

Chapter Eight (in *The Sexual Politics of Disability: Untold Desires*, Tom Shakespeare, Kath Gillespie-Sells & Dominic Davies (1996) Cassell, pp 206-209)

## **Eight**

### **Conclusion**

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. ... It's not that one area can ever be achieved alone – they're all interwoven, but you can't get closer to the essence of self or more 'people-living-alongside-people' than sexuality can you? (Crow, 1991:13)

In sociological terms, one of the inspirations for this book is the recent work of Ken Plummer, a key figure in lesbian and gay studies, and in particular his recent book *Telling Sexual Stories* (Plummer, 1995). His stress on the importance of narrative, and his exploration of the relationship between identity and the stories we tell about ourselves, has been very useful in our work on disabled people's experiences of sex and love.

Towards the conclusion of his book, Plummer develops a notion of sexual citizenship, which is an expansion of the traditional liberal conception of citizenship as comprising civil, political and social rights. The individual's personal and private experiences are placed in the context of wider communities and social relations – the audience for his or her story. Plummer argues (1995:150):

Rights and responsibilities are not 'natural' or 'inalienable' but have to be invented through human activities and built into the notions of communities, citizenship and identities. Rights and responsibilities depend upon a community of stories which

make those same rights plausible and possible. They accrue to people whose identities flow out of the self-same communities. Thus it is only as lesbian and gay communities start to develop women's movements gathered strength that stories around a new kind of citizenship became more and more plausible. The nature of our communities – the languages they use, the stories they harbour, the identities they construct, the moral/political codes they champion – move to the centre stage of political thinking.

Sexual citizenship is about intimate pleasures, desires, and ways of being in the world. It is not a unitary concept, but one based on difference and variation. Many of the accounts in this book are centred on difference - on the ways that masculinity, femininity, sexuality may be variously experienced. We hope the testimonies published here contribute to undermining essentialist, naturalist notions of gender and sexual identity.

Moreover, we feel these stories are about reclaiming the sexual experiences of disabled people, which is important for at least three reasons. First, it mounts a challenge to the non-disabled world, to recognize, accept, value and support disabled people's sexual and emotional expressions, in all their variety. Second, it places the issue of sexuality and relationships on the agenda of the disability movement, which has not always confronted or prioritized these imperatives. If disability politics is centrally about civil rights and citizenship demands, its failure to campaign in the area of sexual citizenship is a major omission. Third, it offers disabled people themselves, as individuals, validation for their own sexual stories, for their own experiences, both positive and negative. We *can* talk about sex. We can *have* sex -we *are* entitled to have sex and find love. We *do* face oppression, abuse and prejudice, but we can fight back and we can demand support and the space to heal.

Plummer highlights seven areas of modern sexual stories: *families* - both traditional and alternative forms; *emotions* -bringing the hidden world of personal feelings I into the open; *representations* -about imagery; *bodies* -about what we can do; *gender* -about polarizations, and about overcoming them; *eroticism* -especially safer sex and sexual variation;

*identity* -about who we are. These broad types of narrative are all covered within this book, because of course disabled people largely have the same types of experiences as everyone else.

One of the great crimes of the past has been to assume that disabled people do not have stories to tell and are denied access to the experiences that 'normal' society takes for granted. The evidence of our research is that this is not the case. Disabled people's narratives may have different emphases: things that are taken for granted by non-disabled people may involve conflict and obstacles for disabled people, barriers which are more often social, rather than biological. However, disabled people emphatically are sexual, are desiring, are loving, and loved and desired. We hope this book is a contribution to the campaign for radical sexual pluralism in which gay writers such as Ken Plummer and Jeffrey Weeks and feminists such as Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh, and men like Bob Connell, among many others, are engaged.

As our book comes to its conclusion, we need to point out that it is only a beginning. In so many areas this research asks questions, rather than supplying answers. The time and resources available to us did not allow more comprehensive or systematic investigation: each of the chapters could make several books, each subsection could be expanded into an article. Moreover, whole areas of experience are ignored or neglected. For example, there is very little on the lives and views of older disabled people, and there is urgent need for research with older people about their sexual and emotional lives. Too often it is assumed that older people, like children, do not have sexuality.

There is another reason why our sample is not representative of Britain's six million and more disabled people. We have predominantly talked to those who are active in the disability movement, at a local or national level. Those who have not 'come out' as disabled are under-represented, and those who live in residential institutions are also neglected. There are many people who do not have the opportunities, and have not developed the positive sense of self, which many of our contributors have experienced.

Not only are many of our contributors politically active, a high proportion of them are lesbian, gay or bisexual. There are several reasons for this. First, the authors' own biographies, as well as the contacts and networks to which we have easiest access. Second, homosexual people were more likely to respond to advertisements than heterosexual people. We had some difficulty reaching heterosexual people, particularly heterosexual men. Third, heterosexual people, especially men, were more reticent and less forthcoming than gay, lesbian and bisexual people. They were less prepared to talk about intimate issues, and had thought less about sexuality, and their ideas were less coherent and developed. Because disabled lesbians, gays and bisexuals have had a double battle to assert their sexual selves, they have a stronger sense of their own sexuality than many heterosexual people. Moreover, they are more likely to take a political perspective on personal matters. These are generalizations, but they broadly correspond to our research experiences. It also echoes the experience of the SHE *UK* research, where out of forty women invited to a seminar, eleven lesbians and only two heterosexual women attended.

Writing this book, we have tried to perform a balancing act. On the one foot, we have had to discuss the oppression and marginalization experienced by disabled people, the barriers, the prejudice and the abuse. On the other foot, we have wanted to give a positive account, celebrating the resistance of disabled people, the delight and the joy of disabled people's sexual and emotional lives, the essential 'normality' of the disability experience. Some disabled readers will think our approach too optimistic - others will think it pessimistic and grim. Particularly, because our sample is not representative, we could be accused of painting too positive a picture. Where are all those who cannot speak for themselves, where are all those who are silenced and institutionalized and unheard, we will be asked. We want to make it absolutely clear that we will realize these imbalances in our work. However, we also believe that what we have done is to show *how it can be*.

Too often disabled people, because of their impairments, are viewed as incapable of sex and love, as incapable of independent living, as incapable of parenting and enjoying family life. The testimony of this book is that disabled people can enjoy sexual citizenship, can participate

in these experiences, because so many of our respondents, regardless of their impairments, clearly do. We are aware that the experience of many disabled people is different. But this book argues that because *some* disabled people have positive sexual and emotional lives, then *all* disabled people can potentially enjoy sexual freedom and emotional expression. The obstacles are not biological, they are social, political, and economic. If this book has a conclusion, it is that disabled people are entitled to their sexual rights, and the time is long overdue for society to meet them.