

Academic Article

Why there is still a need for Pride celebrations in Ireland?

By Dermot McCarthy



With the recent Irish LGBT+ equality laws passed; I consider the role, if any, of Pride in Modern Ireland. I begin with a brief introduction to Irish LGBT+ History. I explain minority stress and heteronormality. I provide the reader with two recent reports which convey worrying statistics in relation to LGBT + mental health. I explain that members of the Irish Transgender Community and others still feel excluded from Pride. I give examples of the benefits of Modern Pride celebrations in relation to my client, myself, and rural Ireland. I concluded that there is still a need for Pride in Modern Ireland in supporting the mental well-being of the Irish LGBT+ Community, but Pride must ensure all members of the LGBT+ Community are included in the celebrations.

History of Pride in Ireland.

In recent years, Ireland has made considerable progress in respect

of Irish LGBT+ rights. In 2019, the LGBT+ Community around the World celebrated 50 yrs of the Stonewall riots. The Stonewall riots were to many the start of the LGBT+ Rights Movement (Shape, 2019). Similarly, throughout Irish History, there are various accounts of rebellion, this aspect of Irish Culture, that is to rebel when oppressed (Wikipedia contributors, 2019). The Irish LGBT+ community are no exception.

Pride in Ireland also has its roots in protest. On Saturday, 27th June 1974, the first Pride march took place in Dublin. Ten men and ten women, mainly members of Belfast's Gay Liberation Society and Dublin's Sexual Liberation Movement marched in protest, against the laws that criminalised homosexuality at the time (Webb, 2016).

The Irish LGBT+ Rights Movement arose due to the oppression of Irish LGBT+ citizens. Sadly, in 1983 the Movement was formed after the

death of a gay man. That man was Declan Flynn. To be LGBT+ in Ireland in the '80s was a bleak prospect. It was illegal to be gay. Within this hostile environment, gay men would seek each other out in suggested places, one such place was Fairview Park. In that park, Declan Flynn was attacked and murdered by five young men. His attackers were found not guilty of his murder. This enraged the Irish LGBT+ Community. In 1984, 200 people marched in protest at the verdict. It was the first official Pride event in Ireland (Buch, 2016).

It has been over 40 yrs since the 1974 Pride protest march. Within this time fundamental changes occurred concerning LGBT+ Rights within Ireland. In 1993, Homosexuality was decriminalised. In 2015, Ireland became the first nation to pass Gay Marriage by public vote. In the same year, the Gender Recognition Act was passed, allowing individuals to change their gender assigned to them at birth. This was a landmark decision for the Irish Trans Community. (Halpin, 2018). In 2017, Ireland elected its first openly gay Taoiseach Leo Varadkar (Linehan, 2017). Pride festivals now in Ireland have encountered record numbers attending their events. Dublin Pride 2018, for example, had over 60,000 participants, a far cry from the brave 200 individuals who marched in the first official Pride event in Dublin (Callagher, 2018).

Therefore, with such an immense embrace of Pride festivals and social change in attitude to the LGBT+ Community in Ireland, one must ask what is the purpose of Pride festivals in Modern Ireland now? Has

Pride simply become a mere pink washing exercise by corporations? Has the mental health of the LGBT+ Community improved since the unofficial Pride march in 1974? What role does Pride have regarding the mental health of the Irish LGBT+ Community?

Heteronormativity and Minority Stress.

Heteronormativity describes the position where heterosexuality is considered the norm, or default sexual orientation within society. Therefore, additional stress is placed on any individual who does not identify as heterosexual. Such stress referred to in literature as 'Minority Stress' (Meyer, 2003). Minority Stress can be applied to a group such as the Irish LGBT+ community who are likely to be subject to a arrange of conflicts. These conflicts occur due to the dominant views and culture of society, in this case Irish society, that do not reflect their LGBT+ identity (Meyer, 2003).

Furthermore, according to (Moss,1973), interactions with society provide the individual with a sense of what the world is and a sense of well-being. Mental well-being is compromised for the minority group, as the minority group's experience is not on par with societies view (heteronormativity). Therefore, the minority LGBT+ individual may put vast amounts of energy into hiding their identity. They may desire to fit into the traditional roles of male and female in Irish society. They may suppress many aspects of their personality.

In doing so, they may experience severe stress and shame resulting in any number of mental health conditions e.g. depression. Furthermore, Dublin Pride 2018 had over 60,000 attend the event (Callagher,2018), one may argue now with this immense support that it must be easier to be LGBT+ in Ireland. Therefore, it can be argued further that the level of minority

stress for the LGBT+ Irish Community should be greatly reduced and being LGBT+ in Ireland is a lot easier than in the past. Sadly, this appears not to be the case.

Recent LGBT+ studies on the mental well-being of the Irish LGBT+ Community.

LGBT Ireland is an Irish LGBT+ organisation that supports LGBT+ mental health. In 2016, the organisation commissioned a survey on Irish LGBT+ youth mental health. The report revealed several worrying findings. The results were compared to the World National Youth Mental Health Study. Among Irish LGBT+ youth, the report found that young people were two times more likely to self-harm, three times more likely to attempt suicide and four times more likely to suffer severe/extreme stress, anxiety and depression than their heterosexual peers (Higgins et al., 2016). In Nov 2019, BeLonG To, an organisation that supports the mental health of young Irish LGBT+ people published their report entitled the "School Climate Survey". The survey's aim was to determine what it is like to be LGBT+ in Irish classrooms. The report found similar concerns those in the LGBT Ireland Report three years earlier. The report highlighted that 73% of LGBT+ students feel unsafe in secondary schools, 77% of LGBT+ students have experienced verbal harassment, 38% experienced physical harassment, and a further 11% have experienced physical assault. CEO of BeLonG To, Monnie Griffith stated that "Growing up LGBT+ isn't all rainbows post the marriage equality referendum. Our findings indicate the intense discrimination, harassment, isolation, and stigma that LGBT+ students experience in Ireland. Worse still, the research reveals that some staff members turn a blind eye to, and sometimes even contribute, anti LGBT+ remarks." She further states that "48% of LGBT+ students reported that they have heard

homophobic remarks being made by teachers and staff members, with a further 55% reporting that staff have made transphobic comments" (Kenny, 2019)."

Even though record numbers are now attending Pride events. These two recent studies convey that LGBT+ youth in Ireland are still suffering because of their LGBT+ identity and acute minority stress.

The Irish Trans Community

Acute minority stress is equally evident from my engagement with the Irish Trans Community. From my own clinical experience, my Trans clients not only have to deal with societal views that Trans is not normal but also with the Irish medical system, a system that appears inadequate to deal with the healthcare needs of the Trans community. Waiting over three years in the public sector to be diagnosed with gender incongruence, has proved to be detrimental to the mental well-being of my own clients.

It appears also that this community feels excluded from the main Pride celebrations. In 2018, the first Trans Pride was held in Dublin. Freddie Trevaskis-Hoskin who attended the event was quoted as saying "the protest (Trans Pride) offered members of queer communities who feel ostracised by the mainstream movement a chance to air their grievances". Hoskin further echoed the sentiments of several speakers at Saturday's protest in describing the Dublin Pride parade as a "marketing tool where members of the queer community who are white, middle-class and often male are allowed to assimilate into society". He further stated that "We see companies like Google and YouTube marching at the front of the march, which is meant to be a protest march, a march for what we disagree within society on how we're treated" (Pollak, 2018).

Philippa Ryder, an activist for the Trans Community both in Ireland and abroad noted that:

Pride celebrations can be an important part of the year for any member of the LGBTQ+ community but are usually mostly celebrated by the gay, and lesbian community, and to a less visible extent, the bisexual community. Drag queens and kings adorn the many floats that make up the huge parade and to some in the Trans community they can be a distraction, making the Trans person feel as if their identities are devalued, simply a performance in some people's eyes.

Yet also to be able to share the wonderful experience of walking down the street with thousands of others, sharing in our common joy at being true to ourselves, in our identity and in showing who we love is so important too and is sometimes the only time that a Trans person can venture out in public in safety. For the more experienced Trans person who may have transitioned Pride gives an opportunity to help the confidence of other members of the community. Yet for many in the Trans community, the current structure of Pride does not provide enough of a voice and this has resulted in Trans Prides being established over the past few years, here in Ireland and elsewhere. More Trans voices are needed, more loudly and more frequently, to restore the balance between the L, and the G in our community" (P. Ryder, personal communication, 23 March 2019)

Modern pride celebrations and the exclusion of other groups.

Indeed, the Irish Trans Community are not the only community that feels excluded from the main Pride celebrations for in 2019, an 'Alternative Pride' event was held in Dublin as a protest against the growing commercialism of Pride as well as the participation of uniformed Garda. The organisers, Queer Action Ireland levelled criticism of big businesses involvement and accused them of exploiting the popularity of

Issues like bullying of LGBT+ youth could be addressed by Pride, and ensuring corporates are not just ticking a "pink box"

the event.

We feel that it (commercialism of Pride) is taking the attention away from the spirit of Pride and the issues that need attention. It's amazing that society has changed, but what we want to do is celebrate the people who have brought that change about (Glesson, 2019).

In the Therapy Room.

In a counterargument to the earlier statements in relation to modern Pride celebrations, I will now provide examples of Pride in supporting the mental health of today's LGBT+ community. Firstly, I will give an example of a recent client, a Trans woman. In 2018, she attended her first Pride in Dublin. She recalled the joy of being a recent participant in Dublin Pride.

Recalling past parades, viewed on tv she observed the colourful display and many examples of people being proud of who they were. She remembers feeling alone and ashamed of who she is. She remembers looking at the colourful floats passing her by. She felt she would never be a part of it. She longed to be part of the celebrations. Being part of Pride was her goal.

In 2018, as she waved her Trans flag with her friends on a Pride float, she recalled with great emotion how immensely proud of how far she had come. Being part of Dublin Pride 2018, gave her great strength. She came out to all her friends and family within the year. In 2021, she is planning to be part of the organising committee of the first Pride in her native county Kilkenny. It seems that being part of a Pride event and reaching her goal a sense of

belonging, greater inner strength in accepting herself and in turn, reduced the minority stress of being Trans.

My Personal Experience.

In 2019, I too had an equally healing process associated with Pride. In my youth, when desperately trying to fit into my local GAA club. The GAA was one of the pillars of the community in which I lived, I suffered immense stress trying to fit in. I knew I was different from the other boys. I felt like an outsider. In 2019, during Pride month when returning from visiting parents, I passed at that same GAA club. Flying high over the GAA club were the club colours, the Dublin colours, and the Rainbow Flag. Seeing that flag, I finally felt I belonged with that GAA club. Seeing the rainbow flag, like my client, I gained greater inner strength. That flag in that context symbolised that being LGBT+ was now accepted within GAA culture. The personal minority stress I felt as a young boy due to being different, was now gone.

Pride in rural Ireland.

Kathy Burke, co-founder of Mayo Pride notes the benefits of Pride in rural Ireland. She explains:

I see Pride as an opportunity to send a message to those in the community that there are supports there, especially those noticeably young and old who are living in small communities and are fearful of coming out. Secondly, it is an opportunity for everyone to be themselves for the day or weekend to meet up with friends to dress how they want, which is especially important for the Trans community and to know they are safe. Finally, it is sending a message to the wider community that there are significant problems the LGBT+ community regularly face because of prejudice, victimisation, and a lack of acceptance and understanding. (K. Burke, personal communication, 13th March 2019)

Kathy is immensely proud of Mayo Pride; however, she is mindful of

the growing corporate involvement in Pride. She states, “We do need to be careful though not to lose the message in commercialisation.” (K. Burke, personal communication, 13th March 2019)

Conclusion and Recommendations.

In conclusion, there is certainly a need for Pride to continue in Ireland. Being LGBT+ in modern Ireland is still not easy. Many of our LGBT+ Youth suffer because of their identity. Many feel unsafe in schools and feel isolated from their peers. Both the LGBT Ireland and BeLonG To report convey that there is still high levels of anxiety and depression experienced within the Irish LGBT+ Community. Waiting lists to access Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) have decreased from 3.5 yrs in 2017 to 17 months in 2020, however, healthcare provided for the Trans Community still needs to be improved (Halpin, 2020).

Furthermore, the role of Pride needs to be reviewed. In 1974, the first Irish Pride march was inaugurated in protest to the laws that criminalised homosexuality. In 1984, the first official Pride march was inaugurated from the murder of Declan Flynn. Due to these milestones, the Irish LGBT+ Community achieved greater equality since, yet there is still much work to be done e.g. eliminating bullying of LGBT+ youth in Schools. Many still suffer from minority stress due to their LGBT+ identity. Therefore, the spirit of Pride should not be lost. Pride could take more of an active role in the support of LGBT+ mental health.

Pride may act as a bridge between organisations that work supporting LGBT+ mental health and corporate organisations. Issues like bullying of LGBT+ youth could be addressed by Pride, and ensuring corporates are not just ticking a “pink box” but implementing substantial procedures and policies supporting their workforce and the wider LGBT+ Community.

With such actions, Pride can

reduce the minority stress of Irish LGBT+ citizens, and in doing so contribute to the mental health and well-being of the LGBT+ community. In 1974, Pride brought a small LGBT+ group together to fight for their rights.

Pride is a celebration of being diverse. Pride gave those who feel that they were on the outside a chance to celebrate who they are.

Both myself and my client felt we were on the outside of Irish society, but Pride gave us a chance to heal our inherited minority stress. Pride in Ireland, with improvements in direction, can give future LGBT+ generations this chance, to be themselves among the rainbow flags, knowing that Pride is not just a corporate “Pink Washing” exercise but an event whose core values are to support their LGBT+ well-being and mental health. ☺

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