



Parallels and Alliances: The Lived Experiences of Young, Disabled Bisexual People

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ABSTRACT

Young people (16–25) who identify as bisexual and disabled have to work against dominant forces of homo/heteronormativity and ableism which regulate sexuality and normalcy. Their lives demonstrate the complex negotiations that must be enacted in order to reside within such restrictive confines. This article uses the lived experience of 15 young (16–25 years) disabled and bisexual identified persons to understand how such identities intersect. Throughout, the voices of young people are centered in order to ensure that their experiences guide the article. Exploration of such life-stories highlights parallels between bisexual and disabled experiences, particularly in terms of misconceptions, erasure/invisibility and how dominant forces are resisted. The article suggests that a bisexual/disabled alliance is potentially fruitful for gaining a more nuanced and detailed understanding of sexuality and disability.

KEYWORDS

Bisexuality; disability; youth; qualitative; identity

Introduction

Research exploring the intersection of disability and bisexuality tends to be conducted in relation to the collective grouping of LGBT+ or queer. Furthermore, young people's (16–25) voices are often absent from any research, as their views and experiences are rarely included. This is perhaps surprising, given that this period is often presented as a period of self-reflection and exploration (Corker, 2001; Freitas, 2008).

This article is a sociological exploration of the lives of young disabled bisexual people, focusing upon their identities in everyday life, specifically the personal, social and institutional negotiations that take place. The focus is not solely upon challenges and difficulties, as there is a specific emphasis on how the young people disrupt oppressive factors in their lives; ensuring that the wisdoms and joys of their experiences are captured. In doing so, the article reflects upon the similarities and parallels in the study of

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bisexuality and disability, and calls for an alliance between the two. Such an alliance can shine light upon how we understand sexuality and disability, particularly in relation to the challenges faced and the strategies used to navigate them. The potential synchronization of bisexuality theory and disability studies was first formally proposed by Caldwell (2010) whose theoretical piece called for such an alliance based upon similarities with regards to experiences of discrimination. This article acknowledges these ideas as a starting point, and although the focus is different (e.g. young disabled bisexuals people's lived experiences) it will contribute to this proposal.

Bisexuality remains largely ignored within academic research, in comparison to other sociological foci (Klesse, 2018; Monro, 2015). Indeed, as noted by Plummer (2017), the study of sexuality is rarely the focus in a wider sociological sense. Although, the body of research continues to grow with important journals and book collections, there remains an unwillingness to engage with the complexities of bisexuality. This article starts from the position that it is important to explore bisexuality as a distinct sexuality (see Barker et al., 2012). Bisexuality challenges different dominant discourses in a distinct way, and as a result is open to different misconceptions.

Sexuality in the lives of disabled people has a clearer history in terms of research. The prevailing medicalization of disability which frames disabled people as non-sexual and in need of fixing (Shakespeare et al., 2009), continues to influence popular discourse. The growth of the social model (Oliver, 1983) has done much to realign this imbalance, as have contemporary critical disability studies (Goodley, 2013; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009), Crip theory (McRuer, 2006) and activism.¹ However, as with bisexuality in everyday life, sexuality in the lives of disabled people is largely erased and invisible.

The article begins with a brief review, accessing literature on bisexuality, disability and sexuality, and the intersection of youth in relation to both. The theoretical framework is discussed followed by the methods employed for the empirical aspect of the research, including discussion of sampling. The main body of the article then explores the interconnecting themes and associated sub-themes that were raised by the participants. Throughout, the focus is upon the parallels and similarities in bisexual and disabled experience, as formulated by the participants; the challenges they faced but also how they resisted such oppression. Bisexuality challenges homo/heteronormativity, including compulsory monogamy and monosexism; whereas for disabled persons, ableism is a constant force. Both bisexuality and disability challenge the way sex and sexuality is conceived. They challenge attraction, sex, bodies and perpetuated norms. As Shakespeare states in relation to disability:

“We can perhaps challenge a whole lot of ideas that predominate in the sexual realm, and enable others—not just disabled people—to reassess what is important and what

is possible. Why should men be dominant? Why should sex revolve around penetration? Why should sex only involve two people? Why can't disabled people be assisted to have sex by third parties? What is normal sex? (Shakespeare 2000, p. 163)

The participants highlighted three themes where the parallels between sexuality and disability were particularly striking: Misconceptions and Misunderstanding, Proving/fixing identity, and Erasure and Invisibility. The article concludes by suggesting a bisexuality/disability alliance provides much needed insight into lived experiences and understanding of sexuality and disability.

Young, disabled and bisexual: Literature review

In this short review, I will outline some of the literature on the key challenges individuals face in relation to bisexuality and disability, paying particular note to youth in relation to these. My goal here is not to provide an exhaustive review on sexuality and disability. The review will highlight the key themes that have emerged from research which suggest potential similarities between bisexuality and disability theory.

Perhaps the most salient challenge faced by those identifying as bisexual, relates to misunderstandings surrounding the concept of bisexuality. In popular discourse bisexuality remains maligned and confused. This is perhaps due to the difficulties in reducing bisexuality to an easily understandable soundbite and reluctance to engage with complexity. Yet, Robinson's (2015) assertion that bisexuality revolves around attraction, behavior and identity is an example of a simple and easily understood definition. This suggests that resistance and biphobia is much more deep seated and relates to the challenge bisexuality presents for established societal norms (Pallotta-Chiarolli & Martin, 2009; Scherrer et al., 2015).

The difficulties surrounding understanding appear to be the starting point for a number of challenges bisexual people have to navigate (Monro, 2015). Attempts to understand bisexuality in relation to what it is not, reduces bisexuality to a non-distinct identity. Furthermore, such exploration diminishes other facets of bisexuality which are outside of homo/hetero binaries. The lived experiences of bisexual Christians, for example, suggest that gender is only one aspect of attraction/intimacy (Toft, forthcoming). Barker et al. (2008) have also clearly expressed that bisexuality should not be reduced to attraction solely to cisgendered men and women. The requirement to display bisexuality (see Hartman, 2013; Hartman-Linck, 2014) when situations may not be read as stereotypically bisexual (e.g. monogamous relationships) is a product of societal requirements for a certain type of bisexuality. This is similar to the pull to be 'bisexual enough' or the need to prove bisexuality via relationship history. Emerging from

such challenge is a sense of invisibility and erasure. Such erasure operates in relation to homo/heteronormativity, compulsory monogamy and monosexism (Berbary & Guzman, 2018; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Hayfield et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2015), and bisexuality, which challenges these, can become lost. Within academia and activism, bisexuality has also been missing from theorization which could potentially be beneficial, such as queer theory (Yoshino, 2000). Although it should be noted that there is a small body of work which explores bisexuality from a queer perspective (Klesse, 2016). Furthermore, the emergence of Crip theory presents an alliance with queerness and disability (McRuer, 2006), yet the position of bisexuality within such queerness is unclear.

Research with bisexual youth is best exemplified through the work Flanders (2015), whose work has been disseminated in a number of articles with colleagues (Flanders, 2015, 2016, 2017; Flanders et al., 2016, 2017; Legge et al., 2018). Several important themes, in relation to challenge and resistance emerge from the work. Although none are entirely unique to young people, it is clear that age accentuates a number of these. Using a social ecological model, the authors suggest that for young bisexual people, mental health is often poorer, there is less support from the LGBT community for non-monosexuals, they are more likely to use a social worker, and cannot turn to queer theory for guidance (Flanders et al., 2017; Legge et al., 2018). There are however, positive aspects that appear to be heightened also, such as the support of friendship groups, involvement in activism and advocacy. It is an important finding that their participants interpreted a lack of negative experiences as a positive (Flanders et al., 2017).

If a bisexual person's everyday challenges start from a lack of precise definition, then a disabled person's challenges with regard to sexuality begin with the desexualization of disabled people; which leads to a denial of education and support. As with bisexuality this says a good deal about heteronormativity and the fact that being LGBT+ is still outside of the norm and unsuitable for disabled people (Abbott & Howarth, 2007; Toft & Franklin, 2020; Toft et al., 2020, pp. 2–19). Such thinking is ableist and affirms narratives on the overprotection of young disabled people (Franklin & Smeaton, 2017). As with bisexuality, the result for disabled people is an erasure of their identities. Sexual identity is invalidated as being a phase on the way to heterosexuality (Noonan & Gomez, 2011) or friendship (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2009). For young disabled LGBT people this is often linked to perceptions about their age (immaturity) and their disability (e.g. they are incapable) and therefore their understanding of sexuality is not legitimate. Of course, such aspects intersect and impact upon each other, heightening their effects (Toft & Franklin, 2020; Toft et al., 2020). Heteronormativity (and homonormativity), relating to the normalization of

sexuality where a certain identity is perceived as being the ideal way of being (see Hird, 2004); and ableism, referring to discrimination based upon disability which reflects hostile beliefs about different human life (Rauscher & McClintock, 1996), are key concepts that underline this article.

Framework

Intersectionality is a powerful tool. It is complex, unwieldy and has been described as imprecise (Davis, 2008), but what is clear is that it can be used to get a fuller understanding of identity and can shine a light on how our aspects of our selves influence and impact, and how we make sense of who we are. Take, for example the following from Hafsa Quereshi, Stonewall's Bi role model of the year 2019²:

“As a bisexual, I am sexualised. As a disabled person, I am ignored. As a Muslim, I am vilified”. (Quereshi, 2019)

Such a statement shows how identities can conflate and create additional challenges. Yet, perhaps more importantly, there are things that occur in the shadows and at the points of intersections that can tell us much about such identities. For example, if we explore bisexuality and disability we can understand what bisexuality ‘does’ to disability, and also what disability ‘does’ to bisexuality. This shines light on the wider issues of sexuality and disability and can help in understanding the resistances/challenges faced; but importantly what people do to disrupt and create their lives against such pressures. Intersectionality in this regard is used as an analytic tool to try and understand power imbalance and inequality (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This research does not claim to be truly intersectional as strategic choices have been made. Specifically, this relates to the decision to focus upon bisexuality and disability underpinned by youth, rather than other marginalized identities.

When combined with an approach that centralizes story and the power of narrative, this creates a method for analyzing lived experiences in an intersectional fashion. I have previously used this method to explore lived experiences (Toft et al., 2020). In practice, this approach is concerned with the life-stories, inspired by Plummer (1995). Taking the stories that people tell and exploring how these relate to their intersectional identities can provide much insight into imbalances in everyday life and working to resist them.

Methods

Sample

This article uses data collected from 15 young persons who identified as being disabled and bisexual or pansexual (see end of methods section for a

discussion on this). The participants were aged between 16 and 25 years and lived in Central England, UK. Their impairments related to autism, learning disabilities, physical disabilities and mental health needs. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms chosen in the main by the participants themselves, although some participants requested that this was done by the researcher. Participant pronouns are provided to ensure that any third-parties do not misgender. Throughout the article the focus is upon the participants sexuality and disability, in relation to them as young people. Identities are intersectional and the participants race and gender (for example) impact upon their experience of sexuality and disability. However, I have taken this strategic approach in order to focus on bisexuality and disability specifically, as the goal here is to examine the parallels in order to better understand how they are understood.

Throughout my ongoing research in this area I have established a network of young disabled LGBT+³ persons who assist and collaborate in research and dissemination. The group consists mainly of members of a youth LGBT support group and a specialist college. Members of the group took part in the research and with assistance of the professionals, helped to identify others who could take part. The sample was constructed via two support groups in the Midlands (UK) who provide a social space for young disabled LGBT+ people. I also advertised and recruited via local online support groups, resulting in a sample that covered the East and West Midlands (UK). Of course, such a sample is purposive and is not intended to be representative. Furthermore, not all disabled people could engage with the research methods used (outlined below). Although I have continued to develop these methods, there remains considerable work to be done.

Research methods

The research data was collected using a staged approach, where each research stage builds upon the previous, refining it for great inclusivity and focus. Five initial scoping qualitative questionnaires, constructed in relation to a review of the literature, comprising of ten questions were completed which allowed the emerging themes to be identified. Open questions such as 'what does it mean to be bisexual and disabled' and 'do other people understand bisexuality?' were included. Questions were purposefully left broad to allow the young people to focus upon aspects that were most important to them with little restriction. At this stage, the challenges and negotiations began to emerge. The data from the questionnaires, alongside the literature review was used to construct interview questions that could be used to explore lived experiences. Again, questioning was open and broad to allow the young people to explore aspects they viewed as being

the most important but guided by the interviewer (the author) to ensure everyday lived experiences were explored. Building upon previous research (Franklin & Toft, 2020; Toft, 2020; Toft et al., 2019, 2020; Toft & Franklin, 2020) it was important to not rely on traditional question and answer sessions and a number of engagement techniques were employed including card games where random cards were turned over containing words (disabled/gay/bisexual etc.) encouraging the young person and research to explore ideas more freely. Role-playing and vignettes were also useful ways of thinking about issues beyond rigid questioning. The researcher used topical stories or fictional accounts to explore aspects of life, allowing for reflection. This was particularly useful as the approach shifted the emphasis from discussing personal issues in the first-person, which was difficult for some young people.

It is clear that for some of the participants interviews were not the best research method, no matter how inclusive and relaxed they were. Spoken interviews are not accessible for all young disabled people for a number of reasons (anxiety, communication needs etc.). As a result, two interactive workshops were convened. The workshops allowed for deeper exploration of specific issues emerging from the interviews, but also provided a safe and relaxed environment where the young people could explore their experiences without a reliance on verbal responses. The workshops were guided by a series of topics which the researcher introduced and then worked with the young people to understand their experiences through talking, drawing, and/or writing. As a result, the data used in this article is audio-based (transcriptions) or art-based (converted to text). All the data was thematically analyzed, using a flexible approach of looking for commonalities across the interviews and focus group (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method complemented the aim of amplifying the voices of the participants and the goal to be guided by their thoughts and experiences.

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

Bisexuality and pansexuality

The decision to include both those who identified as bisexual and pansexual was made following consultation with the participants, after conducting the two interactive workshops which explored this topic, and consideration of research with young bisexuals, where bisexuality is often seen as an umbrella term within which pansexuality resides (Flanders et al., 2017). Others have used the term bi+ to refer to people attracted to one than one gender/sex (Feinstein et al., 2019).

The majority of those who identified as pansexual used bisexuality and pansexuality interchangeably, preferring bisexuality as it was easy to understand. However, two participants purposefully identified as pansexual because pansexuality refers to attraction to any sex/gender. They felt that bisexuality was concerned with attraction to both sexes and there was no room for trans people or non-binary gender identities. As this was the only reason stipulated for not wanting to identify as bisexual, this says much about conceptions of bisexuality. For these two participants bisexuality as a concept is transphobic and is built upon binary heteronormative assumption. Although empirical research exploring pansexuality is emerging (see Klesse, 2018) and the understandings portrayed by the participants may not be representative or pansexuality at large, such a conceptualization of bisexuality is problematic and not representative of my own research or other important work. As explored in the literature review, my understanding of bisexuality is that a very basic level it includes attraction to all sexes/genders, and therefore, the lived experiences of the pansexual-identified persons will align with those who are bisexual in this regard. This has been previously noted by Barker et al. (2008) who found clear examples of the rejection of the phrase ‘attracted to both men and women’, with ‘both’ being the key word. As with my previous work, (Toft, forthcoming) gender was often not the defining feature in attraction or intimacy.

The majority of participants defined bisexuality and pansexuality in the same fashion. A lack of separation between bisexual and pansexual identities could also be considered a sampling weakness, as Mitchell et al. (2014) have noted, pansexual people may experience unique discrimination to others within the bisexual umbrella (Flanders et al., 2017). However, in this instance, it was felt that the self-definitions provided were comparable and that the lived experiences (the focus here, rather than conceptualization) were likely to be similar.

Misconceptions, proving and erasure: Findings

The thematic sections presented here are guided by the experiences of the participants. The stories focus upon the intersection of disability and bisexuality in order to examine how pressures and oppressions further marginalize people possessing such identities, but how young people negotiate and resist such challenges. As a result, the voices of the young people are central to the analysis and each thematic section is led with a quotation which succinctly summarizes the main point being made. Three main themes arise: misconceptions/misunderstanding, where identities are not correctly understood; proving/fixing, where identities must be proven in

order to be valid; and erasure/invisibility, where identities are not seen as being valid.

Misconceptions and misunderstandings

They [parents] don't know what it means, they need educating, and they can't accept that I'm bi with autism, it's too much for them, can you do that when you are autistic? (Amy - she/her)

Both bisexuality and disability are marginally positioned in relation to dominant ideologies of identity and normalcy. The oppressive regulatory forces for the participants revolved around homo/heteronormativity (including issues of monogamy and monosexuality) and ableism. Homo/heteronormativity operates within a binary understanding of sexuality and gender in which individuals are either outside or inside of binary conceptions; where one is defined by what one is not. Bisexuality disrupts this dominant discourse. Ableism, particularly in relation to the sexual lives of disabled people is underpinned by the medicalization of disabled bodies. In relation to the work of Shakespeare (2000, 2009) the framing of disabled people as non-sexual denies access to any sexual identity. LGBT + identities are further outside the reach of disabled persons as they continue to be portrayed as non-normative (Toft, 2020; Toft et al., 2020).

It was common for the participants to experience misunderstanding about their sexuality or impairment, particularly in relation to how these related to each other. One participant, Dixie, suggested that misunderstanding had led her to not reveal her bisexuality in everyday situations. 'People don't understand it [pansexuality], it is easier to say I'm gay'. (Dixie/she)

Although Dixie was frustrated about people not understanding bisexuality and pansexuality, and she did not want to 'let people off the hook', she was keen to suggest that this was not solely due to the ignorance of others. As noted in the literature review and methods section, pansexuality is a largely contemporary identity and perhaps the reactions are understandable in this regard. However, Dixie revealed a later in the interview that this was not as a result of ignorance but rather an unwillingness to engage with her description:

Yes I do [explain my sexuality] but they can't get it. They only see gay or straight. It's like they won't see it. I'm not allowed to be it. (Dixie - she/her)

Dixie experienced difficulties relating to others understanding sexuality which is beyond binary organization. Although past research has conceptualized bisexuality in terms of homo/hetero binaries (see Fontdevila, 2020), this approach has largely been superseded by research which stresses the importance of seeing bisexuality as distinct. Put simply, talking about bisexuality in relation other sexualities cannot capture bisexuality fully and

simply reinforces the normalization of homo/hetero binaries. Yet such normativity is upheld through everyday life experiences even though such perpetuation has negative outcomes for young people (Ng et al., 2019).

Dixie's experiences begin to show misconceptions about sexuality but also how her disability (related to her mental health) impacts upon her experiences. Another participant, Tom, also explored this:

People don't understand it because I can't say its not like being gay, or not being straight. Being pansexual is highly misjudged and not understood, like being disabled. Being disabled and sexual is possible, people are just heavily stigmatising things. (Tom - he/him)

In Tom's life, such misunderstandings revolved around other's perceptions of autism. Furthermore, disability was seen as the cause of his sexuality because his 'failure to decide on boys or girls was because of being awkward'. This not only invalidates his sexuality as a symptom of his disability, but only reduces and simplifies his disability. Other participants were not allowed to be bisexual because they were disabled, further highlighting misunderstandings around their disability. Edie stated:

Some people assume my sexual identity is because I'm disabled. Most people think my sexuality is not real and I can't be like this because I am disabled. (Edie - she/they)

Edie's story highlights the readiness with which her family [in this instance] were willing to dismiss her sexuality, affirming sexual normativity and continuing to boundary-off bisexuality as not being for disabled people.

These stories highlight the challenges the young people faced in terms of how their identities were understood. They show how bisexuality and disability also combine to accentuate such misunderstanding.

Proving and fixing

People have asked about who I've slept with and what I've done. They won't believe me otherwise, like I can change it or something! (Adam - he/him)

In the lives of the participants, beyond complete misunderstanding, misconception manifests in terms of the everyday enactment of identity. Experiences and self-identifications came second to visible sexualities or medicalised impairments. In this regard there lies a second parallel between bisexuality and disability; that both identities must be proved, in order to be seen as valid, and that it is a common perception that the best outcome would be for them to be 'fixed'.

Proving

The participants had to prove, and therefore validate, their bisexuality and disability for others. In terms of bisexuality this related to its visibility within non-stereotypical situations. As Albert highlights:

... they [friends] say I'm straight. I remember when I first went out with [name removed] and we were holding hands and stuff. But I am still bi and they wouldn't understand it. (Albert - they/them)

Although such stereotypical representations of bisexuality (e.g. multiple simultaneous partners) are not reflective of bisexual lives as a whole (Anderson et al., 2015; Hayfield et al., 2018; Klesse, 2011; Popova, 2018), within such a homo/heteronormative environment, the participants felt that they had to prove they were bisexual. To resist such assumptions, previous research has suggested that bisexual-identified persons create bisexual displays (Hartman, 2013; Hartman-Linck, 2014) in order to convey and communicate their bisexual identity using signs and signals. For the participants in my research, proving their bisexuality often related to their relationship history or satisfying others' perceptions of what bisexual is:

If I say I like boys and girls they don't listen. If I say I've had boyfriends and girlfriends they listen better. (Jeff - he/they)

Such experiences suggest that bisexuality must be enacted for it to be valid. Jeff's experiences suggest that for bisexuality this often relates to relationship history, after which people are able to accept the proof offered.

The parallels between the participant's experiences of bisexuality and disability are clear here. Alongside a learning disability, Jeff had an impairment that made walking difficult. Jeff explored how this was experienced in everyday life:

I think the very stereotypical thing is that you have to look disabled to be disabled... I used to be wheelchair bound when I was younger and everyone was like OK, he is clearly disabled. But now because I am able to walk - only last year started coming off the cane as well, because I used to have a cane - I noticed how different people are towards me. (Jeff - he/they)

Jeff noted that he now had to prove he was disabled to others in everyday situations, such as producing his blue badge to park in disabled spaces. As with bisexuality, disability does not become a valid identity unless it is visible and/or medicalised.

Fixing

The proving stages does not work in isolation. The participants discussed how, even if others were able to accept their identities, in general the response was to work toward a fix. My previous work has highlighted how LGBT+ identities are consistently framed as a phase through which one passes, and that this does much to affirm the notion that any other sexuality beyond heterosexuality is can somehow be fixed (Toft, 2020; Toft et al., 2020). Alongside this is the prevailing idea that the young people should

strive for cures for their impairments. To return to Tom's experiences, as someone who made this link:

My parents think my sexuality is because of my Aspergers, and when I came out they just said it's something we can work together on. They say the same about autism, 'it'll be ok, they are doing amazing medical things now'. (Tom - he/him)

This raises two points. First, that because bisexuality sits beyond a binary understanding of sexuality, it is perceived as 'fixable'. Research and wider debates on conversion/reparative therapy show the problem with such an approach toward sexuality, as such therapy is rarely successful (Hackman, 2018; Mikulak, 2020). Heterosexuality is normalized and homosexuality essentialised in or to shift the blame (e.g. I was born gay, there is nothing I can do) (See Huic et al., 2018, Morandini et al., 2015). Bisexuality remains to be viewed as fence-sitting (McLean, 2008, Klesse, 2011; Storr, 1999), although research continues to demonstrate how sexuality is a fluid identity (Diamond, 2015, 2016). There appears to be increased resistance to young disabled people enacting such flexibility, although as previously noted this is in keeping with research on youth identity. Tom's quotations shows how his parents linked his sexuality to his impairment and rationalized that he was not capable enough to be bisexuality. In this regard, bisexuality is constructed as complex and not suitable for Tom,

This leads to a second point which potentially disrupts a good deal of popular discourse surrounding disability and charity, yet the stories of the participants highlight. In the UK charity work is vital in providing services and raising money for research and beyond. However, within the charity culture there is the constant reenforcement that disabled people need curing/fixing in order to live fulfilled lives. This powerful quotation from Eli Clare describes this battle:

'They cry over me, wrap their arms around my shoulders, kiss my cheek. Even now, after five decades of these kinds of interactions, I still don't know how to rebuff their pity, how to tell them the simple truth that I'm not broken. Even if there were a cure for brain cells that died at birth, I'd refuse'. (Clare, 2017, p. 245)

Such a standpoint undermines any semblance of a disabled identity. Tom's story underlines his parents refusal to accept this, and this was more explicit in a number of stories. Albert stressed how he would not want to be without his Asperger's and it was a part of who he was. Amy similarly said how everything was 'filtered through her disability' and that it made 'no sense to want to change my brain are who I am.' Amy explicitly highlighted the well-meaning but problematic nature of 'do-gooders' (Amy's term for fundraisers). Her powerful statement does much to underline the point being made here:

The do-gooders think they can change me and that I'm pathetic, I'm not as good. I am me and that is that. All this money to change me ... change themselves. They are pathetic. (Amy - she/her)

Amy's call for people to 'change themselves' clearly refers to a change in attitudes toward disabled people, away from the desire to fix/cure. This section has demonstrated the parallels between bisexuality and disability in terms of how such identities are validated for others. It has shown that the participants were required to consistently prove their identities are defend themselves against being fixed.

Erasure and invisibility

He [friend] didn't understand what I said, it didn't make any sense it him ... I just try to explain and stand up for myself, then ignore when its unkind. (Chloe - she/her)

Research on bisexual erasure is a growing area of research, as previously noted. As Caldwell (2010) suggests, the theoretical parallels between bisexual erasure and disabled invisibility are convincing. The experiences of the participants confirm this and also begin to suggest what it is about bisexuality and disability that leads to this situation and what this means in relation to homo/heteronormativity and ableism.

The erasure of an identity can have consequences in relation to an individual's wellbeing and sense of self (Flanders, 2016; Monro, 2012; Yoshino, 2000). Even though, as previously noted, identities are seen as increasing fluid and flexible the removal of bisexuality and disability as a valid identity obviously impacts upon the participants lives. Building upon the notions of misconception previously outlined, in relation to erasure and invisibility, the lived experiences of the participants highlight two important considerations. Firstly, both are erased because they are both not seen as valid identities, and second, both are positioned as not being fully developed identities.

Bisexuality is positioned as incompatible with binary assertions regarding sexuality, and disability identity is complex and resists a unifying narrative (see Shakespeare, 1996), yet the medical (as opposed to socio-cultural) focus upon difference remain prominent. Caldwell highlights this intersection:

'Hegemonic society is resistant to disability and believes it should not exist, but believes that not only, does bisexuality not exist it also should not exist' (Caldwell, 2010, np).

Caldwell continues this point by suggesting that in fact, bisexual and disabled narratives are not present outside of their respective domains. Disability can become invalid as an identity due to the medicalization of disability where it is something to be fixed/cured. However, a disabled

identity is complex. As Shakespeare noted (1996) forming a positive identity is difficult because of issues such as segregated education, negative images, cultural representation, absence of positive role models, social treatment of disabled people (104). For my participants, the result of this was to view their disabled identities as precarious, although community and personal networks were important positive influences:

I only involve myself with accepting people who are like me, since if someone is going to be negative, they can fuck off. (Mimi - she/her)

Here Mimi suggests that accepting people (LGBT+) who are like me (disabled) are a source of resistance against such invalidation.

The second important point raised is that both are erased and made invisible because they are positioned as being weak and underdeveloped. Disability is pathologized and disabled persons are referenced in terms of weakness or deficiency with regards to mentality and emotions (Siebers, 2007, 2008), whilst being socialized into thinking they are inferior (Shakespeare, 1996). Of course, this conjures images of infantilisation and the forever child (Craft, 1987). Viewing bisexual identities as underdeveloped is evident in previous research. Freud formulated bisexuality to refer to a state of arrested development where bisexuality is an in-between state before a person adopts a real sexual identity (Freud, 1953). The parallels here are striking and reflected in the stories of the participants, most notably in terms of Amelia who discussed their experiences of disclosing their sexuality to their parents.

When I told them about being bisexual, I sat them down and everything, but they weren't bothered... they said I could decide later. And with my learning stuff, they thought it wouldn't matter anyway, like nothing would ever happen. (Amelia - she/her)

Such reaction was a daily occurrence for Amelia who stated that she worked to educate others. Although she felt that such reaction was due to 'ignorance and not hatred', this and other stories reflect how bisexuality and disability are erased and made invisible by rejecting them as valid identities and by positioning them as flawed or underdeveloped.

A bisexual/disabled alliance: Concluding remarks

The purpose of this article has been to highlight parallels between the participants experience of their bisexual and disabled identities. In doing so, it is suggested, we can learn more about how these identities intersect and what young people do to negotiate but also challenge dominant normativity. Of course, this article has used purposive data, and there are key debates missing here (e.g. the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender). The overall aim of the article has been to begin the debate. Beyond theorization

there is much to learn from the experiences of the participants. We need to listen to young people and their experiences and recognize them as experts in their own lives. The experiences detailed here continually show how they are ignored or seen as incapable. Importantly, as has been the main focus here, certain aspects of life are accentuated as a result of being bisexual and disabled, such as the medicalization of identities. It is hoped that people (e.g. parents, supporting professionals, and society in general) understand how the perpetuation of homo/heteronormativity and ableism affects their lives.

The article has highlighted three overarching parallels between bisexual and disabled experience: misconceptions and misunderstandings, proving/fixing and erasure and invisibility. Exploration of these parallels shows how homo/heteronormativity and ableism filter through into everyday lived experiences. The result of such exploration is an account of how bisexuality and disability challenge and disrupt such normalization. Shakespeare's important (2000) postulation regarding the relationship between sexuality and disability, suggests that disabled people present an opportunity to sidestep hegemonized understandings of sex. Disabled bodies disrupt such understandings. I would argue that bisexuality, with its positioning outside of homo/heteronormativity also does this. Furthermore, this article has suggested that an alliance between bisexuality and disability presents an opportunity to pick apart and resist such pressures. Throughout, I took a strategic approach, focusing solely upon bisexuality and disability in the lives of young people. Research needs to push this further, taking a truly intersectional approach. Also, future work needs to continue to focus upon resistance in light of such oppressive forces, whilst continuing to centralize and collaborate with young, disabled, bisexual persons in order to push this intersectional approach further.

Notes

1. Examples include: Andrew Gurza, Penny Pepper, Anna Mardoll.
2. See: <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/people/bi-role-model-year-2019-hafsa-queeshi>
3. Throughout this article I use LGBT+ in reference to the participants, as with my previous work.. This encompasses a full range of sexualities and gender identities and is not done to diminish identities which reside within the '+'. It is used for consistency and the fact that this was the preferred term used by the young people and the support groups/networks engaged with.

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