

COMING OUT TWICE:

Disability and the Intersectionality of Gender and Sexual Orientation

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INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality is a Framework; a Paradigm:

1. It centers the people marginalized by race, gender and other social identities.
2. It spotlights both individual and group-level notions of identity.
3. It focuses on power relations.
4. It strives for social justice as the goal.

(Jones and Abes, 2013)

PAUCITY OF RESEARCH IN THE FIELD

- Not enough research on Intersectionality between disability and other social identities, especially in higher education.
- To this day the disability identity still appears to be considered as an afterthought with respect to social justice in higher education. Yet disability can and does affect all people, all social identities.
- Both identities were created out of the concept of those who are socially extricated out of the “norm,” where there are the societal “rules” of compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory gender assignment from one’s birth derived from societal expectations, rather than an individual’s development, growth and formation of identity.

ORIGINS OF INTERSECTIONALITY (INTERSECTIONAL THEORY)

- The term was created and used by Kimberlee Crenshaw initially in 1989, to describe the relational concept of dual identities between gender and race.

As research in the field continued, the definition of the term began to evolve and became applicable to other identities (BIPOC), including Disability, and LGBTQ+.

There is Intersectionality in Disability, as there are identities that are diverse and subject to discrimination:

1. In Deaf Culture – own cultural language, customs, traditions, folkways, history and historical trauma, due to stigma and discrimination.
2. In ASD. Students often refer to themselves as “Coming out as a Person who is on the Spectrum,” because of the discrimination and stigma that is perpetuated in society with a label, Students have a reluctance to divulge their disability.

COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO ARE DISABLED AND LGBTQ+ IDENTITY AS INTERSECTIONAL....

- Viewed and stereo-typified by society as Non-sexual and unable to openly convey love and passion, and void of any sexual orientation or gender identity. Viewed as invisible.
- If a student is LGBTQ+ and Disabled, then there are two major issues where there is a reluctance to self-identify openly.
- Students often feel isolated, and uncomfortable to disclose information about their intersectionality, even in the Disabled Student Services Office to their Specialist.
- Psychological and physiological disorders can manifest in the student or exacerbate due to the reluctance, fear and trepidation to share and celebrate their individual social identities.

COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO ARE DISABLED AND LGBTQ+ IDENTITY AS INTERACTIVE....

- Some students interpret their intersectionality social identities as being “Beneficial and Rewarding,” a positive interaction between the two; while other students see their social identities as having a negative interaction between the two.” -Miller 2018
- For those who consider intersectionality beneficial, they find that it allows them to be more creative, perceptive with a sense of a re-birth – becoming a new person.
- For those students who consider intersectionality negatively, they find that it makes them feel as if there are two identities to conceal – that to them to be open about it feels like they are “coming out of the closet twice.” Miller, 2018

COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO ARE DISABLED AND LGBTQ+ IDENTITY AS OVERLAPPING

- Identification as both identities fosters common experiences.
- Is a means to seek out others with the same overlapping identities for a sense of community in the shared experiences.
- A sense of community is sought because of the cumulative historical trauma from oppression and bigotry of “mainstream” society.
- Students feel that each identity is visible interchangeably, validating the experiences of both identities together and as distinct entities.
- The feelings of marginalization begin to change to inclusiveness.

COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO ARE DISABLED AND LGBTQ+ IDENTITY AS PARALLEL

- Used to find how each identity has symmetry and congruence, such that the experiences of both identities are the same in different aspects.
- It creates a way of coping and builds fortitude and resilience.
- Students look at the experiences of coming out with one identity the same as coming out with the other.
- Coming to terms with one identity may vacillate with differing life experiences.
- Can choose when to come out with one identity or both of their own volition.

COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO ARE DISABLED AND LGBTQ+ IDENTITY AS OPPOSITIONAL

- Functions as a form of protection of one's-self.
- Allows the student to view their identities as functioning as separate from each other, when dealing with multiple forms of oppression and discrimination.
- Students are fully aware of the intersectionality in their self identities, but do not place much emphasis on it, do not value it as much.
- View their identities as distinct entities, wondering why they need to bind them together in the first place.
- Students feel the need to elaborate on the definitions of the specific identity in an attempt to prevent others from false assumptions about them.

ISSUES FOR PROFESSIONALS EMPLOYED IN DISABILITY SERVICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Students may have issues with:

Multiple Identities - where one identity is not considered oppressed such as a person who is a white male, who is Gay and also has an invisible disability. Having to reconcile an identity associated with privilege along with two identities associated with oppression and trauma.

Familial Acceptance – Where family members and significant others may acknowledge and respect one identity but not the other. Example: a parent who acknowledges their child's learning disability, not their self identity as Transgender.

Making “peace” with their identities – self acceptance and acknowledgement of themselves and their identities as part of who they are as human beings.

FOR STUDENT SERVICES PROFESSIONALS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

During the Interactive Process:

1. Listen, listen and listen some more to your student. If a student needs to talk about their concerns which they have associated with one identity, or both, be there for them to listen without judgement.
2. Learn about resources in the community, online, and Nationally that can assist students with more broad issues in their lives related to their identities.
3. Align yourself with persons in the community associated with intersectionality for help, and continued education; cultural competence is a constant learning process; read what the experts write, go to events and ask questions. Assume nothing – no one knows it all. Accept that you don't know everything. Your students can also be your teachers. Respect their knowledge and life experiences as well.

SCENARIO ONE.....

- You are in your office with a new student who is seeking assistance from your program for help in a course. They have self-identified to you in confidence that they have a psychological disability – a Dissociative Disorder and are Transgender. It is extremely difficult for them to talk about both identities, and you recognize that. When you turn your back to the student to reach for a pen to write some information down to give to them, you hear a voice, sounding like a very young child, yet it is your student. You realize that the stress of disclosing their identities exacerbated their Dissociative Disorder, and one of the personalities, a six-year-old girl emerges. What do you do?

SCENARIO TWO....

- A student comes to your office in the early morning looking disheveled and very teary-eyed. You sit down with her in your office to talk to her as you are concerned. The student tells you that two days ago she decided that for her own psychological health, she could not live a secret life any longer, and came out to her parents as a Lesbian. Her parents became enraged and told her to not come back to her home again. Subsequent of her disclosure, they told her immediately to get out of their house. She has no place to go, but what scares her the most is that she is on her father's health insurance and has a serious disease, Cystic Fibrosis, requiring medication and at times frequent hospitalizations. She has been living out of her car for the last two days. What do you do to help this student?

SCENARIO THREE.....

- It is 1995; a student comes into your office requesting advice. He is Gay and has Wilson's Disease. Aside from a slightly swollen abdomen, the disease has caused him tremendous weight loss. He feels that the minute he discloses he is Gay, the first thing people assume is that he has AIDS because of his appearance, so he feels he is forced to justify and explain what his disease is, how it affects him, and that it is not a communicable or a sexually transmitted disease. He is fed up with having to explain himself constantly, feels like people view him as a pariah, and is extremely depressed about his disability and his situation. What would you say to him? What would you do?