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The task in this short piece is to respond to Henny Bos’s extraordinarily clear, but decidedly evocative, report from a practitioner’s point of view. What follows is in two parts, where the first interest is with practice questions and the second with a different register: with the imaginative — the new space — Bos’s paper cues. This latter focus will be the briefer but perhaps the more emotive.

Bos argues that there are relatively few ‘gay father families’. This point prompts the obvious statement that practitioners are unlikely to meet with such ensembles. Perhaps, a more nuanced response is that we may unknowingly encounter a member of, even a one-step removed significant-other to a significant-other of a ‘gay father family’ more often than we credit. Such associations may bear upon the actuality, or the prospective possibility, of ‘gay father families’ when we hear service users or colleagues use sexual stereotypes; when a client states that ‘My ex left me for another wo/man’ or ‘Wouldn’t it be great, but scary, to be a gay parent?’ In these circumstances it may be useful to say:

- ‘I work with many people who see themselves as, or worry they might be, different. I try to demonstrate to those I work with that I accept them for who they are.’
- ‘Do the people who are important to you know and accept you for who you are / who in the future you might live with?’ or
- ‘I am relaxed about difference — cultural difference, differences in family form; religious difference. Often starting to talk about these things is hard, but once it gets started it often gets easier.’

Second, Bos notes gay fathers are accustomed to being attacked. This represents a difficult point as raising this matter directly — a position that might seem the preferable choice — risks setting up exactly the kind of defensive/attacking dynamic that is often cued in work with those who have reason to be spiky and suspicious. If the practitioner has been vouched for, this is less likely, but if this has not occurred, the practitioner has to proceed with antennae well up rather than make the assumption that directness is preferable. In a recent article I discussed how practitioners have three choices where shame and stigma are dimensions in the received context.

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Here, ‘being direct’ is not always the best alternative. At times, even if it feels awkward, making ‘feeling attacked’ a focus, a running theme, can be productive. On other occasions the practitioner might (1) internally note, but say nothing, if they sense the client has been assailed; or (2) acknowledge aloud, but in passing, ‘You may have felt attacked’ as a possibility, but then quickly change the subject (Furlong, 2009). On a related theme, Miller et al. (2005) have discussed the importance of being able to raise difficult issues in *Talking When Talking is Tough*.

A third point stimulated by Bos’s paper involves convening. Bos points out it was only the fathers who were canvassed in the study, mindful there are other stakeholders, particularly the children’s mothers. Although it can only be schematically raised here, this reality should be acknowledged by the practitioner’s efforts to be thoughtfully inclusive concerning who they seek introductions to, how and from whom they gather data, and who they seek to actually meet. It is a received truism ‘to work only with those who choose to attend’ or that ‘one can do systemic work with individuals’ but the tough-minded remain systemic with respect to convening.

That gay parents might be sensitised to attack is something that should not be in play, yet nasty ghosts will not give up without a protracted scrap. This connects to what is positively evocative as Bos has offered a despatch about pioneers who are establishing new spaces, options that can’t help but spook the old regime. Out loud, or quietly, alternative families are disputing the authority of those moralising ghouls, those disreputable agents for a disturbed gender ecology, who used to distribute the old roles. As Giddens (1992) discussed years ago, there is now considerably more possibility to formulate freely chosen roles and relationships — but that’s not to say it is comfortable.

Given this context, it is poignant that a less than rosy picture of gay fathers is presented. These men, it is said, tend to be defensive, doubt their fathering, and so forth. As an outsider, I want to say to the diverse cast of domestic activists: ‘Be proud. We straights have fouled the nest while the only research around suggests it is you gay people who have made a special commitment to having kids get a positive report card. Re-purpose your otherness: it’s good for all of us.’ No doubt, as a straight male this is all too easy to say. True, I don’t know the difficulties — but I do revel in the ambition.

References

