

Exploring Sexual Citizenship for Disabled Young People: Recognition, Belonging and Identity'

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Structure of the paper

- Background literature and conceptual framework
- Research methods and sample
- Sexual health education in school
- Accessing sexual health



Background Literature and Conceptual Framework

- Barriers to being recognised as an adult (Morris 2002a, 2002b)
- Sexuality and sexual relationships often not incorporated into transition plans or discussed through relevant agents such as teachers, parents and carers etc.



I've always assumed that the most urgent Disability civil rights campaigns are the ones we're currently fighting for – employment, education, housing, transport etc, etc, and that next to them a subject such as sexuality is almost dispensable. For the first time now I'm beginning to believe that sexuality, the one area above all others to have been ignored, is at the absolute core of what we're looking for...
(Crow 1991, 13)

Disability and Sexuality

- Exclusion of disabled people from sexual spheres has serious ramifications for sexual health, this is especially salient for disabled young people.
- Absence of young disabled people from this social arena is compounded by barriers to forming relationships.
- For disabled young people (particularly in special education) sex education is given very low priority indeed; disabled young people are often infantilised in a bid to protect them from information deemed inappropriate (Shakespeare et al. 1996, 8, Priestly 2003, 99)



If disabled children or adolescents receive negative messages about their sexuality from trusted authority figures it is likely that these will be accepted as truth. Disabled children, like their non-disabled peers, need to know the world has endless opportunities open to them and their destiny is shaped by a combination of personal choice, not by imposed restrictions... (Shakespeare et al 1996,4).



Recognition

- *“defines the conditions of a just society through the aim of recognising the individual dignity of all individuals...the idea of affording every member of society the measure of social recognition that makes him or her a full citizen”*
(Honneth 2004, 342).
- misrecognition leads to ‘social subordination’ and therefore limiting individuals from ‘participating on a par with the rest’ (Fraser 2000, 113).

Research Methods and sample

- 32 in-depth qualitative interviews with 18 disabled young men and women
- Aged 18 – 30
- 10 women, 9 men
- All participants had physical impairments only
- Feminist phenomenological research
- Focus on embodiment and corporeality



Sexual Health Education and Information

P: Did you ever get information about being disabled and having sex or sexual health?

No like I have had that sort of stuff at school but never anything specific ... It was only when I was at leaving school age that I started to worry about it and I knew that I wasn't any different or whatever but I did panic about it because it's a personal and private thing for everybody but I did worry that I would specifically have a problem because I just wondered if I could [have sex].

(Meg, 29)



I would say no, I don't think there's enough [sexual health information for disabled people] because obviously it is a lot different for me and that type of things is different for someone like myself. I don't really feel that the school addressed that as well as they should've. I didn't think about it at the time but looking back they didn't. It was more general boy-girl type things that were dealt with in school, I was dealt with one to one by a teacher but I wasn't given that information.

(Jack, 22)



I think the schools have a duty to make sure that everybody that goes to the school has the information that they require to go on and lead their life and I don't think I was given that information and if you didn't get that information then you don't learn.

(Jack, 22)



I think it's to do with attitude and culture and some teachers in that school would tell people they would never have sex or have a relationship and so it wasn't important to go in to much detail compared to someone like myself who is quite physically able to you know what I mean. I still think that I would be quite keen to see if the information is accessible to disabled people. And a lot of disabled people get married and have families.

(Jane, 25)



The only thing for me, which I didn't know about and should have known about before ... you know? I would get urinary tract infections a lot because of Spina Bifida and Kidneys. I didn't know that sex would make it a lot worse and mean that you would get them a lot worse and more frequently. I didn't know that and I was sitting thinking 'why am I so ill, I'm not supposed to be this ill' and when I went to see my consultant he was like 'oh have you been in a sexual relationship' and I said yes and he said 'well that's why' and I was like 'I'm 20 years old why did nobody tell me this beforehand' why did no-one mention, did they just think I wouldn't?



Did they just think I wouldn't be a normal teenager and I wouldn't be having sex? It was annoying more than anything else. I really felt that someone should have told me cause in school you get talks on sex when you're like 16 so I was kind of thinking why did no-one tell me that 'you have to wear this kind of condom, you have to do this and that' why did no-one tell me? It really puts me off having sex now just because of the awful experience that I had...it definitely puts me off now I'm thinking having sex will now lead to me being so ill and being in hospital and I don't want that... you shouldn't have to learn as a disabled person you shouldn't have to learn through bad experience because it'll impact on your health it's just not ok.

(Cara, 20)



Sexual Health Clinics

It [sexual health clinic] had no wheelchair access, the taxi driver had to go in and say 'your appointment can't actually physically get into the building' and then not just that I was getting something fitted, I think I was getting the coil fitted because I decided to go on that but it's a bit embarrassing that a male taxi driver had to go in for me but then the doctor came out and sat and had the consultation with me in the back of the taxi and I just jokingly said to the taxi driver 'please keep that confidential because that shouldn't have happened in the first place' he said 'I am so sorry I should've stepped out the taxi' and cause I felt so guilty I have him a massive tip so he could go get a drink, I was in so much shock I could've thrown back a whole bottle of wine.

(Ella, 26)



Conclusion

- Exclusion from sexual citizenship impacts on disabled young people's identity and sense of belonging
- Importance of sexual citizenship to be recognised as crucial part of everyday life and citizenship
- Exclusion undermines sense of self, agency and self-confidence
- Exclusion makes it difficult to feel deserving of meaningful sexual experiences