GJSS Graduate Journal of Social Science

Transgender children: more than a theoretical challenge

Natacha Kennedy and Mark Hellen

This research suggests that the majority of transgender people become aware of their gender identities at a very early age. As such many transgender children go through most, if not all, of their time in compulsory education knowing their gender identity is different from that expected of them. Transgender children are characterised as "apparent" and "non-apparent", with the vast majority being "non-apparent". It is argued that their concealment and suppression of identity for such a long period can lead to problems.

This paper examines this evidence and goes on to examine the implications of this from the point of view of children's abilities to rationalise and understand their own situations and make sense of the conflicting pressures on them to conform to gender normative behaviour and to expectations of gender which they are ultimately unable to do. As such they may spend many years of their lives unnecessarily having to deal with feelings of guilt and shame. The consequences of this are likely to be substantial underachievement in all areas of their lives.

Keywords: transgender, children, self-esteem, epiphanies, school, exclusion, diversity.

Introduction

This paper is about one of the most marginalised and excluded groups: transgender children. It is not about confident expression of challenges to existing social normative gender practices, but about their suppression. It is about concealment, suppression, stigmatisation, fear, isolation, doubt and repression. It is about how transgender children exist in the real world and how this experience may affect their lives as adults.

Initially this paper advances evidence, in contrast to what might otherwise be expected, that transgender children become aware they are transgender at much younger ages than previously considered, and that they then conceal or suppress their transgender identities. It subsequently builds on research conducted by Kennedy (2008) about the age when transgender children become aware of their gender identities examining what these children experience in greater detail. Finally,

 ISSN: 1572-3763

the implications of these findings are analysed from the point of view of the social and cultural pressures experienced by transgender children and how those pressures can affect their lives well into adulthood.

There is still relatively little written about transgender children, and much of what has been written is by mental health professionals (eg; Bradley 1985; Zucker 1985; Rekers 1987; Bradley and Zucker 1990; Zucker 1990, Green 1985, 1987). In Minter's (1999) review of these publications the reader is left with the impression that the validity of these studies is open to question as it appears that the ultimate objective of much of this research into Gender Identity 'Disorder' (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 535) in children is to legitimise the "prevention" or "elimination" of what is judged socially unacceptable gender-transgressive behaviour. Additionally, since these studies were apparently carried out with children referred for treatment by parents there may be concerns regarding validity associated with selection of participants.

Much of what has been written outside the sphere of psychiatry seems to suggest that transgender children are very rare. This was the conclusion of some participants in one case study (Hinton 2009, 77). Here, the experiences of 'J', a female–to-male (FTM) transgender child, during primary school and the early part of his secondary school career were documented, and the actions of his schools observed. In this case, the local Inspector of Equality and Diversity could find no instances of literature or guidance relating to very young transgender children:

> I contacted a range of national bodies … the Equal Opportunities Commission, the DfES and transgender agencies. None of them were able to give a clear lead. The youngest age I managed to find official information about was 16. (Hinton 2009, 77)

Individuals involved with these cases could be forgiven for thinking that transgender children are not only very rare but unlikely to develop before their late teens. However, in his commentary on the above case study Stewart (2009) suggests this is not the case, and that there are likely to be children who are less confident than J in coming out to others. Indeed, Hellen (2009) goes further, suggesting that there are two categories of transgender children (*apparent* and *non-apparent)*, and consequently that the participants' observations in Hinton's study should be reinterpreted as suggesting that *apparent* transgender children are relatively rare. This case study showed that a female-to-male transgender child who was very sure about his gender identity and having the support of his parents could be accommodated

within the school system. However, this clearly only applies to *apparent* transgender children. Evidence presented in this study suggests that the apparent transgender child is very much in the minority, and examines why *non-apparent t*ransgender children should be considered the norm when referring to transgender children.

In Kennedy's (2008) study, data was taken from an analysis of an online artefact suggesting that the average age at which transgender people become aware they are transgender is around 8 years old, and that more than 80% of transgender people become aware they are transgender before they leave primary school. The present study includes data from an online survey of transgender adults about their memories of childhood. There are many reasons for obtaining data in this way. It would be inappropriate to obtain this data directly from children since children become aware they are transgender at different times. So a complete representative picture will not be available for a given generation until they are adults. Additionally, there are ethical difficulties associated with obtaining data from children who may not be 'out' to their parents. Also there are likely to be sampling difficulties associated with identifying transgender children to take part in any study, which may result in an unrepresentative sample skewed towards apparent transgender children.

This survey employed a mixed methods approach, combining the collection of numerical data and qualitative data. Aspects such as the age at which transgender people became aware they are transgender were examined to produce a statistical analysis. The survey also examined participants' perceptions of their circumstances as transgender children revealing their feelings about what was happening to them. Data was organised to identify themes arising from these experiences and these were then analysed more closely to enable the construction of a picture of life as a transgender child from which implications may be drawn.

Data collection was via an online survey publicised through prominent online forums for transgender people in the UK between October 12th and October 19th 2009. The short timespan was intended to reduce the likelihood of malicious submissions by people who are not transgender. Approximately 80% of the responses were received within 48 hours of the survey's launch.

121 people took part; 103 were assigned male gender at birth, 11 assigned female, 3 not assigned a gender, and 4 declined to say. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to over 65, with the majority in the 36-45 age range (see fig. 1). Possible reasons for the relatively low rate of response from people in the 18 to 25 and 26 to 35 age ranges is discussed in the following section.

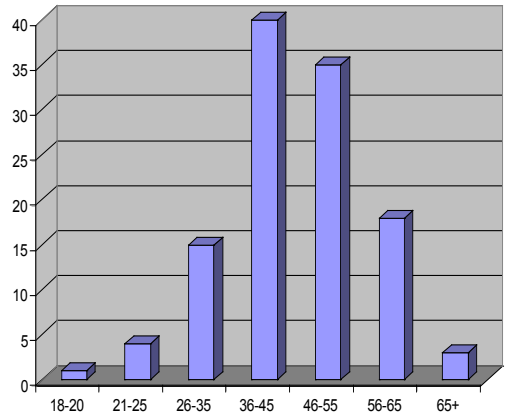

Fig.1 Age profile of participants

Participants described themselves in the following ways;

Transsexual Male to Female	31%
Transsexual Female to Male	6%
Transgendered	21%
Transvestite	21%
Intersex	2%
Mixed gender/ both M and F	6%
Others	12%

Table1.

'Others' included 'genderqueer', 'neutrois', 'crossdresser', 'female' 'gender fluid trans man' and 'not sure'.

Age of epiphany

Participants were asked the first time they could remember feeling that their gender identity was at variance with that assigned at birth (see fig. 2).

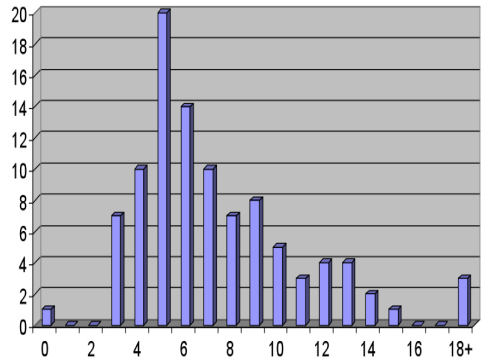

Fig.2 Age of realization of gender variance

The most striking aspect of this data is the clear spike at age 5 years, representing the modal average, with a mean average of 7.9 years. The percentage of transgender people who came to the realization of their gender variance at age 18 or later is less than 4%, with 76% of participants being aware they were transgender or gender variant before they left primary school.

This data is significant because it may, to a considerable extent, have been predicted with reference to Kessler & McKenna's findings regarding the ages at which children come to perceive gender (1978, 102). They argue that children start to understand gender identity between ages 3 and 4 and that this develops over the next two years as they also become aware of social interpretations of gender as an 'invariant' category. Additionally, Intons-Peterson's (1988) study suggesting that most children are aware of gender constancy at around 3 years and 9 months would also in-

dicate that transgender children are likely to start becoming aware of their differences shortly after this age.

However, these findings are not merely consistent with those of Kessler & McKenna and Intons-Peterson relating to gender identity development in children but also closely reflect the results of Kennedy's (2008) study, in which the average age at which male-to-female (MTF) transgender people first tried on an item of female apparel was 8 years old. In that study 84% of transgender people had done so before leaving primary school, which compares with 76% becoming aware they were transgender by that age in this study. A similar proportion in both studies (4%) did this after the age of 18. This is significant because similar data was obtained from two different methods of inquiry and, as such, adds weight to the data's reliability. This data is also reflected in Girschick's investigation into the lives of transgender adults whose participants described their childhood experiences in similar terms to those of the participants of the current study (2008, 51).

Common experiences

One of the most common early feelings about these epiphanies was that 'God has made a mistake' indicating that some transgender children felt strongly about their situation from quite a young age. When asked to 'describe their earliest memories of being transgender', responses appeared to suggest a strongly identifiable perception that something is 'wrong' with them:

> I used to dream that god realised he had got it wrong and I would wake up as a girl.
>
> I used to go to bed and pray I'd wake up with everything put right.
>
> Used to cry myself to sleep, wishing I'd wake up as a girl from about 7 years old.

Here, responses suggest that transgender children appear to be starting to internalise the perception that they are the problem, that there is something wrong with them although, at that stage, God appears to be blamed.

The following, vivid description of one child's first experience of school also suggests that for the youngest children, blame for their situation is not yet internalized:

> It was my first day at primary school and they told the boys to queue on the right and the girls to queue on the left. I went to the left but got moved to the right and remember sobbing all day long because they had got it wrong.

This strong emotional attachment to their feelings of gender identity seems to develop from a very young

age; in this case being assigned a gender which is different from what is internally perceived appears to be an emotional shock. Yet it is significant in the quotation above, that it was 'they' who had got it wrong. This source of blame would appear to change as the children get older, and it becomes directed inward, particularly as they come into increased contact with other children at school.

It was also evident that their perceptions of gender identities soon appear to make transgender children feel different from those around them.

> The earliest indication that something was unusual was that I had an interest in stereotypically male things. I wanted to drive a train when I grew up (age four) and I was obsessed with trains and how they worked.

> …a feeling of being different to the group I was supposed to play with, and a general why couldn't I be like/play with the same things as the other girls at primary school.

> it was just a feeling of being 'apart/ different'.

And the following, again vivid description, of the emotional response one child felt at being different from the other children around her:

> Shock and despair. It felt like missing the school bus and all the other kids waving out the back as it pulls away, knowing that I'd not be going where they were going.

These perceptions of their differences appear likely not merely to affect their feelings about themselves but also the decisions they make, most importantly regarding how they express themselves. These perceptions are also likely to inform a significant element of the internal conversation they have with themselves in order to come to terms with their circumstances.

Suppression and concealment

One of the most consistent responses to come out of this survey was the feeling that the participants needed to conceal their gender identities. As it becomes apparent to them that they are different, it soon becomes clear that to be different in this way is socially unacceptable and as such the most common response to this is concealment of their true feelings. When asked how they felt about their home and school lives it became clear that almost all perceived that they needed to conceal their gender identities:

> The overriding feeling was of needing to keep it a secret.

> Somehow I knew that what I felt was simply not acceptable - and I was frequently told 'boys don't do that'.

> feeling ecstatic about going to a party as a fairy, but then feeling so low at being told it was sissy and had to go as cowboy.
>
> I dressed in my sisters' clothes. It felt 'right' but I knew that I couldn't let anyone else know what I had done. I was about 6 years old at the time.

It seems evident that the children become aware quite quickly that their differences are socially unacceptable and that they need to be careful about expressing them. This appears to lead to them making, what may be from their point of view, the very logical and intelligent decision to conceal their gender identities. For some, this need is made even more demonstrably clear:

> Sissy insult ensured that I suppressed open female behaviour, but started cross dressing secretly from then on.
>
> When I first 'confessed' (around about 9) to some friends and my small brother, the reaction was pure horror, and I knew that I could never reveal anything again.

It would appear that most transgender children's social radar is good enough to tell, even from a young age, that being transgender is 'unacceptable'. However it is apparent, from the above two responses that even those brave enough to reveal something of their identities to others soon find that they risk suffering socially. In addition, this may be likely to result in them making assumptions about everyone; what is unacceptable to some is unacceptable to all:

> It turns out that I probably would have been [OK] if I had confided in my parents, but I didn't know that at the time and was too afraid.

The fear associated with this perception that they need to conceal their identities would relate to Paechter's description of how gender groups (particularly boys) police membership in childhood by denigration of the Other and any qualities associated with the Other (2007, 36). Her application of Lave & Wenger's (1991) theories of learning is relevant particularly in the case of boys. Although they are apprentice members of the male community of practice, there is little physically to distinguish them from girls until puberty; they possess little or no natural strength advantage over girls (and indeed boys aged between 9 and 12 years are often shorter than girls). As such the local community of practice defines itself by other means such as participation in specific activities, hair length, clothes and permitted expressions of emotion and preference, and also by valuing certain qualities in opposition to others. Hence, displaying

any behaviour, appearance or preferences attributed the other gender means ostracisation and exclusion from that group. It would appear that transgender children assigned male gender at birth become particularly aware of this from a very young age. The exclusion of transgender children assigned female gender at birth may take on a slightly different form since they seem to be considered slightly more socially accepted pre-puberty.

Acquisition of vocabulary and confiding in others

According to responses to a question about when participants became aware of words relating to transgender, the average age at which any vocabulary is acquired relating to being transgender (other than 'sissy' or 'Tomboy') such as 'Transsexual', 'Cross-dresser' or 'Transgender', was 15.4 years. This means that there is an average delay of 7.5 years between becoming aware of one's transgender or gender variant nature, and learning any words with which to describe it. This ranged from more than 10 years to minus 2 years. An analysis of the data shows that the age of awareness appears relatively stable, showing a slight decrease over time (see fig 3).

The age of acquisition of transgender-related vocabulary appears to have reduced by around 6 years in the last half century. Those attending primary school in the 1950s and early 60s are unlikely to have acquired any vocabulary of this kind until they were 20 on average, whilst those attending primary school in the 1970s, 80s and 90s are likely to have acquired this vocabulary on average around the age of 14.

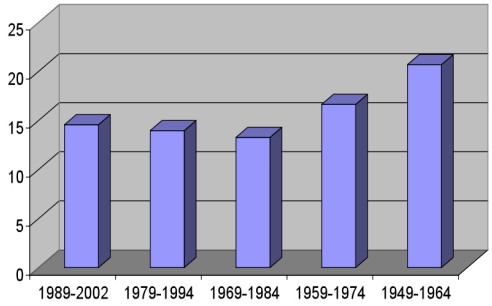

Fig. 3 Age of acquisition of vocabulary by date at which respondents attended primary school

It is probably too early to say as yet, whether the widespread availability of internet access for children will reduce this age still further. Sources of acquisition of this vocabulary are shown in Table 2 below. Here, the Internet is the source of vocabulary acquisition for only the same small numbers as 'Books' and 'Pornography' and is less than for either 'Friends' or 'School'. Given that this is a survey which covers a period during which newspapers and magazines have grown in influence and television has developed from playing a peripheral to a central role in people's lives, but which has only recently seen internet access become widespread, it is perhaps not surprising that its significance is limited. The fact that this vocabulary was mostly acquired from a variety

of mass media indicates that the process of its acquisition is probably predominantly an arbitrary one.

Source	Number
Newspapers/ magazines	26
Television	18
School	7
Friends	7
Books	5
Pornography	5
Internet	5
Popstars	3
Films	3
Parents	2
Advertising	2
Others	3

Table 2. Sources of vocabulary.

The implications of this arbitrary process of discovering words to describe oneself, and the delay in doing so, are potentially quite important; the consequences of discovering this vocabulary in circumstances in which transgender people are eroticized, objectified or ridiculed may be significant particularly if the individual concerned has suffered from low self-esteem as a result of any kind of transphobic bullying.

It would appear that the effects of the delay between transgender or gender variant children becoming aware of this and the acquisition of vocabulary may be particularly significant. It must be remembered that by the time they acquire this vocabulary they could easily have lived more than half their lives knowing they are transgender whilst not knowing any words for transgender. Responses to the question 'When did you first come to learn any transgender-related words?' show that this seems to have a significant effect on how they see themselves:

> I never had the trans words to use.
>
> I never put a name to it and wasn't even aware of the names TV, TS etc.
>
> I didn't know that I was transgendered or transsexual at an early age because I had never come across those terms. I remember intense jealousy of girls and writing a note to my mum saying I wanted to be a girl,
>
> I didn't know of 'trans' as a word or definition.
>
> I guess back then I felt a freak because there was no-one I knew who was like me.

Significantly, one of the most common responses to this situation appears to be that until this vocabulary is acquired, the child perceives him or herself as the only transgender person in the world. This is probably a reasonable assumption to make, given their circumstances and the information they have available, as it is likely that there would have been no other transgender

people around them, and that if there were, they would be likely to have concealed their gender identities as well. Yet acquisition of this vocabulary appears to bring with it the recognition that there are others like them:

> Reading about someone who did so in a magazine when I was 12 and feeling astonished that I wasn't alone.

It is apparent from this that prior to this she must have considered herself to be the only one.

Analysis of these responses reveals a surprising degree of shared (but isolated) experience of childhood for transgender children. This shared experience appears to be of feeling different, recognition of their social unacceptability, concealment and/or suppression. Overwhelmingly they feel they are unlike those around them, that they may indeed be the only person in the world to be like this, and that they need to maintain secrecy and conceal what they feel. As such, it would appear that the child 'J' who was the subject of Hinton's (2009) study referred to in section 1 is likely to be very much the exception rather than the norm. This is perhaps why those professionals involved with J's case may have perceived that his was a very rare case. The care, understanding and sensitivity with which he was treated, apparently by all those involved in both his primary and secondary school, and from other agencies, appears to be a model for how apparent FTM transgender children should be accommodated within the education system. However, the exceptional cases of these children may actually have the effect of obscuring the issue of how to deal with the much larger number of non-apparent transgender children who are still likely to be fearfully concealing or suppressing their feelings and true gender identities.

This is confirmed when examining the data on how many respondents told anyone else about this before they were 18 years old. Only 31% told anyone. Those told were usually friends or sometimes relatives, with one person telling a medical practitioner and one telling Childline.[1] In response to the question 'If you realised you were transgendered when you were a child did you tell anyone?' two-thirds of respondents told no-one until they were over 18. It also appears from the responses, for those assigned male gender at birth, that the reaction from telling someone, or someone finding out about them, was usually negative.

> Mother: She went into denial and her reaction forced me to hide my feelings for years.

> Mother caught me dressing and was angry and unable to handle it. No real conversation.

> Mother - told me to be thankful I was born male as they had better lives.
>
> Father. He tried very hard, I think with our doctors support, to take away from me anything feminine at all including my teddybear. He used to try to get me doing traditionally male things such as football. It didn't work though.
>
> My doctor laughed at me and said I would grow out of it, that I would grow up and discover boys and want to be 'properly' feminine.
>
> Took the piss so I didn't mention it again.

However, it would appear that, to an extent telling friends or siblings may have been slightly more successful:

> My elder sister actually found out and I had to explain myself to her. She ended up being very cool about it and we kept it as "our secret" for fear of upsetting Mum and Dad.
>
> My boyfriend said that one of the reasons he liked me was that I wasn't really a girl.

Generally the small number of participants who did tell anyone appeared to be older, in their later teens, when they told anyone, so it is likely that they may have at least encountered vocabulary with which to describe themselves and to rationalise their situation:

> I told my best friend and sometime crush that I was a transvestite when I was 18

In this case they would have been much more likely to have felt more positive about themselves, at least to the extent of knowing that they were not alone in being transgender. As such it is conceivable that a young person who has thought about his or her situation and discovered that there are others like them would be able to disclose their gender identity to others more confidently and in a much more positive way, and in doing so, increase the likelihood from their point of view of a positive response.

However it is particularly apparent that the majority of transgender children and young people do not tell anyone and it seems that for those who do, the result usually appears to be worse than not telling. The sense of isolation, in these circumstances is likely to be heightened. As such it would seem that the decision of most participants not to tell anyone appears justified from their perspectives and adds weight to the suggestion that their social radar is well developed. It is also likely to greatly increase the probability of their remaining non-apparent as well as, potentially, the likelihood of mental health problems as they get older.

One of the most significant results of this relates to Brown's (1988) research which has documented the relatively high incidence of MTF transsexuals in the US military. It suggests that, for transgender people assigned male gender at birth, concealment and even suppression of their gender identities becomes a significant feature of their lives from a young age until they are well into adulthood (Brown 1988). This suppression appears to develop into a more active attempt to conquer or overcome the feelings of guilt imposed on them by social pressures, in an attempt to force themselves to become more masculine. Such is the power of the socialization to which MTF transgender people are subjected that some of them go to the most extreme lengths to 'prove' their maleness, even to themselves. Although these people may represent those who try most intensely to suppress or overcome these feelings, it is likely that many others, whether transsexual or not, attempt to do this in other ways throughout their teen years and into early adulthood. The response of one participant in the 26-35 age group was particularly revealing:

> Age 25, after a breakdown and failed suicide attempt, I finally told a counsellor during a session. It was the first time I had ever spoken the word out loud.

This is one possible explanation for the comparatively low rate of response to the survey from some of the younger age groups; that they are still at the stage where they are trying to deny to themselves that they are transgender, or even to prove to themselves otherwise.

Expression of gender identities

Significantly, when participants were asked the extent to which they were permitted to express their gender identities at school, of those assigned female at birth, 18% and 10% were allowed to express their gender identities largely or as much as they wanted in primary and secondary schools respectively. This is slightly unexpected when the supposed acceptability of 'tomboys' in primary school is considered, and it compares with 45% being permitted freedom of gender expression at home.

The situation is, as expected, different for those assigned male gender at birth. Here only 2% of participants were permitted the same level of gender identity expression in both secondary and primary schools, and only 4% at home. So, while it is clearly only in rare cases where MTF transgender children could express their gender identities anywhere, the situation was slightly better for female-to-male transgender children, although even at home less than half of them were permitted to express their gender identities on a regular basis.

Of course this does not neces-

sarily mean these children did not express their gender identities at all; one of the features of a large proportion of the responses concerning earliest memories revealed how the natal males in particular started wearing girls' clothes or engaging in 'girls' activities in secret from a very young age:

> Around late child[hood] early teen years, cross dressing was frequent while parents were out.
>
> I spent a lot of time in the Bathroom playing in these clothes as a kid, no one ever found out.
>
> I dressed in my sisters' clothes. It felt 'right' but I knew that I couldn't let anyone else know what I had done.

This echoes the findings of Garfinkel about his subject Agnes (Garfinkel 1967, 285). Agnes, apparently being aware of her different gender identity from a very young age, engaged in a great deal of subterfuge to obtain her sex-change operation, which at the time would probably have been denied her. Her need to engage in this kind of action in order to obtain what she required demonstrates how she was able to exercise a considerable degree of agency and to come to an understanding of the circumstances in which she found herself. It is likely that most transgender children will, to whatever extent they are able, exercise whatever agency they have in deciding the extent to which they reveal their feelings to others, in particular others who they might consider to have the ability to harm them as a result.

Of course the physical and social circumstances of different children vary considerably and not all would have had the opportunity to engage in this sort of secret expression. It is also significant that, although those FTM transgender children did not refer to doing anything like this in secret, it is apparent from the data that in many cases although they were permitted to express their gender identities at home, they were not permitted to do so at school.

Implications

As a population, transgender people, especially if transgender children are included, potentially represent an awkward group, the existence of which could conceivably render untenable widely accepted worldviews of gender. The response to this appears, in some cases to have been attempts at the erasure of what, to some, seems to constitute an inconvenient group of subalterns (cf Raymond 1980, 178). Her idea that transgender people in general and transsexual people in particular exist as the result of pressure from male psychiatrists to become stereotypical females is seriously weakened by the evidence presented here that the majority of transgender people have

known they are transgender from a very young age and well before any contact with psychiatrists. It can be argued that this evidence appears primarily to support the ideas of Girshick (2008) that transgender people are probably most effectively studied from a sociological perspective that includes cisgendered[2] people.

Girshick (2008, 5) quotes W and D Williams; 'If men [and women] define situations as real they are real in their consequences', and problematises cisgendered identities, arguing that gender roles are a social construct in that the binary gender system currently in operation in western society represents an artificial cultural perception. Citing Roughgarden (2004) Girschick argues that the polarised and restrictive gender binary is based on false paradigms of gender, reinforced by selective, and culturally influenced interpretations of scientific research (eg Darwin 1859) rather than anything unnatural or inherently problematic about transgender people. There appears to be a tension between societal expectations of gendered behaviour and the way people are naturally, with some people unable to conform to gender norms. Since gender norms are probably more ruthlessly policed in the world of young children (Paechter 2007, 34) than at any other time in a person's life, this results in those who fail to conform concealing their gender identities for fear of being ostracised.

In particular this data on trans children presents a potential challenge to Judith Butler's concept of gender as an act of 'doing' rather than 'being' (1990 34). Are these children not actually transgender unless they are engaged in doing something which relates to that identity? Do the acts of crying themselves to sleep, praying that they will wake up as a girl or boy, for example, count as (trans)gender expression? What about the acts of wishing they can wear dresses, ties, skirts, trousers or play with dolls or trains?

Paechter's observations that children apprentice themselves into gender identities as they grow up, gradually moving from peripheries of communities of practice to centrality are relevant here. Yet if children are non-apparent transgender, it is quite possible they will appear apprenticed into a gender that is (wholly or partly) not theirs. As the data presented in the first section above suggests, non-apparent transgender children may still explore mentally, and in their imaginations, aspects of the gender with which they most identify.

This does not mean, for example, that transgirls do not wear 'girls' clothes, and engage in some feminine activities; it means that, where possible, they tend to do so in secret. This appears to be one of the main common experiences of MTF transgender children; in the same way that children reenact what they

perceive as adult behaviour in their play, non-apparent transgender children seem to do so in their imaginations, and, where possible, in secret. For them an element of the gender apprenticeship and expression is potentially still there, it is just hidden and normally does not express itself openly; their public expressions of gender being for the purpose of self protection and to prevent social isolation. The evidence relating to how many transboys are permitted to express their gender identities at home but not at school suggests that this may occur in a slightly different way for this group, in that they appear not to perceive the need to be as secretive at home as transgirls. Whether this is their own decision or because their parents are obliging them to maintain a feminine image at school possibly for reasons of self-protection is not clear.

Butler's conceptualizations of performativity and interpellation accept that transgender identities are constructed in the same way as others. Her reference to Althusser (1971) is pertinent here (Butler 1993, 121). Althusser's argument that individuals are always subjects within ideology in any society means that, as such, gender expectations represent the consequences of interpellation of newborn children as gendered subjects at, and just after, birth. As such this results in the child being compelled, from a very early age, to act in conformity with the citational requirements of its gender. Echoing De Beauvoir (1949) and Foucault (1975) Butler argues:

> Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. (Butler 1993, 232)

Although transgender children are subjected to considerable and sustained pressure to conform to gender roles assigned at birth, what is most remarkable is that in defiance of this they still develop a transgender identity. This is particularly significant because current social expectations act to impel us all not merely to behave according to ideal stereotypes of just two genders, but also to expect ourselves to fit into binary gender categories even if we do not.

It needs to be recognized that forcing gender expectations onto some children can lead to them internalizing inappropriate expectations of their own gender expression. This means that some try to force themselves to 'become' a gender they are not (or perform a gendered identity which is not appropriate for them) and attempt to compel themselves to perform (in the case of MTFs) hypermasculine activities in order to try and 'make' themselves more masculine (Brown 1988). Transgender children appear

to be both struggling against their gender assignation whilst at the same time concealing and/or suppressing feelings which they realise do not conform to social expectations. Gender variance for these children could be characterized as performance of a gender identity which is not their own but which is imposed on them by adults and their local gendered community of practice. Yet there is evidence that, as a result of this imposition and subsequent internalized transphobia, many of these children achieve well below their abilities at school, leave school early, are more likely to self-harm or attempt suicide and are more likely to suffer from mental health issues in early adulthood (Whittle et al. 2007, 62).

The existence of transgender children, their embodied, actual experiences of being Monets or Turners in a world of Chiaroscuros, raises questions which can no longer be ignored or erased. Their secretive existence represents an important challenge on many levels, not least of which is effective provision for them within education systems. If a school system tried to coerce any other group of individuals to become people they are not, to regard an inner core of their identities as illegitimate, and prevent them from expressing their identities freely, particularly from a very young age, it would be characterised as barbaric. Yet it appears that schools fail to support transgender children even to the extent of tacitly permitting, ignoring, or indeed participating in bullying which forces them to conceal or suppress those identities. These things are allowed to happen daily in the case of transgender children, to the extent that most appear to be too afraid to reveal their identities to anyone. The pressures on transgender children to conform to a gender system which is unable to deal with this aspect of human diversity, and which obliges them to adopt inappropriate gendered expression, are so intense that resulting psychological problems appear to manifest themselves well into adulthood. As such further research is needed into the nature of transgender children's experiences in school and at home and a programme of public education established enabling these children to express their identities free from the harassment, erasure, bullying and ignorance which results in their suppressed and concealed identities causing psychological harm as they grow up.

In conclusion, one of the reasons why, in western society, the general population, medical practitioners, some academics and even young transgender people themselves appear to have come to view transgender people as problematic is probably the way they represent a threat to one of the most basic concepts, the gender binary, by which they have been brought up to understand and order the world (Devor 1989, 46). The existence of trans-

gender people undermines one of the earliest cognitive structures upon which children's views of the world are built. The concept of the gender binary has become so deeply embedded into the way we all interpret a wide variety of aspects of the world that challenging it is something that will inevitably be uncomfortable for some. Yet doing so is important, so that a section of the human race can live the lives they choose, free from psychologically and emotionally damaging pressures to be someone they are not. Consequently, it is recommended that, as a minimum, schools introduce children to the concept of transgender people, so that transgender children are able to feel they are not alone and that their gender identity is as valid as any other. This would also encourage other children to become more accepting of transgender people, not just in terms of their classmates but when they become adults as well. The human cost, particularly for transgender people themselves, of maintaining the chimera of an immutable and exclusive gender binary is becoming increasingly clear. The internalization of self-hatred, guilt, self-doubt and low self-esteem in childhood affects transgender people throughout their lives. Any education system, or indeed society which allows this state of affairs to continue, is neither fully inclusive nor fully humane.

Endnotes

[1] A confidential telephone support line for children in the UK.

[2] A cisgendered person is someone whose gender identity is the same as that which they are assigned at birth.

References

American Psychiatric Association. 2000. *DSM–iv-TR*. Arlington VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.

Bradley, S. 1985. Gender Disorders in Childhood. In *Gender Dysphoria,* ed. B. Steiner, 175-188. Aarhus: Kluwer Academic.

Bradley, S. and K. Zucker. 1990. Gender Identity Disorder and Psycho-sexual Problems in Children and Adolescents. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 35: 477-86.

Brown, G. R. 1988. Flight into Hypermasculinity: Transsexuals in the Military. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 17 (6) 527-537.

Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity.* New York, Routledge.

Butler, J. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York Routledge.

Darwin, C.1859. *The Origin of Species.* London: John Murray.

De Beauvoir, S. 1989. *The Second Sex.* Trans. H. Parshley. New York: Vintage Books.

Devor, H. 1989. *Gender blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality.* Bloomington Il, Indiana University Press.

Foucault, M. 1975. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. New York: Random House.

Garfinkel, H. 1967. Passing and the managed achievement of sex status in an "intersexed" person part 1 and Appendix to chapter five. in *Studies in Ethnomethodology,* 116-186 and 285. New York: Basil Blackwell.

Girshick, L. 2008. *Transgender Voices: Beyond Women and Men*. London: University Press of New England.

Green, R. 1985. Gender Identity in Childhood and Later Sexual Orientation: Follow-up of 78 Males. *American Journal of Psychiatry* 142 (3): 339-41.

Green, R. 1987. *The "Sissy Boy Syndrome" and the Development of Homosexuality.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Hellen, M. 2009. Transgender Children in schools. *Liminalis: journal for sex/gender emancipation and resistance,* 09 03 81-99. www.liminalis.de (last accessed 14 Oct 2010)

Hinton, K. 2008. A transgender story: from birth to secondary school. In *Invisible boundaries: addressing sexualities equalities in children's worlds* ed. R. DePalma and E. Atkinson, 77-93. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham.

Intons-Petersen, M. 1988. *Children's Concepts of Gender*. New Jersey: Ablex.

Kennedy, N. 2008. Transgendered Children in Schools: A Critical Review of "Homophobic Bullying: Safe to learn, embedding anti-bullying work in schools." *Forum 50* (3): 383-396

Kessler, S. and W. McKenna. 1978. *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lave, J. and E. Wenger. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Minter, S. 1999. Diagnosis and Treatment of Gender Identity Disorder in Children. In *Sissies & Tomboys: Gender Nonconformity & Homosexual Childhood*, ed. M. Rottnek, 9-33. New York: New York University Press.

Paechter, C. 2007. *Being Boys; Being Girls: Learning Masculinities and Femininities.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Rekers, G. 1987. Inadequate Sex Role Differentiation in Childhood: The Family and Gender Identity Disorders. *Journal of Family and Culture* 2 (7): 8-37.

Raymond, J.1980. *The Transsexual Empire*. London: The Women's Press.

Roughgarden, J. 2004. *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender and Sexuality in Nature and People*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Stewart, J. 2009. Commentary on J's Story. In *Invisible Boundaries: Addressing sexualities equalities in children's worlds,* ed. R. DePalma and E. Atkinson, 91-94. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham.

Whittle, S., L. Turner and M. Al-Alami. 2007. *Engendered Penalties: Transgender and Transsexual People's Experiences of Inequality and Discrimination.* Wetherby Communities and Local Government Publications http://www.pfc.org.uk/files/EngenderedPenalties.pdf (last accessed 14 Oct 2010)

Zucker, K. 1985. Cross-Gender Identified Children. In *Gender Dysphoria: Development, Research, Management* (Perspectives in Sexuality), ed. B. Steiner, and B. W. Steiner, 75-174. New York: Plenum Press.

Zucker, K. 1990. Gender identity disorder and psychosexual problems of children and adolescents. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 35 (6): 477-486.