The Negotiation of Intimacy

Negotiating the constituent elements of intimate partnerships is often very important for trans people and their partners, although the necessity of or desire for alterations to the partnership depend upon a number of factors, as will become clear throughout this chapter with respect to the experiences of those I interviewed. As with gender and sexuality formulations relationality is central to understandings of intimacy, and governance and the expectations set up through this governance impact on the extent to which relationships may be negotiated or reconfigured.

The recognition of difference

An important question to consider when contemplating the ethics of intimacy is whether greater recognition would lead to a more ethical approach to intimacy, or whether it would just further normalise patterns currently challenging the status quo, in the way that gay marriage or civil partnerships can be seen as conformity and normalisation of the potentially transformatory (Mattilda, 2006; Mulholland, 2008; Richardson, 2005). Whilst it may be argued that some recognition, and the rights that accrue from this, is better than nothing, Richard Juang has argued in relation to trans rights that, ‘While short-term, tactical compromises in the struggle for our rights are inevitable [...] a society in which we finally settle for anything short of the full array of rights and privileges enjoyed by cisgendered citizens will remain an unjust society. Such an ethical horizon is not a utopian fantasy, but is inherent in the very idea of justice.’ (2006: 706–7) Therefore, whilst challenges to universalised ideals of the self are extremely important, there is also a widespread belief in the necessity of working towards the elimination of inequalities and discrimination. As such it is argued that a
delicate balance must be struck between attempting to transform a society that works to marginalise and places limits on identificatory possibilities, and the arguably more feasible project of gaining recognition that may – although of course it may not – lead to reduced discrimination and less phobic attitudes (Brown, 2006; Markell, 2003).

Academics such as Margrit Shildrick (2009) assert that relationality needs to be considered beyond the dualism of sameness/difference. Shildrick’s assertion that ‘the inherent instabilities of the body always threaten to disrupt the possibility of any fixed relation between self and other’ (2009: 20), highlights the difficulty of discerning relational possibilities in advance. Shildrick is considering relationality with respect to disability, but her discussion of ‘instabilities of the body’ also aligns with trans discourses, where embodiment often alters, thereby changing relations and adding inherent volatility to any relationship involving a trans person or trans people. As previously discussed, for some this is to be celebrated, whilst others find they cannot live with such uncertainty.

Wendy Brown (2006) has explored the discourse of toleration and how the current push towards tolerance, and the related giving up of more liberal approaches, is linked to a movement to separate those who are different from one another. This partitioning works to break down the possibilities for encounters with difference, and therefore positive reactions to Otherness are foreclosed before they have a chance to occur. Many of those I interviewed found that their relations with one another led to inevitable encounters with otherness, and the reactions and rethinkings which occurred as a result are my focus here.

Exceeding partnership limits

For some, the revelation of a partner’s trans identity exceeds the parameters of how they can imagine their relationship, and this realisation leads to a variety of responses. Here, I briefly look at a number of partnerships where the trans-identified partner transitioned after many years of marriage. These types of relationships tended to either end or to continue in a different form, especially with respect to sexual practices and sexuality categorisations. Four couples I interviewed were still married and living together but no longer had a sexual relationship, and some did not see each other as intimate partners any longer, despite still being extremely close and having emotional ties to one another. Many had difficulty articulating the parameters of their relationships, with available categorisations not fully encapsulating the complexities of their living situation.