. It is noticeable, for example, that Ben's claim to have had a *'dis<u>tinct</u> sort of <u>male</u> identity'* during his childhood is followed by a description comprising three parts: *'dressing up (.) as a boy (.) behaving like a boy (.) saying that I was one- I was a boy'*. As observed by Jefferson (1990), such 'three-part lists' are often used by speakers in order to summarise and convey a generality of things or events (see also Potter, 1996: 195 – 197). In the case of Ben's talk the list enables Ben to script a typical and routine version of his childhood self – a self who was undoubtedly cross-gendered and thus in character with both conventional and diagnostic expectations of transsexualism.[7] This effectively demonstrates his claim of having had a *'dis<u>tinct</u> sort of <u>male</u> identity'* during childhood and, at the same time,

manages the question of authenticity that his first statement, *'I think it was just a process of elimination↑'*, made available. Thus, in this sequence the three-part list operates as a device whereby Ben is able to establish his credentials as 'the real thing' – that throughout the *'process of elimination↑'* he was never anything other than transsexual.

Ben's authenticity as a 'transsexual' trans-man continues to be worked up and attended to throughout his continuing talk. Significant to this procedure is his description of getting older and recognising that, despite his *'distinct sort of male identity'*, he was not a boy (lines 13- 19). This contextualizes and 'occasions' the contrastive category *'these people'* later produced by Ben, and enables him to carry out some effective identity work. The statement *'and when I looked in the mirror … and I took off my clothes (.) I wasn't a boy'*, prefaced with the terms *'simply'*, *'simple'*, and the idiomatic expression *'you are what you see'*, has a particularly forceful discursive effect. Here Ben appeals to 'common knowledge' - in this case, the indisputability and conspicuousness of anatomical sex. This enables him to both justify his account and manage the sensitive issue of his individual credibility as a trans-man. The 'conspicuousness' of anatomical sex (*'you are what you see'*), for example, establishes that his *'recognition'* of not being a boy was inevitable and that the *'process of elimination↑'* he went through concerning the nature of his identity was, therefore, only to be expected. In his appeal to 'common knowledge' and understanding Ben thus constructs his actions as having been 'normal' and 'rational' and in so doing he further heads off any discrediting inferences concerning his transsexual status and authenticity.

It is significant that it is here, amidst the 'common knowledge', 'normality' and 'rationality' that Ben mobilises through his talk, that the contrastive category *'these people'* (line 19 - 26) is then produced. An important feature to observe is how the contrast and Ben's preceding talk are rhetorically organised. Whilst the descriptions of childhood identity and the *'recognition'* of not being a boy have what Potter (1996) terms a 'defensive' rhetorical function, in that they are designed to justify Ben's account of *'a process of elimination↑'* and resist an attribution of inauthenticity, the description of *'these people'* has the converse 'offensive' rhetorical function. This undermines and discredits an alternative description of an 'authentic' female to male transsexuality, namely a continuous conviction of being male throughout childhood and adolescence. This is achieved through two discursive procedures. The first is Ben's description of the type of person that he was/is not (lines 19 – 21) whereby he presents *'these people'* as having held irrational beliefs concerning the sex of their bodies. This is accomplished via the discursive design of his description. For example, his use of *'suddenly'*, *'grow'* and *'one day'* creates a sense of absurdity insofar as it suggests a miraculous 'moment' of bodily transformation. Situated against the common understandings of 'normality' established by Ben in his prior talk, this works to characterise *'these people'* as therefore having, or at least claiming to have had, expectations about their bodies which quite simply would have (or should have) defied their 'common sense'.

The second discursive procedure occurs from line 23 onwards as Ben then orients to the issue of why, then, *'these people'* might claim to have had such a 'nonsensical' experience. Here he produces two possible explanations, *'I don't know what (.) if they mean that literally or (.) they want (.) to convey to others their stro- strong sense of identity'*. The inferential work that this carries out is particularly effective as it implies

that, regardless of foundation, the accounts of *'these people'* lack truth and integrity. Thus whilst, as Ben previously establishes, the claim of a literal belief indicates irrationality or at least an abnormal level of naivety, the alternative explanation – that such a claim may be used simply to convey one's *'strong sense of identity'* - suggests deceit and insincerity. Through the two explanations Ben therefore constructs the contrastive category *'these people'* as either senseless or disingenuousness in their claims and, concomitantly, the notion of a continuing conviction of being male as, therefore, inauthentic and false. In the rhetorical design of his talk and his construction of the contrastive category *'these people'*, Ben therefore presents himself as an individual and his account of *'a process of elimination↑'* in a more favourable and, moreover, more authentic light. Thus, in contrast to *'these people'* Ben is neither senseless or disingenuous and has a rational and more credible foundation to his transsexual identity.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed one way in which an interactional understanding of authentic trans-identity can be analytically approached and presented in the context of interview-based research. In treating the interview data as a 'topic' rather than a 'resource' and drawing on the analytical tools of discourse analysis the paper has demonstrated some of the ways in which an 'authentic' trans-identity was negotiated, discursively attended to and interactively accomplished by the interviewees. As well as revealing authenticity to be a 'live' interactive issue the analysis has shown that in the interview setting, establishing an authentic trans-identity involved a subtle and sophisticated negotiation of identity at both an individual and categorical level. This involved the construction of both an ordinary and extraordinary trans-self, achieved

through various discursive strategies in which the interviewees both distanced themselves from, and aligned themselves with, what is conventionally known about transsexualism. The interviewees' constructions of their own and others identities, together with their display of sensitivity to the various 'identity' inferences that were mobilised through their talk, suggest, therefore, that the argument that transsexuals have an investment in 'mimicking' conventional transsexual discourse in order to establish their identities as authentic is misguided.[8]

By revealing some of the discursive identity-work undertaken by the trans-men in the interviews the paper has also demonstrated a novel, alternative constructionist perspective concerning trans-identity which, far from overlooking transsexuals as 'constructing subjects' (Prosser, 1998: 8), takes this as its fundamental starting point. An advantage of such an approach, however, is not only that it overcomes the problem of a lack of agency, characteristic of some constructionist perspectives, but that it moves away from the tendency to homogenise transsexuals as a group. Thus, whilst constructionist frameworks have a tendency to cast transsexuals as undifferentiated 'products' of medical discourses and practices, essentialist frameworks have similarly sought to reveal a definitive unique and uniform 'transsexual' experience. In contrast, the analysis presented here shows that making the shift from an essentialist or social determinist understanding of trans-identity to an interactional one, whereby trans-identities become contextual and open to continual (re)negotiation and accomplishment, opens the door for analyses into issues of variability and trans-diversity.

Appendix

The above data has been transcribed according to the conventions developed by Gail Jefferson (see 'Transcription Glossary' in Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1988).

(0.3)   Pause length measured in tenths of a second.

(.)   Pause length less than two-tenths of a second.

word=   Equals sign: a latching between utterances with no hearable gap.

[ ]   Square brackets: onset and end of overlapping talk.

huh/heh Laughter.

hh   An outbreath.

(( ))   Double brackets: analysts comment.

-    Dash: a sudden cut-off of a prior word.

:::   Colons: stretching the sound of a word.

?   Question mark: a rising intonation

↑   Arrow: a rapid rise in intonation.

-    Underlining: speaker's emphasis.

CAP   Capitals: Rise in volume.

><   talk at a quicker pace than the surrounding talk.

<>   talk at a slower pace than surrounding talk.

°°   Degree signs: talk is of lower volume than the surrounding talk.

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[1] This paper refers to literature on transsexualism within the social sciences and humanities. However, tensions concerning the issue of transsexual authenticity can also be found across clinically informed literature.

[2] For the diagnostic criteria used to identify transsexualism see, American Psychiatric Association (1995).

[3] These were carried out in the context of PhD Research, see ** (author ref).

[4] All the trans-men who participated in the research had responded to a request for interviewees which was placed in 'Boys Own', a community newsletter for trans-men that is distributed several times a year to members of the UK FTM Network.

[5] Transgenderism encompasses a broad array of gender variant identities which, although may be characterised as forms of 'sex/gender crossing', may not involve the desire for medical intervention nor an 'opposite' sex self-identification.

[6] Whilst being married and remaining married is a relatively well known occurrence for trans-women it is less so for trans-men.

[7] See footnote 2

[8] Some analysts may object to this assertion on the basis that it is founded upon talk within an interview setting and not within a context where the talk was 'naturally occurring' (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). However, as observed by Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995: 211), interviews do 'nevertheless function to elicit the kinds of discursive practices which are a feature of everyday communication'.