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Chapter 1

Sexuality and gender identity in the lives of young, disabled LGBT+ persons

Initiating a dialogue

Alex Toft and Anita Franklin

Introduction

This volume is a collection of 13 chapters, three pieces of original artwork and three section introductions which specifically explore disability, sexuality and gender identity in the lives of young people alongside connected debates. The book presents work that aims to amplify the voices of young people and centralises their experiences in debates that affect their lives. By exploring age, sexuality and disability in such an intersectional manner, the collection aims to shed light on how such identities inform and impact upon each other. Although these three aspects are the focus, due to the expertise of the contributors, the international nature of the volume and the emerging nature of this area of research, this is done in relation to a number of perspectives and life paths (including education, personal experiences, activism and broader social life). Furthermore, the collection is multi-disciplinary, with contributions from those working in an academic context (sociology, psychology, youth studies) but also those working in practice (e.g., education and psychology). Most importantly, although the majority of chapters are either written using experiences of young people or reflections on personal experiences, the entire book is framed with contributions from young people themselves. Poetry, diaries and artwork introduce each section, reminding readers of the real importance of the collection, the lives of young disabled LGBT+ people, and listening and working to ensure greater understanding to promote inclusion. Whilst the book is multi-disciplinary, it is also important to note that there are no chapters which pertain to a medicalised view of disability (or indeed sexuality), and the aim is not to pathologise the lives of young disabled LGBT+ people. There are no contributions that seek to question the validity of sexuality or gender identity in the lives of young disabled people. Work which questions young people's agency and ignores their experiences does not represent sound research and is rooted in phobia and bias. We do not accept the argument that it is acceptable to question people's lives and identities in pursuit of presumed academic freedom. Claiming that transphobia and homophobia (for example) are worthwhile pursuits and that such discourse will enable more critical thinking is flawed and ultimately revolves around a belief that young disabled LGBT+ people do not exist.

The book does not claim to cover all identities or debates either; an edited volume can rarely address all issues pertaining to its general focus. As an emerging area of research, the chapters represent an overview of some of the important work that is currently taking place, but they are not an entire cross-section. It is worth noting here, for example, that work with young disabled people who identify as asexual are not represented in the book (see Cuthbert, 2017). Most chapters also tend to see sexuality with regards to 'non-heterosexuality' rather than specific identities. Again, such work is occurring (see Toft and Franklin, 2020 for an example of an exploration of bisexuality). We feel that this kind of work is much needed, but due to the overall desexualisation of disabled people, such powerful collective identities (LGBT+ for example) are important in exposing misunderstandings.

The book emphasises empirical research but includes important theoretical work in order to emphasise the importance of ongoing research in this area. There are contributions from the UK, United States, India and Australia in order to pro- vide more insight into how different nations and cultures approach such identities. For example, disability studies is largely skewed towards white, Western adult populations (see Chapter 2), and the voices and experiences from countries out- side of the UK, United States, Canada and Australia are rarely heard. Whilst we do not claim that this largely academic text is accessible to all, it is an important step in opening up such debates.

As is traditionally the case, the introduction will detail the contributions individually, highlighting the aims and the potential impact that they will have. However, as this is clearly an emerging area of research, the introduction will first present three themes or aspects that this book contributes to as a whole, in relation to existing research: First, the book specifically contributes to debates surrounding LGBT+ identi- ties in disabled people's lives. Second, considerations of disabled childhood and youth studies, and in particular the importance of listening to disabled young people's experiences. Finally, we highlight some of the compounding discrimination and abuses that impact on many aspects of the lives of this group of young people; these experiences weave through many of the accounts given by the young people who have contributed to these chapters.

Identity in the lives of young disabled LGBT+ people – how it is negotiated, understood and enacted in everyday life – was in many ways the starting point for this entire project. We wanted to understand young people's experiences in particular, as we felt this was a period of change and questioning in people's lives. However, the disparity between disabled and non-disabled people's lives with regards to sexuality is stark. The literature is clear that disabled people continue to be de-sexualised and presented as childlike in disclosure concerning sexuality (see Liddiard, 2017; Gill, 2015). Combined with the fact that disabled people's voices are rarely heard in relation to sexuality and gender identity (Morgan et al., 2011), such presentations of sexuality in disabled people's lives are rarely based upon experiences. Foregrounding the experiences of young disabled LGBT+ people does reveal stories of discrimination, misunderstanding and non-acceptance. Any sexuality and gender identity outside of the prevalent heteronormative is reduced to a phase through which young people will emerge. We have proposed that this is in part due to misconceptions surrounding age (immaturity) and disability (e.g., they are incapable of being LGBT+ or their sexuality/gender identity is a result of their disability) (Toft et al., 2019a). Yet research needs to continually ask what dis- ability tells us about sexuality. It is clear, for example, that disability reveals a prevailing sense of non-normality with regards to LGBT+ identities. Disabled people are in this scenario in need of 'protection' against such non-normative identities which are revealed as being not suitable for them (Toft et al., 2019a, 2019b). Of course, this exposes a viewpoint that anything other than heterosexual and/or binary identities are somehow flawed. The chapters in this volume all show an awareness that such exploration begins from a position of discrimination and misunderstanding, yet we hope that in foregrounding experiences the book can speak to the positive way in which young disabled LGBT+ people challenge and re-shape understandings around age, sexuality, gender identity and disability.

In the last few decades, disabled childhood studies as a distinct discipline emerged in part as a response to the multi-dimensional exclusion of many disabled children and young people within research studies and the need to better under- stand the everyday lives of this group. It could also be argued that it sought to counterbalance the overwhelming medicalised and pathologising studies which had thus far excluded disabled children and young people from active roles in research. The dominant research discourse had often been one of ‘being done to’ and passivity rather than a discourse of facilitating voices and learning from lived experiences, moving through to empowerment, ‘working with’ or disabled chil- dren being in a position of control within research agendas and processes (Franklin and Martin, 2018; Shakespeare and Watson, 1998). At this time it was important to centre disabled children’s voices and experiences to ensure their active inclusion in research. Important studies emerged, although they predominantly focused on service and support provision or impairment-related subjects. Scholars, however, highlight the limitations of this narrow focus and expressed the need not to consider disabled children and young people a homogenous group. As disabled childhood studies continues to grow, the importance of looking at intersectional identities and issues – such as the focus of this book – adds depth and colour to our understanding of disabled young people’s lives. It is also challenging dominant discourses which have served to render disabled young people as incompetent or lacking in capacity both to be commentators on their often complex lives or to take part in research. The chapters in this book illustrate that disabled young people negotiate complex multiple identities, can articulate their (often distressing) experiences and have many suggestions for change to eliminate discrimination and exclusion. Despite the young people in these studies coming from different countries, growing up in different circumstances and having diverse identities, collectively their accounts across this book highlight many shared experiences. There are consistent underlying issues that have emerged across the chapters and which appear to underpin many of the lives of this group of young people. These issues have not necessarily been the specific focus of these studies, but they have appeared multiple times in young people’s voices and thus warrant attention. Issues include astonishing levels of discrimination based on the triad of minority statuses: being young, being LBGT+ and being disabled. In a significant number of accounts, young people have openly talked about experiencing physical, emotional and sexual abuse. Similarly, poor mental health and a lack of support to address this scatter across the lives of the young people. We hear of young people becoming isolated, not feeling part of communities (or being ostracised) and experiencing difficulties within their family relationships as a result of who they are. The young people report hiding their identities and experiencing a lack of agency and power in their lives, despite all having rights as children, as disabled people and as LGBT+ people to protection, participation and provision which is often secured in international and national laws.

This is a depressing synopsis; however, its significance and impact on the young people’s lives is important to recognise. In many of the studies contained within the book, young people have been given open opportunities to discuss their lives and have highlighted these issues, thus they all warrant further exploration as we begin to explore and better understand the lives of this group of young people. Only through understanding and listening to the multi-dimensional nature of discrimination at the intersection of being young, disabled and LGBT+ can we highlight these injustices and move forward to achieving equality. Of course, it is important not to simply focus on the negative aspects of young people’s lives. Across the young people’s accounts it can also been seen that the young people have shown considerable strength, resilience and resourcefulness in overcoming many of these issues. There are also accounts of advocacy and collective action to address the societal, structural and cultural barriers young disabled LGBT+ people face on micro, meso and macro levels. Moving forward in the development of this relatively new area of study, research should embrace further examination of how this positive action can facilitate change.

Of equal importance is always to be mindful of whose voices and experiences are still, or are being, silenced. It is hoped that this book centres our attention on disabled LGBT+ young people, and encourages further exploration, under- standing and improvements in the quality of their lives. With any newly emerging area of study there are always gaps in our understanding; we recognise that the following aspects also play a part in shaping the identities and life experiences of this group of young people and warrant further investigation. The following aspects have been beyond the scope of this collection: the impact of class, poverty, ethnicity, religion, geography, access to resources and means of expression and communication, to name only a few. We are aware that young people with specific impairments and/or gender and sexual identities have not been included and that the views of younger children are missing. We are acutely aware that many disabled young people still reside in institutions across the world where identities are very often marginalised. As mentioned earlier, it is always important not to treat disabled LGBT+ young people as homogenous, particularly in light of multiple structural and political systems that impact heavily in their lives. We also still need to amplify the voices of those young people currently not being supported by services and begin to develop our ethical and methodological approaches to be more inclusive of other voices and experiences. Despite highlighting the inevitable limitations of a single book and the emerging nature of this area of research, what this collection achieves is an amplification of the voices of young people and a centralisation of their experiences. This is an important development, and we hope that this book serves to stimulate further research and development in this area.

The contributions

The book begins with a presentation of three pieces of Beth Ward's artwork. They reflect the overall tones of the book, one of hope (the piece titled *Diversity*), pride (*You be you*), but also occasionally despair (*The Outsider*). Beth's important work highlights the need for authentic voices within research. Furthermore, the dis- satisfaction towards a rigid heteronormative, ableist and ageist society is clearly evident, as Beth stresses the importance of young disabled LGBT+ people staying true to themselves. We feel that these are important pieces of work which set the landscape for all that follows.

The book is divided into three sections in order to assist readers in accessing the material they wish but also to show the diverse and growing range of work in this area. Although as previously noted, the exploration of such identities is relatively new within a research context, scholars and practitioners are working to get more work published, and this is perhaps more a reflection on 'publishability' rather than a lack of research in the area. Of course, such sections overlap, but they clearly map the research in terms of what exists and what more could be done. Here we will detail the sections and the chapters within each section.

Section 1 of the volume, ‘Theoretical and Research Landscapes’, does a number of things. Importantly, it gives us an oversight of the research and social landscapes faced by young disabled LGBT+ people. The chapters within the section also give a sense of how things currently stand but also how they can change and improve in the future. Section 1 begins with a poem by James Molloy which on many levels reflects the key aims of this section and the overall book. James’s powerful words articulate the challenges he faces and his wishes for the future. The poem is a fitting beginning to the section and focuses debate upon the important aims of the book.

In Chapter 2, Alan Santinele Martino explores the work of LGBT+ disabled activists and scholars and their important contribution to the lives of young people. Such activists, it is argued, act as role models and provide essential information and vocabulary for young people who are often denied access to formal sex education. Santinele Martino shows how understandings of sexuality and gender are being ‘cripped’ by challenging the normative constructions. Such an approach effectively highlights where young disabled LGBT+ people are excluded and then provides examples of inequalities that exist. However, Santinele Martino’s mes- sage is a positive one and considers the work that has been done but also explores what the future may look like.

In Chapter 3, Debra A. Harley provides a thorough examination of the literature pertaining to psychosocial coping in the lives of disabled LGBTQ+ adolescents. The chapter effectively highlights the difficulties faced in everyday life and the pressures that young people with disabilities who identify as LGBTQ+ have to negotiate. Harley contends that such identifications place added stress upon young people which can adversely affect mental health and contribute to new disorders. Researchers in this area have to negotiate lines of victimisation and pathologisation, yet here Harley shows that if we can understand what is occurring and why, we can then work to remove societal resistance to such identities. In contributing to a greater understanding of identities, research can reduce the marginalisation of LGBTQ+ youth. Chapter 4 is also written from a psychological perspective, as Robert Dinwoodie and Beth Greenhill attempt to construct a psychological understanding of the lived experiences of young disabled LGBT+ people, specifically those with learning disabilities and/or intellectual disabilities. The chapter combines a systematic review and qualitative research to present a robust overview of work published in this area, and as a result includes research with young people and adults. The chapter also uses empirical data to explore emerging themes in detail. The chapter effectively highlights policy and practice gaps and explores what clinical psychologists need to be mindful of when providing a holistic service.

In Chapter 5, Anita Franklin and Alex Toft move the theoretical perspectives towards research methodological considerations. This chapter offers an honest account of some of the considerations, challenges and successes of researching alongside LGBT+ disabled young people. As an emerging area of research, the chapter provides an opportunity to reflect on how we can ensure that this group of young people and their voices remain central to the research agenda and emerging debates in this field. It explores issues of power and control, and how it is impor- tant that we take the lead and learn from young people in order to make research both accessible, meaningful and impactful for this group.

Section 2, 'Identity, Experience and Voice', focuses upon empirical research. The voices of young disabled LGBT+ persons are foregrounded throughout. Research continues to be conducted on young disabled people in particular (as opposed to 'with' young disabled people), with little consideration of the lives they are reporting and their experiences; the chapters here clearly problematise this perspective. A good deal of the work is exploratory and self-reflective, and we feel this is a powerful approach. The chapters represent exploration of identities but in relation to a number of public/private spaces.

The section begins with a reflective account from Zach Brookes, detailing his experiences in the world of sport in relation to his gender identity. Here we learn the personal account of a young man and gain insight into the personal negotiations taking place in his life. The stories show the importance of listening to young people and the importance of learning from others.

In Chapter 6, Edmund Coleman-Fountain provides an examination of ordinari- ness and misfitting in the lives of disabled LGBT youth. Disabled LGBT youth challenge ableist and heteronormative assumptions and in exploring such experiences, a greater understanding of normality and ordinariness can be formulated. The chapter is an excellent example of the powerful potential of disabled LGBT youth to disrupt and re-shape not only gender and sexuality but also what it means to be disabled. The chapter highlights the interplay and negotiation of ableism and heteronormativity through the exploration of one autistic young man's story.

Chapter 7, from Srilatha Juvva, Krupali Bidaye and Mahima Nayar, presents findings from original research exploring the experiences of young disabled trans people in India. It is of course important, as previously noted, that the debates are not restricted to Western conceptualisation of sexuality, gender identity and dis- ability. The chapter prioritises the life experiences of young disabled trans people in order to explore how they negotiate their identities in western India, effectively using liminality to understand the difficulties their participants have faced in working to negotiate their identities in everyday life. Importantly, the chapter also works to explore wider social movements with regards to trans support groups and activism, detailing the importance of such networks for those whose voices are rarely heard.

The Deaf community are significantly under-represented in research with young people. In Chapter 8, Paul Michaels and Abigail Gorman suggest that such young people are indeed a minority within a minority. The authors explore how communities and cultural markers do much to shape young people's lives. For young deaf people whose parents are often not deaf (and whose parents are rarely LGBT+), this presents a situation where there is little discussion about two key aspects of their lives. The chapter also contains illuminating discussion on sign language and Gay Sign Variation, building upon the importance of community and trust within the young people's personal networks.

Chapter 9 from Deborah Philip places the experiences of young disabled LGBT+ people in an educational setting, Throughout the chapter, Philip centralises the narratives of a group of young people to explore how misunderstandings and the lack of training for teachers and practitioners can adversely affect student experience. Focusing upon the experiences of autistic LGBT+ young people, the chapter details how educational journeys are negotiated and navigated by the young people whilst reflecting how such difficulties are exacerbated due to pro-fessionals possessing little understanding of their identities or how they intersect. The chapter has a clear policy focus and highlights the challenges and potential shortcomings of Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) in the UK.

In Chapter 10, Vemel (Resh) Ramasamy provides an important self-reflective chapter, drawing upon his personal experiences as a gay disabled man with autism. The chapter explores research and existing literature in relation to his own experiences and the personal narrative of his friend Aaron, who identifies as bisexual with autism. This unique and powerful approach allows the chapter to explore discrimination and challenges to receiving support in relation to real events and experiences. Furthermore, it allows for an intersectional analysis of life stories. The chapter clearly shows the multiple layers of discrimination young disabled LGBT+ face and the impact this has. In addition, Resh draws upon these experiences to make recommendations for improved support.

Section 3 presents work on support and inclusion. Although this title is rather broad, the focus here is upon examples of young people and academics/professionals working together closely to improve not only young people’s lives but the lives of their peers and the professionals they work with, who would also benefit in changes in culture and practice. Section 3 begins with a reflective piece from Beth Ward, which recounts her experiences attending an LGBT+ support group in a specialist college. Her words highlight the importance of community and reflect how learning together can be beneficial.

In Chapter 11, Paul Withers, with Tina McFay and Shayne Beevers, examines the psychological impact of being young and intellectually disabled in a society which is contextualised as being exclusory for young disabled LGBT+ persons. Throughout the chapter, Withers provides analysis and the voices of his co-authors, who are young disabled LGBT+ persons, to ensure that the focus is upon issues that are most pertinent to their lives. The chapter examines the challenges young people face in accessing support and what they want in terms of information about sexuality whilst also providing a history of the legal and policy context of sexuality and disability and its impact on disabled lives. The title of the chapter, ‘A Forbidden Topic?’, is most apt in this regard, as it reflects the fact that it was not openly talked about with the young people. The chapter moves to explore the importance of support and a shift in attitudes towards discussions around sexuality.

Chapter 12 by Gillian Leno and Andrew Travers presents a practitioner's account of building a LGBTQ+ alliance within a specialist college for disabled young people. The reflective chapter details the key debates and considerations that educators face when attempting to change a school's or college's ethos regarding LGBT+ life. The chapter examines student and staff experiences of setting up the inclusive supportive environment and the challenges faced. Such a powerful success story is an important inclusion within this volume as it represents the application of a number of theoretical perspectives. Furthermore, it highlights the real difference that such changes can make to young people's lives, especially when young people are empowered and encouraged to be the change-makers. This chapter highlights how much learning and creativity came from young people, and when supported by those with power to change cultures it can lead to significant positive change.

There are a number of parallels between Chapter 12 and Chapter 13, which is written by Alex Toft and Anita Franklin, particularly with regards to the desire to change a school ethos with regards to LGBT+ education. In Chapter 13, the authors present accounts and experiences of young students, detailing their thoughts about how best to improve LGBT+ lives within an education setting. Most notable is the students' call for an expansive approach to LGBT+ lives within education. Although specific lessons on LGBT+ life were important, particularly in relation to relationships, the students suggested that the integration of LGBT+ lives within the wider curriculum would do much to normalise such identities. This would be beneficial for LGBT+ students, but also the wider school population who would gain knowledge and understanding which would promote inclusion.

In conclusion, it is hoped that the book stimulates research and discussion which pertains to age, sexuality and disability. Indeed, we feel that such research and the young people involved in such work has much to teach us about life and society which is consistently framed with ageism, ableism and heteronormativity.

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