Transgender Children and Social Work

Theory, discourse and debates

Michael Balkow

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Foreword

One of the most bewildering things about the modern world is that we are not only experiencing rapid technological change, but we are also living through a period of significant social change when many of our assumptions about what is normal, acceptable or sensible suddenly fall apart.

We are very fortunate that Michael Balkow has made the effort to research the idea of being transgender and has explored what it might mean for social work. Social workers cannot be armchair philosophers, pedants who simply argue that this change is right or wrong, or that these people are good or bad. Social workers must work in partnership with people, listen to and understand people, and they must respect the ways in which people themselves understand their own situation.

The idea that gender might be fluid or a matter of choice or of personal control may seem quite strange; but it is an idea which is now part of our social reality and, for some people, part of their own personal identity. This new understanding is a fact, even if we don't fully understand it. In this context Michael Balkow offers social workers some sensible advice on how to work with children who begin to question their gender. In particular he stresses the need to help the child find a way to tell their own story, come to their own understanding, so that they can make their own choices with support.

Gender is an important reality of our identity. The emergence of the transgender identity makes us realise that it is also a far more complex and dynamic thing than we ever realised. In a matter of such great importance listening, not preaching, is our most important priority.

Simon Duffy
Director of the Centre for Welfare Reform

Summary

This paper explores how social workers and professionals can approach an understanding of the complexity of working with transgender children. Drawing on current literature, it attempts to locate a debate and discussion, within the key realms of social work; support, safeguarding and advocacy, making suggestions as to how this can be attained by placing the needs of the young person paramount, whilst paying attention to public and political debates that can amplify transgender issues in both positive and detrimental ways.

1. Introduction

The best definitions, descriptions and debates of what transgender - also often shortened to trans - means should of course come from those who are transgender. However, for the purposes of those who work with or come into contact with transgender people, a workable definition is one step towards understanding how to support anyone who defines themselves in this or any associated way.

In the book *Transgender History* Stryker states that the word transgender only entered into widespread use in the early 1990s (Stryker, 2017). The word's history dates back to the early 1960s, and during the 70s and 80s it usually meant a person who wanted to change their social gender through a change of habitus and gender expression, perhaps also with the use of hormones but usually not surgery. In the 90s the word transgender was used to encompass all kinds of variation from gender norms, including gender-nonconforming and non-binary (Stryker, 2017 p36-38). Moreover it has been noted that the transgender community has generated a unique language with which to communicate its reality, a language which is evolutionary and can change intergenerationally, geographically and within a political context (Mallon, 2009 p1). If this can seem overwhelming and disconcerting, and for those who feel happier with a definition, the advocacy group *Stonewall* offers the following in their glossary:

"[Trans] An umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth."

Stonewall, 2017

A good place to start for advice and information for transgender young people, as well as parents and professionals is the advocacy and support group *Mermaids UK*, offering a helpline and multiple resources. A general rule that the more you know about a service user group, the more understanding and support you can give to that group certainly applies here. However, background knowledge can fall short in comparison to direct experience. So, do all the research you can, and when you meet with a transgender person, be humble but intrepid, for knowledge is only of substance if acted out in human experience.

There can be no place where debates rage louder and longer about transgender people, than on the internet. YouTube clips, TED talks, online debates and video blogs provide a problematic space in which these ideas surface, collide, ignite then explode. At its best, the internet provides a space for transgender people to explore their identity, question established gender

norms, forge links and create communities. At worst it can be a cruel place of vitriolic hatred, a place of misrepresentation or misinformation, with often little policing and moderation. I recently stumbled across a debate online, as to whether there are only two genders. One person proposed that you should be able to identify yourself how you wish, which should also include your gender. In response the opponent to the argument said "So what if I want to identify as a Bobcat?" (a north American Lynx). Sticking to his principles, the first person replied that you could, if that is how you wanted to be identified. The debate finished there, due to time constraints. This idea stuck with me for some time and I believe it provides the basis for an interesting thought experiment as follows.

Taking a more recognisably British animal, imagine you lived for two weeks identifying only as a cat. To simplify the argument, you would continue to speak and act in the manner you had previously, but from then on you would have to identify as a cat, both to existing and new people that you come across in your day-to-day life. Initially the premise sounds humorous, and the response from friends and family would at first be jovial, if perhaps also quizzical. But imagine how soon this would tire before frustration and anger set in, that anger then turning its talons against you as you persistently maintained your being a cat. Picture trying to sign for a parcel, open a bank account or register with any service, given your continued insistence that you were a feline animal. How long would it take before you would struggle to fit in and function within society, how soon before you were the victim of derision, abuse, name calling or even violence? How soon before someone lost their temper against your importunity, maybe they had too many drinks and refused to fathom your change of identity, and subsequently attacked you, maybe landing a punch that knocked you unconscious, possibly even into a coma or worse?

All of this may sound extreme and absurd; however, replace the changing of identity from a cat to a change of gender and all the above could easily be envisioned, and what is more horrific, has been true for transgender people all over the world. Add one more realm to the above experiment, imagine - unless of course you are already - that you are a child going through any of the above circumstances. Recall if you will the capriciousness of adolescence, the rapid bodily changes physically propelling you into a form of adulthood, the struggles of identity, unknown hormonal imbalances, frustrations, longings, desires, mood swings, the struggles to fit in socially and anything else that comes to mind. Couple these with the confusion of not knowing whether your biological gender matches your gender identity.

If you can enter into this mindspace, however briefly, it is perhaps not surprising then that statistics from a UK-based study conducted of over

3,700 Lesbian, Gay, Bi and Transgender (LGBT) children have shown:

- More than four in five trans young people have self-harmed, as have three in five lesbian, gay and bi young people who aren't trans.
- More than two in five trans young people have attempted to take their own life, and one in five lesbian, gay and bi students who aren't trans have done the same (Stonewall, 2017).

These statistics are both shocking and saddening. Transgender children also may be repulsed by biological characteristics that they feel do not match their sense of gender identity. Burgess (2009) discusses transgender children wearing bulky clothing, tight undergarments or bandages to bind breasts or genitals. On the more extreme end, transgender children can mutilate or even make attempts to remove sex organs (Burgess, cited in Mallon 2009 p58), the catalyst of this being the onset of puberty as a young person's body develops into a gender they feel does not match.

The sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu describes the adolescent thus:

"In one case you have a universe of adolescence, in the true sense, in other words, one of the provisional irresponsibility: these 'young people' are in a kind of social no-man's land, they are adults for some things and children for others."

Bourdieu, 1993

Adolescence therefore attracts ambiguity, insecurity and uncertainty from all angles and to borrow from Charles Dickens, albeit out of context:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

2. Online debates

A prominent debate around transgender people has arisen from Doctor Jordan B Peterson, a Canadian clinical psychologist and University professor, who was relatively unknown as an academic until his vocal opposition to Bill C-16. The bill has now amended the Canadian Human Rights Act to add gender identity and gender expression to its list of prohibited grounds of discrimination (House of Commons Canada 2016). Peterson's arguments against the Bill are documented extensively in his YouTube videos, lectures and debates which have amassed several million views. Peterson's fiercely eloquent style of delivery is notable, and in part why he has gained such a large online following, but his position has frequently been used as a mouthpiece for the extremes of the political right against transgender people.

Peterson's objection to Bill C-16, on the surface, is underpinned by the libertarian argument for the freedom of speech, as he voices that in order to be able to think freely, the same proposition must hold true for speech itself. His distaste with the premise of the Bill is that he believes it compels speech, in that the Bill legislates the use of a person's preferred pronouns, taking the addressing of someone as an interaction that could result in fines or imprisonment, if you mistakenly mis-gendered someone based for example on their appearance. Such was the furore around the topic that the Canadian Bar Association wrote a letter to the state senator addressing what they believed to be the widespread misrepresentation of the bill.

"The Toronto Police report that hate crimes against the LGBTQ community increased in 2015 to make up 22% of all occurrences. The effects on the transgender community are pernicious, contributing to widespread fears of safety in public places and devastatingly high rates of depression and suicidal ideation… Recently, the debate has turned to whether the amendments will force individuals to embrace concepts, even use pronouns, which they find objectionable. This is a misunderstanding of human rights and hate crimes legislation."

The Canadian Bar Association, 2017

Further to this, Peterson's assertions of compelled speech are also rebutted:

"For those compelled to speak and act in truth, however unpopular, truth is included in those defences. Nothing in the section compels the use or avoidance of particular words in public as long as they are not used in their most extreme manifestation with the intention of promoting the level of abhorrence, delegitimization and rejection that produces feelings of hatred against

identifiable groups. Those concerned that they could be criminalized for their repugnant or offensive ideas fail to understand a crucial distinction in the law."

The Canadian Bar Association, 2017

Peterson's argument becomes more abstract when he compares any attack on free speech, to a descent into totalitarianism. Peterson claims to be well versed in the history of Russian communism and aligns how attacks on free speech during the Russian revolutions eventually propelled society towards the Gulag and mass extermination. It appears as though Peterson is not using this tendentious argument under the guise of *reductio ad absurdum*, but that he really means it - given the vociferousness of his arguments. Peterson ignores the fact that the Bill is actually designed to protect groups from genocide:

"For hate crimes, Bill C-16 adds gender identity or expression to the identifiable groups protected from those who advocate genocide, publicly incite hatred likely to lead to a breach of the peace or wilfully promote hatred against them."

The Canadian Bar Association, 2017

Once such arguments and accusations of stifling free speech, controlling thought, or eradicating gender have begun to subside, Bill C-16 takes the logical step of adding gender identity to the prohibited grounds of discrimination that already include:

"race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, disability and conviction for an offence for which a pardon has been granted or in respect of which a record suspension has been ordered."

House of Commons of Canada, 2016

3. Theory and discourse

As arguments both for and against the rights of transgender people have gained traction, people are once again talking about postmodernism, a theory that first excited with its radical deconstruction of all that was thought to be theoretically solid in philosophy and the social sciences, but perhaps became a theory that asked many questions, and provided few answers. A more suitable theoretical starting point to examine transgender as a topic is gender theory, which emerged from feminism and came to fuller force in the 1970s.

One of the catalysts for gender studies was the iconic feminist Simone de Beauvoir who asserted in her seminal text, *The Second Sex* (1949) that one is not born, but becomes a woman. De Beauvoir radically distanced from discourse a woman's biological sex from her gender identity and subsequent place in society, to subvert traditional and well-established roles, shining light onto the fact that by her contention, these were socially constructed. Furtherance of these ideas was promulgated by Judith Butler in her theory of gender performativity:

"The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object… that is [gender] which operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon it anticipates."

Butler, 2007

On first reading this quote can seem to be cloudy and opaque. However, it is conveying a comprehensively complex idea, being that your behaviour largely creates your gender. Gender as performative is both an inward inflection of self, conveying this self outwards and towards others, who then react and reinforce this self in innumerable and multi-faceted ways, via sets of circumstances and interactions. Butler's gender performativity can be immediately enticing as a theory to align with transgender social work, notwithstanding the difficulty in interpretation of the source material. As Wilchins states:

"Her [Butler's] main tactic has been to refuse to accept identities at face value. She chooses instead to subvert them by asking such upstream questions as how they were created, what political ends they serve, what erasures have been made possible, and how they are able to present themselves as real, natural, and universal."

Wilchins, 2014

We can pull Peterson back into the argument here, as his other main area of attack is what he sees to be the dangerous resurgence of postmodernism in academia. Peterson's arguments about transgender people, and associated interventions to protect them by state law, when watched in his debates, may make him seem an authority on the topic. However, his ideas are illusive as they are only scantily documented on paper. His recent book *12 Rules For Life: an Antidote for Chaos* only mentions in brief gender re-assignment. Peterson's arguments are therefore as Derrida would say - whom he frequently derides - quite literally outside the text. Over a page and a half, he spreads his main objection to the supposed postmodern claim that all gender differences are socially constructed (Peterson, 2018 p315). Peterson's critique is that if "gender is constructed, but an individual who desires gender re-assignment surgery is to be unarguably considered a man trapped in a woman's body (or vice versa). The fact that both of these cannot logically be true, simultaneously, is just ignored" (sic) (Peterson, 2018 p315). Peterson is saying that you cannot have it both ways, simultaneously claiming that gender does not exist as a fixed entity, but can exist as two competing entities in a transgender person.

This is where transgender people show Peterson to be wrong, and he and others can be forgiven, as this is an immensely complex idea to fathom. Take for example a philosophical counterpart argument in the form of the well known mind-body problem, which has been described as one of the deepest puzzles in philosophy, one that will continue to test our philosophical intelligence of consciousness (Honderich, 1995 p580).

Rene Descartes' proposition of: *cogito ergo sum - I think therefore I am*, was both an assertion of certainty, in that if you are thinking you know yourself to be conscious, and a resignation to the uncertainty of any other existence outside your own consciousness. Attempts to understand what it is like to be transgender, and to understand it without prejudice or presumption, will often fall some way short. A transgender person who believes their physical body differs in a binary way to their own perceived identity, is likewise experiencing a kind of dualism - for example a female mind, but a male body. To deny that this is not a true proposition, has previously led research and debate down the route of defining transgender as a mental disorder. This is despite the medical consensus no longer seeing it as such. That a transgender person somehow wants by whimsy to change their gender for preference of the other, or dissatisfaction with their current - the absurdity of this, given the discrimination transgender people can encounter, is blatantly obvious.

Jordan Peterson has lit the kindling under an immense fire that he stokes, generating hatred towards transgender people, as can be seen in a random sweep of comments, sections, or threads on social media outlets relating

to transgender debates. The political Right frequently uses the banner of free speech as a way to brazenly pour scorn upon those for whom they hold contempt. Even worse then as almost a parody of a paradox, we see majorities now playing the victims, as though they are now somehow the marginalised, the oppressed and the aggrieved due to attention being drawn away from them and towards those on the fringes of society. As Slavoj Zizek writes:

"Todays celebration of 'minorities' and 'marginals' is the predominant majority position, and even the alt-rightists who complain about terror of liberal Political Correctness present themselves as protectors of an endangered minority."

Zizek, 2017

4. Social and medical models

The narrative of transgender as pathology, whereby it is treated as an illness or disorder has only recently shifted. The term 'Gender Identity Disorder', first appeared in the *American Psychological Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III), published by the American Psychiatric Association. It was described as 'incongruence between assigned sex and gender identity' (cited in Mallon, 2009 p68).

This type of dichotomous thinking has been seen before, via the debates surrounding the social and medical models of disability. *The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation* (UPIAS), was a highly influential disability rights organisation, whose radical approach turned the tables on disability from a personal or individual state, to a phenomenon created by society's restrictions and imparted upon those defined as having disabilities. Their stridency is clearly marked in statements such as the following:

"In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society."

UPIAS cited in Shakespeare, 2006

As Tom Shakespeare points out, to its credit, the social model of disability formed an important force in the disability rights movement in Britain. It opened up new lines of structural enquiry in academia, drawing attention to topics such as discrimination, cultural representations of disability, the relationship between disability and industrial capitalism, the development of independent living and direct payments (Shakespeare, 2006 p30). He is however critical of it in various ways, such as it attempted the erasure of the medical model of disability and impairment as an individual component of disability. He argues instead that disability studies should also be concerned with medical responses to impairment, whether the NHS prioritises disabled people's impairment needs, and if research is funded effectively (Shakespeare, 2006 p40).

Whilst I am not saying that being transgender is a disability, this antagonism between two contrasting modes of thought echoes the polar opposites of the central transgender debate. On the furthest parts of the theoretical left, gender is seen purely as a social construct, defined by a rigid and conformist structural and patriarchal society. On the conservative right, gender is viewed as the opposite in that there can be only two: male and female in line with biology, determinable by science and recognisable by physical traits such as genitalia. As transgender people may eventually

undergo some sort of medical intervention to alter their physical characteristics or hormone levels, coupled with social alterations such as a change of name or social presentation, it will be hard to step out of the sometimes antagonistic binaries of medical and social approaches to gender.

In a remarkably progressive move, the Conservative prime minister Theresa May has pledged to press ahead with plans to let people officially change gender without medical checks, as she stated:

"being trans is not an illness and it should not be treated as such."

Mason, 2017

This move may not necessitate the need for extensive medical evidence in order to prove a differing gendered status. It is also worth noting that under the Conservative government:

"Transgender people are waiting up to two and a half years for initial consultations at NHS gender identity clinics."

Turner, 2017

5. Social work and transgender children

We have seen from statistics that transgender people can be subject to abuse and hate in the community, which could also manifest within the home as the family quite literally changes. Having been a children and families social worker for three years, I have never directly encountered any children with transgender issues in my work, therefore I approach this section with trepidation and humility.

Parton and O'Byrne (2000 p68) point to the role of social worker as expert/ non-expert, which they explain as such:

"the service user is the expert on the problem and is the person who has the experience of the problem and of the exceptions to it."

They add that this is not to say that the social worker has no expertise whatsoever, but rather that they can guide in co-constructing new stories or reframes of situations to work towards solutions and improved outcomes. In my own development, by reading and writing about the topic, my knowledge will increase and my ideas will develop, form or falter, until that time when I meet a real expert on transgender - someone who is transgender themselves.

Mallon and De Crescenzo (Mallon, 2009 p79-82) give a detailed yet concise rundown of guidance for social workers who have little or no experience of transgender children (these will hold sway for relatable disciplines also). The first pertinent point is to establish a knowledge base:

"Social workers should begin by educating themselves about transgender children and youth."

This can be done relatively easily given the abundance of online resources. My own knowledge increased significantly by listening to YouTube debates by people who have direct experience of being transgender. Sadly one of the points is "Transgender children and youth should be assisted with strategies for dealing with societal stigmatization, name calling and discrimination." As stated in the gender affirmative model (Whyatt-Sames, 2017), if there is pathology, it more often stems from cultural reactions (e.g, transphobia, homophobia, sexism) than from within the child. Statistics have shown this is likely to be inevitable. As discrimination often develops through ignorance, the increase and advancement of knowledge of transgender

people as well as the elevation of their visibility in society should hopefully lead us down a slow path towards better acceptance and dwindling discrimination.

Diane Ehrensaft, the clinical and developmental psychologist introduced the concept of 'true gender self therapy' in which she describes a therapeutic style based upon three basic principles:

1. If you want to know a child's gender, ask the child. It is not ours to tell but the child's to say.

2. Parents have little control over their child's gender identity but tremendous influence over their child's gender health.

3. Children who are gender nonconforming or transgender are not suffering from a disorder but are demonstrating a healthy, creative variation of gender. (see Whyatt-Sames, 2017).

This model outlines a critical approach to begin working with transgender children and young people. It allows the child to take control of their own identity, whilst refocussing their parents' attention to the child's emotional well-being rather than opposing their choices. Finally it reinforces the paradigm that not conforming to a gender is not a malady, rather a positive variation.

Social work meets at points in people's lives where they require safety or support, advice and guidance, advocacy and autonomy. If these points switch, life can veer dangerously off the rails. A child growing into a body they feel does not match their mind, could encounter hostility from all angles: rejection from family members, a sense of confusion and aberration leading to isolation, antagonism from friends and peers, adding to a cumulative sense of loathing as they are desirous of the acceptance that we all crave. Social work constructs its practice in the way that every case (service user, or family), adds a small but cumulative piece to the corpus of practice knowledge. The importance of constructing narrative with transgender youth is clearly stated by Mallon (2009 p104):

"First person accounts offer a unique perspective. Each story of a transgender person's life is different, unfolding around the particulars of that person's life."

By focusing on the individual we are avoiding the assumptions and generalisations that can lead us down the road of discrimination, instead helping a young person to define their own story and forge an identity with more definitive certainty. The social worker's role with transgender children is not as clearly defined in the literature as more common areas, such as

children who witness domestic violence, or the outcomes for looked-after-children. Therefore, it will be necessary for social workers to construct this practice, foregrounding the narratives of those children, whilst contesting movements that seek to marginalise or pathologise their experience.

In their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkenheimer and Theodore Adorno, although writing pre-internet in 1944 and therefore with great prescience, said the following:

"The flood of precise information and brand-new amusements make people smarter and more stupid at once."

cited in Elliott, 2014

Taking this notion on board we should therefore seek to avoid the pitfalls and perils of the internet, the bile and vile generators of hatred, the peddlers of free speech, who use shrill tones to legitimise their hate-fuelled voices, and rather we should gather our knowledge, sifting out the legitimate from the defunct, as though panning for gold and in our purview become amused, as we grow smarter, wiser and better informed rather than retreating into the comfort of ignorance, misinformation and stupidity.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Balkow works as a social worker with the children and disabilities team in Sheffield. Michael first became interested in social care through his voluntary work. He spent three years as a listening volunteer for the *Samaritans* and two years as an Association Visitor for the *Motor Neurone Disease Association*. Whilst undertaking an MA in social work Michael completed a placement at the *Burton Street Foundation*, a community centre for adults and children with learning disabilities. This was his first direct experience of working with people with disabilities and Michael continued to work there as a support worker upon completion of his placement.

Michael hopes to undertake a PhD in social work in the next few years. His research interests are currently broad and include areas such as the structure and process of parenting assessments in care proceedings, children with disabilities who have been subject to neglect, and the transition of children with learning disabilities into adulthood.

Email: michaelbalkow@hotmail.com

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PUBLISHING INFORMATION

Transgender Children and Social Work is published by the Centre for Welfare Reform.
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