# Identity Management and Community Belonging: The Coming Out Careers of Young Disabled LGBT+ Persons

Alex Toft[1]

## Abstract

Coming out is best viewed in terms of a career with no discernible endpoint. Popular discourse and stage-based models which emphasise a linear phased approach tend not to accurately represent contemporary coming out experiences. Using data from interviews, focus groups and interactive workshops, this article explores the perceptions and strategies towards coming out by young disabled LGBT+ people. I suggest that viewing coming out careers as an identity management technique helps to shed light upon the relationship between intersecting identities and helps to examine the negotiations taking place, whilst teasing out how such identities impact and inform one another against the backdrop of misunderstanding. The stories of the participants also show that the framing of coming out as an imperative to living honestly and authentically was not a common experience. However, coming out to feel a sense of belonging within communities remains central to the perceived benefits. Coming out for the participants reveals tensions between their identities based on ableism and heteronormativity that led them to reconsider the viability and benefits of coming out. However, the participants revealed a challenging two-way relationship between the LGBT+ community and them as disabled people.

**Keywords** Sexuality · Disability · Identity · Coming out · Community

## Introduction

Within popular discourse coming out is framed as essential and positive; a grand one-time announcement with instant benefits. Coming out is portrayed as the only way to live happily and authentically. Such standpoints are often linked to mental health research, particularly in relation to identity reconciliation research. It is suggested that not taking ownership of, and reconciling, identities which appear

✉ Alex Toft
  alexander.toft@ntu.ac.uk

1   Nottingham Centre for Children, Young People and Families, School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, Chaucer Building, Goldsmith Street, Nottingham NG1 5LT, UK

 Springer

conflicted, results in poorer mental health outcomes (see Corrigan and Matthews 2003 and Levy and Reeves' 2011 work on bisexuality and Christianity for one such example). Such reconciliation is often viewed as being vital to a stable sense of self (Cain 1991; Ragins 2004; Corrigan et al. 2013). As a result, research continues to search for universal coming out stories or typologies (Manning 2015) and propose strategies to ease the process (Gurmano 2008). Underlying this research is the assumption that coming out is essential and can benefit all (see Lynch and Murray 2000 for research upon how this can be beneficial for families and children). However, seeing coming out as linear is not an accurate representation of the lives of all young people. Such an approach has received detailed and extensive critiques (Klein et al. 2015). The essential nature of coming out has also been highlight as problematic, as Legate et al. (2012) have shown that there are complex negotiations to be minded and contextually issues to be managed. The focus of much recent work has been upon exploring patterns of coming out and the rise in coming out as a specific identity, e.g. queer or pansexual (Hillier et al. 2010). Research has also begun to focus upon differences within the LGBT+ umbrella of identities. For example, research has generated the suggestion that around 50% of transgender and gender diverse youth populations claiming non-binary identities (Smith et al. 2014) and that transgender and gender diverse people are more likely than LGB populations to come out to service providers due to higher levels of discrimination (Jones 2019).

One of the prevailing misconceptions young disabled LGBT+ people face is that their sexuality or gender identity can be attributed to going through a phase or being in a position of temporariness (Toft et al. 2019b). Taking a metaphor from Plummer (1995) we are seen to be navigating a sea of questions and uncertainties before eventually arriving home. Yet, the life stories of young disabled LGBT+ persons, in my research, suggest that even such a well-meant piece of language is no longer representative of contemporary discourse on sexuality and gender. Any such home, just as a physical home, is temporary and a compromise at best. Such journeys do not need a defined end-point, as an end-point only enhances the focus upon the time at sea, whilst categorising it as being choppy, uneven and essentially, not representative of one's true identity. For young disabled LGBT+ persons, the reduction of sexuality and gender identity to a phase, is built upon misunderstandings in relation to immaturity, incapability and delegitimisation (Toft et al. 2019b). As previously shown (Toft et al. 2019a; Toft and Franklin 2020a), young people have to negotiate their identities in light of such pressures, but they also have to navigate decisions on sharing their identities with others. Such overt expressions of self-identity, and the process leading up to communicating this, are often grouped into what is commonly labelled as 'coming out', where individuals convey their identities to others for a host of reasons.

This article shows how for young disabled LGBT+ persons, this decision is complex and complicated by underlying ableism and heteronormativity. This article explores the coming our experiences and perceptions about coming out of (30) young people (16–25) who identified as disabled and LGBT+, in order to understand their considerations and motivators when beginning their coming out careers. It is important to note that the focus throughout is upon social life in relation to coming out. The aim is to explore the negotiations which take place and not upon

prevalence of LGBT+ identities, comparisons within the LGBT+ umbrella of identities or any trends in relation to ages when young people first communicate their identities.

Experiences were collected using interviews, focus groups and interactive workshops. The article is led by the voices and experiences of the participants; who highlighted two overarching themes. Firstly, participants highlighted the strategic nature of coming out and the way that the process can be viewed in terms of identity management. Seeing coming out in terms of identity management is potentially fruitful in understanding the challenges the participants faced in relation to their intersecting identities, and how such challenges are overcome (including protection strategies used) whilst celebrating the joys and wisdoms associated with the participants identities. Second, the role of community and its impact upon identity. Shakespeare (1999) has previously noted the collective benefits of coming out and the role of community in providing a safe and affirmative space. Accessing and finding acceptance within such communities for Shakespeare's participants was seen as 'coming home'. Yet such a homecoming is fraught with difficulties around the reductive nature of community, to the point where thinking about an LGBT+ community (for example) is largely meaningless (see Formby 2017). Coming out to belong was still important to the participants but it was shrouded by concerns over how such communities may perceive them.

The article begins with a brief exploration of how coming out is perceived within the literature, paying specific attention to coming out careers (as opposed to events) and the idea of coming out to manage ones identity. The article then considers coming out to belong and the role of community, one of the central aspects raised by the participants. After a description of the methods the main body of the article addresses the themes, as noted above, before moving to offer conclusions and wider implications of the research. Throughout I focus upon coming out in terms of sexuality/gender and not coming out as disabled. Unlike Shakespeare (1999) who was able to explore these coming out experiences side by side, the participants here were young people who were in supportive environments for their disabilities (e.g. specialist colleges and support groups). However, the intersection of and their influence upon each other is clear throughout.

## Coming out: Careers and Communities

Coming out is often framed as a psychological concept within the literature, and has been largely seen as representing the end of a battle with one's sexuality or gender identity. It is portrayed as the end goal of a journey of self-discovery and the point at which a person becomes authentic or honest and begins to live as their true self. As noted, research continues to explore the idea that coming out allows people to find their true selves. This also emphasises the importance of creating a positive identity, suggesting that until people communicate their sexuality/gender identity to others, their identity is neither valid nor positive (see Greenfield 2008 for one example).

At the point of coming out, society then welcomes or rejects such an announcement. Such a direct and one-off communication of sexuality has been repeated and

mythologised to the point at which it is seen as the only true and correct route for individuals to take (see Guittar and Rayburn 2016). Coming out in this regard then, is the progression to public communication about sexuality where one is officially 'out of the closet'. This popular understanding has been influenced by psychological staged models such as those proposed by Cass (1979). Such models (see also McDonald 1982; Rhoads 1995) attempted to catalogue the correct stages an individual should pass through in order to accept their sexuality.

Research has suggested that the continued application of such models is an inaccurate representation of people's lives. As Guittar and Rayburn (2016) have succinctly highlighted, coming out is an ongoing career rather than a one-off event, and such models are often retrofitted to events and experiences that have occurred and in fact represent people's inability to describe complexities. Building upon an increasing body of research (see Appleby 2001; Johnston and Jenkins 2004) they showed that such understandings are not representative of lived experiences and that closer examination reveals coming out to be an ongoing process. Although contemporary work has begun to explore the fluidity of sexuality, such work appears to be largely reliant upon sexual identity being deemed as stable (in or out of closet) for it to be healthy and authentic (Diamond 2000, 2016). Throughout this article 'coming out' is used for ease of reading, rather than other more psychological nomenclature (such as identity disclosure) and refers to the entire process of thinking about and sharing LGBT+ identities with others.

Work by Orne (2011) has added sociological weight to the debates around coming out, both as a concept and its role and place in everyday life. Although some contemporary research has attempted to play down the importance of coming out in terms of managing identity (Seidman 2002) or even suggested that society is 'post-gay' where coming out is not believed to be problematic (Savin-Williams 2003, 2006), this does not appear to pay enough attention towards intersectionality and other aspects that affect the reality of coming out (disability, religion, ethnicity and so forth). Additionally, Orne (2011) suggested that coming out, as a concept, has become confused, making research on coming out difficult, due to confusion about what is actually being researched. Orne (2011) also highlighted bias in previous research (Cohler and Hammack 2007; Savin-Williams 2001) which 'treats gay youth as troubled, lacking their own agency to navigate coming out interactions' when they are in fact 'strategic actors capable of making complex decisions and balancing several competing interests' (Orne 2011: 685). Developing the work of Mosher (2001) and the theoretical assertion that gay men are at once both in and out of the closet, coming out is much to do with identity management and negotiation.

Research exploring coming out or identity disclosure for young disabled LGBT+ persons is scarce. Recently Miller et al. (2019) presented a psychological examination of the purposes of disclosure and nondisclosure for University students. They noted three themes that guided students' decisions: disclosing in order to support self and others, disclosing indirectly through signs and symbols, and passing for other identities. Such observations highlight the practical negotiations involved in managing identity and how it is done (e.g. directly, indirectly, strategically) rather than the reasons for disclosing identities (with the exception of the assertion that it is done to assist others who require support). Whilst such

observations are important in moving discourse forward regarding identity management forward for disabled people, the focus of this article, as a sociological exploration is different. Here the focus is upon how young disabled people perceive coming out, and what, in their own experiences, are the benefits and challenges they face. This is explored in relation to coming out as LGBT+ for young, disabled persons.

As Plummer (1995) noted, one of the clear benefits of coming out is the resultant finding of a place within a community of like-minded individuals. Such a community helps to stabilise identity within a safe environment. Plummer discussed this in terms of finding stories which resonate clearly with personal experiences, and the creation of sub-cultures which will help provide meaning:

> The most common strategy for doing this is to gain access to new social worlds- an access to story tellers open to coaxing and coaching into the tales of gay and lesbian life. Here, secrecy and isolation will be broken down, legitimations and justifications for the new way of life are found, and a sense of who one is will finally be arrived at. (Plummer 1995:89).

In terms of disabled LGBT+ coming out experiences, the important work of Shakespeare (1999) remains the key text. Shakespeare, using participants lived experiences, detailed the societal barriers and challenges his participants had to negotiate in order to come out. The research powerfully explored how the participants came out as gay and disabled, and how they did this in relation to the different communities they were attempting to gain access to (e.g. gay communities and disabled communities). Shakespeare showed a diversity of experiences yet highlighted disparity between the acceptance of certain communities, particularly in relation to the gay community being unwelcoming towards disabled men:

> While people had experienced homophobia in the disability movement, and disablism in the lesbian and gay movement, some felt that the former was less of a problem, or less widespread. Moreover, at least it was possible to gain physical access to disability community events and activities, while often lesbian and gay events were totally inaccessible. (Shakespeare 1999:48).

Subsequent research has linked this to preconceptions of masculinity and femininity and prejudice in the gay community over what represents a gay aesthetic (Harley et al. 2002; Blyth 2010). However, the way in which coming out is aligned with coming home, and the emphasis upon finding a coming to be yourself is striking. This re-enforces the necessity of belonging and espouses the benefits of such a life.

In addition to concerns around accessibility, recent research, perhaps best exemplified by Formby (2017) questions the validity of talking about an LGBT community, arguing that such communities are ill-defined and too reductive to carry any meaning. With such diversity, a homogenised representation of LGBT people is unlikely to capture the essence of its members. In summary Formby states that a sense of belonging and collective identity is desired but the LGBT community can be exclusory of certain people, while being more inclusive to others.

## Situating this Research

Since the work of Shakespeare (1999) the coming out stories of (young) disabled LGBT+ people have remained largely unheard. I propose that there three key reasons for this: Firstly, due to the prevailing popular discourse on coming out which reaffirms stages of coming out what is largely linear and with a clear endpoint (direct announcement), coming out has been framed something that LGBT+ people do as a rite of passage. The intricacies of coming out have been lost behind a push for ensuring that LGBT+ come out in order to live their best lives. Second, research exploring the life experiences of disabled LGBT+ people has not pursued this area of investigation. As disabled people's sexualities are consistently denied to the point of being denied access to intimacy (if this is what they desire), they are framed as being childlike or without a sexuality (Toft and Franklin 2020a). This creates an interesting juxtaposition as LGBT+ persons are often hypersexualised (for example, bisexuality is often erroneously linked to hypersexuality, see Alarie and Gaudet 2013, Nathanson 2009, Monro 2015). As a result, these areas have taken precedence over experiences of coming out. And the third factor which underlies both the previous points is that coming out has been conceptually weak and imprecise, resulting in the benefits of exploring coming out stories remaining largely hidden. Orne (2011) has shown that if we understand coming out in terms of the strategies and negotiations that take place, and how in essence it is about managing identity; we can explore coming out in order to understand more about intersecting identity and the inherent challenges and power imbalances as a result of possessing certain identities.

## Methods

### Research Methods

The article uses data obtained during a project with several stages. The first stage of the project involved exploratory semi-structured interviews with 13 young people. Using the existing literature and the exploratory aims of the project (to explore life experiences, understand how identities were negotiated, and discover what barriers exist, and what education looks like in relation to sex and relationships) a very broad schedule was produced. The responses of the young people largely guided the conversation and helped to keep the interview informal. A number of engagement techniques were also used, including using card games to discuss identities and to begin the interview without reliance on questions and answers. The identity cards worked well as ice-breakers to initiate conversation about the young people's lives and to let them reveal personal information on their own terms. Throughout the interview process vignettes or role-playing activities were employed if they were felt to be beneficial. These activities usually revolved around news stories or fictional accounts that in some

way allowed us to explore sexuality and disability. Such stories were often concerned with experiences of other young people, their successes and the challenges they face in everyday life. This broke up any question and answer sessions that might have evolved but also allowed the participants to focus less on themselves, pushing the conversation into the third-person. This was particularly fruitful whilst working with young people who found the interview process rather anxiety-inducing. All interviews ended with a discussion about role models; who they might be, their significance, what they represent. Such discussions were effective in allowing young people the space to think about some of the wider issues and were often a positive way to end the discussion.

The exploratory nature of the interviews meant that whilst there were important for uncovering the broad areas in which young people were interested, they did not present an opportunity for further investigation into specific aspects of life. The participants were members of an LGBT+ support group and a specialist college, and as a result both groups were used to working together and talked openly about their thoughts and experiences as part of the groups' activities. Two separate focus groups (2 groups containing eight and ten participants respectively- six of these had also took part in interviews) were therefore convened as a method to explore aspects in a supportive and reflective environment. This enabled a more detailed investigation into themes that had emerged from the interviews such as the idea of the phase, coming out and experiences in education.

What was apparent from the initial methods employed was that they excluded a number of potential participants, particularly those who preference was not to communicate orally in such an intensive fashion. Interviews and focus groups exclude those with complex communication needs, and this needs considerable investigation in future research. In order to engage with more young people I developed a series of interactive workshops (including five new participants, resulting in 30 individuals across the project) which gave participants more freedom to explore what was important to them in a form that was best for them (e.g. artwork, poems, free writing). The workshops lasted for around an hour and a half, consisting of three half hour sessions. The sessions focussed upon their experiences in relation to education, social life and personal negotiations providing questions for debate and exploration throughout. In practice this resulted in proposing questions to the group which we then explored as a group or individually either through conversation or arts methods (drawing, writing etc.) Although this helped to engage more young people, it is clear that the methods are not inclusive of those with additional needs (such as complex communication needs), this needs further investigation in future work.

The research was approved by Coventry University ethics board and Nottingham Trent University College Research Ethics Committee (CREC).

## The Participants

The young people (16–25) who took part self-identified as LGBT+ and disabled. This resulted in a diverse range of identities (for example gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, gender fluid, non-binary, queer, asexual) and impairments (autism, learning disabilities, mental health problems,[1] and physical disabilities). The purpose of reporting this is to give an overall sense of the sample and not to pathologise such identities. As a result, I will not provide individuals specific impairments and LGBT+ identities as a list/table and will only refer to them if this is relevant to the point of discussion. Although the strategic focus is upon the intersection of such identities, listing and providing such details will result in ranking identities and the erasure of any collective identity. Disability here refers to a social, cultural and attitudinal barriers, whereby people are excluded based upon their impairments. LGBT+ is used throughout as it was the preferred term of the participants overall (discussed during the focus groups).

The young people were from Central England and the majority were in education (two interviewees were in full time work; all members of the focus groups and workshops were in education). The sample was purposeful and was recruited via gatekeepers who work with the young people via social/support groups and networks.

## Theoretical Framing

As previously noted I take inspiration from the work of Orne (2011) and his call to explore coming out as a strategic identity management tool which can help to unpick identities and intersections. In order to do this, I use what I have previously called intersectional story-telling, a form of narrative driven intersectional analysis (Toft et al. 2019b). I propose that exploring experiences and events, whilst always foregrounding the voices of the participants, is an effective starting point for understanding individual's relation to society and the self. Inspired by Plummer's (1995) Critical Humanism and the power of sexual stories, the approach thematically organises the data and centralises the voices of the participants. In this regard the lived experiences of the participants guide the article, as experts in their own lives.

## Coming Out to Manage Identity

The perceptions and experiences of the participants in relation to managing identity through coming out highlighted two main themes. Firstly, using coming out to work against heteronormativity and ableism. In this regard the young people were working in an advocacy capacity to educate others, whilst supporting others and negotiating their own identities. Second, the lived experiences highlight the importance

---

[1] 'Mental health problems' is used throughout for consistency, in line with the rationale provided by mind.org. For the participants in my research, mental health problems were severe enough to have a disabling effect on their lives.

of protection in managing their identities through coming out. The young people discussed how they had to protect themselves (e.g. personal safety) but also how they protected others from knowledge of their identities. Throughout the emphasis is upon how the participants used coming out to managing their identities and how such identities were perceived by others.

## Educating and Supporting

> This guy was filling out the form for her [partner] and asking questions and writing it down and said- got to orientation and said 'straight yeah' and she said no. Because obviously we are together so they just assume that we are straight. And when it came to me as well, because of [Name Removed] he asked me and he was like 'are you straight' but without putting it down, and I said no I am bi. (Aaron, they- interview).

Aaron's quotation recounts an experience in which it was presumed they were straight. At this point Aaron had the option of correcting the person (which is what happened) or saying nothing. Of course, saying nothing at this point would have been viable, as there may be issues of safety. In this instance Aaron decided that it was important to make such a correction, in order to educate and advocate for others. For Aaron, this related to ensuring that others knew that there were disabled people who were bisexual.

> It is assumed that I am straight because of my girlfriend, but also because I somehow don't know my own mind. (Aaron, they- interview).

Here Aaron made a link between sexuality and disability, suggesting that it is a misunderstanding about disability that led to an assumption about sexuality. For other participants, correcting others and coming out represented an opportunity to educate others about a specific impairment or aspect of disability. John, who was autistic and had learning disabilities suggested that revealing his sexuality allowed him to educate others:

> I can talk to them about me and what I go through, with gay and disabled stuff. (John, he- interview).

For John, coming out presented an opportunity to share information about disability. John explained how people made assumptions about his disability, particularly in terms of aspects of intimacy. Although John described himself as socially awkward, and stated that this was how autism affected his everyday life, people assumed he had issues in terms of touch and being close to others. John welcomed the opportunity to dispel such assumptions. He also suggested that coming out in this fashion allowed him to learn about people's homophobia. Although this was often painful, he suggested that this was a two-way learning process:

> If they say something about being gay I can tell them about my life. Then I understand what their problem is with gay people, then I can explain things better. (John, he- interview).

This interesting perspective suggests that John was looking to understand the resistance he faced by engaging with those who did not accept he could be gay. Previous research has stressed the importance of others acting as advocates of for young people. It has been suggested that counsellors in their supporting capacity, advocate and provide a welcoming environment to discuss identity (Matthews and Salazar 2012). Yet, the voices of the young people living such experiences are lost here. As Miller et al. (2019) have highlighted, and is reflected in the stories of my participants, coming out is often a supportive act. My participants suggest, however, that in their experience it is the education of people who may resist their identities which should be the focus. This has been explored previously (Humphrey 1999; Clair et al. 2002). Humphrey argued that in practice there are three dimensions to coming out. A personal layer relating to personal integrity and honesty; a professional layer referring to openness with others (colleagues in the original research), and a political layer, noting the important role coming out plays in educating others. As with my participants, Humphrey noted the importance of challenging pre-conceptions and stereotypes.

It is important to note the potential risks to such an approach. The desire to educate and advocate when presented with the opportunity has a potential constraints, most specifically with regards to the willingness of people to accept the information and their reaction to it. The participants suggested that they focused first on the age and maturity when deciding whether to discuss their identities.

> …when I first came out it was really rocky because I told some of my friends…when people knew they started to take the piss, not for long though, but it seems like it gets easier when you older because with college and beyond they are more grown up and they can deal with that. But when you are a kid they take the piss. When they are older they are a bit more grown up and ok with it. (Kevin, he- Workshop/spoken).

During a focus group Amy also highlighted this. I quote Amy at length as she explores how she would tend to focus upon age, but in reality this was not a fail-safe measure:

> I went up to college thinking that everything would be better because people are more grown up, but it seems that the people in my life who have understood me most would be like my cousins who are 3 or 4 years old who are like OK. Whereas I went to college and I thought I would get away from what was going on in high school because I had no friends, nothing, because of me being gay and trans, to which I just faced more of it because there are people from backgrounds where they have been brought up to hate it and things like that. If it is just a little kid they have not been bought up to hate it. (Amy, her-Focus group).

Legate et al. (2012) have suggested that it is context that is key when considering coming out. Amy's experiences highlight the difficulties of assessing people's individual thoughts. However, it is the wider environment that is of importance, and whether it is deemed to be supportive. As Legate et al. (2012) suggest,

wellness after disclosure is often a result of doing so in an environment of autonomous support. The following section explores how the participants had to be mindful of the environment in which they communicated their identities, and how these protection strategies can be viewed in terms of identity management.

## Protection Strategies

The experiences of participants in educating and advocating for others shows that coming out strategically can be used positively. However, it was clear that for many of the participants, coming out strategically was a tool used for protection. In this scenario, protection refers in main to protecting oneself from unsafe situations, but also protecting others from harm. Although these aspects of identity management could be construed as more negative, as they relate to hiding identity, it is clear that there are spaces in which it was unsafe to discuss their identities. The experiences of the participants highlight the importance of considering identities intersectionally.

### Self-Protection

> I feel that you should be careful with who you come out to, as I am half Turkish, so my Dad's side do not approve of it. I found it difficult coming out to my nan because of it. (Charlotte, her- workshop/written).

Charlotte explained how she told her nan about her sexuality only after discovering her uncle was gay. Her uncle assured her that it was safe to inform her nan. Charlotte explained that she was welcoming and told her that the most important life motto was 'love is love'. However, there were a number of examples of young people who used a strategic approach to protect themselves from abuse. Sam, during an interview, explained that he would not discuss his sexuality with his father's side of the family. His uncle in particular was noted as being an 'unwelcoming military man'. Although Sam felt that this was not problematic due to the support he received from his family and network of friends. Such a strategic approach can be used to negotiate potentially abusive/violent reactions.

It is an important point to emphasise that this strategic approach does not appear to be an option for some of the participants. The trans participants noted that this strategy may not always be open to them as coming out as trans may result in a change to visible appearance (Gagné et al. 1997). Additionally, the young people with mental health problems suggested that not coming out was often detrimental to their wellbeing. Abigail's story here is most pertinent in relation to these points. Abigail was at the time of interview effectively living two lives, one at home and a public life where she could be what she called her 'authentic self'. Since telling other people about her sexuality (bisexual/pansexual) and gender identity (trans woman), her family had largely disowned her. She had to live at home as the wrong gender and not discuss sexuality; whilst in public she was open about her identities. She argued that for her the coming out process was vital. Abigail also had learning disabilities and mental health problems and not communicating her identities was having a detrimental effect on her mental health. Abigail argued that this had

resulted in her being sectioned and attempting suicide. Throughout the interview she repeated the phase 'I came out to save my life', emphasising the importance of making large-scale (Facebook) announcement to her friends and family. Since posting the message Abigail described the discrimination and abuse she had received, including both physical and verbal violence, but argued that for her it was the only answer. This announcement also had the effect of inspiring others:

> I've been told that I'm an inspiration because of transitioning and that. I'm a good person for helping everyone else. I've been called an inspiration, people look up to me. I've been told that people do look up to me and how much I'm an amazing person, and I've been told that by people. And for me that has made me feel a lot better about myself and that kind of wants to make me carry on with things. (Abigail, her- interview).

Such stories were not isolated. During the focus groups a number of participants highlighted how they decided to tell a number of people about their sexualities (in this instance) using a wide-reaching statement. The rationale for such decisions, as with Abigail, often revolved around the thought that it would be beneficial for mental health. However, some young people suggested that it helped them to become comfortable with their identities. Although as James noted, 'people still take the piss' (bullied/mocked), he argued it was helpful for him to communicate this in order for him to gain confidence.

Those who focus upon the imperative nature of coming out do so in reference to the perceived mental health benefits. Indeed, it is arguable that in terms of coming out research, the most widely explored aspect is the potential mental health benefits of doing so. Although this highlights psychology's longer history of research in the area (in relation to sociology), both Abigail and James's experiences highlight this link. For those with mental health problems it is suggested that selectively disclosing limits stigmatisation and increase support (Bos et al. 2009). Large scale studies have suggested that coming out for those with mental health problems can improve quality of life, particularly with regards to the limiting of self-stigma (Corrigan et al. 2010). However, Corrigan et al. (2010) cautiously suggest that guidance from peers is perhaps the most beneficial. This aspect was clearly identified by my participants in relation to the importance of community, as will be explored in the next major section.

## Protecting Others

It is interesting to note that the majority of the participants, when discussing their thoughts on telling people about LGBT+ identities, often considered the opinions and feelings of others before their own. When the topic of coming out was raised during interviews, participants tended to initially think of the effect that this might have upon other people and their lives. Bridget explained how she would work to hide herself in order to not offend people:

> Certain places I do have to alter my sexuality and disability. At college I know people understand my issues, so I'm more open than closed up. But if I were out in public there are some things that I would just deliberately hide to save offending someone, I just wouldn't speak or use gestures if I needed something, and I wouldn't mention my sexuality to fit in. (Bridget, her- interview).

This telling quotation highlights how Bridget puts the feelings of others first, specifically with regards to not revealing her impairments or her sexuality. She discussed how her movements (her tics) could potentially offend people, and how it was best to fit in and appear normative in terms of sexuality. Research has focussed upon this aspect in terms of how 'closetting' or hiding identity leads to isolation (Schope 2004). However, my participants suggested that this response was often more deep-seated and related to a preference to put others before themselves, for fear of challenging normativity within the family. This was most clearly explored by Kabir who focussed for a large proportion of the interview on his relationship with his family. Kabir stated that he did not want to focus upon sexuality when talking to his family as it would unfairly change his relationship with them:

> And it is also that I don't want to change that relationship that I have with them. The relationship I have with them, my family, is very weird…and dad will just shout and my sister is completely joking about my sexuality. (Kabir, he- interview).

Kabir suggested that discussion around sexuality would disrupt his relationship with family, as any reference to being gay would change his family's opinions of him. Kabir highlighted instances where his sister would cover up his sexuality on his behalf:

> So, if her [sisters] husband's family is coming around and stuff and I am being my normal self, certain things that I do, she will say things being closed doors to reassure them. So they don't, you know, say your wife has a gay brother. (Kabir, he- interview).

Much of this protection revolves around ignorance and misunderstanding. As Rachel stated 'it is easier to not discuss sexuality rather than to have to explain things to people who just don't understand'. Edith also explored this in her experiences of talking to her family members:

> She's [Grandma] understanding of people being trans to a degree and all that, but she did not get being non-binary, she did not get that, she said 'well you seem to have a lot of feminine qualities' and I'm like arghh, that's not the point Grandma and sort of gave up with it…unless I'm with the group [local support group] or with my mum, I hold back a lot of the non-binary stuff because people don't get it. (Edith, they- interview).

These experiences highlight the way that the young people either felt that they did not have the energy required to come out with the associated explanation that would be required, or that coming out would place others in a difficult situation. The impact of coming out upon others (family/friends) is under-researched, as the focus

has been upon the experiences of the individuals. Waldner and Magruder (1999) found that people are more likely to come out if they have strong relationships with their families. However, in Kabir's instance this was not that case as he argued that although he had a strong relationship he didn't want anything to change this. This finding underlines the unique negotiations the participants had to manage.

## Community Belonging

The young people explored how the involvement in communities of like-minded individuals had a positive impact upon identity management. Their lived experiences highlighted a number of interconnected examples of the importance of communities, whilst furthering the potential difficulties of engaging with such a homogenised group. Two main themes arose: Firstly, the young people explored how communities were places to gain further understanding and to gain a sense of belonging whilst negotiating identity. Secondly, the participants highlighted their worries with regards to worrying about engaging with LGBT+ communities as disabled people.

> It is good to talk to people who understand. If I wasn't here I wouldn't be talking to anyone. Even though I don't need help finding myself, it is still nice to be around people with stuff in common and we are all on the same page. (Ryan, they- workshop/spoken).

Ryan's experiences of attending his support group reflected his positive experiences of engaging with a community with similar experiences and opinions. Although they clearly stated that they did not use the group to learn more about their identity, it was a place for solidarity and a place where 'we discuss all sorts of things and it helps me understand things' (Ryan). This was the most common response in terms of the role of community. The participants argued that such communities were places for affirmation, in line with both Plummer's (1995) and Shakespeare's (1998) metaphors of journeys and homecomings.

Kabir explored this in relation to his ethnicity:

> It's like Hogwart's basically. You still have got a journey to go on. And in terms of different cultures, in Asian culture it is very small, there is an issue with LGBT people coming out because of their families. So when Asians do come out it is hard for them to find a community because it isn't accepting. You are questioning and you need help and an established community. (Kabir, he- interview).

The importance of community for learning from others and helping to provide a sense of belonging is clear here. The participants highlighted a link between community building and a positive impact upon identity which is often reflected in wider health and counselling literature. It has been suggested that belonging to a community has a positive impact upon wellbeing (Lyons et al. 2013) and helps improve mental health (McLaren et al. 2008; Frost and Meyer 2012; Barr et al. 2016).

Attending an inclusive support group catering specifically for young disabled LGBT+ was highlighted as being important as the intersection of these identities played a central role in the participant's lives. As such an environment was seen as a safe space where he could work through his such for others. Research suggests that the creation of such communities is beneficial (see Morgan et al. 2011). It has been argued that in order to have a positive and inclusive ethos such communities must be created along lines of disability theory (Atkins and Marston 1999). The authors argue disability theory is important as it 'provides a recognition of the social construction of labelling terms, without falling into the bind of deconstruction and abstraction of postmodern plasticity by continually grounding itself in the "messiness" of bodily variety' (p. 20).

## Negotiating Communities

Belonging to such communities is fraught with difficulties. Important research suggests that discussing an LGBT+ community per se is problematic due to the diversity of such identities (Formby 2017). As a result, it is likely that such communities cannot be considered inclusive as they are likely to exclude those who do not fit with established norms. For the participants in my research, accessing LGBT+ spaces could be difficult. Previous research has suggested that the LGBT+ community may not be welcoming (Appleby 2001; Blyth 2010). Shakespeare (1998) also highlighted the poor attitudes of gay people towards disabled persons. The overriding concern of not being the 'right kind of gay' (Ryan) framed a good deal of the participants perceptions of such communities. However, for my participants, as young people, this related in main to their perceptions of such communities. As some may not have been legally able to engage with some communities, they focussed upon what they understood the 'gay scene' to be. To return briefly to Kabir's story. Although he recognised the importance of community belonging, he was wary about what the inclusivity of an LGBT community. He outlined how such a community could never be representative:

> I understand the movement, improving equality and inclusiveness, allowing LGBTQ people to be who they are in society. But certain communities are very…it shows only a certain side of the community which does not reflect every person and who we are. It is more focussed upon a certain type of interest or personality. (Kabir, he- interview).

A number of participants had completely closed the door on attending LGBT+ events or engaging in any sort of community, due to preconceptions about what such a community represents:

> …the gay community, and the LGBT…I feel a lot of people are flamboyant and out there. I don't want people to assume that I am like that, I try to fit in a lot. (Robert, they- interview).

The attitude that LGBT+ communities were not for them was common throughout the participant's stories. LGBT+ communities were portrayed as not being willing to accept disabled people as 'LGBT centres are prejudice and unwelcoming' (Richard). Of course, this does not show that such communities are unwelcoming, rather that they were perceived as being so.

One powerful exception to this were participants who explained that they had mental health problems. LGBT+ support networks/communities were portrayed as being understanding and a positive space in this regard. Anne during a workshop explored this:

> The LGBT community is definitely a lot more understanding and I think everyone in the LGBT community has gone through some form of mental health. Everyone has been through some traumatic incident at some point that they've had to deal with, their families or the community they are in, everyone has had a struggle. So I think that they are a lot more understanding of mental health. (Anne, her- Workshop/spoken).

The young people perceived other disabled persons as being more accepting toward their sexuality. During the focus groups participants were keen to explain that this was due to disabled people empathising with potential discrimination towards LGBT+ identities as they had experienced discrimination due to their disability.

> With disability I think people are more accepting with it because a lot of the time you are born with it. Like with me I am VI so no-one notices til I say anything. And then they are like oh OK, but with my family, they are used to it because I was born with it. But when it comes…comparing it to LGBT in a way it is like…no-one is going to understand what you are going through. (Charlotte, her- Workshop/Spoken).

Disabled LGBT+ persons face multiple layers of discrimination as a result of their positionality between (and potential belonging to both) communities (Davidson-Paine and Corbett 1995; Shakespeare 1998; Harley et al. 2002; Vernon 2002). However, such belonging was highlighted as being important, particularly due to a lack of understanding from parents. It was a common theme throughout the research, and is reported elsewhere (Toft and Franklin 2020b), that parents were happy to support young people's disabilities but not their LGBT+ identities.

## Concluding Remarks

This article has explored the experiences and perceptions of young, disabled LGBT+ persons with regards to the process and act of telling others about their identities (shortened to 'coming out'). It has specifically focussed upon what the benefits and challenges of coming out were in relation to strategic approaches and the role community plays in supporting the process. The stories of the young participants show how coming out can be used to education and advocate for others, but also as a protection strategy for themselves and others. In this regard, coming out is

about identity management; taking ownership of self-identity and determining who gets access to such information. It could be argued that this is particularly relevant for young disabled people who are often de-sexualised and denied access to sexual citizenship (REFS here). Holding the power, and choosing who to tell about sexuality/gender identity in many ways demonstrates a claiming of power. Although this research is perhaps not large scale (30 young people took part), the data is rich and detailed and has deepened information on some aspects of identity negotiation in their lives.

An LGBT+ community was viewed suspiciously by the participants, who had formed rigid views about what access to such communities might mean. Although they had limited experience of such communities, they were viewed as exclusory spaces towards disabled people. However, coming out to learn from other disabled LGBT+ persons was a key finding. The participants saw the challenges they faced as distinct, highlighting the importance of an intersectional approach in this regard. Coming out to spend time with others who were disabled and LGBT+ was an important aspect of managing identity and encouraging solidarity.

# References

Alarie, M., & Gaudet, S. (2013). "I don't know if she is bisexual or if she just wants to get attention": Analyzing the various mechanisms through which emerging adults invisibilize bisexuality. *Journal of Bisexuality, 13*(2), 191–214.

Appleby, G. A. (2001). Ethnographic study of gay and bisexual working-class men in the United States. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 12*(3–4), 51–62.

Atkins, D., & Marston, C. (1999). Creating accessible queer community: Intersections and fractures with dis/ability praxis. *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies, 4*(1), 3–21.

Barr, S. M., Budge, S. L., & Adelson, J. L. (2016). Transgender community belongingness as a mediator between strength of transgender identity and well-being. *Journal of counseling psychology, 63*(1), 87–97.

Blyth, C. (2010). Members only: The use of gay space(s) by gay disabled men. In R. Shuttleworth & T. Sanders (Eds.), *Sex and Disability: Politics, Identity and Access* (pp. 41–58). Leeds: The Disability Press.

Bos, A. E., Kanner, D., Muris, P., Janssen, B., & Mayer, B. (2009). Mental illness stigma and disclosure: Consequences of coming out of the closet. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing, 30*(8), 509–513.

Cain, R. (1991). Relational contexts and information management among gay men. *Families in Society, 72,* 344–352.

Cass, V. C. (1979). Homosexuality identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality, 4*(3), 219–235.

Clair, J. A., Beatty, J., & MacLean, T. (2002). *Out of sight but not out of mind: how people manage invisible social identities in the workplace*. Briarcliff Manor: Academy of Management.

Cohler, B., & Hammack, P. (2007). The psychological world of the gay teenager: Social change, narrative, and normality. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 36*(1), 47–59.

Corrigan, P. W., Kosyluk, K. A., & Rüsch, N. (2013). Reducing self-stigma by coming out proud. *American Journal of Public Health, 103*(5), 794–800.

Corrigan, P., & Matthews, A. (2003). Stigma and disclosure: Implications for coming out of the closet. *Journal of Mental Health, 12*(3), 235–248.

Corrigan, P. W., Morris, S., Larson, J., Rafacz, J., Wassel, A., Michaels, P., et al. (2010). Self-stigma and coming out about one's mental illness. *Journal of Community Psychology, 38*(3), 259–275.

Davidson-Paine, C., & Corbett, J. (1995). A double coming out: gay men with learning disabilities. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities, 23*(4), 147–151.

Diamond, L. M. (2000). Sexual identity, attractions, and behavior among young sexual-minority women over a 2-year period. *Developmental Psychology, 36*(2), 241.

Diamond, L. M. (2016). Sexual fluidity in male and females. *Current Sexual Health Reports, 8*(4), 249–256.

Formby, E. (2017). *Exploring LGBT spaces and communities: Contrasting identities, belongings and wellbeing*. London: Routledge.

Frost, D. M., & Meyer, I. H. (2012). Measuring community connectedness among diverse sexual minority populations. *Journal of Sex Research, 49*(1), 36–49.

Gagné, P., Tewksbury, R., & McGaughey, D. (1997). Coming out and crossing over: Identity formation and proclamation in a transgender community. *Gender & Society, 11*(4), 478–508.

Greenfield, J. (2008). *Coming out: The process of forming a positive identity. Fenway: Guide to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender health. (Makadon HM)* (pp. 45–74). Philadelphia: American College of Physician.

Guittar, N. A., & Rayburn, R. L. (2016). Coming out: The career management of one's sexuality. *Sexuality and Culture, 20*(2), 336–357.

Harley, D. A., Nowak, T. M., Gassaway, L. J., & Savage, T. A. (2002). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students with disabilities: A look at multiple cultural minorities. *Psychology in the Schools, 39*(5), 525–538.

Hillier, L., Jones, T., Monagle, M., Overtron, N., Gahan, L., Blackman, J., et al. (2010). *Writing themselves in 3: The third national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people*. Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.

Humphrey, J. C. (1999). Organizing sexualities, organized inequalities: Lesbians and gay men in public service occupations. *Gender, Work & Organization, 6*(3), 134–151.

Johnston, L. B., & Jenkins, D. (2004). Coming out in mid-adulthood: Building a new identity. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 16*(2), 19–42.

Jones, T. (2019). *Improving services for transgender and gender variant youth: Research, policy and practice for health and social care professionals*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Klein, K., Holtby, A., Cook, K., & Travers, R. (2015). Complicating the coming out narrative: Becoming oneself in a heterosexist and cissexist world. *Journal of Homosexuality, 62*(3), 297–326.

Legate, N., Ryan, R. M., & Weinstein, N. (2012). Is coming out always a "good thing"? Exploring the relations of autonomy support, outness, and wellness for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 3*(2), 145–152.

Levy, D. L., & Reeves, P. (2011). Resolving identity conflict: Gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 23*(1), 53–68.

Lynch, J. M., & Murray, K. (2000). For the love of the children: The coming out process for lesbian and gay parents and stepparents. *Journal of Homosexuality, 39*(1), 1–24.

Lyons, A., Pitts, M., & Grierson, J. (2013). Factors related to positive mental health in a stigmatized minority: An investigation of older gay men. *Journal of Aging and Health, 25*(7), 1159–1181.

Manning, J. (2015). Communicating sexual identities: A typology of coming out. *Sexuality and Culture, 19*(1), 122–138.

Matthews, C. H., & Salazar, C. F. (2012). An integrative, empowerment model for helping lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth negotiate the coming-out process. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling, 6*(2), 96–117.

McDonald, G. J. (1982). Individual differences in the coming out process for gay men: Implications for theoretical minds. *Journal of Homosexuality, 8*(1), 47–60.

McLaren, S., Jude, B., & McLachlan, A. J. (2008). Sense of belonging to the general and gay communities as predictors of depression among Australian gay men. *International Journal of Men's Health, 7*(1), 90–99.

Miller, R., Wynn, R. D., & Webb, K. W. (2019). This really interesting juggling act: How university students manage disability/queer identity disclosure and visibility. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education., 12*(4), 307–318.

Monro, S. (2015). *Bisexuality: Identities, politics, and theories*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Morgan, J. J., Mancl, D. B., Kaffar, B. J., & Ferreira, D. (2011). Creating safe environments for students with disabilities who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 47*(1), 3–13.

Mosher, C. M. (2001). The social implications of sexual identity formation and the coming-out process: A review of the theoretical and empirical literature. *The Family Journal, 9*(2), 164–173.

Nathanson, J. (2009). Bisexual pedagogy: Bringing bisexuality into the classroom. *Journal of Bisexuality, 9*(1), 71–86.

Orne, J. (2011). You will always have to "out" yourself: Reconsidering coming out through strategic outness. *Sexualities, 14*(6), 681–703.

Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling sexual stories: Power. Change and social worlds*. London: Routledge.

Ragins, B. R. (2004). Sexual orientation in the workplace: The unique work and career experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual workers. *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management, 23,* 35–120.

Rhoads, R. A. (1995). Learning from the coming-out experiences of college males. *Journal of College Student Development, 36,* 67.

Smith, E., Jones, T., Ward, R., Dixon, J., Mitchell, A., & Hillier, L. (2014). *From blues to rainbows: The mental health and well-being of gender diverse and transgender young people in Australia*. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS), La Trobe University.

Savin-Williams, R. C. (2003). The disclosure to families of same-sex attractions by lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 8*(1), 49–68.

Savin-Williams, R. C. (2006). Who's gay? Does it matter? *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 15*(1), 40–44.

Schope, R. D. (2004). Practitioners need to ask: Culturally competent practice requires knowing where the gay male client is in the coming out process. *Smith College Studies in Social Work, 74*(2), 257–270.

Seidman, S. (2002). *Beyond the closet: The transformation of gay and lesbian life*. New York: Routledge.

Shakespeare, T. (1998). Out on the edge: The exclusion of disabled people from the British gay and Lesbian Community. *Disability Studies Quarterly, 18*(3), 169–174.

Shakespeare, T. (1999). Losing the plot? Medical and activist discourses of contemporary genetics and disability. *Sociology of Health & Illness, 21*(5), 669–688.

Toft, A., & Franklin, A. (2020a). Sexuality and gender identity in the lives of young disabled LGBT + persons: Initiating a dialogue. In A. Toft & A. Franklin (Eds.), *Young, disabled and LGBT + voices, identities and intersections* (pp. 3–12). London: Routledge.

Toft, A., & Franklin, A. (2020b). Identifying as young, disabled and bisexual within evangelical Christianity: Abigail's story. In A. K. T. Yip & A. Toft (Eds.), *Bisexuality, religion and spirituality: Critical perspectives* (pp. 29–48). London: Routledge.

Toft, A., Franklin, A., & Langley, E. (2019a). Young disabled and LGBT +: Negotiating identity. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 16*(2), 157–172.

Toft, A., Franklin, A. and Langley, E. (2019b). 'You're not sure that you are gay yet': The perpetuation of the 'phase' in the lives of young disabled LGBT + people. *Sexualities*, p. 1363460719842135.

Vernon, A. (2002). Multiple oppression and the disabled people's movement. In B. Bytheway, V. Bacigalupo, J. Bornat, J. Johnson, & S. Spurr (Eds.), *Understanding care, welfare and community, a reader* (pp. 64–68). London: Routledge.

Waldner, L. K., & Magruder, B. (1999). Coming out to parents: Perceptions of family relations, perceived resources, and identity expression as predictors of identity disclosure for gay and lesbian adolescents. *Journal of Homosexuality, 37*(2), 83–100.