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"Queering" the Social Emergence of Disability Identity

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'Queering' the social emergence of a disability identity: linking queer theory with disability studies in the South African context

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> *'Resistance to normativity is not purely negative or reactive or destructive; it is also positive and dynamic and creative. It is by resisting the discursive and institutional practices which, in their scattered and diffuse functioning, contribute to the operation of heteronormativity that queer identities can open a social space for the construction of different identities, for the elaboration of various types of relationships, for the development of new cultural forms' – David Halperin (1997: 66).*

Introduction

South Africa is recognised as having some of the most comprehensive legislation and policy that protects the rights of both people with disabilities and those who identify as queer i.e. lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans-gendered and inter-sexed (LGBTIQ). Take for example, South Africa's Constitution (South Africa, 1996), which states that no individual shall face discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, disability or religion. Although fundamentally important, this legislation does not necessarily reflect societal attitudes or the experiences of people with disabilities and those who identify as queer.

As outlined in Table 1, people with disabilities actually share many similar experiences to those who identify as queer. Besides a history of ongoing activism, sexual minorities and people with disabilities share a history of injustice – 'both have been pathologized by medicine; demonized by religion; discriminated against in housing, employment and education; stereotyped in representation; and isolated socially, often within their own families' (Sandahl, 2003: 26). Perhaps the most

compelling similarity is found in the respective disciplines of queer theory and disability studies, which both challenge hegemonic constructs of normalcy. For instance, queer theorists dispute the supremacy of heteronormativity and its othering of homosexual identities (Valocchi, 2003; Steyn and van Zyl, 2009), whilst disability scholars destabilise notions of ableism and compulsory able-bodiedness and its subjugation of disabled identities (Kafer, 2003; Sandahl, 2003; McRuer, 2006; Campbell, 2009, 2013).

Queer Identity	Disability Identity
Defined in relation to homophobia & heteronormativity	Defined in relation to ableism & compulsory able-bodiedness
Controlled by disciplinary measures of medicine, psychoanalysis and cure	Controlled by disciplinary measures of rehabilitation, care and cure
Stereotypes and discrimination	Stereotypes and discrimination
Rise of movement – early 1980s in response to narrow thinking of sexuality	Rise of movement – mid-1970s in response to professional dominance of disability
Gender/Sex binary	Impairment/Disability binary
Resistance to heteronormativity e.g. gay pride – 'We're here, because we're queer!'	Resistance to compulsory able-bodiedness e.g. disability marches – 'Nothing about us without us'

Table 1: Similarities between queer and disability identities (Chappell, 2013)

Although several scholars in the United States of America have attempted to align queer theory with disability studies (see for example, Garland-Thomson, 2002; Sandahl, 2003; Kafer, 2003; Sherry, 2004; McRuer, 2002, 2006), there have been few attempts to combine both disciplines within an African context. This absence comes as no surprise, especially given the fact that youth and adults with disabilities are typically constructed as de-gendered and asexual (Shuttleworth, 2010). Furthermore, notions of

sexuality and sexual identity in relation to disability have often been depicted as taboo in the African context (Sait et al., 2011).

Given this lack of reciprocity, this paper aims to explore the intersections between queer theory and disability studies in the construction of disability identities. The significance of this paper is not just that a number of people with disabilities identify as queer or vice versa, but the fact that queer theory can challenge and extend current debates surrounding disability identities in South Africa. The paper begins by defining the constructs of disability and queer, and then briefly outlines Butler's (1990) theory of performativity in relation to identity construction and the heterosexual/homosexuality binary. I then go on to discuss how discourses of heteronormativity and compulsory able-bodiedness intertwine in the creation of normativity and the subjugation of disability identities. Following this, I outline how through the 'parody of drag' (Butler, 2004: 90), disabled people can queer their identity and open new social spaces in which to challenge normativity. I then conclude with some critical reflections on the queering of a disability identity and the importance of intersectionality.

Defining disability and queer

The construct of disability has been subject to various historical debates ranging from medical discourse to a social and human rights perspective (see Grue, 2011 for further reading). For the purpose of this paper, I view disability as a discursive construct and draw on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006: 5), which defines disability as 'an evolving concept that results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full participation in society on an equal basis with others'.

Similar to disability, the construct of queer has also evolved over time. For example, although originally used as a pejorative term to describe non-heterosexual identities, queer has now become repositioned as a term of pride and socio-political

identity (Sandahl, 2003). Beyond defining non-heterosexual identities, the construct of queer is increasingly being recognised by theorists as a fluid description for other identities that 'are shaped and reshaped across differences and that interrogate and disrupt dominant hierarchical understandings of not only sex, gender, and sexuality but also race and class' (McRuer, 1997: 4). In other words, as depicted by David Halperin – a well known queer theorist, 'queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant' (Halperin, 1997: 62). In this context, besides recognising queer as a fluid identity discourse, this paper also positions queer as a practice, which challenges and disrupts normative constructs of sexual, gender, racial and disability identities.

Performativity and heteronormativity

According to post-structural theorist Judith Butler, 'identity is a contingent construction which assumes multiple forms, even as it presents itself as singular and stable' (Butler, 1990: 45). The notion of identity being a 'contingent construct' forms the basis of queer theory and Butler's work on gender and sexuality in which she proposes that identity is 'performatively constituted' (Butler, 1990: 25). In accordance with Butler, gender and sexuality are not expressions of what one is, rather as something that one does, '[It]...is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance of a natural sort of being' (Butler, 1990: 25).

Extending Foucault's work on power and the idea of self-regulating subjects (see Foucault, 1978 for further reading), Butler contends that repeated performances of gender and sexual identity mainly that of heterosexuality, has positioned itself as a given natural norm. This assumption has given rise to what Warner (1991) described as heteronormativity. Based on the belief that there are only two sexes with predetermined gender roles and identities, heteronormativity has constructed oppositional binaries such as women/men, heterosexual/homosexual, normal/abnormal. Butler (1990) contends that once a person is identified as belonging to a specific category, certain natural

assumptions are made about them. For example, in the context of homosexuality, Corber and Valocchi (2003: 4) denote that the heterosexual/homosexual binary, maintains 'the dominance of heteronormativity by preventing homosexuality from being a form of sexuality that can be taken for granted or go unmarked or seem right in the way heterosexuality can'. In essence, the dominance of heteronormativity has acted as an invisible power that not only categorises identities, but has shaped much of our societal norms, theories and practices.

Besides shaping our sexual identities, the internalisation of heteronormative discourse is also interlinked to discourses of race, patriarchy and globalisation. Take for example, South Africa's turbulent past whereby apartheid laws such as the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 and the Immorality Act of 1957, were instilled to preserve ideals of hegemonic whiteness (Ratele 2009). Also reinforcing the power of heteronormativity are constructs of hegemonic masculinities (Connell and Messerschimdt, 2005) and hegemonic femininities (Pyke and Johnson, 2003), which have instilled global and local privileging of traditional (hetero) masculine and (hetero) feminine qualities that are central to the organisation of patriarchal societies. Although several scholars have challenged constructs of gender hegemony (see for example, Connell and Messerschimdt, 2005; Schippers, 2007), the fact still remains that we live in societies that continually uphold particular ideals about what it is to be a (heterosexual) man or (heterosexual) woman. These ideals are maintained through institutions such as the mass media. For example, Luyt (2011) documents how television advertising in South Africa continues to reflect traditional hierarchical relations in society, where heterosexual men are depicted as being dominant in relation to women. Likewise, Sanga (2007) contends that many South African lifestyle magazines perpetuate normative scripts of how men and women should look and behave, which for the most part, are based on westernised ideals of (hetero) femininity and (hetero) masculinity.

The over-representation of heteronormativity, further establishes the marginalisation and subjugation of those who do not necessarily embody dominant socio-cultural identities and norms. These for example, include issues such as weight and the subjugation of fatness (Gailey, 2012), transgender identities (Jobson et al., 2012), polygamy (Vincent, 2009) and bi-sexuality (Thoreson, 2008). Escalating evidence also points to the fact that the subjugation of non-heteronormative identities increases the risk of hate crimes and violence. For instance, in South Africa, studies conducted by Wells and Polder (2006) and Morrissey (2013) report on the increasing use of 'corrective rape' against black lesbians. In accordance with Morrissey (2013), the use of 'corrective rape' not only symbolises black lesbians supposed betrayal of heteronormative constructs of (hetero) femininity, but culturally, their lesbian identity is also perceived as being 'non-African'.

Although feminist and queer theorists have made links between heteronormativity with gender, patriarchy and race in the construction of normativity, little attention has been given to the connections between heterosexuality and an able-bodied identity. As denoted by McRuer (2006: 1), 'able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, still largely masquerades as a non-identity, as the natural order of things'. The following section therefore critically explores the links between heteronormativity and disability.

Heteronormativity and compulsory able-bodiedness

The concept of heteronormativity, which produces 'queerness', is very much interwoven with what McRuer (2006: 2) defines as 'compulsory able-bodiedness', which produces disability. Adapting the term directly from Adrienne Rich's (as cited in Kafer, 2003: 77) seminal text, 'compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence', McRuer developed the concept of compulsory able-bodiedness to assert the similarities between the embodiment of a queer and disabled existence. For instance, just like heteronormativity, compulsory able-bodiedness creates a norm by which we not only

judge ourselves, but through which we also judge the ability of others. This norm is clearly illustrated in Campbell's (2009) description of ableism, which she defines as:

> 'a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability is then cast as a diminished state of being human. (Campbell, 2009: 5).

In addition to being linked to notions of neoliberalism (McRuer, 2006; 2012), compulsory able-bodiedness privileges able-bodied performances that uphold notions of health, independence, strength and capability. Quintessentially, heteronormativity is therefore, actually 'contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness and vice versa' (McRuer, 2006: 2). For example, the construct of hegemonic masculinity, which (as discussed earlier in this article) not only privileges heterosexuality, but is also bound up with the notions of physical strength, potency and sexual prowess (Jewkes and Morrell, 2010). This, in accordance with Shakespeare (1999) and Cheng (2009), are often perceived as the antithesis of a disabled masculine identity. Given this context, McRuer (2006) argues that through repetition, able-bodiedness sets itself up as the ultimate achievement for disability, the goal to strive for. Nowhere is this more exemplified than the recent media hype and interest surrounding Oscar Pistorius (the Blade Runner), who in effect, not only personifies an ableist promulgation of overcoming and compulsory able-bodiedness (Liddiard, 2014), but also, an exemplary embodiment of hegemonic masculinity.

'I'm doing well, despite my disability'

The discourse of compulsory able-bodiedness may seem somewhat misplaced, especially when living in a democratic country like South Africa, which has a strong focus towards disability rights. However, Campbell (2009) contends that although disability is seen to be tolerated, it is still assumed to be an undesirable and negative identity. This resonates within my own experiences of being a disabled person and some

of the questions I've been asked by non-disabled individuals such as, 'it must be awful not being able to walk', or, 'I'm sure you'll be much happier once they've found a cure for spinal injuries!'. Given these type of questions, McRuer (2006: 9) rightly contends that the 'culture asking such questions assumes in advance that we all agree; able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for'.

Notions of compulsory able-bodiedness are even reflected within the rhetoric of the South African disability movement. For instance, in the milieu of a social model of disability, the South African disability movement has widely adopted a people-first language, thus identifying the person first before their disability i.e. 'people with disabilities', a 'person in a wheelchair'. Although the use of a people-first language demonstrates a socio-historical shift from a bio-medical discourse of disability, in placing disability as secondary, it actually continues to promulgate ableist notions of disability as an undesirable identity. Incongruent to other social movements such as women, gays and lesbians who have embraced their embodiment as part of their identity (i.e. we don't speak of 'persons with a race' or persons with a gender'!), the disability movement in South Africa continues to disengage with social theory surrounding the body due to 'the risk of further pathologisation' (Campbell, 2009: 12). Contrary to this, as will be discussed later in this paper, by bringing the impaired body back in to discourse, disabled people have the potential to disrupt hegemonic discourses of compulsory able-bodiedness and heteronormativity.

Growing up queer/disabled

Unlike other identity categories such as gender and race, which are shared with other members of a family and community, people who identify as queer or disabled may be the only people in that family with that identity (Sherry, 2004). Subsequently, with a lack of positive role models and in light of dominant socio-cultural norms that privilege heteronormativity and compulsory ablebodiedness, people who identify as queer or

disabled often experience profound isolation (Sandhal, 2003; Sherry, 2004; Cheng, 2009).

Placing this within the South African context, although the national Constitution (South Africa, 1996) recognises non-discrimination based on sexual orientation and disability, youth who identify as queer, continue to face rejection and emotional isolation from their parents (Nell and Shapiro, 2011). Likewise, children and youth with disabilities are often hidden away by their caregivers due to fear of community ridicule or isolation (Chappell and Johannsmeier, 2009). Undoubtedly, these experiences have a profound effect on youth who identify as queer or disabled and their perceptions of a queer/disability identity as they grow up. For instance, according to Rosario et al. (2006), as queer adolescents are often raised in communities that are either ignorant of or openly hostile to homosexuality, they often practice behaviour that does not coincide with their homosexual identity. Similarly, in the absence of positive role models and the need to 'fit in' with their peers, some youth with disabilities try to overcompensate for their differences (Johnstone, 2004). Evidence from South Africa suggests that in trying to overcompensate for their differences and fit in with their non-disabled peers, youth with disabilities may practice behaviour that puts them at high risk of sexual exploitation, abuse and HIV infection (Chappell, 2013).

The parody of queer/disability 'drag'

Despite the dominance of heteronormativity and compulsory able-bodiedness, Butler (2004: 111) maintains that it is possible to challenge these norms by producing counter-discourses using the 'explanatory modes that produce us as particular subjects, in order to resist that categorisation'. For instance, although medicalised constructions of normalcy have affected both queer and disabled people, both groups alike have responded to the oppressive historical conditions of sexism, ableism and homophobia. This has been achieved by creating 'oppositional identities and communities that speak

back to the discourses of pathology and normalcy that try to contain them' (Sherry, 2004: 777).

The creation of oppositional identities has been made possible through what Butler (2004: 90) terms as 'acts of transgression', or the 'parody of drag' as a powerful resistance to essentialist definitions of identities. Take for a start the use of the words 'queer', 'moffie[1]' and 'cripple'. Although these words are widely regarded as pejorative labels, both crip theorists and queer theorists are increasingly repositioning these words as positive identity categories (Cosenza, 2010; Ozwin, 2007; McRuer, 2006). In accordance with Clare (1999), these reclaimed words substantiate an ideology of resistance that, rather than seeking assimilation and acceptance by the dominant culture, turns toward radically different modes of existence.

Besides terminology, the performance of drag queens, gay pride marches, the publication of stories by queer individuals (see for example, Plummer, 1995; Clare, 1999), and the legalisation of same-sex marriages, have all provided powerful ways of questioning the idea of one 'true' sexual identity. Likewise, in terms of disability, such events as the annual Miss Confidence South Africa (a beauty pageant for women with physical disabilities – see Van Hoorn, 2008) also celebrate difference and challenge notions of compulsory able-bodiedness.

On reflecting on the parody of drag critically, it is clear that by asserting the body itself as a site of knowledge over and above the systems that seek to name it (i.e. compulsory able-bodiedness and heteronormativity), and in rendering the disabled and queer body visible, and in naming their desires, it firmly locates the body as a site of opposition to normalizing power. In other words, through embracing disabled embodiment, Inckle (2014) suggests that disabled bodies provide possibilities for diverse transformation.

[1] *Moffie* is the South African equivalent to queer.

Creating queer/disabled identities in homonormative spaces

Despite similarities in experiences between queer and disability identities, both run the risk of creating essentialist constructs of what it means to be queer/disabled, and the development of new hegemonies. For example, in the context of queer identities, Duggan (2002: 179) puts forward the notion of homonormativity, which she defines as 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption'. In this context, global queer communities are increasingly not only mimicking heteronormative characteristics, but also privilege those whose identities match dominant 'socio-homo' norms. For example, many mainstream homosexual cultures continue to privilege identities that mirror constructs of (Western centric) hegemonic (hetero) masculinity i.e. young, muscular, athletic, rich, white (Oswin, 2007). In doing so, older, poor, disabled queers and particular queer cultures such as the leather scene, trans-gender etc. are excluded from homonormative spaces.

Placing the notion of homonormativity in the context of disability, I put forward the notion of disablenormativity. For instance, as the disability movement continues to fight towards mainstream inclusion (McRuer, 2012), they also run the risk of excluding those who do not necessarily embody normative constructs of disability culture such as those with hidden disabilities, disabled queers, migrants, and the elderly to name a few. This, in accordance with McRuer (2012) can prevent coalition across identities, which inevitably can undermine organising around issues like poverty, economic empowerment, HIV, and so forth. To some extent, this is made evident in South Africa through the development of the South African Disability Alliance (SADA). Made up of only thirteen national disability organisations, SADA has been criticised for not representing the entire disability sector.

Queering homo/disablenormativity

In queering the discourses of homonormativity and disablenormativity, it is evident that they continue to essentialise identity categories, which undoubtedly is the anti-thesis of queer theory. As identified earlier in this paper (see Page 5), queer theory rejects the notion of identity as a fixed objective criteria, and recognises identity as a fluid entity that takes into account diverse and changing social experiences. In this regard, queer theory acknowledges the intersectionality of identity and that each of us are uniquely positioned within intersectoral discourses. Given this context and the similarities in experiences between disability and queer identities, there is increasing recognition for the development of coalitions between disability and queer studies (McRuer, 2006).

To be continued....

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