Towards an Ethics of Intimacy

In this concluding chapter I offer an overview of the ethics of intimacy proposed herein, and its relevance to contemporary society. I also detail the ways in which current academic theorising around intimacy could be further expanded to more fully incorporate the experiences of those who trouble widely recognised frameworks of intelligibility. Further, I explore the usefulness of a utopian sociology with respect to the rethinking of the self.

Throughout this book I have considered the regulations and resistances performed with respect to trans people’s intimate partnerships, with a view to proposing an ethics of intimacy. According to Foucault, ‘[p]eople have to build their own ethics, taking as a point of departure the historical analysis, sociological analysis, and so on that one can provide for them’ (1994 [1982]c: 132). My aim has been to offer a sociological account of how trans people and their partners negotiate their intimate partnerships, as a means of articulating some potential new avenues for rethinking intimate practices. The responses of social institutions and individuals to these largely neglected potentialities are also in need of exploration and critique. It is hoped that this type of investigation may add another dimension to the possibilities people consider when building their own ethics.

Why an ethics of intimacy?

The aim of the ethics of intimacy I am proposing is the extension of freedom with respect to intimate lives through the reconsideration of regulatory frameworks of governmentality, and the expansion of thought to include a diverse range of intimate options. In arguing for such a reconfiguration I do not presume this to be a straightforward exercise which may easily be undertaken by individuals. Rather, the recognition
of and openness to difference entailed within this process can be extremely difficult to achieve, but this does not mean that no attempt should be made. Working on the self and on the self’s relations to others outside of existing rules and norms is hard work, in a way that more conventional ethics based on morals is not. This is because of the movement outside of existing discourses upon which identities rest that is involved in Foucauldian ethics, and specifically, for my purposes, in engaging in an ethics of intimacy.

Ethics, or the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, determines how the individual is supposed to constitute themselves as a moral subject of their own actions. However, I am not setting up definitive ideals in terms of how people should conduct themselves, but rather arguing that reconsideration of how we become subjects and relate to ourselves – and, by extension, to others – can work to free us, at least to some extent, from the chains of social, legal, medical and religious moralities and injunctions. This type of reconsideration entails both individual freedom and respect for the freedom of others, and is thereby relational as well as individualised, adding to the argument for a more all-encompassing theorisation of the self. One example of such a theorisation within sociology is Carol Smart’s connectedness thesis (2007). Focusing on the complex connections between people, rather than simplifying such connections through attaching them to an understanding as either individualised or relational, facilitates a less restrictive approach to relationships and intimate lives and practices. The narratives of trans people and their partners – positioned at the complex interstices of gender, sexuality and intimacy – work to unravel the ethics both of the self and of the relation of self to other.

Currently in neoliberal societies the focus is on finding or deciphering a true self, rather than producing something new and altering the self (Rose, 1999 [1989]). The production of something new or unanticipated may involve others in terms of finding out about different ways of being in the world, as well as remaining open to the difference of the other, rather than focusing on sameness in a bid to aid relationality (Merlin, 2003). As our selves are made up of many different aspects, and each of these may or may not be the same for another person, we cannot limit ourselves to thinking in terms of either sameness or difference. As we are all both the same as and different from one another in multiple ways, how we engage with one another needs to be a more studied and reflective encounter, rather than reactions to otherness being based upon initial impressions. This aspect of the ethics of intimacy potentially allows space for more accepting and less phobic relations.