

Out on the edge: the exclusion of disabled people from the British gay and lesbian community

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"I feel I belong to two communities but do not fit into either"
"I felt I did not belong fully to the lesbian scene any more, but neither did I fit in with disabled heterosexuals. I felt very alone and isolated for the first time in my life." (Nigel and Sara, quoted in Shakespeare et al, 1996, 172)

There are many parallels between the experiences of people with impairments, and lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered people: both groups face discrimination and prejudice, and are represented as dangerously 'other' in contemporary society. Indeed, part of this 'othering' is about suppressing the differences within these communities: ignoring the ways in which disabled people include ethnic and sexual minorities, or the gay community is equally heterogenous. This article aims to challenge the 'homogenisation' of the disabled community, and show the particular ways in which disabled people who are gay are doubly disadvantaged. However, in my discussion, I will use the term 'gay' as shorthand for the variety of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or queer identities, and I will use the phrase 'disabled people', to highlight the way in which people with impairments are disabled by social oppression.

Within mainstream discourses, sexual deviants may be regarded as having made blameworthy behavioural choices, and hence to be feared and despised, while physical deviants may be regarded as innocent victims of unfortunate and involuntary conditions, and hence to be pitied. Nevertheless, both groups face exclusion and isolation from the mainstream. The need for a safe, supportive space is therefore paramount for each community: a place of acceptance and understanding, where one's being and behaviour are respected and valued (Corbett, 1994).

Yet, despite these parallels, there is evidence that the experience of disabled people who are also members of the gay community is not always a happy one. While there is an important story to be told about the homophobia that disabled gays

sometimes experience within disability environments - from professionals and personal assistants, and from other disabled people - it would be wrong to assume that non-disabled gays are able to make the imaginative leap between their experiences of exclusion, and those of disabled people. As a result, disabled lesbians and gays can end up doubly excluded, and deprived of a place where they can be fully out, and fully accepted, with both sexuality and disability taken for granted and celebrated.

Research with British disabled lesbians, gays and bisexuals which I and colleagues conducted during 1995-1996 revealed a range of negative experiences in the gay community (Shakespeare et al, 1996, particularly pp 153-181). The broader patterns of discrimination which prevail in society at large (Barnes, 1991) were also evident within the gay environment, despite the profession of anti-oppressive and inclusionary ideologies. The barriers which people faced were both physical - a lack of access - and social - a lack of awareness and acceptance, and even downright prejudice on some occasions. Several of our respondents had also experienced physical and sexual abuse.

Appleby's research (1994) found that the lesbian community was inaccessible to disabled people, and our research recorded much evidence of physical exclusion: clubs and bars were upstairs or down steps, they were crowded and smoky and noisy, there were no signers or accessible toilet facilities. The social options of many disabled lesbians and gays are therefore extremely limited or non-existent, and there was consequently considerable frustration and anger, as Michael indicated:

"They ought to buck their ideas up basically, and start realising that there are disabled people that want to come out and the access is shit in most places [...] the access to the pubs and clubs is not good and most of them have got one step, a lot of them have got more." (Shakespeare et al, 1996, p.159)

A particular gripe was the poor provision of toilets, as he also told us:

"It pisses me off, toilets are not accessible in a lot of gay pubs and clubs I've seen ones with wider doors, but not really a specifically adapted disabled toilet, and that is what I would like to see. There are gay disabled people out there, and perhaps that's one of the reasons that they don't come out." (op cit, p.159)

Physical conditions can be exacerbated by appalling attitudes of other lesbians and gays. Dafydd told us an anecdote about going with friends to a night-club. Although his friends had encouraged him to come to this inaccessible venue, and promised to help him negotiate the environmental barriers, once he arrived everyone else disappeared:

“I’m sat in my chair in the night club, it’s heaving, I can’t leave my chair anywhere and they’ve fucked off. I need to go to the toilet, I had to get my two women friends to go to the toilet with me, and in the process of trying to move through the club, this guy is trying to get around me, instead of waiting for me to pass, he climbs on me, literally, puts one foot on my knee, puts another foot on the handle, and climbs right over me, thinking that’s nothing, I’m just a piece of furniture. But I have to say one good thing happened, one friend of mine who’s quite sussed, a drag queen, hastily followed and decked him, she’s 6’2” in heels, that was good.” (op cit p.160)

These testimonies show that there is often poor provision for anyone who does not fit in with the stereotypical gay or lesbian needs, and a lack of understanding or respect. On the one hand, commercial imperatives make it unnecessary for promoters and owners to cater to the small (and impoverished) disabled market. On the other hand, many gays and lesbians fail to consider the well-being of others in their own pursuit of pleasure. In general, the scene tends to be dominated by people with disposable income, highly focussed on physical appearance and status. Zorah describes the responses she has encountered:

“Oh, it costs too much to be accessible, and we don’t know how to do it. If we made it accessible would any disabled lesbians/gays come along anyway? (is it worth our while? Do we want to socialise with these losers anyway, we won’t fancy them).” (op cit., p.161)

Such views underline the fact that often access issues serve as a pretext for those who believe that disabled people have no place on the scene: ostensible concerns about safety conceal prejudice, as Sara experienced:

“At Heaven [nightclub] I was told that two people must be with me at all times.

I said to the man, ‘they’ll enjoy watching me chat up people then, won’t they, and if I snog someone in the loo (if I can get to it) how

will I fit me, the chair and three people in there?'. He was puzzled and told me I was a fire risk. I told him I was with ten friends and I doubted they would leave me there if a fire broke out." (op cit., p.161)

People with learning difficulties like Nigel are assumed to be child-like, and asexual or heterosexual:

"I have been to gay clubs wearing an obviously gay T shirt, a pink triangle or some gay symbol like that, and the doorman has asked me if I know this is a gay club and do I want to go in still. The assumption is that because I am disabled I cannot be gay." (op cit., p161)

This quotation reveals a paternalism which can undermine gay disabled people. At other times, prejudice can be more blatant. Often the person at the door is literally the gate keeper, as Phillippe found out:

"For example, in Paris quite recently, a door person at the night club, very strong, 100% perfect, good looking person... deaf people came, oh no no can't have deaf people, hearing people yes could come in, deaf people complaining, deaf people are neglected, that's just one example." (op cit, p.162)

The result is to filter out those who do not fit in with the stereotypical gay or lesbian punter. This may be because of physical barriers, deliberate social exclusion, or because lack of self-esteem leads disabled people to exclude themselves. The result is that the visible gay community does not reflect the diversity of gay people, as Daniel makes clear,

"When you go out onto the streets you see a whole variety of people but you go to the gay scene and the Heinz 57 variety has disappeared, gone. There is only variety number one, and I don't know where everyone is. I have an ambiguous relationship with gay men as a constituency. I feel very much a gay man, and I have lovely relationships with individual gay men, but gay men as a collective group of people I feel very ambivalent about, if not antagonistic about." (op cit. p.162)

Daniel's comments highlight the importance of the dominant values of mainstream gay culture. Those who do access the scene

have either to conceal their impairments, or risk rejection. Gay men are notorious for a fixation with conventional beauty, muscles and youth which can exclude men with different physiques. But disabled lesbians have also experienced prejudice, for example Sara told us:

“At clubs I’ve been patronised or used as a token disabled person. At parties I’ve been chatted up when I was sitting on a couch or chair and when people see me getting into my wheelchair they are suddenly called away. Once a woman gave me her phone number and begged me to come for dinner, I said ‘I’ll think about it’. When she saw me get in my chair her face fell and she said, ‘on second thoughts, I’m very busy next few weeks’, I just said, ‘Yeah, I know’ and she was very embarrassed.” (op cit., p.162)

Increasingly, popular lesbian social activities stress physical performance - fellwalking, soccer and line-dancing, for example.

The attitude towards disabled people is often connected with fear of difference, or fear of contamination: Julie argued

“There is blatant prejudice or fear amongst lesbians and gays towards those of us who use psychiatric services or are ‘mental health survivors’. People are generally uptight (and ignorant) re. disability issues.” (op cit p.163)

Many gays have been similarly prejudiced against people with HIV/AIDS, or other conditions, preferring not to be reminded about their mortality or vulnerability. In general, disability is too much trouble for most gays to be bothering with: disabled people distract from the general hedonism of the scene, as Patrick argued:

“The dominant attitude is we wish they weren’t around - ‘why’ve they go to come to our pubs, and why do they have to have disabled access and all this fuss...’” (op cit. p.163)

It is very common for disabled people to be labelled troublemakers when they have insisted on their access rights: for example, there has been an ongoing campaign in Britain by the disabled lesbian and gay group, REGARD, and the disability committee of the UNISON trades union, for the London Lesbian and Gay Pride event to be made fully accessible. Meant to be the major, celebratory, uniting experience of the year, many disabled people have found it a nightmare in the past, for example Nigel:

“My experiences at Gay Pride have been mixed but largely unhappy experiences. I have been left stranded without help when I needed it, I had to call upon friends to call a steward for help.” (op cit., p.163)

Thanks to disabled pressure, the event is improving every year. Some disabled people turn up, not just to show their gayness to the world, but also to make a disabled presence felt in the community, as Ruth indicates:

“I mean ironically, one of the things I am quite clear about is that I don't think I would have gone on my own to Pride if I hadn't been disabled, because Pride is primarily a men's event, and okay it is about expressing the fact that we all exist... [...] It is necessary to make a public statement about our right to be there [...] and I am not sure if I would have gone on doing it if I was not disabled, I am not sure I would have bothered. It's knowing that somebody will see that there are disabled people there.” (op cit. 164)

Kirsten Hearn has written scathingly of the predominant attitudes of the lesbian and gay community:

“Issues of equality are not fashionable for the majority of the severely able-bodied, white, middle-class lesbian and gay communities. To them, our disabilities preclude us from having, or wishing to express, an independent sexuality. We are therefore not considered 'proper' lesbians and gays. Most of us do not look, act, move or communicate in what is considered to be a lesbian or gay way. We are outsiders in our own community, and no-one hesitates to let us know that. The message may be shrouded in patronage or ignorance, but we know exactly what is meant by the space created by our absence.” [Hearn, 1991, 34]

It is a profound irony that the attitudes of many in the lesbian and gay community towards disabled lesbians and gays echo those of the heterosexual world towards lesbians and gays themselves. These types of feelings, combined with the generally intimidating atmosphere of many lesbian and gay venues, and the insecurity of many disabled people, contribute to the isolation often experienced by disabled lesbians and gays. It is difficult to find a community, or to feel at home, and sometimes the only place where one can be

truly comfortable is with other disabled lesbians and gays: as Dafydd said,

"I think the biggest thing was talking to other disabled lesbians and gay men, it was just wonderful, and I learned so much. At last I've got this forum where I can talk about what was happening without feeling like losing control, feeling not attractive, all that stuff. I could talk to other disabled lesbians and gays and be understood." [op cit, 180]

However, it may be a struggle to find this place, as Kit suggests:

"I think we have to create our own place, and that feels hard, when you have got very little energy, when I'm feeling in my down moments, I just feel very, very angry that there is so much rhetoric about equality". [op cit., 173]

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