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research

AN EVALUATION OF THE SCI:DENTITY PROJECT

PHASES ONE AND TWO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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CENTRAL SCHOOL OF
SPEECH AND DRAMA

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Introducing Sci:identity: What's The Science Of Sex And Gender?

"I'm not transitioning via surgery/ hormones... so I didn't think I'd feel as accepted and liked as I did. Speaking to a few leaders and participants about my own lack of gender path was freeing because I was understood and not ridiculed or misunderstood. I could also relate to other people saying their bodies went the wrong way at puberty or social expectations didn't fit with their view of themselves"

- Participant

Sci:identity is an inter disciplinary arts project funded by the Wellcome Trust which engages young transsexual and transgendered people in a series of creative workshops exploring the science of sex and gender through creativity. The project is organised into 4 distinct phases: lead-in, creative arts workshops and exhibition, reflection and development, and an outreach programme. This report is a summary of the main findings of the evaluation of phases one and two of the project¹ and is the written outcome of phase 3; reflection and development. The Sci:identity project in phase one sought to engage young people in the project, and in phase two (between March and June 2006) engaged 17 young trans people in a short series of weekend workshops which sought to explore the science of sex and gender through creativity. These workshops were remarkable in many ways. They were the first time, to our knowledge, that young transgendered and transsexual people from across the UK have had the opportunity to meet together in 'real' space and time. They were the first time young trans people had the opportunity to come together to explore and interrogate the specifics of the medical and scientific models of sex and gender which will have a lasting impact on their life trajectory over the following years. The project was a notable unique opportunity to work with professionals from the arts, social research and medicine. This summary report offers an account of the 'lead in' period and the 'creative engagement' phase of the Sci:identity project. It identifies the impact of, and lessons emerging from, this early phase.

About The Evaluation

In such an innovative project, evaluating the impact of the project and lessons emerging for future work was important. The evaluation was embedded and participative. The main aims of the evaluation were: to encourage participants (staff and young people) to reflect on what was learned in the sessions they attended, identify the impacts of the project and to identify models of best practice for similar projects in the future.

Evaluation Findings:

The impacts of the project were broad and far reaching. They can be grouped into educational, creative and personal impacts. These impacts intersect and overlap, so for example, the educational impact of the project also had an impact on families, as young people took the learning about science home to discuss trans matters with their friends and family.

a) Educational Impacts

The project had a wide range of educational impacts, these included learning about science, medicine, social research, art, sculpture, performance, curation, IT skills, and the production of written materials (a 'zine'). Participants came to the project with mixed abilities and different levels of experience in these areas. Almost all of the participants had done considerable research into transsexuality in the process of self-diagnosis, mostly through the internet. However, qualified and reputable information (particularly from a scientific/ medical point of view) was not easily available to participants, even when they were part of genderqueer social networks. Because the medical profession tends to delay in treating young trans people, many opt out of the medical framework and practise self-diagnosis and self-medication, and this can be dangerous. The project offered a safe space where participants were able to interrogate existing medical knowledge and scientific understandings of transsexuality.

"I've been out for ages and I've met loads of trans people... but [the project] brought more information towards the technical side of things, cause I've never really gone into...chromosomes and everything" – A

In this context, the project provided participants with tools to critically examine the science of sex and gender. Workshops provided a structured space to formulate questions about current medical understandings of trans identities, to put these questions to professionals working with gender and sex, and to develop an informed critique of current medical models of trans-identities. Participants learnt

"The chance to be entirely yourself for the duration of the weekends, to not have to hide anything or be worried about being misunderstood ... Actually the most important thing I've got is friends."

- Participant

¹ To obtain a copy of the full report please e mail Dr. Alison Rooke a.rooke@gold.ac.uk or go to www.gold.ac.uk/cucr/research/scidentity

"I think I realised that with a little motivation I can do more than I thought I could, I really hope I can take that lesson away"

- Participant

about endocrinology and neuroscience through presentations carried out their own interviews with a GP, an endocrinologist and older trans people, and practiced their communication skills by discussing issues at the heart of the project and feeding back into the wider group.

The educational impact extended beyond the group to people who came into contact with the project. For example, the endocrinologist stated the young people's questions revealed how little empirical research is available on the health of transpeople, whilst feedback from visitors to the exhibition showed the event had increased their understanding of what it meant to be trans amongst family, friends and professionals.

b) Creative Impacts

In the workshop space participants used the tools of critical engagement described above, together with autobiographical experience, to explore concepts of sex, gender, identity and science creatively. The workshop spaces emerged as opportunities for creative risk and dialogue, and in this way understandings of trans within the group were revealed. Participants were involved in planning for the workshops and negotiating boundaries and ground rules. Positive risk taking was evident in the ways in which participants tried out new skills, explored their own gender identity, explored their creative skills and critically reviewed and contributed to each other's creative work. The workshops combined critiques of medicine and science with creative skills and autobiography. For example, one participant, Liam, critiqued the authority of medical understandings of sex and gender by drawing on an encounter with his GP who made a series of assumptions about his gender. Liam made a short film which incorporated and modified his GP's language, together with visuals which explored the coherence of the GP's assumptions. This phase culminated in a multimedia and performance event of the young people's art work. This was attended by an invited audience of 86 people together with the team and the participants. The exhibition was evidence of and testament to the dedication of the participants that they achieved so much in such a short time. The working atmosphere of the creative workshops and exhibition was filled with humour, warmth and dedication. This endured in spite of difficulties such as performers not being able to be there last minute due to personal circumstances. The workshops culminated in an exhibition and performance attended by exhibition and performance clearly challenged the de-humanising effects of both a medical model of trans as a disorder and the more sensational representations of trans people in the media. The quality of the work that came out of the workshops and exhibition and the subject matter was also testament to the extent to which the participants seriously explored quite painful and difficult areas with great courage and honesty. Several participants discussed the impact of the exhibition on their families and friends. While some parents of participants found the exhibition a moving (and sometimes difficult) experience it did enhance peoples understanding of the experience of trans youth. Several participants reported that their parents began to address them by their preferred name and pronoun after attending, in recognition of their children's trans identity. After the exhibition, participants recognised that they could have an impact on people's perceptions of trans people.

"Speaking to people at the exhibition about what they've found interesting or learned FROM US was really insightful"

- Participant

"Because the show is built on autobiography the audience can go some way to experiencing how it is to be a trans youth, with the inevitable move away from the 'Trisha Show' mentality of thinking trans people are freaks"- audience member

c) Personal Impacts

The personal impacts of the project were wide ranging. The workshops offered a temporary opportunity to experience support and respect, and a chance to explore gendered and creative expression without fearing judgement or ridicule. The personal gains from experiencing this space include an increase in confidence, higher self-regard, feeling better about one's gender expression and an increase in trust.

These impacts have a 'ripple effect' that extends beyond the life of the workshops. They enabled participants to take positive risks, have faith in their capabilities and increase their social and cultural capital. For example, one participant subsequently applied for (and succeeded in getting) a job, *"presenting myself as myself"*.

The value of face-to-face workshops was that participants built up friendships and working relationships that continued outside of the workshop space, and contributed to widening their social and cultural horizons. Participants went to spaces they hadn't been to before; travelling to new towns and cities to

"Being part of this amazing project has given me SO much confidence with everything to do with my transness. I was so scared and felt so alone before it but now I know that there is help and that I am not alone. I have started to talk to my close family about it and tell more friends about it. I have also started to act more like 'me' and dress more like me. It's fab!"

- Participant

"I've lost a lot of the shame that was holding me back... I'm not trying to spare [people] from my maleness anymore"

- Participant

"I am glad [name] was able to participate! It's been a very positive experience for us all – and it was a great show!"

– Parent

meet each other and participating in trans events, arts events and trans friendly places. At the exhibition several parents discussed how their son's or daughter's behaviour had changed for the better both at school or college and at home. Parents also reported that they had gained new understandings of trans through the participation of their children.

Pedagogical Practice When Working With Young Trans People

a) Recognising experience as a creative resource

The staff team recognised that participants brought rich experiences, opinions and their own research to workshop discussions. The project offered a space where discussions and explorations could flourish by drawing on these experiences with creativity, honesty and dignity. Trans identities had been the source of some difficulty for many participants. For example, four participants were or had been in the care of social services or other care organisations. This meant that sometimes participants had to step out of the workshops due to the emotional intensity of the work they were doing.

b) Pastoral Care

A night duty pastoral care worker was employed during residential weekends to attend to any eventualities and ensure participants staying at a local hotel got enough rest to participate the next day. There is a need to gather detailed background information on participants to ensure the staff team are able to fully support any participant and address their needs.

c) Enabling Creativity And Initiative

The staff team consulted with the three creative groups (performance, filmmaking and visual arts), asking what they wanted to achieve, when they wanted to achieve it by and then working adaptively and flexibly in order to enable participants to achieve the targets they had set themselves.

d) Creating a Safe and Creative Space.

The project was remarkable in the way it opened up a space conducive to creativity. At the heart of this practice was a desire to draw out the participants strengths, and to enable contributions on their own terms, within their own limitations. This was achieved through the following principles:

- Establishing a working contract: participants and staff worked together to set the ground rules for the project. Rules included addressing people by the pronouns and names they chose, and agreeing acceptable language.
- Creating a safe gender space: staff and participants agreed that no-one would be judged on gender expression.
- Not judging people's creative outputs, ideas and execution: this opened up a space where the science of sex and gender could be explored through self expression.
- Ongoing dialogue between staff: staff had a team meeting at the end of each day to discuss practical aspects of the project and any matters arising and to agree what had gone well.
- Fully utilising the skills and experiences that participants and practitioners brought to the project.
- Working adaptively: the membership of the participant group changed over the creative period. Staff and participants worked adaptively to allow all participants the chance to get the most out of the workshops.
- Negotiating consent for the reporting of the project: Many participants were 'coming out' as trans or were out to only a few people. Considerable time was given to discussing consent at various stages of the project. This ensured for example that video footage could be used in the process of evaluation, publicity and the documentary.
- Negotiating parental /carer consent and confidentiality.

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"Absolutely amazing, very empowering"

– comments following exhibition. Same sex domestic violence and hate crime worker