Towards a Butlerian methodology:

Anti-narrative interviewing as a method of undoing organizational performativity

Abstract

This article explores the methodological possibilities that Judith Butler's theory of performativity opens up for organizational research. Specifically, it draws on insights from Butler's critique of subjective recognition as a process of perpetual 'undoing' through which the complexity of lived experience is compromised in the performance of a seemingly coherent, recognizable subjectivity. Drawing on an interview-based study focusing on workplace experiences of gender, ageing and LGBT sexualities, the article considers what it means to undertake organizational research premised upon a performative ontology grounded in a critique of the normative conditions governing organizational recognition. Specifically, it asks: What form might a Butler-inspired methodology take? What opportunities might it open up or difficulties might it pose for organizational researchers? The article outlines and evaluates a method described here as 'anti-narrative interviewing'. We argue that this method constitutes a valuable methodological resource for organization studies researchers with an interest in studying how and why idealized organizational subjectivities are formed and sustained, as well as a way of empirically advancing the in-roads that Butler's writing has made into the study of human relations at work.

Keywords

Butler, performativity, qualitative methods, reflexivity, organizational sexuality

Introduction

In this paper, we consider how organizational scholars might apply Judith Butler's (1988, 1990, 1993, 2004, 2005) theory of performativity to the development of a research

methodology designed to 'undo' the constraints imposed by the compulsion to perform seemingly coherent narratives of self within organizational settings. Drawing on data generated from interviews with self-identified older lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) adults in the UK, we argue that Butler's concept of 'undoing' constitutes a useful resource through which valuable methodological opportunities are opened up. These opportunities potentially allow us to critically and reflexively understand more about the labour involved in maintaining the semblances of subjective coherence upon which organizations depend. In our discussion of the ethical implications of 'undoing' as a methodological approach, we distinguish between an 'organizational undoing' through which, in Butler's terms, 'the subject produces its coherence at the cost of its own complexity' (1993: 115), from what we argue is the critical potential of a more analytical, reflexive undoing as a methodological imperative. While the former requires that constraining and conflating the complexity of lived experience is a condition upon which viable organizational subjectivity depends[i], the latter is designed to bring this complexity to the fore, revealing rather than concealing the labour required to produce and maintain semblances of subjective coherence in and through organizations. In particular, it allows us to consider the consequences for those who cannot or do not conform to organizational norms governing who or what counts as a viable subject. With this in mind, the paper has two specific aims.

First, we aim to consider the methodological potential of Butler's concepts of performativity and undoing for the study of human relations at work. Second, we outline and evaluate the practical application of this potential through our development of 'anti-narrative' interviewing as a method of data generation[ii] and analysis within work and organization studies. As Watson and Watson (2012: 1 and 4) have argued 'narratives play a very significant role in human social life' such that organizational researchers must try to develop 'more sophisticated methods for understanding the complexities of narratives in individual

lives, society and organizations'. With this in mind, we examine how anti-narrative interviewing can be incorporated into the study of work, considering the resulting implications for reflexivity and research ethics within the research process, and for understanding the complexities of narratives, and lived experiences of subjectivity, within organizations. In particular we ask the following questions: (i) How might a methodology underpinned by a performative ontology reflexively 'undo' organizational subjectivities, revealing the normative conditions, and identity work, on which they depend? (ii) How do we develop methodologies and methods that do not simply 'fix' the subjects of inquiry (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2012), reproducing the patterns of narrative coherence and processes of organizational undoing?; (iii) What are the methodological possibilities for data generation and analysis if we adopt an anti-narrative approach to organizational research?; (iv) What are the practical and ethical considerations associated with a methodological, reflexive undoing and with an anti-narrative research method?

In thinking through these questions, we are particularly inspired by Gilmore and Kenny's (2014) recent discussion of self-reflexivity in organizational research, in which they advocate a move from self- to collective-reflexivity as the basis for a method of data collection and analysis they describe as 'pair interviewing'. The latter involves a co-construction of knowledge that allows themes traditionally downplayed, notably emotion, inter-subjectivity and power dynamics, to be brought to the fore. In particular, Gilmore and Kenny (2014: 9) ask: what methods might usefully assist researchers 'who are committed to self-reflexivity that is meaningful rather than token?' recommending a range of research practices. These include adopting a collective approach to reflexivity (see also Brannan, 2011); conducting interviews in which the interviewers avoid making ethical or epistemic judgments about participants' accounts; facilitating a co-construction of research accounts as the research progresses, and developing a collective reflexivity throughout the research process 'as an

ongoing practice, rather than as an afterthought' (Gilmore and Kenny, 2014: 19). However, despite this methodological commitment to collective reflexivity, Gilmore and Kenny (2014) note that the theoretical resources available to us in attempting to move towards a methodology premised upon inter-subjectivity and relationality remain relatively limited.

With this in mind, and in addressing the questions outlined above, we seek to draw on and develop the inroads that Butler's writing (1988, 1990, 1993, 2004, 2005) has begun to make into work and organization studies over the last decade or so (Borgerson, 2005; Harding et al, 2011, 2013; Hodgson, 2005; Parker, 2002; Thanem and Wallenberg, 2014). Within the field to date, Butler's work has been cited particularly in organizational analyses of gender as performative (Jeanes, 2007; Phillips and Knowles, 2012; Pilgeram, 2007; Pullen and Knights, 2007). Her writing has also been a reference point in research on LGBT sexualities, in particular focusing on how LGBT subjects struggle to achieve recognition as viable selves within organizations that privilege heterosexuality (Binnie and Klesse, 2013; Schilt and Connell, 2007; Ward and Winstanley, 2003). While empirically focussed and theoretically rich, what remains relatively under-developed within this literature is the integration of insights from Butler into methodological debates about how we might, in practical ways, develop our understanding of how gendered, LGBT subjectivities are undone by heteronormative organizational processes and assumptions[iii].

At the same time, the wider implications of Butler's writing for the theoretical analysis of the relationship between organization and subjectivity beyond a thematic, analytical concern with gender and/or sexuality have yet to be fully explored (for a notable exception, see Parker, 2002). This is particularly the case in terms of considering the wider implications of how Butler frames subjectivity as the outcome of a process of organization through which the self is 'called to account' (Butler, 2004, 2005). Further, both analyses of gender and

sexuality and broader engagements with Butler's work regarding organization and organizing (Borgerson, 2005; Hodgson, 2005; Parker, 2002) rarely comment on the opportunities for, and the practicalities associated with, employing a Butlerian performative methodology designed to 'undo' organizational/organizing processes in research design. Our aim in this paper is to address this gap. In this respect, we seek to counter some of the criticisms levelled at Butler's theory of performativity and undoing as overly abstract and difficult to apply 'in the field' (Fraser, 1997; Morison and Macleod, 2013). We also seek to address the question of how we might actually 'do' organizational research inspired by conceptual and theoretical insights from Butler's writing. We do so by mapping and evaluating a practice based methodological application of Butler's theoretical analysis of the dynamic relationship between organizational subjectivity and the norms by which it is both compelled and constrained.

The paper is structured as follows. We begin by considering Butler's writing on performativity and undoing, retracing her steps thus far within work and organization studies, identifying conceptual and theoretical inroads. We then consider the as yet unexplored methodological implications of her work for the study of organizational life, outlining the approach we took to researching lived experiences of older LGBT workers. Here we map out three characteristics of our methodology that were particularly inspired by Butler, which we subsequently evaluate in the hope that they might be useful to other organizational researchers. These are: (i) a methodological 'undoing' based on a performative ontology; (ii) 'anti-narrative' interviewing as a method of data generation and analysis, and (iii) a commitment to a recognition-based, reflexive undoing based on an ethics of openness.

In conclusion, we reflect on the many questions opened up by considering the methodological implications of Butler's writing, emphasizing the broader applicability of a Butlerian methodological approach to research within the field of organization studies. Ultimately, our aim is to highlight the as yet unrealized methodological possibilities afforded

by a Butlerian performative ontology for the study of organizations and human relations within the workplace. As such, we now turn to Butler's (1988, 1990, 1993, 2004, 2005) work, which encourages us to pursue the idea of a performative ontology of organization and subjectivity in organizational research design.

Butler, organizational performativity and 'undoing'

Butler's writing on performativity and undoing is developed across a number of her 'core' texts (1990, 2000, 1993, 2004, 2005) in particular *Gender Trouble* (1990), and its anniversary edition (2000), in which she introduces and clarifies her conceptual understanding of performativity. This can be seen most clearly in her oft-cited conviction that gender is 'a corporeal style, an act as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where "performative" suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning' (Butler, 2000: 177). Arguing that 'this repetition is not performed by a subject', but rather 'is what enables a subject' (Butler, 1993: 95), Butler emphasizes that subject positions are continually evoked through stylized acts of repetition, through mundane acts of gesture and inflection that, if performed in accordance with the social expectations of heteronormativity, result in the attribution of viable subjectivity. In one sense, therefore, Butler conceptualizes gender as an act of 'doing' but, crucially, 'not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed' (1990: 33). In other words, Butler argues against a notion of the subject as the originator of action, in favour of understanding how the doer (or 'subject') is the outcome of a process of recognition rather than the basis of it, so that 'the doing itself is everything' (1990: 25). This bifurcation of agency and subjectivity has led Butler to be accused of reducing the subject to a discursive effect, disavowing the capacity of the subject to exist beyond discourse (see Butler, 1993). However, this bifurcation is crucial to understanding how, for Butler, subjectivity is effectively the outcome of a process of social organization through which certain

performative acts come to be recognized as viable subject positions, while others are disavowed. Subjectivities therefore come into effect only through re-iterative performance; 'compelled by the regulatory practices' of social and we would argue organizational, coherence (Butler, 1990: 24).

Organizational scholars such as Kelan (2009: 35) have explored this performative ontology in understanding how 'gender performances and gender identities are not something fixed but something that needs to be *done* at work'. However, as Kelan (2009: 50 and 51, emphasis added) also notes, 'Butler's theories are largely elaborated at a very abstract level, which leads to problems concerning *how the process of gender as a doing can be studied* empirically' so that for her, 'the main problem with Butler's work is … that it remains unclear how people negotiate subject positions in everyday situations'. Drawing on Butler (2004), Kelan locates gender performance within processes of biographic narration, arguing that narration, as a social practice is a form of 'doing gender' in Butler's terms, or 'a way of rendering the individual readable as a human being' (Kelan, 2009: 107).

Kelan's study of ICT professionals sets out to show how different subject positions are evoked when narrating organizational biographies. However, her focus is not on 'undoing' these narratives in a Butlerian sense, or on trying to understand what happens to lived experiences in the construction of these narratives, but rather on revealing *how* narratives are performed at work. Picking up from this point, the approach outlined below is concerned less with how particular organizational narratives are evoked, but rather *why*, and with what consequences; in other words to what ends, and at what 'cost', in Butler's terms, does the subject attempt to produce and maintain a coherent narrative of self?

The approach that we take in this respect is influenced by what is arguably the most radical proposition in Butler's writing (see especially Butler 2004, 2005), namely her insistence that if subjective becoming is a process of doing, then it is always also a process of undoing. Here

undoing is linked to the desire for recognition of oneself as a viable, culturally intelligible subject. For Butler (2006) all subjectivities are precarious insofar as our need for mutual recognition renders us vulnerable; in her account, however, some subjectivities are more precarious than others. For transgender and transvestite persons, for instance, their subjectivities and lives may be at stake, deemed untenable as they are compelled to exist within a gender binary that curtails possibilities for occupying multiple or fluid subject positions (see also Schilt and Connell, 2007; Thanem, 2011; Thanem and Wallenberg, 2014).

Yet subjectivity can be 'undone', in Butler's terms, in part at least, by revealing its constructed and performative qualities. In other words, in the very performativity of subjectivity lies our capacity to reflexively undo its constraining effects, opening up the possibility of reinstating alternative performances that potentially challenge subjective normativity, or at least open to question the terms of recognition upon which it depends, and through which it comes to be organized.

The organizational sexualities of older LGBT adults that constitute the basis of the research discussed here are exceptionally insightful in this respect, that is in understanding how we might research lived experiences of this more reflexive undoing, for organizations compel the performativity of LGBT sexualities in ways that engender conformity to context specific, often heteronormative, expectations and conditions (Ward and Winstanley, 2003; Woods and Lucas, 1993). Expressed differently, organizations may accord recognition to those LGBT subjects whose performative enactment of sexuality and gender approximates a coherent organizational subject, as noted in Williams et al. (2009), who found that 'viable' LGBT subjectivities in the workplace were those that adhered to heteronormative expectations. At risk here, and thus a challenge for some LGBT people, is that the very complexity of lived experience (Butler, 1993) may be sacrificed in order to conform to heteronormative ideals against which a coherent and thus intelligible subject is judged. Lived

experiences of this 'organizational undoing' reveal the ways in which attributing recognition to certain forms of subjectivity while disavowing others constitutes a significant, but often overlooked, process of organization in itself, as well as a series of practices enacted within organizational settings.

Developing a methodology that allows us to reflexively undo these 'organizational undoings', as well as crafting a corresponding method that enables us to appreciate the narratives on which the conferral or denial of subjective recognition within and through organizations depend, is therefore a crucial endeavor. It is one that stands to benefit organization studies researchers with an interest in the complexity of organizational subjectivities, and in developing critical, reflexive analyses of their performance and management (see Fournier and Grey, 2000; Spicer et al, 2009; Wickert and Schaefer, 2014), particularly in understanding the work that goes into maintaining narrative coherence undertaken by marginalized groups such as LGBT people. It does so by focusing on lived experiences of precarious performativities, particularly those that are relatively self-consciously or reflexively enacted and which are especially vulnerable to misrecognition in Butler's terms. It also highlights what these can reveal to us about the apparently coherent character of organizational narratives more broadly. This constitutes, in Butler's words, a reflexive, methodological 'undoing', not of organizational subjects, but rather of organizational subjectivities and the normative conditions upon which they depend. Hence, this methodological rather than organizational undoing is designed to reflexively reveal the processes and governmental norms by which workplace subjectivities are shaped, as well as their consequences for lived experiences within organizations, enabling us to understand more about the identity work that goes into presenting oneself as a viable, organizational subject.

As Borgerson (2005: 64) points out, although Butler has little to say about organizations as places of work per se, concepts such as performativity and undoing have

'profound implications for organization theory'. A Butlerian notion of performativity has been used to understand management as performatively constituted, an approach that Parker (2002: 160) argues might foster a more self-conscious, reflexive way of doing management that 'would dramatically (and ironically) enact its provisionality, its fragility'. While widely cited insights such as these have made great strides in applying Butler's ideas to organization studies, particularly in mobilizing her writing as a conceptual lens through which to undertake empirical analysis, few if any have explored the methodological possibilities opened up by her work for studying organizations and the subjectivities conditioned within them.

In the section below, we consider how as organizational researchers, we might go about 'doing' a methodological undoing; in other words, how we might engage, in and through our research practice, in a process of reflexive undoing. The latter is specifically designed to reveal, rather than conceal, the complexities of lived experience that are constrained in the performance of viable, coherent organizational subjectivities, based on insights from Butler's writing and its impact on work and organization studies to date.

Mobilizing Butler methodologically

Taking the aims introduced above as our starting point, we now introduce and evaluate in this next section three characteristics of the methodological approach we developed in our study of ageing LGBT subjectivities, namely: (i) a methodological 'undoing' premised upon a performative ontology; (ii) an anti-narrative method of data generation and analysis, and (iii) a reflexive, recognition-based ethics of openness to the Other, all informed by insights derived from Butler's work.

To clarify, the focus of the interview-based study discussed here was on lived experiences of LGBT sexualities in a range of occupational groups and organizational settings. In order to negotiate access to participants, we used a variety of sampling techniques,

including advertisements of older LGBT websites and organizations that support older individuals, eventually making contact with eight people who agreed to be part of the study. In keeping with the inclusive ethos underpinning the study, all of those who expressed an interest were invited to take part, resulting in a final sample of five gay men, two lesbian women and one male-female transsexual. Each of these participants was interviewed two or three times, with dialogue being sustained between and after the interviews with many of them (see below for more details).

A methodological 'undoing'

The LGBT people who took part were a particularly apposite group with which to develop both our methodology and our method. Their heightened sense of self-awareness, combined with their relatively self-conscious organizational performances, made them particularly cognisant of the organizational processes involved in maintaining semblances of coherence. Indeed, they were acutely aware of the constant risk of exposure and vulnerability regarding apparent inconsistencies or incoherences in their respective organizational performances. One of our participants, Emma, for instance, described to us how she constantly sought to manage her level of organizational visibility in order for her identity as a lesbian woman not to assume a prominent role in organizational exchanges, this despite her accumulated experience and professional status as a training consultant with large, public and private sector employers. She acknowledged that in order to accomplish this, she had to performatively downplay instances when she began to stand out because of her achievements at work. For example, she recalled how uncomfortable she felt leading a consultancy session with a colleague in which, as she puts it, she started 'to shine', positioning her under a figurative spotlight as a result: 'I felt bad because I was in the limelight … My goal is not to shine, in fact I'd really rather I didn't, because of the visibility stuff which is connected with being a lesbian. You don't want visibility – there's a *huge* thing there' (emphasis added).

All participants we interviewed talked in some depth about the effort involved in sustaining apparent coherence and negotiating a sense of belonging within their respective organizational settings. Another of our participants, Chris, referred specifically to the work or 'busyness' involved in negotiating recognition:

> If some part of you already realizes you're an outcast … you're always busy negotiating a line … You're always busy. You want to belong, you want to be yourself … and of course you want affection and intimacy.

It is in (i) attempting to reveal the labour involved in continually striving for subjective coherence; (ii) understanding how the ways in which the complexities of lived experience are conflated through this labour constitute an organizational 'undoing', and (iii) creating a research space in which participants can reflect on the negating effects of being unable or unwilling to maintain subjective coherence, or on the sheer effort required to do so, that a Butlerian methodology is particularly useful. This is precisely because Butler's performative ontology opens up the possibility for a research design that facilitates a critical, reflexive rather than an organizational 'undoing', one that seeks to reclaim the otherwise occluded processes and experiences referred to above, such as the sense of perpetual 'busyness' Chris describes, or the need to avoid 'shining' on which Emma reflects. Hence, the aim of a reflexive, methodological 'undoing' is to reveal the complexities of lived experience that come to be conflated in the performance of viable, intelligible organizational subjectivities. In other words, it seeks to explore those subjectivities that will be accorded recognition and rewarded as such and in doing so, strives to reveal the labour involved in constantly working to create and maintain a coherent subject position. At the same time, it aims to throw into relief the ontological and material consequences for those who are marginalized by the norms governing organizational recognition. Our interviews with Debbie, a male to female transsexual emphasized this, when during one particular interview, she

described the ‘trade off’ she would have to make in order to complete the transitionary process she had begun to undertake some twelve months before taking part in our study. Anticipating both discrimination and a need for closure, Debbie planned to ‘exchange’ her former life as a successful accountant in an international corporation for a relatively lower status and less well remunerated role as a self-employed advisor, in order to achieve the ontological and social wellbeing she craved. Debbie evoked in her account a sense of her need to trade an unsustainable attempt to maintain narrative coherence, one that contrasted markedly with the complexity of her lived experience, for this lower professional status. Indeed, at several points during our interviews with her, Debbie referred to the months ahead as ‘her time’, reflecting on how, as both a commercially successful and in many respects traditionally patriarchal male breadwinner who wanted to live her life as a woman, she was simply exhausted by the financial, social and ontological pressures she had been under for many years, feeling herself to be as she put it, ‘done in’ by them.

We have thus far explored Butler’s critique of undoing, as well as trying to reveal the ways in which those who took part in our study are ‘undone’, or ‘done in’ as Debbie describes it, by the management of subjectivity within their respective organizational settings. However, our approach also brought to the fore participants’ capacities to challenge and resist the norms and processes involved in the conferral or denial of organizational recognition. Many of those who took part in our study for example, reflected on their experiences of either self-employment or of relatively temporary employment within organizational settings, commonly reflecting on the dynamics of their relative organizational ephemerality as a coping technique, and as a way of tactically ‘undoing’ their own (organizational) undoing. Emma for instance, recalled her experience of organizational transience as a reflection of her relative marginalization and desire to remain on the periphery of organizational life for fear that her lesbian identity would be ‘revealed’ if she remained in one organization for too long.

However, simultaneously, she suggested this status also empowered her to challenge the heteronormativity she experienced.

During our first interview with Emma, she recalled an apparently long since forgotten experience of when, during a period in her life when she was particularly active in lesbian-feminist politics, she worked her way through various organizational settings as a audio-typist temporary (or 'temp') worker: 'I remember I'd made this big badge [she laughed], written in large yellow letters on a black background 'Dyke', and I had it on my multi-coloured, quilted jacket'. When someone mistook the meaning of the badge for a reference to a band she laughed again as she recounted her response: 'I wasn't committed to any organization … I don't even remember what I said because it was just so irrelevant to me what the response was. Because I was only there for a week, I didn't care'. Unlike a methodological approach that strives to 'fix' research participants (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2012), reifying narrative coherence, this first tenet of our methodology sought to bring these otherwise methodologically and organizationally occluded complexities of lived experience to the fore.

In this sense, the research design strove to counter the processes of organizational undoing that the interviews aimed to expose, and in doing so, to recognize the labour that our research participants had to continually undertake in order to maintain viable, coherent narratives of themselves. Often this occurred in work environments in which they felt constantly exposed or vulnerable, or in Butler's terms, at risk of being mis-recognized. As one of our participants, Winston, put it:

> I would have been pretty mortified if people had sought of classed me as gay. I mean, they probably did, to be honest, but they never actually said it to me … It's not the fact that I'm gay. I'm quite happy to be gay, but I don't want to be classed as being, you

know, namby pamby, ‘dresses up in women’s clothing’ and all of this shit, because it’s not the case.

Here Winston emphasizes his concern not to be recognized as a gay man according to terms not of his own choosing, and through a series of associations that he felt would compromise his organizational credibility. His concern surrounded being ‘fixed’ (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2012) into a particular set of heteronormative assumptions and associations through an organizational undoing, assumptions that our research design was concerned to reflexively undo rather than replicate.

It was vital for us in this respect to understand more about the effort that went into maintaining the narrative semblances of coherence considered above, and to avoid the fixed associations that participants in our research such as Chris, Emma and Winston felt they were ‘undone’ by. For this reason we devised a research method premised upon a Butler-inspired notion of ‘anti-narrative’ interviewing, to which we now turn, in order to develop, in a very practical sense, a method of data generation and analysis that would reflect our methodological commitment to a reflexive undoing of organizational performativity.

Anti-narrative interviewing as a research method

Butler’s understanding of narrative, developed most fully in her book, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), provides a useful performative lens through which to understand how narratives operate in the social construction of subjectivity. In particular, Butler’s largely phenomenological understanding locates narrative, as an attempt to cohere and convey a liveable life, within the context of the desire for recognition of oneself as a viable subject; as she puts it: ‘I come into being as a reflexive subject only in the context of establishing a narrative account of myself’ (2005: 15). Framed in this way, narrative becomes not simply

telling a story about oneself, but rather being held to account for oneself, particularly one's difference, within social (organizational) power relations:

> Giving an account thus takes a narrative form, which not only depends upon the ability to relay a set of sequential events with plausible transitions but also draws upon narrative voice and authority, *being directed toward an audience with the aim of persuasion* (Butler, 2005: 12, emphasis added).

In this respect narrative is framed as a process of organization through which the desire for recognition of oneself as a viable, coherent self is both compelled and constrained. This recognition-based understanding of narrative and its connection to subjectivity is quite distinct from theoretical and methodological approaches to narrative within organization studies to date.

Narrative analysis and storytelling research has made significant inroads into management and organization studies in recent years (see Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 1998; Gabriel, 1991, 1995; Rhodes and Brown, 2005), particularly as a method of understanding what Weick (1995) calls 'organizational sense-making'. Yet the latter means that the analytical emphasis within this literature has largely been on understanding how knowledge is produced 'as individuals participate in the narration process' (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2012: 1696), with researchers attempting to develop ways of assembling coherence out of otherwise apparently fragmented accounts. In her discussion of narrative research, Czarniawska (1998: 19) emphasizes how organizational research often replicates organizational processes in this respect, as narrative modes of sense-making that tend to integrate a series of events into a coherent, linear 'plot' are reproduced rather than subject to reflexive critique.

The more performative approach to narrative analysis we develop here draws on Butler's account, discussed above, in emphasizing how narrative is not simply an epistemic device, but rather an ontological premise. In other words, coherent narratives are not what we do as organizational subjects, but rather are what we are, so that the capacity to provide and sustain apparent narrative coherence is not simply a sense-making process undertaken by organizational subjects, it is what constitutes the latter as we seek recognition of ourselves within and through organizations, as viable subjects able to 'give an account' of ourselves. What this means methodologically is that rather than regarding narrative as a mechanism through which to produce apparently coherent ways of knowing or speaking about organizations, organizations and the organizational subjectivities on which they depend are regarded as semblances of coherence that are performatively narrated.

Based on Butler's performative ontology, and on the commitment to 'undoing' as a methodological imperative outlined above, what we describe here as anti-narrative interviewing is designed to do precisely the opposite to this narrative performativity. Specifically, it focuses on 'the aim of persuasion' (Butler, 2005: 12), the methodological intention being to 'undo' apparent semblances of coherence in order to encourage critical reflection on the conditions of organizational recognition upon which they depend. An analytical qualification that it is important to reiterate in this respect is that a methodological undoing is designed to undo organizational subjectivities, and the normative conditions upon which they depend, and not organizational subjects. This means that as a research method, anti-narrative interviewing puts into practice a reflexive, methodological undertaking that seeks to undo the conditions of subjective recognition within organizational processes and settings. In particular, it seeks to understand the consequences for those for whom the evocation of normative subject positions is not possible or desirable.

For clarification, we use the term 'anti-narrative' in this respect, to describe a methodological approach to research as a critical, reflexive process of undoing (Butler, 2004). Anti-narrative research seeks to unravel seemingly coherent narratives, including chronological ones, in order to reveal the labour that goes into producing and maintaining them. In addition, it encourages critical reflection on the consequences for those involved, of being unable or unwilling to conform to the performativity required to sustain coherence. To put it simply, our approach seeks to encourage critical, reflexive evaluation of the conditions and consequences of narrative construction within organizational settings. Our Butler-inspired method differs from Boje's (2001, 2008) methodological concept of 'ante-narrative', which emphasizes that in order to understand the full complexity of organizational storytelling it is important to examine the small, fragmented discourses that are told 'live', as events unfold, and to consider how these fragments result in stories that are complex and multiple. These fragmented, incoherent pieces of story are referred to as '*ante*-narratives' (emphasis added) in Boje's account, and are viewed as stories told *before* narrative closure is achieved. Following Butler, and emphasizing that because the (organizational) self requires constant narration, our methodological premise precludes the possibility of narrative closure but instead, seeks to 'undo' the conditions compelling its pursuit.

Our anti-narrative approach therefore seeks to disrupt the apparent linearity, stability and coherence of organizational performances by 'undoing' (Butler, 2004) seemingly coherent subjectivities as a methodologically reflexive move. At the same time, it encourages research participants to reflect on their own organizational 'undoing' through the conditions of subjective viability. In practice this opens up a methodological space within which participants can reflect on the tensions, conflicts and compromises involved in becoming and maintaining viability at work through the narration of seemingly coherent, recognizable selves[iv].

In pursuit of our anti-narrative approach we encouraged our participants to reflect on experiences such as those outlined above by adapting a drawing-based method to simultaneous data generation and analysis that we had previously encountered in Wallman's (2011) anthropological study of local network effects, and in Longhurst's (2001) use of 'symbolic maps' in her study of women's negotiation of their pregnant bodies in public places[v]. We began by conducting a visually led interaction, asking participants to draw and then talk through an adaptation of Venn diagrams traditionally used to illustrate connective sets in mathematics. Inspired by Fournier's (2002) account of how the participants in her research eluded discrete categorisation of their identities (see also Beech, 2010), our inclusion of the Venn diagrams was designed to encourage participants to reflect on how aspects of themselves that they felt were particularly important were interrelated or disconnected, with some aspects of their lived experiences being brought to the fore, while others were retired. The approach was also intended to encourage critical reflection on the complexities characterizing lived experience, teasing out contradictions and overlaps. In practice, we offered participants an illustration of how the Venn diagram might be used (drawn from an earlier pilot study we conducted), emphasizing that this was merely for illustrative purposes. Then, using a whiteboard to allow for flexibility, we invited participants to draw their own versions of the diagram. During the interviews several participants altered the form or added material around their circles to convey more detail or emphasis. For example, one of our participants encircled her entire diagram with a larger circle that she labelled 'lesbian' to emphasize that she felt this particular aspect of her identity was the most all encompassing (see Figure One).

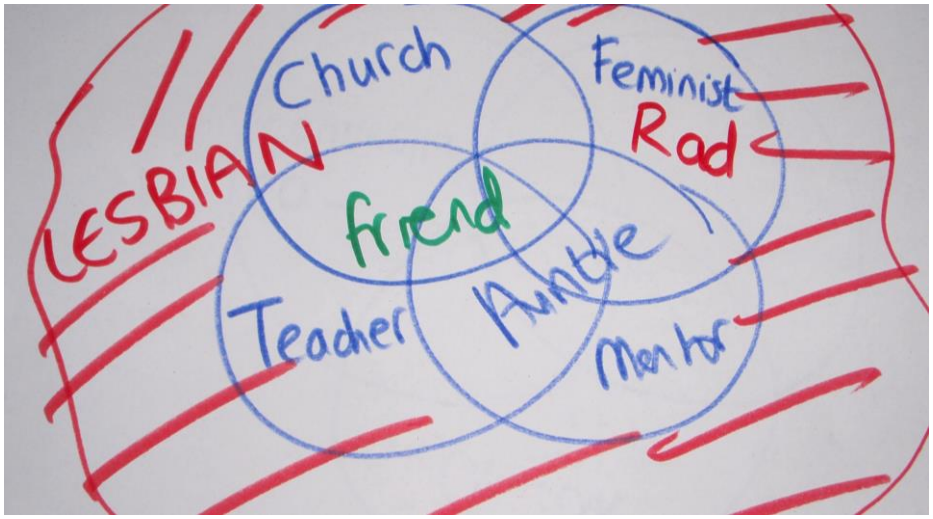

Figure One : Example of an adapted Venn diagram

Methodologically, these Venn diagrams were not intended to contribute to our data as such, but rather to provide a reflexive way of accessing the tacit and elusive connectivities that are often naturalized in everyday experience, 'written out' of organizational identities, or categorized as relatively fixed and discrete in more traditional research designs (see Fournier, 2002 for a discussion). We used these drawings as well as a relatively broad interview schedule to guide subsequent discussion in the interviews, although each of the three researchers was very flexible in how we used the interview schedule, allowing the participants to lead the discussion.

Rather than seeking clarity and categorisation, we encouraged participants to reflect on how various aspects of their identities 'get tangled up and mixed together' as one of them put it. In practice, this meant that we encouraged participants to articulate disruptions, tensions and negotiations within their narratives, considering the work involved in maintaining apparent coherence and in conforming to the norms they described as governing acceptability within their respective workplace settings. We framed this emphasis through quite simple questions such as 'Tell me about yourself and what you do', or 'Tell me about your experiences at work'. But rather than leading participants through the interview as a

narrative in itself, producing what Boje (2001) calls 'modernist stories', we encouraged participants to constantly move back and forth across times and places in their respective accounts, often using their venn diagrams to refer back to[vi]. This created narratives that had no discernible linearity and which were designed precisely to disrupt the apparent coherence that linearity implies. Throughout the interviews we asked participants to focus on sections and intersections in their diagrams, considering not only what was included but also what they consciously chose to leave out as well as reflecting on what might not have occurred to them to bring into the discussion.

While rich and varied, what was common across the accounts was a reflexive emphasis on the sheer work involved in narrating a coherent self. All of our participants reflected on how they had to articulate and live through a narrative that they felt had to coherently situate them not only in terms of a personal history but also within a broader narrative shaped by heteronormative assumptions about life course experiences and trajectories. Emma particularly reflected on the difficulties she identified in trying to make sense of herself in terms of a linear heteronormative life course, a compulsion she said she regularly encountered during work-based interactions such as those involving professional development workshops or interviews, or more informally in social groups to which she belonged. As she put it, reflecting specifically on how difficult she found it to think of her own experiences in terms of a chronological 'life course':

> "Course" to me suggests a path and a more linear kind of thing. So I think I've found that quite challenging, to not be doing like 'the timeline' … I don't think of myself as being in the middle of a timeline. That just doesn't make sense to me, or my life … and certainly not the timeline that's expected of me.

We were particularly mindful of the ways on which the compulsion to conform, to which Emma refers above, effectively 'undid' our participants, requiring them to continually work on constructing and maintaining heteronormative timelines that conflate the complexity of their lived experiences in ways that, as Emma suggests, they did not think of themselves. Therefore our ontological premise, outlined above, as well as the ethos of openness discussed in more detail below, meant that we made no attempt to define or categorize any temporal or life course 'markers' during the research process with Emma or our other participants. Instead, we allowed each of them to articulate their own views and experiences in ways that made sense to themselves, or which made no sense but which they felt compelled, or simply able, to articulate. The interviews were therefore designed to provide a methodological opportunity to 'undo' rather than replicate the compulsion to present and perform organizational subjectivity through semblances of narrative coherence, such as those premised upon linear, heteronormative assumptions about the life course.

Once these interviews had been transcribed and subject to a first level thematic analysis (although not synthesizing or categorizing these themes) discussed among the three researchers, we presented the transcripts along with our initial interpretations of emergent findings from each interview back to each of the respective participants. This sought to develop a dialogic methodology designed to be both collective (Brannan, 2011) and inter-subjective (Cunliffe, 2003), within which data generation and analysis formed part of a reflexive, dialogical process. This meant that, in a similar way to Stephenson (2005), our analysis proceeded by trying to denaturalize the accounts we were given, so that both data generation and analysis constituted an on going and integrated, reflexive process of methodological undoing.

Reflexivity and an ethics of openness

To recap, our approach was underpinned by three inter-related aims: (i) a concern to create the conditions of possibility for participants to reflexively 'undo' seemingly coherent narratives of their working selves; (ii) to provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on the work that goes into maintaining narrative coherence within their respective organizational settings, and (iii) to encourage participants to reflect on their perceptions and experiences of the consequences of being unable, or unwilling, to maintain narrative coherence. Our research therefore aimed to create a reflexive space within which lived experiences of organizational marginalization and exclusion could be articulated and reflected upon. This concern integrated both the ontological premise of the research, one that sought to facilitate a reflexive 'undoing' of organizational subjectivities, and its underlying ethos, the latter demanding an openness to the Other as the ethical basis of the research design to which we now turn.

Taking our theoretical cue from Butler (2003, 2004), our aim throughout the research was to work towards a more collaborative, embodied and inter-subjective understanding of reflexivity than is often the case in organizational research. This involved both 'an interrogation of our own frameworks of knowing' (Author reference); a process which, as indicated above, required us to continually and inter-subjectively evaluate our own assumptions and their implications for the research. It also involved, in Butler's terms, a conception of reflexivity as shaped by reciprocity and relationality, and by the constant need to 'give an account of oneself' (Butler, 2005). This approach is premised upon an understanding of reflexivity as situated and enacted by all parties involved in the research process, and as a methodological pre-condition resulting from our inter-subjective, mutual interdependence and recognition of our shared vulnerability. In practice, this meant that we were mindful of the risks attached to our own potential complicity in normalizing knowledge production and subjective categorisation in such a way that might inadvertently reproduce linearity and stability, replicating precisely the normative compulsions our research was

designed to undo. Yet we were even more conscious of the potential ethical problems opened up by a methodology designed to 'undo' the relatively precarious subject positions that, as became more apparent to us as the research process proceeded, our research participants worked hard to maintain.

In considering the ethical issues at stake here, we took Butler's (2004, 2005) integrated ethico-politics as our starting point. As Butler herself puts it, emphasizing the mutual vulnerability engendered by our need for recognition in exposing ourselves to the Other, through our fundamentally embodied relationality, we constantly stake a claim to recognition yet simultaneously run the risk of misrecognition. Yet without taking this risk we cannot live a bearable life. As she puts it, 'we're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something' (Butler, 2004: 23). By opening ourselves up to the Other, Butler reminds us, we both reaffirm our existence, at the same time as rendering ourselves vulnerable to its disavowal. In this sense, she invites us to engage with the challenges for ethics, reflexivity and narrative posed by a theoretical recognition of our mutual inter-dependency and the need for us to develop an ethical openness to understanding the constraints governing the conferral of recognition, as well as the consequences of its denial[vii]. It is this challenge that we have sought to take up and think through in terms of its implications, and methodological potential, for organizational researchers. In practice, this involved framing the research and ourselves as researchers within relations of reciprocation and recognition in at least three ways that we discuss below, manifest through our approach to (i) self-selective sampling, (ii) data generation as anti-hierarchical, and (iii) data analysis as dialogical.

First, as indicated above, our approach to sampling was highly subjective and largely self-selecting. We negotiated access to participants using a variety of purposive sampling techniques, including placing advertisements on older LGBT websites and through

organizations that support older LGBT people, eventually making contact with eight participants who volunteered to take part in the study. We stated that we were looking to interview 'men and women over the age of 40 who currently work full or part-time, or who are self-employed and self-identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual'. We assured all potential participants that interviews would be anonymous, confidential and subject to the relevant codes of ethical practice. All participants were invited to begin the discussion with the respective researcher before the interview itself, primarily via email, and to continue to exchange thoughts and ideas with the researchers after the interview, as we discuss in more depth below, an approach that was designed to disrupt the parameters of the interview to break down the distinction between data generation and analysis, and to encourage a dialogical relationship between the researchers and the research participants. With this in mind, and in keeping with the ethos of openness outlined above, and with the way in which we sought to integrate this into our research design, all of those who expressed an interest in being involved were invited to take part, resulting in a final sample of five gay men, two lesbian women and one male-female transsexual (as indicated above). Where the interviews took place was also important - most occurred either in our, or the participants', own homes; they were all digitally recorded, and took between one and three hours.

Because the sample was largely self-selecting, our participants tended to be quite reflective, analytical people and this arguably in itself reflected a relatively high level of cultural capital, educational attainment and in several cases, workplace experiences that were either, on the one hand, particularly negative or, on the other, especially conducive to being 'open' about their sexuality. However, it would be an over-simplification either to homogenize our participants' backgrounds in this respect, or to attribute the key themes that emerged from our interviews simply to the composition of the sample. For instance, although many of our participants were relatively financially secure, all of them discussed the various

difficulties they had experienced throughout their lives negotiating a viable sense of self. In this respect, our research aimed to provide a relatively secure socio-methodological space within which participants could discuss their lived experiences of this, and to reflect on the sheer effort involved in continually trying to rework the disjuncture between the apparently coherent organizational narratives they were compelled to perform and the complexities of their lived experience[viii]. Reflecting on his initial interview with us, Chris explained what this had meant to him:

> It was a pleasure to share those thoughts. To be honest, although being gay is such an important part of my life, talking about it is rare. Not many people ask questions. It's taken for granted almost, but never investigated by others. Accepting it is one thing, talking about it is still a bit of a taboo.

To this end, moving on to the second dimension of our attempt to develop a methodology premised upon a recognition-based ethics of openness (Butler, 2004), our approach to data generation was self-consciously anti-hierarchical and reciprocal, in a way that had to be continually reflexive, as our own performativities as researchers were often undone within the research process. In one instance, for example, this involved one researcher opening up to participants by sharing his vulnerability as a gay man and discussing mutual experiences of misrecognition. In several other instances, this involved an interview dynamic in which participants destabilized our own attempts, as researchers, to flatten the assumed epistemic hierarchy within academic research. Our own efforts in this respect involved us attempting, as far as possible, to set up an interview dynamic in which participants took on the role of knowing subjects based on their own lived experiences. But several participants unsettled these attempts, constituting instances of methodological undoings (Butler, 2004) through which our own subject positions were unravelled and the apparent coherence of our

own performances within the research process was thrown into relief. By way of illustration, one of the researchers arrived at the agreed interview time to be met by a participant who wanted to begin by discussing her (the researcher's) academic publications that she (the participant) had looked up and read prior to the interview taking place. Initially this unsettled the interviewer who felt that her attempt to frame the encounter so as to cultivate a subject position of 'knowing expert' for the research participant had been somehow exposed (and the 'framing' of both parties, and the interview itself, therefore revealed), as the interviewer had been repositioned by the participant within a presumed epistemic hierarchy. The interviewer encouraged a discussion that provided a space within which both women could discuss the experience and how they felt about it in relation to their respective roles and positions within the research. Brought to the fore, and played out in this encounter, was a shared understanding of mutual vulnerability premised, in part, on a shared recognition of the relative sense of powerlessness experienced by researchers in unfamiliar research settings or encounters, as well as the relative 'strangeness' and sense of exposure experienced by the participants, both themes that are often overlooked in methodological accounts of organizational research (Gilmore and Kenny, 2014). Rather than understood as 'difficulties' that the methodology needed to overcome, our research design was specifically intended to cultivate these moments of disruption and destabilisation, revealing the performativities at stake within the research process, with the aim being to privilege and also understand the performative capacity, of the research participants in assuming positions as knowing subjects within the research.

However, what this undoing also implied was a more troubling unravelling of participants' carefully crafted selves. As we discuss in more depth below, this raised significant ethical considerations for us regarding the relative vulnerability of our research participants. Debbie for instance, reflected on the disjuncture between the opportunity to 'open up' in the interview and the denial of recognition she experienced in her home life. As

she expressed it, ‘what I get are these nice comments when I can sit and talk … in a rational way, and then I’ll go home and I’ll get “God, you look stupid. Why are you dressed like that?” You’ve got no idea’. On the one hand, Debbie described the experience of taking part of the research as very affirming: ‘I get these nice comments’. But at the same time, she reflects on our limited understanding of her life outside of the interview setting: ‘you’ve got no idea’. In this latter comment, Debbie suggests that not only is our research design not enabling us (and her) to articulate the disjuncture between different aspects of her lived experience, she also implicitly questions the ethics of our approach and of our methodological conduct in ‘taking apart’ the various subject positions she struggles to occupy and the coherent narrative she works to maintain, her latter comment potentially implying both an epistemic and ethical failure on our part. These kind of interventions were particularly important throughout the research process because they required us to be continually mindful of emphasizing the research project as a whole as a reflexive, reciprocal undoing, opening up a space for the interview as an anti-narrative endeavour yet one which explicitly sought to avoid ‘unravelling’ the participants involved and instead strove to ensure that the project as a whole was underpinned by a recognition-based, collective reflexivity (Gilmore and Kenny, 2014).

This approach also underpinned the third aspect of our ethics of openness, namely a commitment to dialogical data analysis. In qualitative data analysis, the conventional premise of coding is to arrange, sort and categorize themes across a range of sources (Bryman and Bell, 2011). In attempting to avoid reproducing organizational ‘undoings’, our analysis sought to steer away from simply categorizing or coding themes within the transcripts (tempting as this was), but rather involved an iterative process premised upon returning to the digital recordings (as per Gilmore and Kenny’s 2014 recommendations) and the Venn diagrams produced during the interviews (although these were not initially intended to be used as

'data', but rather emerged as such). This was extremely important, providing points to 'unsettle' our analysis or question the emergence of apparent coherence. In practice, this meant that rather than attempting to construct a coherent 'story' or linear narrative out of participants' accounts either within the interview itself, or retrospectively within the analysis, we attempted to work with participants to achieve precisely the opposite. Our underlying aim, informed by the Butler-inspired methodology outlined above, was to develop a method of data generation and analysis that would enable us to 'undo' the apparent coherence of our participants' organizational narratives in order to reflect on the normative processes and identity work by which they are underpinned, and to reveal the complexities of lived experience they conflate or negate.

Conclusion

In sum, this paper has explored the methodological possibilities that Judith Butler's theory of performativity opens up for researching organizational settings and relations, drawing particularly on insights from Butler's critique of subjective recognition as a process through which the complexity of lived experience is conflated in the performance of seemingly coherent, recognizable subjectivities. In our discussion of interview-based research focusing on ageing LGBT sexualities, we have considered what it means to undertake research premised upon a performative ontology grounded in a critique of the normative conditions governing organizational recognition, a commitment to a reflexive 'undoing' and an ethics of openness to the Other. Specifically, we have asked, what form might a Butler-inspired methodology take? What opportunities might it open up, and what difficulties might it pose, for organizational researchers? In response to these questions, we have proposed and evaluated a method described here as anti-narrative interviewing, arguing that this method constitutes a valuable methodological resource for organization studies researchers with an

interest in understanding how and why idealized organizational subjectivities are formed and sustained. Gilmore and Kenny (2014: 20) conclude their discussion of reflexivity and power dynamics in organizational research by emphasizing that, if researchers 'wish to remain committed to the production of rich accounts in which the embeddedness of researchers within organizational research contexts is given space to emerge, the development of new approaches is needed'. We have sought to pick up on this point, particularly in developing Gilmore and Kenny's concern to build the theoretical resources from which organizational researchers might draw in the future.

In this respect, our concern has been to reflect on the methodological consequences of Butler's theory of performativity (Butler, 1988, 1990, 1993) and undoing (Butler, 2000, 2004), and on her recognition-based ethico-politics of openness (Butler, 2004, 2005). We argue that taken together, this body of writing provides new ways of understanding and of studying the role played by organizations in compelling particular narrative performances. If, as Butler (2004: 23) puts it, 'I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations' what does this tell us about how and why our subjectivities are compelled and organized? Why is it that the relations we live require us to 'tell a story'? How, and why, must our organizational settings result in us being 'undone by these very relations'? Our research suggests that organizations play an important role in faltering our narratives, the very narratives that organizations compel us to cohere on their behalf. As organization studies researchers, we must interrogate this process and its consequences by providing critical, reflexive spaces within our research for participants to reflect on how and why they are 'gripped' by their narratives, and consider what this means in terms of their respective lived experiences of organizational settings and relations. Within organization studies, we are only beginning to explore these ideas and the range of possible responses and strategies we might subsequently

mobilize. Our own contribution to this process has been to consider some of the possibilities opened up by a reflexive, methodological undoing within organizational research, one premised upon a recognition of the ethical risks attached to, but also the political importance of, undoing organizational undoings.

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[i] We use the term 'organizational undoing' here, and throughout the paper, to refer to what Dale and Latham (2014: 7) have recently described as 'organizational processes which fix and stabilize differences and categories, and apply rules and procedures to maintain these', arguing that subjective viability and organizational recognition depends upon the capacity to maintain a performatively credible conformity to these processes, rules and procedures.

[ii] Our use of the term 'data generation' rather than 'data collection' here and throughout the paper is intended to emphasize our view that research data is generated through the research process rather than pre-exists it, awaiting 'capture'.

[iii] We use the term heteronormativity to refer to the norms that compel particular gendered and sexual perfomativities, whilst constraining others, and that in doing so (re)produce power relations of compulsory heterosexuality, ascribing to heterosexuality a normative and privileged status by reinforcing a heterosexual/homosexual binary (Berlant and Warner, 1998, see also Butler, 1990, 1993, 2000).

[iv] Drawing on Butler (2005), our study of ageing LGBT subjectivities aimed to disrupt chronological narratives and the social processes, including processes of organization, occluded by them. Underlying our approach was a methodology designed to disturb coherence and tease out overlaps, rather than work with and through apparently discrete categories of identity. While our account appears to reflect a logical, linear progression from research design through data generation and analysis culminating in an abstracted process of 'writing up', in practice each of these various aspects of the research process were dynamically interrelated, integrated and improvisational within our research design.

[v] We have also encountered a similar artistic method in the work of photographer Steve Rosenfield's ongoing project, *'What I Be'*, focusing on the visual articulation of participants' ontological insecurities. Rosenfeld's methodology involves volunteers taking a felt tipped pen and completing the following sentence somewhere (anywhere) on their own bodies: 'I am not …' Recent participants in his study have written slogans on their faces, hands and arms such as 'fat', 'faggot', 'Black', 'pushover', 'blind' and so on, before being photographed by Rosenfeld and displayed on an open access website. For further details see: whatibeproject.com

[vi] For a similar approach to this method, see Carlsen et al's (2013) discussion of the integration of A5 cards into research interviews with management practitioners as a way of facilitating dialogue, tactile engagement, ludic interaction and collaboration.

[vii] In this aspect of her writing in particular (manifest across a number of texts cited here), Butler engages with a long tradition of phenomenological accounts of the relationship between mutual recognition and ethical life, arguably beginning (in western philosophy at least) with Hegel, and articulated most clearly in contemporary social theory by writers such as Axel Honneth (1995) and Nancy Fraser (1997).

[viii] Indeed, having read the accounts our participants gave of the time and energy they had to continually expend on maintaining semblances of coherence at work, one of the reviewers of an earlier paper (subsequently published) based on this research wrote: 'the struggle and effort involved in people's performance and repairing of identity was palpable; I felt tired after reading the findings!'