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Original article

Working at the edge: Engaging in therapeutic work with young people with atypical gender identity development

Working at the edge : s'engager dans un travail thérapeutique avec des jeunes ayant un développement atypique de l'identité de genre

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Abstract

Professionals working in a service for young people with Gender Identity Disorder (GID) often experience a particular type of pressure in the course of the work which makes thinking and decision-making very difficult. The paper suggests that an examination of the position of the professional and of the service, within the system may bring some relief and be a starting point to direct thinking and possibly action. The perceived position of the professional and of the Gender Identity Development Service within the wider organization of a psychotherapy and mental health trust is discussed. The paper makes reference to the model developed by Rom Harre et al. as described by Campbell and Groenbaek in their book *Taking positions in the organisation*. The position taken by the professional or the service is also explored as a possible re-enactment of the psychological dynamics of the young people with GID and their families. This view is based on Britton's paper on the re-enactment of individual and family dynamics in the professional network. A view is put forward that this dynamic leads the professional or the service to the risky position of "working at the edge". The paper discusses processes which could facilitate the move from a position of being psychologically at an edge to the more secure position of being in the mainland. This involves exploration of the model of care and the relationship of the professional to the wider organization in which the service is located and to self-help organizations.

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Professionals working in a service which works with children and adolescents presenting with the clinical features of a Gender Identity Disorder (GID), often experience a particular type of pressure during the course of their work. This makes thinking and decision-making very difficult. They feel at risk of becoming involved in courses of action which could be unhelpful to the children and particularly adolescents they are trying to help. Occasionally, the pressure is generated by other parts of the system in which they are involved such as user groups, management or the media. In these circumstances a professional may get some relief by defining which position he/she has ended up taking within the system. Being unaware of one's position may perpetuate the sense of pressure and anxiety, while the acknowl-

edgement of one's position can become a good starting point to direct thinking and possibly action.

In this respect, Positioning theory as described by Langenhove and Harre [1] provides a useful model.

Campbell and Groenbaek draw from this theory in their book *Taking positions in the organisation* ([2], p.16). They say:

"Generally, we choose to take positions within discourses, and we are also positioned by others on the basis of what we say and do. . . These different positions can be placed on one continuum, or what we call a semantic polarity — *semantic* because it provides the basis for meaning."

One example of this polarity is feeling insecure and feeling secure and the individual can position himself/herself within this spectrum.

Feeling insecure

Feeling secure

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Fig. 1. Niagara Falls.



Fig. 2. Individual walking on the edge of a cliff top.

In the work with children and adolescents I would like to suggest the use of the geographical polarity: Edge and Mainland and apply this in a metaphorical way.

Edge

Mainland

Images which evoke the experience of being at an edge could be the Niagara Falls (Fig. 1) or of an individual walking on the edge of a cliff top (Fig. 2). Another image could be *The Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo (Fig. 3); an edge between

Fig. 3. *The Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo.

the two figures of Adam and God. Another representation of the edge can be seen in the powerful “Chicken Run” scene of the film *Rebel Without a Cause*. It portrays the race between two young people towards a cliff edge and the catastrophic fall of one of them over the edge.

All these images can conjure up a constellation of feelings experienced by people who perceive themselves to be emotionally at the edge. It is often an experience of being at the boundary between life and death and of being at a high level of risk in relation to one's own physical and psychic survival.

1. The metaphor of the edge

The metaphor of the edge can be a representation of:

- the boundary between the body and the mind;
- the pressure to readjust the body to a gender identity which is in contrast with the physical appearance of the body;
- the sense of living at the edge and of impending catastrophe if the realignment of the mind and body does not occur quickly enough;
- the edge between life and death – the high risk of self harming that some young people with GID present;
- living at the edge of society experiencing stigma and often bullying.

Campbell and Groenbaek ([2], p. 18) describe a process in which the professional is being positioned by others. They consider it complicated, but also crucial to the understanding of group interactions. In our case the professional often ends up experiencing a similar positioning to that of the adolescent, and working in this area often feels like being at an edge.

The service is also at times positioned at the boundary of the organization within which it is located and at risk of being pushed out and disappearing under the pressure generated by the work with these young people and their families.

Campbell and Groenbaek do not take into consideration in their book the contribution that unconscious processes and communication can make to the mirroring of the young persons states of mind in the mind of the professional.

R. Britton in his paper *Re-enactment as an unwitting professional response to family dynamics* ([3], p. 48) describes this process in detail.

He suggests:

“that contact with some families may result in professional workers or their institutions becoming involved unknowingly in a drama which reflects a situation in the relationships of the family or within the minds of some of its individual members; and this is not recognized but expressed in action”.

Splitting and projective identification are the mechanisms involved in the communication of these states of mind. It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe in detail these complex processes. It is important to highlight here how being positioned at the edge is the result of the reflection in the professional of states of mind, often present in the young person and their family. The awareness of these processes is important to help young

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