

Thinking through the Possibilities of Pleasure

Access:

- Copies to hand out.
- You can also access an electronic copy on my blog: kirstyliddiard.wordpress.com
- In terms of access, my slides only feature some of the written words I speak; there is an image of a woman's face by artist Lecia Bushak behind the words on each slide.

Slide 1

- In this talk, using the sexual stories taken from my research for my forthcoming book, *The Intimate Lives of Disabled People*, I want to unpack pleasure, politics, and precarity. I want to stress that through histories of being denied access to our bodies and to pleasure, disabled people have been rendered on the margins/peripheries of what it means to be human.
- Vitality, I want to centre pleasure to imagine emancipatory modes through which to think about bodies, self and desire in affirmative ways – that bodies with what Susan Wendell (1996:45) calls 'hard physical realities' – bodies that droop, sag, spit, dribble, spasm, ache and leak in ways deemed inappropriate (Liddiard and Slater, *fc*; Morris 1989; Leibowitz 2005) and minds that confuse, forget, hallucinate, or take longer to learn are not non-human or subhuman but can be situated in the realm of the posthuman and dishuman (Goodley, Runswick-Cole and Liddiard 2015). That disability opens up new ontologies of pleasure and prises open alternative economies of desire.
- Most importantly, later in the talk, I want to emphasise pleasure as inherently political in an age of global austerity and advanced neoliberal-ableism (Goodley, Lawthom and Runswick-Cole 2014): a time when disabled lives and futures are systematically being devalued and eradicated. In such precarity, then, I want to suggest that pleasure offers radical counter narratives; that pleasure is not luxury, but a means of survival and thus necessary for creativity, vitality and future.

2. Power, Pleasure and the Human

'Human sexualities may be wildly diverse and passionately different; but in all societies and at all times, they are put under normative regulation' (Ken Plummer 2015: 143).

As the British sociologist Ken Plummer (2015) suggests, all humanly pleasures are subject to normative regulation – pleasure is deemed wild, expansive, unpredictable and in need of containment through the politically conservative and erotophobic institutions of law, morality, and medicine (see Wilkerson 2002). In his article, *The Missing Discourse Of Pleasure*, Mitchell Tepper (2000) traces multiple histories of erotic regulation. While I don't have time to go through these here and now, Tepper's history ends before the mid 20th-century, an era when (traditional) Sexology – an 'empiricist approach that focuses on the study and classification of sexual behaviours, identities and relations' (Bland and Doan 1998: 1) – made sex what Hawkes calls an 'object of study' (1996: 56) for the first time.

The famous works of Kinsey (1948, 1953), Chesser (1950), and Masters and Johnson (1966) were rooted in a Eurocentric and Humanist biological essentialism that posits human sexuality as 'the most spontaneously natural thing about us' (Weeks 1986: 13). Later Western biomedical sexological knowledges of human sexuality made visible and measurable what came to be known as the key stages of the archetypal human sexual experience. Masters and Johnson's (1966) sexual response cycle quantified and charted the physiological aspects of sexuality and became the benchmark for new scientific and cultural understandings of human sexuality.

This new ‘physiological norm’ of the sexually able body, legitimised through expert knowledges, firmly rooted the ability and necessity to ‘achieve’, reach, and strive for orgasm (Tepper 2002) in ways that rendered alternative experiences of pleasure as dysfunctional, inadequate, and in need of treatment (Bullough 1994; Hawkes 1996). Ultimately, under the disciplinary powers of sexology normative pleasures became life giving, vital, and human.

3. Disability, Desire and Disqualification

To draw disability in, then, disablism and ableism – the privileging of ability, sanity, rationality, physicality and cognition (Braidotti 2013) – have long rendered disability as abject and Other. Disabled bodies and minds are actively sequestered from public view, space and culture: segregated in education; institutionalised in hospitals, homes and treatment units; detained in mental health units; criminalised in prisons; lost through child protection systems; and excluded from the popular cultures of perfection which dominate a globalized techno-media age (see Hevey, 1992). As such, disabled people have seldom ever been considered, nor treated, as “fully human” (Goodley, Lawthom and Runswick-Cole 2014) and are situated, at best, at the margins of human sexuality.

As I have argued elsewhere (Goodley et al. 2015: 11), disabled people’s exclusion from the category of the Human operates on a number of levels within sexual and intimate life, denying rights and access to intimate citizenship (Plummer 2003): ‘it compromises entry into normative sexual and gender categories; refutes sexual agency and selfhood; and silences calls for sexual, reproductive and parenting rights and justice. It is not surprising, then, given that humanness, humanity and sexuality are so tightly bound in our cultures, that sexual normalcy subsists as a very powerful cultural and political category of which to gain entry’ (Goodley et al. 2015: 11). For the participants in my research, feeling and enacting ‘human’ in such ways were undoubtedly rooted in lives and selves consistently devalued and dehumanised (Liddiard, 2014).

Relatedly, contexts of dis/ableism have long disqualified disabled people from ‘discourses of pleasure’ (Shildrick 2007: 58). Disabled desires – Shildrick maintains (2007: 54) – are rendered dangerous in [quote] ‘a cultural imaginary that privileges corporeal wholeness and predictability above any form of bodily anomaly, and that supports fears that non-normative sexuality is always a potential point of breakdown in a well-ordered society’. Such a thirst for well-ordered society disqualifies myriad bodies from the realm of pleasure as fat bodies, women, queer and Trans, and Black and people of colour (POC) are rendered disgusting and beyond control (Tepper 2000). But how might we understand disqualification?

4. But how might we understand disqualification?

I just want to take a moment to list potential ways:

- For many disabled people, pleasure is institutionalized through multiple forms of incarceration, as particular individualised regimes of care and a disciplining therapeutic surveillance disrupt the expression of pleasure (see Siebers 2008; see also Liddiard and Goodley 2016).
- Through similar paternalistic processes, pleasure is also colonized, co-opted, pathologised and denied through the both interventions and non-interventions of education, health and social care professionals. For example, masturbation training, chemical castration and over-medicating are routinely used to assuage the assumed animalistic hypersexuality of intellectually disabled, Black, queer disabled and Mad people (primarily men) (Gill 2015).

- The wonderful Esther Ignagni et al. (2016) argue that pleasure is further mitigated through material deprivation/poverty, and through exposure to multiple forms of violence: most notably sexual violence (see Sherry 2004).
- And, as I have maintained elsewhere, pleasure is readily criminalized through non-normative sexual activities such as sex work (see Liddiard 2014).
- And then there are the emotional, psychic and affective politics of pleasure, which includes things like: the absence of Crip sexuality and pleasure in the cultural sphere (film, TV, media); the endemic shaming of disabled people's sexual expression through oppressive care practices (Slater and Liddiard, forthcoming); and psycho-emotional disablism – what the brilliant Carol Thomas (1999, 60) calls 'the socially engendered undermining of emotional well-being' – which can exacerbate the existing denials of an erotic self (Liddiard 2014).
- And if that isn't enough, of course, there's internalised ableism: the insidious process of *learning* to hate ourselves (Stevens 2011). Fabulous Crip Sexologist Bethany Stevens (2011: 12) describes this as not being able to 'muster the capacity to see love for my body'.

5. Theorising a posthuman disabled sexual subject: The Dis/Sexual

Despite such routine and persistent disqualification, however, Crip pleasure exists, persists, survives and thrives – (Liddiard 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016).

Feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti draws out the Humanist human as that which is [quote] 'implicitly assumed to be masculine, white, urbanised, speaking a standard language, heterosexually inscribed in a reproductive unit and full citizen of a recognised polity' (Braidotti 2013: 65) [end quote].

From Braidotti's work, with fellow colleagues Dan Goodley, Katherine Runswick-Cole, and Rebecca Lawthom, we have collectively theorised the dis/human, a political mode through which to explicitly understand the relationships between disability and the human in what are some very inhumane times – to evidence the ways in which some of us are deemed more human than others, but also to illuminate the myriad ways in which disability affirmatively disrupts what we have come to know as human.

The dis/human doesn't reject the human, but 'recognises the norm – the pragmatic and political value of claiming the norm' (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2014: 5) while always seeking to disrupt and contest it'.

In a digestible sentence, the dis/human acknowledges a desire for the Human, at the same time as challenging its very narrow boundaries.

In the context of sexual and intimate life, then, what I have come to call the dis/sexual positions disability as productive disruption to the idealised forms of human sexuality from which we/disabled people are excluded, but recognises that the majority of disabled people, like those in my own research, hold a desire to be included (Liddiard 2012).

The dis/sexual offers a space through which disabled people can claim their humanness through conventional modes of sex and gender (if they so choose), yet simultaneously defy and exceed its confines (Goodley, Runswick-Cole and Liddiard 2015).

6. Terry Example

To give an example; the account on the slide was taken from the sexual story of Terry, a young male heterosexual wheelchair user aged 20:

“Today we’re going to learn how people with muscle weakness are going to put a condom on.” I remember saying – “to be fair you’re talking to someone who can’t even open a chocolate wrapper, so I haven’t got much hope, have I?” I remember it was almost like a shock because he [teacher] said “does that mean you’re not going to use contraception?!” and I said “well no, obviously I’d just ask the other person to put the condom on ...”

Terry was in mainstream education, but was segregated for what we call PSHE (Personal, social, health and economic) education in England and was placed in a class with other disabled students. This was – as Terry explained – considered progressive by the school on the grounds that disabled young people needed ‘special’ (sic) knowledges of sex/uality.

However, Terry’s encounter with his teacher reveals that, even in educational spaces where disability-specific knowledges are *attempted*, they often remain steeped in dis/ableism. For example, his (non-disabled) teacher’s positioning of ‘unsafe’ sex as the only alternative to not being able to put a condom on ‘independently’ (read: as men should) offered Terry little creative resolution to this embodied reality of his impairment. Nor was it acknowledged that Terry had sufficient sexual agency (and imagination) to have already devised a solution to this intimate ‘problem’ (asking his sexual partner to put the condom on).

To re-think this intimate ‘problem’ through a DisSexual lens, then, would reveal the presence of disability – previously troublesome – as a vital and transformative moment:

- A moment through which the (sexist) gendered politics of condom use are disrupted;
- A moment where dominant myths of the (masculine) sexual body as autonomous, in control and self-governing are contested;
- A moment where the (Crip) sexual body emerges as a space of (embodied) relationality and interconnectedness, corporeally interwoven with other bodies and selves in multiple and creative assemblages.
- These are transformative sexual relations, especially in the context of youth.

Therefore, DisSexual ways of being can radically disrupt normative notions of sexual humanness (Liddiard and Goodley, in press), even at times where, in my research, disabled young people forcefully asserted a (naturalised) sexual subjectivity (‘I’m a sexual being’) and made claims only for normative sexual citizenship (‘I want to be [sexually] normal’), locating their rights, access, agency and embodied experiences of sex/uality as central to their humanness.

(Example taken from Goodley, Runswick-Cole and Liddiard 2015: 10-11)

7. Other examples

From the collaborative sexual storytelling of my research (Liddiard 2012), this further extends to, for example:

- Actively displacing, decentering or demoting the orgasm as a marker of pleasure, dislodging it from heteronormative scripts as the ‘natural outcome of sex – the only option for successful sex’ (Cacchioni 2007: 306);
- Queering pleasure through exploration that facilitated discovery of alternative pleasures (tongues, fingers and mundane objects as cocks);
- Expanding normative modes of pleasure through incorporating the visual, staring, fantasy, verbal sex and (sexual) technologies and enhancements, uncoupling human sexuality from its ‘long-presumed biological essence’ (Plummer 2015: 44);

- The discovery of new erogenous zones – orgasmic pleasure through stroking arms, touching shoulders, and kissing necks – crippling the sexually embodied norms of the conventional erotic body that dictates that orgasms are bound only to genitals (Ostrander 2009; see also Liddiard and Goodley 2016);
- Through an acknowledgement that disability can welcome in multiple supports to disrupt the autonomous, independent, self-governing human subject as Crip sexual bodies come to be collectively and collaboratively maintained by chosen others, such as partners, family, carers, sex workers and care professionals (see Earle 1999; See also Fritsch 2010).

Without doubt, then, disability, by its very nature, offers possibilities for opening up new ontologies of pleasure and alternative economies of desire.

8. Emerging Precarity and Intimate Citizenship

Moving forward, if disability tenders such *openings*, what is the relationship of this emancipation to the growing precarity that all humans, but particularly marginalised ones, are facing in these times of advanced capitalism (Braidotti 2013)?

In the UK, from where I write and research, we have watched multiple UK governments perpetrate multiple forms of economic and cultural violence against disabled people, and many vulnerable others, in the name of what I and others (Goodley, Lawthom, and Runswick-Cole 2014) have called ‘austerity as ideology’. Significant cuts to welfare/benefits and public services – a systematic rolling back of the State – have exacerbated existing disability oppressions, and have ontologically, psychically, symbolically, materially, emotionally, and affectively stripped disabled people (amongst many other minorities) of their rights, access and dignity.

For me, love, sex, intimacy, and emotion are central to austerity politics, as disabled people fight to remain part of their communities; stay connected to their partners, children and families; find and stay in meaningful work; be appropriately housed; and participate in civil society. This eroding of what British sociologist Ken Plummer (2003) calls intimate citizenship – the wearing away of disabled people’s already-fragile rights and access to intimate, sexual, and family life (see Ignagni et al. 2016) – is central to the dehumanizing processes of austerity, which already renders disabled lives as lacking value and future (see Kafer 2013; see also Tyler 2013). Cast away as the ‘revolting subjects’ of “scroungers” and “spongers” (disability appearing) disabled people become unworthy of life as death, disposability and disablism begin to run up against one another. In recent times this has included rising hate crime fatalities, mercy killings, and welfare suicides (see Mills 2016) and a pervasive Assisted Dying Bill (disability disappearing). Such a cultural imaginary, which propogates the disposal of disability, evokes what the wonderful Eliza Chandler (2012: no pagination) calls the ‘normative desire to cure or kill disability’.

Drawing Some Conclusions

So where from here? Austerity-as-ideology, neoliberal-ableism and global instability inevitably proffer new forms of precarity that drive us, at best, back into the normative body and self, but I want to (tentatively) propose that asserting, celebrating and living our own pleasures at *this* time in our history, offers radical counter narratives. That we can affirm disability life – in the face of social and literal death – *through* pleasure and desire, at the same time as chip away at the essentialist and normative boundaries of human pleasure I spoke of at the beginning. This advocates that in times of such existential precariousness, pleasure (regardless of its form) is not luxury, but a means of survival and thus necessary for creativity, vitality and future.

Without doubt, then, politicizing our pleasure is important and must become a rallying point: not merely because, as Tepper (2000: 288) argues, by ignoring it [quote] ‘we perpetuate our asexual and victimization status’ [end quote], but because pleasure in the context of the here and the now affirms the *vitality* of Crip and of disability. It also contests the regulated regimes of sexuality that denigrate fat, queer, Crip, black and POC, and Trans bodies and selves, making much-needed space for our intersections, which have long been excluded (see Foucault 1978).

But where and how might we do this work? Where are our spaces for resistance and possibility? And how can we resist together: a place for shared fragility? Jen Slater and I have argued that this can be found through Crip community and Crip solidarity, although we acknowledge that this is a community to which many disabled people don’t have access. Runswick-Cole and Goodley (2015: 182), following British scholar Imogen Tyler (2013), point to a ‘disability commons’, a safe(r) space where ‘opportunities exist to work the spaces of neoliberalism and for disabled people to re-shape, re-fashion and resist the processes of neoliberalisation’.

Might we generate, then, an ‘intimate commons’? Places to come together and share the Crip ontologies of pleasure, intimacy and desire that work the edges of ableism? Making room for us to write, film, perform, read, talk, feel and give pleasure, in the (relative) safety of a commons? I think it’s time. I want to end with the words of the wonderful Eli Clare (2002: no pagination), who states ‘I want to read about wheelchairs and limps, hands that bend at odd angles and bodies that negotiate unchosen pain, about orgasms that aren’t necessarily about our genitals, about sex and pleasure stolen in nursing homes and back rooms where we’ve been abandoned, about bodily—and I mean to include the mind as part of the body—differences so plentiful they can’t be counted, about fucking that embraces all those differences. It’s time.’