GENDER CROSSING TALES: A CASE FOR MYTH AND METAPHOR

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Brighton for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2014

University of Brighton
ABSTRACT

This study argues in favour of creating a new paradigm around gender transition that goes beyond politically distinctive ‘label identities’ and aims to include individuals who seem to lack a clear ‘destination’ within definitions of ‘gender transition’. Contrary to sociological models that have constructed understandings of gender transition via separate categories into which individuals may be grouped, this study argues that those assigned to the categories of ‘gender oscillators’ and ‘gender migrators’ – or ‘cross-dressers’ and ‘transsexuals’ – do not necessarily constitute members of different groups. The thesis draws on a detailed discursive analysis of interactions within focus group discussions and critically engages with the notions of recognition and monstrosity as these apply to trans-gender theorising. Thirteen male-to-female individuals who self-identified as embodying various expressions of gender transition agreed to take part in three independent focus groups that explored participants’ understanding of transition. An interdisciplinary methodological approach was adopted, this drawing upon the principles of discourse analysis to reveal how subject positions are formed within the gender-crossing discourse. Gender crossing tales were collected and analysed as a means of interaction and were set within the framework of myth and legend which had sought to explain human existence and possibilities of viable gendered personhood over the millennia. The use of metaphors was critically examined, particularly those which describe gender transition as a path which leads to a sought-after ‘home’; a place where an individual expects and hopes to find recognition as their ‘true’ female self. This study argues that the various classifications of trans-gender expressions are products of the given sociocultural matrix that regulates recognition within relations of power. It also argues that those assigned to different categories actually share individual expressions of similar embodied feelings, namely the wish to be accepted as females, and that their journey ‘home’ is mobilised by a defence against the fear that the loss of the desired subject position will defeat one’s capacity to have hope about anything. In an effort to introduce an alternative, value-free approach to the more-conventional clinical and politicised attempts to describe and classify individuals who cross the gender norm, this study suggests an account of the metaphorical positioning of the trans-gender self which aims to build connections across various understandings of non-normative gendered bodies and offer new forms of identity and agency which may make the lives of all individuals who gender-cross more liveable.
# Gender Crossing Tales: a Case for Myth and Metaphor

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the thirteen individuals who agreed to take part in this project, as without their contribution this piece of work would never have come to fruition. Also, to the organizers and all members of The Beaumont Society, TransLondon and the Letchworth TG Support Group, for giving me the opportunity to participate in their meetings, for making me feel welcomed and accepted, and for teaching me a lot. Thank you to Jim MacSweeney, manager of the Gay’s The Word bookshop, for allowing me to use the shop’s premises as a venue within which to conduct the focus groups.

I am grateful to my supervisors: Katherine Johnson and Jayne Raisborough, for their consistency and enthusiasm, guidance and advice, as well as their patience throughout the last seven years, and for giving me the opportunity to develop my own ideas, as well as to Paul Stenner, who also supervised this project during the first two years. Also Carla Willig made the time to discuss my research plans before I even applied for this course of study, and introduced me to Katherine Johnson.

My gratitude to my mother, Maria Christoforou, for her survival tips and all the love, cigarettes and vitamins she has sent that kept me going throughout the writing up of this thesis.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to Peter Holmes. Doctor, I know you will not agree with me saying this, but I would have never managed to complete this piece of work without you.
DECLARATION

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material submitted for a degree.

Stella Fremi

October 2014
INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

The ‘transgender phenomenon’ (Ekins & King, 2006) is often referred to as the related processes and results of transitioning from one anatomically-defined gender to another, either on a permanent or a temporary basis. The academic interest which the transgender phenomenon has attracted is indicative of the importance of sociocultural mechanisms involved in the conceptualisation of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, the formation of male and female roles, as well as in identity development (Stryker, 2006). In the prevailing terminology, the term ‘sex’ is used to refer to the sum of anatomical characteristics and physiological processes, which are said to distinguish men from women visibly (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). It has a long history of being viewed as a natural given, and its physical aspect has been the subject of immense medical attention. Sex is differentiated from sexuality, a term that is used to refer to erotic desire and behaviour, and from ‘gender’ (Shaw & Ardener, 2005). Deriving from the Latin ‘genus’ which means ‘class’ or ‘kind’, the term ‘gender’ is thought to express the “sociocultural correlates of the division of the sexes” (Ekins, 1997:16). Regarded as “a system of meanings and symbols” (Wilchins, 2004:35) with regulatory powers, ‘gender’ applies not only to the everyday, sexed presentation of self as being either male or female, but also to rights, responsibilities and rules embedded in the social and cultural categorisation of persons as men or women (Shaw & Ardener, 2005).

The term ‘transgender’ is used when there is a desire on the part of an individual to be recognised as being of a gender at variance with the gender assigned at birth, the prefix ‘trans’ in this case meaning ‘across’ and being a signifier of movement from one place to another, usually of a considerable distance or with a considerable impact (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). The impact of the ‘transgender phenomenon’ is such that it poses a significant challenge to the norms which determine humanhood and the rights associated with this status. Within a culture which perceives the ‘realness’ of a human as being as a reflection of their ability to fit into the mutually-exclusive categories of male/masculine and female/feminine, the true human nature of those who do not conform to this categorisation is said to be generally denied. Since ‘real’ men are expected to be heterosexual and masculine, those who challenge these standards are regarded as ‘not-real’ men and vice-versa for women (Butler, 1990, 2004a).

While the desire to change one’s sexed physicality and gender to match the ‘other’ has been the subject of a long-running series of heated debates, a study of the literature reveals the sheer size of the enduring historical and cultural legacy of the ‘phenomenon’. Such a study suggests that expressions of gender non-normativity were once accepted, even celebrated. Yet, as a result of sociocultural and political changes, gender non-normativity is now more likely to be pathologised, criminalized or ridiculed (e.g. Feinberg, 1992; Bullough & Bullough, 1993; MacKenzie, 1994). Within the academic community, the abundance of multi-disciplinary endeavours
which aim to describe, explain or ‘manage’ any gender expressions which exist beyond the male/female binary have generated both consensus and dispute, and the terms which describe the ‘phenomenon’ are constantly changing to reflect shifts in understanding.

Of interest is Ekins & King’s (2006) approach to identifying the variety of expressions of what they term ‘transgender phenomena’ (see Chapter One). Drawing upon the concept of ‘story telling’ as a means of approaching social reality as it is “produced in social contexts by embodied, concrete people experiencing the thoughts and feelings of everyday life” (Plummer, 1995:16), Ekins & King (2006) examine the processes and practices which individuals employ when crossing the binary gender divide. Refraining from the use of categories such as ‘transvestite’ and ‘transsexual’ they identify four trajectories to account for the experience of bodily social practices of transgendering. In particular: migrating stories are about crossing the divide permanently; oscillating stories are about going ‘back and forth’ between male and female; negating stories are concerned with attempts to eliminate the gender divide; and transcending stories are about individuals who seek to go beyond the binary divide and gender altogether (Ekins & King, 2006). These social stages are presented by them as providing a confirmation that gender-crossing individuals variously move within and between these particular modes. Nonetheless, Ekins & King’s (2006) model has some limitations. Their understanding of transition as separate stages, each of which constitutes a category into which individuals are grouped, corresponds to a categorical epistemology. This classification of gender-crossing expressions is likely to hamper attempts to arrive at an holistic understanding of the process and to offer but limited insight into the subjective experience of transition. Otherwise stated, the relevance of these categories to real life is questionable, and some of these stories appear to be more popular in academic theory, and less applicable to the lived experience of individuals concerned (Ekins & King, 2006).

The present study proposes that an alternative type of ‘story telling’ be utilized to gain insight into the processes and practices involved in the transgender phenomenon. Drawing upon discourse and myth, it suggests a focus on the metaphorical positioning of the trans-gender self, which aims to deconstruct prevalent understandings, as well as to introduce different perspectives. This study aims to redefine gender transition and employs a critical approach to research, beyond clinical and politically distinctive identities. It argues that those assigned to conventional categories and/or story-types do not constitute members of separate groups but actually share individual expressions of similar embodied feelings, namely the wish to be accepted by society as members of their gender of choice. This is important because some non-normative gendered expressions are favoured over others by some gender-questioning individuals and /or by some students of transgender phenomena, depending on how well they fit within the prevailing categorical framework. In particular, this study points to the separation of medically validated transsexualism from the polymorphic and arguably devalued transvestism,
and aims to give transvestites the voice they seem to be denied, both in the literature and in the provision of support services. In the context of promoting an open account of gender transition, the term ‘gender crossing’ is utilised in this thesis in preference to ‘gender reassignment’ or ‘sex change’, as these two terms have been subjected to numerous political debates in academia and the world of the media. Having not been subjected to debate in the same way, the presumed neutrality of the term ‘gender crossing’ is considered to be suitable for a research project with a subjective, process-orientated focus, rather than an aetiological or outcome focus.

Setting the Scene

The writing up of this thesis has been a long and arduous task, and the direction of the research has undergone a number of ‘transitions’. While the original plan was to use discourses identified from within focus group discussions as triggers for writing up memories which would be further analysed using Memory Work (Haug et al., 1987), the study evolved into one in which I began to collect and analyse ‘gender crossing tales’ and examine them for content which reflected the presence of, or identification with ‘monsters’ and ‘homes’. The research process is described in Chapter Three but, at this point, I feel it is relevant to mention that my interaction with the data triggered an abductive process which set the scene for the use of myths and metaphors. The logic of abduction has been characterized as “the step of adopting a hypothesis as being suggested by the facts (…) a form of inference” (Peirce, 1998: 95) which leads to an account of what might be (Levin-Rotalis, 2004). It has been linked with design synthesis, where artists create harmony out of chaos by forging connections between seemingly unrelated events. The process of abductive meaning-making occurs when the data is so rich, that the researcher must externalize it in order to free themselves from the chaos. It is only then that synthesis is achieved via a mixture of inference and intuition, as well as personal experience and cultural patterns (Kolko, 2010). Moreover, an abductive suggestion is said to come to us as quickly as lighting, following a combination of insights as various elements of the hypothesis come together in a way previously unthought-of, triggering a sudden intuitive leap of understanding that offers new knowledge and insights (Peirce, 1998).

During the writing up of this thesis, two instances of ‘epiphany’ occurred while I was working on identifying the discourses which participants used to construct their own accounts of gender transition (Chapter Four). I have named these discourses ‘theatre’ (first group), ‘personal growth’ (second group), ‘embodied wish’ and ‘oddball’ discourses (third group). During the early stages of the analysis though, I realized that every time I thought of these discourses I could ‘see’, in my mind’s eye, a box on a stage. The stage was made of thick wooden boards and resembled a medieval execution platform, but the box was a plain carton. I understood that this
image came from the two allegories identified by participants, the ‘box’ allegory identified in the second focus group, where participants describe their situation as being confined in a ‘gender box’ from which they feel the need to break free, only to realize that they are permanently confined in this, and from the ‘theatre discourse’ in the first group discussion, where participants construct transition as a change of role. This structure haunted me for quite some time and also made me wonder why it did not include the third group’s ‘embodied wish’ and ‘oddball’ discourses. Eventually, I sketched a basic outline of the structure on a blank page. The result looked like a camera obscura from the mid-1800s. On closer inspection though, the sketch revealed a box resting on an even bigger box, and it seemed that each box was an extension, an elongation of the other- as if both objects were parts of one. This rather ‘odd’ structure triggered a visual metaphor and made me think of the challenges and the embodied feelings which individuals who gender-cross have in common, irrespectively of how they have been labelled or diagnosed, and/or how they identify.

The way I interpret this is as follows: gender-crossing necessitates a role change which carries an inherent risk, and the nature of that risk arises from the fact that the necessary change must be presented before an audience. The presence of the others is what makes any manifestation of gender non-normativity amount to an act of crossing. The audience gives the ‘other’ perspective, a point of view which exists only in relation to the ‘one’ being presented before their eyes and sets the criteria for what constitutes change. Regardless of the direction or extent of gender-role transition, individuals remain confined in their expectations by the need to fit within the structure they aim to challenge. They all share the desire to be accepted by society as females, and make themselves vulnerable by communicating that desire to others. The image of the box on stage might arise from the realisation that the would-be gender crosser is bound by the presence of a demanding audience while confined within a larger structure redolent of a scaffold.

The second epiphany was more decisive in shaping the framework of this study. I came across Stryker’s (1998, cited in Juang, 2006: 711) description of the climate of trans-gender politics as characterized by “a wild profusion of gendered subject positions, spawned by the rupture of ‘woman’ and ‘man’, like an archipelago of identities rising from the sea”. This description triggered an image of the birth of goddess Aphrodite. The only character in Greek mythology not to have had a mother or a father, Aphrodite’s birth was the result of a crime. She was created during the war between the Titans and the Olympians for control of the mortal world, at the precise moment when Cronus, having murdered his father Uranus, severed his genitals, and threw them into the Aegean Sea. According to the myth, when the cut flesh of Uranus mixed with the sea’s waves, a circle of white foam was formed, from which Aphrodite arose as a fully-formed, exceptionally attractive woman (Burkett, 1985). The argument presented here is that the circumstances of Aphrodite’s birth bear striking parallels to the present climate in trans-gender theorizing, which some might suggest resembles the aftermath of great turmoil.
Following a long tradition of debates on semantics within the field of transgender studies, as well as consideration of practical issues surrounding gender transition, the ensuing dismantling of conventional readings has facilitated the recognition of various trans-gender selves. Such a defining moment marks the beginning of a decisive state of awareness, analogous to the birth of something beautiful.

Nonetheless, the ‘profusion of subject positions’ is on-going, and makes the plethora of identities acquire possibilities which appear increasingly ‘wild’. Yet there is more to the myth, as the goddess of beauty has sisters. Apparently, when Aphrodite emerged from the crests of the sea foam, the blood from Uranus’ cut flesh mixed with the seawater, and the Furies, or Erinyes, arose alongside her. Described as “the embodiment of self-cursing contained in an oath” (Burkert, 1985: 198), the Erinyes are winged monsters which sport blood-dripping eyes, vulture-like claws, and whose role is to punish any mortals or immortals who have sworn a false promise. The occurrence of such ‘dual birth’ offers a useful analogy to describe the binary ruptures caused by ‘gender-liminal’ beings that obscure the boundaries between the beautiful and the monstrous, the accepted and the excluded, the desired and the abhorred. For instance, the hybrid corporeality of the Erinyes resonates with descriptions of individuals who gender cross as monsters sent to disturb the alleged harmony of the social corpus (e.g. Stryker, 1994). However, most of us see only Aphrodite rising while failing to see the bloodied piece of cut flesh descending into the sea, and the rise of the Erinyes.

The goddess who the Greeks accepted as ‘Aphrodite’ originates from the Middle East. Literature (cited in Marcovich, 1996) suggests that she is a powerful link in a chain of incarnations of the ‘female element’ of nature, along with the Mesopotamian Astarte, the Semitic Ishtar and the Egyptian Isis; primordial goddesses who possess the power to create life and are celebrated icons of fertility, sexuality and war. The myth and characteristics of Aphrodite have survived through the centuries, but her attributes have shifted somewhat. Her life-giving power has been overshadowed by her physical attractiveness, and she has become established as the goddess of beauty, the epitome of femininity, and the generator of sexual desire (Blackledge, 2003). In this thesis, the birth myth of goddess Aphrodite is used as the basis for the establishment of an alternative type of ‘story telling’ based upon a metaphorical positioning of the non-normative gendered self which exists and extends beyond the clinical and politically distinctive identities. In particular, Aphrodite represents the subject position that individuals who gender cross aspire to attain. Her beauty is not in her appearance; instead, she embodies happiness, a state of inner beauty which is derived from her being accepted in the ‘female home’ (e.g. Prosser, 1998). The appeal of such a prospect is magnetizing, and makes the image of Aphrodite Rising powerful enough to overshadow the blood and her sisters. In reality though, the desire to ‘become Aphrodite’ is unattainable; her body can become a site of infatuation, and her beauty is cruel. What is more, the Furies represent the actual subject position which individuals occupy in real life. Their shared monstrosity is akin to the inner turmoil and misrecognition which leads to
their being denied entrance not only to the female ‘home’, but also to the human habitus.

This study argues in favour of creating a new paradigm around gender transition which goes beyond clinical and politically saturated ‘label identities’. It understands gender transition as a process, which neither exists as a collection of definite, medically-assisted stages, nor has a single outcome. Instead, this study proposes that gender transition is experienced as degrees of identification, which are occasioned by a multiplicity of outcomes, not all of which are achieved through medical interventions. Therefore, it is designed to explore definitions of transition, to record ways in which participants put gender transition into discourse, and to investigate the functions and consequences of these constructions created by a variety of individuals who gender-cross. It aims to address this challenge by examining the interaction and emotionality involved in focus group discussions on gender transition, and uses the events surrounding the birth myth of Aphrodite as an overarching narrative to the argument.

The aims of the present study are:

1) To explore the discourses employed by the participants as they make sense of their different and various experiences of gender transition.

2) To identify shared and unique processes in accounts of gender crossing and explore the individual contributions and the interactional processes during focus group discussions.

3) To identify the emotional processes involved in the acquisition of a particular subject position and explore the different ways in which participants manage their affect while actively negotiating their views.

**Thesis Overview**

This thesis is organized into six chapters. Chapter One offers an historical engagement with the classifications of non-normative gender expressions, and presents an overview of attempts to describe and classify ‘transgender phenomena’. It traces the morphing of categories, from the early class of ‘inversions’ and cases of ‘transvestism treated surgically’, to the emergence of transsexualism and transgenderism, and discusses the many controversies surrounding these, focusing
on the separation of medically-validated transsexualism from non-treatable transvestism. Transvestism, also known as cross-dressing, has existed as long as humankind. Instances of gender fluidity are traced back to primordial times, when understanding of the world is cited as being guided by religion and spirituality (Bullough & Bullough, 1993). However, the rapid progress in medical and technological expertise, which started in the 1920s and flowered during the 1950s and 1960s, meant that transvestism could be ‘treated surgically’. The emergence of ‘transsexualism’ as a medical condition enabled those diagnosed to become, permanently and in the recent past legally, members of the gender they felt they always were (Stryker & Whittle, 2006; Davy, 2011). Notwithstanding the vehement criticism and opposition that transsexualism has attracted, its overall impact seems to have over-shadowed other ‘non-treatable’ classifications. The argument presented here is that the devalued portrayal of transvestism is the result of power relations which favour clinical and politicized classifications of non-normative gender expressions over other classifications. Thus, transvestites have been un-done through the ‘rituals of power’ which determine categorization and the understanding of trans-gender expressions.

Chapter Two offers a critical engagement with the notions of recognition and monstrosity as these apply to non-normative gendered selves. It discusses the impact of those classifications outlined in the first chapter on the lives of individuals who variously challenge the gender norm and argues in favour of using myths as an alternative analytic tool. In particular, this chapter discusses Butler’s (2004a, 2009) concepts of ‘undoing’ and ‘liveable lives’ in order to explore how the classification of non-normative gendered expressions can simultaneously enable and restrict one’s integration into heteronormative society. It also addresses the ‘home’ metaphor (Prosser, 1998), common among individuals who chose the transsexual treatment as the road to personal and social fulfilment and points to the experience of inequality for those so diagnosed. I argue that, instead of finding a welcoming ‘home’ in their new gender, they are at risk of being excommunicated from human society for not fitting in the normative framework of intelligibility. Arguably, the journey ‘home’ is a story which individuals abide by, in order to secure a place within the established social structure. The resonance of the ‘home’ metaphor is explored through the notion of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011) which examines persistent attachments to conventional ‘good life’ fantasies of finding a ‘home’ in one’s chosen gender, which almost inevitably end up being unattainable.

Additionally, Chapter Two provides an overview of trans mis-recognition debates, and explores the parallelisms of trans-people with Monsters, liminal beings which do not have a ‘home’ within the human community. It discusses feminist critiques of transsexualism as the ‘Frankenstein phenomenon’ (Daly, 1978) and describes how the field of transgender studies emerged in response to this attack, aiming to re-claim the stigma of monstrosity and “re-define a life that is worth living” (Stryker, 1994: 250). Nonetheless, the figure of the Monster appears to have also become politically saturated. To address this issue, this chapter suggests that an examination
of the historical dimension of ‘gender monsters’ needs to be carried out, prior to their being drawn into academic debates. It presents a number of celebrated, gender-fluid mythical figures and, utilizing insights from the ‘freak discourse’ (Shildrick, 2002) and monster theory (Cohen, 1996), suggests that the attribution of monstrosity is the result of the process of becoming. In turn, this is shaped by the power relations which regulate the recognition of trans people, creating ‘beauties’ and ‘monsters’ alike. Drawing upon the presentation of monsters within mythic discourse and horror fiction, this chapter argues that the use of myths as a tool for analysis is likely to offer insight into the world within the liminal spaces which are created by conventional classifications of non-normative gender expressions, thus enabling the voices of mis-recognized individuals to be heard and understood, and making their lives more liveable.

Chapter Three discusses methodology and method. In this chapter, the study draws upon a detailed analysis of interactions within focus group discussions, using an interdisciplinary methodological approach to reveal the power relations which are implicated in the formation of particular subject positions. Therefore, the methodology section provides the theoretical background to Discourse Analysis, followed by a detailed account of the Foucauldian version of this tool, along with an introduction to the notions of positioning and discourse metaphors. In an attempt to critically examine the ‘monster metaphor’ discussed in the previous chapter as a subject position which individuals acquire within the gender-crossing discourse, and to explore the emotional processes implicated in such positioning, this chapter suggests the use of mythic discourse. The argument presented here is that myths are bound up with institutional practices which regulate subject positioning within relations of power, and function as cultural metaphors of viable gendered personhood, offering additional insights into the historical forces behind current understandings. The method section describes how the research was carried out. It provides an overview of the process, from the original plan of doing Memory Work (Haug et al, 1987), to the use of focus groups. In particular, it discusses the process of recruitment, data collection and analysis, introduces the participants and gives an account of ethical considerations. It also gives the rationale for using focus groups. Focus groups have been described as a microcosm where social norms are circulated (Markova et al., 2007) through interaction among participants, taking the form of metaphorical subject positions. This study aims to explore the positioning of the non-normative gendered self by looking into the ‘historical narratives’ which have been used to describe these. It is expected that an insight into the way these narratives are formed will facilitate an understanding of the dynamic between the Other and the Self, particularly the anxiety which stems from the terrifying prospect of the Monstrous Other taking over the ‘normally’ gendered Self.

Chapter Four is the first analysis chapter, identifying the discourses present in the construction of gender transition, both across and within groups, and exploring the emerging theoretical insights. It presents those views shared across groups, which question commonly-used terms and emphasize the need to review the widespread
understanding of the concepts both of ‘gender’ and of ‘transition’. It also explores, in more detail, the most prominent discourses within each group and offers a critical perspective encompassing group-specific and shared discursive positions. For instance, in the first group the ‘theatre’ discourse constructs gender transition as a change of role, ‘directed’ from the perspective of dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959), and reviewed in accordance with recognition politics. In the second group, the ‘personal growth’ discourse constructs gender transition as the path most likely to lead to the discovery of one’s ‘true’ self. Utilizing insights from the politics of home (Prosser, 1998) and the psychic properties of power (Butler, 1997), it argues that the normative confines of gender facilitate ‘self-realization’. In the third group, the ‘embodied wish’ and the ‘oddball’ discourses construct gender transition as a desire to be contained within one’s physical and social body, which the current hierarchical, binary readings fail to capture (Elliot, 2005). Moreover, the ‘oddball’ discourse describes gender transition as an ‘oddity’, a construction which, from the perspective of the technologies of self (Foucault, 1988), serves to provide a containing ‘home’. This chapter argues that the meaning of gender transition is not static, but arises from the dominant frames of understanding and the ensuing normative discourses of ‘progress’, which are maintained by the mechanics of ‘cruel optimism’.

Chapter Five is the second analysis chapter, which is concerned with the interaction and emotionality observed in focus group discussions, and with presenting the ‘gender crossing tales’. These stories which appear to develop within the groups, are examined through the lens of ancient and modern myths of creation, as well as home and recognition politics. In the first group, the Monster’s Tale is a story of mis-recognition, whereby those who defy the gender binary are regarded as ‘lesser’ human beings. In the second group, the tale of ‘opening Pandora’s Box’ portrays individuals who gender cross as being confined within the normative matrix which regulates the expression of one’s ‘true’ self. In the third group, participants’ narratives overlap with the Monster’s Tale and Pandora’s Box. The second part of the chapter is concerned with the emotional processes involved in the acquisition of a particular subject position, and explores the different ways in which participants manage their affect while negotiating their views. Drawing upon the positions identified in gender-crossing tales, it describes participants’ accounts of the emotions involved in the maintenance of their current position. These emotions are understood as the relational patterns which individuals repeat in their interactions with others, which I describe as ‘flees on a hot griddle’ and ‘hide and seek’. The final part of this chapter offers an insight into the notion of ‘vulnerable creatures’, which is understood to describe participants’ position.

The final chapter summarizes the findings and critically reflects on the themes which emerged from the analysis, before discussing the implications and limitations of the argument developed in this thesis. Nonetheless, at this point I feel it is relevant to acknowledge that I am well aware that one criticism to this research is that there is ‘not enough’ data. For instance, one could question why I did not
organize at least one more group, preferably with younger individuals, given that the average age of those who agreed to take part is approximately 60 years. It is important to state that this study adopts an in-depth approach to the analysis, as its purpose is not just to identify as many discourses as possible, but to explore content layers, group dynamics, and the role of individual participants. In addition, the use of a seemingly-narrow cohort, to which participants belong, is by no means a disadvantage. In fact, the participants who took part have grown up prior to the era of transgender studies, which means that their female self did not emerge in times of growing visibility and socio-political activism, academic scholarship and gendered possibilities. Future researchers will be denied the opportunity to address such an audience as the trans community becomes increasingly constructed of post-transgender studies individuals who have grown up in more-liberal times. Interestingly, seven out of the thirteen individuals who agreed to take part in the focus groups identify as ‘transvestites’ or ‘cross-dressers’. This means that this study has the opportunity to give transvestites a previously un-heard anticipated voice, which they have purportedly lost due to the contemporary hierarchical reading of politically-progressive transgender and conservative transsexual people (e.g. Elliot, 2005; Namaste, 2005).
CHAPTER 1

A history of Cross-Dressing classifications

“trans-sexualists, or those who wish to change their sex are always trans-vestites... [as they] desire to be transformed into members of the sex to which they do not belong” (Cauldwell, 1956: 12-13)

This chapter offers an historical engagement with the classifications of non-normative gender expressions. It presents an overview of the clinical attempts to describe and categorize what is broadly understood as ‘transgender phenomena’, and argues that the pathologization and down-playing of cross-dressing within the medical and academic literature is the result of institutional practices. The chapter is structured in three parts. The first part is concerned with the separation of medically-validated transsexualism from ‘polymorphic’ and arguably devalued transvestism. It traces the development of the sexological discourse, starting from the undifferentiated class of ‘inversions’, followed by attempts to separate cross-gender behaviour from homosexuality, the ‘surgical treatment’ of transvestism, and the ensuing emergence of transsexualism as a new category. The second part offers an overview of the controversies surrounding the ‘transsexual diagnosis’. It presents the psychoanalytic view of ‘transsexualism’ as a pathological expression of homosexuality, the challenges following the revelations of ‘textbook cases’, and the efforts to defend diagnoses and justify the provision of medical treatment. The third part is concerned with those individuals who ‘escaped’ diagnostic classifications. It discusses the pathologization and down-playing of cross-dressing within the medical and academic literature, the emergence of transgenderism and its politically radical practice of going beyond the binary gender divide and gender itself. Such a discussion offers an insight into political and methodological debates in the field of transgender studies, which are concerned with hierarchical and arguably distinctive identifications that seem to have shaped the power relations behind the current discourses of cross-dressing. The chapter concludes with the raising of some concerns over the ‘disappearance’ of ‘transvestism’ and offers insight into how these are addressed in the thesis as a whole.
1.1) From inversions to transvestism

The advent of the Enlightenment in 17th century Europe brought a massive shift in the understanding of the world. Technological and medical developments, which intensified throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, brought into the public sphere questions regarding the credibility of tradition and faith in accessing ‘truth’. Gradually, the regulatory power of religion and spirituality began to give way to natural laws and principles, and scientific reasoning came to be understood as a privileged way of understanding the world (Hergenhahn, 1997). Within this climate, human sexuality came under intense medical gaze which aimed to dissect its every aspect. The emerging field of sexology showed an interest in the private life of married couples and individuals who were attracted to the same sex, the sexuality of the ‘criminally insane’, and the desires of women and children (Birken, 1988; Bullough & Bullough, 1993). However, these early scientific endeavours were pathologizing and, rather than assimilating and accommodating alternative expressions of human sexuality within the predominant scheme, they classified such expressions as ‘divergent from the norm’. In effect, they served to establish what has been described in Foucault’s genealogy of sexuality as the “medicalisation of the sexually peculiar” (Foucault, 1976:44).

The sexological discourse situated human sexuality within a heteronormative, binary frame of understanding and classified those observations, which diverged from this norm, as ‘inversions’. The said ‘inversions’ were interpreted as being indicative of some mental or physical anomaly, whilst their alleged ‘deviant’ aspect attracted the interest of both forensic and medical scholars. Consequently, those previously regarded as ‘sinners’ were now labelled ‘insane’ or ‘criminals’ and their conduct came under the rule of medicine and the state (Bullough & Bullough, 1993). Gradually, ‘inversions’ ended up forming an undifferentiated, broad class of ‘illegitimate sexualities’ which arbitrarily included what is presently understood as homosexuality and cross-dressing along with bestiality, necrophilia and sadomasochism, to name but a few (Ekins & King, 2006). Yet, as the categorization of difference was favoured more than understanding, erotic preference was equated with gender identity; cross-gender behaviour was seen as an expression of homosexuality, and homosexuality as a pathological diversion from the gender binary (Bristow, 1997). For instance, a ‘sexual invert’ was described as ‘a female soul in a male body’ and vice-versa, and cross-dressers were sometimes referred to as ‘bisexuals’, a term intermittently used in the media and in common parlance until the early 1900s (MacKenzie, 1994; Kaiser, 2012).

Various examples of ‘illegitimate sexualities’ were cited in the medical literature as early as 1830 (King, 1996). Case studies of individuals who cross-dressed appeared in the work of sexologist Carl Westphal, in 1869 (Bullough & Bullough, 1993); one of them being described as ‘a lesbian’, the other as experiencing a ‘contrary sexual feeling’. The first systematic accounts came from psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing and featured in his pioneering “Psychopathia Sexualis”, an 1877 taxonomic
study of what he considered to be profound psychosexual disturbances. Cataloguing case histories of the behaviour of ‘inverts’ Krafft-Ebing used the term ‘antipathic sexual instinct’ to describe what is nowadays understood as homosexuality, and applied the term ‘metamorphosis sexualis paranoica’ to what is presently called ‘gender dysphoria’. Conditions which he named ‘androgyny’, and ‘gynandry’, also feature in this collection, alongside the autobiography of an individual who claims to feel trapped in the wrong body, and first-person accounts of “feeling the penis as clitoris” (Krafft-Ebing, 2006:132, orig. pub. 1877). Notably, his work includes examples of ‘viraginity’ which feature women with ‘pronounced masculine’ appearance, psychological qualities and overall demeanour alongside cases of ‘lesbianism’, as well as an instance of what he described as ‘lesbianism in transition to viraginity’ (Krafft-Ebing, 2006:183, orig. pub. 1877). Though Krafft-Ebing did not directly address what is nowadays understood as ‘cross-dressing’, he cites two cases, namely 105 and 106 of ‘dress fetishism’ which feature men who dress in women’s clothes for sexual reasons. Both illustrate the forensic and medical interest in the ‘sexually peculiar’ and rather surprisingly, note that the individuals concerned were exclusively heterosexual. To quote from Case 106,

…When arrested, he wore underneath his overcoat a bodice, a corset, a vest (…). In his room a complete outfit of female attire was found. To put on such garments was the great aim of his sexual instinct. This fetishism had financially ruined him. At the hospital he begged the attending physician to permit him to wear female attire. Inverted sexuality did not exist (Krafft-Ebing, 2006:101, orig. pub. 1877).

In an attempt to raise the public image of homosexuality and secure rights for male and female individuals who identified as such, pioneering sexologists Magnus Hirschfeld and Havelock Ellis resisted the use of medical diagnostic labels. Instead, they focused on the type of being which the behaviour expressed. Examining their case histories as individual occurrences, Hirschfeld and Ellis revealed the existence of a range of behaviours, and also identified a new category, separate from homosexuality, yet to be accounted for by medicine (Prosser, 1998). For Hirschfeld (1910, cited in Stryker & Whittle, 2006) in particular, cross-gender behaviour reflected nature’s diversity. To account for that diversity, he proposed a continuum; extending from ‘pure male’ to ‘pure female’, it encompasses four types of ‘sexual intermediaries’. These refer to hermaphrodites; individuals with physical characteristics contrary to their sexual organs; those with ‘divergent’ sex drive, i.e. masochistic or sexually ‘passive’ men, as well as sadistic or sexually ‘aggressive’ women, bisexuels and homosexuals; and those who display particularities of the other gender, inclusive of clothing, feelings, and mannerisms. It was not until the 1930 case of Lily Elbe, that the term ‘sexual intermediacy’ was employed. Born male, but convinced that he was sharing his body with a female, twin being, Elbe’s surgery was justified as sufficient to correct an intersexual anomaly, for which no hormone treatment had been prescribed. Elbe’s first surgery was a successful
orchidectomy, but a subsequent attempt to implant ovaries in her body proved fatal (King, 1996a; Prosser, 1998; Ames, 2005).

Further differentiating between the fourth type and the others, Hirschfeld coined the term ‘transvestism’. Derived from the Latin ‘trans’, which means ‘across’, and ‘vestitus’, which means ‘dressed’ (Garber, 1992), he applied it to individuals with “the impulse to assume the external garb of a sex which is not apparently that (…) indicated by the sexual organs” (cited in King, 1996a: 82). An early, yet successful translation of this term, which first appeared in German, came from Carpenter (1911, cited in King, 1996a: a) and referred to ‘cross-dressing’. Denying any causal links between transvestism and erotic feelings, Hirschfeld emphasized that transvestites are mainly heterosexual, though he acknowledged that some of them might be homosexual, bisexual, and even asexual (Ekins, 1997). In addition, he stated that transvestism is a harmless tendency, separate from fetishism and masochism (Bullough & Bullough, 1993). Even so, he raised some concerns over its likelihood of causing public disturbance and suggested that the revelation of one’s transvestism might have legal implications (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). However, Hirschfeld acknowledged that his term ‘transvestism’ might be restrictive. In particular, he was concerned that it seemed to apply only to the most obvious, external aspects of the behaviour, at the expense of feelings or predispositions of the persons concerned (Ekins, 1997). Notably, he described one of his ‘sexual intermediaries’ patients, who requested sex-change, as a ‘psychic transsexual’, thus coining, but not popularising this specific term (Stryker & Whittle, 2006).

Like Hirschfeld, Ellis (1920, 1928) differentiated transvestites from homosexuals and argued that the desire to adopt the dress and mannerisms of the opposite genital group is irrespective of the direction of one’s sexual attraction. Originally using the term ‘sexoaesthetic inversion’, to describe the ‘impulse of an inner imitation’ of the object one is attracted to, Ellis later rejected it as he thought it might be suggestive of homosexuality. Disapproving of the term ‘transvestism’ as he thought it reduced cross-gender behaviour to clothes, Ellis (1920, 1936) established his alternative term ‘eonism’, which he coined from the name of the famous French diplomat, military official and ‘transvestite’ Chevalier d’ Eon d’ Beaumont, who lived the first 49 years of his life as a man and the remaining 33 as a woman until his death in 1810 (Kates, 1995). Ellis suggested the existence of two types of eonists. Those classified as ‘common’, he described as mainly interested in cross-dressing, whereas ‘rare types’ he understood to self-identify as members of the opposite sex, but without having delusions about the state of their anatomy. Further opposing Hirschfeld’s ‘impulse of disguise’, Ellis (1928) explained that the eonist feels that he has become empowered and liberated by using the ‘disguise’. This description is said to be closer to contemporary references of achievement of identity, and the term ‘eonism’ has successfully stood as the only alternative to ‘transvestism’ until the early 1970s (Ekins & King, 2006).
Alongside these early theoretical considerations, literature cites prodromal medical efforts which utilized procedures that later developed into what came to be known as ‘sex-reassignment’. However, these efforts aimed to fix perceived biological anomalies. Notably, the earliest record of a surgically created vagina dates back to 1761, and was attempted on a female who was born without one, but had otherwise normally-developed ovaries and uterus (De Savitsch, 1958). The first recorded cases of individuals who had some form of ‘sex-reassignment’ surgery date back to 1882 and Bullough & Bullough (1993) refer to Herman Karl, born female, who is said to have had genital surgery to make the external genitalia appear ‘more’ male, though no further details are given. They also include the 1917 case of Alan Hart, born female, who had a hysterectomy, changed civic status, and lived the life of a married man. There are also several cases of penectomies and castrations, with varying degrees of success (Ekins & King, 2006).

Following rapid advances in endocrinology in the 1920s and 1930s, visible differences between men and women were seen as being caused by the respective ‘sex hormones’, and the belief in the biologically-rooted and unchangeable nature of maleness and femaleness grew stronger (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). Nonetheless, the presumed immutability of ‘sex’ was challenged from within, as the developing surgical expertise allowed some individuals to change their physicality, enabling them to fulfil their wish to become members of the ‘other’ gender. It is important to note that the first sex-change cases, which appeared from 1922 onwards, were described as ‘transvestism’ and were treated with a combination of hormones and surgery (Prosser, 1998; Ekins & King, 2006).

1.1.1) The separation of ‘transvestism’ from medically-constructed ‘transsexualism’

Even though variants of ‘sex-reassignment’ procedures have been arbitrarily performed since the 1800s, the most significant of early cases is that of Christine Jorgensen. Her 1952 ‘sex-change’ surgery was met with an unprecedented volume of exposure and positive media attention, the impact of which is said to have established ‘transsexualism’ as a diagnostic category (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). On her return from Denmark, the place where she transitioned, to the United States, Jorgensen found herself the subject of intense interest. The media painted a romanticised, occasionally sensational, portrait of a transvestite who was undergoing hormonal and surgical demasculinisation. The press often featured photographs of Jorgensen before and after the procedures, and her life was extensively followed by the tabloids over a prolonged period (Jorgensen, 1967; MacKenzie, 1994). Understandably, those experiencing varying degrees of ‘gender confusion’ found similarities between Jorgensen’s story and their own and thus came forward, asking to be helped and similarly treated (Davy, 2011). Within a couple of years following surgery, her medical team received over a thousand letters from individuals who also requested surgical sex-change as a means of “putting an end to mental anguish and unparalleled internal conflict” (De Savitsch, 1958:87).
This publicity also roused medical interest. Expressing concerns over the effect such exposure might have on Jorgensen herself, as well as on those individuals who ‘naturally identify themselves with’ her, Harry Benjamin, an endocrinologist with a long-standing interest in sex-change procedures, contacted her in person. Benjamin had worked alongside Steinach, the gland specialist who discovered ‘sex hormones’ and had prescribed these himself in the 1920s. He also had connections with Kinsey and his 1949 ground-breaking study of human sexuality (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). The resulting professional relationship between Benjamin and Jorgensen is said to have facilitated the recognition of ‘transsexualism’ as a medical condition, separate from both transvestism and homosexuality and its affirmation as a non-psychopathic but partially hormone-induced sexual disorder, which only medicine can treat (Davy, 2011).

Nonetheless, in their original report, published in the Journal of The American Medical Association, Jorgensen’s medical team notes her case as ‘transvestism treated surgically’ with a combination of ‘hormonal feminization’ and ‘operative demasculinisation’ procedures (Hamburger et al., 1953). Considering that they thought they were dealing with a physiological ‘disease’, they emphasized that owing to the immutability of chromosomes the patient’s sex remained the same. In fact, Jorgensen was castrated in 1950 under the Danish Sterilisation and Castration Act of 1935. A penectomy was performed in 1952, but no vagina was yet constructed (Bullough & Bullough, 1993). Notably, procedures such as castration surgery and hormonal administration had long been a part of the enforced ‘treatment’ of sex offenders and homosexuals, albeit with disastrous results, before developing into core sex-change interventions (MacKenzie, 1994). Nonetheless, Hamburger et al (1953) justified their interventions as aiming to create the external appearance of a sex change in order to relieve the patient’s distress and improve her sense of purpose in life. Similar reasons have been provided for earlier cases. De Savitsch (1958) for instance, refers to the 1940 sex-change surgery of an individual, who was considered an ‘invert’. His request for surgery was granted as treatment for his ‘disturbed mental state’.

Benjamin attributed the complexity of what was known until then as ‘transvestism’, to a range of interrelationships between the body, sexual desire, and gender (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). Following the paradigm of Hirschfeld and Ellis, Benjamin also adopted the practice of examining his cases individually and in detail, rather than using diagnostic labels. In doing so, he shifted the focus away from the ‘illegitimate’ element and towards the attainment of a state parallel to what some might call ‘self-actualisation’ (Bullough & Bullough, 1993). Studying the behaviour of transvestites, he initially sought to describe those who wanted surgical ‘sex change’ and to distinguish them from those who did not (King, 1996 a). In particular, Benjamin (1954, 1966) suggested the existence of a continuum, which encompasses three main expressions. The first of these is the ‘principally psychogenic’ transvestite, who is described as having a conventionally male body structure, yet
lacking in masculinity. Drawing on similarities with Ellis’s (1928) type of ‘common eonist’, Benjamin described individuals of this type as feeling content when dressed ‘en fem’, and wishing to be addressed with a female pronoun or name they have chosen. He emphasized that even though their behaviour neither harms nor interferes with society, its disclosure would have social and legal repercussions. Therefore, Benjamin claimed that, to prevent or minimise any unwanted consequences, individuals of this type may choose to over-emphasize certain physical, social, or behavioural traits that are commonly associated with masculinity, aiming to present themselves as ‘tough’. Moreover, he argued that ‘psychogenic’ types resist having drastic interventions, as neither do they wish to surgically alter their body, nor do they abhor their genitals, but they express their desire to keep these in order to have a satisfactory sex life. For Benjamin (1954, 1966), in those cases where some form of treatment is sought, this is likely to be psychotherapeutic, rather than medical.

Benjamin’s classification of the second ‘intermediate type’ of individual was based upon Hirschfeld’s ‘sexual intermediaries’ (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). In particular, Benjamin (1954, 1966) stated that individuals of this type are sexually attracted to both males and females, and their desire to ‘change sex’ is not persistent, but alternates between the need to simply dress and the wish to have surgery. A certain ambiguity in secondary sexual characteristics was also underlined, exemplified by cases of genetic males who displayed a mild form of female physicality, like hair or fat distribution. As for their state of mind, Benjamin (1954, 1966) argued that ‘intermediates’ are profoundly disturbed, gave them a poor prognosis and questioned the benefits of any possible psychotherapeutic interventions. Yet, he claimed that they are likely to be among the most susceptible individuals following the publicity of the Jorgensen case, the impact of which might orient them towards seeking surgery. Thus, Benjamin suggested that ‘intermediates’ might need professional support, possibly a combination of psychological guidance and hormonal therapy (Bullough & Bullough, 1993).

In his account of the third main expression of transvestism, Benjamin drew on Ellis’s ‘rare’ kind of eonism. Nonetheless, he underlined that this type of ‘somato-psychic transsexualist’ has a rather feminine demeanour and appearance, yet does not simply wish to enact female behaviour; instead, he longs to become a “full-fledged woman” (Bullough & Bullough, 1993: 257). According to Benjamin, ‘transsexualists’ hold an intense, persistent conviction of being a real female who was born with the wrong genitals and seek drastic treatments, particularly the genital conversion surgery. Accumulating experience gained from treating a huge number of such cases, Benjamin (1966) authored the “Transsexual Phenomenon” that was heralded as “the first serious book on the topic” (Ekins & King, 2006: 67). In this he proposed a treatment regime, which aimed to meet the sex-change needs of ‘transsexualists’. A combination of surgical and endocrinological procedures, it consisted of castration, the amputation of the penis, and the plastic reconstruction of a vagina, for male-to-female conversions, alongside oestrogen therapy. The administration of feminization hormones aimed to regulate the effects of castration,
and aid the development of secondary sex characteristics. Nonetheless, Benjamin admitted that having some physical, especially facial, feminine characteristics prior to treatment was likely to facilitate the individual’s acceptance within society as female. Besides refining medical procedures, Benjamin (1966) also stressed the importance of psychotherapeutic treatment. Acknowledging the challenges that a change of sex is likely to pose in one’s life, he encouraged the psychiatric evaluation of individual cases, in the hope that this might guarantee successful outcomes. In addition, Benjamin (1954, 1966) argued that the provision of treatment is highly significant for those individuals concerned, and when this is either unavailable or denied, they are likely to become seriously depressed and self-destructive. In line with a tradition of separating transsexualism from sexual behaviour, Benjamin (1966) stressed that ‘transsexualists’ have a largely cerebral, non-genital sex life that consists of feminization fantasies, rather than acts of auto-eroticism or homosexuality. He also emphasized that this type is clearly represented by the case of Christine Jorgensen. Benjamin’s work is credited with cementing the separation of transvestism from medically-constructed transsexualism, and establishing the later as a new category (Ekins & King, 2006; Davy, 2011).

1.2) The controversies of transsexual diagnosis

The clinical management of transsexualism generated a considerable amount of controversy from a variety of disciplines. Not only did it face legal and moral challenges, but it also threatened the professional ethos of those working in the area. Despite the growing medical expertise of the 1950s, sex-change procedures were considered illegal, rather than life-saving. Even Benjamin, amongst others, was stigmatised, and, at some point, his license was under threat (Califia, 2003). In particular, clinicians were condemned for removing functional organs or mutilating healthy bodies in response to demands made by individuals who were thought to be mentally disturbed (Billings & Urban, 1982). Seen as collaborating with the unnatural impulse of those who, “whatever happens, will remain freaks”, the medical treatment of transsexualism was reduced to giving “hostages to fate” (De Savitsch, 1958: 90). Due to the challenges it provoked, the growing incidence of surgical sex-change attracted the attention of the media. The public interest suggested that clinicians might have to justify the motives of some of their patients in the open. The additional pressures of unwanted interest led to further revelations, as a number of professionals admitted that they had been subjected to unreasonable demands by ‘sex-change patients’. As De Savitsch (1958:94) comments, the wish to access surgery was expressed in such a persistent way, that the characterisation of patients as “headaches” amongst doctors working in the field prevailed.

The impact of professional disputes over the issues embedded in sex re-assignment procedures generated tensions, which inhibited the recognition of transsexualism as
a ‘disease’ in the medical discourse for a number of years. Leading the opposition, the psychoanalytic school described transsexualism as an extreme expression of homosexuality, accompanied by masochistic tendencies and severe guilt, and strongly objected to treating a ‘mental disorder’ with surgical techniques (MacKenzie, 1994). In particular, transsexuals were regarded as ‘delusional homosexuals’ who seek surgery in order to avert psychosis, which they feared would result if they were to engage with their erotic object, in a true anatomical sense (e.g. Socarides, 1970). Under a pathologising discourse, the desire for surgical sex-change was explained as a profound impairment in the constitution of self, which might emerge during the process of sexual differentiaion. In this perspective (Shepherdson, 2000), sexual differentiation is a psychic progression, independent of either sex or gender role acquisition. It is thought to occur when the embodied human acquires a body image, which then places it in the given cultural space. Failure to establish the body’s material reality within that space is thought to initiate the desire to change sex, which is seen as nothing but a defence against anxiety. Focusing primarily on males, the psychoanalytic school argued that the transsexual’s perceived ‘inconsistency’ between their external genitalia and the gender they feel they belong to is a result of castration anxiety. In the context of dealing with symptoms of an unresolved oedipal conflict, they reject their genitals and gender, so they can identify as a woman with a penis (Billings & Urban, 1982).

Moreover, psychoanalysts argued that treatment for would-be transsexuals should aim to reinforce gender roles that are ‘congruent’ with their biological sex. Advocating prevention, they urged parents to be aware of the need to encourage gender congruent behaviour in their children from an early age (e.g. Socarides, 1970, 1978; Pauly, 1974). Mirroring ‘cures’ that were first applied to homosexuals in the 1950s, early psychoanalytic opponents of ‘transsexual treatment’ suggested psychotherapy in conjunction with the administration of hormones appropriate to the individual’s birth gender, on the assumption that same-sex hormones would ‘normalize’ gender identity and sexual preference. Sadly, such treatments often had disastrous emotional and health consequences (MacKenzie, 1994). Contemporary psychoanalytic views of transsexualism remain largely unfavourable; those seeking treatment are understood to engage in a form of “defensive splitting”, expressed as “a delusional conviction of belonging to the opposite sex, and the compulsive conviction of wanting to regain it, masking the unconscious fantasy of attacking the ‘bad’ part of the body” (Ambrosio, 2009:12). Transsexuals are also thought of as exhibiting narcissistic personality disorder traits, presumably by being totally focused on permanently altering their body to the extent that they rule out the involvement of any psychic element (Chiland, 2000, 2004).

Defending their practice against the accusations of “treating homosexuals and perverts” (King, 1996:89), clinicians promoted the ‘benign illness’ label alongside their diagnosis of transsexualism. They emphasized their role in improving the patient’s overall well-being, and asserted that transsexualism is neither symptomatic of mental illness, nor is it related to homosexuality (Bullough & Bullough, 1993).
Among these attempts was Benjamin’s account of having studied the early history of Christine Jorgensen, only to confirm that she was an emotionally stable individual who had a perfectly normal upbringing (Califia, 2003). Contesting pathologising assumptions, Benjamin (1966) sought to clarify the needs which an individual seeks to satisfy through receiving transsexual treatment. Amongst others, he underlined the need to live without fear of being harassed or arrested for impersonation whilst in the gender of choice, and to have heterosexual sex. Whilst his reasoning has been criticized for relying on the heteronormative framework, it nevertheless facilitated the acceptance of treatment (Billings & Urban, 1982; King, 1996; Califia, 2003). The emphasis on the benefits, which patients were thought to receive from surgical sex-change, has been understood in the context of propagating the usefulness of treatment. Thus, numerous cases were published, which presented physically-adjusted patients, with restored emotional balance and a greater chance of social acceptability. In particular, early accounts of individuals in turmoil and physicians coming to their rescue gradually constructed a picture of good-will doctors, who might be as helpless in the face of the ‘disease’ as their patients (Bullough & Bullough, 1993; Califia, 2003; Ekins & King, 2006). However, evidence of improved mental and social well-being, a key issue in the justification of treatment, did not become available until the mid-1960s. Physicians at John Hopkins University, U.S.A., published reports of having performed sex re-assignment procedures on individuals, who Benjamin would classify as ‘transsexuals’. These featured results of successful surgeries, which were followed by a smooth period of complete adjustment (Califia, 2003). Benjamin alone claimed an astonishing success rate for fifty out of fifty-one patients, and some of these he referred to as “twice-born” (cited in Billing & Urban, 1982:107).

At the same time, the treatment of intersexuality encouraged both conceptual and scientific insights in the field of sex re-assignment. As Billings & Urban (1982) argue, knowledge gained from the clinical management of ‘hermaphrodite’ individuals born with ambiguities in external genitalia and internal reproductive structures facilitated the establishment of transsexualism as a valid diagnosis with a justifiable treatment regime. Notable amongst the workers in this field is John Money, a psychologist at John Hopkins, in the mid-1950s, who introduced the idea of the independence of biological sex from gender (Billings & Urban, 1982). A firm believer in the binary gender divide and the normal state of masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality, Money perceived his role as “correcting sex errors of the body” (cited in Califia, 2003: 69). In a longitudinal study of 105 intersex births (Money, Hampson & Hampson, 1955), originally designed to investigate the effect of surgical re-assignment on erotic orientation, Money and his team addressed the significance of socialisation. Presenting cases of hermaphrodites who were chromosomal men and had been successfully socialised as women, and vice versa, as evidence, they argued that anatomy might be less significant than previously thought in determining whether one identifies as male or female. Instead, they proposed that it is social experience, which is more likely to impact on the formation of gender role. In particular, Money suggested that new-borns with an intersex...
condition are psychosexually neutral and argued that if a child had surgery before the age of two-and-a-half, whilst being socialised as a member of their non-birth gender, they could adjust perfectly into their new role and have a normal life (Ekins & King, 2006). Given the belief that gender role is fixed by the age of three, it was recommended that, any procedures beyond this should accord with the direction of the individual’s socialisation, rather than their external genitalia (Davy, 2011). Nonetheless, Money himself accounted for the possibility of surgery requests beyond the cut-off age, suggesting that, if an adult hermaphrodite felt that an error had been made in their assigned sex, their request for re-assignment should be seriously considered. This concession proved to be invaluable in promoting transsexualism as condition similar to intersexuality, with analogous treatment prospects (Bullough & Bullough, 1993).

Building on the work of Money and particularly its emphasis on the independence of biological sex and gender, psychoanalyst Robert Stoller described transsexualism as a core identity category. Focusing on male transsexualism, as he regarded its female equivalent to be a different phenomenon, Stoller (1964, cited in Billings & Urban, 1982) sought causality in adverse experiences during an individual’s psychosexual development. He argued that the absence of the father triggered a strong identification with the mother, and suggested that a prolonged and intense contact with the mother’s body might reinforce the desire for feminisation, which could escalate to wishing to become her. In that context, transsexualism was understood as a way of coping with distress from having genitals, which are incompatible with one’s sense of self (King, 1996). The promotion of treatment as a way of aligning of an individual’s biological sex to the gender to which they feel they belong, served to justify its therapeutic importance. The presumed immutability and fixity of gender-role, on which Benjamin based his argument on the ineffectiveness of psychotherapy, was crucial in legitimising medical treatment and establishing the classification of transsexualism as a ‘benign illness’ (Billings & Urban, 1982).

**1.2.1) The impact of ‘textbook cases’ on the credibility of ‘transsexual diagnosis’**

However, gender-role fixity was challenged. Money’s own studies seemed to have provided the only empirical support for his theory, which, as Billings and Urban (1982) show, was soon to be found inconsistent. To illustrate, Money (1955) claimed successes for the surgical re-assignments of 100 out of 105 intersex children, all of which were performed before the age of two-and-a-half. Yet, findings from similar studies contradicted his assumptions. While some documented the successful re-assignment of intersex children operated upon up to 18 years of age, others gave evidence of an equal number of unsuccessful cases, as well as of reversals of early socialisation (Davy, 2011). In addition, his research records have been criticized for being misleading and, by some critics, as having been falsified (Colapinto, 2001). What is more, subsequent evaluations of transsexual surgeries revealed a high incidence of unpleasant, post-surgical complications. Among these
were chronic genital haemorrhaging, breast cancer, hormonal imbalance, and other conditions, which required constant medical attention. This disclosure was soon followed by further accusations of malpractice, and additional criticisms that physicians had failed to detect comorbid psychopathology (Ekins & King, 2006).

Critics drew attention to a social interaction process between providers and recipients of transsexual treatment, whereby the latter sought to conform to the diagnostic criteria, in order to be rewarded with the treatment they longed for. This process was named ‘the con’, because treatment was acquired by deception (Billings & Urban, 1982). Reviewing the early issues raised by operations for what they called ‘gender transmutation’, Kubie & Mackie (1968) argued that, given the lack of identified psychological cause or organic indicators, physicians had to depend upon their patients’ accounts. Knowing that treatment would be given only to those diagnosed, they warned that candidates for surgery had assimilated and accommodated the clinical narrative within their life histories, presenting themselves as “textbook cases of transsexualism” (Kubie & Mackie, 1968: 435). These ‘cases’ portrayed an emotionally stable, exclusively heterosexual person who immensely disliked their anatomy, had a life-long conviction of belonging to the other sex and they had been cross-dressing from an early age but not for erotic reasons. Following the revelation of ‘the con’, it became known that some of the post-operative transsexuals did not fulfil Benjamin’s criteria. In particular, physicians revealed that several of these patients either had a diagnosed mental illness, or were sadists, or homosexuals, or were working as prostitutes: characteristics previously thought as unacceptable for transsexuals. Arguably, the physical and emotional demands of treatment might have exacerbated pre-existing difficulties in some individuals, or actually have triggered conditions such as chronic depression and anxiety (Califia, 2003). In addition, the high cost of treatment might have presented some with no alternative but prostitution as a means of meeting their consequential financial commitments. Nonetheless, the diagnostic validity of the transsexual diagnosis was challenged. As John Meyer (1973, cited in Billings & Urban, 1982:110), director of John Hopkins University gender clinic commented, ‘transsexualism’ came to cover “a multitude of sins”.

Examining the social interaction involved in the process of gender identification, sociologist Harold Garfinkel directed attention to how people might ‘do’ or accomplish gender in the eyes of others. In his classic paper “Passing and the managed achievement of sex status in an ‘intersexed’ person”, Garfinkel (1967) reported on the now well-known case of Agnes, based on thirty-five hours of interviews and conversations. A nineteen-year-old candidate for sex re-assignment surgery, Agnes was referred at the Department of Psychiatry, U.C.L.A. in 1958, by Stoller. Presenting as intersex, with a hormonal imbalance, which she claimed to have made her male body feminize spontaneously at puberty, Agnes requested surgery to ‘correct’ her genitals. Given her unquestionably womanly appearance and demeanour, as well as her established feminine status in her everyday life, the medical team was convinced that her penis was an abnormality and she was granted
Nevertheless, approximately eight years post-surgery, Agnes admitted deception; she revealed that she was a typical, biological male, who was secretly self-administering his mother’s oestrogen pills from the age of twelve, and explained that telling the truth would have made her ineligible for genital surgery. The impact of this case has been characterised as three-fold (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). First, for Garfinkel, it confirmed his theory of an interactive social process, in the course of which Agnes established her femininity by “doing gender” (Ekins & King, 2006). This process was designed to guarantee ‘passing’, which he described as consisting of the sum of efforts towards creating the impression of having the appropriate genitals for people who might never see them. Therefore, whilst successful passing was seen to invalidate the role of anatomy, it also secured the individual’s right to live as normal as possible in the gender of choice. Secondly, for medical specialists, Agnes’ ‘passing’ as a credible female represented a prime example of the process, which has been described as ‘the con’ (Billings & Urban, 1982). Thirdly, for the majority of transgender individuals, the story of Agnes has come to symbolise one’s personal journey to self-actualisation, some aspects of which might require a degree of negotiation with the prevalent relations of power (Stryker & Whittle, 2006).

Nonetheless, sceptics argue that Garfinkel drew heavily upon the sexological discourse and his contemporary gender values. In particular, Davy (2011) notes Garfinkel’s belief in the presumed credence of the male/female dichotomy, namely that people might categorise one another as being either male or female in accordance with certain observable characteristics. In support of this, Davy (2011) points out that Garfinkel (1967) refers to Agnes’ ‘vital statistics’ of 38-25-38 twice in the opening paragraph of his paper, and gives a detailed account of her appearance and demeanour, measuring her against normative femininity. Moreover, she argues that Agnes’ overall conduct was compared to stereotypical notions of how ‘sexual deviants’ and ‘transvestites’ presented themselves. Given that Agnes was neither wearing ‘showy’ clothes, nor that her behaviour indicated the alleged ‘eccentricity’ attributed to transvestites, the fact that she did not look out of the ordinary when compared to women of her own age and class had granted her surgery (Davy, 2011). Her embodiment of normative femininity had produced a gender so credible in the eyes of others, that having congruent genitals was not any more a priority. Interestingly, in her autobiography, which was published a year after Agnes’s revelation, Christine Jorgensen also confessed that she was secretly self-administering female hormones long before she presented for treatment (Jorgensen, 1967).

1.2.2) Defending transsexual diagnosis

Following the ‘con’ and related accusations of ‘collaborating with psychoses’, the medical authority to diagnose and treat transsexualism came under threat. Even though ‘transsexualism’ was established as a benign illness by late 1960s and the number of sex-change surgeries continued to increase into the 1970s, revelations
that treatment was given to some individuals, who did not meet the clinical criteria, gave rise to the call for additional changes aimed at justifying medical interventions. In their article “The socio-medical construction of transsexualism”, Billings and Urban (1982) argued that medical experts fought for the legitimisation of treatment, as this would create opportunities for breakthrough developments in surgery, endocrinology, and psychiatry. Apparently, surgeons believed that sex-change operations were the biggest professional challenge they could ever undertake, the success of which implied that there was nothing they were surgically incapable of performing. It has also been suggested that lower-status medical specialities of the time, such as plastic surgery and psychiatry, perceived their upcoming involvement in the field as a chance to improve their techniques and enhance their professional prestige. Thus, to avoid having sex-change operations declared illegal, clinicians working in the field of surgical sex re-assignment initiated what has been explained as “the politics of re-naming” (Billings & Urban, 1982:110). In that context, surgery candidates who were seen to conform to Benjamin’s requirements were referred to as ‘primary’ transsexuals, whereas those who did not meet the non-erotic and/or lifelong criteria, but were otherwise given treatment, were named ‘secondary’ transsexuals (Ekins & King, 2006).

The ‘politics of re-naming’ prepared the ground for forthcoming sociocultural, feminist, and queer theorisations of gender and identity, and triggered additional changes in terminology (Stryker & Whittle, 2006; Johnson, 2007). In particular, attention shifted from justifying treatment to understanding ‘gender’ and descriptions of transsexuals as “natural experiments” prevailed, and their study was described by professionals working in the field as “promoting the understanding of the development of masculinity and femininity in all people” (e.g. Stoller, 1973, cited in Billings & Urban, 1982: 103). At the same time though, the increasing belief in the social determinants of maleness and femaleness served to undermine even more the conceptual foundations of transsexualism as a disease. In fact, the growing emphasis on the independence of biological sex and social gender suggested that transsexualism is an identity issue, and spurred theorizations of gender as a product of social construction (Ekins & King, 2006). While the debates continued to thrive, the new term ‘gender dysphoria’ appeared, a term coined by Fisk in 1973 to describe a state of profound emotional distress caused by an incongruence between an individual’s experienced gender and the one they were assigned to at birth (Bullough & Bullough, 1993, Ekins, 1997). The use of this term was further supported by the establishment of the Harry Benjamin International Dysphoria Association, whose 1979 draft of ‘Standards of Care’ specified the medical treatment of those diagnosed as ‘gender dysphoric’. Setting guidelines, which are adhered to the present day, the Standards advocate careful psychiatric screening, supervised hormone therapy, and cross-gender living of minimum a year’s duration prior to qualifying for genital surgery. The creation of these Standards was an effort to protect patients from harm, as well as professionals from accusations of malpractice (Califia, 2003).
Nonetheless, these developments did not remove the defamatory connotations that have historically accompanied gender transition. On the contrary, they added to the pre-existing concerns. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association, which is considered by many to be the definite authority in the diagnosis of a variety of mental disorders, first included ‘transsexualism’ in the ‘psychosexual disorders’ section, as a gender identity disorder of childhood, but without addressing the possibility of a late onset (DSM-III, APA, 1980). In the revised 1987 edition, it appeared under "disorders usually first evident in infancy, childhood or adolescence". Subsequent publications, namely DSM-IV (APA, 1994) and DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000), removed the term ‘transsexualism’ and substituted it with ‘gender identity disorder’. Regardless of the chosen term, the diagnosis still features alongside sexual dysfunctions and paraphilias, though as a separate category. The Manual describes ‘gender identity disorders’ as characterized by “strong and persistent cross-gender identification, accompanied by persistent discomfort with one’s assigned sex”. It also states that ‘gender dysphoria’ is experienced as “strong and persistent feelings of discomfort with one’s assigned sex, the desire to possess the body of the other sex, and the desire to be regarded by others as a member of the other sex” (APA, 2000: 535).

In the latest edition of DSM-V (APA, 2013), the diagnosis of ‘gender identity disorder’ has been replaced with that of ‘gender dysphoria’. These amendments have been variously received. Whereas some argue that the removal of the term ‘transsexualism’ and subsequently of ‘gender identity’ from a mental disorders manual herald an era of de-pathologization, others warn that the only change that has taken place is shifting the focus of the ‘disorder’ from sexuality, to identity, to the individual’s emotional response (cited in Drummond, 2011). Notwithstanding the debates, the reality remains that, for many individuals, the availability of the diagnosis is of paramount importance for those who aim to undertake the surgical treatment path. For instance, in many countries National Healthcare providers will only cover the treatment expenses of a candidate for surgery if these are deemed to be medically necessary by a medical professional.

1.3) **The classification of those who did Not Seek Medical Interventions: transvestism and transgenderism**

Clinical and popular explanations of non-medicalized gender crossing have been largely confined within the scope of ‘transvestism’ (Deer, 1978), although the framework of understanding has become more inclusive following the emergence of transgender studies in the 1990s. Generally speaking, ‘transvestism’ and ‘transsexualism’ are broadly understood as medically constructed categories, which differentiate those who pursued surgical treatment from those who did not (Ekins & King, 2006; Davy, 2011). However, clinical views on ‘non-treatable transvestism’
have generated further controversy. To begin with, Benjamin (1954) maintained that the term ‘transvestism’ addressed only one symptom, albeit the most obvious. That was understood as ‘cross-dressing’, a “simple masquerading of a non-affective nature […], a disharmony […] of physical and mental sexuality” (Benjamin, 1954: 15). Acknowledging variations, Benjamin sought causality in intentions; whereas for some the mere pleasure of occasionally adopting the female role was sufficient, for others the satisfaction was sexual. To illustrate, wearing rather uncomfortable but enjoyable female clothes was supposed to enable some male transvestites to establish an affinity with their object of desire. Others though were understood to take delight in hiding their male genitals under female clothes (Stoller, 1977, cited in Deer, 1978). Moreover, transvestites were seen as torn between pursuing pleasure and controlling frustrations. Given the detrimental impact that a discovery of such behaviour might have on an individual’s social, personal, even legal affairs (King, 1996 b), they would have no alternative but to restrict their behaviour to fit their personal and social arrangements. These restrictions ranged from wearing female items of clothing only under everyday garments, to cross-dressing exclusively at home, to even limiting the number of times of cross-dressing altogether (Benjamin, 1954, 1966; Ekins, 1997). Thus, ‘transvestism’ became synonymous with either a narcissistic desire to beautify oneself, or a need to satisfy certain sado-masochistic, fetishistic, or homosexual tendencies (King, 1996 a; Ekins & King, 2006). As far as the treatment of ‘transvestites’ is concerned, Benjamin stated that psychotherapy might be an option, should the patient wish it. Nonetheless, he questioned the purpose of therapy and underlined that a change in society’s attitudes would benefit transvestites more (Benjamin, 1966).

One cannot fail to notice that, before the (in)famous Jorgensen case, the treatment of transvestites was considered “as foolish as trying to treat some star to behave differently in the solar system” (Cauldwell, 1949, cited in Drummond, 2011: 22). Ironically, the case whose impact is credited with facilitating the promotion of transsexualism as ‘benign illness’ was noted as ‘transvestism treated surgically’ in the medical records (Hamburger et a., 1953). For years after Jorgensen’s transition, scientific texts argued that “trans-sexualists, or those who wish to change their sex are always trans-vestites (…) [as they] desire to be transformed into members of the sex to which they do not belong” (Cauldwell, 1956: 12-13). In fact, the term dominated prevalent discourses until the early 1960s, and was only occasionally interchanged with ‘transsexualism’ (King, 1996 a). Gradually though, transvestism came to be seen as quite distinct from transsexualism, and not always under the most favourable light; in fact it has been strongly associated with deceit and pretence. Prior to ‘transsexual treatment’, individuals who cross-dressed were persistently described as “notorious impersonators of sex” (King, 1996 b: 80) and the popularity of mid-1800s labels such as ‘disguise’ and ‘masquerade’ did not show any decline until the late 1950s (McKenna, 2013). Following the establishment of transsexualism, non-medicalized expressions of the ‘transvestitic’ spectrum expanded to include drag queens, certain forms of prostitution and sexual deviancy, and/or potentially compromising, eccentric behaviour (Prince, 1971, 1976; Coleman,
1996). The ensuing lack of ‘serious’ scientific and academic interest seems to have contributed to an erroneous description of ‘transvestism’ as “wearing the clothing of the opposite sex for sexual release (…) or some variant of that” (Prince, 1976:21), a contentious position which is said to prevail to this day. For instance, in a review of literature on male cross-dressing, Drummond (2011: 14) notes that the subject has only infrequently been the focus of research, and quotes a researcher’s confession that “friends expressed their surprise that I should want to study such a bizarre group, with their undertones of underground-verging-on-defiant-lifestyles”.

Tracing the development of the term ‘transgender’, Ekins & King (2006) attribute its significance to the fact that it was created by people who identified as such, and who resisted medicalization. The term is said to have been coined by Virginia Prince (1971, 1976), who described herself as a ‘transgenderist’; an individual who was born male but nevertheless is expressing his previously suppressed femininity by adopting its external manifestations, without resorting to hormonal and surgical treatments. This description also served to differentiate the gender status of Prince and others similar to her from that of medicalized ‘transsexualism’ and sexualized or de-valued ‘transvestism’. Soon after its emergence in the 1970s, the category of ‘transgenderism’ acquired, in the eyes of many authors and the public, a generic meaning that incorporated both transvestites and transsexuals within its scope and, over a relatively-short period of time, acquired a dominant position in the literature. In addition, the rapidly emerging discipline of transgender studies in the 1990s witnessed the term ‘transgender’ acquiring the politically radical, progressive value of going beyond the binary gender divide and gender altogether. In particular, ‘transgender’ is used as an umbrella term to refer to people who might variously identify as ‘transsexual’, ‘transvestite’, ‘drag queen’, ‘drag king’, ‘genderqueer’, ‘trans’ etc. (Stryker & Whittle, 2006).

Nonetheless, the diversity of contemporary identifications has generated ambiguity and has stirred theoretical tensions, which have either idealised or condemned respective identifications. Within these debates, the focus has been on the history of classifications of transsexualism and the ensuing diagnostic dilemmas (e.g. Johnson, 2007), but the impact of the disappearance of other classifications, particularly ‘transvestism’, has been overlooked. Possibly, the enlargement in scope of the terms ‘transgender’ and ‘transsexual’ has led to theoretical overlaps, which now incorporate the previously-held notion of what a ‘transvestite’ is within the scope of these two commonly-used terms. While some ‘transvestites’ might have been incorporated into the category of ‘transgender’, as have some ‘transsexuals’ (Ekins & King, 2006; Drummond, 2011) their individual voices have vanished. The confusion persists as some individuals who would otherwise be classified as transsexuals under clinical discourses embrace the umbrella notion of ‘transgender’, whereas those who associate themselves with the precise, medical description of transsexuality reject the vagueness of the ‘transgender’ category (Davy, 2011). To illustrate,
With the new way of looking at things, suddenly all sorts of options have opened up for transgendered people: living full-time without genital surgery, recreating in one gender role while working in another, identifying as neither gender, or both, blending characteristics of both genders in new and creative ways, identifying as sexes and genders heretofore undreamed of— even designer genitals do not seem beyond reason (Denny, 1995, cited in Ekins & King, 2006: 12).

Within the scope of what it means to be transgendered, meanings and practices are constantly changing and are therefore subject to dispute. In dealing with this confusion, Ekins & King (2006) employ a sociological approach to identify the variety of expressions of what they term the ‘transgender phenomena’. They advocate a shift from “gender as something that people have”, to “the production of a gendered social identity as an ongoing accomplishment, something which is constantly being done” (Ekins & King, 2006: 33). Drawing upon Kessler & McKenna’s (1978) work that gender is mapped onto the genitals as well as other social signifiers, and Plummer’s (1995:16) concept of ‘telling stories’ as a means of approaching social reality as it is “produced in social contexts by embodied, concrete people experiencing the thoughts and feelings of everyday life”, they examine the processes and practices that individuals employ when crossing genders. Establishing the enacted desire to cross the binary gender divide as the starting point of the process and avoiding the use of categories such as ‘transvestite’ and ‘transsexual’ they identify four trajectories to account for the experience of bodily and daily social practices of transgendering. These four trajectories are classified in relation to the type of ‘challenge’ they pose to the binary gender divide. In particular: migrating stories are about crossing the divide permanently; oscillating stories are about going ‘back and forth’ male and female; negating stories are concerned with attempts to eliminate the gender divide; and transcending stories are about individuals who seek to go beyond the binary divide and gender altogether (Ekins & King, 2006). They also underline five additional sub-processes, by which transgendering is accomplished in all four modes. These involve ‘erasing’, ‘substituting’, ‘concealing’, ‘implying’ and ‘redefining’ particular body parts or gendered attributes associated with the birth-assigned gender, with the aim of facilitating a successful transition into the gender of choice. These social processes have emerged from their Grounded Theory work with informants over the past three decades and are presented by them as providing a confirmation that gender-crossing individuals variously move within and between these particular modes.

Nonetheless, Ekins & King’s (2006) model has some limitations. Their understanding of transition as separate stages, each of which constitutes a category into which individuals are grouped, corresponds to a categorical epistemology. Moreover, they underline that the prevalence of some stories is unevenly distributed. In particular, ‘migrating’ stories that reflect medical accounts of what is broadly understood as transsexualism, and ‘oscillating’ stories which correspond to
transvestism or cross-dressing are more widespread than their ‘transcending’ or ‘negating’ counterparts. In fact, they suggest that the concept of the last two story-types seems to be more popular in academic theory, and less applicable to the lived experience of people who gender-cross (Ekins & King, 2006). Arguably, a hierarchy of bodily practices prevails, which differentiates between those who seek medical treatment and those who do not.

Reviewing the multiplicity of debates within the field, Elliot (2009) identifies a bipolar, hierarchical reading of the manifestations of what she refers to as ‘gender variance’, which categorises individuals into one of two main groups, those who identify as transgendered, and those who identify as transsexual. Whereas the latter are understood in the literature to seek irreversible medical interventions in order to cross the gender border, the former she sees as being characterized by a resistance to the medical categories of knowledge. In particular, Elliot (2009) argues that a significant body of debates in transgender studies see transsexuals as conforming to the dictates of the hegemonic gender order, whereas transgender individuals are likely to be praised for being politically progressive. She points out that the applicability of terms such as ‘transgender’ and ‘transsexual’ has been questioned by many scholars and their wider use within the academia has been attributed to the need to justify the theoretical standpoint of those politicized cultures who employ these terms in their work (e.g. Heyes, 2000, Wilson, 2002). Of concern is the queering of transsexuality, namely the endorsement of the intentions of those individuals who embrace unconventional or unintelligible gender categories – hence identifying as transgender- at the expense of those transsexuals who simply wish to live their lives as ordinary men and women (Elliot, 2009). In this context, transsexuals are either praised as radical others, who suffer the effects of prejudice because of trying to, or having crossed the gender border, or are condemned for serving to ensure the continuation of the hegemonic gender order (Elliot, 2009). This hierarchical categorisation is said to play down the socio-political experiences and institutional barriers experienced in the lives of those transsexuals who attempt to achieve sex/gender congruence. Contesting the politicised, queer readings of transsexuality, Namaste (2005) further suggests that most transsexuals have little interest in identity politics or in the cultural analysis of gender. In addition, she advocates the theoretical formulation of terminology which is empirically grounded in sociological research in order to facilitate a novel understanding of gender-crossing expressions via the dismantling and re-evaluation of unnecessary conceptual and political hierarchies.

1.3.1) The disappearance of transvestites

Contemporary clinical discourses describe transvestism as a sexual disorder and even a punishable crime. In the forensic and legal discourse, transvestism is classified as a ‘sexual crime’, alongside bestiality, necrophilia and incest (Aggrawal, 2009). In the psychiatric discourse, transvestism features in the DSM’s ‘sexual and
gender identity disorders’ section, but unlike transsexualism, it is under the category of ‘paraphilias’. These are described as “recurrent, intense sexual urges, fantasies or behaviours that involve unusual objects, activities or situations that cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning” (APA, 2000: 535), and include masochism and sadism, exhibitionism, paedophilia and fetishism. In particular, the DSM-IV-TR explains the paraphilic element of ‘transvestic fetishism’ as cross-dressing by a male in women’s clothes, notes that when not cross-dressed, the individual is usually “unremarkably masculine”, and suggests that sexual masochism may be also diagnosed in some cases (APA, 2000: 574). Notably, ‘transvestic fetishism’ serves as a diagnosis of mental illness only in heterosexual men who wear women’s clothes, but not in those who have been officially diagnosed with ‘gender identity disorder’. In the latest edition of DSM-V (APA, 2013) the term has changed to ‘transvestic disorder’. However, it appears that the ever-changing terms have not managed to remove the stigma from transvestism, but have actually exacerbated the pre-existing negative connotations in favour of surgical re-assignment.

In a review of literature on male cross-dressing, Drummond (2011:14) cites examples of what she describes as a “common theme in problem pages that has only infrequently been the focus of serious academic research”. She points out that the majority of research has been conducted within a psychiatric framework, suggests that clinical samples used may not be truly representative of the general population, and argues that data from non-clinical groups does not support the psychiatric view of transvestism. In particular, transvestism is generally conducted in secret, and long-term associations with fetishistic and masturbatory fantasies may have contributed to a degree of internalised shame for some, and may have also stirred numerous personal and social problems. Moreover, many ‘transvestites’ cross-dress in order to relieve themselves from stress caused by the pressures of masculinity; and while some of these might achieve their intended integrity, stories of self-acceptance and balance have been markedly underrepresented in the literature (Coleman, 1996; Ekins & King, 2006). Arguably, psychodynamic views of gender crossing, such as it being an attempt to deal with castration anxiety, or an indication of un-natural sexuality caused by parent-child dynamics still prevail to this day, though they seem to apply to ‘non-treatable transvestism’ as opposed to transsexualism. Needless to say, medical stories of success and euphoria following transsexual treatment seem to dominate in the literature and in the media (Ames, 2005, Drummond, 2011).

Throughout the years, transvestism has attracted a considerable amount of theoretical and scientific interest and has served as a site for the much-debated intersections of sex/gender/sexuality. At present, transvestism seems to have ‘disappeared’ under the weight of clinical and politicized discourses. Perhaps, the growing emphasis on what the figure of the transsexual acquires on both psychosocial and physiological levels, as well as the conceptual implications of this for gender politics, have acknowledged gender crossing as the attainment of a
definite and irreversible state, and transsexual treatment as the logical conclusion of any form of gender-crossing (Bullough & Bullough, 1993; Ekins & King, 2006). In this context, the ‘routes’ of those who gender cross temporarily and/or reversibly are devalued and ignored because of their denunciation of a political destination. That they still follow a route which leads to their experiencing life as ordinary members of the gender, opposite to that which they were assigned at birth, appears to be of a lesser importance.

Transvestism can neither be appropriated within the heteronormative binary of male/masculine and female/feminine, nor within the more ‘progressive’ transsexual/transgender politicized framework. Not doubting that the more recent, inclusive ‘transgender’ and ‘trans*’ categories allow for a wider spectrum of non-normative gender expressions to come forward, the voices of ‘transvestites’ or ‘cross-dressers’ seem to have disappeared. This is a concern because individuals with “the impulse to assume the external garb of a sex which is not apparently that (...) indicated by the sexual organs” (Hirschfeld, 1910, cited in King, 1996 b) have existed as long as humankind. ‘Transvestism’ has been heralded as a manifestation of an individual’s complete persona, which is free to emerge only when they accept their masculinity and femininity as two integral parts of their personality (e.g. Prince, 1971, 1976). However, following the establishment of ‘transsexualism’ as a benign illness that only medicine can treat, and the politicized academic cultures within the field of transgender studies, it appears that transvestism has escaped contemporary definitional distinctions. As a result, it occupies that ambiguous space somewhere between what is ‘real’ and what is not.

According to Garber (1992:15), whereas transsexualism is the “20th century manifestation of cross-dressing and the anxieties of binarity”, transvestism is “the crisis of category itself”. My understanding is that, as an expression of gender fluidity, transvestism creates a ‘category crisis’ where a body incarnates the two categories into one, without the need to ‘discard’ one in favour of another. This does not mean to suggest that other expressions of gender variance are of lesser importance, or that transvestism is queer. Rather, that transvestism is an indication that one is both and both is one. As stated in the introduction, this study contests the suitability for studying trans-gender identity formation from a categorical standpoint and questions the understanding of gender crossing as consisting of separate stages, each of which constitutes a category into which individuals are grouped. In particular, the present study explores whether individuals assigned to the categories of ‘cross-dressers’ and ‘transsexuals’ –or, according to Ekins & King (2006), ‘gender oscillators’ and ‘gender migrators’- might not constitute members of different groups, but individual expressions of a similar embodied desire.
1.4) Summary

This chapter offers a history of cross-dressing classifications. It argues that the currently devalued portrayal of transvestism is the result of the historical forces of power relations which favour clinical and politicized classifications of non-normative gender expressions over other classifications. This chapter traces the development of these classifications, from the early class of ‘inversions’ and cases of ‘transvestism treated surgically’, to the emergence of transsexualism as a diagnostic category with a ‘benign illness’ label and discusses the many controversies surrounding this. However, the institutional attention to transsexualism, albeit contentious, has facilitated its recognition as a diagnostic category within dominant discourses of reality, whereas transvestism that has ‘slipped through the net’ of political representation and has fallen into rather obscure territory. The argument presented here is that transvestites or cross-dressers have not simply ‘disappeared’ as a result of rationally inevitable facts, but have been undone through the ‘rituals of power’ which determine current classification schemata. These concerns are addressed in the following chapter, this offering an examination of the ‘othering’ and mis-recognition of individuals who challenge the gender norm.
CHAPTER 2

Classification and Unliveable Lives

“...Have any of you ever come home in the evening and turned on the television and there is a panel of people - nice people, respectable people, smart people, the kind of people who make good neighbourly neighbours and write for newspapers. And they are having a reasoned debate about you. About what kind of a person you are, about whether you are capable of being a good parent, about whether you want to destroy marriage, about whether you are safe around children, about whether God herself thinks you are an abomination, about whether in fact you are "intrinsically disordered". And even the nice TV presenter lady who you feel like you know thinks it is perfectly ok that they are all having this reasonable debate about who you are and what rights you "deserve". And that feels oppressive. (...) Have you ever gone into your favourite neighbourhood café with the paper that you buy every day, and you open it up and inside is a 500-word opinion written by a nice middle-class woman, the kind of woman who probably gives to charity, the kind of woman that you would be happy to leave your children with. And she is arguing so reasonably about whether you should be treated less than everybody else, arguing that you should be given fewer rights than everybody else. And when the woman at the next table gets up and excuses herself to squeeze by you with a smile you wonder, "Does she think that about me too? (...)"

(Panti Bliss, Last Noble Call Speech, 2014, media communication).

The above quote is an extract from a post-show oration given by gay rights activist and drag queen Panti (Pandora) Bliss, aka Rory O’Neill, in Dublin’s Abbey Theatre, Ireland, on the 1st of February 2014. Once the video recording of the speech was posted on the internet, it went viral, as a powerful example of the experience of homophobia and oppression. The decision to quote Panti’s speech here is based on my understanding of it as an illustration of the argument presented in this chapter, namely that the misrecognition of individuals who do not fit into the heteronormative matrix represents a denial of their right for respect and human regard, and a loss of personhood. I chose this particular extract because, in my opinion, it demonstrates how ordinary encounters with social others could make the daily experiences of an individual who others classify as being an ‘outsider’ feel
unbearable. In the absence of recognition, or presence of misrecognition, certain individuals are treated less well than everyone else is and are regarded as being incapable of meeting society’s moral standards and as a consequence their sense of self is painfully undermined. And that feels oppressive.

In Chapter One, it was explained how the classifications of non-normative gender expressions has stirred controversy and how their observance has generated inequalities which either idealize or condemn respective identifications. From the all-inclusive class of ‘inversions’ and ‘illegitimate sexualities’ and to ‘transvestism treated surgically’, to the current diagnoses of ‘gender dysphoria’ and transvestitic disorder’, the evolving discursive trajectory of classifications reflects corresponding shifts within frameworks of meaning (Ekins & King, 2006), raising debates over the power relations which are established in the course of socio-political representation of individuals who challenge the gender norm. In particular, rapid developments in medical innovation during the 1950s and 1960s made what we today commonly understand as ‘gender transition’ possible and introduced ‘transsexualism’ as a new category of being. Following the revelation of ‘textbook cases’ among those diagnosed as being eligible for transsexual treatment, clinicians had to defend their practice against the accusations of satisfying an “unnatural impulse” of those who, “whatever happens, will remain freaks” (De Savitsch, 1958:90). In an attempt to prevent their interventions being declared illegal, clinicians based their defence on the presumption that transsexual treatment is proven to enhance the individual’s well-being and to facilitate their smooth integration into society as members of their assigned gender (Califia, 2003; Ekins & King, 2006). In support of their claims, they publicized stories of success, in which those diagnosed as being ‘transsexuals’ had made a transition so successful that it amounted to being ‘twice-born’ (cited in Billings & Urban, 1982). Amidst the institutional attention that transsexualism has received, ‘non-treatable’ classifications such as ‘transvestism’ have slipped through the net of political representation into an obscure zone. Notwithstanding classification debates and the ensuing theoretical tension, the long history of pathologising has tainted the understanding of those who exhibit such behaviour to a significant extent. In everyday life, injustice and misrecognition for transpeople prevail; regardless of how they are classified or diagnosed, they appear as ‘intrinsically disordered’ in the eyes of society (Davy, 2011; Drummond, 2011; Nordmarken, 2014).

This chapter argues in favour of using myths as an analytic tool to facilitate a historical examination of the ‘othering’ of individuals who do not fit within normative gender structures. It consists of three parts. The first part examines the impact of classifications on the everyday lives of those who variously challenge the gender binary. It introduces Butler’s theorizing of recognition and draws upon her account of ‘liveable lives’ to explore how the classification of non-normative gendered individuals can simultaneously enable and restrict their successful integration within society. This part of the chapter also introduces Berlant’s (2011) notion of ‘cruel optimism’ to examine persistent attachments to conventional ‘good life’ fantasies of finding a ‘home’ in one’s chosen gender (Prosser, 1998). The second part of the chapter introduces the notion of the trans-person as a Monster, a being which is denied recognition and is forced into the margins of society. It gives
an overview of trans-misrecognition debates, namely the feminist critique of transsexualism as the ‘Frankenstein phenomenon’ and the rise of transgender studies as a response to this attack. It also introduces a number of celebrated, gender-fluid mythical figures to support the argument that the alleged ‘monstrosity’ of trans people is the result of medical innovations which shifted those power relations which serve to regulate the recognition of cross-gender expressions. The third part of this chapter introduces the notion of myth as an alternative, politically ‘unsaturated’ tool for analysis which will enable an alternative examination of the heavily contextualised trans-gender identities and desires. It presents an ancient and a modern myth of creation as metaphors which describe gender transition, and argues that the attribution of monstrosity is the result of the process of becoming, which results in the creation of humans and monsters alike. The chapter concludes by suggesting that the use of myths as a tool for analysis is likely to offer new forms of identity and agency that will enable the voices of mis-recognized individuals to be heard and understood, and will make their lives more liveable.

2.1) Approaching Recognition

Recognition is commonly understood as the act of assigning an object, person or situation to a category that gives it meaning and value, i.e. assigning it a position within the established and accepted order of human conditions. It has been argued that everyday life is ‘given texture’ by countless acts of recognition, whereby individuals place themselves and others within the shared social space, reproducing relations of identity and difference (Markell, 2003). Within the philosophical and political sphere, the notion of recognition is closely related to the norms which dictate humanhood and the rights associated with this status. Academic debates borrow from Hegel’s understanding of it as a reciprocal act of human validation, exemplified as a struggle between two self-consciousness states, where the presence of the Other is fundamental to the understanding of ourselves (Lloyd, 2007). Contemporary recognition politics transpose the Hegelian notion of reciprocal subjectivity to the socio-political sphere, and examine the conditions under which a subject is constituted. It argues that, even though recognition advocates the right of all individuals to equally participate in society, it also generates discrimination. Recognition operates on exclusion, and this involves the making of judgements about who is worthy of respect and human regard and who is not (Skeggs, 2001; McNay, 2008; McBride, 2013). To claim recognition for some inevitably creates unequal rights for others, and those deemed unworthy are “denied the status of full partner in social interaction” and are “prevented from participating as a peer in social life” (Frazer, 1995: 280). Recognition bestows social validity, but can also generate a pattern of subordination which encourages separatism, social invisibility and acts of disrespect (e.g. Honneth, 2001). To put it bluntly, recognition breeds both humans and ‘monsters’ due to the resulting diversity in power relations between those individuals concerned.
Recognition involves the simultaneous transmission and reproduction of the power relations embedded in identity construction, where the role of the body is crucial. The body is the public manifestation of what a man and a woman are meant to be like and look like, and the fleshly host of our self. The idea of having a self without a body or attempting to interact with other people without having one is beyond imagination. It is because of our body that we can participate in society and form a sense of identity, to which social others respond (Jenkins, 2008). Thus, the body is understood both as a physical entity and as a product of cultural and discursive practices (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004), as well as the ‘site’ where the institutional forces which shape our sense of self, meet (Foucault, 1975). The notion of embodiment is central to identity and recognition, and the concept of ‘embodied subjectivity’ acknowledges that identity arises from the body, as this is inscribed by cultural factors within changing time and shifting space (Grosz, 1994). When the developing identity complies with prevailing gender norms, the process may appear relatively straightforward, but when it does not, it becomes “problematic at different times, in different contexts and with various consequences” (Ekins, 1997:18). As this chapter argues, the trans-gendered body is a site of embodied difference, a ‘corpus differentiis’ that is likely to become ‘monstrous’ as a result of attracting clashes of power and knowledge.

2.1.1) Butler’s ‘liveable lives’

In psychology, Butler is best known for her early work on gender and her theorizing of recognition is less used. Others note that the term ‘recognition’ is rather infrequent in Butler’s work, that the concept is not approached directly but as a commentary on Jessica Benjamin’s work on the subject (Lloyd, 2007; Ferrarese, 2011). The decision to focus on Butler (2004a, 2009) does not mean that one can or should ignore the long tradition of recognition debates or underplay their complexity. Rather, it is based on her interest in the lives of transpeople, and her fostering of connections between recognition, gender norms and liveability. Butler (2004a) suggests that recognition is a normative ideal toward which we strive, an act of communication during which subjects are formed and transformed. Although she accepts the Hegelian notion of reciprocity, she argues that the constitution of the subject does not occur in a dyadic relationship, but requires the participation of all or many. For Butler (2004a) the scene of recognition is first and foremost social and political, and necessitates subjection to the norms.

The role of norms has been the topic of numerous academic debates, along with debates about how norms operate, either as cognitive representations of the appropriate standard of behaviour or as discourses which circulate and sediment, setting behavioural expectations and rules of interaction. However they are construed, conforming to norms is seen as the ticket to securing belongingness within a given social context (Hogg & Vaughan, 1998). Butler (1990, 2004a) argues that the gender norm demands obedience to a heteronormative framework of
understanding which supports the naturalness and immutability of the sex/gender binary. The constitutive power of gender is manifested in its capacity to convey recognition. Butler illustrates this by arguing that individuals who exhibit conventional masculine or feminine traits in and by their body are immediately categorized as being either male or female and are credited with a socially-viable identity. Thus, conforming to the gender norm makes a life recognizably human and therefore ‘liveable’, and allows the individual to flourish as an embodied subject. However, those who do not conform are excluded from society; their survival is under threat and their lives are at risk (Butler, 2004a, 2004b, 2009).

In her earlier theory of performativity, Butler (1990) challenges the notion of gender as ‘natural’ and argues that it has come to be viewed as such through the workings of power and discourse, these simultaneously constraining and confirming the idea of male and female bodies. Gender is “always a doing” (1990: 33), an achieved expression of the normative ideal of what a man or a woman is meant to present, deriving its power through the constant repetition of performances. Such performances or stylized bodily acts are not voluntary, but are the effects of regulative discourses which support the ‘naturalness’ of the sex/gender binary. Butler (1990) uses the practice of ‘drag’ to illustrate this. She describes drag as an artistic, staged performance in which the actor is dressed up as a member of the opposite gender with the full knowledge and acceptance of their audience, and argues that it pulls apart the institutional binary due to the ambivalence between the act and the physical body of the performer. Hence, gender is not ‘real’, but the performance is. For Butler (1990), the gendered subject is always constituted by networks of power and discourse, and the very idea of gender as a ‘natural’ category is socially constructed and therefore illusory. Thus, she advocates ‘gender trouble’ through the de-construction of the binary matrix, as this will create more possibilities for gender expression.

Butler’s view of gender as a socially-constructed performance whose success guarantees a viable identity has been criticized for minimizing any constraints that the physical body places on that performance. Critics argue that, although it is difficult to imagine our bodies outside discourse, they cannot be characterized as a ‘drag’ act (Alsop et al., 2002). In particular, the ‘queering’ of the sex/gender binary and the rejection of identity categories have been opposed by those who advocate the recognition of difference. For instance, hooks (1990, cited in Alsop et al., 2002) argues that the un-doing of identity categories negates ‘blackness’, thus rendering the subjective experiences and rights of black people invisible, further minimizing their opportunities for political claims. Others express similar concerns, namely that un-doing does not address the experience of oppression of particular identities, and Butler’s queering of categories suggests that gender categories are negative (e.g. Martin, 1994). Their argument is that, to participate in recognition, categories that have a sense of value and are inhabitable by those who are meant to occupy them are important (Skeggs, 2001).
Lloyd’s (2007) and Ferrarese’s (2011) discussions and criticisms based on Butler also claim that her portrayal of subjectification undermines individual agency. In particular, that she gives primacy to norms and the rights associated with the observation of these, and whilst she places more weight on constitutive discursive relations, she underplays bodies, vulnerability and the affective dimensions that are implicated in subjectification. In particular, it has been argued that the theoretical space which Butler provides, gives no insight into the conditions under which alternative identities can be adopted, and does not account for how these are likely to challenge power relations (McNay, 2000). Nonetheless, Butler’s theorizing has evolved from a theory of performativity which portrays recognition as a gesture of subjection, to an ethical perspective based on vulnerability, whereby the demand for recognition is reinterpreted as the demand to be the object of respect and human regard (Ferrarese, 2011). Butler (2004a, 2009) argues that life is always relational and therefore vulnerable to the negative actions of others, especially if these actions aim to un-do a life which exists outside the normative frameworks of intelligibility. She describes vulnerability as a state of being exposed to the very physical and psychic injury that is integral to recognition, which is at odds with the normal interpretation of the world, meaning as it does the state of being unable to withstand the effects of a negative action. For Butler, “loss and vulnerability follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (Butler, 2004b: 20).

For instance; in her critique of the treatment of intersexuality, Butler (2004a) problematizes biological naturalness and claims that the occurrence of intersexuality is not a medical but a social problem. She underlines that intersex bodies are surgically ‘corrected’ at birth because they do not fit within the parameters of the male/female binary. Their difference is seen as pathological, and is ‘treated’ in accordance with what is culturally designated as being the legitimate spectrum of bodies existing in the world. Butler (2004a) describes this as a form of ‘normative violence’, a situation whereby what is deemed to be socially desirable is brought to pass by force. Such violence remains largely invisible as it has been appropriated within accepted practices, which overcome the resistance of those who cannot conform. Given that “survival is dependent on what we might call a social network of hands” (Butler, 2009:14), the lives of those who cannot attain the normative ideal are considered as less human, and any loss or injury they have sustained is deemed unworthy to mourn.

In her discussions of ‘transsexual treatment’, Butler (2004a) explores the impact of diagnosis on liveability. She acknowledges that to be diagnosed as being ‘transsexual’ (or, according to the latest DSM term, ‘gender dysphoric’) not only guarantees the provision of treatment, but also strengthens the hope that the desire to be recognized as a member of the assigned gender will be fulfilled. Therefore, from the perspective of the individual, diagnosis is significant in facilitating a form of self-expression that can make one’s life possible. However, the recognition of one’s desire does not release that desire from normalization and regulation. For Butler
(2004a: 2), desire itself is implicated in social norms, therefore “it is bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as recognizably human and who does not”. Her concern is that the power of discourse has de-humanized certain individuals and has put their lives at risk. To quote

On the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized; they fit no dominant frame for the human, and their dehumanization occurs first, at this level. This level then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization which is already at work in the culture (Butler, 2004a: 25).

In line with a Foucauldian view of discourses as productive of the identities they appear to be representing, and subjectivity as a process of submitting oneself to socially-constructed norms and practices, Butler maintains that categorization cannot capture the process of becoming. Instead, she argues that the terms which facilitate recognition are themselves conventional, and that the classification of ‘transsexualism’ reflects this. In particular, being diagnosed as eligible for treatment might guarantee entry into certain structures of political representation, albeit at the cost of accepting a ‘diagnosed identity’ with an inherent pathology. Hence, being recognized as a result of being diagnosed is but a form of ‘gender policing’ which further exacerbates the divide between those who fit into normative categorizations and those who do not. Thus, Butler (2004a: 1) calls for an un-doing of the “restrictively normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life”, which will expand the parameters of human definition and will create opportunities for non-normative gendered individuals to flourish in a more accommodating world. Otherwise stated, she urges for an examination of how the diagnosis is actually lived, and whether it facilitates recognition and survival.

2.1.2) Gendered homes and cruel optimism

Personal accounts of gender transition present a rather idealized, one-sided portrayal of how the diagnosis is actually lived. The majority of these accounts come from individuals who have undertaken the transsexual treatment path, and describe their transition as a ‘journey’ which is initiated by their desire to become the person they feel they always were (Ames, 2005). The aim of this journey is to arrive at ‘home’, to a place where one expects to find belongingness and peace, and to establish identity and body integrity at any cost (Prosser, 1998). However, the ‘journey home’ might be the story that individuals who gender-cross abide by, in order to find a place for themselves within an established social structure. Expanding on the ‘politics of home’, Prosser (1998:205) argues that the longed-for belongingness associated with arrival at the gendered home may also be a product of “sweet imagination”, constructed according to expectations of “where one should feel right”. In other words, any hopes attached to such an arrival are likely to be culturally conditioned. Perhaps, the growing emphasis on what a transsexual acquires on psychosocial and physiological levels, as well as the conceptual
implications of this for gender politics, represent a tacit acknowledgement that
gender crossing is the attainment of a definite and irreversible state, and that
transsexual treatment as the logical conclusion of any form of gender-crossing
(Bullough & Bullough, 1993; Ekins & King, 2006). In this context, the ‘routes’ of
those who gender cross temporarily and/or reversibly —referred to in the literature as
transvestites and/or cross-dressers— are devalued and ignored because of their
denunciation of a political destination. That they still follow a route which leads to
their experiencing life as ordinary members of the gender, opposite to that which
they were assigned at birth, appears to be of a lesser importance to those engaged in
the debate.

As discussed earlier, clinicians promoted transsexual diagnosis as the preferred route
to personal and social fulfilment in the gender to which the individual feels they
belong. However, in her discussion of the medico-legal constructions of
‘transsexualism’ Davy (2011) states that, diagnosis neither facilitates recognition nor
liveability. The introduction of the Gender Recognition Act (GRA, 2004) in the UK,
which states that surgical and/or hormonal procedures are not necessary for legal
recognition in one’s chosen gender, has been heralded as a major step forward for
the rights of transpeople, but has also provoked mixed reactions, as it appears to be
‘differentially progressive’. As Davy (2011) points out, the GRA 2004 is
progressive only for those who can convince the medical authorities that they are the
gender they claim to be.

In reality, the rights of transpeople are still being violated, even in countries which
have supported the European Parliament’s 1989 vote for a resolution on the
discrimination against transpeople. According to the latest report of Amnesty
International (2014) there are inconsistencies concerning the legal recognition for
transpeople in Europe. In some countries for instance, the procedure for attaining
gender recognition documents is exceptionally lengthy, and/or excludes certain
individuals because of their age or physical health status. As a result, individuals
whose official documents do not reflect their gender expression have to disclose
sensitive personal information every time they are required to produce their
identification documents. In addition, legal gender recognition is sometimes
contingent upon changes in marital status, such as when an individual has to
dissolve the marriage they undertook in their birth gender (Amnesty International,
2014). In some European countries, sterilization is mandatory should one wish to be
issued with a gender recognition certificate, whereas in other countries legal
recognition cannot be attained without having a psychiatric diagnosis, and an
individual has to undergo psychiatric assessment even if they only want to change
their name (Davy, 2011).

In contrast, those who variously oscillate between genders and/or identify as cross-
dressers or transvestites are jointly placed under the category of ‘transvestic
disorder’, in the ‘paraphilias’ section of the DSM V (APA, 2013). It appears that
their ‘lack’ of a ‘benign’ diagnosis exacerbates historical associations between non-
normative gender expressions and sexual fetishism as well as various degrees of
emotional instability, further denying them recognition and the right to a liveable life. What is more, the mere inclusion of the ‘condition’ in a psychiatric manual is daunting. It implies that all individuals who challenge the gender binary are regarded as ‘personae non gratae’, irrespectively of whether they undertake ‘normalising’ treatment or not (Drummond, 2011; Nordmarken, 2014). It appears that the classification of individuals who variously gender-cross has neither enhanced their social adjustment, nor has it offered them the longed-for security in their gender ‘home’. Instead, it has compromised their survival, both within the broader social corpus and their ‘own community’. Recalling from Chapter One, those diagnosed as being transsexual are criticized for conforming to the binary gender order, whereas individuals who identify as transgender are praised for being politically progressive. Arguably, this hierarchical understanding differentiates between those who are recognised as a result of being diagnosed, and those who struggle for recognition of their own cross-gender expression (e.g. Elliot, 2009; Namaste, 2005).

Nonetheless, medical stories of success and euphoria following transsexual treatment seem to dominate in the literature and in the media (e.g. Ames, 2005). Arguably, the resonance of the metaphor ‘home’ and the perseverance of individuals to arrive at such a place is a result of their attachment to the norms which dictate recognition. In this context, the appeal of a ‘home’ denies the possibility that such a place is most unlikely to exist, and obscures the fact that the desire to belong to it is essentially enmeshed with the need to conform. The desired attachment can be explored through the notion of ‘cruel optimism’. This refers to Berlant’s (2011: 27) analytic that is designed to “track the affective attachment to what we call the ‘good life’, which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subject who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility in it”. Berlant (2011) explains that cruel optimism is a condition in which the object or situation that one desires actually impedes the attainment of this desired state. The object of desire refers to a cluster of promises which is manifested as various scenes of conventional fantasies, such as the attainment of wealth and happiness. For Berlant (2011), a state of cruel optimism is intrinsically injurious, as the desired object/scene is unattainable, while the weight of the promises it holds generates continuous efforts to attain it, in the hope that it will eventually improve the aspirant’s life in just the right way. Thus, individuals commit themselves to the pursuit of ‘good life fantasies’ without realizing, that by doing so, they put their lives at risk. Hence, the arrival at the gendered ‘home’ could be perceived as a scene of conventional fantasy which is sustained by an optimistic attachment to the belief that changing gender will enable one to find a habitable place.

In spite of its apparent attraction, ‘home’ can also be a dangerous place. If the aim of arriving there is to attain the ‘good life’, the journey is undertaken without considering that the ‘good life’ is preceded by the ‘liveable life’, as in order to improve one’s life, one has first to be recognized as having one (e.g. Butler, 2004a, 2009), and individuals who challenge the gender norm are denied a life that is liveable and a place that is truly habitable. Nonetheless, they pursue their wish to arrive ‘home’ in spite of the adversities which they endure, in the hope that the
journey will bring them closer to fulfilling their desire. Drawing upon Berlant (2011), it can be argued that their perseverance is further sustained by a fear that the loss of their promised ‘home’ will destroy their capacity to have any hope about anything.

The concern with the inequalities generated by heteronormative frameworks of intelligibility is not new. In the 1990s, the emergence of queer politics and transgender studies offered the promise of new rights to individuals and groups who had been side-lined from the structures of political representation (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). These disciplines also raised awareness of hegemonic arrangements within communities which have been historically marginalized. In particular, queer politics challenged the alleged naturalness of heterosexuality, advocating the visibility and the rights of individuals whose sexual and/or gender identities are not represented in dominant discourses of reality (Sullivan, 2003). In addition, they point to inequalities experienced within the gay and lesbian community, whereby certain non-heterosexual identities are not acknowledged, presumably because they do fit into the broader community’s expectations which dictate how a gay man or a lesbian should present and behave (Alsop et al., 2002). Using discussions that lesbians are ‘not women’ and debates in gay and lesbian conferences about whether bisexual people were gay or straight (Hale, 1996), queer politics drew attention to the lived practices which perpetuate relations of difference, and called for a breaking down of sexual and gender categories altogether.

Transgender studies emerged from within these debates, partly a result of trans academics’ response to the refusal by radical feminists to recognize transsexuals, not only as women but also as autonomous, moral human beings (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). Transgender theorists regard gender as a power-system which differentiates not only women from men and vice versa, but also individuals whose gender is immediately recognizable from those whose gender is ambiguous.

This study also calls for an examination of the ‘othering’ of individuals who have been ostracized for not fitting within normative gender structures. Acknowledging that the descriptions of non-normative gender are always politically saturated, and taking into consideration that identity categories are necessary in order to make claims to recognition and liveability, this study addresses a ‘misrecognized’ identity that is attributed to individuals who variously challenge the gender norm, but nevertheless is a category in itself. To achieve this aim, the present study argues in favour of using an alternative space within which to order and examine these heavily contextualized identities and desires. Thus, it transposes the ‘gendered other’ into a mythical terrain, offers insight into the historical dimension of its existence, and examines the notion of the trans-person as a ‘monster’; an entity that has been dehumanized and made ‘unreal’ for not fitting in. Acknowledging Butler’s (2004a) assertion that categories can freeze the process of becoming, the rationale for employing the ‘monster’ category is that it is a manifestation of that very definitional process and a mode of becoming in itself (e.g. Shildrick, 2002). As will be explained later, the Monster is a marker of the Other, a manifestation of projections of the anxieties and fantasies of society onto a physical and
discursive ‘body of difference’ which not only haunts binaries, but is also part of their constitutive power. The Monster may occupy a rather ‘obscure’ space, but this space is nevertheless a ‘home’ in itself.

2.2) **Trans mis-recognition and Monsters**

The term ‘monster’ refers to ‘that which reveals’ and ‘that which warns’. It derives from the Latin noun ‘monstrum’, which means “divine portent”, and also shares its root with the verb ‘to demonstrate’, which means ‘to show’ (Haraway, 1983; Cohen, 1996). In common parlance, the term ‘monster’ refers to ‘that which is bad and ugly’. It is used in a variety of contexts to indicate physical or behavioural anomalies and has negative connotations. In medicine, a common term for pronounced birth defects is ‘teratogenesis’, which translates as ‘monster birth’, whereas in everyday interactions and in the mass media, those found guilty of a horrific crime are branded ‘monsters’. Hence, the term is both descriptive and evaluative; it does not exclusively relate to a particular physiology, but also to a way of thinking about and presenting people (Shildrick, 2002). Monsters have always featured in the world’s imagination throughout the history of human kind as principal characters in religious myths and folklore, as well as in certain literary and cinematic genres. Their popularity does not mean to suggest that they are desirable; on the contrary, they symbolize the diverse, the unlikely, and the abhorred. Monsters appear in times of cultural struggles as the embodiment of the dialectical Other, an Other which resists normative categorisation and embodies that which one is not and should not become (Cohen, 1996, 2012).

Monsters are aberrant creatures that are forced into the margins of society, somewhere between the male and the female or between the human and the abhorred. Having no place that they can call ‘home’, they dwell at the gates of difference (Cohen, 1996). Nonetheless, they do not vanish but persist in making claims to a human identity, which they are continuously refused (Cohen, 2012). Likewise, gender-variant individuals disturb the order of convention, by revealing that human existence transcends beyond the allegedly immutable gender binary. This is an aspect of reality that society is unprepared or unwilling to accept, and the disruption of its established patterns generates anxiety, as the new forms of self-expression exceed the frame of any possible interpretation that falls within the current social narrative (e.g. Stone, 1991). As a result, non-normative gendered expressions are not seen as authentic, but as counterfeit and deceitful, constructed to serve personal or political purposes. In other words, gender-variant individuals are often thought of as “bad by definition” (Stryker, 2006) and suffer the social and moral implications of this, such as loss of certain rights, loss of self-esteem and a defeat in their aspiration to become integrated in society (Davy, 2011).
2.2.1) Feminist critiques, the Frankenstein phenomenon and Transgender Rage

Feminist theory has a long tradition of challenging the essentialist conceptions of womanhood which are employed to limit women to the domestic sphere. Following de Beauvoir’s (1949) landmark publication *The Second Sex*, in which she argued that ‘gender’ is an aspect of identity acquired through socialisation, the early feminist movement addressed women’s oppression in a male-dominated society (Butler, 1986). In the 1960s, the rise of second-wave feminism specifically addressed the unequal values which society attributes to male and female bodies. Debates examined the everyday experiences which women face within a patriarchal society and argued that socialisation has identified the female body as inferior, bound by biology and hetero-sexist norms. Intrinsic to the feminist movement was the assertion that women should re-claim their bodies and their position in society by becoming aware of the ways these are constructed within and by dominant institutions (Oakley, 1972; Stryker & Whittle, 2006).

The feminist movement fought against the historic mis-recognition of women within the socio-political sphere, and warned against the recognition of men who gender-cross. In particular, radical feminist scholars famously attacked transsexualism for being a sinister plot which aims to subvert women’s presence in society; they argued that male-to-female transsexuals are not able to transgress their biological sex, and therefore are not ‘real’ women (Davy, 2011). Interestingly, Mary Daly (1978) refers to transsexualism as the ‘Frankenstein phenomenon’. Drawing upon Mary Shelley’s renowned 1818 gothic horror classic ‘Frankenstein’, Daly argues that Doctor Frankenstein’s hubristic attempt to re-animate the dead is mirrored in the medically assisted, patriarchy-driven enterprise to ‘create’ without women. For Daly (1978:50), transsexualism is an act of violation equivalent to a rape of nature, which she graphically refers to as a “necrophillic invasion (…) of the female world with substitutes”. Janice Raymond voices similar concerns, namely that the aim of the surgical enterprise is to establish an ‘empire’, populated by male-defined versions of women. In her 1979 controversial critique, suggestively titled *The Transsexual Empire*, Raymond accuses transsexuals of ‘rape by deception’ (Raymond, 1994). Placing a major emphasis on the notion of a ‘real’ woman, Raymond (1994) argues that those without biological female experiences do not have the right to be recognised as having an ‘authentic’ female identity. For her, they are deviant men, who use the appropriated version of the female body to take over women’s spaces, aiming to disempower them, especially through infiltrating the lesbian feminist movement. In effect, she is arguing that transsexualism is a product of a medical initiative which serves to ensure the continuation of patriarchy (Raymond, 1994).

The response of trans academics to Raymond’s vehement criticism paved the way for the emergence of the field of transgender studies (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). The first of responses came from Sandy Stone who Raymond had personally attacked in *The Transsexual Empire*. In her article *The Empire Strikes Back*, Stone (1991) argues that Raymond’s theorizations are based upon essentialist, heteronormative
perspectives that not only ignore the importance of subjective experience, but also limit the notion of womanhood. Examining biographical and autobiographical accounts of transition of male-to-female individuals, Stone (1991) observes that their authors have reproduced conventional, male-defined views of women. She underlines that the majority of these accounts paint a romanticized picture of womanhood which largely consists of ‘dress and make up’, alongside an inherent vulnerability. This vulnerability is indicated by exhibiting behaviours that a patriarchal society regards as characteristic of women, such as the desire to relinquish any responsibility for one’s well-being to the ‘capable’ hands of another—a male doctor who specialises in gender re-assignment or as a newly-discovered tendency to faint at the sight of blood (e.g. Hoyer, 1933, Morris, 1974; cited in Stone, 1991). For Stone, these stories do not reflect authentic experience. Instead, their version of events reflects the hegemonic essentialism that feminism aimed to challenge in the first place.

Stone (1991) advises transsexuals to claim a speaking position for themselves, and to create opportunities for self-expression beyond the boundaries of conventional gender. She believes that this will be achieved only by openly challenging the widely established necessity for passing. As explained in Chapter One, passing is based on a biological dichotomy. It consists of the sum of efforts to create the impression of having the appropriate genitals for people who might never see them. Passing is also based on a socio-cultural assumption, whereby the materiality of anatomical sex is generally expected to correlate with a particular gender role (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). Stone (1991) maintains that, by aiming to achieve a convincing female appearance, passing facilitates invisibility, itself a defence against the multitude of dissonances that the transsexual body generates. However protective it may appear, living in invisibility hinders opportunities for recognition and allows acts of discrimination to continue unchallenged. Therefore, Stone (1991) urges people who gender-cross to become visible, first by taking responsibility of their personal history, and then by revealing the ways in which each one constructs a sense of self in reference to their particular form of embodiment.

Following Stone’s appeal for ‘post-transsexual’ theorizing that is rooted in the embodied experience of trans-gender people, Susan Stryker (1994) addresses the associations between Frankenstein’s Monster and the transsexual body. In particular, she acknowledges that, for many, the transsexual body is situated outside the natural order, but nevertheless re-defines this body as a powerful site, from which one can speak and act (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). Stryker bases her syllogism on a particular scene from Shelley’s novel, where the Monster, having become aware of the exact circumstances of his making and struggling with overwhelming feelings of anger and vengeance towards his creator, finally confronts Frankenstein. In her article My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix, Stryker (1994) explains that she can detect a deep affinity between her own experience of being a transsexual woman and that of Frankenstein’s Creature. To quote her:
like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster’s as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that, I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist (Stryker, 1994: 238).

Stryker (1994) describes her position as similar to the Monster’s, who angrily asserts his worth in spite of the conditions which his monstrousness requires him to face, and urges trans people to re-claim the stigma of monstrosity as their source of transformative power. To achieve this, they have to express what she refers to as ‘transgender rage’. Drawing upon Butler’s (1993) assertion that the viability of bodies is determined by highly-gendered regulative structures, Stryker (1994) describes this rage as the subjective experience of being compelled to transgress conventional boundaries and demand a space for oneself within the social corpus. Thus, ‘transgender rage’ is a ‘queer fury’, an emotional response to the oppression that social structures inflict upon gender-variant individuals, determining the liveability of their life beyond the normative gender threshold. To effectively “redefine a life worth living” (Stryker, 1994: 250), individuals have to proclaim the monstrosity imposed upon them and transform it into a tool of resistance.

Following from Stryker (1994), monsters dwell at the gates of difference, a space reserved for ‘personae non gratae’, that can be a site of power, as well as solitude. This living ‘in-between’ can be an awkward existence. Reflecting on his own journey of transition from a female to a person who he describes as having a ‘more masculine’ body and defines as a ‘betweener’ in “an (un)conscious body experiencing life in and between two cultures”, Nordmarken (2014: 38) expands upon the transgender rage proposition to include a corporeal resistance to the gender binary. This involves different kinds of liminality, depending on how one is being read by others not only with regards to their gender, but also their age and abilities, to name but a few. These are complex positionings of corporeal and social liminality, whereby he can become more and less recognizable, in different ways, simultaneously.

Expanding on Stryker’s (1994) analogy, Nordmarken (2014) notes that transgender rage is an embodied emotion which will not only make trans people visible, but will also empower them to claim their humanity, by building connections across difference and minimizing the social distance between normative and non-normative gendered bodies. Arguably, visibility and recognition are attained by “renouncing ‘beauty’ for the ‘beast’, while breaking the binary meaning of ‘beauty’ and ‘beast’ by being monstrosely beautiful” (Nordmarken, 2014: 40). In that way, monstrosity is not denounced but proclaimed, becoming a tool of resistance that can make one even more ‘monstrous’. After all, Monsters are formidable creatures; they generate a terrifying otherness, and their capacity to evoke terror is a definite kind of power (Nordmarken, 2014).

It can be argued that the Monster is a discursive ‘corpus differentiis’ which specifies who can be recognized as being human and who cannot. Nonetheless, this Monster
is politically saturated. It has ‘risen’ from feminist critiques, has been ‘re-claimed’ through transgender rage, and resides within a heavily contextualised space. This ‘doing’ of the Monster takes away some of its appeal, and limits its strength to ‘undo’ the confines of binary gender. This study calls for an examination of the historical dimension of ‘gender monsters’, and for this reason it moves away from the political sphere of well-rehearsed notions of monstrosity such as Frankenstein’s Monster. Instead, it enters into the terrain of myth, aiming to capture the essence of Monsters prior to their being drawn into academic debates.

2.2.2) Gender crossing and Myths; from Beauty to Beast

The notion of the trans-person as a Monster appears to be relatively recent in the history of humankind, yet a genealogical inquiry into the era prior to the medicalization of the ‘transgender phenomenon’ shows otherwise. In particular, myths of early polytheistic cultures feature divine beings who cross-dress, demonstrate behaviours and attributes traditional to the opposite gender for the given culture, or even have aspects of both male and female physicality (Conner & Sparks, 2004). Ancient Hebrew and Mesopotamic traditions underline the androgynous nature of angels, who they also endow with the ability to alternate between genders at will (Davidson, 1967). In a synopsis of various cultural and historical examples, Feinberg (1992) uncovers the sheer size of a gender-crossing legacy, arguing that gender-variant individuals were once honoured and revered as an embodiment of sacred, spiritual experiences, but nowadays are outcasts due to changes in social structure, namely the shift from early tribal, spiritual societies to ones featuring a capitalist mode of production.

In Greek mythology, the goddess Athena frequently assumes the form of a man in order to visit her protégée, Odysseus, in the all-male barracks outside the city of Troy (Fox, 2008). Notable also is the existence of Aphroditos, a Greek god who is depicted as an otherwise typical female, who lifts her dress to reveal male genitals. His name is the male equivalent of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty (Bullough & Bullough, 1993; Winbladh, 2012). Literature suggests that the worship of Aphroditos was associated with the moon, a symbol of the female element, and during religious ceremonies to his honour, men and women followers exchanged and wore each other’s clothing, instead of making sacrifices (Winbladh, 2012). What is more, the ancient gesture of raising one’s skirt or dress to reveal the genitals, referred to as “ana-suromai”, was exclusive to women. It was believed to have powerful apotropaic qualities, such as averting evil influences and bestowing good luck (Blackledge, 2003). It is argued that after his arrival at Athens from Cyprus in the 5th century BCE, the importance of Aphroditos gradually declined, and he came to be known as Hermaphroditos, the androgynous child from the union of Aphrodite and Hermes. However, it has been suggested that the name Hermaphroditos is a mistaken etymology of the original name, and simply means
‘Aphroditos in the form of a ‘herm’, the latter referring to a marble or stone statue of a phallic shape that features a female head (Winbladh, 2012).

Similarly of interest is the figure of Shiva, a member of the Hindu Divine Trinity, who embodies the cosmic functions of destruction and transformation (Watts, 1990, orig. 1952). Shiva is worshipped in the form of the ‘lingam-yoni’, a composite stone structure of a vertical, rounded column in union with an oblong-shaped counterpart. In Sanskrit, ‘lingam’ translates as ‘mark’ or ‘sign’, and ‘yoni’ as ‘vagina’ or ‘womb’, and the structure is said to represent the indivisible, two-in-oneness core of life and human nature (Jansen, 2003). One of the numerous iconographic representations of Shiva is ‘Ardhanarishvara’, whose Sanskrit name translates as ‘the lord who is half woman’. Ardhanarishvara presents as an androgynous form, half-male and half female, split down in the middle, and sometimes sports a beard. In certain representations, the eye on the male side is depicted as smaller than the eye on the female side and on occasions, only half the beard is seen (Goldberg, 2002). It is therefore suggested that the amalgamated embodiment of Shiva-Ardhanarishvara illustrates the non-duality of the Supreme Being (Srinivasan, 1997).

There are also myths about mortals whose sex changes due to divine intervention or acts of magic, which aim to either punish them or empower them (Shaw & Ardener, 2005). Of interest is Tiresias, a complex liminal character who first appeared in Homer and Hesiod. Tiresias was the son of a mortal and a nymph, famous for his ability to mediate between the gods, humankind, and the underworld. A renowned prophet and clairvoyant, Tiresias was also famous for having lived as both male and female (Blackledge, 2003). According to the myth (cited in Burkert, 1979), Tiresias came across a pair of mating snakes, and killed the female with his stick. This enraged goddess Hera, who punished him by transforming him into a woman. Tiresias lived as a woman for seven years, during which she married and had children, until one day she once more came across a pair of mating snakes. This time she took care not to disturb the snakes and this pleased Hera, who released Tiresias from the spell and transformed him back into a man.

There are also legendary mortals, who have challenged gender without help from the gods. An example is the Amazons, an exclusively female ancient warrior tribe that possibly originated from the Balkan region of contemporary Europe and was often in conflict with the Greeks. It is hypothesized that the tribe has truly existed, and was mythologized due to the gender non-conformity of its members. Literature suggests that the Amazons were thought of as ‘trans’ and were referred to as ‘androgynae’, meaning ‘manly women’. Interestingly, one of the suggested explanations for the origin of the word Amazon (literally ‘a-mazoi’) translates as ‘breast-less’ in ancient Greek, echoing the legend that these warriors had their right breast cut off, to enhance the effectiveness of their archery skills in battle (Mayor, 2014).

The contemporary view of gender-variant individuals is very different from the celebrated status of primordial, gender-fluid figures. Once divine creatures whose
gender fluidity was recognized as a part of their extraordinary charisma, nowadays they are non-normative beings ostracised outside the boundaries of their human community. One could argue that they have travelled, throughout millennia, from a place of marvel to a land of derision. This state of affairs alludes to the ‘freak discourse’, which describes a mode of constructing the Other in the most unfavourable light. In her account of the monstrous, Shildrick (2002) argues that Monsters are the by-products of a series of embodied and discursive shifts which alternate from being accepted as human, to being rejected as a ‘freak’. The ‘freak discourse’ follows a pattern similar to (mis) recognition, in that it is concerned with what constitutes a ‘proper’ form of humanity, and derives its potency from its promotion of exclusion. Thus, the popular notion of the monstrous as an anomaly is the result of a socially-constructed process, whereby the physical body of the Other bears the distinctive insignia of a non-normative identity. In the course of this process, “prodigious monsters become the pathological terata of the medical discourse, revelation changes into entertainment, awe turns into horror, a portent becomes a site of progress, and wonder becomes error” (Thompson, 1996, cited in Shildrick, 2002: 22). Thus, Shildrick (2002) suggests a new understanding of the concept of ‘monstrous’, free from historical associations with anatomical and social anomalies, and argues that monstrosity is a condition of becoming. One could argue that, if the celebrated gender fluidity of primordial beings suggests the existence of some element of both sexes in everyone (e.g. Bullough & Bullough, 1993), then the ‘freak discourse’ implies a dormant monstrousness of equal merit.

Nonetheless, a question arises; what do monsters in general, and ‘gender monsters’ in particular want from us? Monsters appear as the embodiment of the Other, who refuses to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things’ and incarnates what one is not, and should not become (Shildrick, 2002). Drawing upon Butler’s (2004a) theorising, I suggest that the Monster incarnates a personhood that has been undone, yet perseveres to rectify its undoing. The Monster haunts us, making claims to recognition, and inducing in us a kind of fear which echoes its own experiences of an unliveable life. It demands to know why we have un-done it, and threatens to retaliate by undoing us. Regardless of their appearances or attributes, all Monsters have one characteristic in common; they eat humans. And they scare us because they express our dread of being torn apart. This monstrous attribute echoes the Hegelian notion of becoming as a primary encounter with the Other, where the price of self-knowledge is self-loss (Butler, 2004a) but acknowledges that this monstrous Other poses the danger that it will literally consume us. For Butler (2004a: 2) “the experience of a normative restriction becoming undone can undo a prior conception of who one is only to instate a relatively newer one that has greater liveability as its aim”. Perhaps then, what the Monster wants from us is a place within a normative recognition schema which involves doing and undoing by both offering and withholding recognition. What is more, it haunts us because we allow ourselves to harbour these thoughts.

In his account of ‘monster theory’, Cohen (1996) argues that the fear of the Monster is a kind of desire. He describes the body of the Monster as a space where fantasies
of aggression, ‘inversion’ and dissidence – anything that is not socially sanctioned are allowed a safe expression. Soon however, escapism turns into horror, as the Monster threatens to overstep its boundaries, awakening humans to the pleasures and the horrors of the body and reminding them of their vulnerability and mortality. For Cohen (1996), the simultaneity of anxiety (our fear of being eaten or undone) and desire (for a seemingly ‘safe’ space of expression, a ‘home’) ensure that the Monster will always entice, even if it dwells at the ambiguous space between fear and attraction. Not surprisingly, literature suggests that “monsters do a great deal of cultural work, but they do not do it nicely” (Mittman, 2012:1).

2.3) Tales of Becoming: Monsters, Myths and Metaphors

Myths are a product of the human endeavour to understand life and the nature of the cosmos. They manifest as narratives that individuals pass on from one generation to the next as symbolic tales of the past, which are formative and reflective of the given cultural ideology (McDowell, 1989). Literature (cited in Kirk, 1984) suggests that mythic discourse deals with the forces embedded in the social construction of reality and that the plot of each story conveys idealized experience, by teaching acceptable norms and mores. Interestingly, mythic discourse operates on a bedrock of opposites, expressed as binary categories which mimic our own thinking process. Hence, it has been argued that the importance of myth lies in the mediation it offers between opposing categories, as well as the justification it provides for their existence (Sellers, 2001).

Myths are concerned with the intersections between the human and the divine, the beautiful and the ugly, as well as between life and death, night and day, male and female (Leach, 1969, cited in Sellers, 2001). At the same time, they portray a rather fixed, hierarchical universe, where “heaven is above earth, the lion is the king of the beasts, the cooked more pleasing than the raw” (Lincoln, 2006: 242). More importantly, myths resonate through generations because they offer lessons and reassurance. Their plot is structured in such a way as to provide comfort over the experience of pain and suffering, which they portray as an essential aspect of a life devoted to the pursuit of happiness, where one’s efforts will definitely be rewarded ‘in the end’ (Sellers, 2001). In a synopsis of various theories of myth, Sellers (2001) points to the many different ways of perceiving myth, including myth as an explanation for inexplicable phenomena, myth as an unconscious projection in the context of human individuation, myth as religious genre, and myth as a charter for behaviour in accordance with the prevalent social institutions. In particular, she notes that myth evolved as a way of rationalising anxiety, by subdividing it into specific agencies, before attending to each one separately. Given that human anxiety is universal, at least to an extent, myths address shared problems of existence, and this accounts for the striking similarity of certain myths around the world (Sellers, 2001).
The term ‘mythology’ denotes the study of myth and the term itself carries an inherent duality. It is a compound word of Greek origin, where ‘mythos’ translates as ‘story’ or ‘fable’, and ‘logos’ as ‘reason’ or ‘discourse’. Literature suggests that the concept of ‘mythos’ as separate from ‘logos’ has an interesting history. In an account of this distinction, a number of scholars (e.g. Manton, 1967, Creed, 1973) note that, since ancient times both divine chronicles and stories of extraordinary mortals were simply called ‘fables’, and were regarded as real events. However, the ever-dominant reverential tradition with its anthropomorphic and passion-driven gods gradually lost its power to Reason. During the Age of Enlightenment in the Western world, the rapid growth of science triggered a shift in the understanding of the world, namely from the recognition of resemblance and interconnection to a system of categorisation based on difference (Foucault, 1966). In 19th century Europe in particular, as scholars begun to compare the fables of their own culture to other cultures, it became apparent that the stories of their ancestors showed similarities to those of the cultures they considered different, if not ‘inferior’, to theirs. Arguably, it was then that the term ‘mythos’ came to denote a distinct category and was paired with the opposite of ‘logos’, the latter referencing the moral and intellectual standard with which the Western world then identified (Lincoln, 1999).

Early psychodynamic theorizing was concerned with those aspects of personality which remain in the background of immediate consciousness, causing neurotic anxieties. In 19th century, the developing field of analytic psychology drew upon mythological figures and concepts to illuminate those aspects of the human psyche which appeared tormenting or inexplicable. Even though this section does not aim to outline psychodynamic insights into the workings of the human psyche, it acknowledges their contribution to the study of the ‘beast’. They raised an awareness of a double-consciousness that exists in all of us, either as the embodiment of the Freudian ‘id’, the Jungian ‘shadow’, or as an indication of the duality and even the plurality of the Self (Mighall, 2002). For instance, synopses of Freud’s theory of personality, (e.g. Zimbardo, 1992; Ryckman, 1997) note that he employed two minor deities of the Greek pantheon, Eros and Thanatos, to describe the presumably dyadic yet contradictory structure of human nature. Eros embodies the life force, relatable to desire and preservation of the species and Thanatos personifies the death instinct, as this may apply to anxiety and self-destructive behaviours. In addition, Jung credited our intuitive understanding of myths to the workings of the collective unconscious which he described as a reservoir of fundamental ‘truths’ which are shared by all humans (e.g. Ryckman, 1997; Sellers, 2001). Jung postulated that myths are symbolic representations of particular objects or experiences which give meaning to our existence, and argued that mythological archetypes are simply recurring images of these shared ‘truths’. These he categorised into events (such as birth, death, and separation), characters (such as hero, parent, god, and demon) and motifs (such as creation, deluge, and apocalypse). Notable is the ‘shadow’, a largely unconscious aspect of personality that the individual mostly rejects, for it embodies the least desirable aspects of one’s being. According to Jung, everyone carries a ‘shadow’ and the more this aspect of self
remains un-acknowledged, the more fierce and darker it is likely to become (Young-Eisendrath & Dawson, 2008).

Similarly, horror fiction is concerned with a primordial fear which still resides in the collective unconscious- the fear of the unknown. Literature on horror fiction (cited in Tudor, 1989) identifies two traditions within the field, the ‘secure’ and the ‘paranoid’ genre. Myths and fairy tales are said to be examples of ‘secure’ horror; they unfold in a magical world, where anything is possible and all actions are justified. They portray fiends and beasts of extraordinary appearance and power, who nevertheless maintain clear boundaries between themselves and the human characters. The plot of myths and fairy tales is predictable; humans defeat the Monster, and the narrative reaches a reassuring closure. In secure horror, the monstrous is not too unsettling, because it poses an external and therefore manageable threat. In contrast, stories of ‘paranoid’ horror occur in the everyday, ordinary world, where the threat is unforeseen. In paranoid horror, Monsters pass; they “stalk the world in mortal dress” and “look exactly like everyone else” (Rice, 2003: 448). This invisibility makes any action against them ineffective and self-destructive. In particular, stories of the ‘paranoid’ genre do not offer a closure, because their Monsters are undefeated. Instead, the narrative escalates into horror from one’s realization that the threat is internal and evil cannot be destroyed without damaging the sufferer (Tudor, 1989).

A large part of the fantasy genre consists of scary tales, with menacing monsters which embody threatening, impure, and most certainly unhuman characters (Grixti, 1989). However, the fantasy genre does not aim to portray a counterfeit, unrealistic world. Rather, it is concerned with inverting elements of this world, re-combining their features in such a way as to produce something strange and new, but most certainly ‘other’ (Jackson, 1981). The forerunner to the fantasy genre is the gothic horror movement. The term ‘gothic’ is used to describe an artistic, intellectual and literary movement which originated in England in the 18th century, partly as a reaction to the intellectual and artistic hostility of the Age of Enlightenment and partly as a revolt against the scientific rationalisation which dominated attempts to understand the cosmos and human nature. In particular, the gothic movement developed as a reaction to the age of Reason, and aimed to emphasize emotions invoked from the experience of one’s encounters with the untamed power of nature, namely horror and awe, and observing the irrational, the exotic and the unfamiliar (Punter, 2004).

‘Frankenstein’ (Shelley, 1981, orig. pub. 1818) is a renowned horror classic of the gothic genre that has been an enduring source of fascination for generations of readers, an inspiration for many films, works of literature and philosophical debates. Commentaries on Shelley’s novel (cited in Johnson, 1981) describe it as a 19th century social drama, which reflects the anxiety of an epoch of rapid technological advances and questions society’s reliance on science as the only way to access the meaning of ‘truth’. However, it has also been heralded as something of a departure in gothic horror literature; as Johnson (1981) explains, ‘Frankenstein’ strips away
the unrealistic, supernatural devices of the traditional gothic genre which safely deposited their monsters in remote and exotic locations, and releases the terror into the everyday, real world. Other works of literature followed ‘Frankenstein’s path; notable among these are R. L. Stevenson’s 1886 “The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde”, and Oscar Wilde’s 1890 “The Picture of Dorian Gray”. The central motif of these stories is the ‘monster within’, and their plot is an allegory of the struggle between the Self and the Other, particularly the anxiety of the terrifying prospect of the Monstrous Other taking over the Rational Self. Notably, Victor Frankenstein, Henry Jekyll and Dorian Gray, fall prey to a similar daunting fate, as ‘their monster within’ destroys them. Perhaps modern Monsters demonstrate the extent of misrecognition as a collective trauma, whereby one is not only denied membership of the broader human community, but also becomes separated from parts of oneself. Thus, their appeal seems to be proportional to the emotional agitation they cause in both the ‘human’ characters and the audience. In fact, frightening Monsters cause powerful affective responses, such as fear or disgust; one could argue that they are rather ‘moving’ (Carroll, 1990).

Frankenstein’s Monster has survived well for two centuries as a metaphor for the repercussions of those scientific enterprises which interfere with the ‘normal’ course of nature (Johnson, 1981). The metaphor is popular in contemporary debates concerned with the ‘hidden dangers’ of biotechnology and regenerative medicine. For instance, practices such as cloning, organ regrowth, some cosmetic surgery procedures and even agricultural engineering have been accused of manufacturing ‘Frankenstein’s Monsters’ and ‘Frankenfoods’ (Zinken et al., 2008). As stated above, the ‘Frankenstein Monster’ metaphor is also popular among critics of ‘transgender phenomena’ (e.g. Daly, 1978; Raymond, 1979/1994). Clinicians who specialise in gender reassignment have been cast as modern ‘Frankensteins’ who, oblivious to the consequences of their allegedly triumphant interventions, create monsters of gender, which they release into a world that is unwilling and unprepared to accept them. Though their interventions aim to enhance their patients’ quality of life, critics argue that in reality they sentence them to a lifetime of struggle with severe social and intra-psychic consequences (cited in Stryker & Whittle, 2006).

‘Frankenstein’ is a modern myth of creation that when considered from the point of view of the ‘freak discourse’ (e.g. Shildrick, 2001), is likely to make one consider the possibility that its Monster had not always been scary and appalling. For one thing, the original subtitle to Shelley’s novel is ‘Modern Prometheus’. Arguably, she drew her inspiration from the Greek myth of Prometheus, the Titan who created the human race and overcome by his accomplishment failed to show respect for King Zeus, and paid for his hubris with his liver. The Promethean legend is a primordial myth of creation and one would neither deny its parallels to the Frankenstein story, nor its strikingly different ‘outcome’. Victor’s endeavours are nothing but victorious, yet the workings of Prometheus prompt the creation of an attractive woman, the ‘all-giving’ Pandora. Interestingly, whereas Victor’s Creature appropriates to himself the name of his maker and becomes Frankenstein (Johnson,
1981), the legend of the Titan has been incorporated into the myth that is known as ‘Pandora’s Box’.

To explain; Shelley’s novel tells the story of the young and ambitious science student Victor Frankenstein who yearns to discover the secret of creating life. He fashions a human figure using body parts and organs from the dead, and selects the features carefully, so that he can create a human of pleasant appearance. However, once he brings this Creature to life, he regrets it. Frankenstein realizes that he has produced a monster, whose “yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath”, and was noticeably taller than average (Shelley, 1981: 42, orig. pub. 1818). Scared and remorseful of his deed, and even more horrified as the newborn Creature stretches out his hand to him, Frankenstein orders him to disappear from his sight. The Creature flees, and Frankenstein, tormented by fear and guilt, suffers a breakdown. In the meantime, the Creature struggles to survive. His quasi-human appearance scares those who see him, and their violent reactions force him to live in isolation. However, the Creature notices that he has taken Frankenstein’s journal by mistake and proceeds to read it. He becomes aware of the exact circumstances of his making and his initial repulsion of himself is soon replaced by feelings of anger and vengeance towards his maker. He hunts for Frankenstein and, following a series of dreadful events, he makes his maker’s own life unliveable.

Pandora’s Box is an ancient Greek myth which was first documented between the 8th and the 7th century BCE, in Hesiod’s ‘Works and Days’ (cited in Athan asakis, 2004; in Hansen, 2005). The myth actually refers to a jar, but due to a 16th century mistranslation of the original document into Latin, the word ‘box’ has endured ever since (Verdenius, 1985). The myth tells of a time when the world was solely inhabited by immortals and the Titan Prometheus, questioning King Zeus’ authority, decided to create life himself. Using clay, water, and the four winds, Prometheus created an all-male human race. Overcome by his accomplishment, he handed over divine secrets to men, along with the power of fire. Zeus decided to punish Prometheus’ treachery and, with help from other gods, created the very first female. She was Pandora, a woman made of clay and water, sculpted by Hephaestus, and modelled on Aphrodite. Her name translates as ‘all-giving’. Once complete, Athena breathed life into her and taught Pandora how to weave to clothe herself, while Hermes endowed her with intelligence. Zeus then offered Pandora as a wife to Prometheus who suspecting a trap refused. Enraged, Zeus chained him to a rock and ordered eagles to feed on his liver, for eternity. However, Zeus’ brother fell in love with Pandora and married her. Zeus was pleased and proceeded with his plan. He gave Pandora a wedding gift of a beautiful, sealed jar and instructed her not to open it in any circumstance. Pandora gladly accepted the present and kept it shut for quite some time until, impelled by curiosity, she broke the seal. The box contained pain, suffering and misfortunes and all the evil inside escaped to spread over the world. Horrified, Pandora hastened to close the jar, but the contents had escaped, except for one thing – the Spirit of Hope. Pandora was deeply saddened by what she had done, and feared she would have to face Zeus’ wrath for failing her duty. However, Zeus
did not punish Pandora; after all, she had helped him, albeit unwittingly, to re-instate
his authority over immortals and mortals alike.

My understanding of these myths is as metaphors for the issues related to trans-
recognition and my argument is that both Frankenstein’s Monster and Pandora are
but aspects of the same being. As stated earlier, trans mis-recognition is the
attribution of monstrosity to those beings who have ‘failed’ the gender norm. Once
celebrated representations of the gender fluidity of the Self, Monsters have now
come to symbolize the much hated and utterly mis-recognised ‘Other within’.
Drawing upon the ‘freak discourse’ (Shildrick, 2002), I suggest that each character
is a rather graphic embodiment of two seemingly opposing constructions of the
‘transgender phenomenon’, the human and the monstrous, the ‘done’ and the ‘un-
done’. Frankenstein’s Creature is a vindictive monster created by a mortal lunatic,
while Pandora is a beautiful woman created by the gods. However, both are mis-
recognized and are denied the right to a life that is liveable. Possibly, the anxiety of
the Monstrous Other taking over the Rational Self is a normative, yet unpleasant
prospect that one is obliged to avoid. The wealth of inferences drawn from these
tales of becoming are revisited throughout the chapters of this thesis, and the
decision to use myths and metaphors as part of the methodological framework is
addressed in the following chapter. However, at this point I argue that the use of
myths as an analytic tool opens the possibility of claiming new forms of agency,
which go beyond the politically saturated spaces of othering and classification.

2.4) Summary

This chapter offers a critical engagement with the notions of recognition and
monstrosity as these apply to trans-gender theorizing. It discusses Butler’s (2004a,
2009) concepts of ‘undoing’ and ‘liveable lives’ to explore how the classification of
non-normative gendered expressions can simultaneously enable and restrict one’s
integration into heteronormative society. It addresses the ‘home’ metaphor, common
among individuals who chose transsexual treatment and draws upon the real-life
inequalities for those diagnosed to suggest that, instead of finding a ‘home’, a place
of recognition and belongingness (Prosser, 1998), they find themselves dwelling at
the margins of society. Arguably, the journey ‘home’ might be a story that
individuals abide by, in order to find a place for themselves within the established
social structure. Thus, this chapter introduces the notion of ‘cruel optimism’
(Berlant, 2011) to examine persistent attachments to conventional ‘good life’
fantasies of finding a ‘home’ in one’s chosen gender, which are nevertheless
unattainable.

In addition, this chapter gives an overview of trans mis-recognition debates, and
explores the parallelisms of trans-people with Monsters, liminal beings who do not
have a ‘home’ within human community. Nonetheless, the figure of the Monster
appears to have also become politically saturated. Therefore, this chapter proposes
an historical examination of the positioning of trans-gender expressions prior to their being drawn into academic debates. It presents a number of celebrated, gender-fluid mythical figures, and utilizing insights from the ‘freak discourse’ (Shildrick, 2002) and monster theory (Cohen, 1996) suggests that the attribution of monstrosity is the result of the process of becoming, which is shaped by the power relations that regulate the recognition of trans people, creating ‘beauties’ and ‘monsters’ alike. Drawing upon the presentation of monsters within mythic discourse and horror fiction, this chapter argues that the use of myths as a tool for analysis may offer insight into the spaces of ‘othering’ that are created by conventional classifications of non-normative gender expressions which will enable the voices of mis-recognized individuals to be heard and understood, and may make their lives more liveable.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology and Method; discourse, metaphor and focus groups

“But we just shared feelings and experiences…it is going to help you with your research, is it?” (Brian, group 1, 1002-3).

Within the realms of social science research, ‘methodology’ identifies “a general approach to studying topics”, and informs the choice and use of a “specific research technique”, or ‘method’ (Silverman, 1993:1). Accordingly, methodology is distinguished from method, as it is directly guided by the researcher’s view of knowledge, or epistemological position, which further shapes the research question (Willig, 2008). This chapter provides an account of the methodological positioning that underpins the research approach, explains how this informed the choice of methods and the suitability of these for analysing focus group discussions on gender transition. This chapter is structured in three parts. The first part discusses the methodology. It begins with outlining the theoretical background of the method referred to as discourse analysis, followed by a detailed account of the Foucauldian version of Discourse Analysis (FDA), along with its features and limitations. It also raises some critical points on the clinical and pathologising discourse of gender crossing, introduces the notion of discourse metaphor, and gives a rational for performing a Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis of focus groups. The second part of this chapter is concerned with the method. It provides an account of how the method has evolved, from the original plan of doing Memory Work (Haug et al, 1987) to a discursive analysis of focus group discussions, followed by the identification of ‘gender-crossing tales’ via the use of metaphor and analogy. It also introduces the participants, describes the procedures of data collection and analysis and gives an account of the ethical considerations. The third part of this chapter explains the use of combined analytical insights as the preferred approach to the analysis. Contrary to textbook images of research which denote discrete stages, each being defined by a set of tasks, this research departs from this linear and progressive narrative. It introduces a ‘movement’ in and through different aspects of data and theory and generates insights beyond those revealed by the more-traditional approaches. This highlights the fact that the process of ‘doing research’ is a lived experience, subject to an on-going series of ‘negotiations and transformations’. To paraphrase a famous Shakespearian quote, “the course of true research never runs smooth”.
3.1) Building a Methodological Framework

This section is concerned with building a methodological framework which draws upon a social constructionist approach that seeks to identify the ways that gender transition is put into discourse. Social constructionism views knowledge as a product of social relations, everyday practices during which people actively negotiate their shared versions of reality. Taking into consideration the impact of prevailing cultural, historical and socio-economical arrangements on subjective understandings, it acknowledges that there is a wide range of possible ‘versions’ of the world (Burr, 1995). From this perspective, research is concerned with the process during which certain forms of knowledge are acquired by people during interaction, by responding to the various ways of constructing social reality within a given culture. Such insights are derived from observations of the positions of subjection and domination, as well as the resistance and emancipation which individuals experience, and the implications of these constructions for human experience and social practice (Foucault, 1984; Burr, 1995).

At its most basic, discourse is a way of talking about things based upon shared systems of meaning (Willig, 2008) such as when a ‘medical’ discourse is employed to describe a physical illness of the body and explain the treatment prescribed to it. The method discourse analysis generally refers to a way of talking within a specific environment, where words are understood according to what precedes and follows them and conversation develops within a particular framework of justifications and criticisms (Wiggins & Potter, 2008). However, the notion of discourse goes beyond the use of language, embracing formation of power relations. Within the field of qualitative research, an array of interpretations of ‘discourse’ is available, depending upon the various intellectual and institutional conditions that have shaped each tradition. Irrespective of some differences, these interpretations share an emphasis on the socially-constructed nature of reality, reveal the situational constraints that shape inquiry and point to the intimate relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon under study (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Arribas & Walkerdine, 2008).

The methodological approach of the analysis of discourse is particularly associated with ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, post-structuralism and rhetoric psychology (Wiggins & Potter, 2008; Morgan, 2010). It emerged out of the intellectual developments within the social sciences throughout the 1950s and 1960s, which contested explanations about the nature of people or society in terms of there being static entities, models of memory or personality traits. Instead, these approaches emphasized those qualities of entities and the significance of processes and meanings which are not experimentally measured. As a result, the direction of enquiry changed towards examining the processes by which people make sense of
the world (e.g. Burr, 1995; Wiggins & Potter, 2008; Morgan, 2010). The emerging shift, described in literature as the ‘turn to language’, did not affect psychology until the mid-1970s, when it specifically emerged as a critique to the discipline’s preoccupation with the study of cognitive processes (Morgan, 2010). Throughout the 1980s in particular, social constructionist researchers increasingly questioned the role of language as providing direct access to cognition and challenged the alleged significance of the latter in determining perception and action (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Within the field of psychology, these researchers critically examined the various ways in which psychological constructs such as ‘emotion’, ‘prejudice’ and ‘psychopathology’ (e.g. Harre, 1986, Potter & Wetherell, 1987, Parker et al. 1995) are ‘made real’, rather than how accurately they might reflect reality. By arguing for the importance of the discursive context within which people speak, social constructionist researchers shifted the focus of enquiry from the individual and their intentions to the productive potential of language (Burr, 1995). Over time, the epistemological focus, once mainly concerned with the identification of cause-effect relationships and the prediction of events or experiences, moved into the study of the construction of meanings and social representations (Willig, 2008). At present, the analysis of discourse is regarded as a philosophical critique of mainstream psychology, which advocates a new understanding of mind, cognition and personality, and expands beyond conventional research methods (Hepburn & Wiggins, 2007).

Fairclough (1992) identifies two main traditions in the analysis of discourse, non-critical and critical, differentiated by the nature of their social orientations. Whereas ‘non-critical’ approaches, like Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) analytical framework, on which Discursive Psychology is based, offer mainly descriptions of discursive practices, ‘critical’ approaches draw upon the impact of power relations and those ideologies which emphasise the constructive effects of discourse upon social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge (Fairclough, 1992). In particular, Discursive Psychology has been criticized for a restrictive focus inherent in its methodology, namely its “interest in discourse and in discourse only” (Willig, 2008: 101). The emphasis placed upon meaning being produced in the text and throughout the text has also been criticized for ignoring the wider social and material context in which this develops, and for minimizing the role of the individual characteristics and motives of people who generate such meaning in particular contexts (e.g. Fairclough, 1992; Wiggins & Potter, 2008). Accordingly, the applicability of the Foucauldian version of Discourse Analysis has become popular within critical psychological research (e.g. Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008).

The Foucauldian version of discourse analysis was introduced into Anglo-American Psychology in the late 1970s by a group of psychologists, who began to explore the role of language in the constitution of psychological phenomena (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). Inspired by post-structuralist ideas, mainly the work of Michel Foucault, they set out to examine the role of psychological theories in constructing the objects and subjects which they claim to explain. In their 1984 publication of Changing
the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity, the authors – Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn and Walkerdine - provided a demonstration of how the application of post-structuralist principles could offer alternative insights into theories of individual differences, gender differences, or child development. This change in how ‘subject’ was understood necessitated a change of focus, from the notion of representation as a direct reflection of reality to a conceptual account of signification which “gives shape to the reality it implicates” (Henriques et al, 1984: 99). As Parker (1999) explains, signification draws attention to the process of ‘forming things’. Instead of trying to find the words that express the presumably ‘real nature’ of a phenomenon, it calls for the locating of the phenomenon within a symbolic system, asking questions about how this has been constructed and why, and alerting us to the intimate connections between meaning, power and knowledge. Drawing upon the presumption that individuals are not entirely in control of the meaning of language, Henriques et al (1984) argued that the meaning of words and phrases derives from systems and institutions. Echoing Foucault’s (1969:49) assertion that “discourses are practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak”, attention shifted to the way these ‘practices’ position individuals in relations of power.

3.1.1) Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

In a synoptic enquiry into the ways the introduction of post-structuralist discourse ‘changed’ the subject of psychology (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008), the authors explained that the shift began with the linking of the construction of discourse to technologies of power. The subject, whose ‘coherent’ and ‘rational’ nature was established by repeated measurements and meticulous classification, whose existence beyond social relations became the focus of humanism and cognitivism, began to emerge from the domains which had constituted it. In particular, psychology’s subject emerged from institutions - such as the family, the hospital, the prison, the school, the court and took shape from an array of concerns, such as juvenile delinquency, industrial inefficiency, sexuality, the very elements which formed its regime of production. Thus, by exposing the multiplicity of power relations that constitute the ‘subject’, the latter is not understood as a ‘thing’, but a ‘position’ produced within relations of force: hence the mother, the child, the delinquent, the worker, the patient, the criminal. Thus, Foucault’s concern with discursive practices as constitutive of knowledge and the conditions for transforming that knowledge, established his approach on discourse as being characteristic of a methodological shift within social sciences research. From this point on, research sought to identify the ‘rules of formation’ that define the possible ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’, as well as the domains of knowledge that are constituted by such rules (Fairclough, 1992).

Within psychology, the Foucauldian version of discourse analysis is particularly concerned with issues of power and the relationship between discourse and subjectivity. Having explored what can be said and done from within different discourses, it aims to investigate what can be felt, thought and experienced from within various subject positions. In this context, discourses construct subjects as
well as objects, offering positions within networks of meaning which speakers can either adopt, or place others within (Willig, 2008). Furthermore, ‘positioning’ implies the construction and performance of a particular vantage point from which to view a specific version of reality, as well as a moral location within spoken interaction (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). Given that moral location and moral order are practical technologies for speaking the truth, they also offer discursive locations from which an individual can speak and act; the subject positions they facilitate opening up or closing down opportunities for action (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008).

3.1.1.1. Methodological Features and Limitations

In the Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis, discourses are understood as “sets of statements which construct objects and an array of subject positions” (Parker, 1994, cited in Willig, 2008:107) and their analysis is targeted beyond spoken and written language, to the ‘conditions of possibility’ of discourse (Fairclough, 1992). Therefore, analysis begins with the identification of the different ways in which the discursive object is constructed in the text. The search for constructions is not guided by direct reference or lexical comparability, but by shared meaning, as well as absence of reference. Contrary to most analysts of discourse who work with written documents or transcripts of audio data, suitable ‘texts’ for the Foucauldian analytic do not have to consist of words. Rather, they can range from non-verbal behaviour, Braille and advertisements, to bus tickets and gardens, to “any tissue of meaning which is symbolically significant” as informed by the research question (Parker, 1999:3). In particular, analysis aims to describe patterns of meaning which organize the various symbolic systems that individuals inhabit, and which are imperative in the understanding of ourselves and the world (Parker, 1999).

In Foucauldian discourse analysis ‘discourse’ serves to describe socio-historically variable rules, divisions and systems of a particular body of knowledge, as well as the whole symbolic domain (Parker, 1999; Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). Thus, the ‘objects’ of discourse refer to entities that particular institutional disciplines recognise within their fields of interest, as well as the practices through which these entities are formed and transformed (Fairclough, 1992). Accordingly, the formation of discursive objects occurs within a given ‘space’ that is defined in terms of the relationship between “specific institutions, economic and social processes, behavioural patterns, systems of norms, types of classification and modes of categorisation” (Foucault, 1972, cited in Fairclough, 1992: 42). Therefore, the Foucauldian approach examines differences between discursive constructions of the same object, as these unfold within wider discourses (Willig, 2008). These differences indicate the various ways in which a given object has been spoken about in the past and exposed to several forms of regulation, punishment and reform—hence, they signify the ‘conditions of possibility’ for the studied phenomenon,
inclusive of its transformation over time and across different institutional spaces (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008).

For instance, it can be argued that the discourse of ‘transsexualism’ as a benign, treatable illness from the 1950s onwards, was the result of the particular relationships which had developed between the medical and psychiatric institutions and between the advanced surgical practices and established psychiatric criteria for a differential diagnosis of transsexualism. This view was further re-enforced by the separation of transsexualism from transvestism and homosexuality (e.g. Billings & Urban, 1982; Ekins & King, 2006). The emphasis on inter-discursive relations has important implications for analysis as it focuses on the totality of discursive practices within an institution or society, and the relationships between these (Fairclough, 1992). In particular, differences between discursive constructions call attention to ‘problems’. According to Foucault (1984: 388), the ‘element of problems’ is what characterises thought, as “it allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present [a certain conduct] as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions and its goals”. Thus, problemizations facilitate a critical relationship to the present, which serves to deconstruct the certainties by which an individual understands themselves as ‘selves’ (Rose, 1996, cited in Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008).

The Foucauldian analytic introduces a new understanding of the relationship between discourse and subjectivity and critically examines the material and historical effects of institutional practices on the experiences of people within particular contexts. Thus, discourse cannot be analyzed only in the present, because the power components and the historical components create such a tangled knot of shifting meanings and definitions over time. Scheurich & McKenzie (2008) describe Foucault’s approach as consisting of three dimensions of analysis employed to study the techniques, or ‘technologies’ which individuals use in the process of forming their sense of self. The first is the ‘archaeological dimension’, which is concerned with the analysis of the discursive practices that shape the conditions of possibility for knowledge. The second dimension is the ‘genealogical dimension’, which is concerned with providing an explanation of how the present situation originated, by examining the historical forces of the power relations behind current discourses. The third dimension is the analysis of ‘truth games’, or technologies through which people engage in ‘practices of self’. In this context, ‘truth’ is understood to be a system of ordered procedures linked with the systems of power which are implicated in the creation, regulation and maintenance of a discursive formation (Fairclough, 1992). Within this well-known argument, power is not a possession, but a technique or action that people exercise, and it exists alongside resistance to what it might dictate (Foucault, 1976). The analysis of truth games focuses on the relationship between technologies of power and technologies of self. Whereas technologies of power seek to govern human conduct by domination, technologies of self are instructed by humans who seek to govern their own conduct in order to attain a self-
regulated state of happiness and perfection (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). Foucauldian discourse analysis can be used to explore the power relations and power effects inherent in discourses within many disciplines and in popular culture, and analysts need to be aware of the conceptualizations of power and resistance in order to be able to recognize them within a discourse.

Nonetheless, its principles cannot easily be operationalized in actual methods of analysis (Fairclough, 1992). Some methodological guidelines for carrying out analysis have been offered, which identify different stages, based on the particular stance they employ towards Foucault’s method. In particular, Parker (1992) suggests twenty detailed steps, aimed at distinguishing discourses, their relations with one another, as well as their historical locations and their socio-political effects. Others, such as Kendall and Wickham (1999, cited in Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008) provide fewer steps, but rely on a more thorough understanding of the method. Willig (2008) identifies six stages, which map the discourses used in a text, the subject positions they contain, and explore the implications that these have for subjectivity and practice. Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008:98) state their wish to avoid reducing the Foucauldian analytic to a set of formal principles and attempt “a light sketch” approach, offering some “methodological signposts” which might be applied to critical psychological work. Notwithstanding the variety of analytic suggestions, it has been argued (e.g. Morgan, 2010) that their selective focus on Foucauldian concepts is confusing. Thus, they recommended that analysts adopt their own procedures, choosing those most applicable to their research question, supported by a detailed, justifiable account of their chosen method (Morgan, 2010).

The Foucauldian version of discourse analysis claims to facilitate critical insights into the relationship between symbolic systems, subjectivity and social relations. It attributes to discourse, the power to construct subjects and asserts that the availability of and commitment to particular subject positions play an integral part in the construction of personal identity and can serve to theorise subjectivity. Foucault traces the role of discourses within the wider social processes of legitimating and power, emphasizing the construction of current truths, how they are maintained and what power relations they carry with them. Nevertheless, this view has been criticized for its limited insight into subjectivity, and the relationship between discourse and material reality (e.g. Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008, Morgan, 2010). Advantageous as it may seem when compared to other analytical discursive frameworks (e.g. in Fairclough, 1992), the Foucauldian approach is claimed by some authors to necessitate a level of speculation, high enough to raise concerns over the method’s suitability to address ‘reality’ (e.g. in Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). The resulting appropriation of the processes of subjection and domination is said to ignore the resistance and emancipation processes involved in the formation of subjectivity (Scheurich & McKenzie, 2008).

It has been argued that the FDA analytic “raises a curious ambivalence in relation to discourse and ‘the real’” (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008: 105). It maintains that discursive constructions have ‘real’ effects, which are manifested in the ways
individuals experience the world, yet does not clarify the ways in which social and material reality may impact upon discourse. As Willig (2008:119) states “if discourse does, indeed, construct reality, then to what extent can ‘reality’ be said to constrain discourse?” The apparently uncertain status of truth has generated strong disagreements between ‘critical relativists’ and ‘realists’ about whether discursive constructions are entirely independent of materiality, or whether reality can be conceived as something separate from, or outside of, discourse (e.g. Parker, 1992, 1998, Edwards et al., 1995). However, proponents of FDA (Arribas –Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008) assert that what is understood as ‘real’ does not constitute a general epistemological question about the status of truth. Rather, it is an historical question that can be broached by a reconstruction of the events that contravene the obvious, in order to rediscover what is regarded as being self-evident and necessary.

Nonetheless, the FDA approach has some limitations. In particular, although the genealogical dimension pays attention to what conditions, limits and institutionalizes discursive formations (e.g. Foucault, 1984), it has been criticized for its restricted focus on the actual effects of discourse and the implications of this for the study of embodied subjectivity (e.g. Simmons, 2002, Johnson, 2007). In particular, the absence of gender from accounts of how people are constituted as subjects has led to the notion of embodiment within the practices of self being problematic. Hardly any genealogies of gendered subjects are offered, other than the position of the ‘nervous’ and ‘idle’ middle-class woman, which is, nevertheless based upon the assumption that male and female bodies are disciplined in the same way (Simmons, 2002). In addition, the function of genealogy is to expose the contingencies involved in what appears natural and to enable individuals to loosen their ties to their identity. The practice of employing ‘multiple practices of self” by acquiring various subject positions within games of truth is thus seen to create an impression that any given individual can contain multiple, shifting and often contradictory identities (Simmons, 2002).

According to Foucault (1984), a complete account of any genealogy of subjectivity should consider the interaction of three axes that determine the conditions of possibility of the phenomenon under study. To illustrate, the axis of truth includes the sciences which offer objective knowledge about fields of enquiry, the axis of power refers to political structures which categorise practices and impact upon relations between subjects, and the axis of ethics involves a relationship to oneself as a moral agent and recognition of oneself as a subject (Foucault, 1984). However, it has been argued that although Foucault invested effort in analysing the interaction between the axes of power and truth, his approach offers only a partial genealogy of the subject (Simmons, 2002). In the process of analysing power relations and their technologies, which impact on the historical practices of self-formation, the Foucauldian analytic does not facilitate self-discovery, but rather self-refusal (Sawicki, 1994, cited in Johnson, 2007). As Foucault (1984:88) states,
“history becomes ‘effective’ to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being, as it divides our emotions, multiplies our body and sets it up against itself(…)deprives the self from the reassuring stability of life and nature (…)because knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting”.

Taking into account some of the limitations of the Foucauldian analytic, the present study addresses the need to clarify the ways in which social and material reality may impact upon discourse (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008) and the implications that the acquisition of a particular subject position may entail (Willig, 2008), by focusing on positioning and metaphor.

3.1.2) Positioning and Metaphor

Positioning Theory was introduced into social sciences qualitative research in the context of the mid-1980s initiative to ‘change the subject’. It is attributed to Hollway’s work on gender differences in the production of subjectivity. In particular, Hollway (1984) argues that masculinity and femininity are not static, mutually exclusive attributes, and suggests an understanding of subjectivity whereby the focus is on men’s and women’s histories of positioning, and the way these histories construct one’s investments in taking up subject positions within prevalent discourses. Positioning theory stems from a Foucauldian framework of self-other interactions, but does not examine social phenomena according to the common triadic distinction of individuals, institutions and society. Rather, its ontological assumption is that the social is constituted by three basic processes, namely symbolic exchanges, institutional practices and rhetoric. The epistemological implications of this suggest that to gain knowledge of social phenomena one has to consider the processes that constitute these (Harré & van Langenhove 1991; van Langenhove & Harré 1999).

According to Davies & Harré (1999),

A subject position incorporates both a conceptual repertoire and a location for persons within the structure of rights and duties for those who use that repertoire. Once having taken up a particular position as one’s own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned (Davies & Harré, 1999, p. 35).

The analysis of discourse is concerned with issues of power, which are central to the notions of positioning and recognition. Individuals take up positions which facilitate the presentation of a particular aspect of their identity in a given situation, and each
position is understood to have a ‘moral quality’ in the sense that it is associated with a set of rights and duties. Hence, the term ‘positioning’ is used as an alternative to the notion of personhood and to the concept of role (Davies & Harre, 1990; van Langenhove & Harre, 1999). Nonetheless, the identity of individuals who challenge the gender norm is largely diagnosed, and this creates problems for the understanding of subjectivity. As explained in Chapter Two, recognition is commonly understood as the act of placing an object, person or situation in a category that gives it meaning. It has been argued that everyday life is ‘given texture’ by countless acts of recognition, whereby individuals position themselves and others within the shared social space, reproducing relations of identity and difference (e.g. Markell, 2003). Drawing upon the notion of recognition as the acknowledgement of having a unique identity worthy of respect and human regard, and autonomy as the ability of each person to determine for themselves a view of the ‘good life’ (e.g. Taylor, 1994; Cooke, 1997), the acceptance of a ‘diagnosed identity’ with an inherent pathology as a pre-requisite for cultural intelligibility is rather problematic. As stated in Chapter Two, being positioned as a ‘transsexual’ or according to the latest edition of the DSM V (APA, 2013) as ‘gender dysphoric’, might guarantee entry into certain structures of political representation, albeit at the cost of adopting other structures that limit one’s chances for recognition and autonomy (e.g. Butler, 2004). However, being positioned as ‘transsexual’ might also imply that one’s body becomes an object of interest to professionals, and is likely to be hurt or exposed during treatment, which forms part of the legitimate, institutional practice. Nonetheless, it might also imply that one’s body is simply a product of a ‘normalisation’ discourse, which constructs the desire to cross genders as an conservative attempt to harmonise oneself with the prevailing heteronormative matrix (Butler, 2004; Stryker, 2006; Elliot, 2009). In addition, positioning oneself as a ‘patient’ allows an individual to get recognition as someone who strives to become their ‘true’ self, and therefore to see their treatment as justifiable and to actually feel less invaded by it (e.g. Billings & Urban, 1982). More importantly, being positioned as a ‘monster’ implies that one’s trans-gendered body is counterfeit and deceitful, and their Self is condemned to exclusion from the broader social corpus (e.g. Stryker, 1994, Nordmarken, 2014). Due to the ensuing tension between conventional and subjective understandings of gender, individuals who variously gender-cross are often regarded as ‘bad by definition’ (Stryker, 2006:9).

The analysis of metaphor is central to discourse analysis methodology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Nonetheless, the focus seems to be mostly on the analysis of established, conventional metaphors that are examined in the context of intercultural communication and cognitive linguistics (Musolff et al., 2014). What this study does differently, is to examine metaphor through the medium of mythic discourse. To explain; in the context of qualitative analysis, metaphors can be described as discursive practices. The word ‘metaphor’ derives from the Greek noun ‘metaphora’, which means ‘transfer’, ‘transport’ or ‘relocation’, as well as ‘figure of speech’. It derives from the verb ‘metafero’, where the prefix ‘meta’ translates as ‘between’ or ‘beyond’, and ‘fero’ stands for ‘to bear’ or ‘to carry’. At its most basic,
a metaphor is the understanding and experiencing of one thing in terms of another, whereby a word and its associated attributes are transferred onto something else on the grounds of perceived or actual analogies, or similarities (Leary, 1990). The resulting “seeing in terms of” (Cameron, 2010: 3) has been characterised as a phenomenon of communication, prevalent in both poetic imagination and everyday language alike. In their account of ‘discourse metaphors’, Zinken et al (2008:363) describe the notion as ‘a relatively stable metaphorical projection that functions as a key framing device within a particular discourse over a certain period of time’. They argue that discourse metaphors reflect the current socio-cultural preoccupations and their meanings constantly develop to adapt to the changing times. Hence, their repeated use contributes to the process by which a discursive practice attains a certain coherence and communicative edge (Zinken et al. 2008).

For instance, the ‘war’ metaphor has been employed to describe the broader experience of a disease, both in scientific discourse and in the media. Individuals diagnosed with a serious medical condition are described as ‘battling’ the disease; professionals who work towards finding a cure are portrayed as ‘leading the war’ against the given disease, and those who unfortunately succumb to it are portrayed as having ‘lost the battle’. Within the gender-crossing discourse, the ‘monster metaphor’ has been variously used to describe individuals who challenge the gender norm as being unworthy of human regard and to position them outside the discourses of reality (e.g. Stryker, 1994). The resulting ‘seeing in terms of’ is, thus, responsible for minimizing their possibilities of viable gendered personhood.

In order to develop the methodological approach and address some of the limitations of the Foucauldian analytic, namely the ambivalence around discourse and ‘the real’, this study proposes that a focus on the positioning of the trans-gender self will reveal new aspects of the positioning process. For this reason, it employs myths as a part of the methodological framework, a practice that is not entirely discordant with the Foucauldian analytic. Mythic discourse is produced during inter-generational interaction, and deals with the forces embedded in the social construction of reality, and the plot of each story conveys idealized experience, by teaching acceptable norms and mores (e.g. Kirk, 1984, McDowell, 1989). These norms are disseminated through inter-generational interaction, in the form of symbolic tales of the past, which are formative and reflective of the given cultural ideology (McDowell, 1989). The idea of using myths draws upon the so-called “fondest illusion of the human mind” (Watts, 1990: 136), which is the belief that, in the course of time, everything may improve. In Buddhist teachings (cited in Watts, 1990), this refers to ‘the illusion of significant improvement’, namely that in the absence of progress, our life would be meaningless. Thus, it becomes impossible to think of life in any other way than positive or negative, good or bad. The idea of using myths also relates to the notion of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011) introduced in Chapter Two, where the attachment to normative frameworks of meaning persists in the hope and expectation that it will lead to the fulfillment of the ‘good life’ fantasy. Myths might play a part in sustaining this illusion. They cannot be tested, and sometimes are passed on without being questioned. This assumed flexibility allows the
dissemination of false beliefs to take place, that is, distorted versions of reality that most of us abide by, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Therefore, the present study draws upon an understanding of mythic discourse as bound up with institutional practices that regulate subject positioning within relations of power, in a way that myths function as cultural metaphors which create possibilities of viable gendered personhood.

3.2) **METHOD**

3.2.1) Initial plans and revisions

This research has undergone some of its own ‘transitions’. For one thing, it was originally designed to investigate participants’ memories of those events that they consider to be significant in shaping the experience of crossing from the male to the female gender. To achieve this, the original plan for this study was divided into two related phases; Phase One aimed to explore definitions of transition from within focus group discussions using analysis of discourse, and Phase Two aimed to use these as triggers for writing up memories of key events, the interpretation of which would be explored by using Memory Work. Briefly stated, Memory Work (Haug et al., 1987) is a method of collection and analysis of qualitative data which is generated in the form of written memories. It seeks to uncover the effects of socialization as captured in the memories and reflections of individuals, and aims to introduce alternative ways of perceiving a situation by revealing the extent to which one is accustomed to seeing themselves through the eyes of others. In accordance with the original design therefore, this study aimed to run four focus groups for the purposes of Phase One and two Memory Work groups for the purposes of Phase Two. It was expected that Memory Work would begin after the completion of analysis of focus group data. This was supported by a comprehensive literature review on the methodological challenges of Memory Work. Details on the original plan to the study and the Ethics Outline form can be found in Appendix A.

The original idea was to use discourses identified from within focus group discussions as triggers for writing up memories that would be further analyzed. Therefore, early in the process of analysis, I sought to identify the different ways in which gender transition was put into discourse, and to extract those discourses that could function as triggers for remembering significant events in the process of crossing from the male to the female gender. However, this aim began to feel presumptuous. How could I expect that what I would identify as a major trigger, could elicit a significant memory for someone else? Even though the process of doing Memory Work famously ‘collapses’ researchers and participants (e.g. Crawford et al., 1992) the identification of triggers from focus group discussions would be the result of my own interaction with data, at least to an extent. However, the idea of doing Memory Work was abandoned; as is explained in the next section, only three out of the four focus groups were attended, and this raised concerns
regarding prospective participants’ commitment to the more demanding process of doing Memory Work. Facing time constraints, attention shifted onto the material which had already been generated by the focus groups, and FDA was identified as the preferred approach to the analysis of this material. On reflection, the idea of doing Memory Work has not been completely abandoned, but has been transformed and enriched through the use of myth. As explained in Chapter Two, myths are forms of cultural memories, symbolic tales of the past, which are formative and reflective of the given cultural ideology (e.g. McDowell, 1989; Sellers, 2001). Otherwise stated, the focus shifted from individual to collective memories.

3.2.2) Recruitment and Participants

I sought to establish links with organizations within the transgender community approximately a year before I even applied for my current course of studies. I wanted to give myself the opportunity to get to know individuals who challenge binary gender in person, rather than via clinical and academic literature. My first contact was The Beaumont Society, “a self-help and social organization for gender-motivated transvestites and transsexuals”. The Beaumont Society was originally founded in 1966, as the ‘UK chapter’ of Virginia Prince’s American organization “Full Personality Expression” (FPE), with the aim of raising awareness on male-to-female transvestism and providing support to individuals who identified as such. In recent years, the Society has evolved to include a wide variety of non-normative gendered persons. Following arrangements with the Society’s London regional organizer, I started attending the Society’s monthly meetings, in a student capacity. I was soon introduced to another organization by members of the Society. This was TransLondon, described as “a discussion/support group for all members of the ‘trans’ community, whatever their gender identity (or identities) and whatever stage in their ‘transition’ they have reached (if at all)” (in http://www.translondon.org.uk). TransLondon was founded in the mid-1990s, and attracts a wider variety of trans-gender expressions than the Beaumont Society, from transvestites and transsexuals to individuals who identify as androgynous or ‘questioning’. At the time the project was planned, I had been attending, in a student capacity, most of the Society’s monthly meetings for over two years, and the TransLondon meetings for just over six months. My presence to the meetings of both organizations was that of an observer who casually interacted with other members and un-obtrusively contributed to the group process. According to my observations, many Beaumont members are cross-dressers, and whereas some might ‘dress’ full-time, others do so less frequently, and there still a few for whom Society’s meetings are their only opportunity to present as females. Additionally, whereas the Beaumont Society appears to provide an informal space where people can mix, TransLondon is structured, discussion-oriented, and demographically diverse. In the interests of ensuring a broader scope of participants, I considered both organisations as sources of participants.
Understandably, one could question why I did not carry out ethnographic research, given the opportunities which this long observation period provided. I suppose that there is always more than one methodology that would suffice to examine a particular research question. For this piece of research, the decision to conduct focus groups was made on the basis that they provided a good space within which to explore the discourses and interactional processes that participants employed as they described their understanding and experiences of gender transition. Moreover, I expected that acquaintance between prospective participants and myself would add to the quality of research work. According to the literature, acquaintance among focus group members and the moderator is likely to facilitate continuity, lessen any anxiety which might arise from issues discussed and enhance feelings of trust and safety, all of which are said to be imperative for the formation of cohesive, productive groups (e.g. Hogg & Vaughan, 1995; Fern, 2001; Stephenson & Papadopoulos, 2006).

The criteria for the selection of venue were informed by accessibility, comfort and safety for those willing to participate. It has been suggested that the quality of the research setting can affect the participants’ emotional well-being and consequently their interaction levels, which are crucial in the running of successful groups (e.g. Robson, 1993; Davies, 1994; Fern, 2001). Therefore, I sought a central London location, close to a tube station. While searching for a venue, I visited a couple of community centres and e-mailed three LGBT-affiliated venues, all of which were based either in the WC1 or in NW1 areas. However, their availability was limited and the room hire prices were rather high. Thus, I considered the possibility of using the TransLondon venue, a centrally-located LGBT bookshop, where I also happen to have been a customer for quite a few years. The manager was very helpful and kindly offered the venue at a very reasonable price. The funds for this were provided by Brighton University. Following a mutual agreement on dates and times for the focus groups, he explained the Health and Safety procedure and gave me the keys. Having made these practical arrangements, I e-mailed the organisers of both support groups, explained the purpose of my research and asked if I could utilise 10 minutes of the next scheduled meeting to introduce my research to attendees and invite them to participate. Attached was a ‘background information’ sheet with a brief description of the project’s theoretical framework, a ‘participant information’ sheet explaining focus group work and confidentiality/anonymity measures, and a sample consent form (see Appendix C). The participant sheet also identified the venue and the focus group slots, namely four Sunday evenings with a 2-week gap between each, covering a period from early October to mid-November 2009. Having received a positive response from both organisations, I presented my project and distributed the informational materials to Beaumont and TransLondon attendees in September 2009. Both presentations were well-received, and quite a few individuals approached me to ask more information about the project, and to state their intention to take part.
In spite of the warm reception that my presentation received, the follow-up response was not as expected and active interest in the project varied. Only two of the prearranged four focus group sessions were attended, namely the first and the third ones. The second group did not take place, as only one individual attended, who was sent home with a myriad of apologies after waiting for 20 minutes to see if any more people turned up. Nobody at all came for the fourth group. Having collected half of the material as per the original plan, and facing time constraints, I considered arranging a group in the home of a cross-dresser acquaintance, following their suggestion. Unfortunately, this plan did not materialise due to unexpected commitments on their behalf. The third group was arranged partly by coincidence. In late February 2010, I was taken along by a cross-dresser friend to the Letchworth support group, in the hope of presenting my research to attendees and possibly setting up a group for a later date. Fortunately, one of the people present had happened to be in the TransLondon meeting, where I had introduced my project; also, a couple of others already knew me from the Beaumont and TransLondon meetings. Thus, I was welcomed and was given the opportunity to explain the project on the spot. Following this, five individuals volunteered to participate. Luckily, I had brought the recording equipment, the information sheets and consent forms along. The Letchworth venue had a spacious room, separate from the meeting place, which proved to be suitable for the focus group work. Hence, the third group discussion was completed.

Diverging from the original plan, three groups were conducted instead of four, in two different venues instead of one, consisting of participants who were affiliated with three different organizations, instead of two. The first and the second groups were run in the LGBT bookshop in Central London, and the third one in the Letchworth trans-support group, Hertfordshire. In addition, the London-based groups consisted of four members each, whereas the Letchworth group had five members. The duration of the discussions varied; the first group lasted for 1 hour and 7 minutes, the second group for 1 hour and 13 minutes, while the discussion in the third group continued for 1 hour and 43 minutes. There was an even further diversion from the original plan, as participants’ subjective identifications did not exactly match with ‘migratory’ and ‘oscillatory’ groups. In particular, out of the thirteen participants, seven identified as ‘cross-dressers’ and three as ‘transsexuals’, one of whom as ‘pre-op’. Two participants did not identify as anything and presented as androgynous; one used a male name, while the other used a female name. There was also one participant who identified as ‘intersex’.

3.2.2.1 Participants

This section introduces the individuals who agreed to contribute to this study. In the interests of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, all names have been changed to protect the identity of participants. Alongside personal information, this section also briefly describes each individual’s presence during regular meetings of the support organisations which they attended at the time (i.e. not focus groups), as well
as some knowledge from acquaintance. The order of presentation of participants’ profiles follows the order in which they contributed to the discussion; for instance, in the first group Josie spoke first, and then Brian followed.

**Group 1**

Josie identified as ‘born intersex’, presented as female and used a female name. She had been undergoing hormonal therapy, had no trace of facial hair, but had not had any surgery. She is white British, in her early 50s. Josie had been present at most of the TransLondon meetings I attended at the time this research was conducted. She actively participated in them and freely voiced her opinion, yet was not observed to interact with other members, prior or after the meetings. Josie did not disclose any information on her sexual orientation during the discussion.

Brian identified as a ‘cross-dresser’, presented as male and used a male name. He had not undergone any appearance-changing interventions, surgical, hormonal or otherwise. Brian is a retired professional in his late 60s, of South Asian origin, who was born abroad but has been living in the UK for decades. He usually presents as male, but in his few appearances ‘en femme’ he wears traditional clothing specific to his culture. Brian had been present at most of the Beaumont Society’s meetings I attended at the time this research was conducted, where he was observed to interact with others in a casual, relaxed way. Brian did not disclose his sexual orientation, but underlined that his cross-dressing is not sexually motivated.

Vicky identified as ‘transsexual’. She had reassignment surgery approximately a year before the group was conducted. She is white British, in her early 60s, and had been occasionally attending meetings of both groups I attended at the time this research was conducted. Vicky was studying for a PhD in a related area, and she always presented as keen to discuss her academic interests with others, who did not always share her enthusiasm on transgender studies. Based on the information shared during the group, Vicky has transitioned twice. Born male, she transitioned into female with hormone treatment but no surgery, then ‘de-transitioned’ back to the male role, and eventually chose to live as female and had genital surgery. Vicky is sexually attracted to women.

Phoebe identified as a ‘cross-dresser’, presented as female and used a female name. She had not had any hormonal or surgical interventions, but had been undergoing facial electrolysis. Phoebe is white British, age 70, and had been present at most of the Beaumont’s and some of the TransLondon meetings I attended at the time this research was conducted, where she interacted with others in a casual and relaxed way and is a keen talker. Phoebe is a semi-retired professor and an accomplished musician, who first started playing in a band en femme just two years before this group was conducted. She claims that her membership in the band gives a sense of purpose to her female identity. Her male self is a leading figure in an academic discipline and he is currently doing research on a subject area partly related to
gender. Phoebe has been cross-dressing from the age of 6; got married in her mid-20s, and hoped that the ‘urge’ will go away. Eventually came out to her wife after 10 years of marriage and happily married for 44 years at the time the group was conducted, with two sons and four grandchildren. The sons and their wives know about Phoebe, but one couple is not willing to meet her. Phoebe has become a good friend of mine, whom I met during the first Beaumont meeting I attended, in November 2006. She was very pleased to know from the start that I had an academic interest in gender transition, and our many discussions have been of invaluable support and inspiration to me ever since.

**Group 2**

**Hilary** identified as a ‘transvestite’, presented as female and used a female name. She had not undergone any appearance-changing interventions, hormonal, surgical, or otherwise. She is white British, in her late 40s. Hilary was my initial contact with the trans community in 2006, through The Beaumont Society’s website, where she gave me information about the Society and invited me to attend the next members’ meeting in London. Hilary is employed, and also volunteers in the running of the Society. As a part of her role in this, she gives short seminars to a variety of organisations who wish to learn more about gender crossing. Thus, I have invited Hilary to my work place on three separate occasions since 2006, where she delivered presentations we had co-designed on ‘transgenderism and mental health’. Interestingly, some aspects of her contribution to the present discussion are reminiscent of the contents of her presentations. In addition, whereas at the beginning of this group Hilary states that she is a ‘transvestite’, I can recall her saying in one of the Society’s meetings that some might think of her as being an ‘effeminate man’ when dressed in male mode.

**Bernie** identified as a ‘cross-dresser’, presented as male and used a male name. He had not undergone any appearance-changing interventions, hormonal, surgical or otherwise. Bernie is a retired professional in his mid-60s, who came to the UK from India in his twenties. He had been present at some of the Beaumont and TransLondon meetings I attended at the time this research was conducted, where he always appeared in male mode, though sometimes he changes into women’s shoes upon his arrival at the venue. He was observed to casually mix with others, but mostly to listen to conversations, rather than taking part. Based on the information shared during the group, Bernie prefers to cross-dress at the privacy of his home, and he is sexually attracted to women, as well as to “the feminine image of a very attractive transvestite” (375-92).

**Rafael** did not identify as anything, presented as androgynous and used a male name. He is white British, in his mid-20s. He had not undergone any appearance-changing interventions, hormonal, surgical or otherwise. Rafael is a soft-spoken young professional, who had been present in few of the TransLondon meetings I attended at the time this research was conducted, where he has been observed to
keep himself to himself. Rafael showed immediate interest in the project, had a long chat with me right after the meeting where I introduced my research, and discussed Donna Haraway’s paper “A Cyborg Manifesto” with enthusiasm. He also mentioned having a girlfriend.

Elizabeth did not identify as anything, presented as androgynous and used a female name. She had not had any surgical or hormonal interventions, but had no trace of facial hair. She is white British, in her mid-50s. Elizabeth had been present at most of Beaumont meetings I attended at the time this research was conducted, during which she was observed to be discreet; though she appeared to pay attention to other members’ conversation and occasionally joined some of these, Elizabeth did not talk much and her direct interaction was kept to a minimum.

Group 3

Fiona identified as transsexual and had reassignment surgery more than a year before the group was conducted. She is white British, in her early 50s. Fiona had been present at some of the Beaumont and TransLondon meetings I attended at the time this research was conducted, and also happened to be the host of the Letchworth group. She was very approachable and happily interacted with others. As revealed from discussions with Fiona during meetings of both groups, and information shared in the focus group discussion, she remains in a relationship with the woman she was married to before transitioning. They have an adult daughter, who, according to Fiona, has accepted her father’s transition.

Sofia identified as a cross-dresser, presented as male and used a female name. A core member of The Beaumont Society, Sofia had been present at a few of the Society’s meetings I attended at the time this research was conducted, and was affiliated with the Letchworth group. She had not had any appearance-changing interventions, surgical hormonal or otherwise. Sofia is a white British, retired professional, age 80. She was talkative and happily interacted with others. She always presents as female, and her unexpected appearance in male mode at the time the focus group was conducted, came as a surprise to all Letchworth attendees. Based on information shared during the group, Sofia is a widower.

Anne identified as a pre-operative transsexual. She is white British, in her mid-60s, retired. The first time I had the opportunity to talk to Anne was at the Letchworth gathering; yet, she said that she sometimes attends the TransLondon meetings, one of which happened to be the one where I introduced my project. Anne explained that she was happy to have the opportunity to participate, as she lives near Letchworth and was not able to travel to London for the groups. Anne was pleasant on approach and was observed to happily interact with others. Based on information shared during the group, Anne is sexually attracted to men.
Betty identified as a cross-dresser, presented as female and used a female name. She had not had any appearance-changing interventions, surgical, hormonal or otherwise. She is white British, in her early 60s. I met Betty for the first time at the Letchworth group. She was a core member of the Beaumont Society, who nevertheless had not been present at any of the London meetings I attended at the time this research was conducted, yet she frequently attends her local Letchworth group. Betty was not observed to interact with others, except with Sofia. Based on information shared during the group, Betty’s wife is understanding and supportive of her husband’s cross-dressing.

Rose identified as a ‘closeted’ cross-dresser, presented as female and used a female name. She had not had any appearance-changing interventions, surgical, hormonal, or otherwise. She is white British, in her early 60s, and a self-employed professional. Rose and I had had a few chats and occasionally been out for coffee just before the Beaumont meetings, with Phoebe (from group 1). Rose was attending the Letchworth gathering for the first time on the day the group was conducted, and has been present at some of the Beaumont meetings I have attended at the time. Rose was always accompanied by her wife, and has been observed to engage in one-to-one chats rather than group discussions. Based on information shared in the group, Rose has a daughter and a grandchild; her daughter is aware of her father’s gender crossing, but has never met Rose.

3.3) Data collection

Towards the very end of the second focus group, just after I thanked participants for their contribution (1271-1373), Bernie asked me why I hadn’t prepared ‘straightforward’ questions, so that people can give me a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. I gave a rather vague reply, namely that ‘straightforward’ questions would have to be sought from books, and I’m seeking explanations from people instead, as my aim is to ‘bring the academia closer to people’. Then, Hilary added that each individual has a unique account to offer, and pointed that “the academia can shoot over the heads of most people” (1361-2). We rounded up the discussion reaching some kind of agreement that ‘we can change all that’. I expect that some may draw upon the plainness of this exchange, and possibly detect a tenuous optimism from my part. Nonetheless, I have to admit that this chat got me thinking that ‘I don’t want to shoot over anyone’s head’. On reflection, I could have given a better, less tentative reply. If Bernie was to ask the same question today, I would have answered that my aim is to go beyond what participants say and attempt an interpretation, rather than a summary of their account. In other words, that I’m not only interested in discourses or narratives per se, but I seek to examine where these come from, and why. I would have also told him that focus groups create the ideal setting to examine these, and explain that they have been described as being “a thinking society in a miniature” (Markova et al., 2007: 46). But as my moment with Bernie is long gone, I can only exercise the benefit of hindsight. Nonetheless, this moment illustrates the need for an alternative reading, a short story about the challenges
of research, and the ‘courage’ to interpret in a way that will not ‘shoot over the heads of most people’.

Focus groups are group discussions organized to explore a specific set of issues, whereby the material for analysis is generated by the interaction among the members of the collective. Literature (cited in Kitzinger, 1994) suggests that an advantage of the focus group method in relation to questionnaires or structured interviews is that it reveals the dimensions of the process of meaning-making. Broadly speaking, interaction is a process during which the effects of one variable are influenced by the effects of one or more other variables (Byron & Byrne, 1997). Within the field of social sciences research, interaction is understood as a dynamic sequence of actions between individuals who modify their reactions in response to the actions of others (Macionis, 1995). Hence, meaning is constructed during interaction, where people exchange information about themselves and each other, and form impressions based on that information: these impressions are then used to categorise and evaluate others, and set the criteria for socially acceptable behaviour (Hier, 2005). Thus, the study of interaction examines the ways in which individuals construct reality and the social processes embedded in the articulation of knowledge, and focus groups mirror the social context within which meaning ideas are formed.

Interaction among focus group members can be either complementary or argumentative, which also depends on whether the group is pre-existing or has been solely formed for the purpose of research (Kitzinger, 1994). To explain; pre-existing groups are formed by individuals who already know each other, and their interaction mirrors how one might ‘naturally’ discuss certain topics drawing upon sources of ‘collective remembering’ (Middleton & Edwards, 1990). This also suggests that interaction in pre-existing groups is likely to offer a clearer, realistic picture of the social context within which meaning is formed (Khan & Manderson, 1992). Moreover, complementary interaction refers to the sharing of common experience, reflects the importance of shared culture, and provides data on group norms. Nonetheless, a disadvantage is that members of the collective are likely to censor deviation from group standards, thus inhibiting certain individuals from discussing certain things. Thus, some groups are likely to become a collective ‘moan session’, whereby interaction feeds on the atmosphere that has already been created (Watts & Ebbutt, 1987). In addition, argumentative interaction suggests that members of a collective can never be entirely homogeneous. By eliciting a variety of responses, it examines the ways in which individuals theorise their points in relation to conflicting perspectives and offers an insight into the social processes embedded in the formation of knowledge (Kitzinger, 1994).

A focus group has been characterised as being “a thinking society in miniature” (Farr, personal communication, cited in Markova et al., 2007: 46). This characteristic presupposes that a focus group might also be a ‘talking society’, where participants think and talk together and respond to the ‘strange perspectives’ of others by activating their own potential to develop new insights (Markova et al.,
2007:46). Drawing on social constructionist notions of ‘truth’ as the product of every day, interpersonal communication (Burr, 1995), the focus group method is designed to examine the ways in which certain forms of knowledge are achieved by people during interaction. By eliciting a multiplicity of views and emotional processes from the members of a collective (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993), it redefines the topic under study and introduces the researcher to alternative conceptualisations (Willig, 2008). The focus group method also advocates the empowerment of participants during the process of enquiry (Seiter et al., 1989; cited in Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Participants in focus group research are not ‘subjects’ under study, but individuals whose interpretation of events guides the research process and whose contribution may overlap with that of the researcher to a certain degree (Markova et al., 2007). In addition, the method follows a critical approach to research (Hepburn & Wiggins, 2007), which stresses the impact of discourse upon the construction of social identities, relations and systems of knowledge (Fairclough, 1992).

Taking into account the limitations of the Foucauldian analytic, namely the need to clarify the ways in which social and material reality may impact upon discourse (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008), and the implications that the acquisition of a particular subject position may entail (Willig, 2008), the present study addresses these by focusing on the interactional processes during focus group discussions. In particular, it employs focus groups in order to collect the discourses, which individuals who variously gender-cross utilize when jointly constructing the meaning of gender transition, and to examine the implications of these for subjectivity and material reality. A Foucauldian-inspired analysis is expected to enhance understanding of the power relations implicated in the construction of the gender-crossing discourse. It is expected that the interactional context of focus group work will introduce a different perspective from which to view the formation of particular gender-crossing positions and the relative contributions of technologies of power in the development of these.

### 3.4) Data analysis

To reiterate, the material for analysis for the present study is generated from three focus groups, consisting overall of thirteen participants who identify with a variety of gender crossing positions, most of which are not achieved through medical interventions. All three discussions were transcribed in a style that emphasizes readability, though it also includes long pauses and laughter as part of conversations. In the interests of aiding reference during analysis, each line in all three transcripts has been numbered. In addition, each transcript was approached in accordance with the order of completion of the corresponding group; the first group was addressed first, followed by the second and the third group. For the purposes of maintaining anonymity during transcription, participants were initially assigned a letter of the alphabet in accordance with their order of ‘appearance’ in the discussion, which was
later substituted with a fictional name. Details on transcription notes can be found in Appendix D.

All discussions were transcribed within a few days of the recordings. Transcription was time-consuming and took between eight and ten hours for each group. The process required my undivided attention for long periods of time, as I felt that any interruption to the transcription would be an interruption to the actual discussion. I was listening to the recordings from my laptop with headphones while typing, and I had only two breaks during each transcription as, for some reason, I felt that any longer interruptions would cause me to lose my chain of thought. The process of analysis was based on an adaptation of Gordon et al., (1998) three-stage model of approaching and organizing data. The first stage is thematic and involves interacting with data that have been collected, with the aim to identify emerging themes. Besides reading and taking notes of constructions relevant to the aims of the thesis, both within and across groups, it also involved listening to the discussions in total silence, or while doing something else. To this day, each time I lay my eyes on the written transcript of any of the groups, read a participants’ quote, or even think about any of the discussions, I can vividly recall, dare I say hear, the voice of the individual who talks. The second stage is interpretative and involves a more detailed reading of the data, in order to examine their content through the themes identified in the previous stage. This involved a thorough reading of the selected text, yet without completely ‘extracting’ it from the discussion, and making further notes on its content. The third stage is concerned with the extraction of examples that relate to the emerging themes. All three stages were carried out in relation to data within and across groups. The selected extracts were collected and then compared within and across groups, to identify both unique and shared constructions. An example of the third stage of this process can be found in Appendix E, which includes illustrations of data extracts from the second focus group that were later ‘translated’ into the ‘personal growth discourse’ (see Chapter Four).

Coming from a Foucauldian-inspired perspective, analysis began with the aim of identifying the ‘truth games’ implicated in the construction of the meaning of gender-crossing. In the early days of my interaction with the transcripts, I observed that in all groups, participants claim that the mass of lay, scientific and theoretical attempts to understand ‘gender transition’ has failed to acknowledge that each individual experiences and expresses their cross-gender feelings differently. Nonetheless, each group also made its own contribution. Thus, I decided to focus on group-specific, rather than shared discourses, the reason being that the former are supposed to redefine the topic under study, a function which is consistent with the notion of effective group work (Markova et al., 2007). However, analysis is not structured on the expense of shared themes. In fact, a combination of insights from the examination of these has triggered an abductive process of meaning-making, which has shaped both the direction of analysis and its structure into chapters. Briefly speaking, the abductive logic of research does not follow any a-priori hypotheses or advance theorizing, but considers all possible phenomena. It has been
paralleled with the work of a detective who has to be free of presuppositions and open to all possibilities that the investigation offers, and combine these to reach an explanation (Levin-Rozalis, 2004). My understanding of this process is that it depends, to a great extent, on the impact that my own interests and current frame of mind have had on the interpretation of the data. To illustrate; I named two of the group-specific discourses ‘theatre’ and ‘personal growth’ (see Chapter Four). The titles of these discourses do not come directly from the data, but are researcher-defined. On reflection, I suspect that my lifelong attraction to theatre has contributed to the emergence of the ‘theatre’ discourse in the first group. Similarly, an existing attention to Buddhist teachings might have made me ‘aware’ of the ‘personal growth’ theme in the second group. It is likely that another researcher would have identified different discourses.

Another instance refers to the use of myth and metaphor. As stated in the introduction, the birth myth of goddess Aphrodite ‘emerged’ from the examination of shared discourses, whereby participants point to a rich tapestry of real-life, cross-gender identifications. In particular, reading Stryker’s (1998, cited in Juang, 2006:711) description of the current state of gender politics as being “a wild profusion” of gender possibilities, generated by “the rupture of ‘woman’ and ‘man’, like an archipelago of identities rising from the sea”, reminded me of the incidents surrounding the birth of the ancient goddess. On further reflection, I realized that the story of Aphrodite can be a useful analogy, a discourse metaphor with the potential to offer a novel understanding of gender-crossing. However, besides the ‘emergence’ of Aphrodite, my increasing knowledge of the attribution of monstrosity to individuals who variously challenge the gender binary, as well as the historically-celebrated gender fluidity of primordial beings (see Chapter Two) seemed to build a stronger relationship between mythic discourse and data. For instance; in the first group, Josie’s contribution is tensed and she insists that she is a ‘freak’. Her positioning and overall conduct seemed to embody ‘Frankenstein’s Monster’. In the second group, participants’ account of gender-crossing as a ‘coming out of the box (…) only to realise that you are still in’, made me think of the myth of Pandora’s Box, a tale of creation that is a part of the Promethean legend. As stated in the previous chapter, the original subtitle to the ‘Frankenstein’ novel is ‘Modern Prometheus’, not to mention that Pandora was modelled on goddess Aphrodite herself (see Chapter Five). In addition, participants in all groups admit that they have been, or still are, seriously affected by fear and a sense of wrong-doing. Their disclosure suggested the existence of emotional processes implicated in one’s positioning within relations of power. This insight generated a rather abductive moving between data, theory and metaphor, where discourses provided a rough sketch of the broader scene of enquiry. Moreover, the assertion that myths are cultural memories produced during interaction seemed ideal.

The emotional processes that are implicated in one’s attachment to a position are understood as ‘affective practices’ that is relational patterns, which individuals repeat in their interactions with others (Wetherell, 2012). The term ‘emotion’ derives
from the Latin ‘emoveo’, which translates as ‘to move out or away’ and involves physical movement (Gouk & Hills, 2005). In addition, the meaning of the term ‘affect’ derives from a combination of the Latin ‘affectus’ which means ‘to act upon’, and ‘affectare’, that is to ‘strive after’ or to ‘pretend to have’ (Collins English Dictionary, 2003, cited in Wetherell, 2012). The popular understanding of emotion is that of an “excited state of mind” or strong feelings of any kind” that arise within the body (Hornby, 1983: 282). Emotional enquiry draws upon a long history of scientific and philosophical perspectives concerned with neurophysiological changes, cognitive processes, or even moral values (Hergenhahn, 1987; Zimbardo, 1992). However, the relatively recent ‘turn into affect’ within social sciences marks a shift from categorisation and causation, to how emotion appears in everyday life, during interaction with social others (Wetherell, 2012). For the purposes of analysis, I follow Wetherell’s (2012) assertion that the study of affect is the study of pattern. Hence, affect manifests in recurrent, socially-recognised routines and embodied sequences of action. In this context, affect is a motivational force, a dimension of intensity that gives meaning to the emotional experience.

This study employs myths as discursive metaphors, and aims to offer alternative tools for gaining insight into the historical forces behind current subjective and shared understandings of gender transition. Analysis attempts a re-construction of some of the events that led the discourses of reason to act as definers of truth about what constitutes the humanity and worth of the differently-gendered self. Therefore, the analysis consists of two chapters. The first analysis chapter identifies the discourses present in the construction of gender transition, both across and within groups, and explores the emerging theoretical insights. The second analysis chapter is concerned with the interactional processes during each discussion and the contribution of individual participants. It introduces the ‘gender-crossing tales’ which participants weave together within and across groups, and examines these through the lens of ancient and modern myths of creation. Drawing upon the ‘title roles’ of these tales as indicative of participants’ positions, it describes the affective practices that they employ to cope with the emotional demands and vulnerability of their position. In particular, the examination of these tales offers an insight into the dynamic between the Self and the Other, namely the practices that participants invest both in the subject position they currently hold, and in the position they aspire to attain, while they try to manage their anxiety that stems from the terrifying prospect of the Monstrous Other taking over the Rational Self.

3.5) Ethical Reflections

The University’s Ethics Committee granted ethical clearance before recruitment procedures were initiated. Information sheets introduced the study as an investigation into how people who variously gender-cross make sense of their gender identity and invited them to contribute towards an increased understanding of the phenomenon. Information sheets additionally assured that confidentiality and anonymity will be kept and underlined participants’ right to withdraw at any time.
These were distributed, as well as being explained verbally, in presentations given during support group meetings, prior to initiating any consent procedures. They were also repeated at the start of each focus group session, together with details of the ethical and practical procedures involved in recording, transcribing and storing of data (The British Psychological Society, 2007). In the interests of ensuring a safe atmosphere, I was mindful of the need to give sufficiently clear information so that those who agreed to participate would not feel threatened or annoyed (e.g. Morgan, 1988). Ethics approval forms and participant materials can be found in Appendices B and C.

At the start of each session, I advised group members of the likelihood that the nature of work to be undertaken may raise sensitive issues. Disclosure of sensitive material in the presence of others is likely to be intimidating, especially for inarticulate or shy members (e.g. Greenbaum, 1998). Given that in focus group research complete anonymity cannot be achieved, it is imperative that participants feel secure in the presence of each other and the moderator (e.g. Krueger, 1988, Fern, 2001). Taken into consideration that all individuals who contributed to this research were recruited from pre-existing support groups, during the meetings of which they share personal information, I expected that, should any distress arise, it would be effectively managed. Nevertheless, I underlined their right to withdraw any information, as well as participation, at any stage during group work and without giving any reason. In addition, I suggested that they verbally agreed on certain guidelines for participation. These referred to the importance of adopting a non-judgmental approach when faced with a wide range of opinions, the significance of not being dominant or disruptive during sessions and the requirement of not discussing any personal information disclosed by other members outside the session. Following the obtaining of consent, group work begun with me thanking the participants and explaining the purpose of the group as ‘discussing the meaning of gender transition’. I gave a brief historical overview of the transgender phenomenon, inclusive of relevant terms used and invited participants to offer their views, as well as to state their subjective identifications.

At the end of each session, participants were also presented with two options in relation to getting access to the results of this study, should they wish to be informed. These included either receiving by post a concise two-page document outlining the key findings, or attending a presentation given by the researcher for the organisations involved. It was specified that, whereas the event of presentation would be subject to arrangements between the organisations and me, the written report would be prepared and sent to participants close to the completion of the study. It was emphasized that these will not be their individual results, but the outcome of group work conducted. The majority of participants verbally agreed to the second option and some gave me their telephone number, so that they can be notified near the time of the presentations. It was agreed that I will present my findings to participants and other members of both organizations following the submission of the thesis.
The magnitude of some of the ethical issues, which might arise during focus group work, has been the subject of debate. Whereas it has been suggested (Willig, 2008) that the method might not be appropriate to address emotive themes, a body of research (cited in Lunt & Livingstone, 1996) has demonstrated that focus groups can be quite useful in researching sensitive topics. To illustrate, Morgan’s (1988) research on the grieving process in widows suggests that focus groups can assume the role of support groups or confessionals. In such contexts, group members act more as consultants than as objects of research, so that they support each other’s self-disclosure in ways that would not be possible in an interview setting (e.g. Ward et al., 1991, Lee, 1993, cited in Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Two instances from the present research seem to support the above argument. In the third group, Rose needed a fair amount of prompting, from both fellow members and me, to contribute. Though her conduct did not indicate distress but undivided attention to the discussion, she remained quiet for the most part of it. Acknowledging her silence, I gave her the opportunity to express any concerns that she might have had and invited her to participate. Shortly afterwards, other group members noted her silence and prompted her to speak. When she did so, she revealed that she was still ‘closeted’ and hardly ever goes out ‘en femme’. It can be argued that, whereas her ‘closeted’ state might have hindered her active participation, it was nevertheless embraced by others, whose encouragement made her feel safe enough to ‘come out’ and join the conversation.

In addition, Josie was disruptive on occasions during the first group, and her overall contribution exemplified experiences and consequences of discrimination associated with cross-gendered living. Just before group work commenced, a male customer for the shop knocked on the bookshop’s door, believing that the place was open for business. Josie answered the door, explained that a private meeting was taking place and the would-be customer apologised and left. Straight afterwards, she claimed that he had called her “freak”, an utterance which was not heard by any of the people present. In addition, throughout the discussion, Josie frequently mentioned that other people discriminate against her and regard her as a ‘freak’. At times, she sounded angry without an obvious cause and seemed to dominate the conversation. Her manner frustrated Vicky, who addressed this rather early in the session in an assertive, but smooth and civil tone. This frustration was recognised by Josie, who subsequently toned down and continued to participate in accordance to the guidelines, which the group had previously agreed. Moved by Josie’s account, and aware that tension was building up among participants, Phoebe brought up the ‘freak incident’ halfway through the session. Acknowledging her frustrations, she talked Josie through this in a gentle manner and, whilst accepting the impact of public perception on one’s cross-gendered confidence, tried to reassure Josie that people do not perceive her as a ‘freak’. One could argue that Josie was re-enacting her negative experiences in the group, and that Phoebe embodied the voices of all transpeople by stating ‘we are not freaks’.
Josie gave me an A4-size envelope prior to the session, and explained that it contained ‘important information for my files’. I thanked her, and I enquired about its contents asking whether opening the envelope, though in private, would be something she might consider a threat to confidentiality and anonymity. Josie replied that it is up to me what I do with it, underlining that ‘there isn’t anything she wouldn’t be happy to share’, and said that she has an electronic copy. The envelope contained an autobiographical narrative of Josie’s experiences of being transgender, approximately 10 pages long, signed by “(name), gender activist”. Enclosed were a photocopy of her male birth certificate, a photocopy of her mother’s death certificate, and several pages of the British National Formulary. Following the transcription of the session, I realized that Josie’s contribution to the group echoed the contents of her manuscript. Both referred to the same themes, and her writing style corresponded to the way she expressed herself during the discussion.

Moreover, Vicky, who comes across as confident and articulate in the first group, presented as rather anxious prior to participating. Right after the session with one of the support groups when I introduced my research to the members of one of the organisations in order to recruit participants, Vicky approached me holding a copy of the ‘information sheet’ I had just distributed. She pointed to the first of the pre-arranged focus group slots and asked me whether she could text me a couple of days prior to confirm her attendance. After confirming her attendance as discussed, Vicky also texted me the moment she left home to come to the session, as well as 5 minutes prior to arriving at the venue, although she was not running late. Vicky was out of breath when she arrived; as I opened the door and thanked her for coming, she asked me for a hug and a kiss on the cheek to help her relax, and stretched her hands towards me.

I had anticipated that my regular presence at the Beaumont and TransLondon meetings, characterised by casual interaction with other members and unobtrusive contribution to the group process, would benefit my role as focus group moderator. Besides coordinating the discussion, moderators are expected to facilitate a relaxed atmosphere, so that interaction among participants would become ‘natural’ (Markova et al., 2007). In addition, moderators who bear some similarities to participants in appearance, behaviour or background are said to be able to establish greater rapport, increase participation, generate feelings of safety and determine the quality of information obtained (Fern, 2001). Interestingly, many individuals from both organisations appear to regard me as a member of the transgender community. Though I have frequently stated my student role and explained my attendance at the meetings as that of facilitating an understanding of the community, some aspects of my appearance seem to have raised questions about my gender identification. On numerous occasions during the Beaumont and TransLondon meetings, I have been asked whether I am ‘gender-queer’ or undergoing transition. The direction of the latter is ambivalent; some think it is ‘female-to-male’ trajectory, whereas others believe it is ‘male-to-female’. Thus, I have been asked whether I experience any side effects from testosterone injections, or if I am seeing a good gender-specialist, or if I
feel more ‘female’ during menstruation. These individuals were, quite justifiably, curious to know what motivated my research interests, and possibly eager to find me a place within the structure of their organisation. Hence, in the interests of addressing any issues of power arising during the recruitment and group moderation processes, I have tried to be as honest as possible and explained my academic interest as being motivated from subjective experiences of gender mis-recognition. Understandably, issues of personal reflexivity are addressed in depth in the following chapters.

3.6) Summary

The present study aims to redefine gender transition. To achieve this, it employs a critical approach to research, which serves to deconstruct prevalent understandings, as well as to introduce other perspectives. In particular, the present study adopts an interdisciplinary methodological approach, which utilizes the principles of Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine the power relations implicated in the construction of gender transition and to reveal how subject positions are formed within the gender-crossing discourse. It draws upon material generated within three independent focus group discussions that explore participants’ understanding of transition, and it attempts to provide an account of the metaphorical positioning of the trans-gender self. The study argues that focus groups are a microcosm that circulates social norms in the form of metaphors and myths. Such myths are discursive metaphors, which are disseminated through inter-generational interaction (e.g. McDowell, 1989), and their use in my analysis is designed to utilise them as alternative tools for gaining insight into the historical forces behind current subjective and shared understandings of gender transition. During a focus group discussion, social norms are disseminated through inter-personal interaction as metaphorical subject positions (Davies & Harre, 1990, 1999). This study aims to explore the positioning of the non-normative gendered self by looking into the ‘historical’ narratives that have been used to describe these. It is expected that this direction of analysis will bring forth the inner processes involved in the acquisition of a particular subject position, and shed light on the different ways in which a given social and material reality may shape the subjective positions which participants acquire within the gender crossing discourse.

My analysis is focused upon the material which might enable one to attempt a re-construction of some of the events that led the discourses of reason to act as definers of truth about what constitutes the humanity and worth of the differently-gendered self. Therefore, the analysis consists of two chapters. The first analysis chapter identifies the discourses present in the construction of gender transition, both across and within groups, and explores the emerging theoretical insights. The second analysis chapter is concerned with the interactional processes during each discussion and the contribution
of individual participants. It introduces the ‘gender-crossing tales’ which participants weave together within and across groups, and examines these through the lens of ancient and modern myths of creation. Drawing upon the ‘title roles’ of these tales as indicative of participants’ positions, it describes the affective practices that they employ to cope with the emotional demands and vulnerability of their position. In particular, the examination of these tales offers an insight into the dynamic between the Self and the Other, namely the practices that participants invest both in the subject position they currently hold, as well as in the position they aspire to attain, while they try to manage their anxiety that stems from the terrifying prospect of the Monstrous Other taking over the Rational Self.
CHAPTER 4

An introduction to the mechanics of trans-gender identity construction, as discussed within focus groups

"I've transitioned definitely now, because I've had the operation. And I have transitioned back to the male gender as well. I have transitioned twice. It was a question of definitions" (Vicky, 1, 560-2).

This chapter is the first of two outlining findings from focus group discussions. As the first analysis chapter, it identifies the discourses present in the construction of gender transition, both across and within groups, and explores the emerging theoretical insights. The structure of this chapter is based upon participants’ awareness of the utility and uselessness of the terms that have been used to describe gender crossing. To explain; in all groups, participants criticized the commonly-used terminology as being 'label identities', but each group addresses this problem in a unique way. To account for these differences, the chapter is structured in three parts. The first part presents the views shared across groups, which question commonly-used terms and emphasize the need to review the widespread understanding of the concepts both of ‘gender’ and of ‘transition’. The second part explores, in more detail, the most prominent discourses within each group. The third part of this chapter offers a critical perspective encompassing group-specific and shared discursive positions.

There are four discourses identified within each group. For instance, in the first group the ‘theatre’ discourse constructs gender transition as a change of role, ‘directed’ from the perspective of dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959), and reviewed in accordance with recognition politics. In the second group, the ‘personal growth’ discourse constructs gender transition as the path most likely to lead to the discovery of one’s ‘true’ self. Drawing upon the politics of home (Prosser, 1998) and the box-like, psychic properties of power (Butler, 1997), it argues that, gender transition is growth, if one transcends beyond binary thinking and embraces the totality of their self. In the third group, the ‘embodied wish’ and the ‘oddball’ discourses construct gender transition as a desire to be contained within one’s physical and social body, which the current hierarchical, binary readings (Elliot, 2005) fail to capture. Moreover, the ‘oddball’ discourse describes gender transition as an ‘oddity’, a construction which, in the light of Foucault’s (1988) technologies of self, serves to provide a containing ‘home’. The emerging theoretical insights from these
discourses are addressed in the final part of this chapter, which argues that the meaning of gender transition is not static, but arises from the dominant frames of understanding and the ensuing normative discourses of ‘progress’, that are maintained by the mechanics of ‘cruel optimism’.

4.1) ‘Label identities’: across groups

This section offers a summary of participants’ accounts of the terms that have been used to describe gender crossing, across groups. The reason for offering an ‘overview’ of themes across groups does not mean to suggest that they are not important to the analysis, rather that they serve to enable a clearer lead in to the group-specific discourses that are addressed later on. The theoretical insights from both shared and ‘unique’ themes are jointly addressed in the final part of this chapter.

In all groups, participants discuss transsexualism as a cross-gender expression, which involves a series of ascending medical stages, upon completion of which one becomes permanently and legally female. Motivated by what they commonly refer to as an urge to become their ‘true self’, individuals take on the “diagnosed identity” of ‘transsexualism’ (Vicky, group 1, 230) or ‘gender dysphoria’ (Sofia, group 3, 36-40) and then commit themselves to a treatment regime, which includes a variety of largely unalterable, hormonal and other invasive interventions. While in treatment, some also identify as being ‘pre-op’ or ‘post-op’ transsexuals, depending on whether they plan to have or have already had their male genitalia removed (e.g. Hilary, group 2, 908-11). Such is the medical emphasis that, understandably, transsexuals “always want to talk about their medications and operations” (Betty, group 3, 532-3). Nonetheless, “not all gender reassignment involves surgery” (e.g. Sofia, group 3, 143-8). In reality, there are some individuals, who meet most of the criteria for ‘transsexualism’, but are happy to retain their male genitalia. Thus, participants (e.g. Bernie & Hilary, group 2, 929-32; Fiona, group 3, 30-4) name certain people within the ‘trans-community’, who have breast implants, take hormones, have regular electrolysis, live full-time as women and have legally changed their gender status, but have not opted for genital surgery, therefore they are “more transgender” (Elizabeth, group 3, 936). In fact, some transsexuals, some cross-dressers, as well as a number of those who remain undecided about the direction of their cross-gender desire describe themselves as ‘transgender’. Apparently, the ‘transgender’ category encompasses a number of cross-gender expressions and therefore can be “quite useful” until one “makes up [their] mind” (e.g. Rafael & Hilary, group 2, 46-56).

In addition, participants portray ‘transvestitism’ as a temporary form of gender crossing that involves a number of largely reversible attempts to feminize one’s appearance, and explain that one can variously oscillate between genders for several reasons. To begin with, participants discuss that the thrill of wearing women’s underwear for erotic stimulation is still “a very strong factor” among some
transvestites (Betty, group 3, 741-2), and suggest that certain individuals dress up “purely for sexual fun” (Hilary, group 2, 85). Yet, the group also address the life-long sexualisation and pathologization of transvestism, and warn that the ensuing confusion has unsuitably linked it with fetishism, as well as with ‘drag’ and ‘queer’ (e.g. Brian, group 1, 361-2; Bernie, group 2, 34-5). Moreover, participants explain that some men dress up simply because they enjoy relaxing at home in a dress and sandals, while others do their housework wearing an apron or a pinafore (e.g. Brian, group 1, 451-4; Bernie, group 2, 58-61). Still, others simply want to pass as females either “out of curiosity” (Rose, group 3, 1008), or in order “to experience the being of a woman…even a fake one” (Sofia, group 3, 1085-6). What is more, participants brand the term ‘transvestitism” “unfriendly, negative…clinical” (Anne & Sofia, group 3, 94-6), agree that it is “the least likable” (Phoebe, group 1, 294), and underline their preference for ‘cross-dressing’.

Besides discussing their understandings of prevalent categories, participants also claim that the plethora of lay, scientific and theoretical attempts to understand ‘gender transition’ has failed to acknowledge that each individual experiences and expresses their cross-gender feelings differently. Hence, they argue that, no single category or name is sufficient to explain or describe gender transition, and criticize the current framework of knowledge, which relies heavily on the fixed, binary notions of before/after and male/female, for being rather restrictive (e.g. Vicky, group 1, 609-52). To support their argument, participants in all groups point to variations among all trans people, and emphasize the need for a new approach which accounts for the highly subjective, experiential nature of gender transition. They demonstrate that, in reality, there is a much wider spectrum of cross-gender identifications than the terminology allows for and that people outside the trans-community find this confusing. For instance, certain participants openly identify with terms, which themselves or other group members openly disapprove, such as Sofia (group 3, 87-90), who describes herself as both a ‘cross-dresser’ and a ‘transvestite’, and Hilary (group 2, 30), who bluntly states that she is a ‘transvestite’. Others identify with more than one term, such as Anne (group 3, 98-9) who refers to herself as both a ‘pre-op’ and a ‘she-male’, and defends the name ‘transsexual’ by stating that, to her, the name transsexual sounds “more positive than anything else” (group 3, 98-9). To complicate matters further, there is also Josie (group 1; 3, 116), who describes herself as a’ freak’, and ‘not normal’.

Notwithstanding the conceptual variations, there are also experiential differences. To begin with, not everybody is ready to accept and name, let alone celebrate or integrate a female self. For those who consider it problematic, their priority is to tackle the ensuing feelings of denial and self-loathing, as well as to cope with shame and social isolation. Therefore “the last thing (they) ever think of is the term” (e.g. Brian, group 1, 297-8). For those who understand their female side as an essential aspect of their personal quest for “expression and freedom”, names are restrictive (e.g. Elizabeth, group 2, 1293-6). In addition, participants describe the idea of transition as rather ‘flexible’ and suggest it might be “a question of definitions”
(Vicky, group 1, 560-2). For instance, they point to the existence of some individuals for whom becoming female was so disappointing, they reverted back to being male (e.g. Betty, group 3, 137-9). There are also those who have transitioned more than once. Vicky (group 1, 560-82) discloses that she had lived as a woman earlier in her life, but had to go back to the male gender for 12 years before deciding to undertake a second, but ‘definite’ step into becoming female and have ‘the operation’. Taking into consideration the wealth of experiential differences among individuals who variously gender-cross, participants suggest that “we don’t really understand [what does] transition [mean]” (e.g. Vicky, group 1, 594-5; Fiona, group 3, 16). Hilary (group 2, 1289-91) encapsulates this when she states that any attempts to come up with a definition are likely to require “having to write up…57 versions of page 1 for every single person interviewed”.

4.2) A focus within groups: discourses of resistance and emancipation

This section offers a detailed examination of each of the constructs, which appear to develop exclusively within a given group. Each discourse is presented in a format which features a summary of the discussion to which it is understood to correspond, along with emerging theoretical insights and proposed links between each discourse and the current debates on transgender theorizing. The final section of this chapter provides a critical appraisal spanning across all discourses.

4.2.1) The ‘Theatre’ Discourse; Group 1

This discourse echoes the Aristotelian view of theatre as aimed to ‘teach’, namely to increase awareness of an aspect of the human condition that the audience were previously unwilling or unable to apprehend (Aristotle, 350 BC, cited in Butcher, 1974). ‘Theatre’ relates to the data on a literal and on a metaphorical level. Participants construct gender transition as a change of role, which takes place on an actual, material stage, as well as on a social, abstract stage, and necessitates interaction between the individual actors and their audience. The process of transitioning into the ‘other’ gender goes beyond changing one’s appearance to match with their new role. This involves the creation of a kind of a staged game, in which one earns credits dependent upon how competently their existing cross-gender role is presented to an audience of others. Drawing upon recognition politics (e.g. Frazer, 1995, Skeggs, 2001), as well as symbolic interaction and dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959), the theatre discourse discusses the practices that those who gender-cross should adopt in order to unlock themselves from the inferior subject positions they are conventionally assigned to.

This discourse echoes a view of gender-crossing that emerges from dominant psychiatric and medical perspectives. The discussion begins with Josie, and revolves around her story of an ‘unliveable life’, the result of her being ‘trans’. Josie discloses that members of the public, her own family, even medical professionals involved in
her care, all think of her as a ‘freak’, a ‘fetish’ and ‘not normal’ (e.g. 3, 116, 475-82, 536-7, 981-3). Josie presents her trans-gendered self in the most unfavourable light and also sees her ‘own kind’ in a way which reflects how she believes others perceive her, repeatedly stating her contempt of the ‘trans scene’ and her fear of ‘proper transsexuals’ who she views as aggressive, ‘masculine’ and ‘prejudiced’ (475-82, 504-5). Nonetheless, she also admits “there is a side of me that upsets people” (528). The discussion unfolds as Vicky, Brian and Phoebe challenge Josie’s account of what Butler has described as an ‘unliveable life’ and offer her suggestions on how to change her idea of self. They give a brief summary of sexualized and clinical views on gender crossing (e.g. Vicky & Brian, 150, 156, 304-10 & 317-9) and argue that, though most still prevail, they are more confusing than enlightening. Citing mixed experiences of having their gender challenged by members of the public, they argue that being ‘trans’ is not intrinsically bad, but might seem to be dependent upon how it is communicated during one’s interaction with social others.

In particular, Phoebe explains that she does not have “so much obsession with the terms” (42) because she is not really involved with ‘trans’ groups, and claims that terms become important through “social interaction with groups, that tell you that ‘this is a bad term’ or ‘this is a good term’ “ (44-5). Phoebe states that whereas one who thinks of themselves as a ‘tranny’ might not automatically be offended when someone calls them such, the same utterance can be offensive when used in a different context (53-5). In support of this, Brian mentions an occasion where some teenagers mockingly called him ‘woman’ (68-80). Even though he was not presenting as female at the time, he experienced the deliberately offensive word as a compliment. There is also Vicky who, despite getting occasionally irritated by Josie’s intense conduct (e.g. 32-6), acknowledges that the legacy of pathology has had such an impact, that the only way to understand gender crossing is to discard any prior knowledge of it. In particular, Vicky argues that all ‘trans’ people should exercise their right to ‘a self-definition’ and question conventional understandings by “picking up the worst epithets…and wearing them with pride” (186-93, 543-52, 594-652).

Towards the end of the discussion, Phoebe draws upon her experiences of playing ‘en femme’ in a band and describes transition as a product of the relationship between individual actors and an audience of ‘social others’ (655-77). She admits having regular lapses of confidence, and though she generally feels comfortable on stage, a mere suspicion that the audience can tell she is cross-dressed can make her uneasy. Nonetheless, Phoebe understands transition as “a switch…whose eyes you are looking from” and says that she can “switch from [her] eyes to other people’s eyes” (655-8). Arguably, the ‘switch’ regulates one’s confidence in their gender role, which in turn influences their interactions with others. It is impossible to explain transition otherwise, as it is a “drift” and also “multi-perspectival” (Phoebe & Vicky, 658-77 & 710-27). Thus, Phoebe tells Josie that the cause of her troubles is that she has accepted the negative views of others as real. To improve her
situation, she has to change her idea of self and accept that there is an aspect to her that most people are not ready to understand. In doing so, Josie will come to realise that being ‘trans’ is neither dangerous nor disastrous, but may become so, depending on how it is communicated to an audience of others. Hence, Phoebe repeatedly tells Josie that her eyes do not see her as ‘a freak’ (738-52) and mentions an instance, where she was queuing at the ‘ladies’ during a gig break and chatted to a woman who had just seen her band performing (855-74). When asked for how long she had been playing the trumpet, Phoebe was scared; nevertheless, she ‘switched’ into the female role and gave an answer so convincing, that made the other woman exclaim, “Since you were a little girl!”.

In this discourse, the notions of interaction and recognition suggest that the meaning of gender transition is not fixed, but is fluid and negotiable. Early in the analysis though, I had associated this discourse with the famous lines that “all the world is a stage (...) and one man in his time plays many parts” (Shakespeare, 1600, cited in Burrow, 1986) as an expression of how participants understand gender transition. The ‘parts’ Shakespeare refers to correspond to what was understood at the time as ‘the seven ages of man’ and indeed, a succession of authors, dating from Aristotle, have been debating whether our course of life can be divided into either seven, or five, or possibly three ‘age parts’ (Burrow, 1986). Similarly, the gender-crossing path has been divided into a number of different stages, whose purpose has shaped the debates in contemporary transgender theorising (Ekins & King, 2006, Stryker & Whittle, 2006). The perspective employed in this discourse suggests an understanding that goes beyond being assigned to, or identifying with, one or more of these stages. Rather, it communicates a view of gender transition as an impression, which can be strategically manipulated in much the same way, as an actor would do in a theatrical performance. Hence, ‘theatre’ relates to data through dramaturgy, and in particular Goffman’s (1959) analogy between social interaction and theatre.

The study of interaction examines the ways in which individuals construct reality. In particular, it argues that meaning arises during social participation, where people exchange information about themselves and each other, and form impressions based on that information (Hier, 2005, Willig, 2008). These impressions are then used to categorise and evaluate others, and set the criteria for socially acceptable behaviour. In fact, society is organized on the principle that any individual whose conduct meets those criteria has a moral right to expect that others will treat them with respect (Goffman, 1959; Blumer, 1986; Macionis, 1995). Gender is prominent among the socially approved criteria. In particular, ‘gender’ is regarded as “a system of meanings and symbols” (Wilchins, 2004: 35), whose regulatory power relates to the construction of the “sociocultural correlates of the division of the sexes” (Ekins, 1997:16). Thus, ‘gender’ applies not only to the daily presentation of oneself as being either male or female, but also to rights, responsibilities, and rules embedded in the social and cultural categorisation of persons as men or women (Roscoe, 1994, cited in Shaw & Ardener, 2005; Ekins & King, 2006).
Nonetheless, society perceives ‘realness’ as reflected by the degree to which an individual fits into the mutually exclusive categories of male/masculine and female/feminine. Thus, those who cannot be directly recognized as being either male or female are considered unworthy of human association and respect (Butler, 2004). Josie’s account illustrates this; her claims to be a ‘freak’ throughout the discussion, as well as of “being a prisoner in London” (110-2) serve as metaphors for being locked into an identity that restricts her participation in social life, and assigns her to the ‘wrong’ part. Moreover, not only is she far from being recognised as a female, but she is also being mis-recognised as a ‘freak’. Drawing upon debates within ‘recognition politics’ which are concerned with how value is attributed to both persons and groups (Juang, 2006), the significance of being recognized as someone legitimate can be measured by the consequences of being regarded as undeserving. When a person is mis-recognised, they are assigned to a position, which lacks social and moral value. Therefore, a trans-person in Josie’s position is “denied the status of full partner in social interaction (…) as a consequence of institutionalised patterns of interpretation and evaluation that constitute [her] as comparatively unworthy of respect” (Frazer, 1995:280). As a result, not only has Josie remained ‘in the closet’, but she has also internalized other people’s negative impressions of her, and even extends that to the expression of fear and contempt of all trans-people. In addition, she sees her ‘own kind’ in a way similar to the way she believes others perceive her, repeatedly stating her contempt of the ‘trans-scene’ and her fear of ‘proper transsexuals’, who she views as aggressive, ‘masculine’ and ‘prejudiced’ (475-82, 504-5). In fact, it has been suggested (Juang, 2006) that trans-people who become a target for the hatred of others, gradually begin to see their selves and ‘their kind’ only through the lens of such hatred.

Understandably, it is in the interest of those who gender-cross to convey favourable impressions of themselves in their desired gender role. Drawing upon Goffman’s social theory, which maintains that individuals are able to manipulate strategically the given social situation, and especially other people’s impressions of themselves, in much the same way as an actor would do in a theatrical performance, I argue that this discourse introduces a dramaturgical understanding of gender transition. This is different from ‘masquerade’, a discourse identified in the literature that has been used to describe individuals who gender-cross (see Chapter One). To explain; theatre is drama and drama is action, which begins once individual roles are established, but cannot continue unless these roles change; the higher the contrast between the roles switched, the more intense the drama (Bern, 1964; Karpman, 1968). Reflecting upon the notion of ‘theatre’ as aimed ‘to teach’ (Aristotle, 350 BC, cited in Butcher, 1974), this discourse introduces an agentic argument; it portrays successful gender transition as requiring the actor to believe in the realness of the part they are playing, and having the confidence to communicate that belief to an audience of others. Understandably, the dramatic contrast between the male and the female social role necessitates that those who switch gender positions convey realness, namely that the gender part they are playing is, and has always been, their
only, true role. To increase their opportunities, trans-people can manipulate their interactions in much the same way as an actor or a director would attempt to control the events taking place on stage, by using certain protective devices (Goffman, 1959).

In this discourse, Phoebe’s ‘switch’ (655) is most worth mentioning, as its purpose echoes the theatrical ‘deus ex machina’ (Dugdale, 2008; Wiles, 2000). In ancient Greek drama, a seemingly unsolvable crisis is settled by divine intervention, presented as a god, who is brought on stage by an elaborate piece of equipment that suspends him above the centre of the playhouse. In contemporary theatre literature, the term ‘deus ex machina’, or ‘god from the machine’ also applies to an apparently impractical plot twist, which the author successfully employs to lead the main character out of a difficult situation. In this discourse, the ‘switch’ does both. It resolves the impending identity crisis by moving the ‘trans’ position from a subjugated to an emancipated place, and clarifies the conceptual chaos. What is more, the staged reality of ‘deus ex machina’ alludes to a powerful symbolism. Namely, that the ‘god’ is the individual himself and the ‘machine’ enables a state of healthy detachment that helps rise above the playhouse of conventional values.

4.2.2) The ‘Personal Growth’ Discourse; Group 2

If the attainment of what is broadly understood as ‘self-actualisation’ involves a re-appraisal of material and discursive practices, then gender transition is the path most likely to lead to the discovery of one’s ‘true’ self. In fact, the experience of crossing the gender border goes beyond bodily, noticeable changes, and it is not complete without a change in one’s understanding of the world. Hence, I came to name this discourse ‘personal growth’, because it portrays gender transition as a journey of mixed blessings, similar to that when developing “from a child to an adult”, during which not only does the individual grow into a larger and biologically ‘completed’ body, but also undergoes intra-psychic changes. To quote Rafael (1222-8), “there are a lot of things that you give up…but you gain other things from that responsibility…in the process, you get stronger”. Hence, this discourse constructs gender crossing as a transition, not necessarily from one gender to the other, but from a conventional to a more subjective sense of self. Therefore, I propose that this discourse draws upon two different notions of identity development, the essentialist and the queer. In particular, it reflects critical debates on whether identity development has well-defined ends or beginnings, which suggests that our sense of self is a “constant, on-going process of transformation” (cited in Alsop et al., 2002:227), and argues that gender transition involves a series of renegotiations of what is commonly understood as one’s ‘true’ self.

The discussion begins with Bernie stating that his cross-dressing is not sexually motivated (58-61). I then suggest that the long-standing associations of cross-dressing with sexual desire belong to the past, as nowadays gender crossing is
thought of as an expression of identity (72-82). At this point, Hilary says that there is a spectrum of cross-dressing expressions; on one end, there are those who dress up for sexual purposes, as opposed to those who do not (117-20). For instance, whereas some will put on a rubber dress or something equivalent in order to attend a fetish club of their choice (84-91), others will wear ‘mainstream’ female clothes to enact homosexual fantasies that they would not attempt otherwise (291-335). Nonetheless, the group states that the wearing of female clothes for the majority of cross-dressers is not sexually motivated, and dress up in private. Fearing the social repercussions, they keep their female self indoors, “all dressed up but nowhere to go” (187) and do nothing but housework or ‘relaxing in a dress and sandals’ (e.g. Bernie, 58-61 & 174-7; Hilary, 191-5). Eventually, some decide to take “a little step out” (Hilary, 237) into the world, only to become aware of the ever-increasing challenges, as excursions out take them further from the safety of the closet. In fact, that first step out marks the beginning of a long and complicated process which involves the experience of alternating states of feeling liberated and accepted, to living a double life and being subjected to discrimination (Hilary, Bernie & Rafael, 187-230, 241-7). To illustrate, being at home ‘hiding’ is accompanied by a need to “show-off” (Hilary, 201), which can help one “develop the identity a bit more” (Rafael, 220), especially “if encouraged by others” (Bernie 224). Yet, this ‘little step out’ (Hilary, 236-7), can also reveal the “biggest drawback, leading a double-life’ let alone that “if you get noticed doing these things you might get attacked as well” (Bernie, 241 & 246-7).

The ‘personal growth’ discourse draws upon the allegory of the ‘box’ (Hilary, Bernie & Rafael, 425-39, 470-87), a solid object which alludes to the austerity of institutional restrictions (Hilary, 470-1). Participants describe gender transition as liberating oneself from these restrictions, by “coming out of that box” (Hilary, 474). Ironically, this also brings the realisation that one is ‘still in’ (Bernie, 476). There is more to transition than ‘kicking’ at appearances; it involves an enduring process of breaking through a number of boxes, and each of these is a barrier to growth. Even though “clothes can be symbols of something” (moderator & Hilary, 155-7), gender–incongruent looks have been notoriously linked with unconventional sexualities and mental illness (Hilary & moderator, 273-87). Thus, one of the first barriers to growth is the box of heterosexuality, which is shaken by those who turn “bi when dressed” (291), as illustrated in Hilary’s tale of “George [who] puts on his dress and becomes Gwendolyn” (306-16). In response to Hilary’s assertion that sexual orientation is not fixed, Bernie (with Hilary, 375-92) admits that he might occasionally feel tempted by a “very attractive TV, who looks like a girl”. In return, Hilary explains Bernie’s homoerotic attraction as the result of being exposed to the feminine image that his object of desire projects. Moreover, Bernie (245-7, 1325-31) also claims that men who gender-cross envy women for their beautiful, feminine clothes, but mainly for their freedom to present themselves in a rather androgynous style. However, they fail to notice that even women are subjected to analogous oppression. For instance, a large number of those women who pursue a career in the
male-dominated industry observe the given norms and cross-dress into men’s-type suits in order to fit in (Hilary, 500-12 & 541-4).

There is also the gender box, which is further divided into a ‘boy’s’ and a ‘girl’s’ box. In spite of conventions which dictate that ‘box occupancy’ must be mutually exclusive, there are some men who “want to have a foot in each [box]” (Hilary, 480). In reality, the plethora of cross-gender expressions includes ‘metrosexuals’ and ‘effeminate men’, who stretch the gender divide (Rafael, 571-5), ‘androgynes’, who combine elements of both genders (Elizabeth and moderator, 974-81), as well as mythical entities and ordinary people. For instance, Hilary and Rafael (with moderator, 983-8) refer to Dionysus, the Greek god who is portrayed as both male and female, and Hilary (992-5) talks about the contemporary Diona, a woman who claims to have a strong male side in herself. Nonetheless, ‘coming out of the box’ is still threatening to most individuals with any measure of gender incongruity. In fact, even being remotely associated with anything female can be very distressful, as Hilary (584-603) graphically demonstrates in her example of a cross-dresser who, though in ‘male mode’, dreads being seen standing by ‘Clinique’s cosmetics counter. In addition, the widely documented broken relationships, as well as cases of social isolation and intra-psychic conflict (e.g. Hilary & Bernie, 724-831; Hilary, Bernie & Elizabeth, 1160-1214) following one’s ‘coming out’ have instilled fear among those who base their identity on their masculinity. Hence, in order to compensate for their fragile, fragmented male self, many conceal their female persona under an over-display of stereotypically masculine behaviour (Hilary, 695-708). In fact, participants agree that, for most men, transition involves what Hilary sums up as “shaking off some of that burden [of masculinity]” (1056-7).

Nevertheless, ‘coming out of the box’ involves more than the term implies. Gender transition is not only concerned with the ‘shaking off’ of masculinity, but necessitates a new outlook. Thus, in response to Hillary’s ‘Clinique counter’, Bernie gives the ‘Holland & Barrett’ example (614-24), where he shops for cosmetics in ‘male mode’. Bernie confidently shows his hands to the shop assistant, directly states his wish to buy nail polish for himself and receives compliments for being ‘brave’. Bernie’s conduct illustrates what Elizabeth later describes as the ‘right’ attitude. This refers to a less rigid reading not only of ‘gender’ but also of ‘self’, a more encompassing identity concept which, according to Elizabeth, will protect one from the consequences of “going against the flow” (1069). As she explains (846-64), the lives of most men who gender cross are ‘dull’, because they take matters seriously. In response to this comment, Elizabeth argues that a lighter, ‘play’ attitude, which allows the expression of additional aspects of self, is more likely to facilitate one’s coming out of their box. Her point triggers a short discussion on what constitutes a complete persona, namely a balanced mixture of masculine and feminine traits which echo the Jungian concepts of ‘animus’ and ‘anima’ (Hilary, 1045-59, in response to moderator, 1014-23).
Most of us live within the confines of a normative discourse that proposes that the
good life is synonymous with advancement in our circumstances. In fact, it is the
general opinion that in the absence of progress, our life would be meaningless.
Therefore, it becomes impossible to think of one’s life path in any other terms than
positive and negative, or good and bad. Trapped into a fixed, binary pattern, we
commit ourselves to the pursuit of happiness, expecting rewards in return. In
Buddhist teachings (cited in Watts, 1957), this refers to ‘the illusion of significant
improvement’, which arises in moments of contrast, such as when one is trying to
make oneself comfortable on a hard bed. The illusion is revealed when we realise
that, turning from the left to the right is better so long as the contrast remains, but
before the right position begins to feel like the left. In other words, the sensation of
comfort can be maintained only in relation to the sensation of discomfort (Watts,
1957). Likewise, this discourse refers to the ‘illusion of personal growth’, which
arises in moments of intra-psychic conflict, such as when one is trying to kick out of
their gender box. The illusion is revealed when an individual realises that, despite
their efforts to break free from its confines, they are ‘still in the box’. In other words,
the longing for what is broadly understood as liberation and growth, stems from the
discomfort of being ‘boxed-in’, and in the absence of the box, there will be no
causal agent, hence no discomfort.

The box allegory illustrates the complexity of identity development; it describes the
experience of transition as the act of ‘kicking out of the box’; akin to ‘self-
realisation’. In particular, the box allegory alludes to the ‘paradox of autonomy’
(Butler, 2004), which maintains that subjection is the prerequisite for freedom, and
to become independent, one needs to have experienced a life almost certainly
unliveable. To explain, a box is an object that can be used for safekeeping,
decoration and offerings and may become an enclosure which provides protection
and stability. However, it can also be used to enforce captivity and isolation. In
addition, a box can be a marker of the space it occupies, and can serve as a point of
reference or contrast. Drawing upon Butler’s (1997) theorising of the psychic form
of power, the box stands for an external, institutional force which is gradually
transformed into the instrument that facilitates one’s becoming. During this process
for the male-to-female transgendered person, the previously-oppressive masculinity,
acquires a psychic value. Thus, the individual either identifies with the space and
contents of the ‘boy box’ and secures a male identity, or uses the box as a reminder
of what to avoid and what to escape from.

In describing gender transition, classical narratives tell a story of progress, which
begins with discomfort and ends in happiness (cited in Ames, 2005). It consists of
three acts; the experience of ‘gender dysphoria’, followed by geographic relocation
where, protected by anonymity, the individual cross-dresses with increasing
frequency, before moving on to hormones and a number of ‘sex change’ procedures,
including genital surgery. The third and final act is the aftermath, where the
individual is finally content in their desired gender. Drawing upon Prosser’s (1998)
concept of gendered ‘home’, transition is a journey, which begins with one departing
from a place of discomfort and ends with their arrival at ‘home’, a place which is expected to facilitate what some might call self-realisation. Arguably, the trajectory of classical narratives reflects a rather essentialist perspective of gender transition. This essentialist view maintains that, gender categories are fixed, and also that membership is exclusive and those who belong to a given category are expected to be similar to each other (Sullivan, 2003). In line with this perspective, ‘home’ refers to an identity category, which denotes sexual difference and secures belongingness when one easily fits into the ‘male’ or the ‘female’ box.

The personal growth discourse supports a polymorphic, multi-levelled emergence of gender self which is attained when a person accepts their masculinity and femininity as two integral parts of their personality. This alludes to Virginia Prince’s assertion that gender crossing is a manifestation of one’s complete personality (Prince, 1971, 1976), which has been regarded as prodromal to the more-encompassing transgender category (Ekins & King, 2006). However, this does not mean to suggest that the personal growth discourse advocates transgenderism. Alternatively, it suggests a rather queer understanding of transition as an ever-evolving process of adaptation and re-invention. In particular, the notion of growth refers to the severing of one’s attachments to the conventional notions of binary gender and homogeneous, mutually exclusive identity categories. Such notions are said to deny the importance of subjective experience and to inhibit the process of becoming (Stone, 1997, cited in Alsop et al., 2002; Butler, 2004). Moreover, the ensuing liberation also calls for the detaching of oneself from positions of illusory psychic value, which are held in relation to certain ‘boxes’ and ‘homes’ (e.g. Butler, 1997, Prosser, 1998). Irrespectively of how one experiences transition, the reality of life shows that “you have to get along with yourself…you cannot divorce yourself” (Hilary, 1263).

4.2.4) Embodied Wish and Oddball discourses; group 3

In the third focus group, participants constructed gender transition as a wish expressed through the changing of one’s body, as well as a state of being ‘at odds’ with the order of convention. This section presents the discussions pertaining to each of these two discourses, namely the ‘embodied wish’ and the ‘oddball’, and reflects on their emerging theoretical insights under a single heading. To begin with, the ‘embodied wish’ discourse constructs gender transition as an attempt to establish some kind of affiliation between one’s physical body and the body of the female population. The wish to become a member of one’s body of choice is partly met by variously adapting one’s appearance to match their inner gendered self. Thus, some men are content with ‘dressing up’, while others undergo drastic medical treatments. Nonetheless, there is conflict as to whether it is cross-dressers or transsexuals who are likely to be accepted as women by others. The group expressed the view that cross-dressers are understood to embody ‘true femininity’, while transsexuals appear to embrace conventions and show little awareness of ‘true’ femaleness. Notwithstanding the stated differences, both ‘embodied’ attempts face similar
rejection from society as a whole. Hence, the embodied wishes of both transsexuals and cross-dressers are jointly addressed in the ‘oddball’ discourse, which offers a summary of the various positionings that individuals have acquired within relations of power. The hard truth seems to be that, gender transition disturbs the order of convention, regardless of whether it simply involves ‘dressing up’ or goes as far as having surgery.

‘Embodied Wish’ Discourse

The ‘embodied wish’ discourse starts with a person realising that they do not fit into the gender body to which they were assigned at birth and it unfolds as they attempt to secure some kind of place within the broader social corpus. The initial realisation of being ‘different’ generates immense confusion, both on a personal and an interpersonal level, regardless of how one strives to come to terms with this. As Fiona (236-48) states, it begins as “something within you […] a feeling there is something wrong…because it is”. Understandably, the enduring legacy of pathology has caused much anxiety, and the ensuing lack of objective information on the issues and practices surrounding gender transition has led many men to believe that their feminine self is symptomatic of moral weakness or mental illness. Nonetheless, they make every effort to form some attachments with the female population, even if this means putting themselves at risk of becoming dis-embodied from the social corpus. During the course of this process, some individuals ‘become’ cross-dressers, while others follow the transsexual path.

To begin with, cross-dressers are described as enacting their lifelong ‘urge’ to embody what they consider ‘authentic femininity’, out of awe and loyalty. To achieve this, they aim to present a convincing female appearance. Sofia, who identifies as a ‘transvestite’ and claims that, for her, “presentation is everything” (695), talks a great deal about clothing, and together with Betty, who is also a cross-dresser, they discuss the strong associations between sexual feelings and a man’s desire to cross-dress (396-411 & 735-59). According to Sofia “for a lot of cross-dressers, there is a great deal of correlation (…) with sheer eroticism” (397-8). Then Betty states that transsexualism is “beyond sexual desire” because “he wants to be a woman, rather than desiring women’s clothes” (404-5). Sofia continues, and explains that men’s attraction to stereotypical female clothing, such as skirts, dresses and stockings, is associated with their onset of adolescent erotic feelings, which they experienced in a period when “women were dressed as women” (411). In response, Betty clarifies that this applies “in the cross-dresser area” (414). Then Sofia states that “you would never find [Betty] or me in trousers, because that does not fit our image of what women ought to look like” (416-7). In addition, “that sexual thing…wearing sexy underwear, if you are a transvestite” (Betty, 741-2), is portrayed as a wish to embody one’s object of desire. As Betty illustrates, and Sofia consents, women’s underwear is male orientated, designed by men for their wives to wear to please them. However, because women are not so keen, men transfer that
desire to their own body by “putting them on themselves, to enjoy the sight and the feel” (Betty, 752-4). In that way, cross-dressers’ wish to embody their ideal of femininity is somehow ‘justified’.

In contrast, transsexuals are described as aiming to express a realistic, rather than a romanticized version of femininity. Discussing the appearance of transsexual women, Betty, Anne and Sofia (444-63) agree that they have no interest in feminine clothes. In particular, Fiona, who has completed her transition, and Anne, who identifies as a ‘pre-op’ explain, that nowadays the majority prefer trousers and tops to skirts and dresses. That is “because they are women” (Fiona, 429 & 433), therefore they aim to mingle with the population with which they identify, rather than to imitate it. Yet, some might wear decorated jeans, as dictated by women’s fashion (Anne, 447). However, transsexuals’ efforts to connect with the female population are downplayed; in fact, participants agree that most transsexuals do not even try to pass. Even though the transition, which they feel they have achieved might be proven in paper (i.e. gender recognition certificate), it is not socially viable, and their looks are unsuitable. Bearing a resemblance to “female bricklayers” (Betty, 550) and “builders” (Fiona, 705) and sporting “the most hairiest arms and legs”, many transsexual women present “horrific sights” (Betty, 535-9). Sadly, they seem unaware or indifferent to the impact their appearance might have on others, to an extent that they might as well be “fooling themselves” (Fiona, 701).

Moreover, participants argue that transsexual treatment should be given with caution. Discussing the impact of the onset of treatment on one’s physicality, Betty and Sofia (560-75) suggest that early interventions are likely to increase one’s chances of passing. However, there is some confusion. Whereas Betty initially claims, “the younger, the better” (560), she quickly backtracks following Sofia’s “burning question of androgen blockers for pre-pubescent boys” (562), and says, “they should leave that a little longer” (567). In particular, Betty explains that a young boy’s desire to become female might be but a fleeting ‘fantasy’, characteristic of the allegedly impulsive adolescent experience. Therefore, as parents are encouraged to put their children’s desire to the test of time, so is society. This calls for an increased surveillance over the provision of transsexual treatment, as some candidates are likely to have the ‘wrong’ motives. As Anne and Betty explain (656-64), many transsexuals have surgery in order to dispose of their penis, rather than to acquire female genitalia. Thus, participants present cross-dressing as an effective, socially viable embodiment of femininity that offers a viable alternative to transsexual transition.

However, there is an interplay between both ‘embodied wishes’, as the attainment of both of these presents the risk of becoming dis-embodied from the social corpus. Notwithstanding their stated differences, both cross-dressers and transsexuals are prone to indefinite anxiety arising from the manifestations of their “true gender self”, and are subjected to similar constraints. For instance, though contemporary health professionals regard transvestitism a “harmless hobby” (Sofia, 116), the wives or
partners of those ‘afflicted’ still regard it as a “perversion” (Betty, 120-1). Likewise, transsexuals might want to be thought of as “normal people”, but they also have to acknowledge that a substantial part of society does not regard them as such (Fiona, 16-7). Moreover, both transsexuals and transvestites experience enduring intra-psychic discomfort, which results from the pressures to conform to the norms. For some transsexuals, the turmoil continues post-surgery, and “[they] change back again” (Betty, 137-9) to being male. For some cross-dressers, the anxiety is so intense they succumb to social pressure, hoping to find peace. As Fiona discusses with Sofia (248-5 & 281-8), they stop dressing and start a family or become involved in stereotypical male activities, only to realise the impossibility of suppressing their female self. Still, others like Anne (295-350), are subjected to ‘normalisation’ from a young age, which is designed to erase any indications of ‘gender inappropriateness’, and suspected homosexual tendencies. Being exposed to a series of ‘corrective’ interventions by her family, as well as by doctors, psychiatrists, teachers and even law officers, Anne believes in the benevolence of these reforms and claims that they served “her best interests at the time” (334-5). On the other hand, the gender crossover is driven by the direction of an individual’s desire. As Fiona states “there is a lot of P.R.” in the trans-scene which promotes transsexualism as the “dream of living a woman’s life” (486 & 490-1). Betty agrees with this view, adding that this attitude lures many “genuine cross-dressers into [becoming] transsexuals” (495-7). Interestingly, both Betty and Sofia (585-90, 604-11, 592-3, 619-21) disclose that they have been tempted to self-medicate with female hormones, and that they occasionally entertain the idea of breast augmentation, but have not proceeded with this. For Betty, the reason is fear of ‘becoming transsexual’ and of hospitals, whereas Sofia is worried about compromising her daily life as a male.

The ‘Oddball’ Discourse

Irrespectively of how they express their wish to become viable members of the broader social body, within group 3, both transsexuals and cross-dressers are constructed as ‘odd’ because they overturn the order of convention. The ‘oddball’ discourse begins with describing that order, starting with the ‘nature versus nature’ debate (771-860), which explores whether gender transition is biologically possible. In particular, Betty wonders why “most trans-women still have male brains” (771-2) and “carry out their men-type things after the change” (830-1), and Sofia attributes this to gender-specific genetic wiring which has been strengthened through “millennia of natural selection” (774-6 & 831-5). However, she also underlines that “the nature versus nurture debate is nonsense, because our personalities are conditioned by both” (Sofia, 796-7). In fact, social convention has reinforced gender-specific behaviours to such an extent, that they are thought of as ‘natural’ and ‘habitual’ (e.g. Fiona, 839), a position which leaves little room for further debate. In fact, research which seeks to understand the ‘transgender phenomenon’ in
relation to brain differences is on-going, and I might add contentious (e.g. LeVay, 1993; Savic & Arver, 2011).

Moving on into exploring the order of convention, the ‘oddball’ discourse continues with a brief, yet challenging reference to religion (Anne, with Betty & Sofia, 876-934). Apparently, God represents the highest order of convention. It is one thing to feel ‘at odds’ with socially-sanctioned conventions (such as the science of biology and the evolutionary framework for understanding gender differences), but quite another to feel in conflict with the very root of life. The latter feeling gives rise to a sense of guilt, which is so intense, it must find release either in denying one’s own nature or in rejecting God. Thus, God’s earthly representative, the Church, is constructed in a way, which casts doubts over its presumably divine character and the validity of its doctrine. As Anne explains, “most priests are homosexuals”, “the Pope is a paedophile” (918-9) and transphobic, who thinks in a way unsuitable for one who is “supposed to be a man of God” (932-4). What is more, many men deal with the ensuing guilt and self-hatred by following physically demanding and risky careers, preferably in the military (e.g. Anne, 942-3), or over-working themselves to the point of exhaustion (Anne & Fiona, 954-9).

The ‘oddball’ discourse concludes with an account of being ‘at odds’ with what one would expect from one’s self. At this stage, Rose, who has not contributed to the discussion, eventually joins. Following some prompting by Betty and me, Rose states that she has nothing to add, as “it’s all been said” (970). However, she decides to remain in the conversation and draws upon earlier references to clothing, particularly Betty’s comment about “[transsexuals]wearing embroidered jeans” (981-2). Responding to this, albeit late, Rose points to the fact that she is not wearing a skirt today, and wonders whether she has “destroyed the street credit” (986-7). Rose explains that she is not a transsexual, yet wears a pair of “very feminine, embroidered trousers”, as Betty willingly acknowledges (933-40). Rose is a cross-dresser, “still closeted” (1040), who just enjoys dressing up for the additional reason that her personal feelings change (1027-9). Indeed, both Betty and Sofia agree with Rose, and all three share reflective accounts of experiencing a change of personality when dressed ‘en femme’. Notwithstanding their curiosity about ‘the being of a woman’, and irrespective of having mixed feelings when they actually present as one before others (e.g. Rose, 1012-29, 1039-61, Betty & Sofia, 1063-86), their understanding of gender transition is one of being ‘at odds’ with their conventional sense of self. Summarised in the “what am I doing” statement (Rose, 1044 & Sofia, 1083), gender transition is an experience that combines trepidation and pleasure, and can make one wonder “whether [the change] is real…and how much of it is magic” (Sofia, 1069).

It has been argued that relations of power have an immediate hold upon the body, which is viewed as a location of the subject’s social and moral production (Scheurich & McKenzie, 2008). Thus, gender transition can be understood as a practice of negotiating a viable place for one’s body for a viable place within the existing discourses of reality. The ‘embodied wish’ discourse refers to the
conventional view of such practice, where the body is variously transformed to match, even outdo, the feminine ideal. In particular, the discussion draws upon standing debates in transgender theorising, which maintain that ‘gender variant’ individuals are pigeonholed either as conservative transsexuals who conform to the dictates of the hegemonic gender order, or as politically progressive transgender people (Namaste, 2005; Elliot, 2009). Interestingly, participants in this group do not discuss transgenderism, but cross-dressing. Though this might be because none of the participants identified as transgender, nonetheless transsexualism is still portrayed as inferior in comparison, despite two group members identifying as ‘transsexual’. The interactional dynamics in this group are addressed in the second analysis chapter (Chapter Five), in relation to the individual voices that somehow seem to dominate the discussion. For participants, being positioned as a ‘transsexual’ seems to imply that one’s body is a product of a ‘normalisation’ discourse (e.g. Butler, 2004; Stryker, 2006; Elliot, 2009), whereas being positioned as a ‘cross-dresser’ suggests that one’s body can be strategically manipulated in order to harmonize, rather than ‘normalise’, oneself with the prevailing discourses of femininity. Understandably, the existence of cross-dressers has not only challenged the presumed immutability of the gender binary, but also the diagnostic validity of transsexualism (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). In addition, the scientific and academic interest, which transsexualism generated, did not expand to encompass cross-dressers, but labelled them as sexual deviants or eccentrics (Prince, 1971, 1976; Deer, 1979; Ekins, 1997).

Notwithstanding these seemingly conflicting readings, both transsexuals and cross-dressers share the wish to secure a place within the existing discourses of femininity. This alludes to the need for arriving ‘home’, a destination that is expected to lead to a state where one finds belongingness and peace, and establishes an identity at any cost (Prosser, 1998). However, as the oddball discourse shows, this home is not femininity. Drawing upon the Foucauldian technologies of the self as “permitting individuals to effect, by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodied and souls […] to attain a certain state of happiness” (Foucault, 1988, p. 147), home can also be what is not. At first glance, the ‘oddball’ might seem confusing. It is neither conclusive, nor complicated; on the contrary, it is predictable (as it deals with the ‘popular’ nature versus nurture debate), at times ‘light’ (citing personal experiences and a few laughs), and the ‘theological’ references do not seem to come naturally into the discussion. However, the ‘oddball’ discourse is powerful, for exactly the same reasons. The order of Biology (or Science), Society, God and the Self, is but the ‘usual’ barrier that anything deemed to be unconventional has to break through. Hence, being ‘at odds’ is but a state of self-defined normality, which becomes a ‘home’ that can accommodate all gender-defiant people, who share certain positions within relations of power.
4.3) Framing Aphrodite

The discourses, which participants employ to describe gender crossing are neither unexpected, nor surprising. In fact, they are reflective of the genealogies which emerge from psychiatric, medical and social discourses described in Chapters One and Two. Briefly stated, the ‘theatre discourse’ constructs gender crossing as a struggle for recognition and acceptance, where the individual is most likely to be forced into a ‘monstrous’ position, that lacking social and moral value. In the ‘personal growth discourse’, the box allegory implies that the confines of binary gender are essential for ‘self-realization’. The ‘embodied wish discourse’ describes gender crossing as motivated by a longing for a viable place within the dominant discourses of femininity, which nevertheless carries an integral risk of social disembodiment, and the ‘oddball discourse’ warns that the desired gender ‘home’ might not be femininity per se, but a state of being ‘at odds’ with the order of convention. My understanding of these discourses is that they echo, to an extent, the ‘classical’ gender crossing narratives. As stated earlier, these narratives chronicle a journey from dysphoria to euphoria in three acts, using a discourse of progress (e.g. Prosser, 1998; Ames, 2005). The journey begins with a detailed account of the discomfort and unhappiness the protagonist is experiencing in their birth gender. In an attempt to cope with the intolerable strain, they relocate to a different environment, preferably to a bigger city, far away from their place of birth. Protected by anonymity (and I might argue, lack of recognition), the protagonist cross-dresses with increasing frequency, before moving on to hormones and a variety of irreversible procedures, which culminate with genital surgery. The finale is generally positive and its portrayal of life ‘post-treatment’ is optimistic; in the vast majority of cases, the protagonist has successfully dealt with a multitude of problems, and is now happily adjusted in their chosen gender. Classical narratives do not fail to emphasize the hardships that one is destined to encounter in their journey, such as inner conflict and social ostracism, to name but a few. However, these are endured as a prelude to becoming female.

The trajectory of these narratives takes me back to the birth myth of Aphrodite, presented in the Introduction. Perhaps, the ‘appropriation’ of this myth as a framework for understanding gender transition is due to its alleged similarities with the classical narratives as it reflects a conventional, and arguably idealized view of gender crossing. For instance, the dysphoria that the protagonist experiences in the first act is equivalent to the social unrest which precedes the birth of the goddess, exemplified as the war between the Titans and the Olympians over the reign of the world. The power clashes between the ‘old order’ and the ‘new order’ escalate into the murder of Uranus by his son Cronus, who cuts off his father’s genitals and throws them into the sea. Possibly, this symbolic gesture amounts to a form of ‘relocation’, as not only does the piece of flesh becomes dis-embodied from its physical body, but also from its territory; it descents from heaven, straight into the sea. The impact of this move is forceful, and as the cut flesh reacts with the water, Aphrodite arises from the crest foam. Overtaken by her beauty, the gods invite her to
take residence at Mount Olympus, thus cementing her status as a goddess among
gods. The offer of divine residence might as well strengthen the hope that the
newborn female self will enjoy a similar recognition and acceptance.

Participant’ accounts of gender crossing echo Butler’s (2004a) description of the
paradox of autonomy, which maintains that in order to live a life that is fulfilling,
one needs to have experienced a reality that is most certainly unliveable. The
paradoxical pairings in this case are that unfreedom is a pre-requisite for freedom,
and the price for self-knowledge is self-loss. In particular, gender crossing
necessitates the existence of an ‘unhappy’ self that needs to be un-done; the strain of
this un-doing facilitates the distancing between the self that one is and the new,
‘happier’ self that one is trying to become. This syllogism alludes to Foucault’s
(1988: 11) assertion that “the main interest in life is to become someone else that
you were not at the beginning”. Nonetheless, one could challenge this- by asking,
for instance, “what if I have always been that someone else?” A way to address this
is to look into the frames of recognition that dictate which gendered lives are
allowed to flourish in society and which are not. As explained in Chapter Two, these
frames are constructed in accordance with the normative standards of femininity,
masculinity as well as humanhood. However, they are subject to a constant re-
structuring. In particular, Butler (2009: 10) claims that frames of recognition are
characterized by “a kind of perpetual breakage, subject to a temporal logic” and
argues that “as the frame constantly breaks from its context, this self-breaking
becomes part of its very definition”. Nonetheless, it seems that the frameworks
which provide for the recognition of individuals who variously gender-cross have
not been suitably restructured. Even though they have responded to both legal and
moral responses to the transgendered, in the sense that they have fewer pathological
connotations, they remain unrealistic and to my mind over optimistic, in a rather
cruel way.

The point to be made here is that the framework for understanding gender crossing
is generated by a normative discourse of progress, which is generated and
maintained by the mechanics of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011). As explained in
Chapter Two, cruel optimism is as paradoxical as autonomy (e.g. Butler, 2004a); the
desired goal is, by default, unattainable and the mechanisms that sustain its pursuit
are inherently defective and potentially destructive A relation of cruel optimism
poses a profound threat to our self and overall well-being, as it does not allow a
clear view of our circumstances. In this case, the birth of Aphrodite is understood as
a scene of conventional fantasy that is likely to jeopardize the survival of the new-
born female self. Becoming Aphrodite is unattainable, but hoping to become her
oneself is both reassuring and sustaining. Arguably, the normative discourses which
describe gender transition as progress are not truly agentic but indicative of the
process of a ‘slow death’. For Berlant (2011), ‘slow death’ is a condition of being
worn out by the activity of re-producing life, whereby agency becomes an act of
maintenance rather than creativity. Otherwise stated, normative discourses serve to
re-produce rather than materialize the scene of fantasy. For instance, participants in
the second group have an underlying suspicion that ‘kicking out’ of the gender box might not be as liberating as they would expect it to be, as their ‘coming out’ reveals that ‘they are still in’. However, not only do they persist in their efforts, but they count each of the layers they need to tear away in order to make their ‘way out’. In the third group, participants suggest that they are more likely to be recognized as ‘oddballs’ rather than to fulfil their wishes to be accepted as females by society.

The myth of Aphrodite is a story of birth. Participants’ discourses of gender crossing are about re-birth. Both feature un-doing as a prelude to progress. For Butler (2004b; 2009), birth is by definition precarious and precariousness corresponds to life itself. She suggests that in birth, as in life, “survival is dependent on what we might call a social network of hands” (Butler, 2009: 14). However, whereas the new-born Aphrodite is supported by a ‘network of divine hands’ that carry her safely first to the shore and then in Mount Olympus, the new-born, mortal female self does not enjoy similar support. On the contrary, she falls prey to a network of institutionalised, medical, political hands that obscure her path. Though they might appear protective as they block out the blood, the cut flesh and the monstrous Erinyes from her view, they leave the ‘mortal Aphrodite’ to make her way into the world alone. She might make it to the shore, but it is not guaranteed that she will make it to heaven. In fact, she might end up like Josie, the participant from the first focus group. Josie is alone, unsupported and worn out, but does not give up. She argues that she has been “sentenced to death (...) for life- and ‘life’ means ‘death’”, and fears that she is “gonna die (...) [because] there is no protection from the elements” (754-88). She has fallen from heaven and she wanders, half-blinded and half-mad, dying slowly while making her way to the shore.
CHAPTER 5

Gender Crossing Tales: between the monstrous and the marvellous

This chapter is the second of the two which outline the findings from focus groups discussions. As the second analysis chapter, it is concerned with the interaction and emotionality observed in focus group discussions. The chapter has the following structure. The first part is concerned with the ‘gender crossing tales’, identifying the dominant stories, which appear to develop within the groups, and examining these through the lens of ancient and modern myths of creation, as well as home and recognition politics. From the first group, the Monster’s Tale is a story of mis-recognition, recounting how those who defy the binary gender divide are regarded as ‘lesser’ human beings. In the second group, the tale of ‘opening Pandora’s Box’ portrayed individuals who gender cross as being confined within the normative matrix which regulates the expression of one’s ‘true’ self. In the third group, participants’ narratives overlap with the Monster’s Tale and Pandora’s Box. This part also offers some observations on the interactional processes between participants in each group. Drawing upon the ‘absence’ of an independent story in the third group, it suggests the existence of a pre-existing social structure within this group. The second part of the chapter is concerned with the emotional processes involved in the acquisition of individual subject positions and explores the different ways in which participants manage their affect while negotiating their views. Drawing upon the positions identified in gender-crossing tales, it describes participants’ accounts of the emotions involved in their current position. These emotions are understood as relational patterns that individuals repeat in their interactions with others and these I describe as ‘flees on a hot griddle’ and ‘hide and seek’. The final part of this chapter offers an insight into the notion of ‘vulnerable creatures’, which is understood to describe participants’ identification within heteronormative societies.

5.1) Gender Crossing Tales

Participants in the first group tell a story of suffering which reflects the angst of Frankenstein’s monstrous Creature, whose attempts to participate in society are violently rebuked. In the second group, participants’ narrative echoes the myth of Pandora, who opened the Box and unwittingly freed a multitude of evils. The original stories were introduced in Chapter Two. In this chapter, they are presented
in a format which consists of brief commentaries on group dynamics, fragments from the interactions among participants, and an identification of the parallels between their tales and the trans-gender existence.

5.1.1) A Monster’s Tale; Group 1

In the start of this group session, the atmosphere was rather tense and, within the first five minutes, there are five instances of interruption among participants. The discussion seems to revolve around Josie’s performance, who also happens to speak first. She enters the discussion stating “I’ve said what I’m going to say” (1) and continues with what threatens to develop into an angry monologue. Josie tells the group that prior to her involvement with the trans-scene she had been searching for “survivors of industrial, chemical and other injuries (…) in mental hospitals”, and these people were “much nicer than the majority of the transsexual people [she had ever] met” (10-18). Right after Josie’s opening remarks, I introduce some of the terms that have been used to describe people who gender-cross, ‘gender queer’ being one of them. However, Josie objects to the last term. To illustrate,

Josie: It causes offence, that last term
Brian: What, the ‘gender queer’?
Josie: Yeah…and be careful using that word, it’s really…
Vicky: Can we have a bit more of a variety of people [annoyed]
Josie: Yes, set your pace
Vicky…rather than just a single person dominating… (26-36)

The discussion continues as Phoebe and Brian discuss the meaning of terms in different contexts. Phoebe states that “it all comes from (…) how you interpret what people say, whether you interpret it as offensive” (87-91), and notes that the term ‘gay’ has changed “from being a negative thing, to now being perceived by the community as a positive thing” (93-4). Then Brian identifies a specific social context; London.

Brian: (…) living in London is…well, it is far too liberal here…
SF: Hmmmm
Brian: Suppose if you are going north probably, they will…they won’t be so kind to us…as they are here
SF: Yes, London is multi-cultural, and…
Josie: And, of course, I’m too scared to say what I think right now, like what a pile of shit London is
SF: Big cities can be controversial…Yes, I see what you mean
Josie: I am here because I was made to be here, I’m not here through choice, I am a prisoner in London…I want everyone to remember that…And I live here because I was made to live here…
SF: I suppose it is difficult…
Josie: And they tell me ‘shut up you freak’ or whatever else
SF: I suppose it is difficult not to have a choice of where to go or where to be… Meanings and…
As tension subsides, I acknowledge that meaning is usually subjective and bring up the ‘heavily medicalized’ meaning of gender transition. Vicky, Phoebe and Brian (140-419) begin a discussion on the dominance of the medicalized, “even semi-pornographic literature, especially on transvestites” (Vicky, 156). Brian discloses that when he was young, “the only place you could find a book on transvestism was to go to a porno-shop! (…) Of course! If you go back say 50 years…And even in porno-shops, they were also hidden. You had to go ‘somewhere at Kings Cross’!” (304-10).

Josie does not contribute much during that part of the discussion, apart from a few cynical one-liners, until Brian mentions London again. While he talks favourably about his experiences of getting involved with trans-support groups (419), Josie interrupts him saying that she “found exactly the opposite” (425), and though Brian responds “really?” (427), he does not give Josie the opportunity to share her experiences; at least not before he finishes what he had to say. Thus, he goes on adding that a drawback of attending such groups is that “you can only mix with the people of your type”, a situation he describes as being a “handicap” that “enforces some kind of loneliness” (459-62). He then turns to Josie.

Brian: What were you about to say?
Josie: Hmm? I am not supposed to say anything, because I am a bottom while I am here…
Phoebe: Oh, no, no, no…
SF: Please…
Josie: I…well…I mean…I find…sort of ‘proper transsexuals’ are bloody…I am bloody terrified of them, I do not like them…I always think of them as ‘queer bashers’, I just don’t want them to attack me physically (…) Phoebe: Why do you find them frightening?
Josie: They scare me (…) they are just the most aggressive, masculine group of people I have ever met…well…they are just frightening…I don’t like them (466-482)

Josie seizes this opportunity to tell her story. She discloses that she was ‘made to live as a male’ by her family, but managed to ‘escape’ to London, where she started living as a female. Her hopes of finding freedom were soon dispelled, as this “wonderful, tolerant, cosmopolitan” city was actually “shit” (499-500). She presented for treatment at a London gender clinic but, to her dismay, not only her request was rejected, but she came across a physician who allegedly “pressurized” her to live as a male, so that he can “save money” (494-500). Josie sought solace in being amongst her ‘own kind’, but unsuccessfully. She also tried to mix with people as an “ordinary person” (490), but she knows she cannot trust them, as there have
been instances where others have been ‘picking on her’ for being a “fetish thing” (536-7).

Moved by Josie’s story, Phoebe brings up an instance that took place prior to the group when someone knocked on the door and Josie answered, only to tell the others straight afterwards that he had called her ‘freak’ (see Chapter Three). Phoebe tells Josie “I don’t see you as a freak” (738), and Josie replies “Yes, no…but really, I’m really, really a freak” (742). Phoebe continues to gently challenge Josie, who nevertheless remains unmoved.

Josie: They spit on me when I walk through South End Green, you know…you know that, don’t you? Literally, spit on me…

Phoebe: Really?

Josie: Yes…yeah…It is known as ‘repository’ in the council, not openly, not public (…) you shiver with the people that gather there…junkies, alcoholics…

Phoebe: Well, I suppose…

Josie: …religious extremists…

Phoebe: Well, it is…

Josie: …you have to keep an eye on them so they won’t cause any trouble…

Phoebe: It is…a rather extreme example. I think if you walked in many other areas, you would not get that response. People’s eyes won’t see you as that…

Josie: I’ve been sentenced to death…for my sexuality…for life- and ‘life’ means ‘death’…

Brian: No chance of moving somewhere?

Josie: No. I am gonna die there. Probably this winter- there is no heating, no protection from the elements…

SF: Hmm…

Brian: Is there any…

Josie: People always tell me to ‘shut up’! That is what transsexuals do, isn’t it? As far as I’m concerned, they are just some of the bad guys… (754-88)

Josie tells the story of an ‘unliveable life’ (e.g. Butler, 2004a), a tale of misrecognition. She longs to belong within a society which she detests for already having rejected her. She sees herself as a ‘freak’ whom others treat as less than human, and whose efforts to participate in society are perceived as attempts to ‘invade’ a forbidden space. Josie is aware that she is “banned for life, because there is a side of [her] that upsets people” (528). Her conduct and discourse embody, quite graphically, the stigmatized conception of transpeople as marginal an unwanted, disturbed beings. Josie’s intense contribution suggests that she is unhappy, not only among her fellow participants, but also among all people of her ‘own kind’, and society as a whole. One could argue that Josie neither has a place in the group, nor in trans-specific scene, nor in the human scene in general. In fact, Josie belongs nowhere.

Josie can be regarded as a Monster, an ‘in-between’ who is regarded as ‘less than human’ by means of her manner and embodiment (e.g. Stryker, 1994, Nordmarken, 2014). Recalling from participants’ profiles in the method chapter, Josie identifies as
‘born intersex’, and detests the medical establishment for having denied her access to transsexual treatment. To make matters worse, her overall conduct suggests, at the very least, someone who is unsettled in themselves and within society. Like Frankenstein’s Creature, an animated assemblage of cadavers’ parts who dwells at the gate that separates the dead from the living, Josie is an amalgam of gender, neither male nor female, but a combination of both. Instead of being valued for her unique characteristics, her distinctiveness not only diminishes her chances of recognition, but ensures her exclusion from society (e.g. Davy, 2011). Her complicated being defies the idea of humankind as conditional to being instantly recognized as an ‘authentic’ man or woman (e.g. Butler, 2004). Therefore, she is forced to dwell somewhere ‘in-between’ the human and the monstrous (e.g. Cohen, 2012). Moreover, Phoebe’s challenging of Josie’s negative self-image, whilst emphasizing her ability to transform her position, and Josie’s resistance to be ‘moved’ echo the recognition debates, which argue that the allegedly autonomous view of what constitutes a ‘good life’ and one’s ‘true self’ is not entirely independent from the given sociocultural context, but is too tightly scripted by it (e.g. Cooke, 1997; McBride, 2013). Not only does Josie insist that she is a ‘freak’, but she becomes particularly aggravated (105 & 425) when Brian says that he found ‘home and solace’ in London and among members of the ‘trans community’. Instead, she argues that her living conditions, both in her place of residence and the broader society feel like “a really nasty punishment” (883).

To explain this further; without a doubt, Josie demonstrates an admirable resilience. For instance, even though she introduces herself to the group as a ‘freak’, and claims that she “does not like getting mixed up in [the ‘trans-scene’]” (16), she also identified as an ‘activist’. As noted earlier, Josie gave me an envelope just before the group started, and advised me that it was ‘important information for my files’. The envelope contained an autobiographical narrative of her experiences of being ‘trans’, which she signed, adding by her name ‘gender activist’. Based upon knowledge from acquaintances, Josie is a keen attendee of several trans-support meetings. In this group however, she admits to having made a few friends amongst other members of trans-support groups, and wishes she “had not been involved with anyone”, because this “makes the way out difficult” (16-9). Josie is in turmoil, caught between a yearning for human regard and the anticipation of being denied it. Yet, despite repeating that she is ‘too scared to say what she thinks’ (105 & 468), Josie does not give up. Like a Monster, she seeks the possibility of human community at any cost (e.g. Cohen, 2012). She is determined to continue her efforts to find ‘a place for herself’, and she seems prepared to suffer along the way. Sadly, Josie has accepted her exclusion for her ‘otherness’, no longer sees herself as a human being, and even finds the term ‘queer’ offensive. She discloses to the group that her family called her “not normal”, and recalls growing up believing that was her ‘real’ name (976-7). To this day, Josie can “still hear people shouting ‘you are not normal!’” (982).
5.1.2) Opening Pandora’s Box; Group 2

In the second group, the interaction among participants is not as forceful as in the first group. In the absence of confrontations, the discussion flows easily and appears to be led by Hilary, who happens to speak first. Hilary is a core member of a trans-support organisation, and part of her role involves giving talks to various establishments. She presents as articulate and confident, her account is lively and pleasant, and she leads the discussion rather effortlessly. Perhaps, her experience in public speaking has endowed her with a reservoir of topics to draw from, and her acquaintance with two of the other three participants, namely Bernie and Elizabeth, facilitates this. Moreover, Rafael’s contribution is discreet; he is attentive to the conversation, and makes a few, but significant, statements which encapsulate the discussion.

In this group, participants interact to piece together elements of their narratives which contribute to the creation of a coming-out story (e.g. Plummer, 1995), which echoes the opening of Pandora’s Box. The reason I chose to draw upon this myth, is the ‘box’ allegory, in which participants describe gender crossing as a ‘coming out of the gender box’. To illustrate,

_Hilary_: …the argument I use, is that society loves to put you in boxes…

- _All participants say “Yes” simultaneously -

_Hilary_: …and you are coming out of that little box, and…

_Bernie_: …and it is wrong, you are still in the box! (laughs)

_Hilary_: Exactly, yeah! And it could be a case…we don’t wanna be entirely in the boy-box, you don’t wanna be entirely in the girl-box, you wanna be…have a foot in each, type-of-thing. Yeah…

_Rafael_: Yes, when people are putting…well, using what psychology says, “putting people in boxes” so they don’t have to try and think a little more…they don’t think much about it, they go “Oh, I’ve seen that before, that is what it is”…so they do not put an extra effort in trying to understand it… (470-87)

Generally speaking, a box is a solid object that has many functions. It can be used as an item of decoration, it can be used for safekeeping, and it can also be used to enforce captivity. In this extract, the box is a metaphor for the confines of binary gender, and contains two mutually exclusive compartments, one reserved for males, the other for females. Participants describe this ‘gender box’ as a socially-constructed device that restricts thinking, exploration and self-expression, and argue that breaking free from it is very difficult. The firmness of the box is suggestive of society’s attitude towards individuals who variously gender-cross. In Pandora’s myth, the Box is a wedding gift, a symbolic object which marks a formal expression of commitment not only to a spouse, but also to the institution of marriage itself. Hidden in its function, within this symbolic offering of a wedding gift lies a deeper underlying meaning, identifying an individual’s attachment to the institution, and serving as a reminder that others have witnessed one’s vows to observe the norms. My argument is that Pandora’s Box represents a paradoxical ‘gift of recognition’,...
whereby being accepted as a female is conditional upon appearing and behaving like one. As explained in Chapter Two, the gender norm regulates recognition and belonging, and the observer’s inability to categorise an individual as being either male or female leads to a loss of superior personhood (e.g. Butler, 2004). Notably, in the myth, Pandora was modelled on goddess Aphrodite herself and destined to become the wife of a Titan- otherwise, doing what society would expect a woman to do, such as getting married. One could also argue that, being a wedding gift, the Box would be carefully draped in layers of beautiful material which have been chosen carefully with the intent of increasing its appeal. Otherwise stated, the way one presents their gender self, either through their choice of clothes or their overall conduct, serves a purpose similar to wrapping up a present; beautifying the exterior to make the promise of the contents more appealing.

In this group, participants discuss a great deal about clothes and appearances, as external signifiers of the inner self, and point to a wide spectrum of cross-dressing. For Bernie, “coming home after work, have a shower, wear a dress, sandals, and have a drink…is the most relaxing part” (60-1), and underlines that there is nothing sexual about it. Hilary then comments that “there are many people who dress up for sexual fun” (84-5), as well as others who dress up “every day, or perhaps in the evening, watching telly or something” (117-20). At this point, Rafael adds that “there is a certain kind of…err…transvestite style of clothes that women just do not wear, or they do not really wear any more” (122-4). Bernie comments on this by sharing an instance when he was out with a girlfriend, who was wearing a trouser-suit on a hot day; he asked her why she was not wearing a dress that would suit the occasion and she replied “only transvestites wear a dress” (132-3). Even though he states his amazement to her remark, he quickly adds that “she doesn’t have the body to go with [a dress]” (139). Bernie also says that he has many dresses but no opportunity to wear them; he is “tired of wearing them in the house” and he is looking forward to the weekends away organized by the trans-support group, “where for the whole weekend you can be what you like” (174-7). Then Hilary (201) states that going out ‘dressed’ is a means of “show[ing] off” (201) for some. Bernie agrees that “get[ing] a reaction” can be “affirming” (207 & 213 & 224) and Rafael adds that this “would help develop the identity a bit more” (Rafael, 220).

For others, ‘dressing up’ enables them to express their bi-sexual identity. Hilary describes this situation as “bi-when-dressed” (291), and gives the fictional example of “George who puts on his dress and becomes Gwendolyn (…) using the clothes to liberate that part if [his] character” (306-63). However, she emphasizes that when George is in a suit he is “completely heterosexual” (315), and if he is asked “do you fancy that bloke” he might “slap you…take you out and beat you” (328-32). In response to this, Bernie discloses that when he was young he was “very anti-gay”, but since he started dressing –up he discovered his attraction to the feminine image. To quote,
Bernie: And when I started dressing up…on very rare…if I find a very attractive transvestite, which looks like a girl to me…I’ve been attracted to them…
Hilary: Hmm…hmm…
Bernie: But not going all the way- just kissing or something…
Hilary: Sure…
Bernie:…as long as she is dressed properly
Hilary: Hmm…because that’s…yeah, that’s the feminine…image!...being presented to you…yeah…
Rafael: Hmm…
Bernie: That time…you completely saw that she is a real girl…
Hilary: Hmm…hmm…
SF: Again, affirmation…through what the others see, yeah?
Bernie: Yes, what you see! (376-98)

Whether it is being embodied by them or just presented to them, participants acknowledge their attraction to the feminine image, yet are most concerned about maintaining their masculine image. They agree that the majority of men who gender-cross dread the reaction, which their immediate group of acquaintances might show in response to a disclosure of their trans-gender ‘proclivities’. The biggest fear is losing face. As Hilary illustrates in the instance of the ‘Clinique’ counter (584-603), many are anxious of the stigma of being seen by the counter of a cosmetics firm that is associated with women, and behave awkwardly, even when they present as males. In order to cope with the intra-psychic conflict, some create a big display of masculinity around them, powerful enough to silence any speculations that they might be keeping a female underneath. Nonetheless, the labour of maintaining that image can be overwhelming. To illustrate,

Hilary:…transitioning is, partly, a case of shaking off some of that burden [of masculinity]
Rafael: Yeah, I think it must be, for a lot of people.
Hilary: Could be, couldn’t it? Hmm…shaking off that burden…because…hmm…you can be brought up to do…you know, you are a bloke, you do this, you do that…a condition of being the man, type-of-thing…and…etc…etc…
Bernie: We said before about ‘being in a box’.
Hilary: Exactly! And now you are kicking out of that box…you challenge, you wanna get out of that box, aren’t you…So, not only you are going away from what society expects a man to do…you know, you are challenging the masculinity…you know, throwing off those burdens! (712-27)

Notwithstanding the evils that flow from the box, things are seen to ‘go wrong’ when one has the ‘wrong’ attitude. According to Elizabeth, “people are coming in with a dull attitude, when a ‘play’ attitude is more appropriate (…) it is a kind of a crossed wires situation” (852-7). Her point is that the evils are not rooted in the contents of the box, but in one’s mind. The locked box is but “a view…you think that you can’t do anything…but in reality, if your mind allows you to do it, you can” (1065-7). One could argue that the ‘right’ attitude, which Elizabeth describes as ‘play’ and ‘lighter’, does not refer to distracting activities of a recreational nature.
Instead, it suggests an awareness of participating in a game in which ‘truth’ is the prize, and the readiness to continue playing reflects the value of the reward for success. In particular, Elizabeth suggests that the ordeal of gender-crossing can be a confidence-building task, which is designed to empower one to survive “the consequences of going against the flow” (1068). The other participants show their agreement by monosyllabic utterances, until Bernie asks a direct question.

_Bernie_: But are we all fortunate enough to go against the flow? You see, there is family, or your job…

_Hilary_: Yeah, yes…

_Elizabeth_: Yes, that is why…as long as you are prepared to accept the consequences…

_Bernie_: Yeah…

_Elizabeth_: …then you can go against the grain. There used to be a guy in a place where I used to work, who was…his wife divorced him…and he was so mad, he decided that he is going to spend the rest of his life dressed-up as a clown! And everywhere he went…

_Bernie_: Clown?… (laughs)…well, yeah, that would be more acceptable than wearing, you know… (laughs)

_Elizabeth_: And he was dressed as a clown for ages and ages, you know…

_Bernie_: …(laughs)…

_Elizabeth_: That has nothing to do with transgenderism, but…

_Hilary_: No! …(laughs)… Is the idea of going against the flow, isn’t it? (1080-1102).

Certainly, Elizabeth’s ‘clown example’ has nothing to do with gender-crossing. However, it takes my analogy back to that of the box as a ‘gift of recognition’, reflecting the fact that there will always be normative expectations which dictate membership within any particular community (e.g. Cooke, 1997). However, such expectations can become oppressive, especially for those who appear in the form which is the opposite of what society dictates is the ‘proper’ way of being. Hence, participants describe masculinity as a burden that has been imposed on them, and has compromised the expression of their femininity. Perhaps, their only chance of coming out of the Box is through making a ‘queer move’, disengaging themselves from the terms and conditions imposed by their acceptance of the ‘gift’, and shifting their focus from the exterior to its contents. Instead of dreading the flow of evils from the open Box, they spring out of it like a ‘jumping clown’. After all, this is a ‘game of truth’ (e.g. Foucault, 1984), and the readiness to continue playing reflects the value of the reward for success.

5.1.3) Beauties and Beasts in the same Box; Group 3

In the third group, participants’ stories overlapped with elements from the Monster Tale and Pandora’s Box, identified in the first and the second group. However, the analysis of this group has been intriguing, as it initially occurred to me that this group ‘lacked’ a clear narrative. In due course, I considered this to be the result of a
pre-existing structure within the group, which manifests itself in participants’ interactions with one another, as well as with the moderator. Therefore, this section consists of two parts; the first presents the overlapping themes, and the second offers an examination of the interactional processes among participants. The theoretical insights from this group’s story are addressed in the final part of this chapter.

5.1.4) Common Threads

In the third group, the content of participants’ narratives overlapped with elements from the ‘gender-crossing tales’ identified in the first and in the second group. In particular, the individual accounts of Fiona and Anne echo a ‘monster’s tale’ of inferior personhood and self-loathing, and the collective interactions of all participants echo the story of ‘Pandora’s Box’, whereby a change of the ‘gendered exterior’ does not always resolve inner conflict. However, these ‘monster tales’ are received rather favourably. Unlike Josie in the first group, neither Fiona nor Anne, who happen to identity as ‘transsexuals’, aggravate their fellow participants. They share their painful experiences without disrupting the overall smooth flow of the conversation. And as both tell their stories relatively uninterrupted, their accounts are presented in a form of a synopsis. Elements that echo the story of ‘opening Pandora’s Box’ manifest themselves during interaction, and are therefore presented as fragments of that dialogue. This is addressed in the following section, which is concerned with the interaction among participants. At this stage though, I note that this group embraces its monsters, and gives them a voice and a ‘home’.

To begin with, Fiona shares the difficulties she endured upon realising that there was “something different” about her, which felt “wrong” and needed to “be oppressed”. Being “naïve”, she feared that she was “perverted” and found it hard to socialise at school. Fiona admits that she has spent “40 years of [her] life hiding (…) going through all the levels of suicide” (168-70), and that during that period she also overworked herself to the point of self-destruction (957-9). Unable to cope with the emotional demands of ‘being wrong’, Fiona gave in to social pressures; she tried “to prove that [she] was somebody else that everybody else wanted [her] to be” (276-7) and “went through [her] marriage and everything else” (281). Though she has now completed her transition, Fiona is still pre-occupied with regrets. She contemplates “what [she] has missed” and wishes she had been able to “live [her] life, as the real person [she] wanted to be and not trying to… dispose herself” (285-8). Likewise, Anne, who identifies as a ‘pre-op transsexual’, discloses that she has “lived 30 or 40 years in a dead-end” (290). She was a rather effeminate young boy, whose demeanour alarmed her father, who urged her to “toughen up” only to “disappoint him” even more, and feel “like a failure” (308-12). Succumbing to the pressure and being referred to “doctors and psychiatrists” (316-7), Anne went through a “sort of a break-down period” (326) when she was prescribed Librium, Valium and testosterone (326-8). Nonetheless, Anne has no hard feelings and tells that the
reason she is not resentful is because she “can accept that what was done was seen as serving [her] best interests at the time” (334-5).

Participants also talk about clothes and appearances, and agree that a change of exterior does not necessarily resolve their inner conflict. This is in stark contrast with the early claims of gender reassignment, where it was claimed to facilitate one’s integration into society and improve their emotional health (e.g. Benjamin, 1966). In reality, the well-documented social and interpersonal repercussions, which accompany the revelation of one’s female persona, force many individuals to remain in the closet, independently of whether they cross-dress or follow the transsexual treatment path. Not to mention that some get so disappointed post-surgery, and “change back again” to being male (Betty, 137-9). However, Betty and Sofia, who identify as cross-dressers, ‘attack’ transsexuals and get away with it. Their positive, almost idealised portrayal of transvestism as the embodiment of authentic femininity is given at the expense of transsexualism. Surprisingly, Fiona and Anne do not directly object to this. At some point into the discussion though, Fiona recovers the downplayed image of transsexualism as ‘real’. This is illustrated in the extract below:

_Sofia_: I think we would like to have been born 50 years earlier, when women were dressed like women!
- (all laugh)-
_Betty_: Yes, there is that…but in the cross-dresser area.
_Sofia_: You would never find Betty or me in trousers, because that does not fit our image of what women ought to look like!
_SF_: Hmm…
_Sofia_: Whereas, 50 years ago, there was no problem, all women wore skirts! Wearing trousers was…er…unusual!
_SF_: Abnormal!
_Sofia_: Watch it!
- (all laugh)-
_Fiona_: If you think about it, a lot of transsexuals do wear trousers.
_Sofia_: Of course they do, because most women today wear trousers.
_Fiona_: Because they are women, they are not interested in women’s dress (410-35)

Later on, Anne states that for some transsexuals, the reason for having surgery is self-hatred. Betty and Sofia agree, noting that cross-dressers do not wish to ‘erase’ themselves, but to project the ideal feminine image. However, the ‘realness’ of transsexual women is not in line with the ideal feminine appearance.

_Anne_: (…)I know transgender people, transsexuals who have had the operation , in most cases…er…they absolutely hated what they got below the belt and it had to be changed, because, basically, I think they more hated what they got rather they wanted…what they were trying to trans-simulate out of the operation…
_SF_: That is an interesting point.
Betty: That is quite true…because, one I knew, quite close…she had quite…hatred of her penis. (…)

Sofia: It is all about self-image. (…) one of the major differences between transsexual women and cross-dressers. (…) Cross-dressers are more interested in projecting an image. It does not matter what goes on underneath, so long as I look like a woman on the outside. So, cross-dressers will go for padded hips and bums. (…) (…) and you will never find any transsexual woman dare wearing any padding, because it doesn’t fit their self-image! They are women, they don’t do that kind of thing! (655-81)

Fiona also laughs in response to Betty’s description of ‘hairy’ transsexual women, along with the rest of the group, who recite conventional accounts of femininity, debating who is ‘real’ in their performativity (e.g. Butler, 1990) and who is not. To quote,

Betty: (…) said she was a transsexual, she wanted to be a woman, she wanted to go down to Charing Cross and then, she was sitting there with the most hairiest arms and legs you ever saw!! Well, surely, if you want to be a woman, you shave them!! The first thing you can do!! And you think ‘my God’, you know…(laughs)…there are many other things you can do!

-(all laugh)-

Betty: I would never like to see hairy arms and hairy legs!!...(laughs)…Yet, transsexuals seem quite happy to have (…) you can even pick them up by the fact that they wear jeans…(laughs, looking at Anne).-(all laugh)-...embroided jeans…long hair (…)  

Fiona: …hairy legs and hairy arms… (laughs)

Betty: They look like female brick-layers, don’t they? (laughs)

- (all laugh) – (554-51)

At another instance, Betty and Sofia talk about “that sexual thing…wearing sexy underwear if you are a transvestite” (742). It appears that they re-claim the sexual connotations attached to transvestism, while reducing ‘transsexual realness’ to having a gender recognition certificate. To quote,

Betty: So, that’s a strong part of transvestism…you can’t deny that…(…). But that doesn’t affect…transsexuals would not think like that. If they just want to wear dungarees underneath, that is what they will wear…, they are not interested in…

Sofia: They are women! And they have a certificate to prove it! ...(laughs)…  

Anne: I like wearing sexy underwear…even now, in my old age…

Betty: There you are, you see… (laughs)

- (all laugh) – (754-65)

There is also Rose, a ‘still closeted cross-dresser’ (1040), who does not contribute much to the discussion. Rose had not been in the Letchworth meeting before, but had been attending most of Beaumont meetings over a period of a few months prior to this group. She had not met Betty or Sofia before, but she was aware of their position within the Society. Following some prompting, Rose joins towards the end, and states that she has nothing to add, as “it’s all been said” (970). Interestingly, her
brief contribution from line 970 onwards consists of her interacting with Betty and Sofia only, finely going along with their narrative. Possibly, Rose’s status as a newcomer, not only to the group but to the ‘trans scene’, is empowered by forming an allegiance with the representatives who she perceives to be the reigning order. To illustrate, Rose joins the discussion after some prompting by Betty and myself, and gently jokes that, as she has not worn her skirt today, she has probably “destroyed the street credit” (987). Betty asks her whether she is a transsexual, and Rose replies “no” (991). Then Betty points that she wears “very feminine, embroidered trousers” (993), and Rose gives short, monosyllabic replies, such as ‘I suppose’. Nonetheless, she is invited in the conversation. To quote,

*Fiona:* Have you got your own personal view, you know…

*Betty:* Why do you cross-dress…do you have any particular reason for doing that?

*Rose:* Er…hmm…out of curiosity…

*Betty:* Did you wake up one morning and said “oh, I’m going to…”

*Rose:*…(laughs)…No, no…I’m…er…knowing someone who has undergone…how you call it…gender re-assignment…

*Betty:* Trans-mogrified…

*Rose:* I beg your pardon?

*Betty:* Whatever you said…

*(all laugh; “good word” someone says)*

*Rose:* Baffling me with long words…(laughs)…(1004-23)

Rose then adds that she enjoys dressing up because her personal feelings change, and proceeds with an account of the first and only time she appeared in public ‘en femme’, and was read by a group of youngsters (1039-61). However, Betty and Sofia do not directly comment on Rose’s story, but continue talking about clothes and experiencing a change in personality when dressed ‘en femme’. Betty states that she becomes “more confident, and a lot more aggressive, a lot more ‘in your face’” (1064-5), and Sofia wonders “whether the change of personality” she experiences “is real…and how much of it is magic” (1068-9). In agreement, Rose adds “just have a look at our wardrobes…I’ve got more clothes than my wife has!” (1091).

5.1.5) Interactions

The analysis of this group has been intriguing. Countless hours of working with both written and audio transcripts pointed to what I initially understood as a ‘lack’ of clear narrative. Even though some elements from participants’ narratives overlap, to an extent, with ‘Frankenstein’s monster’ and ‘Pandora’s Box’, they do not form an ‘independent’ story. To complicate matters further, I observed that participants in the third group interacted much less with me than participants in the other two. These early insights were disappointing, as I expected that this group’s ‘gender-crossing tale’ would reprise its empowering discourses. Nonetheless, I gradually came to realise that this group operates on a different level from the others, and its narrative lies in the ‘lack’ of narrative. To be precise, what I have not found is a
“myth”. Instead, this group recites conventional discourses of femininity. It is important to remember the circumstances of its ‘formation’. As explained in Chapter Three, only half of the pre-arranged group slots were attended, therefore I went to the Letchworth meeting, in the hope of presenting my research and possibly arranging something for a later date. Luckily, some attendees agreed to participate that evening, and a focus group was conducted on the spot. In other words, whereas the first and the second groups were formed exclusively for the purposes of this research, the third group was pre-existing and arose spontaneously from a meeting arranged purely for a social purpose. This suggests that interaction among individuals who already know each other is more ‘natural’ and is likely to offer a realistic picture of the social context within which meaning is produced (e.g. Khan & Manderson, 1992; Kitzinger, 1994). One could also argue that my role on this group is different because I ‘walked into’ an existing social structure, with its own history of interactions. It would be surprising if they needed a moderator to discuss what brought them together in the first place.

Moreover, my role in the third group is different. I seem to contribute more to the running of the first and the second groups. Not only do I talk more, but participants acknowledge my presence, and include me in the conversation. For instance, in the first group, Vicky directly addresses me on two separate occasions, by my name; “I think you are pointing to a very important shift, Stella…” (140), and “I agree that, what you are trying to do, Stella…” (223). In addition, Brian shows some interest in the progress of my work. He wonders whether it would be easier for me if I ask people direct questions (996), and wants to know whether the collective’s “sharing of feelings and experiences (...) is going to help [me] with [my] research” (1002-3). In the second group, Hilary asks me to imagine myself, 50 years ago, walking in a City of London office, “dressed in a suit and a pair of trousers” (275), and states that people’s immediate reaction would be “who the hell is that...what is wrong with her” (276-7). Further into the discussion, when Elizabeth comments on the significance of the transactions among people (850), Hilary tells me “that’s an extra paragraph for your book” (889). Elizabeth then adds “cross-reference, transactional analysis” (892), and everybody, including myself, starts laughing. My understanding of this laughter is that it indicates an awareness of the amount and depth of work I have to do, hence the mentioning of ‘extra paragraph’ and ‘cross-reference’.

However, there is a different dynamic between myself and the members of the third group. Even though everybody was friendly and welcoming, and showed me exceptional politeness before, during, and after the group, they did not invite me into the discussion. There are hardly any instances where participants address me or actually speak to me. Even when Sofia, who presented as male on that day, invites me to recall the last time I saw her ‘en femme’ (614-5) she does not expect any answer. Instead, she proceeds by giving that answer herself, that “she attempts a completely feminine appearance” (614-5).

An argument is that this group also operates within a clear hierarchical structure, which is independent of its members’ cross-gender identifications. This structure
represents the well-rehearsed discourses found in binary, conventional accounts, as opposed to the new opportunities which this thesis claims that myths may offer. Perhaps, this demonstrates that we are not always able to replace one explanation with another. Within this structure, some individuals have voices of authority, which they impose on other members. In particular, I suggest that any hierarchical arrangements within this collective are mapped onto the structure of the Beaumont Society. This does not mean to suggest that the Society is a model in itself. Rather, that Betty and Sofia, who were both core members of the Society at the time this group was conducted, as well as regular attendees of the Letchworth meetings, have transferred their established positions of authority into this group. Drawing on the transcript, Betty and Sofia interact with one another more frequently than they do with other participants, and lead the discussion. They both identify as cross-dressers and their narrative pays tribute to transvestites, while it passes judgement on transsexuals. Contrary to what one might expect, Fiona and Anne, who identify as transsexuals, hardly object to this negative portrayal. This is interesting, because, contrary to the politics that are said to operate within the broader gender-crossing arena (e.g. Namaste, 2005; Elliot, 2009), not only do transvestites in this group have a voice, but it is a voice which over-rides that of the transsexuals and those who identify in other ways. Perhaps, transvestites in this group become ‘transgendered’.

5.2) Like flees on a hot griddle

It has been argued that the position which an individual currently occupies or wishes to occupy, motivates their telling of a particular memory or story (Hemmings, 2011). What is more, positions require an emotional investment on the part of individuals involved, which also affects the power of their discourse (Willig, 2008). This section identifies the positions which participants occupy in the gender crossing tales as those of an ugly monster and a beautiful woman. Nonetheless, irrespectively of how the female self is embodied, she is ‘stuck’ in a position of compromised endurance and caught in a cycle of alternating states of fear and desire. The labour inherent in the effort to maintain or transform that position is both destructive and sustaining. Motivated by her longing for recognition and human regard, she seeks community with others, knowing that she is most likely to be rejected by them. My argument is that the position, which participants occupy is embodied in the saying ‘fleas on a hot griddle’, a metaphor used to describe the human condition. It maintains that there is no ‘choice’ in life, as none of the attempts to improve one’s situation can actually offer a solution. The reality of the matter is, that “the flea who falls must jump, and the flea who jumps must fall” (Watts, 1990: 137, orig. pub. 1957). As Fiona says “you are trying to hold it down over the years, you are trying to bottle it down, and it comes up all the time. And in the end, it just takes you…you know…you’ve got nowhere to go, you’ve got to admit it to yourself, I suppose you have to accept it” (group 3, 262-5).
Participants’ tales seem to ‘lack’ a closure; their plot revolves around never-ending fear and suffering, and gives no indication of eventual catharsis. One could argue that this is because the rising self did not emerge during a climate of socio-political activism, academic scholarship and gendered possibilities. Instead, she has emerged prior to the era of transgender studies, during a period of pathologization and invisibility, when most people “knew nothing about trans this and trans that” (Brian, group 1, 69 & 319), and they had “no protection from the elements” (Josie, group 1, 780-1). She was sentenced to live for “at least 30 or 40 years in a dead end” (Anne, group 3, 286-7), and still dreads the consequences of “kicking out of the box” (Hilary, group 2, 470-4). To explain, participants belong to a narrow cohort, with an average age of 60 years. It is likely that their female self has escaped from the confines of specialised scholarship, but it is unlikely that she has not experienced fear, shame, and discrimination. Instead of being concerned with gender possibilities and identity resources, she struggles for recognition and survival. One might argue that Rose (group 3) somehow embodies this period, at least to an extent. She is “still closeted”, and fears that “one day the penny will drop” (1039). The only time she ventured out ‘en femme’, she encountered a group of kids that yelled at her “Christ, a bloke with boobs” (1051). Rose “certainly didn’t say anything to them”, but continued on walking, “rather quickly” (1056-61).

One could also argue that participants’ tales ‘lack’ a closure because the rising self has not completed her journey. She has not found a ‘home’ yet. As explained in previous chapters, the ‘home’ metaphor has been used to describe gender transition as a ‘journey’ that begins from a place of suffering, and finally leads to a place where one finds belongingness and establishes an identity at any cost (Prosser, 1998, Ames, 2005). The reason for embarking on the ‘journey home’ is the need to restore what one understands to be their true, gendered self. However, this female self embodies a rather monstrous aspect of human nature, whose inclusion into the broader society can be very challenging. Therefore, she is either excluded for being a ‘freak’ who makes persistent claims to an identity which she not entitled, or she is confined in the ‘gender box’, occasionally changing the wrapping paper but not the contents. In fact, a Monster’s story is about never discovering the place where one can find an everlasting home (Cohen, 1996, 2012). Nonetheless, the rising self has no alternative, but to continue searching for a home.

The process of emergence can be very unsettling. As Elizabeth claims, not everybody is prepared or fortunate enough, to “accept the consequences of going against the flow” (group 2, 1067-8). Caught in-between the desire to find a ‘home’ for their female self, and fearing the consequences that such an achievement might have on their male self, individuals become entangled in a pattern of behaviour which entails their having a dread of being found yet longing for that moment of revelation to materialise. Drawing upon Wetherell’s (2012) assertion that affect is a force that gives meaning to the emotional experience and manifests as socially-recognized patterns and embodied sequences of action, I suggest that the affective patterns that participants reprise in their interactions with others resemble a game of
‘hide and seek’, where players conceal themselves in their immediate surroundings, to be found by the ‘seeker’. The player who is found last is the winner, and is chosen to be the ‘seeker’ in the next game. This parallelism does not mean to suggest that individuals who gender-cross are emotionally disturbed and play childish games. Rather, it is employed to illustrate a contradictory state of affairs, where one simultaneously pursues and avoids community between their ‘unconventional’ female self and the world.

To illustrate, some are simultaneously tormented and seduced by the prospect of their female persona taking over their male self. For them, the ‘realness’ found in transsexual discourses is not significant. Rather, they embrace the experience of change in a realistic and empowering way.

Betty: The only other aspect of my cross-dressing is when I become ‘Betty’ I can be…far more than my male self…I can be more confident…and a lot more aggressive…I can be a lot more ‘in your face’…there is a lot of things I do as ‘Betty’ which I would never do in my male self…

Sofia: What about the male side of the self…of personality…I do feel a change of personality…but I am wondering whether it is real…how much of it is magic…

Sofia: I have also found myself adopting feminine gestures…

Betty: Oh, yes, you do…

Sofia: It only becomes conscious after a while…‘what am I doing?’… If I was to see a bloke doing that, he would look ridiculous! (laughs)…but…well…a large part of the reason for dressing, originally, was curiosity. To know what is like. To experience the…being a woman…even a fake one. (group 3, 1063-86)

Others are tormented by the possibility of even being remotely associated with anything female. In the second group, Bernie shares a personal story of revelation and rejection. He tells of the time he used to go out with a girl, who was “very interested” in him. One day they were talking about Asian women, and she mentioned something about ‘sari’. Bernie immediately replied “I got one!”, and the girl screamed. “From that moment”, Bernie says, “she lost all interest; she did not want to know me! Just one word, one sentence…” (764-72). He also mentions that a cross-dresser acquaintance of his hides his female attire “in the garage, so the wife cannot find them” (745-6). In addition, Hilary gives an example of a cross-dresser who, though in ‘male mode’, approaches a cosmetics counter “in a collar and dark glasses (…) because [he] does not want to be known” (589-91). Apparently, he is “frightened of going to the ‘Clinique’ counter, because most people think that’s women’s stuff” (597-8). He worries about being thought of as a “weirdo” (602) and he is concerned of “what will his mates say” (612).

There are also those who fear the very process of physical transitioning. In the first group, Brian, who identifies as a cross-dresser, discloses that the more trans-support meetings he attends, the more he hears about surgeries and the more frightened he
gets. He categorically states that he “would never go that far” (356-7). In the third group, Betty, a cross-dresser, tells of having considered undergoing breast augmentation, but discloses that the reason she is not able to go ahead with it is her “fear of hospitals”. Betty jokes that “once they get the knives out… [she] might sort of scream and come off the sleep and start running like Jack the Rabbit” (604-11). There is also Sofia, who admits having contemplated taking oestrogen, but eventually did not, because it would mean “compromising [her] appearance as a male in everyday life” (620-1).

A ‘creature’ is a ‘created being’, a ‘made thing’, and the term usually refers to “someone who owes his position to another, especially one who is content to carry out another person’s wishes without question” (Hornby, 1983: 201). Participants’ stories portray their ordeal as similar to that of a creature that has been formed and roused by a force other than her own. Had Frankenstein not become obsessed with producing life in a laboratory, and had Zeus not wished to punish Prometheus and the mortals, neither the Monster, nor Pandora and her Box would exist. At first glance, they appear to differ; the Monster is ‘recognizably’ unhuman and easily fails to meet the standards of ‘normality’, while Pandora presents as a ‘proper’, beautiful female. Moreover, the status of Pandora is rather complicated. In fact, she is a forged Aphrodite, whose inner state is reflective of a turmoil that is similar to the Monster’s. Pandora is neither happy, nor content, but scared and confused, half-way between ‘marvellous’ and ‘monstrous’, but not yet either. However, whereas both Creatures are the embodiment of their maker’s wishes, each one follows a different life path. In particular, Frankenstein’s Monster rebels against his maker, while Pandora appears unwilling to contest her fate.

My argument is that Pandora is also a Monster, albeit one which has been humanized by the very systems which would have otherwise excluded her (e.g. Cohen, 1996, 2012). Her difference from Frankenstein’s Monster is both visual and existential. She is lovely to look at, albeit a shaky and scared, replica of the goddess of beauty. Unlike Frankenstein’s monstrous creation, Pandora does not simply rest on the boundary between the human and the non-human, but actually hides that boundary from common view. Her beauty conceals her ‘monstrosity’. Reflecting on the notion of the ‘hide and seek’ game, where players hide themselves in the immediate environment until they are discovered, I suggest that, whereas Frankenstein’s Monster has been ‘found’ and is now a ‘seeker’, Pandora has ‘merged’ with her surroundings. Pandora is not a seeker of a different role, but a keeper of the role she already has.

5.3) Vulnerable creatures

I recently spoke with a friend, who asked me whether I am making any progress with this chapter. This was Phoebe, one of the participants in the first focus group. As explained in the method chapter, Phoebe is a good friend of mine, and our
discussions on gender-crossing have proven invaluable ever since we met. Phoebe identifies as a ‘cross-dresser’; she plays trumpet in a band en femme, and admits that this membership gives a sense of purpose to her female self. Phoebe and I had a kind of a general chat on gender-crossing and emotions, where she recalled an instance which she described as ‘terrifying’. She told me of a time when she was queuing at the ‘ladies’ during a gig break and chatted to a woman who had just seen the band performing. When the woman asked her for how long she had been playing the trumpet, Phoebe was horrified. Fearing that a response would reveal her male self and put her in a vulnerable position—a man in drag, in the ladies’ toilet, to say the least—she had no option but to act fast. She ‘switched’ into the female role, ‘feminised’ her tone of voice, and gave an answer so convincing, that made the other woman exclaim, “Since you were a little girl!” I reminded Phoebe that she had shared this example with the group (group 1, 855-74). She said she could recall saying this, and added that, in order to cope with the demands of that encounter, she had to “wipe out” and “deny” her male self. The reason I am referring to this instance again here, is the exact words that Phoebe used to describe what she had to do; she said “I killed him”. This phrase struck me. In the group, Phoebe challenges Josie’s ‘freak position’ and keeps repeating that her eyes do not see Josie as a ‘freak’ (e.g. 738-52). Phoebe advises Josie to accept that there is an aspect to her that most people are not ready to understand, and claims that, being ‘trans’ is neither dangerous nor disastrous, but may become so, depending on how it is communicated to an audience of others. However, following my chat with Phoebe, I get the feeling that I’ve missed something. Perhaps she was advocating ‘murder’ all along.

In a study designed to investigate how individuals who gender-cross experience themselves as embodied subjects (Johnson, 2007), two contradictory constructions of selfhood were identified, namely ‘being the same person’, and ‘being a new person’. Whereas implicit in the former position is a denial that the physical changes have affected one’s sense of self post-transition, the latter entails a radical separation from their previous male being altogether. Integral to these constructions is the continuity of social relations, which can either confirm or denounce the emerging female self. Thus, independently of whether one identifies as ‘the same’ person or feels that they have been transformed into a ‘new’ human being, the process of becoming necessitates an on-going struggle with their past. It can be argued that their biological, cultural and personal history haunts them like a monster. It creeps in during unexpected moments, causing fear and uncertainty, destroying the boundary between past and present, while it commands “remember me; restore my fragmented body, piece me back together, allow the past its eternal return” (Cohen, 1996: ix).

As explained in Chapter Two, the ‘freak discourse’ (Shildrick, 2002) describes a mode of constructing the Other in the most unfavourable light. Accordingly, Monsters are the by-products of a series of embodied and discursive shifts which alternate between being accepted as human, and being rejected as a ‘freak’. The ‘freak discourse’ follows a pattern similar to (mis) recognition, in that it is concerned with what constitutes a ‘proper’ form of humanity, and operates based on
exclusion. Thus, the popular notion of the monstrous as an anomaly is the result of a socially-constructed process, in which the physical body of the Other bears the distinctive insignia of a non-normative identity. Thus, Shildrick (2002) proposes a new understanding of the concept of ‘monstrous’, free from historical associations with anatomical and social anomalies, and argues that monstrosity is a condition of becoming. One could assume that, if the celebrated gender fluidity of primordial beings suggests the existence of some element of both sexes in everyone (e.g. Bullough & Bullough, 1993), then the ‘freak discourse’ implies a dormant monstrosity of equal merit.

A paradox lies in Pandora’s attachment to her Box. One cannot think of the ‘box of horrors’ anywhere else but in Pandora’s arms, and some might argue that they are one and the same. In the myth, her attachment is embodied in the Spirit of Hope. Apparently, when Pandora opened the jar, all evil therein escaped and spread over the world, but the spirit of Hope, or Elpis, did not. In fact, commentaries on the myth (cited in Verdenius, 1985) point to a ‘lack’ of clear explanation as to why Elpis remained in the jar, and discuss the ambiguities surrounding this issue. For instance, it has been argued that the jar has two possible functions; to keep Elpis safe for humans, as well as to make it inaccessible to them. More importantly, the nature of Elpis has generated speculation, which suggests that it might not be what is commonly referred to as ‘hope’ or ‘optimism’. Given that Zeus’ original intention was to punish, the jar could not contain blessings. In fact, literature suggests that Elpis is the embodiment of the evil spirit which torments humans by imposing a never-ending expectation of suffering, and leads them to falter in their search for its relief. Perhaps, Zeus felt unable to cause even more pain over humankind, therefore changed his plan and made Pandora open the jar in such a way, that only Elpis could fail to escape. Since Elpis did not spread all over the world, evil and suffering continue to take humans by surprise (Verdenius, 1985).

Nonetheless, Pandora clings onto the jar as if it actually contained blessings, in a manner similar to an individual who sustains an injurious attachment that is likely to impede their growth. From a Foucauldian-inspired perspective, I would argue that the myth of opening Pandora’s Box is a tale of self-surveillance, with a plot akin to what literature describes as “panopticism in action” (Ussher, 2006: 7). The Panopticon is an idea for a model prison, designed to keep the inmates under constant surveillance. Originally proposed by Jeremy Bentham (1995, orig. 1787) as a structure that aims to instil a mental uncertainty in prisoners, which would function as an instrument of discipline, the Panopticon is used as a metaphor for institutional control, which comes to be internalised as self-regulation. Drawing upon Foucault’s (1975) theory of surveillance, and in particular his argument that discipline and punishment are self-induced, I suggest that Pandora’s acceptance of the gift has sealed her fate as a prisoner of the institution she wants to break free from and has turned her into her own vigilante. In other words, Pandora represents those individuals whose desire to be accepted as a female by others is so intense that they settle for a compromised existence characterised by a recurring fear of anticipation of society’s wrath for failing their ‘gender duty’. In fact, Pandora embodies what one
is most likely to become- the keeper of a burden that eventually becomes their raison d’etre.

Arguably, participants’ tales reveal that the portrayal of gender transition as the path to happiness and self-realization is but a ‘cultural dream’, the product of the social matrix that gives rise to the marvellous alongside the monstrous. This matrix is defined by the tales which examine the circumstances under which one’s ‘true’ self might be one’s ‘trans-gender self’, and is sustained by ‘cruel optimism’: “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” (Berlant, 2011: 24). Individuals maintain this relation despite evidence to the contrary, because it allows them to survive through moments when their life becomes unliveable. In this context, suffering is justified as a prelude to fulfilment, and is experienced alongside the hope that persistent efforts will be rewarded ‘in the end’. Thus, neither Pandora can contemplate ‘freeing’ herself from the jar, nor can the Monster imagine ‘liberating’ himself from the angry pursuit of Frankenstein and his hope that a confrontation with him will make his suffering bearable.

The suggestion presented here is that this matrix operates on vulnerability; a state of being that defines the impossibility of escaping from harm. Vulnerability is inherent in all humans and monsters alike, but it is considered a negative attribute because it denotes a disruption to the ‘natural’ order of things. Within its realm, the boundaries between the marvellous and the monstrous are blurred, and the ensuing challenge to the reigning order amounts to a rupture within one’s self (Shildrick, 2002). In effect, the differently-gendered self is in a state of constant emergence, fluctuating between the positions of the ‘beauty’ and the ‘beast’, yet holding on to these as a defence against the fear that the loss of its dream will destroy the capacity to have hope about anything (e.g. Berlant, 2011).
CONCLUDING CHAPTER

Preface

This thesis has focused upon myths as metaphors for gender transition, arguing that gender-crossing tales are a modern equivalent to primordial creation myths. It proposes an alternative interpretation of non-normative gendered expressions, free from clinical and politicised terms and identifications. This perspective draws upon the events surrounding the birth myth of goddess Aphrodite presented in the Introductory Chapter, a creation myth which is used as a metaphor for the state of euphoria which is expected to result from transitioning gender. Creation myths are symbolic, cosmogonical narratives which tell of the origin and nature of the world and are generated by societies over long periods of time, often millennia. They are cultural dreams which, regardless of their diversity, share a recurring pattern in their plot. In particular, literature on studies of ancient texts (e.g. Aune, 2003; Leeming, 2010) identifies these patterns of myth generation as the break-out of a cosmic battle where the initial unrest and turmoil is a prelude to the restoration of harmony and order. They emerge from a chaotic state of amorphousness which becomes transformed into a ‘cosmos’, meaning a good and beautiful, ordered universe. Notably, the creation of the ‘cosmos’ is usually marked by the rise of a primal female figure (Friedman, 2012).

The climate in trans-gender theorizing is one of unrest, similar to a cosmic battle of power relations over the reign of the gendered world, where harmony is yet to be restored. Because the act of tearing down the boundaries between the two established genders is seen as an anarchic act by many present-day western societies, the impact of gender-crossing is such that it poses a significant challenge to the norms which determine humanhood in their eyes, along with the rights associated with this status (e.g. Butler, 1990, 2004a). Following the rupture of conventional understandings of ‘male’ and ‘female’, the plethora of gendered identities which emerged has created an archipelago of selves which are yet to settle so that the femaleness of goddess Aphrodite becomes freed to settle over individual transpeople, like a transformative cloak to grant them the persona which they crave. For the time being they continue to float, some presenting as fully formed, recognizably human beings, others embodying a state of monstrous amorphousness, while others have been swept by the waves and have been consumed in the depths of the sea.

The unfavourable and improbable classification of non-normative gendered selves and the pathologization of their desire inspired me to revisit the myth of Aphrodite and consider her ‘forgotten’ sisters. These are the Erinyes or Furies who, unlike Aphrodite, present ‘horrific sights’. They are Monsters, whose bodies combine
elements from human and animal physicality; they sport vulture-like wings and claws, serpent-entwined hair and arms, and blood-dripping eyes. They are described as “the embodiment of self-cursing contained in an oath” (Burkert, 1985: 198) and their role is to avenge crimes against the reigning order. The Furies are notorious for their wrath, which manifests itself as tormenting madness, illness, or natural disaster, inflicted upon any mortals or immortals who have sworn a false promise, or have committed a crime. What is more, their anger could be assuaged only by the completion of a task assigned for atonement (Graves, 1987). My argument is that the Furies incarnate those unconventionally gendered individuals who are rendered ‘unintelligible’ by society because, unlike Aphrodite, they do not fit within the normative discourses of femininity and humanhood. The ‘self-cursing’ they embody is a consequence of dis-obeying the norms and disturbing the harmony of the cosmos and, as the primal female figure has to rise for order to be restored, the Furies are forced into invisibility and are overshadowed by the goddess.

In an attempt to escape being ‘thrown to the Furies’, some individuals have to settle for an incarnation into a gendered body that inhabits the same space as their object of desire, but does not flourish. This is the body of Eros, a minor deity of the Olympian pantheon, whose relationship with Aphrodite has been widely debated in the mythological literature. Whereas in some versions of the myth Eros is said to have existed long before Aphrodite was born, others portray him as her son, ardent follower and servant (Marcovich, 1996). According to the account attributed to Socrates in Plato’s “Symposium” (1951, orig. 385 BC), Eros was a product of the events surrounding her divinization; he was begotten on the day of her birth, during celebrations held to honour her ascendance to Mount Olympus. While the gods were partying at Zeus’ palace, Poverty came to beg for alms. Standing by the palace gates, she noticed Contrivance the son of Invention who, intoxicated with nectar, was sleeping in the garden. Hoping that having a child from Contrivance would bring her good fortune, Poverty seduced him and she conceived Eros. The popular image of Eros is that of a spirited, winged youngster armed with bow and arrows, which he indiscriminately aims at mortals and immortals alike, to ignite sexual desire. Nonetheless, his ‘true’ face is far from idealised. In fact, Eros is “poor (…) weather-beaten (…) homeless”, and at the same time he is also “bold (…) strenuous (…) and full of resource” (Plato, 1951: 82, orig. 385 BC). Having Poverty for his mother, he desires to possess what he identifies as good, in the hope of alleviating his troubled condition. Being the son of Contrivance, he has an innate ability to invent mechanisms which will improve his situation. Being Aphrodite’s faithful companion, Eros is an incarnation of a desire that is neither sexual, nor romantic, but abstract and refers to an intrinsic yearning to possess what is good and beautiful, for ever (Plato, 1951, orig. 385 BC). Taking this syllogism a step further, Eros signifies the human desire for everlasting happiness, whose intensity secured him a place by Aphrodite’s side for eternity.

However, Eros’ attachment to Aphrodite is injurious. Eros never grows old, but remains imprisoned in an infantile body as if, in exchange for an eternal place by the
goddess’ side he has sacrificed his growth. Similar to individuals, who gender-cross in the hope of securing a ‘home’ in the rather utopian ‘gendered homeland’, only to get stuck into a marginal space across the border of gender and humanhood alike, Eros is forever bound into a karmic cycle of inflicting desire on others but being denied the opportunity to experience it himself. Similar to those who cannot find belongingness and acceptance in their gender of choice but nevertheless persist, only to become objects of scientific interest, public ridicule and sufferers of emotional turmoil along the process, Eros’ attachment to Aphrodite is one of ‘cruel optimism’, and he embodies a desire that is destined to die a ‘slow death’ which accompanies the process of trying (Berlant, 2011). Yet, in his yearning to possess what is good and beautiful for ever, he has invented a mechanism to improve his condition, that of inflicting desire on mortals and immortals alike, luring them into becoming entangled in similar injurious attachments. Likewise, motivated by their intense longing for acceptance as females, individuals who gender-cross remain lodged into a state of continuous effort that might appear agentic, until they come to realize that they embody their very efforts, rather than the living testimony of their aims.

In this thesis, the critical perspective on Aphrodite’s birth myth draws upon the scene that Botticelli immortalized in his 1486 painting ‘The Birth of Venus’. The painting belongs to the Renaissance period, a cultural movement which originated in Italy, and gave rise to techniques for achieving the representation of a ‘more natural’ reality in art. Notably, the word ‘renaissance’ means ‘re-birth’ (Honour & Fleming, 2005). Ironically, the reason for which I find Botticelli’s work relevant to the analysis is its ‘lack of reality’. Instead of depicting the turmoil which preceded Aphrodite’s birth, it shows the newborn, fully-formed goddess arriving at the shore on a seashell, surrounded by protective deities and colourful, beautiful nature. The image is rather romanticized, and the view it promotes of ‘Aphrodite Rising’ might as well be a conventional ‘good life’ fantasy (e.g. Berlant, 2011) of how becoming and being a female ought to be. Nonetheless, the Botticellian image resonates, and we see only Aphrodite being swept away gently on a beautiful shell, far from blood and monsters, safely heading for a welcoming shore, much like in an individual’s dream of gender crossing as arriving at a welcoming gendered land. The appeal and popularity of this scene is that it creates a space where past promise and future possibilities meet, carrying the goddess forward and leaving everything else behind her, much like the female-created self promises. Hence, most individuals who gender-cross enmesh their hopes on that idealized scene. By doing so, they choose to ignore the ‘fact’ that the birth of the goddess of beauty was the result of patricide, and fail to notice the Titan’s genitals descending into the sea, or the Furies rising, in the same way that the emergence of the female self is accompanied by the ‘death’ of the male.

My understanding of the painting is that it has an aura of stillness in it. Aphrodite neither looks back, nor sets her foot on the land, but remains standing on the shell, not moving, as if she wants to prolong what seems to be a wonderful, ‘homecoming’ moment. She is caught in a state of ‘sweet melancholy’, induced by her longing for
the shore she is yet to reach, knowing that she might not make it there. Perhaps, if she could talk, she would plead “remember me; restore my fragmented body, piece me back together, allow the past its eternal return” (Cohen, 1996: ix), in a paradoxical discourse that echoes a monster’s plight. Arguably, the force that makes the Botticellian scene resonate is nostalgia, a paradoxical sentiment that combines joy and sorrow. My argument is that nostalgia signifies a space where affect and embodiment ‘meet’.

Nostalgia is generally understood as sentimentality for the past, and a wish to go back to the ‘good old days’. It is paradoxical because the desire to return back home (‘nostos’) is both distressing and appealing, and consists of both suffering (‘algos’) and happiness alike (Boym, 2001). Nostalgia has been described as a historical emotion, where the longing for an allegedly glorious past intensifies in the midst of rapid progress and turmoil, usually in the guise of a desire to return to a slower and possibly safer point in time (Boym, 2001). The understanding of nostalgia has undergone some transformations. In the 17th century Western world, it was considered a medical condition akin to a psychiatric disorder with psychosomatic features, and was first diagnosed among members of the armed forces who were fighting away from home. The symptoms included fatigue, loss of appetite and lack of motivation, as well as some extreme cases of delusions and hallucinations (Cheung et al., 2013). Thus, nostalgia was explained as an escapist reaction to the demands of the present and an indication of extreme anxiety towards the future. The scene began to shift in the late 20th century, when nostalgia came to be understood as a form of survival mechanism. Even though studies on possible biological triggers for nostalgia, such as smell and touch, whose stimuli are processed through the amygdala, the emotional seat of the brain, the contemporary meaning of nostalgia is rather positive and even agentic (Boym, 2001). Nostalgia is understood as a healthy defense mechanism used to combat loneliness, curtailing its intensity by recalling positive interpersonal relationships and meaningful events. Hence, nostalgia is thought to enhance perceptions of social support, improve mood and make life more meaningful (Batcho, 2013; Vess et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2008).

My understanding of nostalgia is that of an affect inherent in the labour of maintaining optimism (Berlant, 2011). It manifests as embodied sequences of action whereby the individual leans towards the promise of the desired object or scene. Following Wetherell’s (2012) suggestion that affect is a force that gives meaning to the emotional experience and manifests as socially-recognized patterns and embodied sequences of action, I suggest that nostalgia is the force which sustains the Botticellian scene of ‘Aphrodite Rising’, a depiction of the conventional fantasy of how becoming or being a female ought to be. Nostalgia functions as a defense, following the realization that neither does the welcoming shore, nor the goddess of beauty exist. It serves to reconstruct an imaginative gendered homeland out of “a yearning for a perfect past (…) the desire for the purified version of what was (…)” (Prosser, 1998: 84). Arguably, nostalgia is a sentiment which panders to the ‘illusion
of significant improvement’ (Watts, 1957), and the notion of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011), and it can be both beneficial and destructive. To quote,

The ‘danger’ of nostalgia comes at the moment when we try to replace longing (algos) with belonging (nostos), the apprehension of loss with a re-discovering of identity. The longing is what we share, but the return ‘home’ is what divides us. It is the promise to rebuild the ideal home that lies at the core of many powerful ideologies, tempting us to relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding. The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home with the imaginary one. In extreme cases, it can create a phantom homeland for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill. Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters. (Boym, 2001: xv-xvi).

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter One presented an historical overview of the attempts to describe and classify the vast range of unconventionally-gendered selves. Arguing that transvestism has long existed as a celebrated manifestation of an individual’s complete persona (e.g. Prince, 1976, Feinberg, 1992), it traced the morphing of cross-dressing classifications, from the early, undifferentiated class of ‘inversions’ and cases of ‘transvestism treated surgically’, to the emergence of transsexualism and transgendering. This chapter traced the establishment of transsexualism as a benign, treatable illness from the 1960s onwards, and the recent politicised academic cultures within the field of transgender studies, showing how they have contributed to the ostracism of transvestism from political representation relegating it to the very margins of political debate. The argument developed in this chapter is that transvestites or cross-dressers have not simply ‘disappeared’ as a result of inevitable facts but have been un-done as a result of power relations which favour clinical and politicized classifications of non-normative gender expressions over other expressions. Transvestism can neither be appropriated within the heteronormative binary of male/masculine and female/feminine, nor within the more ‘progressive’ transsexual/transgender politicized framework. Rather, it is “the crisis of category itself” (Garber, 1992: 15), where a gendered body incarnates the two categories into one, simultaneously being each individual and both combined.

These concerns are further addressed in Chapter Two, which examined the forces which operate within the archipelago of trans-gender selves, determining who will rise above the water’s surface and who will disappear underneath it. This chapter critically engaged with the notions of recognition and monstrosity to explore the impact which those classifications outlined in the first chapter have on the everyday lives of individuals who variously challenge the gender norm, while advocating the use of myths as an alternative analytic tool. Utilizing insights from Butler’s (2004a, 2009) account of recognition and liveable lives, and drawing upon the socio-political
inequalities experienced by all individuals who gender cross regardless of whether they have been recognized as a result of being diagnosed or not, this chapter argued that the recognition of gendered possibilities is bound by heteronormative frameworks of intelligibility which determine who will become integrated into society and who will be ‘un-done’ and, thereby, excluded from it.

Chapter Two also examined the norms which shape current frames of trans recognition, especially those sustaining the ‘good life’ promise that completion of transsexual treatment is expected to fulfil. It addressed the ‘home’ metaphor (Prosser, 1998), common among personal accounts of those who undertake treatment, believing that it leads to personal and social fulfilment. The resonance of this metaphor is examined through the notion of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011), which describes a relation where the object of desire is actually an obstacle to its being attained. In this thesis the object of desire is what Aphrodite stands for; optimism is inherent in the hope of finding an accepting ‘home’ in the female gender, and cruelty is a hidden attribute of an attachment to the norms of recognition and belongingness. Longing for acceptance as females within the broader community, individuals who gender-cross eventually come to realize that their expectations to arrive at a ‘home’ may be a product of “sweet imagination”, constructed according to hopes of “where one should feel right” (Prosser, 1998: 205). The desire to become, or even to approach Aphrodite is by default, self-destructive. In reality, their efforts to house their ‘old, unhappy self’ into a ‘new, happier being’ are riddled with a constant fear of annihilation; of being devoured by the very human society of which they wish to become a part, irrespective of how they are diagnosed or self-identify. Their optimism is shattered when they realize that they will always be denied a place they can call ‘home’, and that not only have they missed their opportunity to be “twice-born” as Benjamin assured them they would be (Billings & Urban, 1982: 107), but have to struggle with feelings of fear and despair from realizing that “whatever happens, [they] will remain freaks” (De Savitsch, 1958: 90).

To address the experience of exclusion from society, Chapter Two also presented an overview of trans-misrecognition debates in order to explore the parallelisms of trans-people with Monsters, liminal beings which are denied a ‘home’ within the human community. The notion of the trans-person as a Monster variously prevails in lay, subjective, and academic understandings of trans-gender existence, either as a mis-recognized (e.g. Daly, 1978; Raymond, 1994) or as an agentic figure (e.g. Stryker, 1994; Nordmarken, 2014). The Monster is a symbolic identity, which embodies anything that does not fit within the prevalent frameworks of intelligibility; it rises in times of crisis and dwells in metaphoric crossroads, as an incarnation of a certain sociocultural moment (Cohen, 1996). Nonetheless, the figure of the Monster appears to have also become politically saturated within trans-gender theorizing. To address this challenge, this chapter introduced a number of celebrated, gender-fluid mythical figures, arguing that what we now understand as ‘transgender phenomena’ were once regarded as manifestations of divinity in
celestial beings and mortals alike. Utilizing insights from the ‘freak discourse’ (Shildrick, 2002) and monster theory (Cohen, 1996), as well as from the portrayal of monsters in myth and horror fiction, this chapter suggests that the attribution of monstrosity is a stage in the process of becoming. The trajectory of this process is shaped by the institutional forces which prevail within a given socio-political landscape, determining who will be recognized as a human being and who will be denied the rights associated with this status. Drawing upon the assertion that myths are symbolic tales of the past which are formative and reflective of the given cultural ideology (McDowell, 1989), this chapter introduced an ancient and a modern myth of creation, namely ‘Pandora’s Box’ and ‘Frankenstein’, as examples of positions which individuals who gender-cross are likely to acquire within discourses of reality. The argument presented here is that the use of myths as a tool for analysis offers a clearer, alternative insight into the spaces of ‘othering’ that non-normative gendered bodies are forced to occupy, this space stretching beyond the medicalised and politicised frameworks of understanding.

Chapter Three introduced the methodology and method used to examine the power relations which give rise to humans and monsters. The methodological framework of this thesis utilizes combined insights from the Foucauldian version of Discourse Analysis, as well as from the notions of positioning and discourse metaphor to examine the forces which sustain the subject positions which individuals who gender-cross acquire within discourses of reality. The material for analysis is generated from the recorded content of three independent focus group discussions which explore participants’ understanding of transition. The rationale for using focus groups is based on the assertion that they are “a thinking society in a miniature” (Markova et al., 2007:46) where social norms are circulated as participants interact with one another, in the form of metaphors and myths. This chapter argued that this direction of analysis offers insight into the ‘historical’ narratives which have been used to describe the positioning of the non-normative gendered self, and reveal new forms of identity which make the lives of individuals who gender-cross more liveable.

Coherent discourses which participants employed to describe gender crossing were developed both across and within groups, these being utilized to explore their emerging theoretical insights in accordance with the aims of the thesis. Chapter Four set out to explore the discourses employed by the participants as they made sense of their different and various experiences of transition, in order to meet the first aim of the thesis. In the first group, the ‘theatre discourse’ constructed gender crossing as a struggle for recognition, in which the individual strives to escape from the ‘monstrous’ position to which they have been forcibly assigned. In the second group, the box allegory presented in the ‘personal growth discourse’ suggested that the normative confines of gender facilitate, rather than impede ‘self-realization’. In the third group, the ‘embodied wish discourse’ describes a longing for a viable place within the discourses of femininity in the full knowledge that any attempt to reach such place carries a risk of social dis-embodiment, while the second theme, the
‘oddball discourse’ warned that the desired gender ‘home’ might not be femininity per se, but a state of being ‘at odds’ with the normative ‘cosmic’ order.

Chapter Five identified the shared and unique processes in accounts of gender crossing and explored the individual contributions and interactions during focus group discussions, in order to meet the second aim of the thesis. It also explored the emotionality involved in the acquisition of a particular subject position and the ways in which participants managed their affect while negotiating their views, this satisfying, to some extent, the third aim of the thesis. In particular, the interactional processes and emotionality observed in the discussions, frequently led to the presentation of the ‘gender crossing tales’ which appeared to develop within the groups. These tales I examined through the lens of the ancient and modern myths of creation which I introduced in Chapter Two, namely those of ‘Frankenstein’ and ‘Pandora’s Box’. The Monster’s Tale is a story of mis-recognition, which has its resonances with those who challenge the gender norm becoming ‘lesser’ human beings, whereas the tale of Pandora is a story of compromise and confinement within the framework that regulates the expression of one’s ‘true’ self. I claim that, by analogous adoption of the shared emotional processes, the protagonists of the ‘gender crossing tales’ adopt the subject positions of the Monster and Pandora and, regardless of the differences in their social positioning, remain trapped in an endless cycle of fear and suffering. What is more, the plot of these tales does not have a closure and the trans person adopting the position of either Pandora or the Monster is caught between a desire to find a ‘gendered home’, and the fear of the consequences of making that effort. Thus, they become entangled in a pattern similar to a game of ‘hide and seek’, dreading being rescued yet longing for that moment to come. Their attempts to manage their anguish resemble the situation metaphorically described ‘flees on a hot griddle’, where the only alternative to death by fire is to leap from the burning griddle into one’s death by falling.

While the discourses which participants employed echo, to some extent, the ‘classical’ gender crossing narratives, they also reveal narratives which point to the emergence of cohesive mythical realities which both describe and attempt to decipher the transgender conundrum. These narratives purport to describe a journey from dysphoria to euphoria with an optimistic finale, where the protagonist has successfully dealt with a multitude of problems, and is now happily adjusted in their chosen gender (e.g. Prosser, 1998; Ames, 2005). Classical narratives do not fail to emphasize the social and intra-psychic hardships that one is destined to encounter in their journey, but portray them as a prelude to becoming female. Participants’ discourses were woven around the ‘illusion of significant improvement’, a Buddhist concept which is used to describe the impossibility of thinking of one’s life path in any other terms than positive and negative, or good and bad (Watts, 1957). Effectively trapped by this mode of thinking, individuals become enslaved by a constant pursuit of happiness, expecting but rewards in return, only for the illusion to be shattered once they realize that their ideal of happiness does not exist. Nevertheless, in an attempt to cope with their experience of fear, rejection and grief
inhomogeneous in such realization, they continue to pursue that ideal. Even though the likelihood that they could ‘become Aphrodite’ might be really low, their persistent efforts to ‘become her’ provide them with much-needed reassurance and sustenance in order to survive. Hence, I argue that the ‘illusion of significant improvement’ reflects a structure of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011) inherent in the classical narratives of progress, which serve to sustain claims to recognition and the liveability of non-normative gendered selves (Butler, 2004a).

Like the trans-person with their unfulfilled desire to achieve their goal of feminineness, the modern mythical character, Frankenstein’s Monster longs for recognition. He incarnates the desire of such longing, and his actions and intentions call out for recognition by the human community at any cost. Since that “dreary night of November” (Shelley, 1981:42, orig. pub. 1818), he seeks to get closer to a creator who is unable to behold the thing that is of him. His tale of abandonment by his maker is shared by members of the focus groups as, driven by a desire to find a place within the body of human society, the Monster seeks to be near others, only to be rejected again and again. Just as his ugly, quasi-human appearance scares all who come near him, transgendered individuals constantly feel that their position of existing between the genders can similarly lead to fear and loathing. The monster’s public excommunication makes him sink into a lonely existence, burdened by self-loathing, and despair, a situation which resonates with the tales of the trans-community. Persistent in his yearning for companionship, yet discouraged as each new attempt is fraught with extra challenges, Frankenstein’s Monster finally has a ‘change of heart’. His initial feelings of affection towards the world turn into immense anger and hatred, and he becomes his maker’s sworn avenger, pursuing him to the bitter end. The ending of the trans tale may take this turn but being predicated upon the personal and social circumstances of each individual, the anger may be assuaged or similarly directed to those who are identified as blocking the path of desires. By contrast, Pandora’s tale appears rather tame. She is not an animated assemblage of cadaver’s parts, but a beautiful combination of earthly and divine elements. Pandora was modelled on the goddess Aphrodite herself, so that her attractiveness would ease Zeus’ revenge. Unlike Frankenstein’s Monster, Pandora has been embraced and loved since she was born, and it appears that she lives a rather uneventful life until she opens the Box. Drawing upon the birth myth of Aphrodite, Pandora is the ‘cut flesh’ which has been moulded into a beautiful goddess, while Frankenstein’s Monster has been left to sink into the blood; dehumanized, he becomes a Fury- the ‘angry one’.

**Critical Reflections**

This thesis has met its aim to introduce an alternative way to explore the meaning of gender crossing. It advocates an interpretation of non-normative gendered
expressions that is based on myth and metaphor, and breaks away from the entrenched, categorical thinking that characterises clinical and politicised interpretations of the phenomenon. Nonetheless, I suspect that the strengths of this study are also its weaknesses. The use of myth and metaphor as a part of the methodological framework of this thesis allows room for fallibility. As I have explained earlier, myths are cultural metaphors whose resonance lies in the power of the collective consciousness which sustains and re-generates them. Their use as analytical tools might offer an alternative to conventional classifications and clinical language, but it is not without its limitations. Not only is the understanding of metaphor highly subjective and prone to variations, but the decision to employ metaphor is the result of my own contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, which, it could be argued, is likely to have led to the ‘construction’ of the findings, to a certain extent.

I have a long-standing interest in Greek mythology. To be precise, I am Greek and I grew up reading stories about the Olympian Gods, and the adventures of intrepid warriors against terata of various forms and dispositions. Perhaps, these early experiences have shaped my interpretation of the world to a greater extent than I was previously aware of. Long past my childhood, I am still reading myths and tales, but this time from a broader background. I am particularly drawn to gothic novels, especially those about ‘liminal’ beings, and ‘monsters’. It is likely that another researcher would have based their inventiveness on a different field, and, in the event that they had relied on mythology, it is most likely that they would have drawn upon different myths, drawn from their own cultural background.

What I find most interesting about myths and tales in general, is that they deal with the most profound aspects of human existence, yet with such technique, that not only their delivery is captivating, but their message is imprinted in the collective consciousness of generations. Myths successfully promote their version of events as the ‘truth’, and survive because every reader or listener can find parallels between some aspects of the story-line and the trajectory of their own life. Gender-crossing tales, as I have shown, are relatively new phenomena, identifiable but still poorly formed and emerging only in recent times when interactions within the trans community have allowed such tales to become sufficiently refined to present a more-generic mythological reality. Therefore, their claim to offer a new understanding of non-normative gendered expressions is yet to be tested.

What is more, I often rely on metaphor in my clinical practice, especially when I am dealing with a potentially challenging situation. I work in an acute psychiatric setting, and I use metaphor in my sessions with patients to illustrate certain therapeutic interventions and/or clinical concepts in a way that is meaningful to them. For instance, I have used the ‘Rocky metaphor’ (inspired from the well-known movie saga) to illustrate the significance of not giving up in the face of challenge but continue fighting ‘all the distance’ without ‘throwing in the towel’. The ‘Rocky metaphor’ has been proven quite useful especially among individuals who suffer from mood disorders; in fact, there are a few who have purchased the
DVD box-set of all six sequels to the movie and watch them as a means of ‘grounding’ themselves and controlling their anxiety. Nonetheless, my use of metaphor in a psychiatric setting as a therapeutic tool, albeit successful, does not necessarily mean that it will have a similar usefulness as an analytic tool. It might be an effective way to communicate a concept to an individual who is experiencing mental distress and struggles to make sense of their situation, but not equally effective when applied to the analysis of focus group data. Nevertheless, I dare to suggest that, if the use of metaphor can somehow contribute to making the life of an individual with a diagnosed mental illness more liveable, it is likely to enhance the understanding of non-normative gendered expressions in a similar way.

This thesis introduced an alternative understanding of non-normative gendered expressions and has met all its three aims, the first two fully but the third one only partially. In particular, it examined the discourses which participants used to describe their experiences of crossing genders (aim one), identified shared and unique processes in accounts of gender-crossing and explored the individual contributions and interactions during focus group discussions (aim two). This thesis also identified the emotional processes involved in the acquisition of a particular subject position within the gender-crossing discourse. It was felt at the time that further pursuit of aim three, exploration of the ways in which participants manage their affect while negotiating their views could only have been achieved at the expense of the other two aims as it would have called for specific interventions on my part as moderator of the groups, during the sessions. In retrospect, I now feel that this was the correct decision as the discussions, largely self-driven, followed a trajectory which was particularly productive in revealing participants’ life experiences and processes of self recognition with respect to the negotiation of their transgendered existence within the binarity of their lived world. However, it might also be a case that my use of myth and metaphor did not allow for the full exploration of the third aim, the reason being that their relationship to the lived world is variable and subjective, to say the least. Possibly, attention should be paid to debates concerning affect and embodiment in future research, in order to satisfy the third aim.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

The cosmic battle of power relations over the reign of the gendered world is ongoing. Following the rupture of the conventional male/female binary, the archipelago of trans-gendered selves is still overflowing with vulnerable creatures, and harmony is yet to be restored. Amidst the chaos, the image of ‘Aphrodite Rising’ dominates the trans world’s collective consciousness, overshadowing the turmoil of the creatures underneath. As stated earlier, the figure of Aphrodite is utilized as a symbol of the subject position which individuals who gender-cross aspire to attain. Her beauty reflects an inner state of happiness which is sought by
being accepted at the female ‘home’ and her body is a fictional site of the social corpus to which the trans subject longs to belong. In this thesis, the image of ‘Aphrodite Rising’ is used as a visual metaphor to illustrate the idealized state of recognition and liveability sought by those with non-normative gendered selves and bodies. As stated earlier, nostalgia is the force that sustains the image of Aphrodite, as well as the sentiment which panders to the ‘illusion of significant improvement’ and the notion of ‘cruel optimism’. Nostalgia can be destructive, as the intensity of the individual’s longing for a gendered homeland is likely to be misinterpreted as a proof that such homeland actually exists. Such a realization might come much later, when an individual has already been stuck in the border between the monstrous and the marvellous, leaning more towards the marginal, monstrous side.

To explain the meaning of this for transgender studies, I will briefly revisit the work of Ekins & King (2006). As stated in the introduction, they drew upon the notion of ‘story telling’ as a means of approaching social reality as it is produced “in social contexts by embodied, concrete people experiencing the thoughts and feelings of everyday life” (Plummer, 1995:16) to examine the processes and practices which individuals employ when crossing the binary gender divide. They identified four trajectories of stories to account for the experience of bodily social practices of transgendering, which confirm that individuals who gender cross variously move within and between these particular modes. Nonetheless, Ekins & King’s (2006) model does not account for the force that generates and sustains such moves, and does not consider the occurrence of mishaps along the way. My argument is that an understanding of nostalgia as an affect inherent in the labour of maintaining optimism, which manifests as embodied sequences of action towards the desired state of being is likely to offer a new perspective into the understanding of non-normative gendered bodies and desires. Such perspective consists of one story, albeit multi-faceted. The facets of this story do not correspond to categories into which individuals are grouped, but account for the holistic experience of crossing the gender binary, which consists of alternating states of being that correspond to ‘beauties’ and ‘beasts’ alike. Arguably, an examination of that nostalgic space will prevent the rise of monsters and will give individuals who gender-cross the opportunity to thrive in society as embodied subjects.

This study set out to re-define gender transition, and introduced an alternative approach to the more conventional clinical and politicized attempts to describe and classify individuals who challenge the gender norm. It advocates an account of the metaphorical positioning of the trans-gender self which aims to build connections across various understandings of non-normative gendered bodies and offer new forms of identity and agency which make the lives of all individuals who gender-cross more liveable. Given that the experience of nostalgia by participants was shown to be linked to the description of it as that of “mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values, for a home that is both physical and spiritual” (Boym, 2001:8). I have also demonstrated that the focus group narratives identified gender-crossing tales which
offer a novel insight into gender transition, beyond ‘label identities’ and politically-saturated landscapes. Individuals who occupy seemingly opposite subject positions demonstrated by their input to the discussion actually share expressions of embodied feelings, namely the wish to be accepted as females and the fear of being rejected because of this desire. It became clear during the course of the group discussions that, irrespectively of how they are diagnosed or self-identify, their journey ‘home’ is mobilized by a defense against the fear that the dissolution of the image of their new-born female self as similar to that of ‘Aphrodite Rising’ will defeat their capacity to have hope about anything.

The findings from focus group discussions indicated that a collective consciousness exists within the ‘trans community’, this expressing an awareness of their fractured relationship with mainstream society. This was reflected in the dialogue of the focus groups and it has been put into more-technical language by writers in the fields of psychology and sociology. However, it becomes more meaningful and apposite to the lay person when phrased in the poetic analogy of the mythical expositions of the ancient and modern world. As these societal and individual authors, both ancient and modern, weave together the threads of human interaction, they create a narrative form which has a deep resonance within the broader ‘trans community’.

While the ancient myths and legends have benefitted from generations of refining voices, and modern authors have drawn on these, the tales of the trans community are but a mere lifetime old. For many of the participants in the focus groups, the Trans Tale has emerged during their lifetime. It has surfaced piecemeal, largely in small, isolated cells and still lacks the cohesion granted by the act of constant repetition and refinement by the community as a whole. However, while the threads which make up the weave of ancient legend may differ from those of the trans community, the finished pattern which they create resonates deeply with trans people. For the present, the myths and legends of ancient times must serve their community while they toil together to find a creative way to fashion a narrative world which engages the population at large with their concerns. I hope I have helped.
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APPENDICES

A). Ethics Outline and original plan to the study
Application to the Faculty of Health and Social Science Research Ethics and Governance Committee

Working Title of Research Proposal: Gender Crossing; Remembering Events in the process of transition from the male to the female gender

SECTION 3, STRUCTURE OF PROPOSAL

3.1.1. INTRODUCTION

The ‘transgender phenomenon’ (Ekins & King, 2006) is often referred to as the process and result of transitioning from one anatomically defined gender to another, either on a permanent or a temporary basis. Thus, ‘transgender’ is often used as an umbrella term to refer to people who might variously identify as ‘transsexual’, ‘transvestite’, ‘drag queen’, ‘drag king’, ‘genderqueer’, ‘trans’ etc. The research conducted in this field has had a significant impact unveiling the social mechanisms involved in the formation of personal identity (Stryker, 2006) and revealing the states that regulate belongingness within the human race (Butler, 2004). Yet, for most authors, theoretical debates have been concerned with its conceptual implications for gender politics, and unduly focused on the process as an aggregation of various ‘corrective’ procedures that facilitate permanent transition.

The lasting interest in what an individual acquires both on a physiological and on a psychosocial level (in Pfafflin & Junge, 1992; in Rakic et al., 1996) seems to lead to a view of gender transition as the attainment of a definite and irreversible state and to minimize interest in its temporary and reversible expressions. Thus, the diversity of experiences when moving into a different personal and social self appears to be frequently ignored. As a result, accounts of gender transition appear to describe the attainment of a euphoric state of self-actualisation, which is assumed to follow permanent gender change (in Ames, 2005). In addition, whereas the impact of culturally-approved gender norms on identity development has been the subject of numerous debates (in Alsop et al., 2002), their effect on the processes, which lead to a stable transgender state, seems to be markedly under-represented in the literature.

Nevertheless, the majority of references to gender transition appear to follow a set route. A typical account (in Ames, 2005), usually begins with departing from a dysphoric situation of ‘wrong’ embodiment, which restricts the development of self, and ends with arrival at the desired, euphoric state, where the new gender identity prospers. Thus, stories of success and accomplishment following permanent, as opposed to temporary, transition seem to dominate accounts of gender crossing. Such stories have been compared to the need for arriving ‘home’. As Prosser (1998) explains, the journey ‘home’, an analogy frequently found in accounts of identity, is
expected to lead to a state where one finds acceptance, belongingness, and peace. Therefore, he suggests that individuals who cross from one gender to the other aim to establish an identity and body integrity as the person who they long to be (Prosser, 1998).

However, a long history of critical debates on identity development (in Alsop et al., 2002) indicates that its final state is neither achieved when arriving at a particular place, nor does making the journey guarantee a successful outcome. Instead, identity is regarded as a product of “a constant, ongoing process of negotiation and transformation” (Alsop et al., 2002:227). Expanding on the ‘politics of home’, Prosser (1998:205) argues that the longed-for belongingness associated with arriving at the gendered home may also be a product of “sweet imagination”, constructed according to expectations of “where one should feel right” (Prosser, 1998:205). Such expectations may be culturally conditioned. In accordance with Butler’s (2004) account of ‘liveable life’, [a state which she describes as being characterised by peace, belongingness, and acceptance, and being recognised as a legitimate human being] it depends upon adherence to prevailing gender norms. Thus, a gender presentation, which either challenges or does not conform to these norms, will most certainly lead to some experience of social exclusion. It could be argued therefore, that the human need for an account of a liveable life creates the demand for stories of successful, permanent transition.

This study seeks to understand the ways in which individuals who gender-cross to varying degrees account for their experiences of transition. For the purpose of this study, transgenderism incorporates both permanent and fluctuating practices of gender-crossing and the present study proposes that these practices may not differentiate between two separate groups, but simply highlight individual expressions of a similar embodied desire. The study aims to address this hypothesis by collecting accounts of transition given by those who Ekins & King (2006) define as ‘oscillators’ and ‘migrators’ and analyse these in order to identify any similarities and differences. In particular, this study is designed to explore definitions of transition, to record memories of events that participants regard to be significant in shaping its process, and to investigate how explanations of these are constructed by a variety of individuals who gender-cross. Definitions of ‘gender crossing’ will be sought within focus groups, while interpretations of memories of key events will be explored using Memory Work (Haug et al., 1987).

3.1.2 PURPOSE OF STUDY

The present study has the following aims:

A. To explore meanings of the term ‘gender crossing’ as given by individuals who are transitioning from the male to the female gender.
B. To record and explore key events in the lives of individual participants, which are associated with the processes of crossing from the male to the female gender.
C. To identify shared memories of gender identity construction and explore their relation to culturally-approved gender norms.

D. To investigate the relative contributions of both personal and cultural imperatives in the initiation and consolidation of the desire to arrive at the gender in which participants feel most at home.

In order to meet its aims, the present study will be divided into two parts. These will be:

**Study One**, which will meet aim A using focus groups. These groups will accommodate equal numbers of ‘gender oscillators’ and ‘gender migrators’ (as identified in Ekins & King, 2006), i.e. individuals who cross genders temporarily and permanently. Participants will discuss what ‘gender crossing’ means to them. The decision to utilise focus groups consisting of the two differing types of cross-gender expression is expected to generate a variety of definitions of gender crossing. It is anticipated that these will inform the process of Memory Work (Haug et al., 1987), by serving to formulate a selection of phrases, which will be used to trigger key events of transition for Study Two. In addition, the investigation into the subjective definitions of the term, which this study proposes is expected to enhance understanding of the conceptual framework employed in understanding gender crossing itself.

**Study Two**, which will meet aims B, C, and D, using memory work groups. This study will utilise Memory Work (Haug et al., 1987; Crawford et al., 1992), a method of enquiry, which is designed to examine of the process of socialisation as it emerges from the analysis of participants’ written memory accounts. Having been used to explore the social construction of meaning in concepts as important as identity, the use of Memory Work is expected to facilitate a critical understanding of the desire to arrive at the gender in which participants feel most at home. The examination of themes, which will emerge from the analysis of memories, will aim at building theory in relation to the desire to arrive at the gender in which participants feel most at home and the different presentations this acquires.

### 3.1.3 PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

(i) Prospective participants will be sought from the male-to-female population. The rational behind this is that, according to the researcher’s personal observations in discussion with transgender individuals from both sexes, society appears to be less tolerant towards indicators of ‘gender presentation inappropriateness’ in transgendered females, compared to transgendered males.

In an attempt to secure a wide range of voices, this study will recruit 24 individuals, who will be divided into 12 temporary and 12 permanent gender-crossers. According to Ekins & King’s (2006) typology of transgender expression, ‘oscillators’, otherwise ‘cross-dressers’ or ‘transvestites’ are said to be moving back and forth across the gender divide without intention to permanently transition. Having undergone some non-radical appearance-changing procedures, these
participants will be chosen based upon having both the ability and desire to revert to their birth-assigned gender as will. ‘Migrators’, (otherwise referred to as transsexual or transgendered individuals) to be considered as likely participants for the study will be selected based upon having had genital surgery at least 12 months prior to being asked to participate.

The division of participants into permanent and temporary gender crossers should by no means be regarded as a restriction imposed on transgender expression. Considering Ekins & King’s (2006) categories as an attempt to record the variety of transgender expression, the present study will employ similar terms with caution. Contrary to conceptualisations of cross-gender behaviour as involving separate expressions of permanent and temporary nature, made possible due to advancements in technological means to ‘change sex’ (in Ekins & King, 2006) the present study begins from the premise that these constitute different expressions of the same phenomenon.

Two key organizations will be considered, ‘The Beaumont Society’ and ‘TransLondon’; the researcher has attended the majority of the former’s meetings for over a year, in a student capacity, and currently has had contacts with the latter for sometime and now attends their meetings on a regular basis. According to the researcher’s personal observations, whereas the former appears to provide an informal space where people can mix, the latter is more structured, discussion-oriented and demographically diverse. Thus, recruitment from two independent organisations will be in the interest of ensuring diversity of opinions and transgender expressions.

(ii) To ensure the formation of successful groups, the present study will set out to recruit prospective participants from within transgender support organizations. Acquaintance among group members is expected to lessen any anxiety, secondary to issues discussed, as well as to enhance feelings of mutual trust and safety, all of which are said to be imperative for the formation of productive, long-lasting groups (Willig, 2001; Stephenson & Papadopoulos, 2006). In addition, acquaintance among group members and the researcher is also expected to facilitate the formation of successful groups. The researcher’s regular presence to meetings of both organizations, involves casual interaction with other members and un-obtrusive contribution to the group process. Having stated her student-status, the researcher neither claims expertise nor assumes a directive role. The researcher’s presence amongst group members is one of equivalent status, and this is anticipated to prevent any issues of power or conflict from arising during the consent process. Prospective participants for both Study One and Study Two will be verbally introduced to the initiative of the research during the regular meetings held by each of the organizations, and will also be given an information sheet as a means of inviting them to consider contributing to this research. It will be underlined that their decision is voluntary. Should they decide to participate, they will be given five working days to contact the researcher via e-mail and inform her of their decision.
Consent forms will be either posted, or e-mailed or hand-delivered before the study commences and will be collected prior to running the groups. *(See Section 4 for samples of participant information sheet and consent form- now in Appendix B).*

**iii** In accordance with the Ethical Principles for conducting research with Human Participants *(The British Psychological Society, 2007)*, individuals likely to be considered for forming focus and memory work groups will be informed of all aspects of this study prior to being asked to give consent. They will be given both verbal and written assurance of the importance placed on adhering to the principles of confidentiality, privacy, data protection, as well as protection of participants. Confidentiality will ensure that any information, which participants provide, will be treated anonymously and when published will not be identifiable as theirs. Given that, the present study involves group work, the interactive nature of which cannot facilitate complete confidentiality and anonymity, it is imperative that participants preserve these. To facilitate this, an introductory session will be arranged prior to the study, where members of each group will discuss the meaning and the significance of these principles in the context of the work they are about to undertake. The purpose of this session would be to create a shared code of conduct, the points of which will be agreed by members of each group. Participants will be required to indicate their consent to the code of conduct in the consent form.

For Study One, members of focus groups will need to agree on guidelines for participation. These may include the importance of adopting a non-judgemental approach when faced with a wide range of opinions, and the significance of not being dominant or disruptive during group sessions. For Study Two, members of memory work groups will need to reach a more thorough agreement on confidentiality and anonymity. Given that discussing personal memories of gender transition is likely to steer up more sensitive issues than generating definitions of ‘gender crossing’, it is imperative that participants feel safe in the presence of each other. Though this requirement may be partially met by recruiting from support groups, where the effect of acquaintance in the face of each other is expected to enhance participants’ feelings of safety, confidentiality and anonymity will be given extra emphasis when formulating the shared code of conduct. The latter will further emphasize avoiding naming co-participants, should they happen to discuss the study outside the group. Anonymity in case of publication will be further ensured. *(See Section 4 for samples of participant information sheet and consent form- now in Appendix B).*

In addition, participants will be reassured that all data they provide will be handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act *(1998)*. This will involve verbal and written explanation of the procedure involved in transcribing and storing of data, as well as assurance that all data will be anonymised and securely stored. As data collected for the purposes of this study will be in two different forms, it will be underlined that both audio-recorded and written data will be kept in a place known and accessible only to the researcher. In addition, participants will be informed that any data, which needs to be electronic stored, will be kept in a password-protected
device. In the interest of ensuring that any potential risk of psychological harm during investigation will be no greater than in ordinary life (The British Psychological Society, 2007), participants’ right to withdraw any information, as well as their participation, as any stage of the research process and without giving any reason will be underlined.

(iv) As with any kind of research involving human beings, the present study will attempt to control and eliminate possible threats to the participants’ psychological well-being. Thus, procedures for obtaining informed consent will be kept in place. To facilitate this, an outline will be prepared, which will state the background of this study, its aims, the methods to be used, and the way participants are expected to contribute. It has been argued (in Robson, 1999) that, changes in the emotional well-being of participants while conducting research may change the direction of the study undertaken. In asking for consent therefore, the likelihood of having to anticipate the emergence of sensitive issues will be explained to candidates, and their right to withdraw without giving any reason and at any time, will also be underlined. These issues will further inform the contents of the participant information sheet, which will be distributed, as well as verbally explained prior to initiating any consent procedures (See Section 4 for sample copies of informed consent documents- now in Appendix B).

(v) The present study will be divided into two parts. Study One will meet aim A by using focus groups, and Study Two will meet aims B, C, and D, using Memory Work groups (Haug et al., 1987). Four focus groups will be formed for the purposes of Study One, and two Memory Work groups will meet the aims of Study Two. In the interest of ensuring diversity of opinions and transgender expressions, two key transgender support organisations will be considered for recruitment. Thus, prospective participants for two out of the four focus groups of Study One will be sought from The Beaumont Society, while the remaining two will be considered from TransLondon.

Within these organisation-based sets of participants, focus groups will be formed in accordance with Ekins & King’s (2006) typology- thus, a focus group of ‘oscillators’ and a focus group of ‘migrants’ will accommodate members from each organisation. The topic of focus will be introduced as “exploring meanings of gender crossing” and will be addressed during four separate sessions, each of which will aim to last approximately 1 hour. Each group will meet once. The formation of the two memory work groups for Study Two will require a distribution of participants according to organisation-membership within each group- thus, each group will consist of four participants, two of which will come from The Beaumont Society, and two from TransLondon. Each group will accommodate four members, and will be meeting regularly over a period, which will not exceed seven weeks. The frequency of the sessions will be decided within each group.
(vi) For Study One, discussions will be tape-recorded using a digital recorder and will be transcribed on the researcher’s computer later for analysis. Discussions for focus groups will be generated around “exploring meanings of gender crossing”. For Study Two, the main body of data collected during the first and the second phases will be in the form of written memories; discussions generated during the second and the third phases will be tape-recorded using a digital recorder and will be transcribed on the researcher’s computer later for analysis.

(vii) A venue that is likely to facilitate a relaxed atmosphere will be agreed amongst group members prior to running the sessions. They will be encouraged to explore a number of options, inclusive of the choice to use either mutual or neutral spaces.

3.1.4 ANALYSIS

(i) Data obtained from focus groups during Study One will be thematically organised, as to acquire various definitions of ‘gender crossing’. It is anticipated that these will inform the process of carrying out Memory Work (Haug et al., 1987), by serving to formulate a selection of phrases, which will be used to trigger key events of transition for Study Two. The researcher will undertake the analysis of all data gathered for Study One. Data obtained from Memory Work groups during Study Two will be analysed according to rules created by Haug et al (1987) and further elaborated by Crawford et al (1992). As these rules advise the participants’ contribution to the analysis of the data, which they generate (Willig, 2001), the researcher will coordinate the process of joint analysis, which informs the whole of the first and second phases of the process and will be fully responsible for writing up Memory Work.

(ii) Qualitative data collection methods will be used in this study.

(iii) N/a

(iv) The analysis will offer a comprehensive account of meanings given to the term ‘gender crossing’, and will facilitate a deeper understanding of how individuals who cross genders construct explanations of their desire to arrive at the gender in which they feel most at home.

3.1.5 CONCLUSION

(i) The present research aims to move beyond clinical and politicised accounts of how the social body understands gender crossing. Challenging commonly-held notions of the individual as belonging to a fixed and determined gender, it aims at raising consciousness. The attainment of such a state is expected to enable individuals to live their life in accordance with their own meanings, actively forming their identity and initiating social change (Haug et al., 1987). In particular, it is expected that individuals who will contribute to the focus and memory work groups
utilised by this research will experience a sense of empowerment, instigated by their involvement in a project, which is relevant to them, and which they feel will make a difference. It is anticipated that the interactive, applied nature of group work will positively affect participants’ experience of being actively involved in the decision-making process, being valued as experts, and being given the chance to work collaboratively with the researchers (Gibbs, 1997). Participation in this study is not expected to have any adverse effects on the participants. However, should they become distressed by the process of taking part, participants will be supplied with the researcher’s contact details, as well as with a list of organisations, which offer forms of appropriate support.

(ii) It is anticipated that the results of this research will contribute to the process of facilitating a deeper understanding of the desire to transition into a different gender, both within the academic world and the wider population. These results will be disseminated through the submission of the PhD thesis in the context of which the present research is conducted. They are also likely to form parts of journal articles and book chapters. Participants will be presented with two options in relation to getting access to the results of this study, should they wish to be informed. These will include either receiving by post a concise two-page document outlining the key findings, or attending a presentation given by the researcher for both organisations involved. Whereas the event of presentation will be subject to arrangements between the researcher and the organisations, the written report will be prepared and sent to participants within a pre-arranged period, close to the completion of the study. It will be emphasised that these will not be their individual results, but the results of group work conducted.

3.1.6 PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS

This research will not offer any form of payment for participating. However, participants will be offered full coverage of their transportation costs, upon showing their ticket/receipt, should they are required to use public transport.

FREGC APPLICATION FORM- section B- Risk Assessment

Safeguards and Monitoring Procedures re: item ‘6’, i.e. “questioning of participants regarding sensitive topics’, such as beliefs, painful reflections or traumas, experience of violence or abuse, illness, sexual behaviour, illegal or political behaviour, or their gender and ethnic status”.

Individuals who will participate in this study will be invited to share personal information with the researcher and other members in their group. Discussing definitions of gender crossing and sharing personal memories of the process of transition may be upsetting for some participants. In addition, there is a possibility that the interactive nature of group work may increase the chances that any sensitive issues raised will cause distress. It has been argued (in Fern, 2001) that individuals might perceive group work to be threatening and thus try to compensate for loses in their personal space and privacy by using verbal and non-verbal behaviours, which
are likely to affect the quality of work done. Given that all participants will be recruited through groups, which are well-practiced in supporting these types of needs, it is expected that social support will be available. Nevertheless, relevant procedures will be in place to ensure that, should distress arise, it will be detected and effectively managed. These may include taking a short break, or, in more extreme situations, ending participation.

Participants will not be ‘questioned’; on the contrary, the nature of their contribution, which will be explained to them both verbally and in writing, will emphasize their ownership in terms of which events they discuss and how much they contribute. Moreover, they will be encouraged to prepare their own guidelines for work done within their group, the particulars of which they will have to agree amongst themselves.

However, the researcher will be attentive to any signs of distress shown by group members, and will protect individuals against any discomfort which may arise from participating in this study. According to literature on group work research (in Fern, 2001), non-verbal signs of distress consist of decreased eye-contact and the adoption of more closed postures (such as crossing arms and legs), whereas verbal indicators include colder and more distant voice tones, as well as attempts to shift the focus of discussion to less intimate topics. Should participants exhibit these or similar signs, they will be encouraged to approach the researcher, who will be able to provide support. The latter will entail the opportunity to discuss any uncomfortable issues and explore ways to deal with these. Should the need arise, individuals will be encouraged to contact an organisation which offers generic emotional support, as well as help tailored to individual presentations. A list of relevant LGBT organisations and their contact details will be provided; this may include groups such as ‘Pace’, ‘London Friend’, or ‘The Samaritans’.

In addition, the researcher should be aware that some participants might be likely to interpret aspects of the moderator’s behaviour as an invasion of their privacy. It has been argued (Fern, 2001) that when the group moderator is directive, participants tend to direct their attention and comments to those sitting on either side of them, thus curtailing interaction within the group. Thus, it is advisable for the moderator to use non-reflective listening skills in order to encourage members’ contribution to the discussion or group work, without influencing the nature of their participation. Therefore, the researcher/moderator will avoid being active in the group discussion and instead use non-verbal communication skills to validate the input of group members. Eye-contact and gestures can emphasize points that are being made, can be used to emphasize points, which are being made, as well as to signal agreement or disagreement and regulate the discussing flow (Hare & Davies, 1994).
B). Ethics Forms

Faculty of Health and Social Science
Research Ethics & Governance
Proposal Review Form

Date: 4.6.09

Title of project: Gender Crossing: Remembering Events in the process of transition from the male to the female gender

FREGC Application No: 09/30

Name of Principal Investigator/Supervisor: Paul Stenner

Name of All Other Researchers/Students: Stella Premi

Reviewers’ Names:

1st Reviewer Kathy Martin
2nd Reviewer Stephen Brown

Outcome:

- Approved
- Approved with minor changes, the chief investigator or the supervisor should confirm in writing to the administrator of FREGC that the changes have been undertaken
- Return to researchers for major changes and resubmission to FREGC
- Not approved

NHS Sponsorship Recommended? Yes ☐ No ☐ N/A ☐

Comments:

(Please indicate clearly any specific revisions required.)

In general the proposal is well written although the use of e.g. within the references may need to be considered.

It is noted that participants will be recruited from suprt groups in which the researcher has participated in regular meetings. Clarification as to what role that was in, in order to avoid issues of power/conflict during the consent process.

The applicant should include the supervisor’s name (Paul Stenner) on the applicant consent form. Clarification as to why Katherine Johnson’s name is on the consent form.

In the focus groups will the researcher be recording and facilitating the group. The researcher may need to consider having a 2nd person available to record the focus groups.
Re: FREGC Review Form

a. The use of ‘e.g.’ within the references has been reconsidered, and therefore ‘e.g.’ has been omitted as instructed.

b. The researcher’s role in the support groups’ meetings has been clarified. Non-directive and reflective of a status of equivalence rather than power, the researcher’s participation in these meetings is anticipated to prevent the emergence of power dynamics or conflict during the consent process. (See changes made in section 3.1.3, point ii).

c. Katherine Johnson’s name was indicated on the applicant consent form as she also supervises this project. It has been replaced by the name of Paul Stenner as instructed.

d. Regarding focus group work: The recordings will be made with the use of a tape-recorder, whose straightforward use is unlikely to interfere with the facilitation process. It is anticipated that the small size of each focus group (i.e. four members) and the use of a venue with a relaxed atmosphere will further contribute to a successful group work. The researcher feels confident to carry out both processes without extra support in the recording, as this might raise ethical concerns and issues of confidentiality. Given that participants will share personal information with the researcher and other group members, there is a possibility that some might feel that their privacy is being invaded, thus the research setting might become a cause of discomfort.
likely participants for the study will be selected based upon having had genital surgery at least 12 months prior to being asked to participate.

The division of participants into permanent and temporary gender crossers should by no means be regarded as a restriction imposed on transgender expression. Considering Ekins & King’s (2006) categories as an attempt to record the variety of transgender expression, the present study will employ similar terms with caution. Contrary to conceptualisations of cross-gender behaviour as involving separate expressions of permanent and temporary nature, made possible due to advancements in technological means to ‘change sex’ (in Ekins & King, 2006) the present study begins from the premise that these constitute different expressions of the same phenomenon.

Two key organisations will be considered, ‘The Beaumont Society’ and ‘TransLondon’; the researcher has attended the majority of the former’s meetings for over a year, in a student capacity, and currently has had contacts with the latter for sometime and now attends their meetings on a regular basis. According to the researcher’s personal observations, whereas the former appears to provide an informal space where people can mix, the latter is more structured, discussion-oriented and demographically diverse. Thus, recruitment from two independent organisations will be in the interest of ensuring diversity of opinions and transgender expressions.

(ii) To ensure the formation of successful groups, the present study will set out to recruit prospective participants from within transgender support organisations. Acquaintance among group members is expected to lessen any anxiety, secondary to issues discussed, as well as to enhance feelings of mutual trust and safety, all of which are said to be imperative for the formation of productive, long-lasting groups (Willig, 2001; Stephenson & Papadopoulos, 2006).

In addition, acquaintance among group members and the researcher is also expected to facilitate the formation of successful groups. The researcher’s regular presence to meetings of both organizations, involves casual interaction with other members and unobtrusive contribution to the group process. Having stated her student-status, the researcher neither claims expertise nor assumes a directive role. The researcher’s presence amongst group members is one of equivalent status, and this is anticipated to prevent any issues of power or conflict from arising during the consent process.

Prospective participants for both Study One and Study Two will be verbally introduced to the initiative of the research during the regular meetings held by each of the organizations, and will also be given an information sheet as a means of inviting them to consider contributing to this research. It will be underlined that their decision is voluntary. Should they decide to participate, they will be given five working days to contact the researcher via e-mail and inform her of their decision. Consent forms will be either posted, or e-mailed or hand-delivered before the study commences and will be collected prior to running the groups. (See Section 4 for samples of participant information sheet and consent form).
C). Participant Materials

**Background information**

**Gender Crossing: Remembering Events in the process of transition from the male to the female gender.**

The ‘transgender phenomenon’ (Ekins & King, 2006) is often referred to as the process and result of transitioning from one anatomically defined gender to another, either on a permanent or a temporary basis. Thus, ‘transgender’ is often used as an umbrella term to refer to people who might variously identify as ‘transsexual’, ‘transvestite’, ‘drag queen’, ‘drag king’, ‘genderqueer’, ‘trans’ etc. The research conducted in this field has had a significant impact unveiling the social mechanisms involved in the formation of personal identity (Stryker, 2006) and revealing the states that regulate belongingness within the human race (Butler, 2004). Yet, for most authors, theoretical debates have been concerned with its conceptual implications for gender politics, and unduly focused on the process as an aggregation of various ‘corrective’ procedures that facilitate permanent transition. The lasting interest in what an individual acquires both on a physiological and on a psychosocial level (in Pfafflin & Junge, 1992; in Rakic et al., 1996) seems to lead to a view of gender transition as the attainment of a definite and irreversible state and to minimize interest in its temporary and reversible expressions. Thus, the diversity of experiences when moving into a different personal and social self appears to be frequently ignored. As a result, accounts of gender transition appear to describe the attainment of a euphoric state of self-actualisation, which is assumed to follow permanent gender change (in Ames, 2005). In addition, whereas the impact of culturally-approved gender norms on identity development has been the subject of numerous debates (in Alsop et al., 2002), their effect on the processes, which lead to a stable transgender state, seems to be markedly under-represented in the literature.

Nevertheless, the majority of references to gender transition appear to follow a set route. A typical account (in Ames, 2005), usually begins with departing from a dysphoric situation of ‘wrong’ embodiment, which restricts the development of self, and ends with arrival at the desired, euphoric state, where the new gender identity prospers. Thus, stories of success and accomplishment following permanent, as opposed to temporary, transition seem to dominate accounts of gender crossing. Such stories have been compared to the need for arriving ‘home’. As Prosser (1998) explains, the journey ‘home’, an analogy frequently found in accounts of identity, is expected to lead to a state where one finds acceptance, belongingness, and peace. Therefore, he suggests that individuals who cross from one gender to the other aim to establish an identity and body integrity as the person who they long to be (Prosser, 1998).

However, a long history of critical debates on identity development (in Alsop et al., 2002) indicates that its final state is neither achieved when arriving at a particular place, nor does making the journey guarantee a successful outcome. Instead, identity is regarded as a product of “a constant, ongoing process of negotiation and transformation” (Alsop et al., 2002:227). Expanding on the
‘politics of home’, Prosser (1998:205) argues that the longed-for belongingness associated with arriving at the gendered home may also be a product of “sweet imagination”, constructed according to expectations of “where one should feel right” (Prosser, 1998:205). Such expectations may be culturally conditioned. In accordance with Butler’s (2004) account of ‘liveable life’, [a state which she describes as being characterised by peace, belongingness, and acceptance, and being recognised as a legitimate human being] it depends upon adherence to prevailing gender norms. Thus, a gender presentation, which either challenges or does not conform to these norms, will most certainly lead to some experience of social exclusion. It could be argued therefore, that the human need for an account of a liveable life creates the demand for stories of successful, permanent transition.

This study seeks to understand the ways in which individuals who gender-cross to varying degrees account for their experiences of transition. For the purpose of this study, transgenderism incorporates both permanent and fluctuating practices of gender-crossing and the present study proposes that these practices may not differentiate between two separate groups, but simply highlight individual expressions of a similar embodied desire. The study aims to address this hypothesis by collecting accounts of transition given by ‘gender oscillators’ and ‘gender migrators’ (as identified in Ekins & King, 2006), i.e. individuals who cross genders temporarily and permanently, and analyse these in order to identify any similarities and differences. Participants will discuss what ‘gender crossing’ means to them. The decision to utilise focus groups consisting of the two differing types of cross-gender expression is expected to generate a variety of definitions of gender crossing. The investigation into the subjective definitions of the term, which this study proposes is expected to enhance understanding of the conceptual framework employed in understanding gender crossing itself.

Prospective participants will be sought from the male-to-female population. The rational behind this is that, according to the researcher’s personal observations in discussion with transgender individuals from both sexes, society appears to be less tolerant towards indicators of ‘gender presentation inappropriateness’ in transgendered females, compared to transgendered males.


**Participant information sheet**

Hello,

My name is Stella Fremi, and I am doing research on gender transition. The title of my project, which is part of PhD-study requirements at the University of Brighton, is; “Gender Crossing: Remembering Events in the process of transition from the male to the female gender”. Its purpose is to look at how people who identify as transgendered make sense of their gender identity. It is expected that this will make a start towards understanding cross-gender behaviour and reducing trans-phobia in the long run. I would like to invite you to contribute to this.

This study will use 4 independent ‘focus groups’, whose members will discuss what ‘gender crossing’ means to them. These groups will have 4 members each, plus the researcher, who will moderate, and will meet only once, for one session, which will be designed to last for 1 hour. You will be asked to participate in one of these groups.

If you decide to participate, I will then ask you to sign a consent form, to show that you have agreed. I will then talk to you about the study, and then we will go through this information sheet, which you can keep. As your participation is voluntary, you would be free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

Before running the groups, I will explain what confidentiality and anonymity mean in the context of this research and how they will be preserved. Group members will need to create a code of conduct, which will be agreed by all. You will need to indicate your agreement to it by signing the consent form.

Group discussion sessions will be tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Tapes and transcripts will be handled and stored securely; their contents will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to me. Excerpts from the discussion groups, as well as the results of the analysis of discussions held, will be published as
part of the final research report. Under no circumstances will your name, or any identifying characteristics, will be included in the final report.

Should you wish to be informed of the results of this research, feel free to write your contact details at the end of the next page. These will not be your individual results, but results of the work done within the groups.

This study has been reviewed by an ethics committee, and it is not anticipated that participation in this study will cause any inconvenience, discomfort, or distress. In the event that you have any concerns about any aspects of this study, you should speak to the researcher (S.Fremi@brighton.ac.uk; 077-xx-xx-xx-xx).

If you are still not satisfied and you wish to pursue it further, you can do this through contacting P.Stenner@brighton.ac.uk

* If you feel you would like to participate, I would ask you to consider the following dates:

Group 1: Sunday, 4th of October, at 7 pm
Group 2: Sunday, 18th of October, at 7 pm
Group 3: Sunday, 1st of November, at 7 pm
Group 4: Sunday, 15th of November, at 7 pm

ALL GROUPS WILL BE HELD AT “GAY’S THE WORD” BOOKSHOP,
66 MARCHMONT STREET, WC1N 1AB
www.gaystheword.co.uk
Please bring this form with you

- Please sign this form to show that I have read the contents to you – (this is NOT to indicate consent to participate)

Sign:
Name (print)
Date:

- Would you like to receive a report on the results of this study? (this is NOT to indicate consent to participate)

YES    NO

- Contact details for those requesting a research report:

Thank you for reading this.
Consent Form

Title of Study: Gender Crossing: Remembering Events in the process of transition from the male to the female gender

- I agree to take part in this research, which is to discuss meanings of the term ‘gender crossing’
- The researcher has explained to my satisfaction the purpose of the study and the possible risks involved.
- I have had the research procedure explained to me and I have read the information sheet. I understand the procedures fully.
- I agree with the code of conduct the group has formulated.
- I have had the transcription and storage of data procedure explained to me. I understand and agree with the procedure.
- I am aware that I will be required to participate in group discussion and express my opinion in the presence of others
- I understand that any confidential information will be seen by the researchers and will not be revealed to anyone else.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the investigation at any time.

NAME (print)

SIGNATURE

DATE
D). Transcription Notes

SF= initials for researcher/focus group moderator in discussion extracts included in the body of the thesis

Moderator’s contribution was recorded in capitals in the initial transcriptions

(…)= pause in speech, each full stop indicating one second

(…….)= pause in speech, longer than 3 seconds

//=/ indicates an omitted word, either because it was inaudible and/or to protect confidentiality and anonymity

(laughs) or (all laugh)= indicates that participants laugh

D (or any other capital letter)= indicates a given participant in the group, in accordance with their order of appearance in the discussion; these letters were later substituted with a fictional name
E.) Example of Data analysis

Group 2


**A:** Well there is the saying…”All dressed-up, but nowhere to go”…
**B:** Well, yes…hmm…
**A:** …Because I know people who will get all dressed-up, made-up, ready to go, and, similar to you (to B)…you know…you’ve been sitting at home, watching telly, talking to the cat…and you’ve done that…you’ve done the hovering wearing a nice frock, and you’ve done your washing up wearing a frock and a pinafore, and…it’s like…well…What do I do next? Where do I go?
**C:** Yeah…
**B:** Yes, hmm…
**A:** Yeah, I want to show-off!!

HMM

**A:** You know, it is almost like……especially…
**B:** At least you get a reaction from them…
**A:** Yeah! Yes, yes…
SO, IS BEING AMONGST OTHERS A MORE ‘AFFIRMING’ STATE?

**B:** Yes, yes…affirming…
THAT…I SUPPOSE…COULD WE SAY THAT THIS IS A KIND OF TRANSITION? BECAUSE TRANSITION IS NOT ONLY MEDICAL, YEAH?
**A:** It isn’t, certainly. I think it is a progression…
**C:** Would it help you…would it help you develop the identity a bit more…
**A:** Yes!
**B:** Yeah, it could be developed…if encouraged by others, if they are there…
**A:** Hmm…hmm… Now, it is a case of you, where, by coming in a meeting, and people accepted you…whereas previously, it was like “hold on a minute, I’m doing something which is not right…that does not fit in…I’m not meant to be doing this, I won’t be accepted”. Then he comes in a meeting, and people are now accepting you, and that is like “Oh!!” I’ve gained…I’ve moved on…place?
**YES**

**B:** Hmm
**A:** Well, I suppose, it like…just being at home all the time, hiding-hiding, you know…so a little ‘step-out’, you know…

HMM

**B:** Yeah, this is the biggest draw-back, leading a double life, keep it secret all the time…
**A:** Yeap!
**B:** All I want is…we should have the same freedom as women! If a woman puts on a bowler-hat, nobody is going to call her “pervert”! But, if you get noticed of doing these things…you might get attacked as well!

470–485. The Box / society

**A:** Yes, well it is also…well, I suppose…my…the argument I use, is that society loves to put you in boxes…
{all say ‘Yes’, simultaneously} –
**A:** …and, you are coming out of that little box, and…
**B:** …and it is wrong, you are still in the box!!! (laughs)
A: Exactly, yeah!! And it could be a case...we don't wanna be entirely in the boy-box, you don't wanna be entirely in the girl-box, you wanna be...have a foot in each, type-of-thing. Yeah...

C: Yes, when people are putting...well, using what psychology says, “putting people in boxes”, so they don’t have to try and think a little more...they don’t think much about it, they go “Oh, I’ve seen that before that is what it is”...so they do not put an extra effort in trying to understand it...

575-603: pushing against the box/ stretching boundaries/fear

C: ...I thought they say ‘effeminate men’, but I don’t really think it is...quite...slightly effeminate, I think...It is sort of...taking more care of your appearance and stuff...but I think it is still quite...very much in the road of masculinity...I think it is stretching it, which is a good thing.

A: I think also, guys are very...secretive, over the whole issue.

C: Hmm

A: I know this from chatting to some women on the make-up stands...Whereas women are quite happy to talk about...you know, “I popped out to the ‘Mac’ counter to buy this—and-that”...Or, “I went down to Este Lauder”...etc, etc...hmm...it was one of the make-up stands, I think it was ‘Clinique’...the lady says “Yeah, I get a few men here, but they are always...sort of...you know...”...looking around...are there any friends here, who might see them on the counter, type-of-think...so they turn up in a collar and dark glasses { laughs }...to buy something from the ‘Clinique’ counter, or something...because they do not want to be known...

C: It could be just buying products aimed at men, or...

A: Oh, yeah, yeah, that could be...’Clinique’, for example, does a very good shaving range, excellent if you get prickly skin, or something... You see, they will be quite...in a way...frightened of going to the ‘Clinique’ counter, because most people think “Oh, ‘Clinique’...that is women’s stuff, that’s make-up”......And so, there is Fred buying his shaving gear from the ‘Clinique’ counter, his mate Bill is gonna be walking past...”That is Fred on the ‘Clinique’ counter...hold on a minute!” Tink...tink...tink...tink...’Clinique’...make-up...women...Fred...man...oh! It doesn’t add up, sort-of-think...So, Fred is a weirdo!! He is buying stuff from ‘Clinique’, you see...

700-728: kicking out of the box/shaking the burden of masculinity

A: Yeah, a big display... Most guys like having a big display around them... “Hey, look at me”, you know...”I’m wonderful, I’m great”. When it comes to attracting women“hey, I’m a babe-magnet, I’m really, really groovy”, you know...”I’m the number-one guy, type-of-think. So, if you dare do anything that challenges that, you can...you are in danger is bursting that ego...making their tail fold-up...and they will lose all that...’aura’...of ‘machismo’, to use the Spanish term...of masculinity...By challenging that masculinity, you are challenging their manliness, and if you dare move away from the typical male gender, you know...you are challenging that!

SOUNDS AS IF...IF I UNDERSTAND IT WELL...SOUNDS AS IF THE CONCEPT OF MASCULINITY IS A VERY HEAVY BURDEN TO CARRY...

A: Oh, yes! It can be. Yeap!........Thinking from there...is transitioning, or partly, a case of shaking off some of that burden....

C: Yeah, I think it must be, for a lot of people.
A: Could be couldn’t it? …Hmm…shaking off that burden…because…hmm…you can be brought up to do…you know, you are a bloke, you do this, you do that… A condition of being the man, type-of-thing…and…etc…etc…

B: We said before about ‘being in a box’…

A: Exactly! And now you are now kicking out of that box…you challenge, you wanna get out of that box, aren’t you… So, not only you are going away from what society expects a man to do…you know, you are challenging the masculinity…you know, throwing off those burdens! I am happy to wear a pink shirt under my blue suit, or something…yeah…

1055-1103: going ‘against the flow’/growth/consequences

A: And I think, perhaps…going back…shaking-off the masculinity is releasing that female ‘anima’ bit…to come out a bit… Whereas most guys would sit on that part, because it is not done…the guys think they would be a bit weird, you know…”What could they say about me down the pub”, type-of-thing…

RIGHT…

A: So, I think that, yeah…

D: It is a bit of that kind of thing which is holding us back at the moment……but, even speaking about it…it is a…and we are aware that…a lot of that is in your own mind…because you take on this…view…you think that you can’t do anything, because of it…but in reality, if your mind allows you to do it, you can… And, as long as you are prepared to accept the consequences of going against the flow……

A: …yeah…

B: Yeah…

C: Hmm…

D: …then, you can.

A: Yeap! Yes!

B: But, are we all fortunate enough to go against the flow?…you see, there is family, or your job…

A: Yeah, yes…

D: Yes, that is why…as long as you are prepared to accept the consequences…

B: Yeah…

D: …then you can go against the ground. There used to be a guy in a place where I used to work, who was…his wife divorced him…and he was so mad, he decided that he is going to spend the rest of his life dressed-up as a clown! And, everywhere he went…

B: Clown? …(laughs)…well, yeah, that would be more acceptable than wearing, you know…(laughs)…

D: And he was dressed as a clown for ages and ages, you know…

B: …(laughs)…

D: That has nothing to do with transgenderism, but…

A: No!...(laughs)…Is the idea of going against the flow, isn’t it?