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QUEERING NARRATIVES, HONORING LIVES

Chicken Smarts

Thirteen-year-old Quinn, a cisgender BIPOC girl, settled into the chair next to me and reached for the candy jar. Her parents, Eric (a Black, straight, cisgender man) and Rachel (a white, straight, cisgender woman), sat on the loveseat across from us. The four of us had met a handful times before, and the family always came prepared to talk about any new developments and challenges they were addressing since Quinn had come out as bi. I enjoyed their humor and the affection they expressed for each other, and I especially appreciated how fiercely supportive and proud of Quinn Rachel and Eric were.

Eventually the conversation landed on the topic of, in Quinn's words, "coming out to more people at school." As Quinn talked, I heard an all-too-common refrain: "I'm just not brave enough to come out to them." I'd often heard both young people and adults disparage themselves for lacking the courage to come out to certain people. Of course, I had questions.

"Quinn," I asked, "what kinds of situations or experiences have you encountered in your life that required courage?"

"Well, I guess stuff that seems scary. Like when I auditioned for the musical. Also, when I told my teacher last year that he was wrong about something."

“OK, so stuff that seems scary requires some kind of courage...Is something at risk in those scary situations—something that matters to you?”

Quinn nodded. “With the teacher, I was afraid I’d get in trouble, or he’d say something to embarrass me. With the musical, I just really wanted to be in it with my friends. I didn’t want to miss out.”

I asked Quinn if I could check with her parents about when they’d seen her have courage, and she agreed.

Eric and Rachel talked about how they saw Quinn as being “very courageous, but not stupid.”

“For example,” Rachel said, “when Quinn was about eight, she told her best three friends that she wouldn’t play with them anymore if they kept making racist comments about the Somali family that lives down the street...We weren’t sure, to be honest, how these kids or their parents would react, and Quinn had literally grown up playing with these three little girls. They were tight, and she knew she could lose them, but she said it was OK because she had other friends who aren’t mean.”

Eric added, “That’s what we mean by courageous but not stupid: it was a risk, but she understood what was at stake and had a back-up plan. She might end up hurt and sad, but she knew she’d be OK.”

“OK,” I said. “So, does she have smart courage, or courageous smarts?”

“Both!” Quinn half-shouted. Her parents nodded in agreement.

Eric said, “I also think she used smart courage when she came out to us. It was really brave to come out to us, but I hope for her it wasn’t stupid. I mean, she knew we’d support her.”

Quinn added, “I didn’t feel brave coming out to you because it wasn’t scary. I didn’t think that anything bad would happen.”

We talked for a few minutes about what this meant in terms of their connection, the trust among them, how well Rachel and Eric were living into their mission as parents, and the security Quinn experienced with them. Then I said, “So, if I have this right, stuff that’s scary, where something bad could happen, requires courage. But stuff that isn’t scary, and something bad can’t happen—like coming out to your parents—doesn’t require courage. Am I keeping up?”

“Barely!” Quinn said, then popped some candy in her mouth.

“Thank you for bearing with me.” I smiled. “So, regarding coming out to everyone at school, how do you assess this situation—is it one that requires courage, or nah?”

“Totally. It’s really scary,” Quinn said seriously.

“And, would you say that you’re using smart courage or courageous smarts, or both, or something else?”

"I don't know. . . I don't have any courage. I'm a chicken."

"Quinn, do smart courage and courageous smarts mean that you always do the thing that's scary and risky? I mean, what would stupid courage or courageous stupidity look like? Wait, maybe it's chicken smarts?"

Quinn paused. Then she laughed and looked at her parents. "I don't know. . . What do you mean by chicken smarts?"

"Well, I'm wondering a couple of things. First, in general, does having courage and smarts mean you always do something that's scary? And, I'm wondering if there's something smart about being chicken in this specific situation."

"Maybe. . .?" It was half a statement, half a question.

"OK, so, before you told your teacher he was wrong, you weighed the possibility of getting in trouble and decided it was worth it. Before you auditioned, you weighed the possibility of not being in the show and missing out on stuff with your friends. When you were little, you decided you could handle not being besties with those three friends anymore if they wouldn't shut down the racist stuff. . . Do I have this right, Quinn?"

"Uh-huh."

"So, Quinn, what's at stake that you're not willing to do without, or that you're deciding is not something you should have to go through, if you come out to everyone at school?"

"Well, I could get beat up, or teased, and all the stuff that straight people do to queer people. I go to a really conservative school."

"Quinn, are you saying that you're not willing to get beat up or teased or subjected to homophobic stuff?"

"I'm not stupid!"

"No, you're not. In fact, is this what chicken smarts might be?"

"Yeah, I guess so!" Quinn laughed.

"Quinn, if you're using chicken smarts to keep from getting beat up and stuff, does that mean you value your safety and dignity?"

"Well, yeah. I do. I never thought of it like that."

"Is it okay if I ask your parents some questions?"

"Sure," Quinn said.

I asked Eric and Rachel if they had any other stories about Quinn taking care of her own safety and dignity. They offered a few examples, and I asked them if they saw any connection between Quinn's history of keeping herself safe and how she was now protecting herself at school. They both did. "In every example" Rachel said, "Quinn chose her safety over what she would hope for someday—but other people or circumstances made it too dangerous for her, either physically or emotionally."

I asked Rachel, "So, you saw, and now see, Quinn staying away from danger?"

Rachel nodded. Eric said, “Totally.”

“So, she’s engaging in practices of protection?”

Eric’s face opened in a smile. Rachel said, “Absolutely.”

I turned back to Quinn. “So, what do you think about what your parents said? Are you engaging in practices of protection?”

Quinn’s mouth fell open a little. Then the words “Yes, yes I am!” jumped out.

We continued talking about how chicken smarts, courageous smarts, and smart courage were all types of Quinn’s practices of protection. Quinn also identified some other practices that she used at school, and out in the community, that involved friends and family helping her. She dubbed these people her “protection posse.”

By the end of the conversation, Quinn decided that “I’m out to the people that I want to be out to, right now. I’m not going to win a medal if I tell every random kid at school.”

We all agreed that this showed all kinds of smarts and courage—and that it was a testimony to Quinn’s regard for her own worth.

As we wrapped up the session, Quinn pulled her phone out of her pocket and starting feverishly texting. Eric asked her to put the phone away until they left.

“Sorry,” Quinn said. “I’m just texting Sonny, Bree, Jessi, and André to tell them that they’re not chicken—they have chicken smarts!”

From Queer Narratives to Queering Narratives

When a 13-year-old queer girl (or, really, a queer or trans person of any age) collapses the identity of “chicken” onto themselves, my discursive landscape compass immediately points to the *compulsory coming out* narrative. This influential discourse comes out of various models of identity development¹ that position “coming out” as a targeted achievement and end point (Tilsen, 2013), in which queer and trans people ostensibly emerge from a universalized developmental trajectory, and are then whole and complete.

This narrative relies, first and foremost, on the individualistic notion of an essential self. According to this notion, there is an “authentic self” that develops within people, and this self includes their gender and sexuality (although, as we’ve seen, these categories are highly unstable). It also relies on the institutionalization of heterosexuality and cisgenderism. After all, there would be nothing for anyone to develop into and come out to if we didn’t set cisness and straightness as defaults—and if gender and sexuality were not categories into which we sorted people.

In this chapter, I provide some queer critiques of this pervasive discourse. I offer an alternative queer theory-informed narrative therapy approach to working with this important issue. And I critique another prevalent (and related) narrative: *the parental loss narrative*. As with the coming out narrative, I provide alternative ways to engage people around this idea of “losing a child” when that child comes out.

Q-TIPS: NARRATIVE THERAPY IN ACTION

In my conversation with Quinn and her parents, I did a good deal of deconstructing and asking meaning-making questions. I’d like you to read that vignette again, and identify some of the narrative therapy practices that I used.

Here are a few examples:

- **Absent but implicit:** I asked Quinn about what was on the other side of the scariness she experienced—that is, what mattered to her—when she considered coming out to someone. This paved the way for our conversation about protecting what matters to her
- **Externalizing:** I externalized chicken smarts, smart courage, courageous smarts, and practices of protection, rather than locating them internally, as Quinn’s characteristics or attributes
- **Multiple perspectives:** I sought Rachel and Eric’s input. This provided not only a variety of perspectives, but also a history that enabled us to connect Quinn’s current courageous smarts and smart courage to her past actions and decisions.

Coming In from Coming Out

In general, therapists—queer and cis, straight and trans—are trained to encourage coming out. Yet our cultural and professional infatuation with the individualistic ideal of “being yourself” can obscure the unique complexities surrounding any person’s coming out and being out. Although this stance is well-intentioned, assuming that stance is potentially problematic.

To begin with, compulsory coming out can function as a standard that people feel obligated to uphold. This often sows the seeds for feelings of

failure, as people evaluate themselves and feel that they are not coming out in the “right way.” Quinn was caught up in self-evaluation because she felt that she was failing a standard of being totally out to everyone.

A second problem is the implication that not coming out represents internalized homophobia, and is dishonest, and lacks courage—that is, that if a person chooses not to come out to everyone, they’re broken or bad in some way. For example, recall the story of Cesar from Chapter 2. His white American friends accused him of internalized homophobia and of not being honest with himself. Yet they ignored important cultural contexts that involved not only Cesar’s physical safety, but also the safety of his connections with family. This was an ill-suited and ill-advised standard for coming out. LaTrisha (from Chapter 1) also faced allegations of internalized homophobia, because she took a stand against identity labels and categories. In short, compulsory coming out perpetuates the burden of individualism and the privatization of social problems by placing the responsibility of coming out on individual persons, while ignoring both context and personal meaning-making.

Discourses around honesty in coming out are especially problematic—and especially powerful. I often hear people say, “I don’t want to lie about who I am.” I also hear therapists say that they want to encourage people “to be honest about who they are.” Of course, I am not advocating dishonesty or lying. I am saying that the honest/dishonest binary, like most binaries, is limiting. It ignores context, and it values one of only two acceptable and recognized positions (in this case, honesty) over the other.

For an alternative way to approach the notion of honesty, we can turn to Foucault’s (1997) ideas about what he calls *games of truth*. Foucault defines truth games as “a set of rules by which truth is produced” (p. 197). According to Foucault, truth is socially constructed, and both produced by and productive of power relations. When we participate in games of truth, we engage in self-subjugation and self-policing that are indistinguishable from the policing of identity by dominating discourses, institutions, systems, structures, and people. The compulsory coming out discourse becomes a truth game when people’s primary or sole purpose for coming out is a response to this pressure to “be honest.”

When I explore this with clients, I inquire about their relationship with honesty, and why it’s something they value. This enables them to honor and thicken the story of their relationship with honesty. I also ask

questions that situate their experience in discourse. This positions us to consider how “failing at honesty”³ might also mean resisting unjust or dishonest expectations. It might also mean succeeding at maintaining dignity, practices of protection, or something else that matters.

Here are some sample questions I might ask a client as we deconstruct discourses of honesty:

- Can you tell me about your history with honesty, and what about it matters to you?
- Who has inspired your relationship with honesty?
- Who else can relate stories about your relationship with honesty?
- Could there be situations when there’s something other than honesty or dishonesty involved—where there are some complexities or nuances? What examples of such situations can you think of, either from your own experience or the experience of others?
- Do you think all people always respect the truths of others? Has everybody always respected your truth?
- Given how much you value honesty, how do you decide who deserves your truth, and who does not?
- What might be the relationship between considerations of honesty/dishonesty and practices of protection?
- Think again about the people you know who can speak of your relationship with honesty. What advice do you think they would give you about coming out—and about honesty—in situations that you see as unsafe?
- If not coming out in a particular situation is dishonest, does this make you a liar? Does it erase all the times you’ve been honest?
- Is it fair or just to consider yourself or someone else a “liar” if they choose to engage in practices of protection?
- Do you think that a world that assumes cisness and straightness is honest in making those assumptions?
- If the assumption of cisness and straightness is not honest, then how is it that you and other trans or queer people end up as dishonest—or as liars?

Stories of being liars, and/or of lacking courage, place the problems of homophobia and transphobia squarely on the shoulders of queer and

trans people. The questions in the list above, and others like them, free people from this unjust burden by situating the issue of coming out in discourse. They also challenge the binaries of honest/dishonest and courageous/cowardly, and situate them not as essential qualities of a person, but as relational acts. Each such act occurs within, and is influenced by, the discourse—as well as by the politics and the ethics of the particular relationship involved.

What are the implications for your therapy practice? By situating honesty and courage in discourse—and understanding them as relational activities rather than as essential, internal characteristics—we are better positioned to help people generate thick, contextualized stories. For Quinn, understanding what she was doing as “practices of protection” and “chicken smarts” (practices that had both a history and appreciative witnesses) freed her from the thin and problem-saturated identity conclusion that she lacked courage. These practices then became available to Quinn as important skills that she could use again, as she saw fit.

When people who are tangled up in truth games have a chance to question the idea of “being honest,” they often tell stories that involve practices of protection and taking care of relationships. There are other practices, too, that can help people navigate the complexities and contradictions that this issue is thick with. For example, Randy—a white, cis, gay man from a fundamentalist Christian family—said to me, “Not everyone deserves my truth, because they’ll distort it to hurt me and others.” Randy’s pronouncement is as clear a comment on the politics of truth as I’ve ever heard.

While claiming a queer identity can be enormously powerful and liberating for some people, coming out “is not an equal-opportunity endeavor” (Tilsen & Nylund, 2010). For example, the consequences of coming out and being out are different for me as an older, middle-class, white, cisgender professional living in the United States than they may be for people who occupy other social locations—or for people with less financial stability or less access to support and resources. This is another critical reason for taking up an intersectional approach.

Given the contexts of heteronormativity, homonormativity, and cis-normativity, visibility is undeniably important for queer and trans people. This means that, as a therapist, you need to reconcile the tension between queer theory’s questioning of mandatory identity practices

(e.g., fixed categories and compulsory coming out) and the personal and collective political power that people experience through coming out (Tilsen, 2013).

Cultural theorist Jack (formerly Judith) Halberstam (2005) queers the process and trajectory of the conventional coming out narrative and offers a useful stance for this dilemma. Halberstam suggests that, rather than coming out being an end point, it is a starting point from which we ask the question, *Now what?* Other questions naturally follow: *In what ways might your identity continue to unfold or emerge from this place? What does being out make possible for you and others? How can you use your outness to challenge the constraints of normativity?* Embracing coming out as a collective practice that cultivates community, rather than as an individual task to accomplish, is one way to re-imagine and re-organize our relationship with coming out. In doing so, we help generate, make available, and welcome in an abundance of nuanced and situated stories. One or more of these can then be selected and lived into.

Conversations such as these signal our recognition of both the constructive and the problematic aspects of coming out. They also help us to have complex and generative conversations with our clients about meaningful futures.

We can understand coming out as a political reality in a heteronormative, homonormative, and cisnormative world, while simultaneously fostering resistance to the oppressive realities that make coming out a perceived necessity.

Ultimately, what matters is that we approach coming out with a critical curiosity; an openness to a variety of ways people make meaning of it; and conceptual and conversational resources that question the effects of coming out or not coming out.

Q-TIPS: REFLECTING ON COMING OUT

Consider these questions (with a conversational partner or by yourself) about coming out:

- How have you thought about coming out?
- What position do you take with clients on coming out?
- How does intersectionality influence your thoughts about coming out?

- Do you think straight and cis people should practice routine coming out?
- What's new for you to consider? What's challenging? What new possibilities are emerging for you?

What does all of this look like in the therapy room? In addition to having conversations about practices of protection and resisting dishonest demands for honesty, I have conversations about *inviting people in* (Beckett, 2007; Tilsen, 2013). Extrapolating on White's (1997) idea of each of us having a *club of life* (in which we choose whom we invite into our lives and who merits a high-status membership, based on how much we value their influence), I ask questions such as these:

- Who would you like to invite into your life, where you can be a gracious host—rather than coming out into a hostile world that treats you as an unwelcome stranger?
- How do people qualify for a platinum-level membership in the club of your life? A gold-level membership? A silver? A bronze?
- What are disqualifiers—things that prevent people from being invited in?
- What will people discover when you invite them in that isn't available to them from the outside?
- What difference do you imagine (or have you experienced) inviting people in will make, compared to when you come out?
- Who do you get to be when you've hand-selected who you invite in? How does this compare to whom you get to be when you feel pressured to come out?

Shifting the conversation from coming out to inviting others in puts people in charge of their own stories and processes. It also undoes the all-or-nothing, in-the-closet/out-of-the-closet binary that's at least implicit, and often explicit, in the conventional coming out narrative. Thus, we create space for the relationship complexities, nuances, and contradictions that most people live with.

Critiquing the compulsory coming out narrative does not imply that it is universally and categorically wrong. For some people, surely, it is

useful and relevant. My purpose here is not to completely devalue a dominating discourse, but to critique it—and to remind you that such a critique makes visible what has been obscured by the very domination of that discourse. In other words, we critique influential discourses in order to stay mindful of the assumptions that uphold them—and to acknowledge that these discourses do not include or apply to everyone. This is one way we can stay close to our clients' experiences—and avoid participating in games of truth and other dominating practices.

Q-TIPS: RESISTING THE BINARY OF SUPPORTIVE/ NOT SUPPORTIVE

How often do you say (or think) that someone is either supportive or not supportive of a queer or trans person? This is an easy binary to fall into, but one that is very important for therapists to unpack. If we don't, we run the risk of overlooking meaningful nuances—and missing opportunities to nurture relationships between queer and trans people and the significant people in their lives.

Support is not an all-or-nothing thing; it almost always happens in degrees. There are a variety of ways of expressing support. For example, a parent may not understand or support their trans or nonbinary child's desire for gender affirmation surgery, but they may use their child's chosen name and respect their pronouns. Or, a gay man's sister may not be willing to go to a gay drag show with him at a gay bar, but she may welcome him and his boyfriend into her home.

Finding points of support—even imperfect or partial support—is important for starting conversations, and for keeping them going. Allowing support to occur in steps, or to unfold over time, respects the complexity of support, focuses on relationships, and provides an opportunity for queer and trans people to experience greater affirmation from significant people in their lives.

Say Goodbye to the Parental Loss Narrative

Jen and Owen, both straight, cisgender, and white, were the parents of their five-year-old gender-creative trans daughter, C.J. Owen and Jen met with me to talk about some questions they were grappling with around parenting C.J.

After our initial introductions, I asked if I could “meet” C.J. through some pictures or videos they had on their phones. Jen showed me a video of C.J. wearing purple tights, a long, polka-dot t-shirt, and a blinged-out tiara. C.J. was singing the theme from *Frozen*, punctuating the high notes with dramatic, full-body gestures. “C.J. loves theatrics,” Owen said, laughing.

The couple shared how C.J., who was assigned male at birth, first told them that she was a girl when she started pre-school a year earlier. They decided at the time to, as Jen said, “give him some room, not force anything.” She described trying to make available all kinds of clothes and toys for C.J., “so that his stuff didn’t have to be gendered.”

Owen added, “We wanted him to get the idea that there’s not a right way to be a boy, and that he could be any kind of a boy he wanted to be—including a boy who likes and does what some people think are girl things.”

“The thing is,” Jen said, “C.J. isn’t any kind of boy. She’s a girl. And it took us almost a year to really believe her.”

As we talked, it was clear that Jen and Owen were advocating fiercely for C.J. They had set clear expectations with extended family members about pronouns and C.J.’s name. (They were using the initials of her given name until C.J. decided she wanted to change her name.) They made sure that play dates validated C.J.’s female gender. They made sure that C.J.’s school was supportive of gender-creative and trans children, in both its policies and its practices. It was clear to me that Owen and Jen were as responsive as possible to their child’s needs. They had also connected with some other parents of trans and gender-creative children for perspective and support.

Yet, while doing what they needed to do for C.J., Owen and Jen found themselves struggling with some conflicting feelings. “We absolutely know we’re doing what’s best for C.J.,” Owen said. (Jen nodded her agreement.) “But sometimes one of us, or both of us, feels sad about it. It’s not about worry or fear about the challenges she’ll face—that’s real, and something to talk about sometime, for sure. This is something different than that.”

Jen added, “Yeah, it’s like, we see how absolutely happy she is now, and how it hurts her if someone misgenders her. It feels like a selfish thing we both get caught up in. It’s a kind of disappointment, like we’ve lost the little boy we had...or thought we had.”

They both explained that they felt bad about feeling bad. They wanted to celebrate the happiness and freedom that C.J. was experiencing, but they weren’t able to. Owen said, “Some people, including my own therapist, tell us it’s natural to feel this way, and that it’s a loss we need to grieve. But both Jen and I go back and forth on that.”

The discourse that Owen named—the discourse of parental loss—receives less attention in the professional literature than the coming out discourse. Yet it influences many queer and trans people, many of their parents, and many of their therapists. In fact, when I do trainings or consultations, I’m often asked how to address “parental grief and loss.”

Understandably, this discourse seems to matter a great deal to therapists. Bull and D'Arrigo-Patrick (2018) reviewed the family therapy literature and called the prevalence of this discourse "striking" (p. 174). A somewhat parallel review of the literature marketed to the parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children (Martin, Hutson, Kazyak, & Scherrer, 2010) reveals an extensive history of equating coming out as queer "to the death of a loved one" (Bull & D'Arrigo-Patrick, 2018, p. 174).

Many self-help books treat the emergence of a child's queer identity as, at best, disappointing to parents and, often, as tragic. Both the professional and lay literature cite Kubler-Ross's stages of grief as a framework for "working through" and "incorporating" the "loss" of a child who is queer or trans. One study of families with a transgender family member used the concept of *ambiguous loss* to explore people's reactions to having someone in the family come out as trans (Norwood, 2012).

Bull and D'Arrigo-Patrick (2018) acknowledge that some parents do experience feelings of grief and loss when their child announces their queer or trans identity. However, they also suggest that questioning the prevalence of the parental loss discourse in the professional literature (and the assumptions that undergird it) is necessary, so that therapists can avoid centering that discourse or imposing it on clients.

The parental loss narrative assumes straightness and cisness as defaults. To see this more clearly, let's return to my conversation with Jen and Owen. During our discussion, I strove to take a both/and approach, in which I honored and validated their feelings, and also asked questions that invited them to examine where those feelings came from. This is of course a queer approach; it's relational rather than individual in multiple ways. It locates feelings in the social world (i.e., in discourse) rather than views them as an internal state. It approaches gender transition as a family experience that involves all members and their relationships with each other. It questions norms. And it challenges one of therapy's most sacred cows: the exalted status of feelings.

Here is how my conversation with Owen and Jen continued:

JULIE: When it "feels like a loss," I'm wondering what has gone missing, or is no longer present in your lives, that's important to you, that you value?

JEN: I guess it's the ideas I had about who C.J. is, or who she would become. The idea that C.J. is a boy. That's what's gone.

OWEN: When you ask that, I think, *Well, what have we lost, actually?* C.J. is still C.J. But I still feel it...

JULIE: Yeah, that feeling is strong. It keeps a hold on you?

OWEN: Yes, very much.

JULIE: Owen, Jen said it's the *idea* about C.J. being a boy that's lost. Does that fit for you, too—that there's something about that idea that's lost, and that's what keeps you feeling it?

OWEN: Yeah, it's like you organize around some sense of what it means to have a boy or a girl, even when you try to avoid all the stereotypical gender crap, like we did. We didn't want all the problems that come with the idea. But maybe there's something comforting in the idea that your kid's gender is what it is.

JULIE: Jen, I see you nodding. What's Owen touched on that resonates for you? Can you say what's wrapped up in that idea that feels important, and speaks to what feels like it's lost?

JEN: It's just this really fundamental idea of having a boy or having a girl. But we're not invested in traditional "boy things" or "girl things," so I just swim in the feeling of sadness, of loss, even though it doesn't make logical sense.

JULIE: Yeah, it doesn't make sense, given the critique you have of gender, right? And all the ways you've responded to C.J.'s gender-expansive interests and inclinations speak to your resistance to those norms. But the sadness is still there....Am I getting this?

JEN AND OWEN: Yes.

JULIE: OK, I want to make sure I understand this sadness and how it shows up, even though you've been so intentional around avoiding gender conventions. It sounds really painful. I'd like to ask some more about the idea of having a boy or having a girl. This might sound silly, but I'm really interested in understanding something—where does that idea come from? I mean, what set you up to have this fundamental idea, as Jen said, that you had a boy?

OWEN: Silly or not, that's a good question...

JEN: Yeah, it does feel like a set-up. It's everything that we're led to believe about gender...

OWEN: You know, the first question is always, "Is it a boy or girl?," and people buy stuff based on gender...

JEN: Yeah, it's like people have an idea that they can know something about a person, or a baby, by knowing the gender. And of course, the assumption is that we can even know the gender without the person having a say in it.

JULIE: OK, so there's all this stuff we do culturally that pressures us to identify gender, plus the assumption that a gender identity tells us something about the person. Plus, that someone's gender can be known independent of their having a say in it...Are there other assumptions that contributed to this set-up, and to the feelings of loss?

JEN: Well, the obvious one: that it's a girl or a boy based on their body, and that it will stay that way.

JULIE: Yeah. So, you mean it's a set-up for parents to assume that gender is based on anatomy? And that there only are boys and girls?

OWEN: Yeah, like, I knew it intellectually, and I know Jen did, too, but it was just an abstract idea. We weren't prepared for the possibility that our kid would be gender-creative and trans.

JULIE: What were you prepared for?

JEN: We were prepared to have a cisgender child who conformed to what we assumed her gender was, according to her body.

JULIE: How has your preparation for a cisgender child, and lack of preparation for a trans child, contributed to the sadness and loss you're experiencing?

JEN: Totally. I mean, that's it.

OWEN: Yeah, and that's why it doesn't feel right to feel this. We're losing an idea that's false anyway.

JEN: It's false and hurtful. I know it hurts C.J. to think that we're sad or missing something when she's so happy.

In this conversation, you can see that I took care to understand and validate Jen and Owen's experience, while I also asked questions to deconstruct their feelings. Understanding parents' feelings of grief and loss as products of discourse (rather than as "natural" internal states) shows compassion for parents. At the same time, situating loss within discourse gives parents discursive space to see that their experience is not their fault. This helps to alleviate the guilt that some parents feel.

Parents of queer and trans people did not ask for the gender binary, heteronormativity, or gender essentialism to shape their expectations and experiences of parenthood. When parents see how gender's cultural position as a powerful construct—one central to how we organize identities—contributes to their experience of loss, they can position themselves in relation to gender in ways that allow them to live into their values as parents.

In my work with clients, once the parental loss experience is deconstructed, I encourage the de-centering of gender (or sexuality, if that's the case), and uncouple it from what parents love about their child. Gender and sexuality are not typically what parents love about their children. Indeed, when I ask parents what they cherish, admire, enjoy, or love about their kids, they typically point to their children's actions, achievements, and ways of being in the world. I have never heard a parent say, "I love my child because they are a girl (or a boy)" or "We love our kids because they're straight." Through further deconstruction, we can detach personal qualities from gender or sexual identities—and, in the process, reveal the influence of discourse on constructing these specifications.

Q-TIPS: PARENTAL LOSS DISCOURSE AND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SEXUALITY AND GENDER

There are actually two parallel parental loss discourses: one about a child's sexuality (whom they are attracted to) and one about their gender (how they define and describe themselves, and what they experience themselves to be). It's of course possible to have to grapple with both discourses in regard to the same child. Let's look at how these two discourses are similar—and how they diverge.

Both involve unmet expectations established by normative discourses: heteronormativity when a child's sexuality is queer, and cisnormativity when a child is transgender. As therapists, we can help our clients deconstruct these responses, and expose the assumptions of heteronormativity or cisnormativity wrapped inside them.

However, the effects of these two normative discourses tend to be quite different. While I frequently hear parents of queer people express a loss, I never hear them say, "I could handle this if they were trans." However, I often hear parents of trans people say, "This is really

hard—I could handle it if they were gay.” This speaks to the way that gender is seen as an immutable and natural attribute, while sexuality is not. And when something we thought was permanent changes, we are likely to experience a significant loss. (Of course, queer theory demands that we interrogate the discourses that circulate stories of gender as immutable.)

Then there is the conflation of anatomy with gender identity. Parents often focus on what a transgender identity means in terms of their child’s body. Because trans and nonbinary people sometimes medically change their bodies so they can feel more at home in them, parents’ feelings of loss can be a response to a gut-level reaction to the idea of making physical changes. Bodily adaptations seem more “real” in a world where corporeal matters are privileged. This gender essentialism, coupled with the cultural power of gender as fundamental to identity, produces the perfect discursive context for parents to feel a significant loss. They feel that the very “essence” of their child is changing—along with, perhaps, the body that houses that essence.

Compare this with essentialist discourses about sexual orientation (e.g., born this way; biological and genetic explanations; etc.). While these are also dominant, and widely accepted and assumed, parents may not feel as heavy a loss when their kids come out as queer, because this does not involve a body modification.

In addition, the success of the contemporary gay rights movement’s core message—“We’re just like you”—has blurred the difference between queers and straights. Queer people are now far more widely accepted by mainstream culture than they were only a generation ago. As of 2021, however, trans people have not received this wide acceptance. Thus, part of the trans parental loss discourse includes feeling that a child’s inclusion in mainstream culture has been lost.

For example, Owen and Jen said that they always admired C.J.’s “confidence in her physical strength and abilities.” While these particular qualities are traditionally gendered as male, Jen and Owen rejected that sexist coding. Instead, they embraced C.J.’s physicality as a “reflection of her passion for life and feeling good in her body.” As they identified the many other things they cherished about C.J., I invited them to share stories around each of their daughter’s qualities—the histories

and possible futures of C.J.'s skills and attributes—so that they could imbue C.J. and her abilities with meanings other than those organized around gender.

Another practice I use when working with parents is interviewing them about their mission as parents. A Mission Interview helps parents take a bird's-eye view of their parenting by focusing on their values and aspirations as parents. This gives parents an opportunity to reclaim what matters to them, and to reposition themselves in resistance to ideas that don't align with their own values, or with their hopes for their children.

For Jen and Owen, the Mission Interview (which we did in our second meeting) allowed them to reclaim their priority of "caring for C.J. and fostering her independence and happiness." After naming their mission and identifying the principles and practices that support it, Owen and Jen came to see the cisnormativity of the parental loss discourse as a barrier to their mission. As Jen said, "Supporting and celebrating C.J.'s health and happiness is at the heart of our mission. Anything that reinforces cisness takes away from her joy and doesn't align with our mission." This helped free them from the feelings of loss.

Below are some examples of questions I might ask in a Mission Interview:

- What is your mission, purpose, or aspiration as parents or (if my client is a single parent) a parent)? If you were to write a mission statement, what would that be?
- What is the history of this Mission? Who inspired it, and how?
- What experiences have you had in your life that helped shape this Mission?
- What values and principles inform this Mission?
- What are the practices you engage in that bring these values and principles to life?
- How will you know if you've accomplished your Mission?
- What are some of the barriers to living into your Mission?
- How do the conventions of gender and sexuality support your Mission? How do they thwart or complicate it?
- Who supports you in your Mission as parents? Who helps you live into it when these barriers get in your way?

- What would your child say have been some of your greatest Parenting Mission successes?
- What advice would they have for you to better live into your Mission?
- When you are really nailing your Mission, and parenting according to its values and principles, how much do the rules of normative gender and sexuality matter?
- What would you advise parents of a queer or trans child to do to help keep themselves focused on their Mission?

Mission interviews solidify parents' commitments to their children, and to their preferred identities as parents.

Sometimes, the questions I ask in a Mission interview help parents put words to—and reclaim—intentions and practices that they already center in their lives, but may have lost sight of in the struggle to make sense of their experience of their child's sexuality and gender identity. At other times, the questions evoke responses that parents say they had never felt or considered before. This is the magic of words—the *abracadabra* of language: the ability to create new, significant meanings that help people imagine and live into stories that matter.

Queering Narratives and Narrating Queerly

Let me say it again: the conventional discourses of coming out and parental loss can be meaningful, legitimate, and well-suited to many queer and trans people and their families. But they do not define the limits of legitimacy or meaning.

As a therapist, accepting these discourses without question puts you at risk of imposing unhelpful and possibly harmful narratives on people. It also prevents you from bringing out important nuances that lend meaning to people's lives.

Queering these narratives involves questioning the previously unquestioned assumptions and the discourses they uphold. It also involves helping people to story their lives in ways that not only resist convention, but *honor* this lack of convention, in all its contradictions and complexities.

Notes

1. The emergence, acceptance, and integration of a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender identity is known variously as *identity development* (Coleman, 1981–1982), *identity formation* (Cass, 1984), *identity acquisition* (Troiden, 1979), or *differential developmental trajectories* (Savin-Williams, 1998; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 1997), depending on the model used.
2. I use “child” and “children” to define a relationship, not to distinguish age. In other words, my use of child/children is inclusive of queer and trans adults in relationship with their parents.
3. I draw on Halberstam’s (2011) idea of the *queer art of failure* here. “Failing” to do something that is unhelpful, unmeaningful, or otherwise problematic is actually an art, given the pressure to doing or complete it.