



Culture & Person-Centered Care Practices – “The Importance of Chosen Family Supports in Queer, Trans, and Disabled Communities”

SPEAKER(S)

Lydia X.Z. Brown

Warning: Explicit Language

My name is Lydia X.Z. Brown. Pronouns are they/them. I'm a youngish East Asian person with short black and teal hair and glasses. I'm wearing a dark gray shirt and I am in front of a fake background of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.

Today, I want to talk about the concept of chosen family and how chosen family shows up in queer, trans, and disabled communities. Many times, when we think about who someone's supporters are, people who are professionals in the service industry and profession, think about a person's neighbors. They might think about people from someone's religious community, but first and foremost, they tend to think of a person's family. In particular, one of their parents, their siblings, and sometimes a partner or a spouse, if the person they're thinking of has a partner or a spouse.

But for many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, it's often assumed that we don't. That we're not capable of having a partner and that the people who are in our lives as parents or siblings are always our supporters and are always going to be part of our lives.

For many of us, however, our first abusers were our family members, parents, siblings, extended family. Our first abusers were our teachers. Our first abusers were the people in the so-called “helping” professions.

For many of us, we grow up as the only known disabled person in the family, even though many of us have also come from multi-generational disabled neurodivergent families. Being the only one diagnosed and labeled with a disability, puts us in a position of isolation that is very similar to the ways in which many queer and trans children grow up.

We're even in families that are accepting of us. We might be the only one, or there might be a cousin or there might be an aunt or an uncle, or rumors about a great grandparent who might have also been some kind of queer. But it's very common, that we don't grow up with families in our immediate vicinity who share our identities and experiences. And for those who do and are open and proud about it, that's a rarity.

For the majority of us who can grow up being the only one, or the only identified one as disabled, the only identified one as queer, the family that may be the most supportive for us - even if our family of origin is supportive and loving and not abusive (which is not a given) - the



National Center on Advancing Person-Centered Practices and Systems

family that is most supportive and most understanding, the people who are most actively involved in our day-to-day lives, may be our peers in the community.

That's been true literally for decades and decades, and decades, much of it in history that was never written down and history that isn't documented anywhere. You're not going to find academics who are cataloging our histories and our community's experiences, but we know that trans and queer and disabled people, especially those of us that straddle those lines of identity and experience, especially those of us who are also people of color or who are immigrants of some form or another, that we've always had to build our own families and support networks.

And so, if we're asked, "Who are the people who are supporting you in your life?" The names that we give might not be the names of professionals or the names of our family of origin or immediate bio family members. They might instead be the names of other disabled people who helped us first learn what it meant to be disabled, how to accommodate ourselves, how to navigate bullshit and fuckery from doctor's offices and hospitals that don't believe us and don't listen to us; and assume that anything we say is inherently unreliable.

The people whose names we give might be the first queer or trans people that helped us figure out that we weren't straight, that we weren't cisgender, the ones who made it safe for us to explore; and to question and to not know and to try on different words until we found out either what fit or that maybe they're not any words that fit, but we know at least what we're not.

If you ask us who our supporters are, they might not be people who've achieved the tangible markers of "independent" and "non-disabled" adulthood; the people who have full-time salaried jobs, college degrees, married, committed, exclusive partners and children. They might be, but they might also be people who are receiving benefits, who are chronically unemployed, who have not been able to complete their education because they were denied support, because they were discriminated against or because they were pushed out.

They might be people who by all means, according to ableist ideas of what's normal and successful, haven't been successful adults. But they've been mentors and supporters in our lives. And so, the message that I want to offer to you in thinking about who someone's supporters might be and how to effectively work with someone's support team, is to expand your definition of who someone's supports might be coming from and what support might look like.

People like to dismiss disabled people as incompetent and as not really knowing our own experiences or knowing what's for our own good. But for many of us, we experienced what Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha has talked about as "disability doulas" where other disabled people were the ones that first mentored us and supported us into becoming disabled adults.