

Reconceptualising the gender/productivity relation beyond the gender binary: an exploration of the productivity narratives of transgender and gender non-conforming workers in the UK

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While the relation between gender and productivity has been predominantly explored in management and organization studies literature along the rigid boundaries of the gender binary, the perspectives of transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) workers have received little attention. Moreover, whereas studies have illustrated how productivity is a gendered construct that favours cis-gender men over cis-gender women at work, alternative conceptualisations of productivity have rarely been explored. Aiming to come to a more flexible and gender-minority-inclusive conceptualisation of the gender/productivity relation, this study analyses 19 interviews with TGNC workers in the UK and develops an alternative notion of productivity based on Queer Theory. The findings illustrate how TGNC workers produce narratives in which they portray the lack of queer productivity in the workplace as requiring emotional and queer labour. They engage in discourses that present these forms of gendered labour as draining them from resources they could otherwise invest in their individual hegemonic productivity. Simultaneously, they portray workplaces where they are not engaging in gendered labour as environments where their individual hegemonic productivity is facilitated. This paper contributes to the literature by reconceptualising productivity as a multiplicity, and by reframing the gender/productivity relation beyond its binary frameworks of reference. It also highlights the significance of social-identity-sensitive notions of productivity, and it illuminates forms of minoritised gender inequality tied to productivity dynamics in the workplace.

The relation between gender and productivity has been predominantly explored in the management and organization studies literature along the rigid boundaries of the gender binary. On the one hand, both mainstream and critical studies have mainly conceptualised gender along the gender binary when exploring the gender/productivity relation, with workers who identify and/or are perceived as women being constituted as potentially boosting (Bae and Skaggs, 2019; Périlleux and Szafarz, 2022) or supposedly hampering (Perreira, 2021; Jankowska et al.,

2023; Kasymova et al., 2021; Tleubayev and Kozhakhmet, 2022; Whittington, 2011) productivity in relation to their difference from the cis-male worker. On the other hand, a different branch in the critical literature has revealed how the notion of productivity itself is implicitly tied to the cis-male body (Acker, 1990; Burns et al., 2022; Jones and Floyd, 2024; Steffan, 2021) and to what are perceived as hegemonically masculine competences, skills and behaviours (Beck et al., 2021; Fenech et al., 2022; Jonnergård et al., 2010; Kark et al., 2024). While these extant understandings on the gender/productivity relation are mainly based in the gender binary, the management and organization studies literature on transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) workers has paid little attention to productivity. Yet, the themes this body of literature has explored, such as the discrimination and stigmatization with which TGNC workers are confronted (Dray et al. 2020; Jeanes and Janes, 2021; Martinez et al. 2017; Muhr et al. 2016) and the (in)effectiveness of organizational support mechanisms (Ozturk and Tatli, 2016; Primecz and Pelyhe, 2024), are likely to affect TGNC workers' productivity.

Current approaches towards the gender/productivity relation not only marginalise the perspectives and experiences of minoritised genders but also fail to look beyond hegemonic notions of productivity that do not take cis-masculinity as its frame of reference. Therefore, this study aims to come to a more flexible and inclusive understanding of the gender/productivity relation, by focusing on the productivity experiences of 19 TGNC workers in the UK. It also develops an additional, alternative notion of productivity that is linked to queerness rather than to cis-masculinity, based on Queer Theory (Butler, 1990; De Lauretis, 1991; Kosofski Sedgwick, 1990). The findings of this research show how TGNC workers produce narratives in which they present cis-normative workplaces as absorbing resources by requiring queer and emotional labour, which they could have otherwise invested in their work tasks to optimise their hegemonic productivity. In this paper, first the different bodies of the gender/productivity literature are discussed, followed by an overview of the TGNC literature. Then, the theoretical concepts of queer labour and queer productivity are introduced, followed by the methodology section. In the findings, the analysed productivity narratives of TGNC workers are presented, followed by a reflection on the findings and implications for the discussed bodies of literature in the discussion, and the conclusion.

The narrow conceptualisation of 'gender' in studies on the gender/productivity relation

Mainstream and critical management studies have mainly conceptualised gender along the gender binary when exploring the gender/productivity relation, relying on and (re)producing conceptualisations that portray cis-gender women as facilitating or hampering productivity

because of their difference from cis-gender men. Mainstream studies, based on a positivist ontology, have mainly examined through quantitative approaches how and under which conditions gender diversity relates to productivity at work. In these studies, productivity is often defined as employee productivity, calculated based on metrics and aspects such as operating revenue, sales or net firm income divided by the number of employees (Ali, Ng and Kulik, 2014; Bae and Skaggs, 2019; Kim et al., 2021; Luanglath, Ali and Mohannak, 2019). Gender is typically conceptualised along the gender binary, with studies focussing on the representation of cis-gender men and women in boards, management teams, or the overall workforce and usually relying on a calculated measure such as the Blau's index of heterogeneity (e.g. Ali, Ng and Kulik, 2014; Bae and Skaggs, 2019; Gonzalez and Denisi, 2009; Kim et al., 2021; Luanglath, Ali and Mohannak, 2019).

These studies have produced mixed and nuanced results, with some finding a positive linear relation between specific forms of gender diversity and productivity (Ali, Ng and Kulik 2014; Luanglath, Ali and Mohannak, 2019), while others have found a U-shaped relation, indicating that productivity might be highest with homogeneous groups (Bae and Skaggs, 2019; Richard, Murthi and Ismale, 2007). In explaining these results, studies have relied on various theoretical framings, including among others on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel et al., 1971) or the business case for diversity (Robinson and Dechant, 1997). Social Identity Theory holds that group cohesion facilitates productivity, while (gender) diversity is presumed to undermine productivity, as the generation of ingroup/outgroup categorizations within work groups may undermine group functioning (Bae and Skaggs, 2019; Van Knippenberg and Schippers, 2007). The business case for diversity presumes a positive effect of (gender) diversity on productivity, as it holds that workforce diversity is good for business, among others because a multiplicity of perspectives is expected to stimulate innovation and creativity by bringing different ideas to the table (Robinson and Dechant, 1997).

Critical studies have criticised the business case for diversity (among others) for instrumentally making the inclusion of marginalised groups of employees dependent and conditional on their ability to facilitate the realisation of business goals (Noon, 2007; Zanoni et al., 2010). Hence, critical work has relied on a different understanding of the gender/productivity relation. Aiming to unravel the functioning of inequality mechanisms in and beyond organizations, a branch of critical work on the gender/productivity relation assumes that the unequal division of reproductive labour at home constitutes a significant barrier for the productivity of cis-gender women at work. In these studies, workplace productivity is typically measured at individual employee level and is defined as a quantitative output, such as number

of patents (Whittington, 2011) or publication rates (Perreira, 2021), or as a self-rated measure (Jankowska et al., 2023). Gender tends to be taken for granted and normalised from the perspective of cis-gender women who are mothers and who are in heterosexual household with a cis-gender man. This branch of the literature, which has particularly burgeoned in response to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, has illustrated how the way in which these women (are expected to) take up a disproportionate amount of domestic labour and childcare responsibilities negatively affects their workplace productivity, often in contrast to their male counterparts (Perreira, 2021; Jankowska et al., 2023; Kasymova et al., 2021; Tleubayev and Kozhakhmet, 2022; Whittington, 2011). This body of work has provided key insights into the way in which the burden of accumulated small everyday tasks at home has a big impact on women's careers (Perreira, 2021). Yet, it has been criticised for conflating women with mothers, and for excluding minoritised gender identities and 'non-traditional' household structures (Perreira, 2021; Utoft, 2020). Indeed, both the mainstream and critical literature have mainly presented cis-gender perspectives when studying the gender/productivity relation, thereby marginalising the experiences of TGNC workers.

Conceptualising 'productivity' as cis-masculine in studying the gender/productivity relation

A different branch in the critical literature has revealed how the notion of productivity itself is gendered (Acker, 1990; Burns et al., 2022; Jones and Floyd, 2024; Steffan, 2021). Relying on a social constructionist ontology, it has illustrated how ideas of productivity at work are implicitly linked to what are perceived as hegemonically masculine competences, skills and behaviours (Beck et al., 2021; Fenech et al., 2022; Jonnergård et al., 2010; Kark et al., 2024). This body of work relies on the notion, inspired by the work of Joan Acker (1990; 2006), that organizations themselves actively produce gender hierarchies through seemingly neutral organisational practices that implicitly deploy the cis-gender man as their frame of reference. Relying on a social constructionist stance, productivity is conceptualised here as a gendered, neoliberal source of power that favours cis-gender men over cis-gender women along the gender binary (Jones and Floyd, 2023; Steffan, 2021).

On the one hand, studies in this branch of literature have illustrated how organizational instruments such as performance appraisals and assessment centres favour what are seen as typically male qualities and characteristics over what are perceived as hegemonically female traits (Beck et al., 2021; Fenech et al., 2022; Jonnergård et al., 2010; Kark et al., 2024). By basing notions of productivity and performance on aspects that tend to be easier for men to be

recognised for, such as perceptions of time on the job (Fenech et al., 2022) and assertiveness (Kark et al., 2024), women may be approached as less productive than their male counterparts, with negative consequences for their recruitment chances, salary and career progression. On the other hand, authors have shown how dominant organisational notions of productivity implicitly deploy the male body as the frame of reference, rather than the female one. By constructing women as Other (Kark et al., 2024), organisations deploy the cis-male body as the (what is presented as) neutral standard in relation to which the (menstruating, lactating, menopausal...) female body is seen as deviant, different, flawed and unproductive. Central elements to the female body, such as pregnancy (Jones and Floyd, 2024), menopause (Steffan, 2021) and breastfeeding (Burns et al., 2022), are typically approached as incompatible with the productivity demands of the workplace and contribute to notions of women as ‘less ideal’ workers. Female practices such as pumping breastmilk at work or going on maternity leave tend to be seen as disrupting women’s productivity and as threats to their career success (Burns et al., 2022; Jones and Floyd, 2024).

While these studies have provided key insights into the gendered nature of this hegemonic form of productivity, little is known about alternative conceptualisations of productivity that do not take cis-masculinity as their implicit frame of reference. Yet, to come to a more inclusive approach, there is a need to conceptualise productivity differently.

The missing focus on productivity in the TGNC literature

To date, the management and organization studies literature on TGNC workers has paid little attention to productivity. Yet, the themes this body of literature has explored are likely to affect the hegemonic productivity of TGNC workers, who are defined in this paper as ‘anyone who does not feel comfortable in the gender role they were attributed at birth, or who has a gender identity at odds with the labels “man” or “woman” credited to them by formal authorities’ (Whittle, 2006: xi). One branch of the literature has explored the levels and forms of labour market discrimination with which TGNC workers are confronted (Ciprikis et al., 2020; Mizock and Hopwood, 2018; O’Shea, 2020). Most statistics are available on the US context, showing that the unemployment rate of TGNC people there is estimated to be two (Mizock et al., 2017) or even over three times (James et al., 2016) the level of the general population. Some of the challenges that TGNC people encounter in the recruitment process include receiving comments about the mismatch between gender markers and names as recognised by authorities, and experiencing difficulties to prove and challenge well-masked gender discrimination in the recruitment process (Paine et al., 2025; Primecz and Pelyhe, 2024; Torres-Castro and Morales-

Villena, 2025). When TGNC people are employed, they tend to be overrepresented in precarious jobs and to have lower levels of pay compared to non-TGNC workers (Cipriakis et al., 2020; Greene and Ervin, 2024). These inequality mechanisms may limit the ways in which TGNC workers can become hegemonically productive.

In the workplace, TGNC workers are often confronted with stigmatization and micro-aggressions (Hadjisolomou, 2021; Mills and Owens, 2023), for example when being misgendered by co-workers (McEntarfer and Rice, 2023; Paine et al., 2025), or when being barred from bathrooms and changing rooms (Hennekam and Dumazert, 2023; Primecz and Pelyhe, 2024). The forms of discrimination and stigmatization that TGNC workers face may differ, depending on their (perceived) gender identity and other intersecting social identities. TGNC workers who align themselves the least with the gender binary are the most likely to experience forms of stigmatisation and discrimination at work that are unique to minoritised genders (Dray et al., 2020; Jeanes and Janes, 2021; Martinez et al., 2017; Muhr et al., 2016). Simultaneously, TGNC workers who have transitioned tend to be ‘re-enlisted’ (Schilt and Connell, 2007) by their co-workers to fit the gender binary and might subsequently benefit from cis-male-like privilege or suffer from cis-woman-like discrimination (Asraf et al., 2023; Greene and Ervin, 2024). Furthermore, racialised TGNC workers are confronted with intersectional structures of disadvantage (Greene and Ervin, 2024; McEntarfer and Rice, 2023). Studies on other social identity groups indicate that these types of aggressions can have a severe impact on workers’ levels of hegemonic productivity in the workplace (Vara-Horna et al., 2023).

Another theme in the literature focuses on TGNC workers’ coping strategies and organizational support mechanisms for this community. Coping mechanisms range from resilient strategies such as seeking organizational positions of power to change workplace cultures (Mizock et al., 2017) and confronting or refusing to serve transphobic customers (Hadjisolomou, 2021) to strategies that illustrate TGNC workers’ vulnerability, such as hiding one’s gender appearance (Ozturk and Tatli, 2016) and leaving transphobic workplaces (Hadjisolomou, 2021). Simultaneously, studies on organizational EDI and diversity management practices, although having identified some effective practices, show that support measures are often absent or inadequate to address the needs of the TGNC community (Ozturk and Tatli, 2016; Primecz and Pelyhe, 2024). Overall, the extant literature on TGNC in the workplace has paid little attention to hegemonic productivity. We need to broaden our understanding of TGNC workers’ productivity experiences to come to a more inclusive, alternative understanding of the gender/productivity relation.

A queer notion of productivity

To explore alternative, inclusive understandings of the gender/productivity relation, this paper not only departs from a different notion of gender compared to hegemonic gender/productivity conceptualisations by focussing on TGNC workers instead of cis-gender workers. It also takes an alternative approach towards the concept of productivity to go beyond its foundation in cis-masculinity. Among previous studies that have explored alternative conceptualisations of productivity (e.g. Adkins and Ylöstalo, 2021; Jammaers, Zanoni and Hardonk, 2016), Christensen, Just and Schwarzkopf's (2025) connect it to the concept to queerness. In their study on corporate pride partnerships, productivity is conceptualised as ethical tensions between corporate interests and corporate support of the LGBTI+ movement that are fruitful because they allow to critique organisational norms and generate new ethical norms on basis of which more inclusive organisational practices emerge (Christensen, Just and Schwarzkopf, 2025). Inspired by Christensen, Just and Schwarzkopf's (2025) conceptualisation of productivity, this study develops a queer notion of productivity by relying on Queer Theory.

Emerging out of the work of Judith Butler (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) and Teresa De Lauretis (1991), Queer Theory is characterised by a poststructuralist stance (Pirani and Daskalopoulou, 2022) that focuses on 'the constructed, contingent, unstable and heterogeneous character of subjectivity, social relations, power, and knowledge' (Sullivan, 2003: 42–43). Queer is characterised by 'its resistance to what it differs from' (Jagose, 1996: 99). It defies definition, as it is rather a critique of an identity (Butler, 2008). According to Parker (2002), queer 'is both a claim to difference and to community, to radical alterity and to political tactics, at one and the same time' (p. 148). Queer theory and queer politics aim to challenge gender binaries (Rumens, Moulin de Souza and Brewis, 2019) and to disrupt dominant understandings of gender, bodies and identities in society (Pirani and Daskalopoulou, 2022). In the context of the workplace, the goal is to disrupt cis-normative workplace norms and to produce alternative organisational norms on basis of which queer-inclusive organisational practices can unfold themselves (Christensen, Just and Schwarzkopf, 2025; Parker, 2002). Cisnormativity 'assumes individual traits and social roles that correspond to binary gender orientations specified at birth' (Anderson, 2024: 1).

Based on these characteristics of queer theory, I develop the notion of *queer labour*, which is defined here as work that aims to challenge cis-gender norms in the workplace to create new types of practices that are not tied to cisnormativity. Queer labour often differs from regular labour in the workplace, as it has emancipatory goals to challenge the status quo, while

regular labour intends to realize organizational goals. Based on queer's basis in community (Parker, 2002) and resistance (Jagose, 1996), queer labour is collective and may generate change slowly over a long period of time, as organisational norms are rigid. Queer labour becomes productive (queer productivity) when it successfully challenges cisnormativity at work and gives rise to new, queer-inclusive organizational norms and practices. Based on the concepts of queer labour and queer productivity, in this article the following research questions are addressed: 1) What are the gendered forms of labour TGNC workers engage in at work? 2) How do TGNC workers portray the relation between these gendered forms of labour and queer productivity? 3) How do TGNC workers portray the relation between these gendered forms of labour and their individual hegemonic productivity?

Methodology

Data collection

The data that is used for this study was collected in the scope of a bigger research project that aimed to capture the enablers and barriers to individual productivity as perceived by a diverse set of workers in the United Kingdom. After the research project received approval from the Research Ethics Review Board of the university, nearly 200 participants were recruited via employee resource groups within organisations, recruitment agencies and snowball sampling. To capture a wide range of perspectives and experiences, participants were identified across sectors and across a wide range of career stages, ranging from entry-level to positions at the highest level of seniority. They were selected based on whether they self-identify with at least one of the social identity groups that the study aimed to include, covering workers who have a quantifiably lower trajectory in the British labour market, or are 'neglected' in the sense of low levels of coverage by firm policies to aid the group's progression. This included, among others, workers who self-identify as TGNC workers. Where possible, research participants were matched with a researcher with similar social identity characteristics, to facilitate the data collection process (Rosenberg & Tilley, 2021). However, as the interview team consisted of five cis-gender researchers, it was not possible to apply this approach to the TGNC workers. This may have limited the possibilities for gaining trust and building rapport in the data collection process, and it may have discouraged some potential TGNC research participants from participating in the study or from fully sharing their personal and potentially sensitive experiences, due to the lack of shared identity between the researcher and themselves (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013). Yet, members of the research team tried to minimize this risk, by

presenting themselves as allies who intend to support vulnerable groups of workers with the study.

Relying on semi-structured interviews to allow the participants to freely share their (potentially unanticipated) experiences and to enable the researchers to go into depth with follow-up questions (Clarke and Braun, 2013), interviews were conducted online for budgetary and practicality reasons (as the original project targeted 200 interviewees) and lasted about 60 minutes each. Before the interviews, participants were provided with a study information sheet, which contained information about the research goal and procedures to safeguard confidentiality and data protection. When permission was provided, interviews were recorded, or alternatively notes were taken by the interviewer. During the interviews, participants were queried about their personal experiences with productivity at work. They were asked, among others, to elaborate on what productivity means to them, to provide examples of when they feel the most and the least productive at work, and to reflect upon (the lack of) support initiatives in their workplace. All recorded interviews were transcribed and anonymised. Each interviewee was assigned a code and pseudonym, which were used instead of real names, to safeguard anonymity. In addition, immediately after each interview, memos were written to document analytical themes, and participants were asked to fill in an online survey (using their assigned code instead of their name) to provide additional demographic data.

While workers with a broad variety of social identity characteristics were interviewed, this study relies on a subset of that dataset, selecting only those interviews conducted with workers who self-identity as a minoritised gender. Out of the nearly 200 interviews that were conducted for that overarching study, 19 interviews involved workers who identify as TGNC workers. This sub-group is predominantly British and white, with a few respondents of mixed backgrounds with other nationalities. Most respondents fall into the 20-29 or 30-39 age brackets, with almost equal representation of these two groups, while a few of them are aged above 40.

Data analysis

In the first phase of the data analysis process, I concentrated on the first research question: What are the gendered forms of labour TGNC workers engage in at work? Rather than looking for all types of labour conducted by TGNC workers, I intended to find forms of work that were specific to their minoritised gender identity. I followed an iterative process between data and theoretical concepts based on Charmaz's (2008) coding method. Relying on the concept of queer labour, I interpreted practices that disrupt cis-normative workplace norms as gendered

forms of labour. Examples include educating managers on TGNC issues and promoting the use of pronouns in the organisation. I selected and coded these excerpts and then combined them in an overarching code on queer labour. In this process of selecting interview excerpts, I noticed that respondents not only talked about the work they did to challenge cisnormativity in the workplace, but also frequently discussed how they invested time and energy in managing their emotions in relation to their workplace environment. I realized that they were engaging in emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), which is originally defined as ‘the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display’ (Hochschild, 1983: 7), and refers to ‘the effort made to transform heavy emotional moments in order to answer the feeling rules dictated within a specific environment’ (Desjardins et al., 2021: 31). I interpreted this type of work as a gendered form of labour, because the interview data revealed that these practices of emotional labour were closely intertwined with workers’ gender identity. I selected excerpts that I interpreted as forms of emotional labour, coding items such as handling emotions around (not) coming out at work, around being confronted with transphobia in the workplace, and around being misgendered by colleagues. Then, I combined these codes into an overarching code called emotional labour. I further combined the codes ‘emotional labour’ and ‘queer labour’ into a higher-level code called ‘gendered labour’.

In the second phase of the data analysis, I concentrated on the second research question: How do TGNC workers portray the relation between these gendered forms of labour and queer productivity? Building on the codes of the first phase of the data analysis, I went through the coded excerpts and looked for signs of queer productivity. In this process, I found that TGNC workers discussed instances of queer and emotional labour in relation to workplace contexts and interactions in which cisnormativity prevailed and (sufficient) queer productivity was lacking. Examples of elements I interpreted as cis-normative, include colleagues using the wrong pronouns and organisational procedures not being (sufficiently) adapted to the needs of TGNC workers. Then, I looked for the way in which workers implicitly narrated the relation between this lack of queer productivity and their emotional and/or queer labour. I captured workers’ narratives in two overarching codes: 1) The lack of (sufficient) queer productivity requires queer labour and 2) The lack of (sufficient) queer productivity requires emotional labour.

In the third phase of the data analysis, I focused on the third research question: How do TGNC workers portray the relation between these gendered forms of labour and their individual hegemonic productivity? I went back to the interview transcripts, this time looking for references to hegemonic productivity in relation to TGNC workers’ gendered labour. I

interpreted any aspects that TGNC workers self-described as performance or productivity as hegemonic productivity and I also included elements that were part of getting their formal, paid work tasks done, such as making deadlines and delivering outputs. I selected excerpts that captured narratives on the relation between queer and/or emotional labour and these forms of individual hegemonic productivity, coding them under labels such as ‘not having to think about minoritised gender identity boosts hegemonic productivity’ and ‘dealing with being misgendered negatively affects hegemonic productivity’. Then, I merged these codes into higher-level codes, leading to the identification of two overarching narratives: 1) TGNC-gendered labour drains workers from resources they could otherwise invest in their individual hegemonic productivity, and 2) TGNC workers’ individual hegemonic productivity is facilitated in workplaces where they are not required to engage in TGNC-gendered labour.

Findings

Narratives portraying workplaces that lack queer productivity as requiring queer labour

A first way in which TGNC workers portrayed the relation between gendered forms of labour and queer productivity, is by presenting cis-normative workplaces that lacked queer productivity as requiring queer labour. When sharing their cis-normative workplace experiences, respondents talked about a broad range of queer labour activities they engaged in, such as educating others on TGNC matters, helping to adapt organizational procedures and practices to the specific needs of TGNC workers, reporting transphobia, and handling situations in which they are misgendered. While talking about these forms of queer labour, various respondents emphasized how they felt constant pressure to continuously invest their time, energy and headspace into these activities. The excerpt below is exemplary thereof.

“I’m constantly having to educate people about myself, about my identity. (...) Almost every day you’re having to constantly come out to everyone. Or like, not every day, but on an ongoing basis for your whole life, it’s not just like a one and done thing, although I am very visibly trans, you know, and I don’t pass very easily as – especially when I’m speaking I have quite a masculine voice, I know that, I understand that about myself. It is quite draining when you’re constantly having to do that” (Amber, transgender woman).

Amber refers here to a cis-normative workplace context that requires her to ‘constantly come out to everyone’. She stresses that having to continuously engage in this form of queer labour

is 'quite draining', thereby discursively constructing the lack of queer productivity in her workplace as absorbing her valuable energy. The excerpt illustrates how minoritised genders need to put substantial work in navigating and communicating their gender identity in the workplace.

Other TGNC workers produced narratives in which queer labour was presented as an activity that mainly rests upon the shoulders of the TGNC community, who can rely on little support from cis-gender colleagues. They portrayed workplaces that lacked queer productivity as contexts that placed a high workload on workers of minoritised genders.

'Pretty much everything positive has been done by individuals and not necessarily the organisation. You know, it's been like trans or queer individuals who are pushing for positive change, like [name of a colleague] (...) had a massive impact on, you know, the experience of transpeople in the organisation, and she's set up loads of really positive things, especially the trans network. (...) For me, somebody who's obviously not openly trans, having a space where I can bring all of myself to work instead of just – you know, that is definitely appreciated as well' (Gavin, transgender man).

In this described context of cisnormativity in which Gavin did not feel comfortable to come out as trans at work, he portrayed the trans network as something that had been set up by the community itself through queer labour without (much) support from others in the organization. Thereby, Gavin discursively constructs the described form of queer labour as a typical TGNC activity in the continuous struggle against cisnormativity. Although not all respondents produced a similar narrative, as several TGNC workers shared stories of how their cis-gender manager or colleagues engaged in queer labour to support them, research participants consistently emphasized how much effort and work it takes to challenge cisnormativity in the workplace. Overall, they portrayed workplaces that lack queer productivity as generating a high workload of queer labour.

Narratives portraying workplaces that lack queer productivity as requiring emotional labour
A second way in which TGNC workers portrayed the relation between gendered forms of labour and queer productivity, is by presenting cis-normative workplaces that lacked queer productivity as requiring emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). TGNC workers portrayed discrimination, misgendering, and harassment, which are signs of lacking queer productivity,

as demanding their emotional labour. Most research participants shared stories of the emotional workload that negative experiences, such as not feeling comfortable to come out at work or experiencing cis-gender-like types of discrimination when passing as a cis-gender woman after transition, placed upon them. The excerpt below is exemplary of that narrative.

“I was working in accounting in a somewhat pretentious, quiet, non-diverse, everyone was perfect and white, yeah. Just like if you even had a hair out of place it was wrong, so to then go back in and be like, I’m non-binary, it just wasn’t very well accepted. (...) So I then – yeah, I did go back into the closet, I guess. (...) I wasn’t comfortable again, I was really uncomfortable, um, I did – again I ended up on antidepressants again because I was just so uncomfortable in everything, I didn’t feel – I didn’t feel like I could be who I wanted to be, I didn’t feel like I could be who I was. Um, so yeah, I struggled a lot with that” (Casey, non-binary worker).

Casey refers here to a ‘non-diverse’ cis-normative workplace in which they did not feel comfortable to come out as non-binary, even though they had been out previously. The emotional burden that this dynamic placed on Casey is expressed here in the reference to the anti-depressants, which are portrayed as a coping mechanism to deal with the heavy and severely negative emotional consequences generated by a workplace culture in an environment that lacked queer productivity.

Respondents also produced narratives that presented the rigidity and pervasiveness of cis-normative standards in workplaces that lacked queer productivity as requiring their emotional labour. They talked about emotional labour caused by (their continuously unfruitful efforts to address) the misalignment between organizational cis-normative practices, procedures and (managerial) support mechanisms, and the needs of TGNC workers and customers. This includes, for example, challenges to implement name changes in organizational systems and adapting tick boxes to include options for non-binary clients.

‘Having to transition for the most part of start to finish whilst I’m in a full time – like whilst I’m in the job, is quite – not stressful, but something that you’re quite aware of that is quite a vulnerable – a vulnerable stage, er in your life. (...) The deed poll (...) caused a lot of problems with getting my ID cards up and things, ‘cos my name wasn’t legally the name it is now. (...) HR wasn’t very quick with that sort of thing, so I had about a month of having my name be the wrong name on the system, and not having an

ID card because they couldn't order one yet, and that sort of thing. And that was obviously quite unpleasant to deal with 'cos I had to keep getting introduced as the wrong name on Teams calls and things, then having to correct myself after I joined the call, and that was quite unpleasant. (...) Mostly HR being incredibly slow with it to be honest, the actual deed poll part of it only took a day for the name change to be accepted, and then on the system and things, took about a month. And it was quite annoying to know that I'd done everything at that point, we just had to wait for people's systems to update and that sort of thing' (Katherine, transgender woman).

Katherine talks here about the range of emotions of unpleasant feelings, feeling vulnerable and feeling annoyed that the discrepancy between her actual name and the name that was captured in the systems of her workplace generated. Rather than portraying this as a mere administrative issue, she discursively constructs the slow process of name adaptation as a highly sensitive and deeply emotional matter that requires her to engage in emotional labour during seemingly mundane, everyday workplace activities such as participating in a Teams call. Through this and other narratives, the lack of queer productivity of workplaces in which cis-normativity prevailed was presented as a phenomenon that was intertwined with TGNC workers' emotional labour.

Narratives on the relation between gendered labour and hegemonic productivity

TGNC workers also produced narratives on the relation between queer and emotional labour and their individual hegemonic productivity. Some of them presented these forms of TGNC-gendered labour as a burden that drained them from resources they could otherwise invest in doing their job. For example, Alex, who had discussed earlier in the interview how they had handled an instance of being misgendered at work (an act of queer labour), portrayed this interaction as taking up valuable energy that could have been spent on their hegemonic productivity.

'Interviewer: "So, for example, in the previous workplace, when you had that negative experience, did you feel it affected your productivity?" Alex: "I think in the short-term, possibly (...) because I was also dealing with a lot of stuff at the time. (...) Are you familiar with spoon theory? (...) [The number of spoons] represents your energy for the day. And on some days, it takes one to get out of bed, one to have a shower, one to make breakfast, one to drive to work, and you've got that for the rest of the day. And

then on bad flare-up days, you know, you've still got the same number of spoons, (...) [but] sometimes you just don't have enough spoons for what you need to do. (...) Fork theory is an offshoot of that. (...) Like you have lots of little forks in you and they make you use up spoons faster. (...) This was all to explain at the time when I had the sort of – the fight with the person in work, or like the drama with them, I had so many forks in me, I needed to take a fork out, and that fork was, "Please can you stop calling me a good girl. I'm already up to here, if I take this fork out, I'll be losing less spoons for this situation"" (Alex, gender fluid).

Alex describes here how 'the drama' with the colleague who misgendered them, and the queer labour involved to challenge this discriminatory, cis-normative behaviour, absorbed their valuable energy by making them 'use up spoons faster', thereby negatively affecting their hegemonic productivity. This narrative portrays a negative relation between queer labour and individual, hegemonic productivity. Moreover, the excerpt below is exemplary of the way in which TGNC workers presented a similar relation between hegemonic productivity and their emotional labour.

'I need to (...) to manage my productivity, 'cos I actually work better in my home environment, because it means that I'm not being mis-gendered on my way into work, it's means that I don't have to worry about that in my mind. I'm less likely to get mis-gendered by my colleagues from home as well, um, because I'm not in the same room as them, which is really frustrating at times. And that impacts – has a ripple impact on my productivity for days, um, and that can – you know, really can have a significant impact. I've always said to my boss, "If I get mis-gendered in the workplace, I'm probably going to get nothing else done that day," or if someone says something trans-phobic or something that really impacts me on a personal level, that's it, I'm out. If someone triggers my anxiety, I'm – it's gone. If someone, you know, really gets me in that space, it's like – but the problem is then I will have such anxiety fatigue or like a ripple effect of dysphoria where it will linger, there could be days or even the rest of the week written off productivity, which is really, really hard' (Amber, transgender woman).

Amber describes here how the worries, frustration and anxiety generated by being misgendered in the workplace as requiring so much emotional labour that it takes up the headspace she needs to be productive at work. By referring to the ‘ripple effect’ of productivity written off for the rest of the week, Amber illustrates how severe the impact of having to engage in heavy emotional labour is on her individual hegemonic productivity.

TGNC workers also produced narratives in which they portrayed not needing to engage in TGNC-gendered labour as having a positive impact on their hegemonic productivity. For example, the excerpt below illustrates how not needing to worry about managing or navigating a cis-normative environment frees up TGNC workers’ headspace to concentrate on their job.

‘If I’m happy in a team and able to not have to think about (...) my gender or (...) how am I presenting myself, how am I dressing, are people going to – if I wear this top, are people going to refer to me as a woman more, or does this top look more masculine, if I paint my nails are people going to stop thinking that I’m non-binary. Like, I don’t have to think about that because I know that they get it, so I can just free up my head from thinking about that, and actually just come in and do my job, and do my job well, which is so refreshing’ (Nathalie, non-binary worker).

Nathalie portrayed working in a team in which cisnormativity had been successfully challenged (queer productivity) as something that saved them the TGNC-gendered labour that a cis-normative culture requires, thereby facilitating their individual hegemonic productivity. Overall, TGNC workers’ narratives presented being relieved from the burden of emotional and queer labour as facilitating their ability to do their job well.

Discussion

Aiming to come to a more flexible and inclusive understanding of the gender/productivity relation, this study has illustrated how TGNC workers produce narratives on the relation between (the lack of) collective queer productivity, gendered forms of labour, and hegemonic productivity. The insights this study has provided contributes to various bodies of literature.

Contributions to the gender/productivity literature

This study contributes to the gender/productivity literature by reconceptualising the gender/productivity relation. It does so, first, by approaching productivity as a multiplicity, rather than as a singular notion. The extant gender/productivity literature has typically

understood productivity as a singular phenomenon (e.g. Bae and Skaggs, 2019; Périlleux and Szafarz, 2022; Perreira, 2021; Jankowska et al., 2023; Kasymova et al., 2021; Tleubayev and Kozhakhmet, 2022; Whittington, 2011), taking hegemonic productivity for granted as the only productivity form. By coining the notion of queer productivity, this study opens the door for recognising and exploring the functioning of other types of workplace productivity in gender/productivity relations, including unrecognised, unvalued and unpaid forms. Significantly, through this productivity-as-multiplicity-approach, this paper has revealed how different productivity types may be implicitly presented by workers as interrelated phenomena. The findings of this research illustrate how TGNC workers experience workplace environments that lack queer productivity as requiring their emotional and queer labour while simultaneously portraying these gendered forms of labour as depriving them from resources they could otherwise invest in their hegemonic productivity. They also present workplaces in which they are not required to engage in gendered forms of labour as facilitating their hegemonic productivity. Through these narratives, a picture emerges in which queer productivity is experienced as boosting hegemonic productivity, while the absence of queer productivity is felt to hamper it. These findings not only imply that gender/productivity relations might best be studied as a multiplicity, but also that workplace experiences of singular forms of productivity cannot be fully understood when examined in isolation of other productivity types.

Second, this study reconceptualises the gender/productivity relation by taking it beyond its binary framework of reference. On the one hand, it has highlighted a form of productivity that is not implicitly tied to the cis-masculinity and the cis-male body (cf. Burns et al., 2022; Jones and Floyd, 2024). By focusing on a productivity concept that is inherently intertwined with queerness, this study expands the literature that illustrates how hegemonic productivity is gendered (Acker, 1990; Burns et al., 2022; Jones and Floyd, 2024; Steffan, 2021) into a territory past the gender binary. This study presumes that queer productivity emerges in workplaces where cisgender norms have been successfully challenged in acknowledgement of the bodies, characteristics and needs of minoritised genders. In contrast to the way in which hegemonic productivity actively produces binary gender relations at work (Fenech et al., 2022), this study has illustrated how queer productivity ‘undoes’ gender (Butler, 2004) by disrupting organisational processes and practices that uphold such gender binaries. For example, when colleagues use TGNC workers’ pronouns, or when gender neutral toilets are installed, organisational practices acknowledge minoritised genders in ways that stops forcing TGNC workers to (mis)fit themselves into binary gender structures. This illustrates how queer

productivity and gender cannot be separated from one another and how gender is an integral part of queer productivity.

On the other hand, this study has reconceptualised the gender/productivity relation beyond the gender binary, by exploring the productivity experiences of TGNC workers rather than of employees within the gender binary. In doing so, it has revealed how gendered forms of labour, including emotional and queer labour, are portrayed by TGNC workers as hampering (or, when absent, as facilitating) their hegemonic productivity. These findings reveal similarities with the literature on the experiences of cis-gender women, who may also find that the burden of the financially unrewarded reproductive labour they engage in might drain them from valuable resources they could otherwise invest in their hegemonic workplace productivity (cf. Perreira, 2021; Jankowska et al., 2023; Kasymova et al., 2021; Tleubayev and Kozhakhmet, 2022; Whittington, 2011). The concepts of (TGNC-specific) emotional labour and queer labour allow to make visible the heavy, additional workload that is put on TGNC workers as a price to pay to simply be present in cis-normative workplaces. Like the way in which the reproductive labour load is disproportionally borne by cis-gender women, the narratives of TGNC workers seem to suggest that minoritised genders may take on a large part of the queer labour burden in the workplace. Moreover, while studies have revealed how capitalist workplaces parasitically feed on and are sustained by unpaid reproductive labour (see, for example, Ruiz-Castro et al., 2024), the findings of this study hint that a similar dynamic may exist for the way in which queer labour is portrayed to facilitate hegemonic productivity. These insights further underline the need to explore the interrelations and dynamics between different (financially rewarded and unrewarded) productivity forms to better understand gender/productivity relations.

Third, although this paper has focused on *gender/productivity* relations, it points at the overall significance of developing social-identity-sensitive notions of productivity that refuse to uphold the idea that productivity is a neutral concept. Building on the work of Jammaers, Zanoni and Hardonk (2016), who have illustrated how disabled employees produce discourses on alternative conceptualisations of productivity that better align with their identity characteristics, this study has developed a social-identity-sensitive notion of productivity in the form of queer productivity. Such alternative productivity notions allow to better capture the unique productivity experiences of marginalised groups of workers than approaches that (solely) focus on hegemonic understanding of productivity.

Contributions to the TGNC literature

A second body of literature to which this study contributes is the TGNC literature. It does so by revealing additional inequality mechanisms with which TGNC workers are confronted. The extant literature has explored the forms of discrimination, stigmatisation and exclusion this community faces on the labour market and in the workplace (Ciprikis et al., 2020; Hadjisolomou, 2021; Mills and Owens, 2023; Mizock and Hopwood, 2018; O'Shea, 2020), and the way in which organisational support mechanisms tend to fall short in meeting their needs (Ozturk and Tatli, 2016; Primecz and Pelyhe, 2024). The findings of this study extend these insights by highlighting how these structures of disadvantage further burden TGNC workers through the emotional and queer labour they require, which are experienced by these employees as hampering their hegemonic productivity. As opportunities for upward career mobility tend to be linked to recognised forms of hegemonic productivity (Jones and Floyd, 2023), it is likely that TGNC workers' chances to climb the career ladder are (even further) impeded by this dynamic. Simultaneously, as we know from other bodies of literature that typically only hegemonic forms of productivity in the workplace are valued (Jones and Floyd, 2024; Steffan, 2021), the hard work TGNC workers (and their allies) collectively invest into queer productivity may not be recognised in standard reward structures and practices. These insights not only highlight the functioning of the inequality mechanisms TGNC workers face in the workplace, but they also reveal how organisational productivity practices further reinforce these structures of disadvantage.

Implications for the world of practice

The findings of this study have implications for the world of practice. In view of the portrayed negative effects of cisnormativity on TGNC workers, organizations may invest efforts into disrupting cis-normative workplace practices and structures. While all workers could engage in queer labour, the findings of this study suggest that the heaviest burden of challenging cis-gender norms at work tends to fall disproportionately on the shoulders of the TGNC community itself. Hence, organizations may attempt to distribute the workload of queer labour more equally among their entire workforces to reach queer productivity goals. This can be done, among others, by incorporating queer labour as an aspect that is included, valued and measured in organizational instruments such as performance appraisals and promotion criteria. By incorporating efforts and achievements of challenging cisnormativity in the workplace into organizational rewards structures (cf. Fenech et al., 2022; Kark et al., 2024), the existence and value of multiple forms of productivity can be recognised by organizations.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

As this study was conducted in the UK context, future studies may explore TGNC workers' narratives on queer and hegemonic productivity in other societal context and at moments of higher or lower societal tension around the TGNC identities. Moreover, as this study only covers a limited set of TGNC identities, authors may explore other minoritised gender identities that have not been covered in this study. Lastly, this study encourages to further explore alternative, social identity-sensitive productivity conceptualisations that allow to capture the unique productivity experiences of specific sub-groups at work, especially those who may be typically portrayed as less productive, such as older workers (Beck et al., 2021).

Conclusion

This study has highlighted how focusing on hegemonic forms of productivity alone is not sufficient to fully capture the productivity experiences and barriers of minoritised workers. Dominant organisational productivity practices not only favour cis-gender men over cis-gender women, but also further disadvantage TGNC workers. By acknowledging alternative productivity forms and their interrelations with hegemonic productivity, not only gender/productivity relations can be better understood, but structural inequality mechanisms in the workplace can be better addressed.

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