

Sex and Stigma in the LGBTQ+ Community

By Dr Maurice Nagington

It is a fact that LGBTQ+ people have higher rates of depression, anxiety and even suicide. This holds true across the societies and cultures willing to measure the mental health of their populous, and allow LGBT+ people to identify as such on these surveys.

For some LGBTQ+ people the causes of poor mental seem obvious, such as damaging aversion or conversion therapies, or particularly traumatic and violent reactions from loved ones when coming out. Yet in many other cases finding some sort of explanation requires a more complex account for how LGBT+ individuals navigate a society that is structurally prejudiced towards people who aren't heterosexual and cis-gendered. Such prejudices can be miniscule, hardly even morally objectionable. Yet they can suffuse the day to day lives of LGBT+ people and those that they face.

And face it we must. All those tiny little micro-expression of bafflement and, on occasion, disgust on the face of a stranger when they clock us holding hands, kissing or just generally being a bit queer. We know they don't look at straight people like that, so these expressions insidiously mark us out as different or other. Faced with these reactions on a daily basis cannot fail to leave a nagging sense of anxiety and depression.

Some writers such as Matthew Todd and David Fawcett have termed this as "internalised homophobia". They suggest that it is at the root cause of all the "expressions" of a troubled (gay) psyche; particularly activities such as bareback sex, and drug and alcohol use. What these arguments do not allow is that these "expressions" can also be engaged with for pleasure, rather than a mechanism to hide some deep insidious pain. The logic then goes that society needs to fully accept gay people so that they fully fit in. Presumably once this happens these "expressions" will disappear.

But LGBT people aren't merely lost individuals wandering lonely in a wilderness waiting to be rescued by a more compassionate hetero-patriarchal cis-gendered society who have learned to benevolently smile. We've been busy building community whilst we were (and still are) experiencing violence and prejudice. There are sporting groups, book clubs, yoga retreats, pornography, literature, plays, art clubs, saunas, bar and pubs, choirs, research groups, churches, synagogues, mosques and even humanist meetings. And let's not to forget the night clubs. There's a growing and vibrant LGBT culture waiting to greet you, if you're queer there's a place for all of your interests and passions to be shared with others just like you. We've been building a broad and wonderful solidarity based around our sexuality: and, whilst these can sometimes feel like bubbles, where there's enough LGBT people located to make such activities viable; and whilst there are positive signs of "Prides" popping up in Oldham, Stockport, Wigan and other smaller regional towns and cities; and whilst yes we've been building community and solidarity... we've not been building a utopia.

Within the LGBTQ+ community there remain horrible and insidious ways of inflicting hurt on one another: racism, sexism, ageism, transphobia, misogyny, classism, slut-shaming etc. Not to mention the prejudice that HIV positive people still experience. If you don't believe me, or you doubt some of this is true, take a walk down Canal Street. Do you see many older

faces? Do you see many non-white faces? No, I don't either, but I do when I walk just a few blocks away from Canal Street. Then take a look on the dating and hook-up apps, it won't take you long to find profiles that say "no fats" or "no fems" or even "no blacks or asians". Nor would it take you long to find someone who has experienced prejudice for being HIV positive and having the audacity to be honest and open about it. It would appear some LGBTQ+ people are more comfortable expressing their own prejudices and fears to complete strangers on a hook-up app, than being kind.

So, when we talk about "Pride" and we parade the achievements of the LGBT+ community, maybe we should also parade our shortcomings, and not just project them onto those others who we don't feel in community with, so that we can maintain a fantasy that being LGBTQ+ is actually just a synonym for being good. Such a parade would require that we as a community recognise our responsibility for the difficulties we experience and propagate (whether they are of our genesis or not). Finally, this must be done on an individual level where one attempts to walk into the lives of others with a modicum of compassion and love that rejects the repetition of the hurt(s) we may have experienced. When individuals aim to walk together in a parade such as this, we may finally be part of the solution rather than the problem and be justified in our sense of pride.

Dr Maurice Nagington

Dr Maurice Nagington is an academic who specialises in exploring the cultural representations and lived experiences of health and healthcare services. He has particular interests in sexuality, death and dying, HIV, and chemsex.

This article was commissioned by Green Carnation Company and published on the 12th October 2018 in conjunction with their production of Alexi Kaye Campbell's play, 'The Pride', and formed part of the project's extended reach programme.