

## **Telling Young Disabled LGBT+ Stories**

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### Introduction: Sexual Stories

People tell sexual stories to assemble a sense of self and identity. Sexual stories lay down routes to a coherent past, mark off boundaries and contrasts in the present and provide both a channel and a shelter for the future. If they do their work well, sexual stories will give us a sense of our histories- partly of our own life and where we've come from, but no less a sense of a collective past and shared memories. They will provide a cause, a sequence, a history. (Plummer 1995:172)

Plummer's seminal work 'Telling Sexual Stories' explores the importance of telling stories in relation to forming identity and community. It explores how we tell stories to understand ourselves and in turn how we fit within the world. Stories, it is suggested, have the power under the right circumstances to move into the public consciousness and become accepted life narratives. Importantly, Plummer examines how some stories become dominant narratives whilst others remain isolated or 'floating' without ever taking off. One example is how gay stories are analysed in relation to the cultural shifts which enabled them to enter a wider cultural consciousness. Plummer also considers why certain stories have not been accepted; those that have not yet had their time:

Certainly, there are stories- important stories at that- which remain largely hidden from sight. Much of the sexual can still not be said, and there are stories that may well be awaiting their time. (Plummer 1995:114)

Although written over 26 years ago, the assertion remains astutely valid, and many sexual stories are still not being heard. The stories of young disabled LGBT+ person fit this category. Plummer (1995) suggests that certain stories often slot into cultural understanding because of their alignment with accepted narratives. Yet, this has not been the case for young disabled LGBT+ persons. Such stories reside largely in private isolated tellings.

Using this framework and my own empirical research, I will explore the resistance to these stories and propose ways that this may be addressed. Put simply, I will explore why young LGBT+ disabled stories have not yet had their time. In order to do this, I will do two three things: First, examine what the current narratives are; secondly, explore how stories are adopted in the cultural consciousness and what the stages are for this taking place; and finally examine how young people are empowering themselves and how empowerment can be enabled by others.

## A note on methods

This brief report uses data collected as part of an ongoing research project exploring the lived experiences of young people who are disabled and LGBT+. Methods ranged from literature reviews, interviews, focus groups and interactive workshops. Full details are reported in: Toft et al, 2020; Toft and Franklin, 2020; Toft 2020a; Toft 2020b.

## Current stories

As noted, Plummer (1995) suggest that certain stories often gain cultural acceptance due to their alignment with other stories. One example provided are gay stories which began proliferation in the 1970s. However, this has not occurred for disabled LGBT+ stories. My research has suggested that this is largely as a result of misconceptions and phobia that arises as a result of the intersection on

disability, youth and LGBT+ identities. Even with regards to sexuality as a broad concept, disabled people are often labelled as being non-sexual, as lacking any kind of sexuality.

*And other people say it too, not just my parents. They say I can't be bi because I'm autistic, it's like its just not possible- they just don't think of me like that, or my future.*

*(Amy/she/interview)<sup>1</sup>*

In the lives of young people who are disabled and LGBT+ there are confusions regarding their maturity, capability and the overall legitimacy of their identities (Toft et al. 2020). Ableism and phobia frames the young people's lives in at least three ways:

1- As not understanding their LGBT+ identity because they are not capable of doing so- showing how LGBT+ identities are 'othered' or seen as more complex than others.

2- That their LGBT+ identity is a result or symptom of their disability- therefore their identity is not seen as being real or valid.

3- That they are too young to understand what being LGBT+ is. (Adapted from Toft et al. 2020).

The intersectional of disability and LGBT+ means that young people struggle to align themselves with existing narratives. As a result, they cannot move their private stories into public life in order to change public perception.

The process can be pictured as a move from an 'inner world' of telling stories to the self privately to an increasingly public one where the circle of discourse becomes wider and wider. In the earliest moments, the story can hardly be imagined: it may be told privately as a tale to oneself. Later it gets told to a few people—a lover, a friend, a psychiatrist. Slowly it can move out into a public domain where it comes to take on a life of its own. It becomes part of a public discourse. (Plummer 1995:126)

Public knowledge and the hearing of such stories is vital because all delay results in actual harm. One example of this is the denial of Relationship and Sex Education to disabled students on the grounds that it is necessary for them to learn such things (Blyth & Carson, 2007). In reality, a denial of such

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<sup>1</sup> This section makes use of a range of datasets. These have been detailed most clearly in the forthcoming chapter: ADD REF HERE.

education can leave disabled young people less well prepared for adult life (Franklin & Smeaton, 2017). This is another example of prevailing infantilisation in current stories.

## Making new stories

### Story construction

In order to move stories into the public consciousness, it is proposed that there are five key processes:

- 1- Imagining—visualising—empathising;
- 2- Articulating-vocalising—announcing;
- 3- Inventing identities—becoming story tellers;
- 4- Creating social worlds/communities of support;
- 5- Creating a culture of public problems. (Adapted from Plummer 1995:126)

The final move into the public domain of real life stories, has not taken place. For young disabled LGBT+ persons, the articulation of these identities has been stifled and not the creation of identities or social worlds. Throughout wider society, disabled voices are often not amplified, and this is echoed throughout research. Research often fails to include the voices of young people themselves and does not value them as experts in their own lives (Franklin & Toft, 2020). It is clear that the young people are not been given public tellings; they are not being allowed to become story-tellers. Although identities are being noted and claimed by young disabled LGBT+ people, this stage of empowerment is largely missing. For empowerment to be enabled, giving/amplifying voices and then listening to and valuing experiences is key (Santinele Martino, 2017).

*I explain it but they don't listen, it's just ignored, they just let me say it to myself. That is what is feels like. (Dixie/she/interview).*

In order for stories to be heard, there must be people willing to listen. For Plummer this largely relates to the construction of social worlds through community. Such communities are places of identity strengthening and confirmation where people learn about themselves amongst those who are similar. In reality, such communities are rarely representative and often exclusory to difference (Formby 2017). However, the idea of a common voice working towards change is pervasive and intersectional communities are vital.

## New stories

The stories being presented need to be cohesive and convincing:

In the earlier part of this century, many men and women who wanted homosexual experience got no further than this. Yet, once these problems are identified, there is a potentiality for finding a solution. And the solution lies in finding the right story. (Plummer 1995:88)

The outcome of telling the wrong story at the wrong time can be devastating and could lead them to 'mock you, disbelieve you, excommunicate you, sack you, hospitalise you, imprison you or bash you bleeding senseless to the ground...' (Plummer 1995:120). Indeed, my participants noted that in their everyday lives:

*Because I have been getting quite a bit of abuse about it as well. I have been called a tranny, I've been told to slit my throat, slit my wrists, nobody wanted me here. I've been beat up a few times as well. (Abigail/she/interview)*

New stories must bring people together, change law and attitudes, lead to mass protests and coming out, and enable people to cope with diversity (Plummer 1995). Importantly also, with less reliance on locality, social worlds can align together and give each other prominence. When social worlds come together and are shared in other spheres (e.g., outside of the one in which they originated), social are given more prominence.

## Empowerment through storytelling

Once the right story is constructed, several factors need to be in place in order to change to occur.

These are detailed by Plummer thusly:

- (1) a large number of people willing to claim it as their own,
- (2) a willingness to tell the story very visibly so that others can identify with it and
- (3) the presence of alliances who do not claim the story as their own, but who are keen to give it credibility and support. (Adapted from Plummer 1995:129)

Taking these points alongside how sexual stories are created, this section now moves to consider how this approach might be useful in encouraging empowerment.

### Empowering and enabling

Plummer (1995) rather pessimistically concludes that if stories are not ready to be heard it is often better to be silent. However, it seems, even within Plummer's own work, that there is much that can be done to encourage empowerment. As noted, the young disabled LGBT+ persons are often excluded at the beginning of the process, before such stories are being articulated or 'heard'. To conclude this section, I will explore how certain aspects might be developed further to empower young disabled LGBT+ persons. Put simply, how do we speed up the fact that these stories are not yet ready to be heard, and what young people who took part in my research have been doing to push against or highlight this. It is clear that there are certain aspects of Plummer's framework that resonate with my research, and this will be briefly outlined here.

These aspects relate to: Giving Voice, Communities and Visibility, Role models and allies.

#### Giving voice

In order for identities to be created and articulated, and become stories, voices must be amplified and heard. There needs to be a shift in societal understanding of disability and sexuality which acknowledges the ableism in seeing disabled people as non-sexual, in order to actually hear the

stories being told. It is important to stress that young people are working hard to have their voices heard, using online avenues and social media to educate others; the change must come from others to listen.

*I mean I don't mind explaining it to them, like I'm the teacher, I will tell everyone about things as long as it's safe to, and I'll tell more people too. (Luna/she/interview)*

## Communities and Visibility

Communities are spaces of support and identity consolidation, but also places visibility and collective response. Whilst supportive groups do exist in the UK, there are rare. In reality it may be groups formed by young people that become most important, if they move from being private to public facing.

## Role models and allies

Role models are important for young people, particularly for those who do not see themselves represented in everyday life. Such role models can be important in helping young people create their stories and providing visible evidence that they are not alone. One participant (Jake) noted how seeing other disabled LGBT+ people in his college gave him the confidence to be himself, highlighting a form of personal empowerment.

Although the young people in my research were reluctant to receive Relationship and Sex Education from non-LGBT+ educators, there was a sense that issues of equality did not need specialist knowledge. Importantly, allies were seen as a step towards normalisation in their lives, particularly in terms of their teachers and peers.

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