Working with LGBTQ Youth/Gender Independent (GI) Children and Their Families – Practice Challenges for Social Workers & Social Service Workers

Annual Meeting and Education Day, OCSWSSW, June 19, 2014, Toronto

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Who I am and what I know so far about sexual & Gender identity...

- 16 years of direct practice with LGBTQ/GI students, teachers, parents & families in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB)
- Anti-homophobia workshops with students across the TDSB, kindergarten to grade 12
- Social work support to the Triangle Program, Oasis Alternative SS – Canada’s only high school program for LGBTQ students
What shapes our own understanding of sexual and gender identity?

- **Personal** (who I am, who I know)
- **Political** (what I believe, what others believe)
- **Sexual & Gender Identity**
- **Professional** (education, ethics, expectations)
The following is but one bigger picture to think about...
Euro-American Sex/Gender System/model*

- **Sex Assignment at birth**
  - **xy** Male genitalia
  - **xx** Female genitalia

- **Gender Identity**
  - Boy/male
  - Girl/female

- **Gender Role**
  - masculine
  - feminine

- **Sexual Orientation**
  - Attracted to ♀
  - Attracted to ♂

* Dr. Adam Green, 2007
Progression through the above model seen as natural and normal; one category must lead to another.

Any actual or perceived violation/transgression of the model subject to stigma, ridicule, shame, criminalization, pathology.

This gives rise to homophobia, transphobia, biphobia.

Model is supported by medicine, religion, education, family, media.
Sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression

- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, straight
- Two-Spirit
- Trans*(gender, sexual); cis gender
- Bio male + feminine, Bio female + masculine (to name a few)
- Gender Expression i.e. who am I and how I wish to express myself
Some things to think about...

- Sexual and gender identity is not stressful in and of itself... but rather distress is a response to family/school/community/environmental/structural issues of homophobia and transphobia.

- Some will internalize these social structures and come to believe that there is something wrong with them.
Some things to look for?

- Short of disclosure there is really no clear and obvious signs that a young person is facing a struggle specific to sexual identity or gender identity; however as we continue to speak about mental health and well being, keep in mind that coming out/questioning may be an underlying component and may require support of social workers and social service workers.

- In some cases, young people who express a great deal of homophobia and/or transphobia may themselves be struggling with identity issues (i.e. what someone hates about me, they hate more about themselves).
Gender Independence: What I know so far...

- Over the school year 2009/10 three families contacted me regarding young children whose gender expression was independent of the social expectations of their assigned sex; in short, I met three young boys, aged 4 to 7, who liked all things, as they understood it, ‘girly’: wearing dresses, long hair, dolls etc.

- At that time, the boys, often assumed to be girls, who would say they were boy, if asked; if others thought them to be girls? Great!

- So from these individual family meetings...
GIG: Gender Independent Group

GIG – A Brief History

- The Gender Independent Group began meeting in 2010 as a social/support space for children (K-Grade 4) expressing Gender Independence. It was meant as a space for kids to meet others like them and to just let them be.

- I made a conscious decision to avoid discussions about what the “expression of gender independence means” i.e. Is this about gender identity? Sexual orientation? Etc… For this, the parents were grateful...

- It also became a space for their parents and caregivers to meet, socialize, and discuss and share challenges and joys having a gender independent child.
A more comfy school (excerpt from “A Day in the life of a GI kid”)

C: “It would have only bathrooms where boys and girls could both go in. There could be two, one upstairs, one downstairs”.  

C: “And also it would be a bit better that the teachers do know you...like you should tell the teacher if you’re Gender Independent or not. That’s what I would prefer.”

Why is it important that adults know?

C: “So they don’t keep calling me the wrong thing and I feel uncomfy”.  

What a 7 year old GI kid wants:
Believe me when I tell you

C: “And also my friend, M. I told him that I’m a girl and he knows now. He helps sometimes. And there’s two girls I know from camp that still don’t believe me and they go to this school...And that’s why I’m not very happy”.

[a group of students walk by and C remarks: ‘Those are the two girls’]

C: “If a Gender Independent kids says that they’re a girl and they look like a boy, you should believe them...you should believe them from then on”.
Gender Independence, Gender Identity, Trans Identity

- Take care to understand the similarities and differences between these concepts and the lived realities thereof; can be related; should never be conflated.

- Take care to self reflect how our own experience with gender shapes overtly and covertly our understanding of someone else’s experience of/with gender.
Implicating Social Work and social service work Practice...

- In what ways does our understanding, experience, studies inform the relationship between gender, gender roles, sexuality, mental well being, and mental health?

- Historically, the kids in GIG would be (and some still are) viewed/diagnosed as problematic with their non-conformity; their parents viewed with suspicion by letting their kids just be;

- From a structural social work perspective and AOP stance, the problematizing would be on the reaction of others to these children and families

- What is social work’s relationship to “normality”? How have we enforced it? How have we interrupted it?

- How have you successfully problematized homophobia and transphobia?
Some things to do

- Directly challenging any and all expressions of homophobia and transphobia will:
  - Demonstrate your support of LGBTQ/GI young people, those with LGBTQ/GI parents, and those assumed to be LGBTQ/GI
  - Affirm LGBTQ/GI identities i.e. they are important and valuable and worthy of being stood up for
  - Support your inclusive pro active practice efforts

- Do not assume everyone is heterosexual and cis gender.

- Maybe do nothing at all...
Something to revisit

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Thank you

- Questions
- Comments
- Criticisms