

Barbies and Beer: Narrative Therapy with a Gender Variant Child

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Eric was a 7-year-old Caucasian child who was referred to me at his mother's request. Eric's parents are of a middle-class background. They had sought help because they were concerned of Eric's gender non-conforming behavior. His parents (a married, straight couple) had noted cross-gender behavior since the age of two.

Eric preferred girls as playmates and since he was two-years-old and was cross-dressing at home. According to his mother, Eric had been partial to girl toys including a purse, Barbie Doll, and jewelry. He often spoke of wanting to marry a boy when he grew up. Eric avoided rough play and stated that he wished that he did not have a penis because he was a girl, not a boy, and girls did not have penises.

Eric arrived for the first interview dressed in girl's clothing, accompanied by his mother, Rosemary. There was an obvious warmth and affection that existed between the two, although there was also notable tension due to Eric's insistence that he was a girl. Eric's father, Vic, did not attend the session. According to Rosemary, her husband was embarrassed and angry. He feared losing his standing in the community when neighbors began to ask him what he had done to make his child "that way." Rosemary was also uncomfortable by Eric's cross-dressing, by his insistence on being called by his preferred name, "Erica." In addition, Rosemary was upset because Eric was attending a Catholic grade school and wanted to wear the girl's uniform, a plaid skirt. Justifiably, mom was worried that Eric would be teased and verbally harassed by students as well as being perceived as disturbed by school officials.

To be published in *CREATIVE STRATEGIES IN CHILD THERAPY:*

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I addressed Eric by his preferred name, Erica. Speaking in a high-pitched voice, Erica (AKA Eric) said that he was being teased by the boys at school because he did not want to play sport, preferring to play with girls. Rosemary added that Vic was pushing Erica into sports as though participation in such activities would correct the gender non-conforming behavior. “I hate sports. I am not a boy.”

Tearing up, Rosemary asked me if I could “change him back? Is this a phase?” I replied by saying, “Generally not, your child has identified as a girl since two-years-old.” Rosemary asked if she was to blame for Erica’s gender variance. Parents, particularly mothers, often feel guilty and responsible for their child’s gender variant behavior (Mallon, 1999). Western society tends to reward parents who socialize their children to traditional gender roles. Parents, feeling as if they failed, often attempt to push their transgender child back into socially prescribed gender norms, particularly if they view their child as having a disorder. Gender non-conforming behavior is a psychopathology according to the American Psychiatric Disorder’s DSM—Gender Identity Disorder (GID). Parents, influenced by this deficit discourse, can seek to have their child cured through endless mental health assessments or reparative/aversion therapies.

In order to counter the effects of mother-blaming, I asked Rosemary such questions as:

- What effect is mother-blaming having on your motherhood?
- How did you get recruited into the idea that you are to blame for your child’s gender identity? Did your mom blame herself for you identifying as a female?
- Why is your husband not attending this meeting? Does this give the message that you are responsible for ‘fixing’ the problem?

- Is it fair that mothers experience more parent-guilt than fathers? Why do you think guilt recruits more mothers than fathers?
- If you knew that Erica's gender identity was not a sickness but who she genuinely is, what difference do you think it would take to your parenting practices with Erica?
- If you freed yourself from mother-guilt, would it be more likely that you would support Erica's gender identity?

The above deconstructing questions, a tool that critiques taken-for-granted assumptions so clients can arrive at new viewpoints (Freedman and Combs, 1996; Madigan, 1992; Smith and Nylund, 1997; White, 199), alleviated some of the guilt that had influenced Rosemary. She appeared more receptive to supporting her daughter living as a female. Once guilt was diminished, space was cleared for Rosemary to value the ways that she had encouraged Erica to be her preferred self. I asked Rosemary if her parents supported her preferred self. Rosemary stated emphatically, "No, I wanted to play sports but my parents said only my brothers could play sports. They made go into cheerleading. I was a tomboy but they didn't like it." In spite of her parent's insistence, Rosemary defied her parents by playing high school softball and basketball.

Next, we mapped out Rosemary's history of gender non-conformity. There were many acts of gender non-conformity including playing sports, not wearing makeup as a teenager, and refusing to acquiesce to boys. Instead of internalizing her parent's view that she was a problem, Rosemary believed that her history of challenging cultural and familial norms was indication of courage and strength. "Do you think your history of being your own person has allowed Erica to find her own courage to be herself?"

Rosemary, slightly grinning said, “I hadn’t thought about it but I think you’re right.”

“Would you have liked to have had yourself as a parent?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

I asked her, “What difference would it have made to you if you had you as your parent?”

Mulling over my question, Rosemary replied by saying “I would have been free to be a tomboy”

“So, you wouldn’t have lived in a gender straightjacket?”

Crying, she answered, “yes.”

“What would it be like for Erica if you enforced a gender straightjacket and didn’t support her gender non-conformity?”

Rosemary said, “She would probably feel like I did growing up.”

“I noticed that while we have been talking Erica is playing with a Barbie and other stereotypical toys. Have you noticed that you are not forcing her to play with the ‘boy toys’? What does this say about who you are as a parent?”

The conversation continued as we explored Rosemary’s intention to not sanction Erica’s gender variance. I then turned to Erica and asked if I could talk to Barbie. Erica, bemused, said “Ok.”

“Hi Barbie.”

Erica, serving as a ventriloquist for Barbie said, “Hi.”

“Barbie, do you like Erica?”

In response to replying yes, I asked Barbie what she liked about Erica.

Erica (as Barbie) said, “I like that she’s nice. Plus she tells me how to do my hair better and look pretty.”

“So Barbie, you see Erica as a good girlfriend,” I inquired.

“Yeah,” Erica said with a smile.

“Barbie, some of the kids at school are mean to Erica; they tease her because she’s a girl. Do you have any advice for Erica on how to deal with mean people?”

“Just don’t listen to them. They are mean and she should just ignore them and walk away.”

“Barbie, do you have any ideas on how Erica’s mom and dad could help her?”

“They should let her wear girl’s clothes and be a girl,” Erica (as Barbie) said with conviction. Rosemary listened attentively and lovingly hugged her child.

By the end of our first meeting, Erica and Rosemary both were smiling and seemed very connected to each other; allies against transphobia. Before leaving my office, Rosemary asked about any resources, books, on gender variant youth. I complimented Rosemary for her valor in standing up to mother-guilt and transphobia. “Why is it important to read and learn more about gender variant kids?” I asked.

“I want my child to be happy,” Rosemary replied gently patting Erica’s back. With a concerned look, Rosemary continued: “I just don’t know how to deal with the school. And oh yeah, I need help on what to do with Erica’s father. He’s not on board with this,” with a concerned look.

I referred her to books written for parents of gender variant children along with recommending that she watch the film *Ma Vie en Rose*, a story about a gender non-conforming

child. I also referred to the local PFLAG group where there were members who had a transgender child.

In our next meeting, we addressed issues in regard to Erica's educational setting, a private, Catholic school. Schools are often the least supportive environment for gender variant children (Mallon, 1999). Gender non-conforming youth are targeted by school officials and bullied by other students. Catholic school is particularly reinforcing of the normative gender roles (the gender binary) in many ways including the dress requirement—boys wear pants and girls wear plaid skirts. In addition, the Catholic's disapproving position on GLBT issues added to Erica's trouble in school. Lastly, California school's anti-discrimination law did not apply to Erica since she was in a private school.

As a family therapist working with transgender youth, it is imperative for me to move beyond the private room of my therapy office and become an advocate. Key work includes educating school officials about gender variance and advocating for my clients and their families. Rosemary and I met with Erica's school counselor. While the counselor was somewhat supportive, he realistically said that the school's entrenched position on gender would make it impossible for Erica to dress and act as a girl.

With the reality of the school situation, Rosemary, Erica and I developed compromise strategies such as asking Erica to dress in original gender clothing for school but permitting her to wear female clothes at home, and androgynous clothes in social situations. Erica, uneasy with this idea, briefly attempted to act in "boy mode" (my terms) in school. As expected, this suggestion did not work; Erica felt restrained by Catholic uniform. Hence, Erica was pulled out of school and was home schooled while they looked for an alternative private school that

supported a wider range of gender performances. At the time of this writing, Erica transferred to an affirming educational setting. Changing schools where Erica could be herself had a profound effect on increasing her self-respect

Rosemary and Erica's mother-daughter relationship became closer due to mom's increasing acceptance of her child. Yet, Rosemary revealed that her relationship with her was increasingly strained. According to Rosemary, Vic withdrew as a father and husband, threatened by Rosemary and Erica's connection. Often, Vic blamed Rosemary for her support of their child's preferred gender identity. Erica, witnessing the tension between her parents, became discouraged.

In order to counter Erica's sadness, I called Vic and strongly encouraged him to meet with me in private so he could express his concerns. Begrudgingly, due to his feeling that his viewpoint was not being addressed in my sessions with Erica and Rosemary, he met with me. I began by complimenting Vic for his attendance: "Most fathers do not come to these sessions. It must say something about you as a father." Our conversation focused a great deal on what Erica appreciated about Vic. Related to this line of inquiry, I asked him several questions about what he valued about himself as a father. Vic shared that historically he had been very involved in his child's life including taking Erica to the pediatrician on a frequent basis, supporting Erica's involvement and interest in non-traditional "boy" activities such as dance, and organizing some of Erica's birthday parties. I complimented Vic for challenging the traditional practice of "mom's responsible, dad helps out."

I asked Vic, "Was your dad involved in your life the way you are with your child?"

To be published in *CREATIVE STRATEGIES IN CHILD THERAPY:*

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“No way, he was a man’s man who was served by my mother and left all parenting responsibilities to her,” Vic replied.

“So, Vic, it appears that you have challenged traditional ideas of manhood including what it means to be a father and husband.”

Vic expressing a blend of pride and surprise, replied, “Well I had not thought of it but you’re right.”

Vic commitment to full-fatherhood (as opposed to his dad’s “minimal-fathering”) constituted what White and Epston (1990) refer to as a “unique outcome,” an action or thought that contradicts the dominant story. In this case, Vic countering the story that he did not care for Erica is indicative of a unique outcome. Albeit halfheartedly, Vic pondered the ideas that that his involved fatherhood may have created space for Erica to feel safe to express her gender identity.

Building upon this unique outcome, I asked Vic how well he knew his child: “I thought I knew her well.” I asked Vic if I could interview him as Erica; to allow him to answer questions as he thought his child would answer. This intervention, developed by Karl Tomm is referred to as “internalized other questioning” (Nylund and Corsiglia, 1993). Internalized other questions are based on the idea that the ‘self’ is constituted by one’s internalized community. By interviewing Vic as Erica, I hoped that he would experience an embodied experience of her. This experience could help him to have possible empathy for her. Some of the questions I asked Vic (as Erica) were:

- Erica, what’s it like to be ridiculed for something that felt very natural to you?
- Erica, what it’s like when father is not supportive?

- What do you need from your dad, Erica?

Vic uncomfortably struggled in answering the questions from his child's perspective. Although Vic often replied with "I don't know," it encouraged him to move out of his stuck position and develop a more relational self with Erica. Vic seemed more open to my feedback, in particular, my concern that gender variant children are at risk for depression and possible suicide, particularly if not supported by loved ones. In conclusion, I again complimented Vic for having the courage to attend our meeting.

Vic never attended another meeting. Yet, Rosemary said that her husband halted the mother-blaming comments. "He's not going to PFLAG meetings but he is at least, neutral, with Erica's gender." She and I acknowledged that although Vic was not completely "on board," it was a huge step.

I confessed to Rosemary that I had compassion for Vic. "Even though I am a gender therapist, as a father, I would have a very hard time if my son wanted to transition. You see, I was raised to think that gender variance was abnormal also. This is going to be a process, a grieving process. Vic is grieving the loss of a son and all the expectations he had for Erica. And his lukewarm support also reflects the realistic difficult process that Erica is up against in a transphobic society." Both Rosemary and I shed a few tears thinking about Erica, her courage and the difficulty she is going to face. I truly am moved by transgender children and their families navigating their lives in the face of considerable odds. While we talked, Erica grinned playing with toys in my office. When asking Erica if Barbie was proud of her mom, she replied with a firm yes. Accompanied with a Barbie doll, Erica went over to Rosemary and the three of them hugged.

A few months after our work, I received a call from Rosemary telling me that she was helping other parents of gender variant children. Next, Rosemary shared a hilarious and moving event that recently occurred that demonstrated her support for Erica. On a particularly harried day, Rosemary and Erica went to McDonald's. Erica, dressed in androgynous clothes, and Rosemary waited in the busy line to order a "Happy Meal"—a packaged meal that includes a toy that is traditionally assigned as boy toy or girl toy. After waiting in line during the busy dinner hour, they approached the young male cashier ordering the popular boxed meal. Assuming Erica was a male, he put the masculine toy (a Transformer) in the Happy Meal box. Rosemary, in front of many customers challenged the cashier for assuming Erica wanted the boy toy. Put on the spot, the cashier directly turned to Erica asking her what toy she wanted, the Transformer or the girl toy. Erica proudly exclaimed "the Barbie please!"

Felt supported by her mother in public brought them closer (according to Rosemary's telling of the story). The cashier, now amused, asked Erica what she wanted to drink. She said "A beer, just kidding. A root beer silly! (When Erica was younger, she referred to root beer as beer)." The cashier then exclaimed to fellow employees "A Barbie and a beer for this kid!" People in the restaurant laughed; a transitory moment in a public space that disrupted the gender system. May Rosemary and Erica's defiance of the gender system inspire more of these moments.

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