



An artistic inquiry into gender identity disorder/ gender dysphoria: A silent distress



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ABSTRACT

Gender Dysphoria is a condition with a strong and persistent incongruence between one's experienced and assigned gender. The magnitude of disturbance is enormous, ranging from social isolation, rejection, segregation and exclusion from the society to some severe mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, self-harm and death. The condition been recognized across wide range of cultures around the world; however the degree of its expression and tolerance varies.

Art has long been used as a medium for expression as well as a tool for therapy. In this paper, the researcher has used the medium to highlight the challenges associated with Gender Dysphoria.

1. Aim

To highlight the value of visual art as a method for understanding complex psychiatric disorders, using Gender Identity Disorder/ Dysphoria as an example. A further aim was to understand this disorder in cultural context by providing additional commentaries.

2. Background

Gender Identity Disorder (GID) or GenderDysphoria (GD) is a complex condition characterised by a strong and persistent cross gender identification and persistent discomfort about one's assigned sex or a sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex. There is a preoccupation to live as a member of the opposite sex which may manifest as choice of dress, mannerisms or acquisition of the physical appearance of the other sex through hormonal and surgical manipulation. Individuals with this condition frequently experience isolation and ostracism as well as co-morbid anxiety, depression and personality disorders (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental disorders, 2000*). It has been influenced by social, cultural, legal and political factors over the years (*Meyerowitz, 2004*), with various revisions of, and proposals for, diagnostic criteria (*Cohen-Kettenis and Pfafflin, 2010; Zuker, 2010; Lawrence, 2010*).

Historically art has also been influenced by social cultural and political factors (*Campos-Bueno, 2010*). Art making can be considered as

form of inquiry – a learning process which is experiential and constructivist and in which creative image making helps construct knowledge, creates new insights and transforms perceptions. It follows a path from the mental image that lay down the “concepts” in our mind, to what's out there in the world as visible images that shape our thought. Beside language, vision (visual image) has to be appreciated as cognitive modality with its own capacity to construct and convey knowledge (*Marshall, 2007*).

How art has played a powerful role is in the progress of science over the past number of centuries is evident from “The anatomy lesson of Dr Nicholas Tulp” painted by Rembrandt in 1632, and the famous painting of “Opisthotosmos” by Scottish surgeon Mr. Charles Bell in 1809. It also evidences the fact that scientists themselves became the protagonists of art (*Campos-Bueno, 2010; Baljet, 2000*).

In the case presented the researcher has used paintings to both illustrate and develop their understanding of the concept of GID/ GD and through the medium of art has attempted to use this to help in teaching and informing others about the experiential and theoretical knowledge of this condition.

3. Method

1 Background knowledge about GD was ascertained by:

a. Review of current literature and bibliography (in English

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language)

b. Meeting with an individual with Gender Identity Disorder to incorporate their subjective experience of the condition.

- 2 Representing the knowledge gained through paintings to develop learning and understanding of the Gender Dysphoria at different points in its clinical presentation.
- 3 The supporting text accompanying each painting is the authors' own.
- 4 Material used- water and acrylic paints on canvas.

4. Results

Paintings below represent different stages in clinical pathway.

1. "Painting of a child with his parent". In this painting the father is encouraging gender-typical behaviour by presenting a football to the child while the child is trying to hide the doll behind him. Implied within this piece is the child's previous stressful experience of attempted gender conformity, along with the parental wish, efforts and associated anxiety for conformity.

4.1. Pic # 1 COMMENTARY

South East Asia is a patriarchal society, and where being a father is considered an expression of masculinity. He is the one who provides food and protect his family. A son is expected to carry his father's name down to the next generation. Therefore the boy not only should be of emanating strength but also be agreeable to marry a girl chosen by his family for him and have male off springs to keep his family's name and traditions going alive. The task of fatherhood carries all these unspoken pressures, which makes the whole issue quite difficult, sensitive and challenging in culture centric countries. Traits like aggression, rough and tumble play may be covertly encouraged. Gender focused countries where only two sexes are acknowledged, people with gender identity specially transwomen, usually overstate their characteristics in a typical way to get accepted (Roshan et al., 2019). In this painting the father persists with his demand on playing with a football ignoring the child's emotions i.e. fear and sadness [Picture 1](#).

2. "Person with two heads" seeks to show that Gender Dysphoria is



Picture 1.

a complex condition, with perhaps different and ambivalent views by both the patient and society, including clinicians.

The mask represents the patient's own defences which may be the result of negative life experiences and prejudices experienced, allowing the patient to conceal what they believe should not be shared (as a protective mechanism). For the clinician the mask may represent a barrier to understanding and treatment that needs to be overcome. The theatrical presentation i.e. clothes, make-up, also suggests a need to 'put on an act' in order to survive.

In this painting the subject is standing in deep water and one cannot see their feet – this represent the fact that, in order to understand the patient's position, one requires both knowledge and expertise to make sound clinical judgement.

4.2. Pic # 2 COMMENTARY

Gender Dysphoria creates many challenges for its sufferer. Attempts to avoid abandonment, rejection and the need for survival results in the patient enduring much emotional trauma. People do present late, around 20s, in most of the developing countries including Pakistan (Rehman et al., 2016). The importance of a careful assessment and management strategies is highlighted here [Picture 2](#).

3. "Person with shaded eyes" refers to the importance of clinical psychiatric interview in the complex case histories.

The clinician may be overwhelmed with information, as indicated by strong colours running across the canvas, creating a risk of losing focus. Relevant information may not be readily available or volunteered and has to be deliberately sought. This is indicated by shaded eyes which have to be seen carefully to be noticed.

4.3. Pic # 3 COMMENTARY

There is dearth of specialist centre, in third world countries, for training to help this unfortunate group of people in the population at



Picture 2.



Picture 3.

large. There are no official statistics for children born with intersex states or those struggling with gender and sexuality issues. Culturally it's a taboo and the picture is complicated in how religion and society views these matters. Besides public education, society badly needs trained professionals to help identify and manage these issues and give guidance in a culturally sensitive manner [Picture 3](#).

4. Painting of “A woman staring out of the window seeing darkness” refers to the hopelessness and distress in a parent of a child with GD.

4.4. Pic # 4 COMMENTARY

Just like in many other parts of the world, the birth of a child is considered by far the most welcome and celebrated event. In Sub-continent though, it is often an extended family affair where a mother-to-be is the centre of attention. In some remote and tribal areas often the whole village flocks to congratulate the new mom. A woman hopes to give her husband a male child one who would support and carry his name and honour. Scenario gets further complicated when the delivery happens at home rather than at maternity setup [Picture 4](#).

A child with gender issues / ambiguous genitalia is the last thing she would ever want, because it may not only threaten her marriage but her very survival. Such children are given away, abandoned or rejected having been seen as a curse or punishment by God. Feelings of guilt and shame amongst the parents are very intense and things may take on an unexpected turn. The agony of a parent has been depicted in the picture.

5. Painting of “A person in a prison” seeks to display the psychological state of entrapment in the cases of transsexualism or GD. The patient feels trapped in the wrong body and struggles to find freedom or acceptance through treatments such as counselling, medication, hormonal therapy or surgery.

4.5. Pic # 5 COMMENTARY

The absence of recognition, support and services sadly for many



Picture 4.



Picture 5.

may bring about a never-ending cycle of entrapment, resulting in long-term negative implications and sometimes even death [Picture 5](#).

6. Painting of “A person walking away from the darkness towards brightness” represents a situation where an individual with GD, gets the treatment and is hoping for positive life changes. However, there are still many potential risks, dangers and hurdles to overcome, as represented by the thick jungle and hidden predators. Some of the factors related to positive outcome and future adjustment depend on how society reacts and accepts the individual.

4.6. Pic # 6 COMMENTARY

In Pakistan the challenges of growing up as a transgender person or indeed having a different sexual orientation are many and those who survive in the face of rejection and hostility truly deserve credit. While



Picture 6.

some live as eunuchs or Hijras in small groups, often unemployed and working as beggars or sex workers, carrying a high risk for HIV, the majority goes unnoticed and without help. Much needs to be done to give these individuals back a dignified human experience they deserve, particularly in the third world countries [Picture 6](#).

5. Discussion

GID/ GD is a rare condition ([Moller et al., 2009](#)). It has faced criticisms about its very existence and has been the subject of legal and ethical debates particularly with regards to the treatment and management of this condition ([Mc Hugh, 1995](#); [Lev, 2006](#)).

Understanding of this complex disorder has improved over the years evidenced by the changes in successive editions of DSM ([Cohen-Kettenis and Pfafflin, 2010](#); [Zuker, 2010](#); [Lawrence, 2010](#)). These advances will hopefully resolve some of the confusion and misunderstandings and dissipate the conceptual fog that surrounds the disorder. The additional commentaries were provided to add for the better cultural understanding of this complex condition.

The author's use of paintings at different clinical end points, and through the lens of different players in the set, is an attempt to understand this complex condition further through the process of visualization, using creativity to go beyond the bounds of everyday language, which can be as limiting as it is stigmatizing.

By using the art material to assist in disseminating knowledge allows others to tune into their own perceptions with regard to this illness and to consider how these may affect their relationship with the patient. Through the unstructured and free floating interpretation of the art, students may be brave enough to externalise their own erroneous

views to those that might be depicted by the artist, without having to initially own the controversial or potentially harmful beliefs. This is also an attempt to help facilitate learning of the experiential aspects of the disorder. Such a method may be usefully applied to the study of any type of mental health disorder. The commentaries are added to allow for the cultural understanding of the disorder

6. Conclusion

Art has played a powerful role across time and culture and in the development of science. It helps with learning about issues of human importance by connecting real life experiences with imagined outcomes. It gives birth to new ideas by stretching one's imagination, considering alternatives, and creating room for research and experimentation. It utilises the strengths of creativity and applies them to learning and education. It attempts to follow in the thoughts of Confucius "Tell me, I will forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I will understand." (Confucius c 450 BCE).

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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