Curious correctness

Making our language more inclusive has a double-edged effect

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A colleague was talking about how the initialisms 'LGBT' and 'LGBTQIA', and other variants ('QUILTBAG' is a personal favourite), were becoming increasingly contentious. As we discussed the way some so-called 'politically correct' terminology can – for better or worse – lose its potency, it became clear she hadn't heard of the more recent term 'GSRD' (Gender, Sexual and Relationship Diversity). She liked it and found it made a lot more sense. I'd had the same response when I first came across it.

In their extremely useful BACP guide, *Gender, sexual, and relationship diversity (GRSD)*,[1] Dr Meg-John Barker points out that our understanding of GSRD is just one among many in the world today. The biopsychosocial model they advocate is open and inclusionary, therefore it's inevitably expanding and shifting. This is to be welcomed, even though some of our contemporary concepts are likely to be seen in the future as misleading or just plain wrong. Historically, sex and gender research shows how some firmly held beliefs and standard practices become dispelled and superseded as each decade passes. In this respect, we're wise to remind ourselves how little we know.

Supervisory dialogue is our way of grappling with what it is we think we know about our work with persons with all kinds of identities. Much of the language we employ comes from psychologies and therapeutic theories invented throughout the 20th century; some arrived in our lexicon only yesterday, so to speak, and can sound peculiar and feel unwieldy. During supervision sessions, I've noticed a tendency to doubt the validity of a trendy neologism when it appears to be merely the latest addition to 'woke' orthodoxy. But some words that strike us as novel have been around for a long time. To take just one example: 'cisgender' seems new-fangled to many people I've talked to, but according to Wikipedia[2] it originated in the 1990s and has been in the Oxford English Dictionary since 2013. That's not ancient, but it's not exactly brand new either.

'Correct speech' in the public sphere is arguably never a bad thing when it has the effect

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of making our everyday language kinder and more inclusive, but it doesn't follow that 'non-correct speech' in private conversation is always a bad thing or inherently unkind. In the confidential setting of supervision, our ability to speak freely is essential for the deepening of our real understanding of ourselves and others. Simply adopting the corporatised language of 'wokeness' is not the path to genuine awakening.

That view was expressed repeatedly in responses to a questionnaire I've been circulating in recent months, as part of a non-academic enquiry into 'free speech' in supervision. Many people referred to the importance of trust in the supervisory relationship – the kind of mutual trusting that enables unguarded dialogue around divisive issues. Some spoke of the relief they felt in not having to 'walk on eggshells' with their supervisors when discussing controversial topics (the debate around transwomen's and ciswomen's rights was given as an example). At the same time, several practitioners were concerned not to say anything in supervision that could be offensive to anyone.

The high level of concern about words that cause offence – especially to people in marginalised groups – is a contemporary phenomenon that seems to run through us like an electric current. It generates a stream of commentary on social media, where the flow of offence-giving and offence-taking is relentless. Even in normal, friendly conversations lately, I've noticed a tense kind of attention paid to certain words and phrases. This goes beyond simple good manners. When it shows up in a supervision session, I'm curious about what might lie behind the apparent tension. And I'm especially interested when the notion of 'permitted speech' comes into the frame.

For example, a supervisee recently asked, 'Am I allowed to say this?' before describing a client as 'mixed race'. Now, the initial thoughts you might

have in response to this are probably similar to what occurred to me at the time. First of all, I wanted to know what the client called themself, because I would almost certainly take that to be their preferred term. Secondly, I wondered what the counsellor really meant by asking me if they were 'allowed' to say those words. What's implied by the question is that our ordinary speech is somehow being regulated and monitored. This might lead us disingenuously to ask: who exactly is in charge of all this policing anyway? But it's more useful to reflect on what *ethos* it is that permits or prohibits the language we use.

In the context of supervision, I believe that what gives us the freedom to speak freely is rooted in the ethical principle of self-respect. Out of all the principles stated in the *Ethical Framework*, self-respect comes to the fore here. Respecting myself is the basis of my respect for others. I disrespect myself when I silence myself, and I disrespect others if I silence them. About one-third of the people who took part in my survey believe that political correctness in supervision leads to harmful self-censorship. Are we becoming censorious? I hope not. I want supervision to be a space where everything is seeable and nothing is unsayable. ●

References
1. Barker M-J. Good practice across the counselling professions 001: gender, sexual, and relationship diversity (GSRD). Lutterworth: BACP; 2017.
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cisgender [Online.] (accessed 14 January 2020).

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