

Toby Odland

Re-framing in friction: on Trans-inclusive enactment of gender equality aims

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I entered the board room with some trepidation, amidst a gaggle of nervous colleagues. We were followed by the LGBT Equality Champion, and the Interim Head of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion. The room itself was relatively mundane. Some chairs sat around a set of rectangular tables. A blank screen was linked to a computer in the corner. It could have been any room in the institution – if it were not for the view.

We were on the top floor of a shiny new building. Through floor-to-ceiling glass windows we could see a magnificent sweep of the city. I admired the soaring gothic tower of the university, the busy streets nearby, and the new blocks clustered around the river. A long march of tenement buildings to the south was ended by a wide semi-circle of high hills, with wind turbines working busily atop them.

We had gathered in this room to discuss national proposals for the mandatory segregation of trans staff and students. My colleagues had asked for the meeting to

explore what – if anything – our employer might be prepared to do to counter these damaging proposals. We had taken time out of our busy schedules. There was no accounting for this in our workload. There was no guarantee we would achieve anything of use. We were concerned about the impact of the proposed segregation scheme on our work lives – but also about the impact of the meeting itself upon our wellbeing.

All of us, aside from the institutional equality leads, were trans ourselves. Many of us had previous experiences of equality schemes, having put countless hours into discussions intended to reshape policy to the benefit of minoritised staff and service users. We often felt isolated and bogged down in such conversations: finding it hard to explain the urgency of action, struggling to translate ideals into action, and fearing that we would be positioned as troublemakers.

As we sat down together, I found myself thinking about Toby Odland's framing of the second law of thermodynamics:

Some input of energy is required to go between states of non-movement and movement. In large scale systems some of the energy put in to get an object to change state will be dispersed as heat

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into the environment. Not all of the energy put in is transferred to kinetic or static energy as may be the desire of the one providing the input. In other words, *work wastes energy*. (29)

Friction

In that room with the beautiful view, I was painfully aware of how inequalities can be reproduced in interventions designed to combat them. This phenomenon is a central concern of Toby Odland's doctoral dissertation, *Re-framing in friction: on Trans-inclusive enactment of gender equality aims*. The dissertation offers a phenomenological interrogation of how gender inequalities persist for trans people in institutional environments, despite efforts to identify and tackle them.

Odland grounds his discussion in a dense analysis of gender equality work, trans studies, and qualitative interviews with 21 gender equality practitioners working in Swedish government agencies or state-funded organisations. These include local authorities, disability support groups, and hotlines for survivors of sexual violence. Through the interviews especially, Odland seeks to "follow the criticality" of practitioners, learning about the institutionalisation of gender equality while also developing a methodology for studying this practical labour. His findings help us understand institutional barriers both to trans equalities, and to gender equalities more widely.

"Friction", as a critical concept, is central to Odland's work. In physics, friction is a force that resists movement when two surfaces are in contact. Therefore, "[s]ome

input of energy is required to go between states of movement and non-movement" (154). Odland's work reflects a growing interest in thinking with friction within trans studies. This can be seen in recent works such as Aina Huttunen's dissertation *Friction and bodily discomfort*, which examines embodied information practices among Finnish trans people, and Nat Raha and Mijke van der Drift's book *Trans femme futures*, which argues that social tensions and arguments can support traction within social movements through enabling the development of new ideas.

Theorising gender inequality

Odland's dissertation is split into two major parts. The first, titled "Finding friction", offers a range of useful concepts for understanding attempted change and resistance to change within institutions, building especially on the work of queer theorists such as Sara Ahmed.

Odland understands the institution not as a fixed establishment, but rather a form that manifests "in/through the fabric of organisations" (40). Processes of institutionalisation shape and are shaped through organisational practices and actions, such as the enactment – or ignoring – of equality policies. Institutionalisation also manifests through institutional habits, such as collecting data on sex/gender. Odland refers to this as "gendersex"; an anglophone interpretation of the Swedish word "kön". Institutional norms then emerge from the sedimentation of institutional habits. For example, forms of data collection and policy enactment can lead to normative female

and male bodies being “at home” within an institution, whereas trans bodies might be positioned as “out of place” (113).

Various things happen when bodies are out of place. One especially useful concept Odland introduces is the “breakdown event”. This describes moments in which institutional norms or habits break down: a “situation when an assumed non-event becomes an event” (61). Examples include: the unexpected arrival of a trans person; a trans person inappropriately coded as female or male; and a trans person asking, “am I allowed to be here?”.

When institutional norms are barriers, this creates institutional work: for staff or service users attempting to navigate systems, and for change agents seeking to prevent breakdown events. This is not simply the work of change, but also the work of negotiating the institution’s contradictions. Drawing on Ahmed, Odland observes that “practitioners encounter gaps between what organizations *say* they are doing, and what they *do* do” (75).

Odland identifies two master frames for institutional gender equality work in Sweden: the idea that gender equality is auditable, and the idea that gender equality is (almost) achieved in the “most gender-equal country in the world” (132). These complicate equality work, especially where some experiences are difficult to audit, or where the very concept of gender equality has shrunk into an almost-empty signifier.

Tracing contours of trans inclusion

The second half of Odland’s dissertation, “Tracing contours” focuses on empirical

findings. He explores how service users encounter the gaps between what organisations *say* they are doing, and what they *do* do, and how change agents seek to address or “mind” these gaps.

Gendersex auditing is a prime context for friction and breakdown events. Complications arise around coding trans individuals as “women” or “men”, due to practitioners’ cisnormative assumptions around appearance, and the fact that not everyone fits into this binary. Institutional safety for some – e.g. those who feel comfortable collecting or sharing gendersex data within a male/female binary model – is premised on discomfort for others. Addressing this, meanwhile, can result in increased discomfort for those who previously took gendersex auditing for granted. For example, participants in Odland’s research discussed their colleagues’ fears around “doing something wrong” when encountering a trans person. Pragmatic solutions, such as a worker ticking two boxes, or an organisation introducing an “other” box, variously appeal to and trouble the presumed necessity of categorisation.

Odland also explores problems with statistics as a tool for gender equality. If trans people are not represented, trans inequalities disappear from institutional view. Change agents identified very different ways to mind this gap, such as explicitly auditing trans status, or assigning an ostensive but inaccurate gendersex to a person. Such solutions can cause friction, preventing progress. For example, some change agents position trans-inclusive data collection as “too complicated” (326), or

otherwise argue that additional variables undermine the legitimacy of gendersex statistics, therefore undermining equality itself. In other cases, trans data is collected, but not analysed.

An especially fraught area for trans inclusion is found in separatist organisations which support women and girls. Odland focuses here on change agents working for hotlines and shelters for survivors of “men’s violence against women” and/or “gender-based violence” (217). Change agents identified problems not simply with the idea of trans inclusion, but also with its implementation in organisations theoretically open to change. Issues included debates over language, a need for continual inclusion training as new people enter organisations, and conflicts between trans-inclusive separatism and funders’ priorities, putting strain on inclusive organisations.

Following practitioners’ criticality

The opening vignette of this review draws on my work experiences at the University of Glasgow in June 2025. It is to Odland’s credit that I turned to his framing, his analysis, to make sense of my experiences and those of my colleagues in Scotland. The group that gathered that day were not so much trying to improve the lives of trans staff and students; rather, we

were fighting a rearguard action against attempts to entrench anti-equality policies. Nevertheless, our experiences of that fight, which were to the detriment of our own equity within the workplace, share important similarities with other efforts to achieve change or prevent harm within the context of neoliberal governance. Odland’s dissertation provides an important contribution to understanding these dynamics in many parts of the world.

Through following practitioners’ criticality, Odland beautifully demonstrates how trans inclusion is always “difficult”. This produces endless requirements for ongoing labour, as experienced by myself and my colleagues. What Odland does not offer is clear answers or solutions. Indeed, he intentionally elides these, emphasising that his work instead seeks to understand how and why institutional inequalities persist for trans people. In this, he succeeds admirably. This dissertation will be invaluable for those who wish to understand the friction they encounter in attempting to enact trans-inclusive gender equality. It is up to us to determine the next step – in whatever context we may be based.

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