



Vile bodies

Young people's relationship to their physical selves is often problematic. **Lucy-Jean Lloyd** discusses the significance of this issue, which may not arise naturally in session unless counsellors themselves are comfortable within their own bodies and willing to address it

'Who has ever struggled with feelings of dislike towards their body?'

Addressing the question to the workshop participants, I asked for a show of hands. Just for a moment, everyone seemed to freeze. I put my own hand up and immediately the 'yes' people were in the majority, hands in the air, ready to acknowledge that difficulty with the body is a fundamental human problem, common to us all.

The difference between the adult practitioner and the adolescent client in this area of life is, perhaps, only one of degree. So I think it is important that counsellors who work with adolescent clients can tolerate such uncomfortable realities. It seems to me impossible to begin to help a young person with his or her difficulties if we cannot be in touch with the troubles and turmoil of our own internal adolescent.

Having said that, once we reach maturity, we usually have a relatively stable relationship with our own bodies and a relatively positive body image. We are also likely to have resources that contribute to our background 'sense of self' – which might include achievement in the world, a sexual partner, a home and a family. So it is helpful to remember that a child or adolescent does not have as many means of identifying the self as are available to an adult, and in some cases, as Buckroyd notes, this can leave 'little other than her physical self as her means of self-definition'¹.

An adolescent is thrown back *into* the body in the natural course of development from puberty onwards, a period when there is more physiological change taking place than at any other point in the life cycle, except *in utero*. Freud remarked that the ego is 'first and foremost a body ego'², pointing to the idea that our earliest experience of our 'self' is generated *through* the body. Winnicott developed this idea further when he spoke of a mother's face being the mirror for the infant's self: he or she looks into the face of the mother to see *him- or herself*³. Many have argued that adolescence can be thought of as a rerun of infancy. The body, with its impulses and appetites, is once again presented forcefully to the mind in this period, and this unconsciously reactivates and reworks earlier experiences of being alive. And the 'mirroring other' is now more likely to be located in friends or peers than in parent figures, a development that adds a complex dimension to a young person's feelings about their body, body image and self.

A preoccupation with the body and its appearance, skin surface, weight and shape is also culturally sanctioned, particularly in Western society, where compulsive attention to physical appearance is both normalised and fuelled by advertising and social media networks. When we are children, the care of our body is in the hands of our parents, who first held, touched, fed, bathed and clothed us. This changes as we grow up, but at puberty, the care of our body is handed over by parents to us. So why might it be that the first thing many young people do at this point is attack, reject or try to modify their body, often in quite extreme ways?

There are no easy answers, and encountering disturbance

in relation to the body in work with young people is not something that many of us in the workshop felt confident about. What emerged was that most of us are all too aware of the body as the place where much conflict and ambivalence about the self can be located for a young person. This article explores ways of understanding the impact of the body and its potential meanings in adolescence, in the hope that we can begin to have more discussion within school counselling about how to engage with the body when we offer to help young people.

The (sometimes unwanted) tie to parents

The body presents a young person with potentially difficult realities: those of a determined biological gender, physical growth and the irreversible nature of time. First and foremost, the body stands as a physical reminder of the facts of our parentage and biological origin. We are all, whether we like it or not, born out of the union of two parents, who may or may not have loved one another, and may or may not have been able to provide a psychological space in which we could grow. The body and its form, our skin colour and hair and the way we are put together are all part of our genetic inheritance from parents and grandparents, and as we grow up, and awareness dawns of being in the body that we have inherited, we can no longer escape this knowledge. While an adolescent wrestles with questions about identity and who he or she is, separate from his or her biological parents, taking ownership of the body at this time in life can be problematic, because the body links us irrevocably to our origins, and to our original dependency on parents. The tie to the body in adolescence is imbued with the qualities of the emotional tie to our parents when our body was in their care. This non-verbal, pre-linguistic experience of relatedness is, in turn, shaped by the generation before, in the ways in which our grandparents held and handled our parents before us. Our bodies are marked by our histories and our cultural inheritance.

Ethan: trapped in 'his dad's skin'

Ethan, for example, dislikes his body and especially his skin, which he has tried to cover up on his face by using foundation. He says his skin is 'my dad's skin', which he thinks of as coarse and 'dark' and unlovely. When we explore Ethan's relationship with his father, it emerges that Ethan's dad is either 'in my face' all the time – criticising him and picking at him, or, at other times, 'not there at all, not caring'. Ethan describes a father who has not been able to provide a safe psychological space for him – he is either intrusive or distant. Ethan experiences unwanted and intrusive thoughts about his own body – he does not feel at home in his skin. He has felt suicidal at times. One of his fears, as he grows up, is that he is going to turn into his father, and his body somehow is a daily reminder of what he feels he can 'never get away from'. The hostile feelings about his father have literally got 'under his

This article is based on a workshop of the same title offered in September 2011 at King Alfred's College, Wantage, as part of a conference for school counsellors.

skin', and he cannot seem to separate himself out at a bodily level from the longed-for and hated father.

The body is at once an external reality and a kind of internal object. The experience of being OK in one's own skin arises out of an early relationship in which there was a *shared* corporeality between mother/father and infant. The body is both subject and object. How the body is held in mind by parents in our childhood – whether it has felt 'looked after' or more 'looked at' (as in the case of Ethan, perhaps) – contributes to the way a young person forms a symbolic representation of their body for themselves. Feeling desirable and desired happens first through a relationship. Much of this early sense of self is encoded, by the time we reach puberty, in the right brain, where pre-verbal, implicit, non-episodic memories of being related to are laid down. 'Many babies... do have a long experience of not getting back what they are giving. They look and they do not see themselves. There are consequences.'³

Ethan's body is his own, but he is struggling to take ownership of it. To me, he presents as a beautiful young person, wishing to be loved. But the way Ethan regards himself, and in particular his own body, is full of hatred towards the father who has looked at him critically and failed to help Ethan see himself. Ethan feels oppressed and trapped by these feelings, and inhabits a poorly differentiated bodily space ('it's my father's skin'), as if he *embodies* his father's negative perceptions of him: 'I am not the boy he wanted.'

The body is also subject to the temporal laws. We simply cannot hold time back – physically growing up happens whether we like it or not. The growth of the body also brings on an intensification of drives and instincts – an intensified and hormonally charged experience of emotion that is

psychophysical, whether that be sexual desire, aggression or anxiety about these strong feelings. A young person in adolescence is faced also with the loss of a *mental representation* of the body, which, until now, if all has gone well enough, will have been firmly anchored in the ego. This includes both the loss of the child's body, often uncomfortable for parents and children alike, and an accompanying loss of the body we wished for in childhood, perhaps 'perfect' or unflawed – in any case, unlike the body we actually find ourselves to have. Alessandra Lemma⁴ notes that the experience of 'feeling ugly' can signal the intrusion of something disturbing or different into our experience, which is better thought about as not having so much to do with the body as with our state of mind. Lemma talks about the feeling of beauty as a kind of unifying, symmetrical sense of things matching up – often our perceptions of beauty are linked with symmetry, wholeness and harmony. The experience of ugliness often suggests a rupturing into consciousness of disturbing, frightening phantasies. It also reminds us that the experience of wholeness or beauty, so strongly linked with the wish to be 'one' with the other, which comes from infancy, can never be permanent. If we are to live an embodied existence, we have to manage experiences of differentiation and difference from our parents, of not being their 'perfect' babies any more.

Ella: who does not have the 'right body'

Ella tells me: 'My mum loved me until I started to grow up. Since I turned 13, she doesn't like the way I am – my hair, my body or how I dress.'

I am confused. Is it Ella or her mother who 'does not like the way I am'? Ella dyes her hair all the time. I see her as an

“ Often the most powerful transferences we have to work with when we are seeing a young person may be their transference onto their own body ”

attractive girl, but the dyed black hair seems to spoil her – it certainly jars on me. Ella does not like even a bit of her hair roots to show, because it ‘makes me feel too insecure’.

Ella, like Ethan, presented with anxieties and disturbances in relation to her body. She feels herself to be ‘ugly’. Ella dyes her hair obsessively – it is a compulsion, rather than a pleasure or an experiment. Ella has also upset and shocked her mother by having extra piercings done on her ears, carefully covered by her hair, but revealed to her mother in a moment of closeness, which then resulted in them ‘not speaking for two whole days’. Ella’s anxieties about her body are linked to a fear of not ‘fitting in’ and ‘being left out’. Ella is afraid that she does not have the ‘right body’. She literally cannot ‘be herself’, in case she is rejected by others at school (‘my roots must not show’).

When we talk about Ella’s story, it emerges that she feels close to her mother, but finds it difficult to be away from her, and to tolerate feelings of separateness from her. As a mother-child couple, they struggle to negotiate being at the right distance from one another. Significantly, Ella was born after her mother lost a baby, and she was thought to be another boy (there are three older brothers) right up until the moment when she was identified as a girl (‘I do not have the right body’). The space in which Ella grew with her mother has something of an overclose

feel to it, but also there is a gap, which Ella experiences persistently as a kind of bodily panic about being left out. It may be that the lost baby has meant mother held onto Ella tightly, but also that Ella internalised the gap left by the baby who died. In adolescence, Ella’s body seems to be the place where

she is struggling to separate from the mother of infancy. When a young person is not able to experience their newly adult sexual body as belonging to them, they may react as if their body still belonged to the mother⁵. In this state of mind, the body can be experienced as alien, and not ‘right’. A disturbance in the way a mother related to the body of her child can also leave a feeling of undesirability towards the body, which is actually a sense of deprivation. This can give rise to a strong wish to attack the object, a wish that is located in the body. Ella’s ‘attacks’ on her own body (the compulsive hair-dying and piercings) may be driven by a wish to pierce through her confusions about what is *me* – Ella, and what is her *not-me* – mother.

Body talk: uncomfortable for the counsellor

In our workshop, we began to get a real sense that the body in adolescence is easily held to account for the sense of inadequacy or general anxiety about the self which troubles all of us at times, and most young people as they struggle with growing up. Often the most powerful transferences we have to work with when we are seeing a young person may be their transference onto their own body – how they *feel*

about their body – which contains much complex information about their history, infantile object relations and current preoccupations.

I asked participants to think about their own young clients and to consider if there was any space in the consulting room for the body in the way they worked. Most of us felt daunted by this. We did a role-play in which the ‘counsellor’ was to try to bring the body into the conversation with the ‘client’. This proved difficult. Most participants in the counsellor role found it uncomfortable. Those playing the role of a young client found it challenging, but also a kind of relief. One colleague, who works with a young person who has a physical disability, felt a new permission to talk about that openly with her client for the first time (it had been there, but never spoken between them). We all have a transference onto our own bodies – counsellors and clients. Perhaps if counsellors can become more aware of what the body means for them, and more accepting of their own relationship to the body, this body-tie, and all the realities and phantasies that go with it, can be more easily opened up within the counselling space we offer to young people. ●

“Taking ownership of the body at this time in life can be problematic, because the body links us irrevocably to our origins, and to our original dependency on parents – our bodies are marked by our histories and our cultural inheritance”

References

- 1 Buckroyd J. The application of psychoanalytic ideas to professional dance training. *Psychodynamic Counselling*. 2001; 7(1):27-40.
- 2 Freud S. Standard edition of the complete works of Sigmund Freud. Vol 19. London: Hogarth; 1923.
- 3 Winnicott DW. *Playing and reality*. London: Karnac; 1971.
- 4 Lemma A. *Under the skin: a psychoanalytic study of body modification*. London: Routledge; 2010.
- 5 Laufer M, Laufer M. *Adolescence and developmental breakdown*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; 1984.

