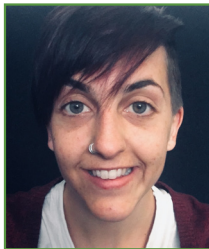




## Queer Invitations:

*Fostering connection between queer young people and their loved ones*

*by Rosie Maeder*



### *Abstract*

This paper demonstrates ways that queer theory can inform narrative practice, including through practices of invitation, deconstruction, questioning dominant discourses and mobilising nonbinary superpowers. The particular focus of the paper is on counselling conversations with queer and trans young people and their families. However, the paper argues that queer theory, with its critical practices that unsettle hegemonic assumptions and call into question the naturalness of taken-for-granted binaries, can fruitfully inform narrative practice in general. Specific examples of practice are included, such as inviting loved ones to join counselling conversations, using therapeutic letters to foster collaboration, guiding conversations about preferred names and pronouns, and responding to pathologising discourses including in relation to gender dysphoria.

**Key words:** *trans; queer; queer theory; young people; youth; therapeutic letters; collective documents; deconstruction; gender dysphoria; narrative practice*

In my experience, narrative practice comprises a string of invitations. And in my practice, the invitations I extend are queer. Queer invitations are curious and require that the practitioner imagine where conversations *might* go and which directions *might* be useful, while remaining open to unexpected possibility. They are vigilant to the effects they may have on the person, whether they are taken up or not. They are tentative and collaborative, attending to power relations and the politics of consent. They are informed by poststructuralist, feminist and queer theoretical ideas, and they are nonbinary.

'To *queer* something is an emergent process of disrupting expected norms in such a way that new possibilities emerge and standard unquestioned practices become open for interrogation' (Tilsen, 2013, p. 6). Queer invitations give people room to move, to poke holes in things that seem solid, to make visible the operations of rigid constructs of gender and heteronormativity in all of our lives, and to endeavour to connect people with a sense of agency in relating to these norms. At the same time, queer invitations avoid imposing or enforcing queer poststructuralist understandings through embracing a de-centred but influential therapeutic posture (White, 1997).

In this paper, I describe the ways I use narrative practices informed by queer theory in counselling conversations with queer and trans young people and their loved ones. I describe the origins and foundations of my queer invitational practices and outline some of the realms of practice in which they can be used: letters inviting loved ones to join counselling conversations; deconstructing discourses; conversations about pronouns (and names); resisting pathologisation of trans young people; relational enquiries and using therapeutic letters to foster collaboration between queer young people and their loved ones. This paper is not a how-to guide, but rather an account of my own work, some of which might resonate with other practitioners and be adapted to their local contexts.

## *Queer invitations addressed to me*

In 2018, Cheryl White and David Denborough approached me about imagining into existence a counselling service for queer young people in Adelaide, 'Our Place'. They wanted Our Place to be a relational service that welcomed the families and loved ones of queer young people. This made sense to me and challenged me. Often in Australia, 'queer services' are

individualistic and only accessible by those who identify as LGBTIQ.<sup>1</sup> This can create barriers to access and can obscure the contexts of queer people's lives (including transphobia, homophobia, biphobia and discrimination against intersex folks), contributing to the internalising of problems and the pathologising of queer people's experiences (White, 2011).

In my previous work supporting and advocating for queer folks in Adelaide, I had been recruited into a sense of scarcity and binaries of 'us' and 'them'. It felt like a battle to get funding for services and spaces for queer young people and I was reluctant to 'give away' any of that hard-earned space to others. I felt frustrated when I heard parents of trans kids talking about how they wished someone had been able to support them when their child was coming out and I'd think, 'there's hardly any support available to your child! Why should you get support?!' Pain and frustration from watching people I loved suffer the effects of discrimination through the actions and words of family had taken me away from curiosity and generosity.

A few months after beginning this project, I heard three parents speak about their 'journey to acceptance' at the Living and Loving in Diversity conference in Victoria (Fok, Yang, & Zhang, 2018). Two mothers and one father, all of whom had migrated from China to Australia, shared their experience of their children coming out to them. Both mothers spoke about a period of many months following their sons coming out as 'gay' during which they cried day and night and felt isolated in their communities. They believed they must have done something wrong as mothers. The intersection of homophobia with the racism and xenophobia experienced by these families and the gendered pressures on mothers and women was made starkly visible to me. One of them said:

For a few months after he came out, I went into mourning. I cried day and night. The son I knew was dead ... I was also very scared that he would be ridiculed, that he would frequent gay bars and have sex with lots of people and die of AIDS or an overdose. I also felt fear of ridicule. I went into the closet at the time that Tim walked out of it. I was hoping that an accident would happen to my family so no one would ever know this secret. (Fok in Fok et al., 2018)

She spoke to a room full of mostly queer people about how she had campaigned with her church against homosexuality. And then, crying, she said, 'I want to say to all of you here, I'm sorry'.

She spoke of 'perseverance' and many 'awkward family conversations' and that now she regards herself as part of the rainbow community: 'I hope that I can be accepted. I think we have a lot to do, because I have wasted a lot of time in the past so I hope that we can fight this together' (Fok in Fok et al., 2018).

I was profoundly moved and humbled by this queer invitation to witness their experiences and confront my own prejudices. It supported me to externalise homophobia and transphobia and made available a new compassion for parents expressing homophobic and transphobic views. It generated a strong commitment to inviting loved ones into therapeutic conversations with queer young people and fostering connection. This has shaped my work in a multitude of ways. Whenever I find myself being drawn away from curiosity and compassion in interactions with family members whose actions are harmful, I call upon those three parents to bring me back to the place I want to be working from.

## *Inviting loved ones in*

When I meet young people, I always invite them to bring anyone they would like along to our therapeutic conversations. If they are consulting me about transphobia or homophobia showing up in their relationships, I enquire about whether their loved ones might be interested in joining us or me for a conversation. I take the lead from the young person about whether that feels safe, appropriate or useful. If the young person is interested in exploring this possibility, I write a letter to their loved one(s) in collaboration with the young person. I check in with gender-diverse young people about what pronouns or name they would like me to use to speak about them with their loved ones<sup>2</sup>, and I make sure to demonstrate in the letters that I know more about the young person and the loved ones than just the problem story (Markey, personal communication, 2018). Here's an example:

Dear Marie and Allen,

My name is Rosie and I am a counsellor with the Family and Relationships Counselling team at Uniting Communities. Our team supports families with all sorts of things including illness, grief, violence and abuse, schooling challenges, separation, big life changes and transitions. I've attached some information about the service.

Currently, I mainly work with young people who are questioning their gender or sexuality and I provide support around the kinds of challenges that can come up for families around that. I have met with Alex twice now and it has been a delight to learn about Alex's love of music and sense of humour. I've heard a bit about your family's move from Victoria, which I imagine must have been a big but hopefully positive change. It sounds like Alex is really enjoying the new school too.

I wanted to extend to you an invitation to meet with either myself or someone else from my team. In my experience from meeting with families from all different backgrounds, when a young person in the family is questioning their gender, it can be confronting, challenging and sometimes isolating for parents, especially if this is completely new and unfamiliar terrain. Some parents speak about grief. Others talk about fears that their child might experience violence or struggle in their lives. And many parents are not quite sure how best to support their child. Speaking to a counsellor can offer a safe, nonjudgemental space in which to unpack and make sense of some of these challenges and also to connect with hopes for the future.

Often loved ones might begin by naming their child's gender as the problem. And a young person may similarly name their parents as the problem. This invitation has been crafted to avoid inviting blame or shame, to make visible that I am not making assumptions about what the parents might be experiencing and to begin externalising problems. Invitation letters provide a valuable opportunity to be transparent about narrative ways of working and to extend queer invitations beyond the counselling room, which may influence the context of the person.

## *Queer theory and narrative practice*

In this paper, I use the term 'queer' not as an umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex and transgender, but to describe people and acts that transgress, fail at, reject or resist norms in relation to sex, gender, sexuality, relationships, family and bodies (Tilsen & Nylund, 2010). I also use queer to describe the political approach associated with queer theory. Of course, it's important to acknowledge that the term 'queer' does not fit for many, and still carries a heavy history of homophobic and transphobic violence for

some. When I meet with people in my work, I check in with them about what language suits them. By saying 'I know these things can shift and change' or 'there might not be any words' I hope to subvert the pressure on queer people to identify in a certain, fixed way. I sometimes ask, 'how do you feel about the word queer?' Ultimately, I take the lead from them, making sure to keep checking in about whether that changes.

My practice is based on a belief that narrative practice and queer theory are MFEO<sup>3</sup>, and that queer theory should inform all narrative practice work, not just work with queer people. Tilsen and Nylund have described queer theory as:

a set of critical practices that seeks to complicate hegemonic assumptions about the continuities between anatomical sex, gender identity, sexual identity, sexual object choice, and sexual practice. Queer theory rejects biological theories of sexual identity and calls into question so-called 'natural' sexuality. Central to these ideas is the challenge to the gender binary system that produces and maintains binary constructions such as male/female and hetero/homo. (2010, p. 66)

I'm using a queer lens if I'm inviting a cisgender man to examine how he learnt about masculinity and how to be a man; if I am speaking to a heterosexual couple about the roles they play in their relationship or whether monogamy is their preference; and if I meet a person and resist the urge to assume that I know who they have sex with or how, or whether they even like having sex at all. In work with queer folks, my queer lens helps to make visible the operations of heteronormativity and discrimination in our lives, and to poke holes in the lateral oppressive forces of homonormativity and transnormativity, which often recruit queer people into policing each other and ourselves.<sup>4</sup> Tilsen and Nylund have pointed out that 'both heteronormativity and homonormativity [and transnormativity] require fixed, naturalised heterosexual identities in order to maintain and regulate the norms of these discursive institutions' and that 'as queer theorists, we question fixity and essentialism of identities' (2010, p. 66).

As narrative therapists, we are similarly invested in questioning internalised states, which are immovable, often totalising and at which it is easy to 'fail' (White, 2002, 2007). Born this way. Born in the wrong body. Marriage equality. Coming out (Hammoud-Beckett, 2007). Butch and Femme. These are a few of the more well-known discourses that rely on biological

essentialism, replicate heterosexuality and/or reinforce binary notions of gender. They tend to normalise queers rather than destabilising norms. None of these ideas are inherently problematic or harmful; they have provided frameworks through which many queer people have been able to access a sense of legitimate personhood, belonging, connection, safety and community. However, the dominance of those ideas means that complying with them is often *required* in order to access those things. Some of us receive a ticket into acceptability while many others (fat queers, disabled queers, nonbinary people, QTPOC, kinky, poly, genderfucking queers) get further pushed to the margins.<sup>5</sup> More often than not, queer folks can find themselves breaking out of one ill-fitting box only to find themselves being squished into another.

## My position

My capacity to trouble homonormative and transnormative discourses in therapeutic conversations is made possible by my queer experience and my use of nonbinary superpowers, which I will describe in more detail later. I am a gender-resisting nonbinary femme person, but I am not transgender. I am indebted to my transmasculine partner for the understanding I have of some of the multitude of discourses and systems that can impact the lives of trans folks.<sup>6</sup> I am an upper middle-class professional white person living on colonised land. I am thin, able bodied and neurotypical. These traits grant me unearned privilege and access to power. I'm youngish: at 30 I often sit between the young people I work with and their loved ones, which can sometimes support my capacity to subvert the power imbalance between young people and older folks. My privilege means that my gender nonconformity never places me at a risk of violence or compromises my access to resources. I usually experience 'queer visibility', which grants me unquestioned access to 'queer spaces' and can contribute to young queer people feeling safer to be more open with me. I paint this picture because I want to make visible the relational context of my conversations with queer young people and their loved ones.

Holding insider knowledges as a practitioner can be generative but can also create unique challenges (Drahm-Butler, 2015). It is easy to be drawn into the assumption that we have similar experience, knowledge and politics and to contribute to fixed notions of identity. Understanding similarity can be a barrier to therapeutic work (Iqbal & Foord, 2018). It can shut down curiosity



and possibility for movement from what is known and familiar towards what is not yet known or has been obscured (White, 2004). When curiosity departs, doors to alternative stories close. On the other hand, recognition of identity can reduce the barriers that are experienced by queer and marginalised folks seeking to access services (Iqbal & Foord, 2018).

I work to hold a tension between recognition and curiosity. Sometimes a knowing laugh at an *L Word* reference can allow someone I work with to feel seen.<sup>7</sup> At other times, it is essential that rather than nodding and murmuring 'mmm, yes', I question: What does the word transition/queer/butch mean to you? What stands out to you about that? Is that okay for you, not okay, a mix of both? These questions exoticise the domestic and avoid imposing meaning or prescriptions of queerness (White, 2004). Similarly, I would never start by questioning someone about their identity as I am profoundly aware of the ways queer folks are disbelieved and forced to prove who they say they are. Queer people are not homogenous; the experiences we share pale in significance to the ways they are different. My sense is that in my work, my attention to discourses that touch the lives of queer folks, including at the intersections of multiple systems of oppression, is usually more valuable than my queerness (Crenshaw, 1989).

### *There weren't any signs' and other discourses*

There are many discourses that frequent my conversations with parents of gender-diverse young people: 'They're only doing it because it's trendy'; 'I've lost a daughter/son'; 'they're going through a phase'; and 'young people are too obsessed with labels – why can't they just be happy the way they are?' One that I hear often is that 'there weren't any signs' the young person was trans when they were a child. This discourse is linked to fixed, pathologising, internalised and binary understandings of gender. Much of the media about trans folks carves out a similar story – a child rejects the gendered expectations forced upon them by their family and displays behaviour associated with the 'other' gender consistently throughout their childhood and youth. This homogenous account of trans childhood leaves no space for fluidity and reinforces a binary understanding of gender – you played either with trucks OR dolls. It also negates the relationality of gender and the effect of gendered violence – which includes the kind of gendered violence

enacted against children and people who transgress or fail at conforming to gendered expectations.

In order to begin deconstructing this discourse with parents, I ask:

- Where did the idea that there are signs come from?
- What difference would it have made if there had been signs?
- Can you imagine any reason why there might not have been signs?
- Many parents speak to me about there not having been any signs, what might be the reason that this idea that 'there are signs' is so prevalent?

These questions can begin, even if only slightly, to subvert pathologised understandings of trans identities and invite loved ones to consider alternative possibilities. One mother told me that she felt guilty for not noticing the signs. This was the first time I clearly understood the ways that this discourse might also be harmful for parents and families who feel a sense of failure for not seeing their young person in their preferred ways.

I also consult young people about the effects of this discourse. Aj, a nonbinary young person, told me their parents didn't believe they could be trans because they didn't 'show signs' when they were younger.<sup>8</sup> I asked Aj about this idea of 'signs' and why there hadn't been any in their case. They said: 'I didn't know there were any other options', and when they found out about nonbinary gender 'it made a lot of sense'. I asked why they thought the presence of signs would have been important for their parents and they speculated that their parents might have thought 'we're your parents, we should have known'. I hoped that through my questions, I would be able to position Aj's subjugated knowledge about the discourse of 'there were no signs' as expert, provide an opportunity to thicken an alternative story of transness being valid with or without signs and to invite Aj to consider why that discourse had captured their parents. Whatever the discourse, these enquiries will never eliminate their influence, but they may loosen their grip in such a way that makes space for new possibilities, however microscopic.

### *Conversations about pronouns*

Many of the young people I work with prefer different names and pronouns in different circumstances and

with different people and these preferences often change. When I speak with loved ones of a queer young person for the first time, I am careful to avoid assumptions. I usually mirror their language and where possible avoid using gendered language until I have a sense of the loved one's position on their child's preferred name and pronouns, and the child's preferences for what pronouns and name their loved ones or I should use for them.

I am interested in inviting loved ones into the practice of naming and speaking about pronouns, a practice that is new to many, and in fostering collaboration between the young people and loved ones. The intake forms we use ask everyone to identify their preferred pronouns, which may mean loved ones have their first experience of being asked about *their* pronouns, allowing them to notice this taken-for-granted privilege. And when I meet loved ones and young people together, I introduce myself to the young person in the presence of their family with my pronouns and ask what pronouns they prefer.

When a loved one expresses an intention to try using their child's preferred name and pronouns, I express curiosity about what this might speak to and enquire about the ways our conversations can support the project of using a different name and pronoun for their child. I might ask:

- What does it reflect about what's important to you that you are interested in using the new name and pronouns?
- What might get in the way of and what might support using the new name and pronouns?
- What would you say to other parents who are beginning to use new names or pronouns?

I want to avoid inviting shame into the room for parents and other loved ones around misgendering their child.<sup>9</sup> Shame often impedes the learning of new names and pronouns and can collude with discourses of parental (especially maternal) blame to invite defensiveness. An extremely common experience of trans and gender-diverse folks is having to respond to other people's shame around misgendering them – emotional labour on top of transgression – which certainly does not foster connection. I use double listening to hear and enquire about stories about the effects of misgendering, and the challenges parents might experience in learning to use a new name or pronoun for their child, alongside stories of parents finding creative ways to learn new names or pronouns and

working hard to support their child's wellbeing (White, 2000).

In some instances, sustaining a therapeutic relationship with a parent and centring the young person's safety means that I do not challenge the name or pronouns the parent uses. One parent of a transfeminine young person told me that she had consulted a psychiatrist before seeing me who used 'she' instead of 'he' to describe her child. This had made her feel disrespected and numb.<sup>10</sup> I hoped to continue working with her and support this family so, with permission from the young person, I use 'he' and the birth name of the young person when speaking to the parent and continue checking in with the young person about the effects of this and her preferences for my conversations with her mother.

## Nonbinary superpowers

Nonbinary superpowers enable me to keep in mind the material and tangible implications of identities and how they serve people while simultaneously challenging, expanding and destabilising those same categories (Visschedijk & Wishart, 2018). This was well articulated by a young person at the Feast Queer Youth Drop-in:<sup>11</sup>

It's so great to have a term to put to it sometimes and to have a community around you. As useless as labels can be, they can also be really helpful to find a community. [The can also be] dividing and complicated. There are so many different ways to describe my gender. Identities change. Identity is complicated.

One of the lessons I have learnt is to ensure that I scaffold and move slowly towards identity deconstruction and don't rip the rug out from underneath people, leave people behind or take away ideas of identity that are supportive. In the same way that for some, a mental health diagnosis might be a desirable framework for meaning making and addressing challenges in their lives, for some trans folks, the narrative of being born in the wrong body might acknowledge their experience, where for others that story is experienced as harmful (White, 1995). Many of the young people I support are consulting me at a time when their identity is already in flux and a sense of fixedness or certainty is desirable, especially in a world that demands that they constantly define and justify what or who they are. I work to affirm identity while ensuring there's room to move and

making it possible to consider the ways that notions of identity can be supportive and the ways they can be limiting.

## Resisting pathologisation of gender diverse young people

The dominant contemporary understanding of trans experiences is pathologised, just as homosexuality once was. Gender dysphoria (GD) replaced gender identity disorder (GID) in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* in 2013 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). A GD diagnosis is required for anyone wanting to access puberty blockers, hormone replacement therapy and gender affirming surgeries in Australia and many other countries. Although the change from GID to GD was intended to move away from defining gender nonconformity as a mental disorder, it continues to locate the problem in trans people rather than in the context of rigid heteronormative constructs of gender. The American Psychiatric Association acknowledges that the 'DSM not only determines how mental disorders are defined and diagnosed, it also impacts how people see themselves and how we see each other' (2010). Yet, in order to access surgery or hormones, the DSM requires trans folks to prove they experience 'clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning'. And they must reject or disassociate from things that align with the gender they were assigned at birth. This has created a strong single story of what it means to be a trans person, which has a huge influence over how many trans people see themselves and how they are seen by others.

One nonbinary young person I work with, Ollie, eloquently articulated the effects of this story in their life in a letter they wrote to me:<sup>12</sup>

I have felt the need to reject femininity, to prove my 'trans-ness'. I was a hella femme teenager, but I'm trans ... so that must have been a product of conformity, right? (no!) I have been too scared to accept masculinity. I don't have a good relationship with Men™ and I don't know how to undo the fear I have deeply internalised. I have felt guilty in embracing androgyny. Wrong, disappointing, unfit.

I've felt like I wanted to reject everything. And all of these emotions (as well as my mental health and relationship with my family) fall

exactly into the 'suicidal trans kid' storyline.

This was the most negative gender idea I took on – that nonconformity goes hand in hand with unhappiness and pain. It crept into every crack in my mind and I'm still struggling to scrub it out.

When young people speak to me about wanting a GD diagnosis, it sparks my curiosity and also has me calling on my nonbinary superpowers. I ask: What hopes do you have connected to getting a GD diagnosis? What do you imagine might be made more possible by getting a GD diagnosis? I am interested in their position on the diagnosis generally, and, where possible, in making visible the broader political context of pathologised trans experiences. I ask: Who gets to decide whether or not you are trans? What other stories of what it means to be a trans person might be obscured if gender dysphoria is the only story we hear? Thirteen-year-old J told me he too had heard lots of 'stories about trans people being sad ... but there are lots of good parts of their stories – like the first time I got my hair cut, getting my name changed at school, getting called by the right gender in public'. I hope to reposition trans young people as experts in their own lives and bodies, and to provide space to express doubt or concern about surgery or hormones without fear this will jeopardise access to services.

The story that gender dysphoria and pain legitimise trans identities is so pervasive that it often recruits trans folks into policing themselves and each other. 'If you're not struggling with gender then you're not a *real* trans persons' is an idea that is familiar to all the gender-resisting young people I work with. Transphobic internet campaigns have contributed to this by popularising the notions of 'trans trenders'<sup>13</sup>, creating viral memes satirically suggesting that it's possible to identify as a snake, a cucumber or a tyrannosaurus rex, or sharing sensationalist stories of people detransitioning. These tactics are intended to undermine the legitimacy of trans identities and to force people to take up fixed, definitive and binary gendered positions.

As part of Our Place, I host a nonbinary ('NB') youth group for young people who don't identify with binary gender. Loved ones or support people are welcome to attend the group and have a privileged opportunity to witness and be invited into nonbinary conversations. As a group we grappled with the competing pressures experienced by trans and nonbinary young people in relation to gender dysphoria and I captured some of the conversation in the following collective document (Denborough, 2008).

We also spoke about some of the narratives attached to gender dysphoria and to being trans: that you can't be trans if you don't experience gender dysphoria, that you have to hate your body if you're a trans person, that all trans people want surgery or to go on hormones, that if you don't experience pain, or enough pain, then you're not trans, otherwise known as 'obligatory suffering'. Many in the group reflected that these ideas were harmful, especially when they seemed to come from other trans people.

'Dysphoria isn't the only thing that makes people trans. You shouldn't have to want to change your body to be trans. And I personally think that you can be trans and not actually care socially. There are so many different ways that if we revert to saying that dysphoria is how you tell if you're trans or not, it's defining yourself through pain, which is the cis narrative of being trans and not one that I'm about.'

If gender dysphoria is the only story of what it means to be a trans person, what might get missed?

We also spoke about a sense that some people 'treat it as something that's cosmetic as opposed to something that's really difficult, [which takes] away from how much of a hard reality it is for us to just live.'

'Experimenting with your gender is fine, but it's a different story when you're trying it on willy nilly. It's something that should be treated with a lot more respect.'

'People saying that your identity is a trend really got to me. At some point, I started believing it and thinking I'm not existing.'

So many folks fight daily to prove that being nonbinary is a real thing. And while we know there are overtly violent forms of discrimination against trans and nonbinary folks, sometimes the more subtle notions of nonbinary 'trending' or being something that can be tried on can feel just as hurtful. Being told that being nonbinary was 'a phase' or 'a fad' was familiar to many in the group. We agreed that 'everyone goes through phases in their life', but that 'even if it was a phase, even then it should be respected or treated well. Even if you think it's a phase and you're worried that if they go any further it might hurt them, it's still good to listen to them because through phases you still grow'.

Many identified with having phases as part of the process of figuring things out. Like trying to be a manly man or womanly woman before realising that was actually not what felt right.

'I had a phase of "must be man, must get packer" and all the things, but then I realised no, that's other people telling you that.'<sup>14</sup>

There is A LOT of pressure to know or decide who or what you are and to stick to it once you've decided – once you've 'come out'. And there is often even more pressure for trans folks to conform to gender binaries than for cisgender people. These pressures – which aren't just imagined but come from parents, family, friends, schools, doctors, forms, police, TV, the internet and almost all places – can also sneak into trans and queer communities in the form of lateral violence and even recruit us into questioning our own knowledge about who we are.

*If these pressures were hungry beasts – what is it that's feeding them? Who or what benefits from nonbinary people questioning whether they're really trans or trans enough?*

*What are the ways that queer, trans and nonbinary people (and their allies) can collaborate to make visible these pressures and decline invitations to follow them down winding paths?*

*How can we honour that pain and struggle are a big part of some trans people's experiences without requiring it or measuring it in each other?*

Perhaps it doesn't have to be one or the other. Perhaps it can be both-and. If there is one thing nonbinary people are incredible at, it's holding two different things that some might consider to be contradictory at the same time. Holding space for nonbinary and trans people, telling stories of what it means identify as trans or NB while at the same time celebrating fluidity of expression and identity, celebrating phases, making sure that there isn't ever only one story of what it means to be a trans person. Because that's the cis narrative and we're not about that.

## Externalising gender dysphoria

Externalising GD – separating the problem from the person – enables deconstruction and supports trans folks to be in dialogue with GD, rather than defined by it. The term GD has been institutionalised and popularised to such an extent that many young people I meet with treat it as universal and objective in nature. Externalising questions can illuminate a diversity of meanings and experiences. Consulting trans young



people about GD in the presence of their loved ones enables collaborative resistance and means that young people are less isolated in their efforts to respond to transphobia and transnormativity. I proposed the idea of externalising GD to Morgan, who identifies as nonbinary, and their mum, Kate. I started out by explaining a bit about externalising practices and enquired about whether Morgan would be up for trying it out. I wanted to be transparent about the practice in the hope that I might invite them to continue externalising GD beyond the counselling room. They decided they would like to try it.

The conversation that followed was shaped by Michael White's statement of position map 1 (2007). I asked Morgan if they would be able to draw GD on the whiteboard, which they did. I checked in about whether it was called GD or maybe something else and was surprised to find out that this character was called 'Ghostie Boi' and that Ghostie Boi used she/her pronouns. I was interested in when she first showed up in Morgan's life and found out that it had arrived during puberty. I asked when Ghostie Boi was loudest or most present and learnt that sometimes she shouted at Morgan, other time she whispered, but she consistently hung around. We zeroed in on when it was that she shouted (when Morgan was doing feminine things or in a place where they were not 'out') and when she whispered (when Morgan wore stuff with pink on it, put their weight on one leg, or talked with their hands).<sup>15</sup> The shouting and whispering also had different effects including changing Morgan's behaviour, making them feel like garbage and having them question 'am I actually a trans person?' Interestingly, sometimes Ghostie Boi would go quiet, but even when that happened, the lack of distress and apparent GD had Morgan questioning whether that might mean they weren't a real trans person. This is another poignant example of the effects of the pathologised definition of transness as being validated by the experience of gender dysphoria.

I asked about what Ghostie Boi intended for Morgan's life and where she got her ideas and beliefs from. She wanted Morgan to be *either* a binary trans guy OR a cis woman.<sup>16</sup> She was most supported in her self-righteous commitment that this would be best for Morgan by some of Morgan's distant cisgender family, by random people on the internet, by the gender binary and whenever people didn't use Morgan's pronouns – they/them. When Morgan would get misgendered, Ghostie Boi would say to them 'Mmm, see! They agree with me!' I asked how Morgan would respond to Ghostie Boi and they told me that they would shout

back 'fuck off! You're wrong. I am not a woman and I am not a man'.

It wasn't a surprise to me that Ghostie Boi's beliefs conflicted with Morgan's own. Morgan is a passionate advocate for diversity and binary resistance and always trusts that people are who they say they are without expecting them to prove it. They told me that in spite of Ghostie Boi's attempts to persuade them otherwise, they knew that they don't need a certificate from a professional to prove they're trans because they knew themselves better than Ghostie Boi or a psychologist did. After learning so much about the influence Ghostie Boi had on Morgan's life and the ways Morgan responded to those effects, Morgan told me they were okay with Ghostie Boi being around. It seemed like she didn't have the same influence that she used to. At the end of the conversation, Kate said she understood a lot more about GD's influence in Morgan's life.

## Relational enquiries

As often as possible, I ask questions that invoke relationship and make visible the ways loved ones participate in co-constructing each other's sense of self, whether or not they are in the room. These questions are inspired by Carlson and Haire's theory of relational accountability (2014), White's re-membering conversations map (2007) and the work of Nylund (2019). Examples of these questions include:

- What's your sense of how your child experienced your response to them telling you they identify as trans/nonbinary?
- What do you think your child was hoping for in sharing this with you? What might it say about the value they place on their relationship with you? How might they have been hoping you would respond?
- What do you think your child might appreciate about how you responded? What kind of a difference do you think that might have made for them?
- Are there ways in which your understanding of your own gender, sexuality or society has been influenced by your child? What has this made more possible in your life?

When I ask what stood out about our conversation, parents have often told me they found most useful the questions that had them thinking from their child's perspective or experience.

I ask parents of queer young people to tell me about their hopes for their child's life, for their family and for their relationship with their child. I ask about the values that guide their parenting and the history of how those values became important to them. This establishes a preferred terrain of identity, which can later enable me to enquire about trickier subjects, like whether fear, grief or discomfort have them acting in ways that do not align with their preferred way of parenting. Mark and Alice said, 'it's all about our kids' wellbeing – whatever makes them happy'. This was the primary value that informed their parenting. I elicited more detail about this value and its history. They told me about a sense of loss at their child not using their birth name and about not being ready to use 'he/him' pronouns. Because of our previous conversation, I was able to ask about the effects on their child of them not having used his preferred name and pronouns up until that point.<sup>17</sup> I didn't want to invite blame, shame or defensiveness, but I did want to allow them to consider whether their practices of using their child's birth name and previous pronouns fit with their 'whatever makes them happy' philosophy. We were then able to talk about what might make using the new name and pronouns more possible.

When I work with young people, I ask about who affirms their queerness, and what it is those people know or appreciate about them that others might miss. I ask who or what has made it possible for them to develop their understanding of, or relationship with masculinity/femininity/gender. Responses include family members who value nonjudgement or who flout norms of gender, K-pop artists, Ru Paul's Drag race, queer instagrammers and youtubers, characters in books, cosplay conventions, queer youth drop-in spaces and other queer people at school. I seek to enquire about and make visible what those spaces or people do that affirms their sense of personhood as much as I enquire about the forms of discrimination that undermine it. I also ask about what the young people do that makes it possible for them to experience that affirmation, whether it be gathering courage to attend a queer community event, seeking out and posting in trans forums on Discord or Facebook, or creating culture in their friendship group in which it's okay to be who you are.

If they are consulting me about homophobia, biphobia or transphobia showing up in their home, I try to draw out multi-storied accounts of their loved ones and use my nonbinary superpowers to avoid getting drawn into dichotomies of parents or other family members being supportive or unsupportive (Nylund, 2019). One of the

trans young people I work with, whose parents felt their religious beliefs meant it was not possible to affirm her gender, told me 'I don't want anyone to ... give them a firm talking to. It wouldn't be fair justice on them'. I was curious about what she would want for her parents and she said: 'right now, them being able to talk about how they feel is fair enough.'

I want to make space for young people to speak about the effects of their loved one's actions, and about what those responses might speak to. I ask about what might get in the way of loved ones acting in affirming ways. The nonbinary youth group identified that fear sometimes had parents responding in ways that were less helpful. I captured some of this conversation in a collective document including some questions for parents. My hope was that the young people might be invited into noticing the effect that transphobia was having on their parents, and that any parents who read the document might be invited into examining whether fear had them responding in ways that did not align with their ethics as a parent.

We spoke a lot about parents. Memories of being told 'I have a son, not a daughter', 'thank God you're straight', 'where did I go wrong, I've failed you as a mother', 'never associate with this person, they're going to turn you weird' about another gender-nonconforming person. What it's like when parents seem to use male pronouns as much as possible in spite of knowing you prefer 'they'. Many of us had stories of parents saying things like, 'it's fine if you're gay, it might even be okay if you're a trans man or a woman, but it's not okay to be nonbinary'. All of these moments have effects. They make it harder to know that it's okay to be who we are.

One of us spoke about not blaming their mother because it was a terrible time for both of them.

'I am going through all this but so is she in a way.'

We discussed the Fear that parents often express. We wondered, what might this Fear speak to? And what might it obscure? We wondered about whether the fear might be that we would get less opportunities as a nonbinary person – that our lives might be harder.

For any parents of gender-resisting kids reading this:

- Has Fear been around for you? What is it telling you about the life or future of your child?
- Do you ever question the stories Fear tells you?

Are there any things you know about your child that stand against those stories?

- What is the Fear an expression of or testament to?
- What supports the Fear? Are there any things, people or places that makes the Fear smaller?
- Does Fear have you acting in ways that fit with how you want to be as a parent? Or is it separating you from your preferred ways of parenting?
- Did your parents ever get captured by Fear in ways that had them acting in ways that you experienced as harmful? What was that like? What did you wish they knew or understood about you at the time?
- Would there be anything else that you would prefer to guide you in your parenting rather than Fear?

## Fostering collaboration through therapeutic documents

Many of the families I work with collaborate in all sorts of creative ways to respond to problems in their lives, and I want to make visible the skills, knowledges and values that make these collaborations possible. When our conversations unearth stories of collaboration, I try to rescue words and capture those stories in therapeutic documents (Freedman, Epston, & Lohvits, 1997). Morgan and Kate had been jointly resisting rigid notions of gender for many years before meeting me. They told me about the safe bubble they had created as a family and I documented some of what stood out from the conversation in a therapeutic letter filled with questions I hoped might thicken the stories of collaboration.

Kate, you mentioned the *safe bubble* and the challenges that might come up outside of that bubble. I was interested to know what each of you in the family has done to create that *safe bubble* and what it takes to sustain it. And Morgan, what kind of a difference does it make having access to that bubble? What does the existence of this bubble say about your family and what you value? As a family, you *started talking about pronouns years ago*. It sounds like you have quite a lot of experience in thinking about and practicing using different pronouns. Kate, I wonder what you would share with other parents who are only just beginning

to think about using different pronouns for their child? What kinds of skills or supports have you called on? What kinds of values have fostered your commitment and had you keeping on correcting yourself when 'she' slips out?

I was interested in how both of your relationships and understandings of gender have shifted over time. Kate, you said: *What surprised me was how different Morgan was treated as a boy. So eye opening to see how differently the world treats the same person. And highlights hugely the bias and that the reason we have gender is to work out how to treat someone. Not even gender but whether you have a vagina or a penis.*

I asked what those things might be named as, and Morgan reckoned it was *sexism/prejudice/old white men*. Kate, you spoke about it being *ingrained* and noticing the way it shows up in your relationships with your other children. What does it take to step into this kind of awareness of sexism, prejudice, white men, gender? Is it hard? Easy? Something in between? Does it take work, skill or a kind of knowledge to hold on to that awareness? What does it say about what's important to you both that you step into these spaces of challenging taken-for-granted norms? Are those things different for both of you? Or are there some things that are shared?

There are many creative ways of capturing stories of collaboration including using a whiteboard and rescuing words during a conversation. Documents can make visible the particular skills of living and values that guide families in how they relate, which can often pass by unnoticed.

'Therapeutic interaction is a two-way phenomenon. We get together with people for a period of time over a range of issues, and all of our lives are changed for this.' (White, 1995, p. 7) At the same time that I am making queer invitations, I am being invited into new ideas, knowledge, language and culture; invited to witness the vast diversity of queer experiences; invited to question my own taken-for-granted assumptions and to notice when my nonbinary superpowers have departed and I've been captured by a totalising discourse; invited to pay closer attention to all the creative ways that people are resisting oppression and refusing to go along with norms that don't fit for them. I'm humbled and all the queerer for having these conversations.

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## Notes

1. LGBTIQ is one of many acronyms used by community services in Australia to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer or questioning folks.
2. **Gender diverse**: a term that encapsulates transgender, nonbinary and agender identities, gender nonconformity and experiences of questioning or exploring gender roles and expressions beyond the ones assigned at birth.
3. **MFEQ**: made for each other
4. **Heteronormativity**: the assumption that binary gender roles are necessarily linked to binary sex categories and that normative heterosexual relationships are 'natural' and superior. This assumption results in the privileging of heterosexual, monogamous romantic and sexual relationships, including through institutions like marriage, the education system, the legal system and the medical system.  
**Homonormativity**: ideas that normalise and naturalise being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender but maintain white, cisgender, heterosexual institutions and practices as central and superior (e.g. getting married, being monogamous, engaging in consumerism, having masc and femme roles in relationships, erasure of bisexuality).  
**Transnormativity**: ideas that normalise and naturalise transness, privilege certain ways of being trans (e.g. 'passing' as a cisgender person, 'real' trans people have surgery and hormone replacement therapy, nonbinary erasure) and put pressure on trans folks to conform to fixed binary gender.

5. **QTPOC**: queer and trans people of colour.  
**Kinky**: refers to people with nonnormative sexual practices and preferences.  
**Poly**: refers to people and relationships that are not romantically or sexually monogamous.
6. **Transmasculine**: a term used to describe people who were assigned female at birth but identify with masculinities to a greater extent than femininities. This includes people who identify as male as well as people who do not identify with binary gender.
7. *The L Word* is an iconic American Canadian lesbian TV drama from the early 2000s.
8. AJ is a pseudonym.
9. **Misgendering**: when a person is gendered incorrectly, either through the use of the wrong pronouns or by being described with other gendered language (e.g. calling a transwoman he instead of she or describing a nonbinary person as a girl).
10. **Transfeminine**: a term used to describe people who were assigned male at birth but identify with femininities to a greater extent than masculinities. This includes people who identify as female as well as people who do not identify with binary gender.
11. The Feast Queer Youth Drop-in is one of the local social recreational support spaces for queer young people in Adelaide. It is run every two weeks.
12. **Nonbinary**: a person who does not identify as male or female or who critiques the idea of binary gender including by not identifying with any gender. Some nonbinary people may identify with the term trans, others may not.
13. **Trans trenders**: a derogatory term suggesting people are identifying as trans as part of a fad or to get attention. This term also suggests that it is not possible to identify as transgender if you do not experience gender dysphoria.
14. **Packer**: something that creates a bulge in the pants such as a prosthetic penis.
15. When Morgan spoke about not being 'out', they were referring to being in spaces where people did not know they are trans or nonbinary and wrongly assumed that they were a girl.
16. **Cis or cisgender**: people whose gender identity aligns with the gender they were assigned at birth.
17. Mark and Alice are pseudonyms.

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