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## EDITORIAL

**Peter McGill, Tizard Centre**

In 1963, the sociologist, Erving Goffman, wrote a famous book called *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* in which he discussed the varied ways in which society responds to individuals who are different in some way, whether as a result of disability, illness, behaviour or whatever. Goffman's analysis remains highly salient to an appreciation of the everyday difficulties faced by people with learning disabilities in their encounters with those Goffman ironically refers to as the *normals*.

In the articles in the current issue, the notion of identity is perhaps most immediately apparent in Ellena Wood's and Neel Halder's article on gender disorders. Their review shows how little attention has been given to these issues in respect of people with intellectual disabilities or autism. David Thompson in his commentary suggests that this may reflect the very limited attention that has been given to gender itself. It is as though, in a manner Goffman might recognise, the person's disability "swamps" their identity in the eyes of others so that everything is attributed to it and other aspects of their identity (such as their gender) become less salient. In passing, note how this effect may also be at the root of the diagnostic overshadowing which leads to misdiagnosis of the health conditions of people with learning disabilities.

Precious Sango and Rachel Forrester-Jones, implicitly, suggest a similar analysis with respect to our frequent ignoring of the spiritual or religious needs that an individual with learning disabilities may have. Further, they note that this is not surprising given the absence of attention to these issues in policy documents. The commentary by Claudia Camden-Smith draws attention to the way in which issues of identity are, at least for people with learning disabilities who need support from others, inherently tied up with how comfortable those others are in supporting identities which may be at variance with their own. This may apply both to activities like going to church and gender dysphoric behaviours such as cross-dressing.

The article by Nick Gore, Richard Hastings and Serena Brady makes a case for the importance of early intervention with children who are at risk of displaying challenging behaviour. Identity is based not just on enduring physical or personal characteristics but also on the typical behaviours that are expected of an individual. Thus, it has been noted how the "reputation" developed around an individual whose behaviour is described as challenging may reflect more the failure of support than the inherent unmanageability of the person (e.g., Smull & Burke Harrison, 1992). Early intervention, then, may be a way of preventing a future, spoiled identity and, as Eric Emerson notes, the best evidence for its effectiveness may come from research with children without learning disabilities. Interesting, as Eric notes, how the identities of the people we work with are often so spoiled that research carried out with normals is not immediately accepted as applicable!

## References

Goffman, E. (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Prentice-Hall, New Jersey.

Smull, M. & Burke Harrison, S. (1992) *Supporting People with Severe Reputations in the Community*. National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services, Alexandria, Virginia.