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Title: Barriers, boundaries and buffers – protection and projection in residential child care.

Abstract: Children cared for by the state in residential settings away from their homes and families have usually experienced appalling and painful experiences in their very early years and many of them display their distress through difficult and challenging behaviours. Both their distressing histories and these problematic behaviours evoke strong emotional responses from those in their immediate environment and from wider society. Such pain can be experienced as unbearable and the resulting troubled behaviour can be deemed unacceptable.

This paper will draw on the presenter's extensive experience of consulting to and training in residential settings across the UK to examine the psychological dynamics and systemic factors that shield individuals, settings and society from facing the meaning and impact of these children's experiences. The paper will explore both the functional and dysfunctional aspects of these processes using the metaphor of the wall as outlined in the theme of the conference.

Some of the systemic barriers to genuine connection between adults and children will be outlined and the othering function of such barriers examined. Alongside this the paper will consider the internal psychological processes that allow workers and communities to block the meaning of children's lived experiences. The paper will argue that such barriers are constructed through policy, regulatory practices, distancing professionalization as well as through intra and interpersonal dynamics that protect people from their own primitive rage and hatred towards children.

All systems require some boundaries to delimit their space and to allow them to operate effectively yet they also need to be able to interact productively with their environment. There is a continual struggle within residential child care settings between boundaries that are too permeable, where children are exposed to a constant stream of workers and other official visitors, and boundaries that are too closed, where children are unable to interact with their community and friends in the same way as their peers. Boundaries between individuals are also complicated and contested where information about intimate details of children's lives are widely known and shared but the normal intimacies of life such as touch or endearments can be viewed with suspicion.

Children require space and buffering opportunities to recover from trauma, where their pain and behaviour can be understood and worked with over time. In some cases, communities also need buffers that can protect them from the negative consequences of children's behaviours. How such buffers can be developed so that there is safety and protection for all without stigmatisation and exclusion is a challenging task for managers and practitioners.

In examining these various representations of walls the paper will identify how some of these can provide genuine protection to children who are already vulnerable. It will also, however, highlight that through the process of projection and a variety of social defences against anxiety, these children often become seen as the other and provide convenient receptacles for some of the most primitive and troubling terrors that human beings can experience.