

**Lived Difference: Ordinariness and Misfitting in the Lives of Disabled and LGBT
Youth**

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Abstract

Debates about normalisation and the changing meaning of difference in LGBT youth studies usually do not consider the ‘misfit’ character of disabled LGBT young people. For disabled LGBT youth, difference can indicate not only expressions of gender and sexuality that depart from the expectations of heterosexuality, but a way of being that disrupts ableist norms of the body. An expanded awareness of the interplay of ableism and heteronormativity, and the different possibilities for fitting in and standing out that these create, can therefore unsettle emerging narratives about LGBT youth identities and their relation to what it means to be an ‘ordinary’ person. By exploring one young man’s story of fitting in and standing out in terms of both disability and sexuality, this chapter reconsiders debates about LGBT youth, identity and ‘normality’. It asks how the lived experience of difference expressed in the stories of disabled LGBT youth may offer deeper insight into the processes of fitting and misfitting that are not usually identified, but are often implicit in, new narratives of normalisation.

Introduction

Disabled young people's experiences are often left out of debates about difference and identity in LGBT youth studies. Normalisation is characterised as a major shift affecting identity for LGBT youth, because of which sexuality is said to have become less important (Savin-Williams, 2005, Cohler and Hammack, 2007, Coleman-Fountain, 2014). For disabled LGBT youth, the scrutiny that comes with impairment means that 'difference' is relevant not only in relation to heteronormativity and homophobia but to standards of normalcy that define disabled bodies as 'broken or tragic' (Clare, 2001: 362). Instead of existing separately, these 'regimes of the normal' (Warner, 1993: xxvi) fold into one another (McRuer, 2006). What this means for how LGBT youth construct difference is what this chapter explores. By examining how normalising regimes intertwine, it asks how the complex meanings of difference in the stories of disabled LGBT youth frequently get overlooked in 'post-gay' debates (Kampler and Connell, 2018). The chapter first explores heteronormativity and normalcy as entwined vectors that construct normality and difference, then it explores the account of a young gay man with Asperger syndrome, drawing out how he articulated a 'misfit' identity (Garland-Thomson, 2011). The chapter ends by discussing the importance of attending to diversity in how LGBT youth understand difference.

Methods

The chapter draws on data from a study that addressed young lesbian and gay men's narratives of identity. Participants were aged between 16 and 21, white, and living in the North-East of England. Recruitment was through lesbian and gay youth groups, internet chat boards, and word-of-mouth snowballing. Autism or Asperger syndrome were not part of that study, but (like a wider range of sexual identities) became part of it because of who

participated. The study used in-depth qualitative interviews to explore the meanings the young people gave to their sexual identities in the context of lesbian and gay ‘normalisation’ (Richardson, 2004, Coleman-Fountain, 2014). These were interpreted using theoretical literature that links identity to a flow of sexual stories (Plummer, 1995). In this chapter, I first explore normalisation and then draw on one case: Jack’s. Before his interview, Jack identified himself as autistic, asking whether that was a barrier to taking part. I confirmed that I did not see it as a barrier, but also did not make it a focus of the interview. It would not be appropriate to make claims about how Jack saw autism, but by exploring how he described himself as *different*, I use his account to ask how reading LGBT youth identities through intersecting structures of oppression and discrimination helps us understand the multiple and varied ways that difference becomes meaningful to LGBT young people. While acknowledging that autism or Asperger’s is not always defined as a disability, I accept the view that autism does become meaningful because of ableism (Coleman-Fountain, 2017a, Bagatell, 2007). Following Garland-Thomson (2011), I read Jack’s account of difference as expressing a ‘misfit’ identity associated with him being treated as both ‘outcast’ and as distinctly vulnerable.

Ordinary Youth: Difference and the Flexible Construction of ‘Normality’

...if you asked a straight person ‘does your sexuality define who you are?’ they would probably just regard themselves as being an ‘ordinary person’... The only difference I can see between myself and a straight person is my sexuality, and because there is so much else about me, and there is probably so much else about them, I wouldn’t regard it as being central. (Chris, 19)

In my research on the sexual selves of lesbian and gay youth, I was struck by how participants used the language of normality, ordinariness and sameness (Coleman-Fountain, 2017b). Before discussing Jack's story, I examine this language as it sheds light on the 'normalisation' of lesbian and gay identities (Richardson, 2004, Seidman, 2002). The above quote shows a typical framing of being lesbian or gay as part of an 'ordinary' self. My interest is in how disability complicates framings of sexuality as something people 'just happen to be' (McRuer, 2006: 175).

Normalisation was expressed through the emphasis on aspects of identity that made the young people 'normal' or 'ordinary', such as access to roles and identities associated with being a young person (e.g. being a student) in contrast to being defined in terms of sexuality. This positioning of sexuality can in part be attributed to changes encountered by the young people to homonormativity and homophobia, linked to what McRuer (2006: 12) describes as a more 'flexible', tolerant form of heterosexuality. The view that sexuality did not constitute a 'master status', or the core of the biographical self (Layder, 2004: 18), reflected the shift away from compulsory heterosexuality (Seidman, 2009), and to an increased censure of overt homophobia. The routinisation of gay life and the feeling that homophobia was less all-encompassing (Seidman et al., 1999) allowed some to say that sexuality was not always going to be a 'problem':

What it will do is have a huge impact on my personal life and... social... I quite rigidly regiment my professional life as something different... in that I can't really see it having a huge impact, 'cos I sort of would like to, I naively believe in equal

opportunities and I don't like to think that I will face any homophobia at the workplace. (Alex, 19)

The importance of declining anti-gay sentiment as a key factor in the formation of a new story of LGBT youth has been identified in recent analyses of 'normality' in gay young people's lives. For example, Cohler and Hammack (2007) show how the incorporation of same-sex desire into images of 'normal' life gives gay youth the opportunity to replace scripts of an 'oppressed' gay identity. For some LGBT young people, the offshoot of this may be the development of an ordinary 'post-gay' identity in which sexuality is de-emphasised (Hegna, 2016, Nash, 2013, van Lisdonk et al., 2017) as well as greater fluidity in the labelling of the self (Savin-Williams, 2005).

The idea that difference matters less in shaping LGBT youth identities depends on how far homophobia has declined (McCormack, 2012). Evidence shows that this is not evenly spread or irreversible (Kampler and Connell, 2018), and that comparable gains have not been made for bi- or transphobia (Mathers et al., 2018). A connected issue is the intersectionality of difference and what that means for LGBT youth. While 'flexible' heteronormativity may produce difference without the status of the Other (Seidman, 2013), or 'gay bodies that no longer mark absolute deviance' (McRuer, 2006: 12), this may be to the benefit of those who already experience some form of privilege. As Clare (2001: 364) argues, multiple systems shape relationships to the norm, and these impact 'the lived bodily experience of identity and oppression'. This intersectionality is evident in the writing on homonormativity and normalisation in LGBT youth research. Critiques of narratives of hope for LGBT youth (such as the anti-suicide 'It Gets Better' project started by Dan Savage and Terry Miller) show how 'queer futurity' narratives reproduce white, middle-class gay expectations and ignore the challenges faced by working class and young people of colour

(Goltz, 2013, Grzanka and Mann, 2014). Normalisation can also be read through theories of stratification. The stratified distribution of resources and access to discourses are, Skeggs (2004: 53) argues, central to the construction of ‘normal’ biographies (see also Grant and Nash, 2019).

No research specifically addresses what the normalisation of LGBT identities means to young and disabled LGBT people. Disability is important to consider however because of how normalcy leads to disabled young people being subject to judgements around their ‘normality’ (Davis, 1995, Michalko, 2002). In a study on disability, youth and the body, McLaughlin and I noted how the pursuit of ‘ordinary’ lives and futures entailed an ongoing negotiation, through modification or replacement, of ‘conventional’ everyday practices (McLaughlin and Coleman-Fountain, 2018a). This included envisioning adapted heteronormative practices and imagined adulthoods (McLaughlin and Coleman-Fountain, 2018b). Being compared and comparing oneself with standards of ‘normal’ embodiment influenced the meaning our young participants made of these practices as ‘ordinary’ but ‘different’. In relation to imagining LGBT futures, the treatment of disabled young people as ‘passive, incompetent and incomplete’ (Corker, 2001: 103) may make imagining these as ‘normal’ and ‘conventional’ harder. Anxieties about sex education, especially on non-heterosexuality, can lead to stories about LGBT lives being withheld (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2008, Blyth and Carson, 2007, McClelland et al., 2012, Duke, 2011). Ableism also affects how disabled young people get treated as LGBT. Toft et al. (2019a) shows how LGBT identities can be viewed as mistaken due to immaturity or a lack of capacity to understand sexuality, or as illegitimate due to disability overshadowing disabled young people’s identities. This is significant for autistic LGBT youths because medical discourses often link matters of self-expression, including sexual self-expression, to autistic symptomology or mental health (such as lack of self-awareness or ‘obsession’) rather than social identity

(Yergeau, 2018). As Loomes (2019: 137) argues, autistic young people often get told that they are ‘wrong’ about how they feel.

Formby (2017) makes the point that identity and difference in LGBT communities are multi-layered. Age and generation are a key source of diversity (Plummer, 2010, Stein, 1997). For young LGBT people, access to narrative and symbolic resources are central to how stories of LGBT identity emerge (Coleman-Fountain, 2014, Plummer, 1995). Social dynamics around disability, such as stigma and sexual norms (Liddiard, 2018, Shakespeare et al., 1996) also shape youthful stories of LGBT identity (Toft et al., 2019b). If normalcy and ableism often disrupt claims to normality by promoting more negative readings of difference (Michalko, 2002), then this raises questions about whether the more ‘flexible’ form of heteronormativity that feeds processes of normalisation for LGBT people continue to reinforce normative expectations about the ‘able’ body (McRuer, 2006). A further question is whether the same logics of normalisation, through which ‘post-gay’ LGBT youth subjectivities have potentially arisen, hold in disabled LGBT young people’s narratives around the meaning and significance of ‘difference’. I argue that they may not where disability contributes to a ‘misfit’ identity charged with an intersectional experience of difference which renders claims to normality more problematic.

Lived Difference: Theorising the ‘Misfit’

The disabled, transgender poet, Eli Clare (2001: 359) has criticised critical theories for having ‘sometimes ended up sidelining the profound relationships that connect our bodies with who we are and how we experience oppression.’ Describing the embodied experience of social injustice, Clare (2001) explores how it feels to be ‘gawked’ at, called names, ‘mired’ in ‘body hatred’, and to see your body as ‘utterly wrong’, as well as the power of pride for

reclaiming bodies from shame. Difference, Clare (2010, 2017) argues, gains meaning in the encounter between disabled and LGBT bodies and inhospitable social worlds shaped by prejudice, violence, and pathologisation, and perceptions of those bodies as problems. Disability and sexuality have different relationships to normalcy, producing 'different identity environments' (Warner, 1993: xviii) and histories of struggle, however being positioned as 'other' in relation to hegemonic norms has shaped such commonalities in disability and LGBT experience. Sandahl (2003: 37) argues that disability and LGBT activism both 'identify the negative social ramifications of attempts to homogenize humanity', speak to expectations on disabled and LGBT people to accept their subordinate status and perform 'stigma management', and reveal the importance of pride for resisting shame.

Clare's work informs Garland-Thomson's (2011: 594) concept of the 'misfit' which she uses to theorise disability as a body-world relationship, 'a way of being in an environment' that 'does not sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it'. The disabled body has its own specificity, or what Clare (2001: 362) calls 'irrevocable difference', but the misfit body becomes visible and is experienced as a 'problem'. For example, Weiss (2015: 91-2) describes misfitting as an 'intensely personal' experience, 'usually accompanied by a mixture of unsettling emotions such as anxiety, embarrassment, diffidence, and fear'. For Clare (2001: 362) such affects are the 'body-centred' price paid 'for variation from the norm'. Garland-Thomson (2011: 596) sees these affects as occurring with the loss of the 'material anonymity' that comes with being 'suited to the circumstances and conditions of the environment', and which is usually bound up with the stigma management that comes with being different (Scully, 2010, Goffman, 1968). Garland-Thomson argues that this is an issue of social justice however, rather than individuals. It is a lack of

accommodation and acceptance that comes with the exclusion of disability from society that creates the experience of a misfit, rather than the disabled body itself.

The concept of the misfit does not depend on ‘generic figures delineated by identity categories’, but rather describes a range of subject positions where bodies and ‘stories about them reach toward tractable states called *normal*’ (Garland-Thomson, 2011: 598). As Clare (2001) argues, bodies can be marked for many reasons. Being ‘queer’, including a disabled queer, can also be a source of misfitting if that body is not sustained. It is this idea that I use to explore one young man’s account of difference. Jack, a young gay man who identified himself as having Asperger syndrome discussed his own lived experiences of difference, the hostility and prejudice he experienced, as well as attempts, such as those of his friends and mother, to sustain him in a world in which he seemed to be identified as ‘vulnerable’ (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Next, I explore Jack’s account of experiences of hostility, then present the arrangements of care and support that sustained Jack in the context of his ‘misfit’ relations with the world. I then discuss these in relation to the meaning and significance of difference for Jack’s identity.

Standing out: Jack’s ‘Misfit’ Story

I previously explored meanings of difference for disabled and LGBT youth, and have identified the varied experiences that can shape how difference gains significance. In this section, I explore these issues using data from an interview with ‘Jack’, who I spoke with about his experiences as a young gay man, and who had identified himself as having Asperger syndrome. I explore Jack’s lived experience of difference, and how that took shape through the range of social relationships that seemed to stem from his own ‘misfit’ identity.

These relations became apparent as Jack spoke about himself as both an object of hostility and a 'vulnerable' subject of a care.

A Misfit Identity: Embodied Difference, Hostility and Pride

Jack did not see difference as something to be de-emphasised. It was instead central to his identity. When asked about his sexuality he said, 'I just see it as the way I was born and you can't really change who you are.' Sexuality was an 'irrevocable difference' (Clare, 2001), which Jack also felt that many people rejected as a 'problem'. Jack's approach often seemed to be a response to experiences of prejudice relating to him standing out. His physical presence, personal tastes and style, and difference was something others teased:

Jack: like when I'm in bars the first thing people ask when I am outside mainly, mainly the younger men go 'oh are you gay' and if you go 'yeah' they go 'ugh keep away from him' and... Or he might try to get with us and I've said to them 'just because I am gay it doesn't mean I am gonna try and get with you'.

Edmund: So why do you think they look at you and think that you are gay?

Jack: Just the way I dress really. It's... I wouldn't say it's girly I would just say it's quite camp but it's just what I like wearing, it is who I am.

His appearance meant that he was frequently and publically called names:

'Some people like, some people do in the street like come up to me and go 'oh you gay twat' and things like that and I just walk off and ignore it.'

Jack's attitude was to be himself. As he said, 'It's who I am and I am quite proud of it and I am not bothered what people think.'

Jack's world was not strictly defined by sexuality categories. He described a set of social activities that cut across gay and 'straight' worlds. For example, he described his preference for rock music, alternative dress, and dislike of some aspects of gay night life, including what he saw as an overemphasis on drug-taking among people motivated to conform to expectations around gay life. In contrast to the 'overpriced' and 'too expensive' gay scene, Jack liked more moderately priced 'rock' bars, although he acknowledged that they might not always be welcoming:

Jack: I go to some [North East] rock bars... with my friends who live near... and we go to the bars around the central city like, not the gay scene, but like the [Wetherspoons] and things like that and the [mainstream club space].

Edmund: Why do you like going there?

Jack: Because my friends go there and I think the bars are cheap there and they are nice. But the only thing I don't like about it is when people there are less accepting of you and sometimes I have had trouble where doormen have like said 'you're not getting in' and I've had ID and I've not even been drunk or anything. And my friends have got in and it was me and like this my lesbian friends who didn't get in and we thought it was because they were being prejudiced against us so we made a complaint.

It is this more individual quality of Jack's interview that was interesting. He described ways in which he stood out from others, including gay peers, as well as the strategies he undertook

for managing his 'misfit' identity. Jack did not downplay difference, but made it central to who he was. In so doing, he revealed the 'body-centred' prices that Clare (2001: 362) sees people as paying for their 'variation from the norm', such as the upset and hurt at being stared at, picked on, called names, and kept out of spaces, things that his friends who were more materially and visually anonymous did not typically experience (Garland-Thomson, 2009, 2011). His use of the language of pride suggested an attempt to reclaim his experience in positive terms.

Misfitting and Vulnerability: Being Sustained

The concept of the misfit arises from disability theory, however Garland-Thomson (2011: 598) argues that it 'extends beyond disability as a cultural category and social identity toward a universalizing of misfitting as a contingent and fundamental fact of human embodiment.' The misfit, she argues, is a product of the interdependence and vulnerability at the heart of human identity and embodiment, as it is through social relations with others and the environments they create that people are sustained or not. A sustaining environment, she explains:

'...allows a person to navigate the world in relative anonymity, in the sense of being suited to the circumstances and conditions of the environment, of satisfying its requirements in a way so as not to stand out, make a scene, or disrupt through countering expectations.' (Garland-Thomson, 2011: 598)

Jack's account of his misfit identity reveals the way that some identities can be vulnerable to harm because of stigmatisation. A common theme in the experiences Jack

spoke about related to the way he 'stood out', and the way others targeted him. In relation to disabled and LGBT identities, this may reflect the struggles LGBT youth have historically faced in order to be recognised and accepted (Cohler and Hammack, 2007), or the use of name calling to mark the bodies of disabled youth as different (Clare, 2001, 2003). Jack's defence of himself however, may also be evidence of the way in which he was sustained in the context of his own loss of anonymity. Two groups of significant others undertook the work of 'sustaining' him. One was his group of friends who would be with him when out and about, and the other was his mother, who was active in helping him find a set up where he could live safely, which she did through helping him find a form of supported living in a new city.

Jack's friendship group consisted of heterosexual young women and young gay men and lesbians he had become friendly with through college and his current accommodation. His friends were important because they joined him on nights out, sharing his interest in exploring different spaces of the North East's night time economy:

'I'd heard about it from gay friends at college but I'd never really been and my straight friends who were living in this house where you share a house and you rent a room and she used to go regularly, well she's straight and she asked me if I wanted to go with her 'cos I'd said I'd always wanted to go, but I didn't know anyone that would go and then she, we both just went and it carried on from there.'

They also indulged his queer sense of humour:

Jack: A lot of my friends who are gay I find them more funny than straight people.

Edmund: In what kind of ways?

Jack: Cos some of my friends um the way that they are, some of them are quite camp and they walk quite camp and I find it quite fun.

The way that Jack described his relationships with his friends showed the importance of finding like-minded, accepting individuals. These young people were often in a similar situation to him and shared similar tastes. They were young people who attended further education colleges in the North East, and whose time was divided mainly between home and leisure. In contrast to the bullies, they sustained him through accepting him as ‘different’:

When I see people it makes me think ‘are they gonna judge me or are they gonna accept it... but all my friends don’t really judge me.

It is arguable that this context of support is what gave Jack the confidence he needed not to ‘conform’, including being able to move between different zones of the North East’s night time economy which (considering his own lack of ‘anonymity’) is known to be heavily divided by labels of taste, class, gender and sexuality (Nicholls, 2019, Casey, 2016, Chatterton and Hollands, 2001). Jack did not articulate a lack of knowledge about gay identity because of this support, and he did not raise the issues discussed by Toft et al. (2019b, 2019a) about being disbelieved. This network of friends who shared his interests enabled him to more comfortably ‘stand out’, and supported him in standing up to things that he thought were wrong, including homophobia.

This network of support helped Jack find his way into the world. However, it was his mother, who he described as protective but deeply caring, who played a key role in shaping

his living arrangements. Jack had been staying in supported accommodation for LGBT young people, which he appreciated because it was a safe space that brought him into contact with others who could join him in looking into and exploring other gay spaces. His specific support needs intersected with his situation as a gay man who was vulnerable to homophobia:

‘...it’s dead nice because you get to know more about things that are happening on the gay scene, and you get to meet people who are like you, and you get to like have laughs and jokes with the workers like you couldn’t joke on with straight people, because they would think you were being offensive and stuff.’

The situation had come about when he had expressed a desire to move cities in order to attend a college course, to which his mother showed reservation. His mother therefore was instrumental in shaping how he would make that transition:

Jack: My mum she accepted it straight away cos she’s had friends who are gay but she’s always more overprotective now. She’ll say ‘be careful about where you go...’ and things like that... I don’t mind that she’s caring and things like that, it’s nice. But it’s when um every like bar I go into she says ‘oh be careful’.

Edmund: So was she happy for you to move down to [the North East]?

Jack: She wasn’t when I first... she wasn’t happy because she wanted me to live there in case anything hap....went wrong she could come and get me. Then when I explained I had friends up here and that I was going to do the next college course and things she was quite happy because she knows where I am living has got the right support.

Part of the negotiation of this situation involved his mother having input on where he lived once he moved. She was actively involved in seeking out the right accommodation for him when he moved away for college, which is what brought him to the supported residence:

‘...me and my mum we were looking for support places... we got there and looked around and I said to my mum that it was full of drugs and alcohol users, severe, and gays get beaten up and she was like wait until you go in and we can have a look and see what it is. And then when she realised what it was she was like ‘oh no you’re not living there’... I think even if I wasn’t gay she wouldn’t want me to live there.’

The provision of support, via the supported accommodation and the additional help of his mother, may be described as ‘sustaining’ Jack, as it gave him an arrangement in which he and his mother felt comfortable that he might thrive. However, this was in the context of a broader ambivalence about the extent to which society could sustain him more broadly, for instance with anxieties on the part of his mother about his safety, which extended beyond homophobia to concerns with where he and how he should live. Jack’s misfit identity was clearly articulated in these comments. His comments can perhaps also be used to do something akin to what Sandahl (2003: 37) calls ‘cripping’, which she describes as the ‘spinning’ of ‘mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects’, and which extends to ‘critiqu[ing] and expand[ing] notions of what it means to be queer’. His move to supported accommodation, facilitated by his mother, might reveal something about the assumptions of ‘ordinariness’ that pervade representations of LGBT youth in the context of the normalisation of LGBT life, from which Jack could

arguably have been excluded. The relatively unusual situation of moving into supported LGBT accommodation, which seemed indicative of his being labelled as a disabled young person, points to diversity in how LGBT young people grow up, and of the specific context of material needs related to other dimensions of difference, including disability. For LGBT youth who experience different relations to normality, the potential vulnerability to misfitting might make it harder to engage in discourses of normality, particularly where a need for support might have the additional effect of limiting choice where typically young people are assumed to have increasing levels of choice around their lives (Savin-Williams, 2005).

Discussion

To end this chapter, I want to reflect on the original problem raised at the beginning about the significance of difference for LGBT youth. Debates in LGBT youth studies have hypothesized that changing dynamics around heteronormativity have led to sexuality being de-emphasized as a 'core' aspect of the biographical self (Hegna, 2016, van Lisdonk et al., 2017). In contrast, I have hoped to explore something of disabled LGBT youth's views on difference, with the knowledge that these young people's relationship to ableism can engender an alternative set of negotiations around sexual identity (Toft et al., 2019b, Santinele Martino, 2017). My aim has been to make space for discussing how those experiences might play a role in shaping the meaning and significance of difference as more than a compartmentalized identity 'thread' (Seidman, 2002). By exploring the story of Jack, I sought to address his engagement with the meaning of 'irrevocable difference' (Clare, 2001), and the ways that meaning was shaped by a set of relations through which he was both sustained and made vulnerable to 'misfitting' (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Through doing so, I put his experiences into the context of discussions of 'inhospitable' social worlds (Clare, 2003, 2009), and considered how inhospitality might entail more than a relation to

heteronormativity, but to forms of ableism that also structure relations to the norm, and access to discourses of ‘normality’ and ‘ordinariness’ (McLaughlin and Coleman-Fountain, 2018a). For example, in thinking about name calling and prejudice, there is potential for thinking about what makes people ‘stand out’. In relation to vulnerability, there is potential for asking how structures of support and care complicate or exclude people from definitions of normality. Finally, in relation to the language of pride, there is reason to think about how difference becomes a matter of conflicting embodied feelings in contexts of a lack of hospitality to bodily differences that are multi-layered. Attention to the complex, intersecting issues might present an alternative to emerging narratives of normalisation in research on LGBT youth.

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