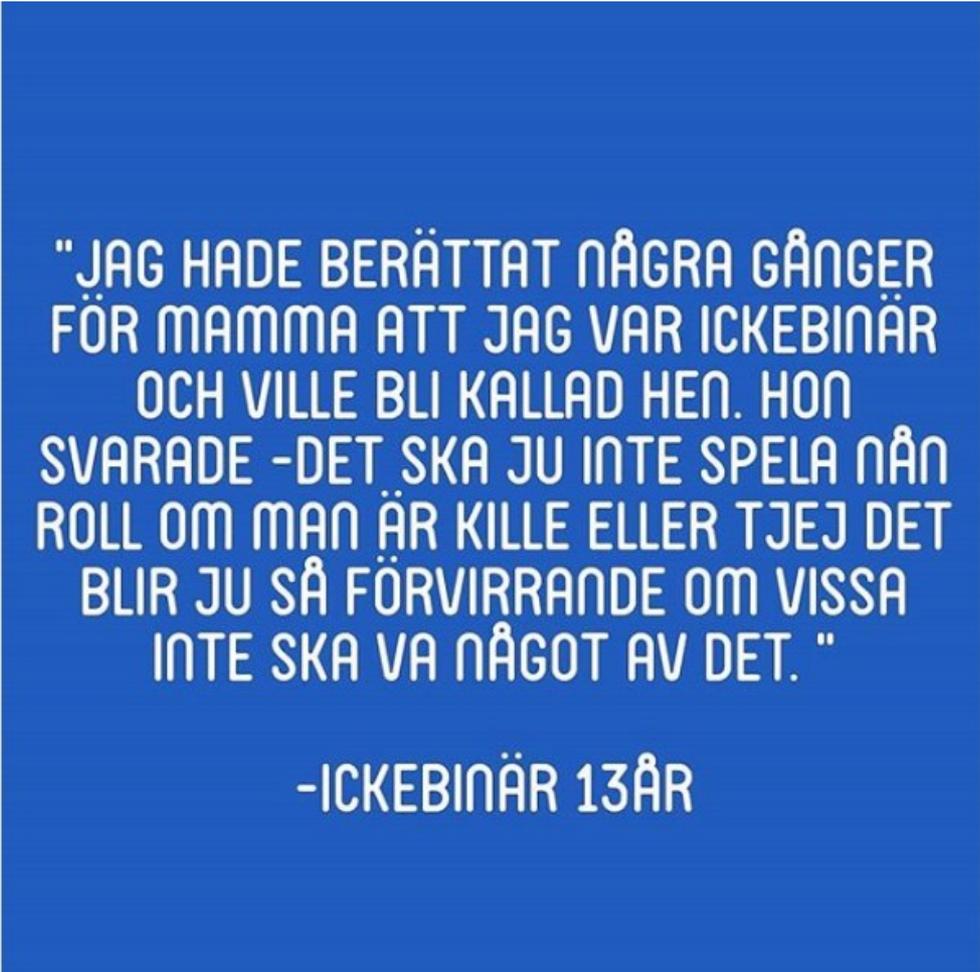


Snapshots from Between

Non-binary identity construction on Instagram

Kai Reichwaldt



"JAG HADE BERÄTTAT NÅGRA GÅNGER
FÖR MAMMA ATT JAG VAR ICKEBINÄR
OCH VILLE BLI KALLAD HEN. HON
SVARADE -DET SKA JU INTE SPELA NÅN
ROLL OM MAN ÄR KILLE ELLER TJEJ DET
BLIR JU SÅ FÖRVIRRANDE OM VISSA
INTE SKA VA NÅGOT AV DET. "

-ICKEBINÄR 13ÅR

"I had told my mum a few times that I was non-binary and wanted people to use a gender neutral pronoun for me. She said – It's not supposed to matter if you're a guy or a girl, it gets so confusing if some have to be neither."

-Non-binary, 13 years old

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ABSTRACT

Though technically not a new phenomenon historically or geographically, non-binary identities are starting to be more visible in Sweden, and have become a topic of both discussion concerning human rights and anti-discriminatory practices, but also mockery. In this thesis I wanted to have a closer look at how Swedish people identifying as neither wholly male nor female present themselves on social media in text and image, as well as how they describe the resistance they meet in regards to their identity and choices of presentation. Its theoretical basis lies in works of Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam and Lee Edelman to examine which societal structures the subjects of this study have to relate to. The source of my empirical material are ten Instagram accounts, which were analysed via an integrated discourse psychology/discourse theory approach. During the period of material collection, an incident in the shape of a public debate concerning trans questions had a considerable impact on the lives of the subjects of this study, consequentially making it a significant theme of the thesis. The results show the difficulty of trying to hold a balance between or outside the gender and/or sex binary in a society which only recognizes male and female, as well as the conflicts of identity which can arise when one's gender identity clashes with other important personal values.

Key words: non-binary, intersex, gender identity, feminism, trans, instagram, social media, identity construction, discourse psychology, discourse analysis

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1. PROLOGUE: A SHORT BIO

Writing this thesis has not been easy. I feel like I am both too close and too far away from what it is about. Although not actively identifying as under the non-binary umbrella, I myself am someone whose personhood has been challenged due to not having a typically legible gender expression. Knowing many people in similar positions or identifying as non-binary, I feel weirdly removed from the people who created my material, having to “pick apart” their words as I had to considering my choice of method. Most of all I want my work to be beneficial to the people who I am studying, instead of exotifying or hurting them. I want to make sure these people’s lives get documented, also in the light of that many of them feel they are made invisible in a multitude of contexts.

2. BACKGROUND: NEITHER / NOR OR IN-BETWEEN?

It’s not supposed to matter... but damn you if you don’t decide for one or the other. Though nothing new on a global or historical scale¹, one has to remember that people with identities beyond male and female are still an extremely marginalized group. Claiming to be neither man nor woman, or to be both, is met with disbelief, ridicule and explanations of why this is impossible. Judith Butler states in one of her books that a bearable life is impossible unless one is legible within the system of sex and gender ruling society², yet people not giving in to these demands have always existed throughout the world. With the possibility of easily accessible global connections for a large number of people, there has been an increasing visibility and awareness of people who identify outside the gender and/or sex binary. Social media platforms like Instagram are a tool where some of these people keep a diary, publicly document their life with its highs and lows, and support each other through transition processes. But it also leaves them open to attacks from various directions by people who do not agree with their choices. People with non-binary genders, while statistically a small percentage, are nevertheless a sizeable portion of the population, but they remain at risk of victimization and stress due to discrimination.³ According to a recent report by RFSL (The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Rights and – recently added – Intersex Rights), non-binary people are also the group among trans variants that are doing worst in terms of

1 Richards et al., “Non-Binary or Genderqueer Genders”. 95

2 Butler, “Gender Trouble”, 320/321

3 Richards et al., “Non-Binary or Genderqueer Genders”. 95

well-being both psychologically and physically, likely as a result of this discrimination.⁴ I intend to study and create a deeper understanding of the experiences and actions of non-binary subjects at a time in which they are simultaneously gaining rights to recognition and are facing discrimination from various directions. I feel this is important because of several reasons: Conditions are changing on a global scale, with several countries considering adding a third legal gender. Social media is giving them new ways of expressing themselves both concerning their identity as well as political change, and I believe that documentation of this through research might contribute to transforming ideas about which ways of living count as valid in society with regards to sex and gender. Also, in connection with the ongoing debate concerning trans as a phenomenon within feminism, examining what the people in my study have to say is a chance to show views on the topic which rarely enter public visibility – even though trans activists have made themselves heard in the most recent debate in Sweden, it is still more common for binary transpeople to be able to take this kind of space, in comparison to those that for themselves reject the gender/sex binary entirely. It is a chance to hear more than the voices which are already dominating the debate.

2.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of my study is to investigate how non-binary people (including both non-binary transpeople and intersex people with a non-binary gender identity) present themselves in virtual spaces (in this case Instagram) with a special focus on how they construct their identity in gendered terms, and for this purpose I will be examining:

- How they construct themselves as subjects outside of the gender binary
- How they describe the resistance they experience

I chose to do this in the context of the recent public discussion around sex and gender in Sweden, where the opinions and views of feminists, LGBTQI-activists and others clash. A number of things uttered (both published and private) in this discussion caused strong reactions among the subjects of my study, resulting in them speaking out both about how they define their own identity, and about what they feel is under threat, considering what implications the opinions expressed in the discussion might have for their lives.

4 https://www.rfsl.se/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Trans_health_2017_RFSL.pdf

2.1.1 Disposition:

This thesis is structured as follows: First, I will give a general overview of the research field on non-binary identities and social media, followed by elaborating on which theoretical framework I am using to analyse my empirical material. The theory section is divided into the under-sections “Discourses, Subjectivity & Identities”, “Gender, Society & Rights” and ”Queer Negativity & Temporality”. The material and my methodological tools are explained in the chapter after this, as well as a short section on the “trans debate”. The analysis itself is structured based on two larger themes, “Building Blocks” and “Stumble Stones”, which are each divided into shorter sections. In the final chapter, conclusions and reflections, I aim to give an answer to my research questions.

3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH: A “NEW” FIELD

One of the first things noticeable is that most research directly concerning non-binary identities is within a US context. While much is written on the medical aspects of intersex bodies and issues concerning binary trans people, relatively little specifically focuses on non-binary gender identities on a higher academic level. However, there are a number of studies I felt were related enough to help me understand better what the people in my study describe experiencing, as well as two master theses (one of them also within a Swedish context). How Trans Care has been practised in the past as well as now is something the people in my study have to relate to if they want to make any legal or physical changes. The studies presented in this section provide a context for the experiences and descriptions of the medical support the people in my own study are receiving, and which difficulties they might face. The topic of Intersex is relevant due to my study including at least one person with an intersex background (the circumstances surrounding intersex states cause people to rarely be open about them) and illustrating how physical sex not a strict binary. Since my research focuses on Instagram, I need an understanding of how Social Media and LGBTQI-issues relate to each other, also considering that many of the people in my study are invested in online activism. The last section, Non-binary Identities, presents research directly about these. In the light of the previously mentioned scarcity of research done on them, the choice of them is self-evident.

3.1 Trans Care

To understand certain aspects of the daily life of the subjects of my study one needs to know how trans care has handled the phenomenon of non-binary gender identities. Dean Spade, in their paper “Mutilating Gender” (2000) describes trans care at the time as requiring one to have the wish

to be perceived as a cisgender⁵ in order to be read as a “real” transperson. As well as there being a growing sentiment among transpeople criticizing idealized gender dimorphism also in trans care⁶, being read as not-trans is not something the non-binary transpeople in my study strive for. But despite the trans diagnosis in Sweden having distanced itself from criteria closely adhering to the heterosexual matrix⁷, the ghost of having to prove yourself to be genuinely trans is still something they have to relate to. Spade also mentions the claim of trans-individuals to be a variant of intersex to gain access to treatment⁸, speculating that in the case that a transperson would ask for the *creation* of intersex genitals, both counsellors and surgeons would refuse this. Setting dichotomous standards, gatekeepers in trans care forbid these options from the very beginning. In a potential reality in which the success of transition is not equated with results matching the cis-ideal as closely as possible, there could be a multitude of outcomes in anatomy and gender-legibility, where someone’s self understanding is not measured by society’s understanding of gender.⁹ Spade argues for the determination and expression of sex and gender for individuals and groups without punishment or strict legal regulation.¹⁰

3.2 Intersex

“How Sexually Dimorphic Are We“, by *Blackless, Charuvastra, Derryck, Fausto-Sterling, Lauzanne and Lee* states that the idea of humans being absolutely sex dimorphic depending on sex chromosomes, gonadal glands, hormone levels, and the shape of the internal and external genitalia comes from a long-standing belief that for each binary sex there is a single correct composition and destination. Their conclusion is that the frequency of intersex births may be as high as 2% of live births, while the frequency of individuals receiving “corrective” genital surgery, however, probably runs between 1 and 2 per 1,000 live births (0.1–0.2%).”¹¹ In the past, arguments for the surgical alteration of intersex infants’ genitals has been that it would allow them to fit in, feel comfortable and normal. This has sometimes been done with the support of the parents, who do not want their child to suffer. However, the results are more often causing pain and suffering than alleviating it.¹² While many intersex people identify as entirely men or women¹³, some do not, which made this

5 Spade, “Mutilating Gender”, 322

6 Butler, “Undoing Gender”, 64/65

7 Spade, “Mutilating Gender”, 320/321

8 Ibid, 315/316

9 Ibid, 323/324

10 Ibid, 317

11 Blackless, et al, “How Sexually Dimorphic Are We”

12 Butler, “Undoing Gender”, 54

13 Richards et al, “Non-binary or genderqueer genders”, 95

relevant to my study. One goal of intersex activism nowadays is to raise awareness of how common intersex is, for people to maybe in the future not feeling forced into the male/female sex binary.¹⁴

3.3 Social Media

Concerning social media and activism on the net, there are Tobias Raun's "*Video blogging as a vehicle of transformation*" from 2014, which specifically looks into social media as a tool for support during transition processes, as a sort of mirroring tool, for trying out and assuming identities, and seeing one's experiences reflected in others.¹⁵ The people in his study used their video-logs to document their transition, as well as for artistic expressions.¹⁶ Even though Raun's study deals with binary transpeople's self representation through video-logs, there are enough similarities to make it useful to me using Instagram in providing a ground for documenting and getting feedback¹⁷. Michael Dahlberg-Grundberg, in "*Digital media and the transnationalization of protests*", admits to downsides such as possibly creating weaker social ties and only engaging in low risk activism¹⁸, as well as social media not being impartial, creating barriers that are hard to see on the user level¹⁹. However, he also writes that social media has made it easier for activists to spread their own materials quickly.²⁰ The globally sprawling quality of social networks on the internet creates a political culture based not on formal organisation, but rather on personal and decentralized links²¹, making the connection between people in these social media communities affective rather than based on fixed ideologies.²² Rather than "collective action", he calls this "connective action", which is less cohesive, but also more flexible and inclusive.²³ Even without a single physical place to connect, there is real solidarity and common consciousness among activists in online communities, and the community can become a kind of public square.²⁴

3.4 Non-binary Identities

"*Non-binary or genderqueer genders*" (2016) by Richards, Bouman, Seal, Barker, Nieder & T'Sjoen gives a definition of what is actually meant by "non-binary gender", and discusses how to help non-binary & genderqueer people who desire hormones and/or surgery from a

14 Intersex Scandinavia, <https://intersexscandinavia.wordpress.com/about/>

15 Raun, "Video blogging as a vehicle of transformation", 366

16 Ibid

17 Ibid, 371

18 Dahlberg-Grundberg, "Digital media and the transnationalization of protests", 10

19 Ibid, 11

20 Ibid, 9

21 Ibid, 15

22 Ibid, 21

23 Ibid, 20

24 Ibid, 22

medical/psychological perspective. According to the authors various types of these identities are increasingly being recognized in legal, medical and psychological systems and diagnostic classifications in line with the emerging presence and advocacy of these groups of people²⁵. Factor & Rothblum's study *Exploring gender identity and community among three groups of transgender individuals in the United States MTFs FTMs and genderqueers* from 2014, set out to illustrate the various ways its subjects experience and express their gender identities, describing "genderqueers" as outside the binary and by that putting them in the same demographic as the subjects of my study, finding that a previously isolating gender experience is starting to become intelligible among a larger number of people partly by putting words to the identity in various ways. However, this study is also heavily based on statistics, and while showing at what frequency people are comfortable with certain terms and pronouns it tells us near no personal details, which is something I am hoping to examine with my study.²⁶ There are two master theses on the topic of non-binary gender identities: Anna Pless' *Hitta rätt – En studie om icke-binära transpersoners identitetsskapande genom orden*, from 2015, which focuses on how non-binary transpeople relate to words and identity positions and found that words have a central place in the life and identity construction of the informants. As well as using a variety of terms to describe themselves, they also contrast these against others which they do not think describe them adequately; their choices are connected to both wanting to be understood by the general public and creating connections within their community – it is more than the terms' own meanings which are important for their choice.²⁷ The study shows that identity construction is a highly social process where constant consideration of identity terms in relation to one's surroundings is taking place.²⁸ Erin Patricia Savoia's *"Neither of the Boxes": Accounting for Non-Binary Gender Identities* from 2017 found that non-binary individuals are mostly expected to conform to normative performances of gender, but are also fighting these constrictions in small but meaningful ways, trying to live in a way that feels genuine and comfortable to them, whilst having to relate to society's expectations depending on what they are read as.²⁹ Often they can feel coerced to perform gender normatively in order to avoid conflict or unease in social interactions, but their constant labour of trying to have their choices of address respected may create small ruptures in the

25 Richards et al, "Non-binary or genderqueer genders", 95

26 Factor & Rothblum, "Exploring gender identity and community among three groups of transgender individuals in the United States", 236

27 Pless, "Hitta rätt", 69

28 Ibid

29 Savoia, "Neither of the Boxes", 87

gender structure.³⁰ This is especially interesting in connection with the incident which I will be discussing in the next chapter.

With my own intended focus being on identity production through self presentation online, what I found lacking were studies that were not either interview based or from a strictly medical perspective, as well as there being generally very little work done in a Swedish / Scandinavian context. Even though the studies I found are relevant and important, I believe my study can fill a gap in the field. Additionally there is the connection to the before-mentioned discussion concerning gender, sex and trans as a phenomenon within feminism, which while currently resurgent has caused divisions within the movement for a long time, but has not been covered from the viewpoint of subjects who see themselves as outside the gender binary.

4. THE “TRANS DEBATE”

The conflicts around this discussion flared up after I had started collecting my material. My intended focus was initially to concentrate on the way the people in my study constructed their online identities. However, considering mentions of it turned up in almost every account I was following I felt that I could not ignore the impact it had. The perception of transpeople’s existence being a threat to the goals of feminist and queer activism has a long history: Stryker gives several examples, such as a well-known gay activist at a conference in the 1970s claiming that all transpeople were psychopathic individuals mutilating their bodies and perpetuating oppressive gender stereotypes, wanting to infiltrate and destroy the gay and lesbian movement³¹ as well as some feminist ethicists considering transpeople as falling prey to a type of false consciousness, having failed to analyse gender oppression properly, and by transitioning perpetuating the system instead of helping to dismantle it.³² Similarly to Sojourner Truth’s question “Ain’t I a woman?”, the issue of whether trans women should be included in the fight for women’s rights has brought about heated discussions – questioning who can be counted into the category “woman”, trans as a phenomenon challenges its unifying possibilities.³³ Non-binary identities can be seen as complicating this additionally, which I will be looking into more deeply in my analysis. This conflict is going on to this day, occasionally becoming publicly visible. January 17th 2018, an article by a Swedish journalist, writer, and activist is published, about sex as the supposed biological foundation of

30 Savoia, “Neither of the Boxes”, 90/91

31 Stryker, “The Transgender Studies Reader”, 1/2

32 Ibid, 7/8

33 Ibid, 7

women's oppression, saying that gender identity should not be allowed override it³⁴. Various other prominent voices within both feminism³⁵ and trans activism³⁶, as well as a biologist³⁷ and two writers positioned to the political right³⁸ entered the discussion. Because of this playing out in at least nation-wide accessible sources, many other, less public people also had the chance to form an opinion and take a stand on the matter. The discussion quickly became rather polarized. While there was no 100% agreement on either side of it, it is not difficult to see that there are two main stances on the view on trans as a phenomenon, and which implications trans activists' goals are said to have for the feminist movement and society. I am presenting this overview of arguments averse and sympathetic to the cause of trans activism partly to give an idea of which arguments were made at all, but also which specific arguments it were the people in my study reacted to as a threat, as well as which they themselves are using. Roughly sorting the arguments into two opposing stances would result in this:

Averse	Sympathetic
Transpeople are upholding the idea of gendered attributes as "natural". ³⁹	Transpeople's do not uphold the idea of gendered attributes more than a society already does. ⁴⁰
People assigned male at birth claim to be trans/non-binary to invade women's spaces. ⁴¹	This does not happen in any numbers worth mentioning, and not on a structural level. ⁴²
Trans as a phenomenon only exists due to gender norms constricting people's identity. ⁴³	Transpeople would likely still exist even if society as a whole were to abolish gender norms. ⁴⁴
Transpeople need psychiatric help, not operations and/or hormones. ⁴⁵	Transitioning is the only known way to actually help transpeople today. ⁴⁶

34 Kajsa Ekman, *Könet i knoppen*, Aftonbladet, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/wE8VAP/konet-i-knoppen>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

35 Montelius, Martina, Jag betackar mig för ditt systemskap Ebba, Expressen, <https://www.expressen.se/kultur/jag-betackar-mig-for-ditt-systemskap-ebba/>, (accessed 16 June 2018) / Björk, Nina, Jag förstår inte vad transpersoner menar, Aftonbladet, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/a2Wm82/jag-forstar-inte-vad-transpersonerna-menar>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

36 Ramnehill, Maria, Ekis Ekman sprider skrämselpropaganda om transkvinnor, Göteborgsposten, <http://www.gp.se/kultur/kultur/ekis-ekman-sprider-skr%C3%A4mselpropaganda-om-transkvinnor-1.5066365>, (accessed 16 June 2018) / De Bourg, et al, Hotet är patriarkatet, inte transpersoner, Aftonbladet, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/e1a10Q/hotet-ar-patriarkatet-inte-transpersoner>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

37 Brändén, Henrik, Naturligt att vara född i fel kön, Aftonbladet, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/3j4kr9/naturligt-vara-fodd-i-fel-kon>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

38 Ingerö, Johan, Twitter, <https://twitter.com/JohanIngero/status/953697499293933568> / Arpi, Ivar, Kanske finns det inga kvinnor, Sveriges Dagblad, <https://www.svd.se/kanske-finns-det-inga-kvinnor>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

39 Kajsa Ekman, *Könet i knoppen*, Aftonbladet, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/wE8VAP/konet-i-knoppen>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

40 My material

41 Rosenberg, Tiina, Kajsa Ekis Ekman skuldbelägger transpersoner, Expressen, <https://www.expressen.se/kultur/ide/kajsa-ekis-ekman-skuldbelaggar-transpersoner/> (accessed 16 June 2018)

42 Ramnehill, Maria, Ekis Ekman sprider skrämselpropaganda om transkvinnor, Göteborgsposten, <http://www.gp.se/kultur/kultur/ekis-ekman-sprider-skr%C3%A4mselpropaganda-om-transkvinnor-1.5066365>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

43 Björk, Nina, Jag förstår inte vad transpersoner menar, Aftonbladet, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/a2Wm82/jag-forstar-inte-vad-transpersonerna-menar>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

44 My material

45 Kajsa Ekman, *Könet i knoppen*, Aftonbladet, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/wE8VAP/konet-i-knoppen>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

46 Brändén, Henrik, Naturligt att vara född i fel kön, Aftonbladet, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/3j4kr9/naturligt-vara-fodd-i-fel-kon>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

Children feeling they are trans result from adults imposing ideas on them and transitioning may destroy their future. ⁴⁷	Children identifying as trans should be taken seriously and addressed as they wish, it will reduce their distress. ⁴⁸
Gender identity is caused by gender norms. ⁴⁹	Gender identity is separate from gender norms. ⁵⁰
Gender dysphoria, is caused by socially constructed gender norms, and can be alleviated by raising awareness of this. ⁵¹	Gender dysphoria, no matter if to socially constructed or not, cannot be treated with therapy or the awareness of this. ⁵²
Women's oppression is so closely connected to "female reproductive biology" that including transwomen in the fight is disruptive to the cause. ⁵³	Women's oppression is based on feminine attributes being valued lower, so transwomen also experience women's oppression. ⁵⁴
A queer-/trans-ideology is aiming to forbid use of the word "woman" or "mother" when talking about pregnancy, menstruation and uteruses. ⁵⁵	There is no "trans ideology" or "trans agenda" and no one is trying to prohibit the use of female coded terms. ⁵⁶

5. THEORY: CREATING A QUEER GENDERED SELF

5.1 Discourses, Subjectivity & Identities

I am working with the epistemological assumption that identities are socially constructed rather than essentially contained in an individual, but that identity being constituted by context does not mean it is not real. Since I am trying to understand how the people in my study are constructing themselves as non-binary subjects I need to have theoretical tools concerning subjectivity in a social constructionist context, as well as specifically relating to gender & sex in connection with society. In line with feminist and post-structuralist theory, I understand subjects relationally rather than as autonomous mental islands, and defining themselves by creating a distance to attributes/individuals they understand themselves not to be like, as described in chapter 5 of Nick Mansfield's book *Subjectivity* where he describes views on subjectivity prominent within feminist theory⁵⁷.

47 Kajsa Ekman, *Könet i knoppen*, Aftonbladet, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/wE8VAP/konet-i-knoppen>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

48 Brändén, Henrik, Naturligt att vara född i fel kön, Aftonbladet, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/3j4kr9/naturligt-vara-fodd-i-fel-kon>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

49 Björk, Nina, Jag förstår inte vad transpersoner menar, Aftonbladet, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/a2Wm82/jag-forstar-inte-vad-transpersonerna-menar>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

50 My material

51 Björk, Nina, Jag förstår inte vad transpersoner menar, Aftonbladet, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/a2Wm82/jag-forstar-inte-vad-transpersonerna-menar>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

52 De Bourg, et al, Hotet är patriarkatet, inte transpersoner, Aftonbladet, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/e1al0Q/hotet-ar-patriarkatet-inte-transpersoner>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

53 Ensam Mamma Röker <http://ensammammaroker.wordpress.com>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

54 Montelius, Martina, Jag betackar mig för ditt systerskap Ebba, Expressen, <https://www.expressen.se/kultur/jag-betackar-mig-for-ditt-systerskap-ebba/>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

55 Witt Brattström, Ebba, Förneka inte kraften i systerskapet feminister, Expressen, <https://www.expressen.se/kultur/ide/forneka-inte-kraften-i-systerskapet-feminister/>, (accessed 16 June 2018) / Ensam Mamma Röker <http://ensammammaroker.wordpress.com>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

56 My material

57 Mansfield, "Subjectivity", 66

No matter if one, in accordance with Lacanian theory, considers the process of subject-formation as relatively alike for all humans, but still constructed through relations within the family, or like Foucault and those who have related to his theories in their own work, seeing the subject as a construct conditioned by culture and power relations which are diverse throughout history and geography, one can agree upon that there is no essential, autonomous subject outside relations to the surrounding structures of society. Based on this view, individual identities do not form without outside influence, they have to come from *somewhere*, and relate to *something*, to have meaning to oneself and others.⁵⁸ Thus, my position is that the subjects in my study create their identities and that their identities also are created by the discourse they are embedded in; by relating to their surroundings in specific ways, and by in turn being seen in specific ways, they come into being. As described by Winther-Jørgensen in “Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method”, there is no reality to be reached outside or behind discourses, they *are* our reality⁵⁹ – it follows that discourses being socially constructed does not entail that they have no material consequences.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, subjects are to be understood as ‘subject positions’ within a discursive structure. Discourses designate positions for people to occupy as subjects, being interpellated⁶⁰. Interpellation is defined as by way of language constructing a social position for the individual, making them a subject in the process,⁶¹ meaning it is traditionally understood in discourse theory as placing someone into a subject position from the outside.⁶² Furthermore, no one only has one identity or is limited to one single subject position. The subject is fragmented, occupying different subject positions within different discourses⁶³, even if these can be contradictory.⁶⁴ Often this does not have to be very noticeable for a person themselves, it is first when these positions are conflicting in the same situation, that it is tangible for an individual, not knowing which possible position to accept.⁶⁵ In connection with the mechanics of creating *yourself* within discourse psychology, my main method, I would argue that it is possible to cause yourself to be interpellated by others in the context of online profiles and the possibilities of deciding which terms one will be “called” by. In a short biography, as often used on social media websites, one uses terms that feel most relevant, and the ones which one would most want to be identified by. Someone

58 Mansfield, “Subjectivity” 52

59 Winther-Jørgensen, “Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method”, 21

60 Ibid, 41

61 Ibid, 15

62 Ibid

63 Ibid, 41

64 Ibid, 17

65 Ibid, 41

can be “red-haired”, “bisexual” and “a Star Trek fan”, but may only display some of these, signalling to the world what the writer primarily sees themselves as, and what the reader can identify them as. It is a way to choose into which context one wants to be seen. As Mansfield writes, again concerning Foucault, that if there is no authentic or natural self that one easily can find underneath the social, then people’s subjectivity should be a dynamic, creative process happening in every day life, trying to defy what is imposed upon them.⁶⁶

5.2 Gender, Society & Rights

When speaking of human society and gender, there is no clear dividing line between nature and culture. Judith Butler says that there is no “real” biological body that serves as a foundation for the system of gender which is embedded in society. We already understand everything through our cultural systems and can only guess at what could possibly exist outside of them. So, seen through the filter of what society calls gender, the sexed body is also a construction within the same system, and gender is neither directly following from a biological base nor is it an interpretation of one.⁶⁷ But regardless of what one’s view on the social construction of sex and/or gender is, or if the subjects of my study consider their identity as inherent or not, research on transpeople’s mental and physical health has shown that letting them transition and respecting their identity is more effective at securing a liveable life for them than any other type of treatment.⁶⁸ The brain and its contents are part of the body, from something not being inherent it does not follow that it is changeable at will.

But to understand the situations they encounter, I need a framework of how society tends to function. Subjectivity and gender are entangled, no matter which way one looks at it. Mansfield describes the effects of gender norms on social behaviour as a tyranny, regulating everything down to what one desire, what body one is creating through habits, as well as entering consciously into every interaction. Failure or refusal to perform gender in the right way is met with social isolation, mockery, violence, rape, and even death; we’re endlessly forced by our surroundings to “correctly” represent our gender.⁶⁹ Butler sees gender identity and sex as equally constructed, cis- as well as transpeople’s; all gender is performed. However, only some genders are considered real, based on the ontological view of only some body configurations being considered natural.⁷⁰ In her concept of the *Heterosexual Matrix* as the network that structures society, gender follows from sex, and desire

66 Mansfield, “Subjectivity”, 63

67 Butler, “Gender Trouble”, 90

68 Durwood et al, “Mental Health and Self-Worth in Socially Transitioned Transgender Youth”

69 Mansfield, “Subjectivity,” 77

70 Butler, “Undoing Gender”, 214

has to match perceived sex and gender, otherwise a person will not be understood as a coherent subject and punished for digressions. Sometimes they even get redefined as developmental failures or logical impossibilities. Sex, gender and desire cannot be separated in the heterosexual matrix, crossing the borders of one will upset how the other two are perceived.⁷¹

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler is discussing to what extent coherent gender secures a life as livable and which threat those who do not live up to these norms are under⁷². Non-binary transpeople, with a neither female nor male gender identity, fail to live up to the norms of binary gender (and also, if wanting to modify their bodies, sex). Intersex people, if understood as an anatomy literally between male and female, fail to live up to the idea of binary sex (and also, if they also identify as neither man nor woman, gender). Both upset the idea of sexuality defined by sex/gender: Non-binary and intersex people are seen as queer (when by queer strictly meaning queer sexuality) simply by existing. Regardless of their own definition, a position outside the binary makes calling someone hetero-, homo- or bisexual impossible, as long as these terms draw their definitions from the two legitimized sex/gender categories.

Butler writes that while we need norms in order to live and know a direction in society, we need to oppose them when they constrain us in ways which do us harm. Norms can both guide us to do justice, but also, as in the case of gender, coerce us into performing the roles of “real” men/women; if we fail to do this, they justify exclusion from being a valid subject of society and, in the worst case, violence.⁷³ There is a horror for using “it” as a personal pronoun, as if to deny gender were to deny personhood.⁷⁴ In the light of this, willingly choosing the in-between position may seem absurd, yet the subjects of my study do this. When, as Butler writes, the norm is both what threatens and guarantees your social survival, your relation to it can become a complex of both suffering and political self-realisation, linked to survival, whether your life is possible at all, if you are even considered existent within the category of human. This is yet different from being oppressed, since oppression requires you to already be a legible subject.⁷⁵ According to Butler trying to be outside the norm is creating a paradox. To be neither really masculine nor feminine still means one has to define oneself in relation to these terms.⁷⁶

71 Butler, “Gender trouble”, 23

72 Butler, “Undoing Gender”, 205

73 Ibid, 206

74 Mansfield, “Subjectivity”, 74

75 Butler, “Undoing Gender”, 218

76 Ibid, 42

She writes that there has been a tendency in gender studies to assume that the alternative to the gender binary would be more genders.⁷⁷ But is “non-binary” technically a gender in itself? Using of the word for a specific identity is relatively new, but has also quickly become common in certain spaces, while others use it as an umbrella term for everything that is not strictly within the category “man”/“woman”. When discussing which breaking of the norms is containing the promise of change of the norms, instead of reifying them by putting a name to what is outside of it⁷⁸, Butler writes about a potential world where people with mixed genital attributes could be accepted and loved without forcing them into the mould of the ideal dimorphism supposedly needed for human development which she, in the light of the variants which naturally anatomically occur, calls arbitrary and false.⁷⁹ Even though nowadays the support for operating on intersex infants or small children is decreasing, the perceived necessity of assigning a sex is still standing fast.

It would also be difficult to talk about the presentations of the people in my study without discussing minority- and human rights discourse. On the topic of sexual rights, including the rights of transgender and intersex people since sexuality can’t be entirely disconnected from gender/sex, Butler writes that the struggle for rights is not only about *attaching* rights to a person, but the right to considered a person at all. Personhood in the shape of for example a trans person has to first be established via social transformation, to be able to formally attach any rights to them. What it is to be a person is constantly under redefinition and renegotiation within international human rights.⁸⁰ As well as the right to an unharmed body, there is the right to self-definition, autonomy over one’s body, including the right to alter it. Butler considers it a paradox that the body, which she thinks transgender and intersex individuals should have autonomy over, also depends on its surroundings gendering it – making the wish to have one’s gender identity respected inseparable from the society one cannot avoid relating to.⁸¹

In the *Transgender Studies Reader* (2006), Susan Stryker describes the field as concerning anything that disrupts assumed connections between biologically specific gendered bodies and social positions a particular body is expected to occupy.⁸² Instead of just wanting to understand these assumed connections between sex and gender, biology and culture, transgender studies question who creates those connections and how they relate to those who “break” them. Stryker also states

77 Butler, “Undoing Gender”, 43

78 Ibid, 54

79 Ibid, 64/65

80 Ibid, 33/34

81 Ibid, 20/21

82 Stryker, “The Transgender Studies Reader”, 3

that feminism and queer studies, at whose intersection transgender studies emerged, could not quite make sense of the lived complexity of contemporary gender, a gap which transgender studies aims to fill. As well as asking why it is such a big concern that people experience their sex and gender in such different ways, there is a need to look into what possible political actions can be taken to counteract the violence and injustices that are inflicted on those who are considered gender non-normative or atypical.⁸³ In the context of this, transgender and intersex voices can be counted among subjugated knowledges,⁸⁴ making the online presence of the people in my study interesting to investigate in the hope of having a positive influence on how they are treated in the future.

5.3 Queer Negativity & Temporality

Wanting to understand how queer identities relate to society, one can turn to Jack Halberstam's work, among other things exploring why some genderqueer people are willing to hold onto their gender identity and expression when this is risking their livelihoods and sometimes lives.⁸⁵ He also discusses the way in which trans care had to conform to certain stylistic criteria.⁸⁶ His book *In a Queer Time and Place* is presenting the idea that queer subcultures are living a different kind of temporality, which stands at a distance to the schedule that someone's life should be structured after according to society: Birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.⁸⁷ This is relevant to my study insofar that both intersex and trans people have in the past been subjected to measures taking away their reproductive ability, a choice made by their surroundings, not themselves, as well as the idea of (gender)queer people never really growing up by not adhering to this schedule. Since 2014 sterilization is not a requirement for legally transitioning in Sweden, and far from everyone seeing themselves as outside the gender binary *decides* to not have children.

Lee Edelman is working with the idea that society is oriented after a futuristic paradigm, where the figure of a symbolic, innocent "Child" represents the continuation of society and that which reads as queer sexuality, due to not by default resulting in reproduction, subverts this paradigm⁸⁸: The queerer it gets, the more of a threat to society it is perceived as. Considering the focus on "female reproduction" in some arguments made in the "trans debate", I believe there is a possible connection to be explored here. According to Edelman, that which is "queer" is unknowable to and also needed in society, but always ends up being absorbed into the knowable, as

83 Stryker, "The Transgender Studies Reader", 3

84 Ibid, 9

85 Halberstam, "In a Queer Time and Place", 10

86 Halberstam, "Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum", 298

87 Halberstam, "In a Queer Time and Place", 2

88 Edelman, "No Future", 13

for example the growing marriage and family orientation of gay and lesbian couples signalling “we are just like you”.⁸⁹ It seems that ultimately one cannot escape this framework, for working towards being included in spite of something one is also stops it from being subversive.⁹⁰ Then the question is if the goal the people in my study have is at all to subvert.

With these theoretical tools I believe it is possible to make sense of the self-presentations which make up my empirical material, which I will describe in detail in the next chapter.

6. METHOD & MATERIAL: DISCOURSE ON INSTAGRAM

6.1 Collection of material

The starting point for my study was an interest in the self presentation of non-binary people on social media. The reason I chose Instagram for the creation of my empirical material was that this social media platform is, as opposed to for example Facebook, largely open to the public (although it is possible to have private accounts), as well as being specifically meant for the creation of spontaneous updates. It is possible to quickly and easily take and upload a picture with a short text via the mobile application.

Despite planning to not interact, I created a new user account displaying my legal name + researcher for the case of needing to contact any of the accounts I was watching, as well as this being a way to make my presence visible, along with the profile:

Kai Reichwaldt Researcher – Konto i forskningsyfte pga Masteruppsats i Genusvetenskap. Allt jag ser härifrån kommer att anonymiseras ifall jag använder det. Inga foton kopieras.⁹¹

Due to the Internet’s sprawling nature, I needed to limit the amount of collected material. The original restrictions I decided for my empirical material in advance were:

- The social media platform Instagram
- People within Sweden
- At most two years backlog of each given account

A few accounts I knew from before. During two weeks I looked for entries and more accounts, tagged with the following terms, on the Instagram website and the search engine “Google”:

icke-binär, non-binary, ickebinär, nonbinary, ickebinärasverige, icke-binärasverige, ickebinärasweden, ickebinärasweden, non-binärasverige, nonbinarysverige, non-binarysweden, nonbinarysweden, non-binarytrans,

89 Edelman, “No Future”, 13/14

90 Edelman, “Ever after: History, Negativity, and the Social”

91 Research account for working on my Masters Thesis. Everything I see from here will be anonymized in the case I use it. No photos will be copied. Profiles are limited to 150 characters, and have to be brief because of this.

nonbinarytrans, icke-binärtrans, ickebinärtrans, trans, transsweden, transsverige, transsexuell, transsexuella, transaktivism, intersex, intersexuell, intersexsverige, intersexsweden, intersexuellsverige, intersexuellsverige, intersexuellasverige, intersexuellasweden, intersexaktivism, syskonskapet

Through this, I found more accounts fitting into the demographic of my study, while already starting to analyse the material gathered. Noticing commonly used ways of communicating specific things, I started focusing on which visual and textual clues were connected to communicating their identity and in which ways this clashed with their surroundings.

Instagram accounts contain many fragments of daily life, of which not all are directly relevant to the phenomenon I am studying. Due to my aim, but also limited time, I did not analyse the construction of any particular person's whole identity, instead focusing on the parts I found relevant. I cut some accounts from my material which did not contain any useful data for my purpose, partly because of my shift of focus due to the "trans debate", but also if there was too little to analyse or if they closed the account during the time of collection. Based on the limitations I had set for my material, I have been watching ten accounts matching the requirements.

6.2 Accounts

This is a short presentation of the accounts. Even though not going into detail about the bodily configurations of the people in my study in these presentations, some things are unavoidably possible to figure out in the analysis via mentions of surgery, hormones or similar; in the places where they become specifically relevant they are mentioned directly.

Alexis: Very engaged in LGBTQI- as well as other minority rights activism, giving lectures at conferences and schools. Pronouns not disclosed.

Cay: Self described as "alternative / video, audio, photo – hobby-artist with interest in social change for better". *She*.

Devon: Artist. "Gender Not Otherwise Specified™ art account". Many self-portraits. *He or they*.

Kelly: Artist. Often writes inspirational texts for other (non-binary) transpeople. Many self-portraits, as well as transition updates. Pronouns not disclosed.

Leo: Very focused on body activism, both concerning trans issues and concerning body norms and ideals in general. Many self-portraits. *They*.

Mika: "The only solution is revolution". Very engaged in both online and "real life" LGBTQI- and antiracist activism. Currently pregnant. *He or they*.

Sasha: Describes their account as a transition-documentation. "Transmasculine non-binary person in Sweden". Pronouns not disclosed.

Terry: Self-described feminist and transhumanist. “Postgender”, “fluid gender identity”. Prefers *they* as a pronoun, can accept *she* but not *he*.

Tony: Likes costuming, and takes part in acts of performance art. Many artistic self-portraits. “Gentlehen”. *They* or *he*.

Vanja: Self described “queer trans fuck from Sweden”. Engaged in LGBTQI activism as well as activism concerning ill mental health. *She* or *they*.

I will be referring to a given person by the pronoun(s) they ask for. While it, in a real life scenario, is not usual to use for example he/they as a combination when talking about someone, I am going to do so here for the people who state that both can be used, mainly to make it somewhat easier to distinguish between different people within the text. This proved to be one of the downsides of writing in English: While “hen” in Swedish works well as a neutral personal pronoun, using “they” at almost every instance for the people in my study quickly became confusing in connection with also having to use “they” when describing a group of people in the same sentence/paragraph.

6.3 Framework of analysis

According to Winther-Jørgensen Discourse Theory is the concept of language being structured according to different patterns that people’s utterances follow in different parts of life, with Discourse Analysis being the analysis of these patterns.⁹² Due to my thesis dealing with identity construction within a specific relational social context, I decided to make use of discursive psychology, described as the analysis of how people use discursive resources rhetorically in social interaction⁹³ or as Wetherell & Taylor explain, examining what people *do* with what they say, instead of trying to guess at what is happening in their minds⁹⁴ since descriptions also are versions of reality constructed by the speakers in particular rhetorical contexts⁹⁵. Discursive psychology rejects discourses as abstract phenomena, in favour of considering them situated practices⁹⁶, giving more agency to people than assuming that subjects are entirely determined by discourse(s). As recommended by Winther-Jørgensen, I include elements of traditional discourse theory of Laclau & Mouffe’s, to avoid assuming all too much agency in people’s choice of discourse, like some who use discursive psychology do.⁹⁷ I wanted to stay aware of how it is a choice how these people place themselves through text and image, but it is also limited by what is available to them discursively. Both types of discourse analysis reject the understanding of the social being governed by one single

92 Winther-Jørgensen, “Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method”, 1

93 Ibid, 144/145

94 Wetherell et al, “Discourse as Data”, 153

95 Ibid, 154

96 Winther-Jørgensen, “Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method”, 103/104

97 Ibid, 141

ideology, in favour of the view that discourses compete.⁹⁸ Within discourse analysis, certain terms defining a subject position are privileged and called “nodal points”, which are not by themselves filled with meaning, but get it through other terms. These are linked together in what Laclau and Mouffe call chains of equivalence (describing how the subject *is*), and distinguish themselves from terms in chains of opposition (describing how the subject is *not*).⁹⁹ The nodal points which are most important in my analysis are “gender”, “gender identity” and “feminism”, and the analysis is partially structured based on them. I will analyse the empirical material focusing most on:

- the points where there is an open struggle between different representations; and
- any understandings naturalised in all of the discourses as common-sense.¹⁰⁰

Although having decided against a semiotic interpretation on all levels of the visual part of my material, I take help from Gillian Rose’s approach to the discourse analysis of images presented in “Visual Methodologies”, integrating the analysis of text and image. My analysis of the visual parts is not as deep due to this, but I also quickly noticed that while the picture of an update the subjects of my study made might indeed be a quick snap-shot or a pre-existing image being spread, the text parts of updates were often long and well thought-through, on many occasions images being mostly used to catch attention or as a place-holder (it is not possible to make text-only updates on Instagram). Rose writes that one can think of imagery as part of discourse, showing specific things in a particular way and hiding others.¹⁰¹ I began with sorting my empirical material by similarities and key themes. As nodal points and chains of equivalence became apparent, I examined the relation between visuals and texts¹⁰². I chose the so-called “Trans Debate” as a context to be able to conclude something meaningful about the utterances of the people in my study, considering that, as Winther-Jørgensen writes, a single study can only capture a limited number of things said within a certain discourse, it is therefore necessary to have a background to set them in relation to.¹⁰³

6.4 Research Ethics / Reflexivity:

With just ten people in total, anything I conclude is a small window on what there is to see. Noting that many of them have characteristics in common other than their gender identity does not mean it reflects the distribution of these traits generally among non-binary individuals; what it *may* indicate is which kind of non-binary person will have an Instagram account stating their gender in

98 Winther-Jørgensen, “Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method”, 16/17

99 Ibid, 42/43

100 Ibid, 144/145

101 Rose, “Visual Methodologies”, 191

102 Ibid, 210

103 Winther-Jørgensen, “Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method”, 140

some way. I am aware of that some people are given more space in the analysis than others. I have chosen examples and quotations based on what seemed most representative, and even though some are less often mentioned by name they are still included in how I reached my conclusions.

Most of the accounts included were public, in two cases I was granted access to them with my research account after applying. After finished material collection, I cancelled all subscriptions from accounts, to make it impossible to trace them back. Observing without interaction comes with both advantages and risks. I am less likely to influence things said in the same way as I would as an interviewer, but the risk of misinterpreting the things I am observing is higher. Asking any of the observed individuals what they mean by what they are displaying is not an option. I also decided not to include example images; their texts can be anonymized to a relatively high degree, their faces and bodies cannot. The choice to write in English was partly inspired by a few of them occasionally writing in English, but mostly to make it accessible to a broader public. Certainly translation adds yet another filter, but not citing in original language also provides additional anonymity; English quotations have been changed slightly for the same purpose.

In addition to the established impossibility of being an entirely impartial observer, I am also part of very similar social circles to the ones that the people in my study move in, increasing the likelihood of both insight and bias. My epistemological assumption is that everyone's way of understanding the world, including my own, is historically and socially specific and contingent¹⁰⁴, I do not stand outside of context. The following analysis is produced by me, as a subject situated close to that which I study.

7. ANALYSIS: TEN NON-BINARY IDENTITIES

7.1 Building Blocks

What I set out to do was to examine the ways in which the people in my study are creating their identities as non-binary subjects. In this first part of the analysis I am going to describe a number of ways this is happening, starting with their self-labelling in text, moving on to the more intricate parts of their presentation as a whole, and finishing with a section concerning the activism they involve themselves in. My focus in this part is on the nodal points **gender** and **gender identity**.

104 Winther-Jørgensen, "Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method", 100

7.1.1 Putting a name to it

The subjects of my study are using a large range of descriptive terms for their gender identity when tagging their posts, such as:

#nonbinary, #trans, #genderfluid, #ickebinär, #nonbinarytrans, #bigender, #genderqueer, #genderfuck, #genderfluid, #gendernonconforming, #transperson, #transgender, #queer,

Less common ones are:

#intersex, #intergender, #ambigender, #androgyn.

Within the discourse they exist in and are using the nodal point “gender” is being filled with meaning through a variety of terms additional to “male” and “female”. All accounts either use the terms “icke-binär/non-binary”, “genderqueer”, “queer”, or the word “trans” / the trans-symbol in their short presentations, often combined with a gender neutral pronoun, and sometimes also one gendered pronoun, such as “he/they/them”. Complete examples are: “Another intersex (XXY) ☿ and queer” (Alexis), “Gender Not Otherwise Specified™” (Devon), “queer non binary transdude” (Tony), as well as “A queer trans fuck from Sweden. [...] Pronouns is she or they/that (hon eller den.) ☿” (Vanja).

The language available to them, like everything social, is influenced by gender, and since most if not all of gendered language is adhering to a binary frame, it becomes very difficult to express something outside of it. Similar to Pless’ conclusion that even though some of the subjects of her study dream of a wordless world without categories, society right now has a need to call them *something*.¹⁰⁵ The terms and symbols the people in my study use are not necessarily all interchangeable, but they serve to cover more or less what people could search for, not only for people who are already familiar with them, but also for people who have heard one term and search out of curiosity. Searching for example for the term “non-binary” becomes an interpellation by others, caused by the subjects of my study themselves: the searcher finds pictures and text connected to the term, and sees a person who at that moment becomes the non-binary subject – in the ideal situation for the person found. Another outcome is that the searcher will refuse to read the subject as they want to be read, due to a critical stance against the terms. Regardless of this, the term has been connected to the person. Halberstam writes that at the time of writing his book, many young gay and lesbian people had started to consider the act of labelling themselves a type of oppression that also needed to be cast off, to move on into infinite diversity, even though the unwanted identity categories represented the fight of earlier activism.¹⁰⁶ The people in my study do

105 Pless, ”Hitta rätt”, 69

106 Halberstam, ”In a Queer Time and Place”, 19

show a need to label themselves; non-binary identities being accepted to a much lesser degree than for example homosexuality has started to be in many parts of the world, they still have the need to hold onto those identities to be able to fight for their rights. They are using these identity terms to *take* the subject position: Non-binary. Tags are a relatively easy way to position oneself, choosing the combination of words most likely to be “read right” at least in one’s own community, but also possibly making them known to a larger public. Some are introducing themselves somewhat ironically “en-till-sån-där-jävla-ickebinär”¹⁰⁷ or jokingly: “Intersex describes a person born with sex traits that are too cute to be binary”. The joking tones, use of irony and/or sarcasm, as well as the attitude brought across by phrasings like “queer trans fuck” are both showing an awareness of that their identity is being mocked by some, but also in a way removing the option of mockery in advance. Having made this joke about yourself takes the edge of someone else doing it – or it is at least creating the image of being someone “tough enough” to take it. It also implies a light-hearted approach to giving a name to their identities, which is not matching up with the severity of upset when their requests for being referred to by specific terms or pronouns are not met.

The frequency of requesting gender neutral pronouns to be used shows their importance for the creation of non-binary subjectivity for the people in my study. Savoia writes in her study that since gender neutral pronouns are not commonly used within hegemonic discourse, relationships need to be formed first before it becomes possible for someone to have their wish for them respected.¹⁰⁸ Likely due to the depersonalizing effect of using “it” as a personal pronoun¹⁰⁹, none of the people I observed consider its use, but rather other gender neutral pronouns. Tony writes:

“my pronouns are THEY & HE [...] please vary between them, i still feel awkward in he/him if it happens too often. which is okay, too. it has to be”.

In connection with a picture of text from a letter to Leo as a patient they write:

“I had never met the nurse before, and understood very quickly that they had imagined a man. They looked at me confusedly when seeing that there was no one else in the waiting room and then asked if I was Leo. In the plan for medication I had also been described as “he”. I never dared to correct this, which is annoying now afterwards. Sure, it feels better being called “he”, but it’s still wrong. It chafes. It hurts.”

Leo describes the reaction to being misgendered in physical terms like “chafes” and “hurts”, stressing the extent to which they/he considers it wrong. Similarly to the identity terms used, stating your preferred pronouns also serves as a way of causing people to interpellate you as you want. In

107 Yet another of those damn non-binary people

108 Savoia, “Neither of the Boxes”, 88/89

109 Mansfield, “Subjectivity”, 74

this sense, being addressed properly makes the subjects of my study not only more comfortable, but also literally has the promise of making them who/what they want to be. However, while being called a gender neutral pronoun has at least potentially placed them into neither the subject position “man” nor “woman”, it also risks putting them in the subject position “weirdo”, due to illegibility, depending on how the onlookers fill ”gender” with meaning.

7.1.2 Presenting an image

Sasha, in connection with a screen capture of a video by another transperson, writes about recently trying to look more masculine and having dismissed simple make-up and androgynous clothes in order to “pass”. The question is: How do you pass as non-binary, when there is no such recognizable position in society? Transition updates are a part of the studied accounts to different extents. Examples for tags used for with these are *#proud*, *#powerful*, *#transisbeautiful*, often in combination with identity terms, which can be interpreted as a way of showing it is possible to transition as a non-binary person nowadays. Results of hormonal or surgical changes are displayed in pictures, scars often getting a particular focus. One example is Sasha showing their naked chest with taped scars, the lower half of their face visible, making the victory sign: the flat chest, including scars, is displayed as an accomplishment. Devon also quite often displays their/his scars purposefully, almost always in combination of a gesture of defiance such as showing the camera the middle finger, or in combination with something strongly feminine-coded. Some choose to show themselves partly or entirely naked, regardless of how close their bodies are to beauty ideals; there seems to be a certain pride in showing bodies that could be perceived as flawed, wrong or simply unusual – the term “battle scars” is used as a description. Thinking of J. Halberstam’s concept of there being a specific “transgender look”, which among other things also includes a focus on scars¹¹⁰, I was wondering if there was such a thing as a “non-binary look”. Tobias Raun found that many of the subjects in his study used video-logs to make updates on their transitions, tracking and archiving physical changes and states of mind, as well as “checking in” with followers¹¹¹. The people in my study upload a lot of self portraits, which can be interpreted as similar to the mirroring function described in Raun’s study, as a way to keep track of your appearance and having control over what you are signalling to the public as the face of a non-binary subject. In style they range from vaguely alternative to decidedly subcultural with dyed hair and varying amounts of piercings,

110 Halberstam, “In a queer time and place”, 117/118/119

111 Raun, “Video blogging as a vehicle of transformation”, 368

some making use of androgynous styles associated with for example David Bowie in the 1970s/1980s. While still using words like "masculine" and "feminine" in their descriptions, when it comes to style, they often make use of distorting and distancing themselves from normative conceptions of gender. In the way that Savoia describes in *Neither of the Boxes*¹¹², trying to create an appearance which is different enough to not be easily counted into the masculine or the feminine. Just like words, the meanings of stylistic signs are open to change. It is certainly common to have specific haircuts, body modifications and jewellery among the people in my study, yet none of them can be described as "khaki-clad frat boy clones", like how Halberstam describes the typical transmasculine style at a particular time¹¹³. I would argue that many of them are using similar styles to those which at the time of Halberstam writing *Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum*, were discouraged for transmasculine people, being signs meaning "gender deviant" and putting them at risk of being read as "butch lesbians" as opposed to just "men".

They have to use the gender markers available since there are no other distinct gender markers to relate to in hegemonic discourse, even if it is in terms of trying to balance between them, like Kelly does when writing about their chest surgery, emphasizing two contrasting elements:

"In about six months the final result will be visible. I am worshipping myself with femininity."

This is one example of where, as Butler writes, the norm is both what what you need to use and what threatens your social survival¹¹⁴. Trying to be outside the norm is creating a paradox, and even when identifying as neither masculine nor feminine one still has to define oneself in relation to these norms.¹¹⁵ It is hard to find a way to present as neither masculine nor feminine (or both) by way of attributes, due to one usually being created via exclusion of the other, also since one's body influences people's perception. The people in my study articulate feelings of being restricted by exclusively female/male norms, but also need to use them to achieve any legibility of their gender, as well as trying to have it established as reality within the discourses of society. But by presenting in unconventional ways they also risk negative reactions from their surroundings. Terry, self-describing as "non-binary feminist" and a "future android/cyborg, transhumanist", dreams to:

"one day be entirely artificial, get exactly the body I want, free from the whims of nature, free from ideas about the "essence" of what people thought I was, free from letting people have power over me only because of what they thought I was born as."

112 Savoia, "Neither of the Boxes", 87/88

113 Halberstam, "Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum", 298

114 Butler, "Undoing Gender", 218

115 Ibid, 42

This evokes thoughts of Haraway's theories¹¹⁶, as well as other texts that have taken these further, but in its second part is also very descriptive of the longing for not having to relate to people's associations between perceived anatomy and gender. The question is how much of a connection the people in my study themselves make. There are statements from some of them that what one looks like is not at all relevant for being a non-binary subject. On several occasions, they write reassurances meant for their followers, like Kelly on Transgender Day of Visibility:

“To you who reads, you who isn't yet daring to show yourself, or want to start living your truth: Don't forget, YOU ARE TRANS ENOUGH. You don't need to do anything to prove you are trans. You don't have to change your body or your name. You are enough. And if you still want to change yourself physically to feel better this is always as genuine.”

Leo, in a picture wearing only a trans-flag writes:

“My body is not a woman's body. My breasts are not women's breasts. The whole of my body. The whole of my soul. The whole of me. is non-binary. [...] But it's also okay to not look like them. We are as much trans. We are as much non-binary. We are as much trans despite our bodies not being thin or our chests flat. We are as much trans despite dressing "feminine" or wearing make-up. We are as much trans despite not having white bodies or norm-bodies. Don't forget our fight. [...] We who are never going to have a flat chest or the genitals we want to have. We who want to change our bodies, but are not allowed to because of not being thin. [...] We who don't want to change our bodies. We also exist. We are as much trans as you. Don't forget us.”

This is putting more distance between outer appearance and gender identity: No matter what you look like, this *is* what a non-binary subject looks like, because you are what you say you are – also as a performative action. Considering it is a common fear to not be “trans enough” as a non-binary person, as shown in Sasha's expression of worrying about not getting a diagnosis due to not fitting the typical image of a trans person, and in connection with Dean Spade's experiences¹¹⁷ this is not uncalled for. While the rules for the treatment of non-binary people in trans care have changed, for a long time the meaning of “trans” in medical discourse has excluded non-binary genders due to a rigid enforcement of binary gender alignment, as Spade describes¹¹⁸, and it is not strange that this still lingers in the minds of transpeople today. The people in my study do not have the goal of being one day read as “non-trans”, they have separated themselves from having to live up to the earlier standards of trans care. This is a way of signalling to others: “Since you *are* trans, whichever traits you have also belong to that”.

116 Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto”, 66/67

117 Spade, “Mutilating Gender (Transsexual Studies Reader)”, 322

118 Ibid, 329

But how do they actually define gender identity? I am not expecting there to be a completely consistent definition throughout the material, since I am looking at individual people, but making them label themselves with such a term as “non-binary” nevertheless means that there is common idea of what gender identity is among them. In one update Tony addresses someone:

“To the guy who didn’t want to snog me when I was 16 & newly in love with festivals, because he was gay but then changed his mind and thought it was a pity because “girls are so good at snogging” [...] How. Do. You. Gender. Lips.”

together with a close-up of Tony’s lips, septum piercing and two fingers with red nail polish showing. Alexis writes, in the style of other “educational” updates they make:

“GENITALS. There are not only two types of bodies. There are not only two types of breasts, genitals or gonads. There are more than two bodies and more than two sexes. Bodily variations are natural. It’s the idea of binary sexes that is a construction.“

This gives the impression that many of the people in my study see gender identity as something separate from a socially formed gender norm as well as anatomical sex. That does not mean they see it as something inherent or essential, but what they believe constitutes it is not always clear. As Anne Fausto-Sterling et al. write, the idea that for each binary sex there is a single correct composition and destination is not accurate, so Tony’s questioning of how lips can be gendered/sexed is valid. Neither the anatomy of the lips, nor the kissing behaviour of a person technically needs to be connected to gender or sex, yet this is often automatically assumed to be so. However, Tony also posts a picture of (implied?) menstrual blood applied as nail polish, writing about remembering their/his first period, at the time being excited because of “ironically” having longed for it, since it meant becoming “A Real Woman”. They/he describe how the next time they/he was in pain, crying and cursing, and that it was at this point they/he understand that they/he was not a woman. In Tony’s description of reality, the reason for such strong anxiety over bleeding becomes proof of their/his identity being true, making a connection between anatomy and their/his gender. The desire to physically transition at all is pointing to there at least on some level being a connection. Devon shows comparison pictures after their/his mastectomy, writing about years of pain and discomfort before, and a feeling of freedom after. This description in strongly negative terms before and very positive ones afterwards, even in the face of complications, are a recurring theme: Sasha describes their nipples turning black and being worried about the healing process, yet being “super-happy about having a flat chest”. This is signalling that even while things that might be

considered disturbing are happening it is still worth it. Devon also mentions another aspect of this new body configuration, which may be more specific to a non-binary trans experience:

“And even though my body now feels more natural and comfortable to me there has been a shift and when I move around in public I sometimes feel marked, like my body has become unnatural in another way. Sometimes I enjoy and relish in my unnatural body but sometimes it scares me, when I just want to move under the radar.”

Contrasting how their body feels “natural” to them, while possibly becoming “unnatural” in the eyes of others, they are signalling that while what they did was right for them, they know about their body not matching the clear cut idea of sex which the heterosexual matrix dictates¹¹⁹ and the dangers that come with this. Alexis often shows a striking awareness of what is and is not accepted as a position in society, mentioning possibly not really ever having accepted themselves as intersex, due to, in their own words, society’s “normpolicing and dyadic gaze and freakification of intersex bodies”. Assigned male at birth and failing to live up to expectations of being a man, they say finding out about being intersex was liberating, but that there was no available way to live in as an intersex person, since this isn’t a position that society acknowledges. Therefore they started identifying as trans instead, in a way being both trans and not, and there now also being expectations of living up to femininity instead. Another factor is that a lot of intersex people are incapable of reproducing biologically, which also can be discussed in the light of Edelman’s concept of reproductive futurity¹²⁰. As long as they claim a position as an “almost normal” woman/man, they uphold the notion of being a member of society who at least potentially can contribute to what the futurist paradigm demands, but claiming an intersex identity means acknowledging a position which threatens it. However, Alexis’ way out of this pressure to “decide” is to redouble their efforts of claiming exactly this position, saying they should maybe just stop trying to live up to any expectations of sex and gender presentation and live up to being intersex, in combination with an image of the intersex flag with the words "I refuse to hate myself" written across it.

7.1.3 Activism

Regarding the question of gaining rights, it is important to note that many of the subjects of my study are engaging in activism. One frequently used sign of (political) belonging are trans & intersex symbols and flags, which already have their meaning within LGBTQI-rights discourse. The trans symbol shows up as a tattoo, pendant and also as an ASCII symbol in text, there are pictures

119 Butler, "Gender Trouble"

120 Edelman, "No Future", 15

of people having flags on the wall, wrapping themselves in them or holding them up. Pride-pictures can be found on almost all accounts, as well as updates about being at demonstrations and protests, activist- and support groups or holding lectures in schools, but also things that are online specific. One example of this is Cay uploading a picture originally published on another account: People lying on asphalt with chalk outlines, the front-most one with one hand on a sign saying “#trans lives matter” most likely taken at a protest. Another is Vanja repeating another user’s message:

“Damned if you forget where it came from. You are wonderful. Find other queers and survive. Find activism and direct your rage back where it belongs. God damnit.”

This can be interpreted as a memetic repetition of other’s utterances, positioning oneself in a group fighting for the same goals. As Dahlberg-Grundberg describes, online movements are often not so much following a collectively formulated ideal as a range of personal convictions¹²¹, but the people in them still need a collective identity, which is among other things established by the personalized sharing of similar content.¹²² They are also influencing each other: If the reason to repeat another’s words is “I would say the same thing”, one can’t be sure if that thought came before or after seeing the text in question; opinions are also formed by reading the things other people in one’s social group are expressing. Mika writes that their/his existence in itself becomes political activism, that everything they/he does is a statement, giving as an example wearing a t-shirt with the text “This is what an awesome Dad looks like” over their noticeably pregnant stomach. And with gender ambiguity still being an upsetting factor in a heteronormative society, there is both an active and an involuntary part to the activist position the people in my study are inhabiting. At the same time it is not certain that people would react to the sight of Mika at all were it not for this contrast. Butler states that that which makes society question what is real in terms of gender, is also what can make people understand that the norms governing reality *can* be questioned, especially when involving bodies¹²³, and Mika’s deliberate showing of contrast may contribute to this.

Referring to people within their community as “trans/non-binary sibling” is a recurring element. Examples of use are an image displaying the text “Your transphobia isn’t feminism” tagged with “syskonskap”, as well as Tony writing:

“[...] I am also refusing to watch when I and my non-binary siblings are being reduced and derided again and again.”

121 Dahlberg-Grundberg, “Digital media and the transnationalization of protests”, 14

122 Ibid, 20

123 Butler, “Undoing Gender”, 217

The first place the term “siblinghood” caught my attention was a picture of Alexis wearing a t-shirt with the print “Syskonskap” (Siblinghood), the O replaced by a ♀-sign. I am interpreting this as a modification of (radical) feminism’s use of the word “(universal) sisterhood”, making use of an existing discourse to make it’s meaning understandable. It is also connecting the fight of trans- and intersex-rights to women’s rights, giving the idea that trans-oppression has its origin in the same reasons as women’s oppression, making it inclusive to other people oppressed within patriarchy. So, the Venus sign is here not necessarily standing for “women only”, but an inclusive feminism. The discourse of the circles they move in also defines what the rights they are struggling to gain entail. Several times they express that they consider it an obviously basic right to define their own being and their experiences, on one level with the right to be physically unharmed – unquestionably self-evident. This is interesting in connection with the subjectivity as something relational. Given the conflicts that can emerge around requests to have one’s gender identity respected and the consequences of not being seen as who you see yourself as, one never really has completely free will to decide who one is. According to Factor & Rothblum, contemporary transgender identities and communities are based on self-identity¹²⁴, matching Spade’s observation of other trans people believing what they say about their gender, sharing with them what their counsellors did not: a commitment to gender self-determination and respect for all expressions of it.¹²⁵

While many of their activities online could be interpreted as what Dahlberg-Grundberg describes as “low-risk activism”, what exactly they are trying to achieve also matters. Their activism is a lot about supporting each other, not only among personal friends. It may not directly create political change, but it is a tool for globally connecting to people with similar experiences, creating a support for other members of their community, raising each other’s quality of life.

7.2 Stumble Stones

In this second part of the analysis, I will first describe ways their identity is contested in general, and then move on to go more into detail about what influence the “trans debate” had on their online presence. While many instances of meeting resistance they describe is more focused around the nodal point **gender**, the incident is complicating things with contested meanings of the nodal point **feminism**, entangled also with the meaning of gender in different feminisms.

124 Factor & Rothblum, “Exploring gender identity and community among three groups of transgender individuals in the United States”, 236

125 Spade, “Mutilating Gender”, 325

7.2.1 Contestation of their gender

Updates displaying negative reactions from surroundings are common for the people in my study, but few of these negative experiences are of an openly hostile nature. Direct attacks on the watched accounts are rare, although I can't be sure of their frequency, hurtful comments might be removed before I can see them. While reports of being made invisible or poorly understood or more common than being openly attacked or ridiculed, it does happen. Cay receives and posts a message:

“Hey there, you really need some style advice. You look like you dress yourself as if you were born with an extra chromosome. I don't have to myself be able to assemble styles to see that yours are horrible. “Androgynous uniqueness”, I don't think you know what androgyny is.”

This is suggesting her either being a variant of intersex, or more likely having Down's Syndrome. She receives many supportive comments that the sender of the message is a horrible person and Cay's style is fine. Mika updates about a person they/he knew from before having stalked them, trying to contact them/him over the course of two years and using their/his friend's social media accounts to gain access to their/his pictures and updates, in combination with a screen-shot saying:

”Send some pretty pictures of your beautiful tits. Good luck with the child and become a big, warm trans mother now (various smiling and winking emojis)”

This is an example of exotification/fetishizing of transpeople, on top of clearly being sexual harassment. It is also clashing with how Mika would choose to position them-/himself. In another update a smiling Mika is wearing the before-mentioned t-shirt saying: "This is what an awesome dad looks like", making it clear that they/he does not want to be interpellated into the subject position “mother”. When making a list of “things that are tough right now”, it contains among other things the need to hide their/his belly from the trans care team, and they/he writes:

“I am one of those pregnant not-women [...]. Because I am a living proof that more than just women can become pregnant and birth children.“

In addition to pregnancies in the past having been used by trans care as a reason to deny someone transitioning, Mika's pregnancy is starkly at odds with Edelman's definition of the position of queer in society, where only heterosexual sex can produce an “after”, the symbolic Child that stands for the continuation of society. Sexuality being entangled with gender and sex within the heterosexual matrix, a pregnant body will be read as “heterosexual woman who is in the process of reproduction”. Mika is simultaneously, in Edelman's and Halberstams definition, submitting to the

normative temporality of reproduction¹²⁶ and subverting heteronormativity by refusing to take the subject position mother – *if* they/he can manage to convince their surroundings to read them/him as a non-binary subject. This is not only applicable to Mika’s situation: The silences the people in my study meet, the unwillingness to use the pronouns they consider right and the terms they want used on them, might also be a symptom of having moved too far from what is read as queer. Calling themselves queer (as in their tags and short biographies) and at the same time wanting to count as a member of society “just like everyone else”, might result in being less likely to be the victim of violence, but also cause others to read them automatically as heterosexual and cisgender. Then the question is if they, in Edelman’s definition of the word, would even be considered queer.

Even without a pregnancy complicating situations, daily life is difficult for many of the subjects of my study. Sasha describes getting wrong information about when and under which circumstances they can get surgery, and later being called by the endocrinologist to correct it:

“Just think about those who are feeling so bad that they might simply not manage to get such information and maybe had done something drastic.“

“Something drastic” being an established code for “(attempted) suicide”, Sasha hints at just how bad this kind of mistake is. Considering the low mental health among trans people in general, and especially among non-binary trans people as described in RFSL’s report¹²⁷, this is not uncalled for. Mentions of not doing well psychologically are common: Tony’s introduction at the top of their/his account is ”a mentally ill genderfucking queer”, Vanja’s ”a queer trans fuck [... s]urviving borderline one day at a time”. Many of the people in my study are open with this, Vanja is listing “psykradikalism” (a type of activism concerning mental health, based on the idea that there are no clear barriers between mentally ill and healthy, as well as a distinct openness with the aim to remove stigma¹²⁸) as a theme of their account. Some of them write about feeling invisible, unsure of their identity and questioning their decisions when encountering difficulties. According to Butler, the “new” genders she has in mind have technically existed for a long time, but not been acknowledged by the terms that govern reality. For this to happen, social and literal theory, as well as psychiatry have to adjust, to create a reality in which people with these genders can live without the threat of violence or a sense of their own unreality¹²⁹. This matches research showing that the low mental health of (especially non-

126 Halberstam, “In a Queer Time and Place”, 2

127 “In society I don’t exist, so it’s impossible to be who I am.”, RFSL, https://www.rfsl.se/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Trans_health_2017_RFSL.pdf

128 Schwartz, *De radikaliserar psykdebatten*, Göteborgs Fria, <http://www.goteborgsfria.se/artikel/91475> (Accessed 2018-06-25)

129 Butler, “Undoing Gender”, 219

binary) transpeople is not due to an inherent connection between trans* and mental illness, but difficulties finding understanding for who they are¹³⁰.

Some instances of conflict between the subjects of my study and their surroundings arise due to insufficient knowledge of the meaning of gender which is considered up-to-date within LGBTQI-circles, like when Leo shares feedback from a teacher, criticizing Leo's use of the words "non-binary trans person" and "dysphoria", advising them to write "is neither a man nor a woman", "transsexual" and "has a dislike for". People comment that the term "transsexual" has fallen out of use, that Leo does not have to write for the "cis-gaze" and that there is a need of more texts for them to be able to identify with. The teacher is not used to the queer-feminist/trans-activist discourse Leo writes in, in the way that their usual readers are. Both Leo and the readers know that if their terminology were to enter hegemonic discourse around gender, attempted corrections like the teacher's would not happen. Some people are avoiding a reaction altogether when faced with people being open about their non-binary identity. A non-binary person writes to Mika:

"This really is a thing I didn't expect when coming out. Thought I would be questioned and get shit, but instead this silence. Avoidance. It's hard to respond to."

This connects to the earlier mentioned inability of a heteronormative society to cope with people wanting to be read outside the legible frame. With no frame of reference for how to act towards a non-binary subject, that which has just been disclosed is filtered away.

Positive experiences with people other than their friends or community are written about also, but framed as unusual, like when Leo writes about a meeting with a doctor going really well:

"No shaming, annoying comments or questioning my non-binaryness. Now this is how it's supposed to be, but I still was both surprised and happy about the nice treatment. I'm always like a cat on hot bricks when I am meeting medical staff, but this time I didn't need to be."

Mika writes about their/his doctor at the antenatal ward being good "for a doctor", because of seeming empathic and helpful, but like many others misgenders them/him and also "chooses to comment [Mika's] body in a not fun way". What is brought across here is that Leo and Mika are treated in a way they find unacceptable more often than not, being surprised when they're treated well. These experiences with medical care, also within specific trans care, are a recurring theme:

130 "In society I don't exist, so it's impossible to be who I am.", RFSL, https://www.rfsl.se/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Trans_health_2017_RFSL.pdf

“but even more i’m angry at the trans care. it shouldn’t be this long of a process. siblings are dying from the wait. & when you finally get an appointment to the gender police, you find out there’s at least one more year to get hormones, if that’s what you want & maybe even longer for any kind of surgery.”

Tony describes trans care here as the “gender police”, bringing to mind Spade’s descriptions of how gate-keeping has functioned¹³¹. Even with the recent changes to trans care in Sweden to include non-binary subjects, being an authority which has for a long time enforced the hegemonic binary meaning of gender, trans care can’t be entirely trusted, and is here put in the role of an antagonist rather than a helpful instance. Sasha paid for their own surgery in the end, stating complications around rules concerning trans care as the reason. In an earlier update they describe being worried about starting hormones before surgery, expressing that it might feel weird to have breasts while hormones started to change their body, and that it was the mastectomy which had been their priority to begin with. They are using the words “forced and stressed” to begin hormone therapy, which can be interpreted as them not having chosen to take hormones at all, had it not been a prerequisite for the surgery. Sasha is afraid of being falsified, much like Butler describes, in the process of succumbing to the conditions of an instance which is technically supposed to represent them¹³² (trans care), to be able to get the life and body they want.

Variants of “How hard can it be?” or “It doesn’t have to be that difficult”, are frequently used. Such as Mika expressing frustration over being misgendered daily, describing clenching their/his teeth and accepting being called “she” due to not being able to fight all the time:

“How difficult is this supposed to be? How hard is it to say the right pronoun if somebody you are meeting regularly feels bad because of your misgenderings?”

A comment echoes:

”Respectless, and I can really relate. How difficult can it be![...] I AM SO BLOODY SICK OF THIS. SO DAMN MANY SUFFER AND IT’S NOT TAKEN SERIOUSLY.”

Respect is also a link in the chain of equivalence associated with feminism, siblinghood and existence. Within the queer/trans feminist discourse that many of the subjects of my study exist in this is not something difficult, and not to do so is a sign of disrespect. These rhetorical questions are signalling that it should not be difficult for anyone, that those who find it hard are doing something wrong. But considering how the heterosexual matrix structures people’s thinking it is in fact that difficult for a great many people.¹³³ In hegemonic discourse around gender, there is simply no space

131 Spade, “Mutilating Gender”

132 Butler, “Undoing Gender”, 91

133 Butler, “Gender Trouble”

for the position the people in my study are taking. Being unable to instinctively read a person as anything but male or female, people will most of the time automatically use the pronouns that come to them most easily in a naturalized process depending on what their brain picks up on first. It becomes more pronounced the further away this pronoun is from what they're used to: Using "she" for a person read as male (or vice versa) can be difficult enough for people, being asked to use a pronoun which does not technically exist in hegemonic discourse will be even harder.

7.2.2 Feminist Spaces

A specific type of resistance they describe meeting is taking place in feminist spaces. In posts concerning the most recent "trans debate" some of the tags used are: *#feminist*, *#terfs*¹³⁴, *#intersectionalfeminism*, *#FuckTERFs*, often with an identity marker, likely as a way of positioning oneself in opposition to the topic discussed. In the aftermath of a conflict with another user, Leo writes that they can't understand how anyone calling themselves feminist can say "such transphobic and denigrating things", or how anyone can support the person in question, asking if there is no place for (non-binary) transpeople in their feminism. A commenter replies:

"[s]uch bloody quasi-feminism, such bloody backstabbing sexism. So damn disrespectful to piss on all others who are fighting their battles. [...] Then I wonder how I can be able to identify as a feminist. How can this so called sisterhood back her? How is it that not All Swedish Feminists are in rage? What shall I say to my children? To my youngest? Sorry darling, but we're living in a society where a random biddie¹³⁵ gets to take space in media for saying that you are the root of the patriarchy!" My child who is the most and best feminist I ever met. Boo!"

Phrasings like "this is not feminism", "*your* feminism" appear often, like when Kelly states that "spreading incorrect information and not listening to socially vulnerable people is not feminist" about Kajsa "Ekis" Ekman's article. Referencing a feminist blogger's¹³⁶ post blaming trans-etiquette for female coded words like "woman" and "mother" supposedly no longer being used in obstetric care, Mika writes:

"No one has used the right pronoun even though it's marked down in my journal and birthing letter. Nobody has been avoiding calling me mother/woman even though I and the other parent have said this several times."

Mika is expressing frustration with how they/he is being addressed, showing a stance opposing the blogger's; Mika most likely *would* actually advocate language in obstetric care changing. Updating with the picture of the book "*We should all be feminists*" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, they/he

134 Trans-exclusionary radical feminists

135 tant

136 "About a feminism which cannot discuss sex – trans and a thousand questions" (translated from Swedish) - Ensam Mamma Röker <http://ensammammaroker.wordpress.com>, (accessed 16 June 2018)

describes how 10 minutes in the author starts talking about biological differences between men and women, illustrating this with the example that “women can birth children, men cannot do that”, and writes that it makes them/him want to puke and cry.

In the discourse the subjects of my study exist in, the nodal point feminism is associated with the chain of equivalence: “intersectionality”, “inclusion” and “queer-/trans-feminism”, while “transphobia”, “terf”, “white cis feminism” is excluding someone from being a feminist. Alternatively, the threat of someone displaying attributes from the antagonistic chain of equivalence being seen as “the real” feminist, makes them wonder who *they* are: “Who is a feminist in this discussion?”, “Who is feminism for?”, “If this person is a feminist, what am I (who thought myself to be a feminist)?”, “If I am a feminist, this person surely isn’t”. The position non-binary subject and feminist activist becoming incompatible reveals their identity being tightly connected to an understanding of themselves as feminists. Since they need to distance themselves from the things they understand themselves not to be¹³⁷, both them and their opponents claiming to be feminists creates a conflict in their self-identification. With, as Winther-Jørgensen writes, identities having become fragmented as they are constructed within contradictory discourses¹³⁸, one of the effects this debate results in many of the people in my study being overdetermined by conflicting subject positions: “Non-binary and/or trans activist” and “feminist”.

It is in connection with the incident that the concept of “existence” becomes especially important. The term can be considered a link in the chain of equivalence belonging to both the nodal points “non-binary” and “feminism”. Terry writes that they are happy to know that there are many will not let people who say that non-binary people don’t exist be unchallenged, stating that transpeople always have existed and always will. Early on, Leo updates with an image saying “TW¹³⁹ transfobi”.

“Because we exist. We are real people with real feelings. If you feel threatened or unsure because of our existence, because we are not like you, then my door is open for a fika¹⁴⁰. [...] Can’t we destroy the patriarchy together, instead of fighting each other?”

Inviting to a conversation, Leo is here reasoning similarly to the reaction article “Hotet är patriarkatet – inte transpersoner”¹⁴¹ by DeBourg, Krantz and Romson, where the original article by Kajsa Ekis Ekman is referenced as painting transpeople as a threat in a very similar to the way the

137 Winther-Jørgensen, ”Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method”, 43

138 Ibid, 110

139 Trigger Warning

140 A quick meal break with one's colleagues, friends, date or family

141 The threat is the patriarchy – not transpeople

political extreme right does. This, especially in connection with the original article also focusing on "not confusing the children", also makes it possible that Leo is picking up on being the "queer threat" to Edelman's futuristic paradigm, trying to soften this by saying "we're harmless":

"I want to believe that most of those who are against our existence, are this because of ignorance & fear for what is new, different or strange. I want to also believe that we, by getting to know each other can get a better understanding."

This is signalling "we can become knowable", thereby becoming less of a threat by the terms by which queer subjects are most often allowed to be absorbed into society. The "trans debate" is in a way functioning as a catalyst: In the face of their identity being challenged (not exclusively in this debate, but becoming very visible in the what they write concerning it), "existence" comes to be a key aspect in their utterances, being one of the terms which give meaning to the subject position "non-binary". Butler is, in *Undoing Gender*, asking the question of what counts as a coherent gender, and in turn as a person. People who don't automatically accept the gender they were assigned at birth, or feel at home in either binary category, will at some point have to ask themselves who they can be, given the contemporary order of things, if there is a place for them at all.¹⁴² Already in *Gender Trouble*, she describes that some gender identities can't "exist" at this point, as opposed to those which are already intelligible within the heterosexual matrix, but also states that if these non-existent identities are persistently claimed they have a chance of entering reality.¹⁴³ There is no easily inhabited place for non-binary subjects in the hegemonic discourse of gender, something the people in my study are obviously aware of, and are also persistently fighting to gain, claiming both the "gender which can't exist" and "existence". The incident strengthening the sense of community through a common reason to be upset is also visible in a number of updates.

"In the beginning I thought they would defeat me. That they would manage to scare me. But they have only made me stronger & more sure that I am doing right when I'm not quiet. They shall never defeat me. They shall never quiet me. I would be lying if I said it wasn't difficult, but I'll manage. I can take being exposed, hated and denigrated. I can take that my feelings and experiences are ridiculed. But I will never stay quiet when someone is attacking my siblings. [...] I will continue to be heard, seen & take up space."

This is basically a freedom fighter's speech, presenting Leo as someone who is attacked and hurt, but still prevails, standing up for their community. Vanja considers the chosen description of "trans debate" to be flawed in itself, and states:

142 Butler, "Undoing Gender", 58

143 Butler, "Gender trouble", 23

“There’s no trans debate happening. A trans debate is like, how medical care can improve or how schools can better inform about trans. Or like if Laverne Cox is the best or the damn best. What is happening now is no trans debate. It’s just shitty think-pieces from mossy trans-haters. To say that transpeople don’t exist is not a debate, that’s just hate. Weird hate.”

as well as encouraging their/her followers to ”all take each others hands and then let go to all in a simultaneous movement give Kajsa ”Ekis” Ekman the finger.”, accompanied by with twenty-two “showing the middle finger”-emojis. Alexis writes:

“It’s embarrassing when cis-feminists want to position themselves and want to make their twitter account bigger by kicking downwards. It’s important to kick back, continue with that (kiss emoticon).”

Similarly to the ironic, tongue-in-cheek introductions at the beginning of the analysis, this is also a way of presenting as someone who is capable of withstanding being attacked, a “they can’t take us down”-attitude: If we all stop taking this seriously, and (indirectly yet publicly) flip off the cause of our pain, we can defeat this, while what our opponents are doing is merely embarrassing. Vanja spreads another user’s text, containing the line: “Refuse to let cis people theorize around our damn reality.” and a screen-shot saying: Feminism for fools [...] Kajsa Ekis Ekmans views cause violent consequences for trans people”. One of the conclusions Dahlberg-Grundberg reached is that much of the connection between activists in social media communities is affective rather than based on fixed ideologies.¹⁴⁴ While this “debate” is by many treated as a highly theoretical discussion, it caused the people in my study to show a storm of emotions. They describe it to be infringing very practically on their daily lives and well-being. Alexis updates with a picture of their face, eyes closed, resigned expression – with the text overlay ”So tired of the trans debate”:

“Consisting of a load of cis people who discuss what they think trans people say about sex/gender. Obviously not all trans people say the same thing about it, so already the basic assumption that trans exists because of some sort of ideologic tendency is a super-weird assumption that feels like it’s based on a generalised idea of how trans people are. It also feels like so enormously much of this debate is because of cis-feminists refuse to listen to what trans people actually say, and instead make assumptions based on what other cis-feminists say about trans people. And then there’s the eternal question if trans people strengthen gender roles. I am wondering why trans people should have more responsibility for gender roles than cis people? Cis people who strengthen their gender identity with different normative attributes get no shit, but trans people who do this “support norms”, well yes all who are a part of a structure support it. But why does the one who breaks norms have a bigger responsibility to question? And that thing with men being allowed to call themselves women to not be punished and so on. Have you ever seen statistics for vulnerability? All feminists should know that it isn’t easier to live as a woman. You

144 Dahlberg-Grundberg, “Digital media and the transnationalization of protests”, 21

don't gain anything by calling yourself a woman in society, especially not if you're also trans. No one would live as a trans woman to avoid punishment, because you don't."

When Butler writes that even if some transpeople have a desire to have a stable binary identity recognized in society, denying them what they need to live would be cruelty.¹⁴⁵ And why would non-binary identities even figure into this when they by definition try to avoid these? According to Butler no one should have to conform to a gender norm that is considered an unlivable violation¹⁴⁶. She states that in a way, all gender norms can be considered violations imposed from the outside, functioning as an interpellation which can only be refused by paying the possible consequence of being disqualified as a valid person in society.¹⁴⁷ She writes this originally when discussing why some trans people choose to act according to binary norms, but it can also be applied to the subjects of my study expressing that both the subject positions "man" and "woman" are unlivable violations to them. It seems like the non-binary subject position is on the way of becoming a livable option, just recently becoming more acknowledged by way of how trans care and to an extent public discourse around gender has changed, but the "debate" risking to sway public opinion against (non-binary) transpeople hangs over them as a threat of making this void.

8. CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

8.1 Conclusions

Identity is always open to change¹⁴⁸ and depending on the social context, people act from different identity-positions. Since subjectivity can only be created relationally, the people in my study have to relate to their own community, the LGBTQI-movement, the feminist movement, their families and various official instances in society, such as the medical system. There is ample opportunity here for different discourses to clash.

8.1.1 How do they present themselves as subjects outside of the gender binary?

The subjects of my study are trying to find ways to express a non-binary identity as a practice, as well as trying to establish it as "real" within the hegemonic discourse in society. They create the subject position "non-binary" for themselves, partly by straight-forward saying on their profiles: These words describe my gender (identity), these are my pronouns; giving the terms they want used on themselves they are publicly connecting these to the faces they are also displaying.

145 Butler, "Undoing Gender", 8

146 Ibid, 214

147 Ibid, 214

148 Winther-Jørgensen, "Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method", 108

Many are also displaying a style which has become associated with non-binary/genderqueer people, choosing alternative/subcultural attributes used near identically by men and women in the subcultures in question. But of course there are more subtle ways: Talking about gender identity, they do *not* usually refer to the definition of gender as the social extension/counterpart of sex, despite some taking actions to anatomically change their bodies. When it comes to medically transitioning, getting to pursue the shape that makes your own body comfortable to you, is generally expressed to be more important than to have a particular body configuration that would *communicate* non-binary clearly (if that is possible), yet which kind of physical attributes they want appears to still be partly dependant on sex assigned at birth. Even though not trying pass as cisgender or exclusively male/female, they face the problems of either having to adhere to some normatively feminine/masculine attributes or using the hard-to-find attributes not decidedly associated with either. They have to use the signs already understandable within the existing order to try making the position they claim legible in society. Since the position “non-binary” can only exist in relation to other positions which *are* binary, in combination with the body itself being a factor in how a person’s gender is read, this is a figurative walk on a tightrope.

Much of their activism is directed at making life better for themselves and others on a day to day basis rather than more general political change (although they also do engage in this kind of activism). It is also noticeable that being an activist is an important part of the image they are wanting to convey. Given that the theory of the heterosexual matrix states that people who break its rules cannot have a life as a valid subject in society, putting aspects of your life on public display becomes a kind of proof of existence, showing you are a person, saying: My life is worth living. If one understands sex and gender as neither divided into two clear categories nor clearly separable from each other, nothing of what the people in my study claim about their identity should be cause for resistance from their surroundings.

8.1.2 How do they describe the resistance they experience?

Having their naturalized conception of gender and sex called into question causes people to fall back onto familiar categories, in a way filtering out the people not matching up to these. Gender (identity) in relation to society and ideology mean different things within the discourse of the people in my study, and the discourses many of those they have to relate to.

When the subjects of my study say that their existence is denied, they are meeting the argument that there of course is an awareness of their existence as living people. However, what they mean by denial of their existence is trans as a phenomenon not being accepted, nor the concept of being neither male nor female (or both) as legitimate. Living with the constant perceived violation of being put into a position they reject, in connection with the all-encompassing influence of how one's gender is read in everything social, they have no existent position in society. They call themselves "queer", but this is not exactly what for example Edelman means by queer. While being perceived as a threat to society for not fitting the heteronormative mould by some, the way they position themselves is not in itself opposing a future orientation, but they may, via their publicly displayed existence, be broadening the idea of who can be understood as a person within society.

Their queer feminist discourse offers them a subject position matching their self-perception, while they express that the discourse of their opponents in the "trans debate" is not offering them an acknowledged position at all. Instead of others using the terms which would grant them the subject position "non-binary", they see themselves being called "confused", "men", "women", "obstacle to the cause" – and also have to ask themselves the question if both sides can be feminists. "Non-binary and/or trans activist" and "feminist" end up being conflicting subject positions. They have already rejected the subject position "man" and "woman", being interpellated into the position of "not having understood" or "obstacle" to feminism, a cause they themselves see as very important to them, they say here too their existence is denied/made invisible, as well as being insulted in their identity as activists for feminism and trans rights. If their opponents manage to shift hegemonic discourse around transpeople in Sweden towards their goals, the subjects of my study would likely not be able to continue to call themselves feminists with a clear conscience, and the feminist movement, which has largely been in favour of trans rights during recent times, will fail them.

Yet especially in the face of this incident, they are emphasizing: We exist, it is this framework of gender that society forces us into which is wrong, doing us harm. With all the pain this "trans debate" is causing, it also gives them a chance to show themselves as people who do not back down, or give up. The situation makes them claim their non-binary identities even harder.

8.2 Discussion

It is very hard, if not impossible, to say with any certainty what gender identity is. Henrik Brändén's addition to the debate, an article on which biological factors are possibly influencing how

people will feel about their sexed bodies later in life, while simplified, is stating that they are many factors which cannot be sorted into two separately aligned sides, and that no statistical difference can say which specific traits an individual will have. This is making an important point about no one really being on the absolute end points of the spectrum physically, meaning that there is no material basis for maintaining such a dichotomy (socially or biologically) similarly to the kind of research Anne Fausto-Sterling is presenting. Putting oneself into the position non-binary as an identity in itself means that there is a binary to relate to. If the ideal outcome is to accept that gender/sex was never binary at all, would mean that no one would have to identify specifically as “non-binary” in relation to those who are.

Many entries in the recent “trans debate” were about concerns of being unhappy with society’s gender norms being the reason to want to transition. There are still evaluation processes used within trans care to avoid people making rash or uninformed decisions (although this is not unproblematic either, due to the implied assumption that transpeople of not being able to make informed decisions without outside influence, as well as care-givers not being exempt from society’s standards for men and women) and the tendency in Sweden today is to leave the ultimate decision to the person inhabiting the body this concerns, instead of stricter gate-keeping. As mentioned before, the treatment of trans people via operations/hormone replacement therapy/legal changes has shown itself to be the most effective in alleviating suffering. Also the society they relate to is still functioning according to in this binary, making it very hard to escape it *even* if a person were to not feel the need to transition if society did not exert this pressure. In the debate there were voices saying they used to believe themselves to be non-binary, but realised it was about gender norms later. While this might be true for a specific person, it would be a fallacy to assume that it must therefore be true for everyone who states they are non-binary, especially in the light of there not being a single truth about what constitutes gender identity.

One of the things I also observe within the recent “trans debate” is its uneven power balance. An already vulnerable group is having to relate to hegemonies which do not allow them a place, both in the general ideas about gender in society and some variants of feminism. On top of this, there is the problem of people being unable to see their own naturalized ideas of binary gender and/or sex, even when having an advanced analysis otherwise. I understand many people within the “trans debate” as desperately clinging to to the idea that there must be something underneath the

constructions. Even the ones who assume all gender to be constructed seem unable to grasp that their position and self-understanding as for example “biological women” is as constructed.

In the end, it feels like I only ever scratched the surface during the process of working with this. Almost all of the things discussed would in themselves have been interesting to have a much closer look at, and there were also many things I didn't have the space or tools for examining within the frame I had already set for myself. Two examples being the meaning of styles for gender expressions, or the aspects of their gendered embodiment without the enforced distance of focusing on how they phrase things. This is a topic I see myself returning to.

“Some of you who believe in the binary paradigm do so by default, swimming in the same unquestioned cultural waters as everyone else. Which fish discuss water? (Answer: The drowning ones.) Some of you believe in it for admirable and noble reasons: hoping it can more swiftly bring justice to your oppressed gender, or hoping it can ease your transition from a gender assigned to you to a gender you feel you belong in. I support your goals and do not wish to do anything that hampers your progress, and I request that you not run over us along the way.”

–Zot Lynn Szurgot¹⁴⁹

149 Kaldera, *Hermaphroditities*. 252

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