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Conversion therapy policy debate

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I am sure most of us are aware of the huge issues about the transgender movement that have suddenly become significant in New Zealand and throughout the world. I am writing now concerning the potential changes to the NZAP conversion practices policy, in relationship to this movement, and wondering what it might mean for the principles of psychotherapy as we have known them up until now.

Before I begin, I want to be clear that I am not criticising the young trans people who maybe suffering from gender dysphoria, caught in a social contagion, or just making a choice about how they live their lives. If only it was as simple as 'live and let live'. However, I believe the movement is driven by activists who are being remarkably successful at getting policy and law changes taken on, promoted, and enforced by the government and many organisations, councils, and schools, swiftly and with seeming little thought about the other people they may be negatively affecting, especially women and girls. All this with almost zero mainstream media acknowledgement.

I am concerned about NZAP taking on a policy of 'gender affirming care', which feels to me to be antithetical to the principles of explorative or psychodynamic psychotherapy. The transgender ideology also challenges beliefs that have been fundamental to our way of thinking about gender, family, and psychological development for hundreds of years and which form the basis of our theories. Most significantly, that there are only two sexes and that gender may be a mental/emotional identification but cannot replace biological sex as a category.

But this view, called 'gender critical' thinking, has suddenly become something one can lose one's job over and be socially ostracised for. To even write this piece puts me in a position of being seen by the trans community and its supporters as a 'transphobe'; and may elicit a protective reaction in readers, to not want to hear what I have to say. It seems this community is so sensitive to insult and disagreement that it cannot tolerate any voice that is not 100% affirmative. My biggest concern is that free thought and debate becomes almost impossible.

Conversion therapy and gender affirming care

Conversion therapy (Parliamentary Counsel Office, 2022) once referred to therapists trying to convince gay people they were really straight. Now, however, it has come to mean being against transgender affirming therapy.

'Gender affirmative therapy' means the affirmation of a client's gender, as presented, without question. This is based on the idea that children can be born in the wrong body and sometimes puberty blockers, cross sex hormones, and surgery may be needed in order to modify one's external genitals to align with the gender one feels inside. This is called transitioning. However, the painful reality is that taking cross sex hormones does not lead to a normal puberty as the opposite sex; rather, leads to permanent sterility and loss of orgasmic capacity. Surgically constructed genitals are never fully functioning. Additionally, a person faces a lifetime of expensive medicalisation and other medical problems (e.g., early osteoporosis; Hudson et al., 2018).

Thankfully New Zealand is currently reviewing the safety of puberty blockers (NewsHub, 2023), and Sweden and Finland are now rolling back the use of puberty blockers. Also, in the United Kingdom, the Society for Evidence Based Gender Medicine says:

> Following…a systematic review of evidence, England's NHS has issued new draft guidance for the treatment of gender dysphoria in minors, which sharply deviates from the 'gender-affirming' approach. The previous presumption that gender dysphoric youth <18 need specialty 'transgender healthcare' has been supplanted by the developmentally-informed position that most need psycho-education and psychotherapy. (SEGM, 2022)

However, from the position of the transgender ideology, explorative and psychodynamic therapy may be seen as akin to conversion therapy because it is not a whole-hearted affirmation of the gender a person presents as being the truth of 'who they are' - and so there may be a suspicion that the real intention behind explorative therapy is to convince a client that their 'gender dysmorphia' stems from other psychological issues. And if the uncertainty and questioning that is necessary for psychological self-reflection is felt to be threatening to the belief system, this may lead to more internal conflict and an attack or refusal of psychological processing.

Clinical issues

This reminds me of Bion's (2013) idea of "Attacks on thinking":

> Attacks on the link, therefore, are synonymous with attacks on the analyst's, and originally the mother's, peace of mind. … At this point analytic problems arise through the patient's employment (to destroy the peace of mind that is so much envied) of acting out, delinquent acts and threats of suicide. (p. 297)

This may play out in the victim, persecutor, rescuer, triangle dynamic in a therapy, in which the internal persecutor (rejecting parent) is projected onto the therapist who feels drawn into having to choose between playing out the persecutor or moving to the empathetic rescuer, supportive, position to de-escalate tension and prevent polarisation. But if the organisation behind the psychotherapist supports "affirmative only" responses, it becomes harder for the therapist to remain reflective about the pressure and the dynamic, especially if there is suicidality present.

Literalising

I think people in the western world have come a long way in terms of both male and female being able to be gender non-conforming, so literalising the old stereotypes and suggesting they are signs that someone is literally born in the wrong body, seems confusing.

Transgender Trend[6] say:

> Gender non-conforming behaviours are very common in young children. …It is not abnormal or unusual for a child to like playing with toys and wearing clothes which are associated with the opposite sex. It is also not uncommon for such children to insist that they actually are the opposite sex although most simply grow out of it. It is well known that gender non-conforming life-styles are often associated with gay men and lesbian women. There is also research showing gender non-conforming behaviours seen in children can be predictors of homosexuality later in life.

There has also been a huge bloom in the numbers of young girls wanting to transition to be males in the last few years and the phenomenon has a lot of characteristics of a social contagion profligated by social media. But who is asking: what is it about being female in this day and age that is so frightening or unattractive to girls? We also know adolescence, for both sexes, is a time of huge change and confusion about sexuality. Adolescents are impulsive and critical thinking skills are not usually a strength at that time, while their brains are rewiring in preparation for adulthood. Surely this is not a time to be concretising anything.

Evans (2021) says:

> The Memorandum is, in my view, symptomatic of the way that political agendas have influenced this area of clinical practice. We do not just accept/affirm a patient with anorexia when, although she weighs 45kg, she thinks she is overweight and needs to eat more carefully. Instead, we take it as our duty to try to understand what it is that is driving that belief while persuading her that she needs to eat.

Family and societal cohesion

One of the worrying aspects of the transgender ideology, for me, is that it threatens to alienate children from parents (e.g., by allowing children in schools to socially transition to the other gender without telling parents). In this way it is breaking down societal cohesion, all the while suggesting that the traditional family is the threat to social cohesion.

The Disinformation Project (2023) has created a booklet called "Transgressive transitions" which is very focused on the protection of transgender rights but lists "conservative ideals around family and family structure" as a dangerous "far-right ideology".

> Such ideologies include, but are not limited to, ideas about gun control, anti-Māori sentiment, anti LGBTQIA+, conservative ideals around family and family structure, misogyny, anti-immigration. Mis- and disinformation and 'dangerous speech' pose significant threats to social cohesion, freedom of expression, inclusion, and safety. (Disinformation Project, 2023, p. 4)

But what can it mean to suggest that 'the family' is both dangerous and a far-right ideology?

Policy

I am aware there is a 'conversion practice research group' working to update the previous NZAP conversion therapy policy and I want to advocate for NZAP to retain a strong stance to support meaning-making and symbolic thinking, as I believe the exploration of unconscious dynamics is at the heart of psychotherapy itself. If NZAP does feel the need to adopt a gender affirmative policy, I hope there is sufficient protection for practitioners to still feel safe enough to practice in a psychodynamic way. Also, if such a gender affirmation policy was advertised, it would raise expectations and may be more likely to open NZAP to having complaints against its non-complying members. Years down the track, it is likely that therapists who have not sufficiently explored a client's choice to medically transition, may well be sued by people who later regret it, as there are an increasing numbers of cases happening now in the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States.

The ideology

The transgender ideology reappropriates ideas from critical race theory, social justice theory, and post modernism. But I feel we may be seduced by the often heard claim that transgender people are the most oppressed and vulnerable victims of the privileged classes, which is aimed at eliciting empathy. My thesis is that the everyday transgender people, we all know, are very different from the activist driven ideology, which is not a bottom up, grass roots civil rights movement, like previous human rights movements such as those we may have identified or empathised with in the past. Rather, it comes from the top down and has moved swiftly and introduced new laws, particularly the 'Gender Self-ID' law (June 15, 2023) meaning that any male can now self-define as a woman. This is more than just a claiming of equal rights as is effectively erases "biological women" as a separate category, meaning it usurps women's previous sex-based rights. Along with this, female words like mother, vagina, and breasts are being renamed and neutralised. This has many unacknowledged consequences.

I have expressed my concerns about many of the fast changing laws and policies that are taking place at the moment, everywhere in the world at once, leaving me to think through and discuss consequences or what it is all about at a deeper level. I also feel the wider aspects of the transgender culture may get incorporated unconsciously when adopting some of its edicts into our policies. This is why I feel it is important that NZAP retains its commitment to symbolic and critical thought, as we may be the only ones who are able to step outside and reflect on this as a phenomenon, rather than be controlled by it.

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