



CRITICAL AND APPLIED APPROACHES IN
SEXUALITY, GENDER AND IDENTITY

Working with
Transgender Young People
and their Families
A Critical Developmental
Approach

Damien W. Riggs

palgrave
macmillan

Critical and Applied Approaches in Sexuality,
Gender and Identity

Series Editor
Christina Richards
Calver, Derbyshire, UK

This series brings together scholars from a range of disciplines who have produced work which both informs the academy and, crucially, has real-world applied implications for a variety of different professions, including psychologists; psychiatrists; psychotherapists; counsellors; medical doctors; nurses; social workers; researchers and lecturers; governmental policy advisors; non-governmental policy advisors; and peer support workers, among others. The series critically considers intersections between sexuality and gender; practice and identity; and theoretical and applied arenas – as well as questioning, where appropriate, the nature or reality of the boundaries between them.

In short, it aims to build castles in the sky we can live in – after all the view is nothing, without a place to stand.

Editorial Board:

Christina Richards, Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, UK

Jon Arcelus, Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, UK

Surya Monroe, University of Huddersfield, UK

Simon DuPlock, Metanoia Institute, UK

Timo Nieder, Interdisciplinary Transgender Health Care Center Hamburg, Germany

More information about this series at

<http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/15443>

Damien W. Riggs

Working with Transgender Young People and their Families

A Critical Developmental Approach

palgrave
macmillan

Damien W. Riggs
College of Education, Psychology and Social Work
Flinders University
Adelaide, SA, Australia

Critical and Applied Approaches in Sexuality, Gender and Identity
ISBN 978-3-030-14230-8 ISBN 978-3-030-14231-5 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14231-5>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019934466

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2019

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover illustration: ©Lilith Saintclaire

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG. The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

For two special people, who lead me to this path

Preface

My intentions for this book started from a very simple premise: transgender young people exist, they know who they are, and they deserve all of the support and care we can give them. From the first transgender young person I worked with over a decade ago, to the many many young people I have worked with since, I have always been driven by the desire to listen and to affirm. As such, writing this book is certainly not the end point of my journey of learning: I learn with every young person who shares part of their life with me. But in putting up my hand to write this book, I did so from a place of knowing. Not of knowing everything, but of knowing that some of the insights I have gained from the young people I work with, and how they challenge both public and clinical representations of transgender people, are important to share.

Writing this book, then, was very much a labour of love. It was a true intertwining of my own journey within critical psychology, and the journey I have undertaken with the many young people I have worked with. As a field of psychology, critical psychology seeks to challenge social norms, to examine how power operates to both privilege and marginalise, and to be liberatory in the sense of opening up new vistas for thinking about subjectivity. As children, as people, and as active agents in the world around them, the young people I have worked with push the remit of critical psychology to new ends by asserting themselves in the face of cisgenderism, by speaking to power from a place of knowing, and in so

doing creating new vistas within which they and others (including myself) can think about gender.

Just as this book was informed by a simple premise, my approach to writing this book was simple. I sought to bring together two forms of evidence: the fictionalized (though not fictional) narratives of some of the young people I work with, and the latest research about transgender young people and their families. In so doing my goal was to challenge much of the received 'wisdom' that circulates about transgender young people, not by engaging in unnecessary critiques of previous literature, or by giving space to the voices of those who oppose transgender young people and their families, but rather by using a critical psychological lens through which to situate clinical practice with transgender young people and their families. This meant that whilst I am fully aware of literature that seeks to challenge or question transgender people's gender, it did not have much of a place in this book.

By staying away for the most part from aspects of the literature and public narratives about transgender people that often leave us 'stuck' in cisgenderism, I was able to write a book that is both situated and optimistic. It is situated in the sense that it is situated in the context of transgender young people's lives, and particularly their need for affirming clinical care. And it is situated in a literature that seeks to understand the specificities of transgender young people's lives. Importantly, this does not mean that the book shies away from debate when necessary. The situatedness that I adopted within this book, however, means that the debates that I engage with are never about the veracity of transgender young people's lives. Instead, any debates that I take up within this book challenge the terms of the debates themselves (i.e., the idea that transgender young people should be a topic of debate).

Focusing primarily on the lives of transgender young people and their families, then, allowed me to focus on topics that are often left to one side when debates over transgender young people predominate. Primarily it allowed me to think through what a critical developmental approach to working with transgender young people might look like. Mindful of the critical psychological deconstruction of 'developmentalism' (i.e., the idea that there is one 'correct' developmental pathway for all children), I was able to reconstruct an account of transgender young people's gender

development, an account that emphasises diversity, that is both non-linear and non-normative, and which is grounded in a critical account of the latest literature in the field. Placing this alongside fictionalized case studies enabled me to provide an overview of the broad contours of gender development for transgender young people, without being prescriptive.

To frame my thoughts about gender development I generated a mnemonic that, in both my own clinical practice and that of other clinicians who have undertaken training with me, enables transgender young people's diverse journeys to be heard and engaged with. Eschewing diagnosis, the mnemonic is situated within an extended family context, and is mindful of the negative impact of cisgenderism upon all people. This situatedness and mindfulness means, I believe, that the GENDER mnemonic I outline in this book offers a critical psychological account of how to go about the work of adopting an affirmative approach to working with transgender young people. It most certainly owes more than a debt of gratitude to all of the scholars and clinicians who have advocated for affirming approaches, and who have made it possible for me to write this particular book. But it also builds upon this work, offering new avenues for thinking about how clinicians can best work with transgender young people through a lens that is critical of received wisdom, instead centring the knowledges that transgender young people bring with them to the clinical encounter.

Importantly, and as I noted above, the GENDER mnemonic is not prescriptive. There is no requirement that aspects of the mnemonic be addressed in any particular order, nor that any one aspect *must* be of relevance to a particular young person and their family. In other words, the mnemonic is *not* intended as yet another form of gatekeeping, and thus should *not* be used to keep transgender young people in a holding pattern controlled by the clinician. Instead, its utility is its capacity to open up productive conversations, but whether or not these are productive or simply not relevant can only be determined by young people themselves. This will mean that at differing ages or in the context of differing life experiences certain aspects of the mnemonic will be more salient. Again, it is young people who 'activate' our focus as clinicians on certain aspects

of the mnemonic, rather than clinicians dictating what aspects should be given concerted attention.

As I came to see, however, having written this book, nothing is ever quite as simple as the account above might suggest. I was very fortunate to receive critical feedback on this book from many people, including other clinicians, parents of transgender young people, and from transgender adults (acknowledging, of course, that these three categories overlap). Some of the changes that resulted from this feedback, and which I signal here, add necessary complexity to this book. Indeed, starting with the word ‘complexity’, I use it throughout this book to argue that clinicians working with transgender young people should not seek simplistic answers, and specifically to suggest that there is no one singular transgender narrative. This, however, is not to suggest that clinicians should situate ‘complexity’ *within* transgender young people. We are all complex people, whatever our gender may be. Rather, my aim as a clinician is always to listen to the diversity of narratives that any one person brings with them, instead of trying to produce one definitive account of their life. This is different, however, to demanding that transgender young people spend unnecessary amounts of time ‘unpacking their gender’.

As I will clearly argue in this book, my starting place is always that young people know their gender. But like all of us, living as we do in a context of social norms that regulate what forms of gender expression are intelligible, in my experience it is helpful to encourage conversations about what gender means and looks like, for both young people and their parents. This is in *no way* about questioning anyone’s gender, or suggesting that they should live their gender in a different way. Nor is it about suggesting in *any way* that parents are somehow ‘responsible’ for a child being transgender. Instead, by having complex and critical conversations about gender, my aim is always to help young people to understand that the way they express their gender is entirely a matter of their own determination, and that there are no set rules about being a particular gender. For parents, and particularly those who may be struggling to understand a child who is transgender, talking to them about their own gender is about helping them to understand that just as they experience their gender to be true, so do their children. As such, discussions about gender

may or may not be salient, depending on the journey that young people and their parents are undertaking.

Another word that I use throughout this book (and indeed this preface) is 'critical'. As I have elaborated above, this draws from the field of critical psychology, and is critical in the sense of examining social norms, and offering a creative space in which to think differently about normative assumptions. As such, my use of the word 'critical' is in no way associated with so-called 'gender critical' approaches, which seek to reassert the normative assumption that assigned sex determines gender, and hence that transgender people do not exist. Indeed, a critical psychological account of gender would be highly suspicious of 'gender critical' approaches, and would seek to deconstruct the types of claims made in the name of such approaches. I do just such deconstructive work within this book, as I carefully unpack how gender development has been historically understood, and how it may more productively be understood from a critical developmental starting place that seeks to be affirming of transgender young people.

Also important to note is that this book is not a 'how to' guide. There are many such books already on the market, some of which I summarise in Chap. 1. I intentionally did not write a 'how to' guide, partly because there are already so many on the market, partly because they are often region-specific, and partly because they can date quite quickly as our critical understanding about the needs and lives of transgender young people grows. Instead, this book is a clinical book in that it takes a critical stance on existing empirical literature so as to clear the way to an inclusive and affirming account of gender development that can be used by clinicians across the world, and it does so by linking the account that I develop closely with fictionalized clinical case material. My hope is that such a linking will bring into being new ways of thinking about clinical work with transgender young people, ways that challenge gatekeeping, and which are instead founded upon the knowledges that transgender young people bring to the clinical space.

Finally, and this is a vital point, clinicians must know when we should step out. Certainly, some transgender young people may need ongoing support, particularly in the context of mental health concerns arising from the effects of cisgenderism. Other families may need ongoing

support as parents work through their own struggles. And at certain key points in their lives transgender young people may need to re-engage with clinicians for support. But there will also be many transgender young people who simply need access to clinical services to achieve a particular aim, whether that be puberty suppression or hormone therapies. Such services should be available with minimum wait times, and without gatekeeping that serves to prolong the wait to achieve a particular aim. Clinicians thus need to know when to step out, always leaving the door open should new needs arise.

In conclusion, I hope that readers of this book will see the complexity in the simple way that I have approached writing this book. That my focus on an affirming approach that is critical of received wisdom is understood as one that can only be determined by young people and their families: only they can determine what counts as affirming, and what might be experienced as gatekeeping. As such, despite the complexity and criticality that I introduce throughout this book, my premise remains simple: clinicians must be guided by young people in terms of how they understand their gender, and the goal should always be to listen and affirm, never to question unnecessarily for our own edification.

Adelaide, SA, Australia

Damien W. Riggs

Acknowledgements

I begin by acknowledging the sovereignty of the Kurna people, the First Nations people upon whose land I live and work.

This book has been a long time coming, and has benefited from input from many people with whom I have had in depth conversations about the topics contained within it. Thanks must go to Ruth Pearce for insightful suggestions when I was reviewing the literature on gender development and adolescence. Thanks to Shoshana Rosenberg and Georgie Swift for lengthy conversations about clinical work. Thanks to Gavi Ansara for his leadership in the field of cisgenderism studies, and his generous insights about how to translate research into practice. Thanks to Nik Taylor and Heather Fraser for encouraging me to think about the intersections of human and animal lives, which led to some of the material addressed in Chap. 5. Thanks to Jo Hirst for many early conversations that helped me to decide what to include in this book, and to FierceMum for later conversations that helped me to clarify how my work might be misread. A special thanks to Clare Bartholomaeus for our many collaborations that informed this book, and for her generous proof reading and indexing. Many thanks are also due to Joanna O'Neill and Grace Jackson, commissioning editors at Palgrave, for providing such generous support throughout the writing of this book, to Christina Richards for believing in this book from the onset, and to Lilith Saintclaire for providing the wonderful cover image.

I was fortunate to be able to present my thoughts about the GENDER mnemonic to several audiences in 2018: as part of a webinar series for the Australian Psychological Society, in a workshop with Heidi Jansen at the Australian Psychological Society Clinical College conference, in a workshop for the Australian Association of Family Therapy, and in a workshop for the Australian Psychological Society Educational and Developmental Psychologists College. Thanks to all attendees for such insightful and constructive feedback, and to Judith Gullifer, Helen Linder, Nina Levin, and Helen Broomhall for their kind invitations to run these events.

As always, I must thank the family with whom I live: Leo, Gary, Jayden, Liam, Damian, Jeremiah, Herman, Patience, and Mandy, for supporting me in my work, and for always accommodating me when I need to focus on writing. Special thanks to my mother Sharon for helping me to continue to see clients when Jeremiah came into our family. Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to the many transgender young people and families with whom I have worked over the past decade. This book would never have happened without your insights.

Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Children and Gender Development	31
3	Challenges and Joys in Adolescence	57
4	Parent Journeys Through Cisgenderism	83
5	Siblings, Grandparents, and Animal Companions	105
6	Conclusion	123
	Author Index	145
	Subject Index	147



1

Introduction

For most of my career I have thought of myself as a scientist-practitioner. To me, this is exemplified by the intersections of my clinical work as a psychotherapist who specialises in working with transgender children and their families, and my role as an academic whose research primarily focuses on the lives of transgender people. This image of myself as a scientist-practitioner was formed through my training in the discipline of psychology, where the scientist-practitioner model is very much a taken for granted norm, and in which the search for 'truth' central. Yet as part of my formation as a psychoanalyst, the topic of what counts as 'truth' very much came under question. Coming into a relationship with one's unconscious, and indeed coming to authorise oneself as a clinician – as is central to Lacanian psychoanalysis – led me to question what it means to 'know'. Furthermore, coming to grapple with my own complex gender histories as a nominally cisgender (i.e., not transgender) man led me to question what it means to 'know' one's gender, and how, as a clinician, I can understand the gender of another.

This book represents an attempt at coming to terms with what it means to 'know' gender in the context of working with transgender young people and their families. To know, I will argue, is always partial, and always