The Intersection of Queerness & Disability

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"Within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community students with disabilities, at a minimum represent a dual diversity" (Harley, Nowak, Gassaway & Savage, 2002, p. 57). These authors use the term dual diversity to introduce the multiple marginalized identities that a queer person with disabilities must manage. The intersection of marginalized identities becomes even more complex when race, class, gender and other identities are considered. In this paper I will be focusing primarily upon the intersection of queerness and disability, as these are the two identities central to Harley et al. (2002) article. Yet it is important to keep in mind that these two identities exist within the context of numerous other identities. Further, it is possible that a queer person with disability does not identify either of these as their most salient identity. Harvey et al. (2002) reported that colleges and university typically view identities as parallel rather than as interconnected. This dissection of marginalized identities has deemed certain populations invisible. People who are disabled and who identify within the queer community are often one of those silenced populations. The silencing of this dually marginalized population is further illustrated in the lack of existing research. I was able to locate only one article addressing queer identified college students with disabilities, and it was published a decade ago.

Traditionally people with disabilities have been categorized as, or assumed to be, asexual (Harvey et al., 2002 & Whitney, 2003). These assumptions impact how children and teens with disabilities are educated about their bodies. Children and teens with disabilities are not educated about sexual health and the right to protect their own bodies in the same way their able-bodied peers are (Whitney, 2003). In the rare cases when sexuality is recognized heterosexuality is assumed (Whitney, 2003). For these reasons and others, college may be the first opportunity for
queer people with disabilities to explore their sexuality. Unfortunately campus climate towards queer people and people with disabilities does not often support this intersection of identities.

In addition to the desexualizing people with disabilities, the queer community tends to place value on able-bodied characteristics (Whitney, 2003). These combined can result in those who identify in both communities receiving double messages of unwelcomness. Whitney’s (2003) study of lesbians with disabilities gives voice to these marginalized experiences. One of the participants stated, “We are seen, and see ourselves, as different as outsiders—outside the mainstream, rejected by the disability community, excluded by the lesbian world. We have no community of our own” (p. 40). The women in Whitney’s research and others with disabilities who identify at LGBT, “share the position of being not only outside mainstream culture but outside their own subcultures…they may experience the queer community's ableism; and the disability community's homophobia” (Sandhal, 2003, p. 36).

Despite these areas of division between these two communities there is also shared history of oppression. Both communities have a history of having been pathologized by medicine; demonized by religion; discriminated against in housing, employment, and education; stereotyped in representation; victimized by hate groups; and isolated socially, often in their families of origin (Sandhal, 2003). How much further isolating must it feel to be member of both communities?

Based on the research shared by Harley et al. (2002) is seems the authors believed that campus climate was worse for LGBT students than students with disabilities. Harley et al. cited a 1990 study of first year college students. The study by D’Augelli and Rose found that 29% or first year college students felt campus would be better without sexual minorities, further more than 80% admitted making hostile remarks toward sexual minorities (Harley et al.)
climate for LGBT students has been improving (Beemyn, 2005). However the discussion rarely includes how to support queer students who have a disability.

This under-researched intersection of identities among college students needs to be considered by student affairs professionals. Harley et al., (2002) provides recommendations for making campuses for inclusive of LGBT students with disabilities, but their recommendations are broad. Further, no one has researched their effectiveness or provided updates since they were written ten years ago. These recommendations include:

“(a) getting to know LGBT student with disabilities; (b) organizing support groups and encouraging coalition-building and regular programming that appropriately representing the diversity of the entire campus community; (c) making space available, accessible and safe; (d) monitoring the quality and character of the campus climate; (e) increasing service potential by cross training staff; (f) hiring personnel, especially in counseling positions who foster self-acceptance; and (g) being non-judgmental regarding sexual-minorities” (p. 533)

Looking beyond the research about students with disabilities, research regarding inclusion for transgender college students, provides helpful suggestions to aid in shifting campus climate. The research identifies six campus elements that should be modified in order to promote a trans-inclusive campus climate. Five of these have overlap with areas that would also support students with disabilities. These five campus features are (a) residence halls, (b) locker rooms, (c) bathrooms, (d) health care and (e) inclusive programming (Beemyn, 2005). Combing the suggestions presented by Harley et al. and Beemyn with Universal Design may help to begin identifying explicit changes campuses can make to best serve queer people with disabilities.

Universal Design is defined as "the design of products and environments to be usable by all
people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Burgstahler, n.d).

“Improving the campus climate for transgendered students requires nothing less than the changing of the campus” (Beemyn, 2005). I believe this statement can be applied to improving campus climate for all marginalized student populations. As diversity increases on college campuses, it is important that research be done to assist campuses in determining best practices for serving all students. It is frustrating that no new scholarly research has been published regarding queer college students with disabilities since 2002.
References


