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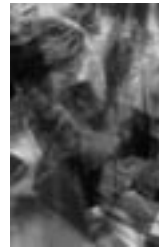
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Intimate Transitions: Transgender Practices of Partnering and Parenting

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ABSTRACT

This article begins by examining sociological studies of intimacy and suggests that, despite a rise of interest in non-normative practices of sociality, transgender lives and experiences are absent from analyses of changing social relationships. Drawing on research data in the form of three case studies, I explore the experiences of intimacy within the context of gender transition: first to consider the impact of gender transition upon partnering relationships, and second to reflect upon how gender transition is negotiated within parenting relationships. I conclude by suggesting that the incorporation of transgender experiences into analyses of contemporary practices of intimacy enables a richer understanding of wider social changes in patterns of sociality.

KEY WORDS

gender transition / intimacy / parenting / partnering / transgender

Introduction

The term ‘transgender’ may refer to individuals who have undergone hormone treatment or surgery to reconstruct their bodies, or to those who transgress gender categories in ways which are less permanent. The term thus includes people who are at different stages of gender transformation: physically, emotionally and temporally.

Although sociological interest in transgender has increased over recent years, the dominant framework of discussion remains focused upon the construction of transgender as a theoretical category. Thus the broader social context of gender transitioning remains under explored. Conversely, whilst there

has been an expansion of research into shifting familial and partnering structures within sociology and social policy, experiences of intimacy are largely analysed in relation to congruent expressions of gender identity. This article aims to overcome this lacuna by exploring the experiences of intimacy within the context of gender transition. In doing so the article has two aims. First, I hope to bring a sociological analytic to transgender theory and, second, to encourage a non-normative gender inquiry within sociological studies of intimacy.

In order to position my research within a sociology of intimacy, the article begins by addressing recent studies which suggest that the realm of intimacy is transforming within contemporary society. The article proceeds to draw on empirical research on transgender practices of identity, intimacy and care. Research data in the form of three case studies is used to enable a close reading of individual transformations in intimate relationships. I explore how these research participants negotiate their relationships through transition with partners and children. Shifting patterns of intimacy are first explored in relation to the reconfiguration of existing partnerships and within the context of the formation of new intimate relationships. Experiences of intimacy are then examined through an analysis of how transition impacts upon parenting relationships. In utilizing the theme of intimacy to contextualize transgender experiences, the article aims to contribute further to analyses of non-normative patterns of sociality.

Analysing Intimate Practices

It has been widely suggested that intimacy has become a site of social transformation within modern society. In the work of Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), intimacy is seen to acquire new meanings and an increased importance in contemporary society. For Giddens, an 'ideal of intimacy' (1992) is personified by the desire for a 'pure' relationship, which represents greater levels of emotional and sexual democracy, with the stress on choice and trust. An important feature of the pure relationship arises from 'plastic sexuality' (Giddens, 1992), where sexuality attains distinct signification as it becomes liberated from reproduction. Although Giddens sees such shifts as taking place within heterosexual relationships, he suggests that lesbians and gay men have long been practitioners of the pure relationship in which notions of equality and autonomy are held central. While Jamieson (1999) warns against over-stating the extent of the pure relationship in stressing how structural inequalities continue to hamper its existence, she too claims that same-sex relationships offer its greatest potential. Likewise, Stacey positions lesbian and gay families as the 'pioneer outpost of the postmodern family condition, confronting most directly its features of improvisation, ambiguity, diversity, contradiction, self-reflection and flux' (Stacey, 1996: 142).

The most comprehensive UK sociological study to speak about non-normative intimate relationships is provided by Weeks et al. (2001). Like

Dunne (1999), the authors argue that developments in non-heterosexual patterns of intimacy are linked to wider changes in society, and that exploring the social organization of 'families of choice' enables a greater understanding of changes within the family and intimate relationships in general. Weeks et al. (2001) find a diversity of 'life experiments' underway, which support Dunne's (1999) assertion that same-sex intimate and partnering relationships hold greater possibilities of equality in the organization of domestic life, employment and child care.

Central to the work on non-heterosexual patterns of partnering and parenting is the emphasis placed on emotional agency. Writing about gay and lesbian kinship networks, Sandell (1994) points to the queering of emotional boundaries within extended kinship patterns. She suggests that these affective relationships reflect fluidity in the demarcation of friends and lovers. This point has also been made by Weeks et al. (2001), Roseneil (2000) and Roseneil and Budgeon (2004). Additionally, the body of work on non-heterosexual relationships supports the assertion that individualization and detraditionalization within modern society have led to greater levels of reflexivity (Castells, 1997; Giddens, 1991; Weeks et al., 2001). Whilst the degree of individual and collective agency is undeniably uneven and subject to structural constraints (Jamieson, 1999), there is considerable evidence of heightened degrees of agency in the creation of equitable and caring social networks within studies of non-heterosexual patterns of partnering and parenting. Moreover, unless such accounts are simply reduced to narratives of 'difference', the creative shifts in same-sex patterns of partnering, parenting and friendship can shed light upon the changing role of intimacy within wider society. Weston's premise that gay kinship ideologies have 'transformed, rather than copied, existing kinship networks' (Weston cited in Sandell, 1994: 9) is relevant here, as is Roseneil's (2000) assertion that the heterosexual/homosexual binary is increasingly fragile within contemporary society. Likewise, Weeks et al. point to an 'increasing flexibility' and 'moral fluency' in intimate life, which stretches across the heterosexual-homosexual divide' (Weeks et al., 2001: 20). As Sandell (1994) argues, these developments hold political possibilities for alliances between a diversity of non-traditional family groupings.

However, while studies of same-sex intimacies pose a challenge to sociologies of the family, which have theorized intimacy through an all-exclusive focus upon the nuclear, heterosexual, monogamous, reproductive family, as Roseneil and Budgeon argue, non-normative patterns of intimacy tend to be relegated to 'subfields of the sociologies of family and gender' (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004: 136). Moreover, the partnering and parenting practices of trans people are not only neglected within sociologies of the family, but also go unrecognized within gender research. As such, transgender lives and experiences remain absent from these analytical frameworks, which rest on an uninformative and naturalized binary gender model that recognizes only male or female gender categories. Thus sociologies of the family, studies of same-sex intimacy and analyses of gender relations have yet to take account of the specificities of transgender.

Furthermore, the body of literature that has recently emerged from the developing area of transgender studies in the UK largely examines transgender in relation to theoretical (de)constructions of gender identity. While the impact of gender transition on relationships with partners, lovers and children will differ within individual circumstance, the process of transition will always take place to some extent within a social framework. Sandell's (1994) premise of adopting a queer analytic, which moves beyond traditional identity politics to forge connections with wider communities who are creating distinct kinship networks, is important for the incorporation of transgender experiences into analyses of intimacy. It is from this juncture that the article moves on to explore changing experiences of intimacy through transgender practices of partnering and parenting.

Research Notes

The research on which this article draws is linked to the ESRC project 'CAVA' ('Care, Values and the Future of Welfare') at the University of Leeds, which is exploring changes in the meanings and practices of care and intimacy, the ethical practices associated with these, and the implications of these for future social policies. Data was generated through in-depth interviews with 30 transgender men and women. Participants were purposively selected in relation to the variables of gender, age, sexuality, 'race' and ethnicity,¹ occupation, geographical location, relationship and parenting status, and levels of involvement in transgender community organizations. Thirteen participants were trans men and 17 were trans women; the age range of the sample was from 26 years to 75 years old; a little under half of the sample lived in rural towns or villages, while just over half lived in urban localities; 15 members of the sample group identified as heterosexual, while 15 members identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or queer; 8 participants were single, while the remainder were in relationships; 7 members of the sample group were parents. All of the participants resided in the UK.

The Case Studies

The article now explores the partnering and parenting experiences of three research participants in the form of case studies. Following Platt (1998), Roseneil and Budgeon (2004) suggest that case studies are useful because 'if these practices are possible in these cases, they must exist in other cases, and (that) they must be taken into account in the formulation of general propositions about intimate life' (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004: 153). Although each of these case studies represents individual biographies, they are useful for the purpose of this article as they portray broader research findings of how gender transition impacts upon experiences and practices of partnering and parenting.

Thus while this article is based upon three cases that have been chosen for particular reflection, the analysis is based upon wider knowledge and narratives.

Bernadette is in her seventies and describes herself as a transsexual woman. She is of Celtic descent and lives in a small rural village. She identifies as heterosexual and lives with the woman she has been married to for 40 years. She had a stepson who died and has an adult stepdaughter. She is a retired physicist and government communications advisor, and remains Chairperson of her local council. Bernadette transitioned 10 years ago.

Dan is in his thirties and considers his gender identity as FtM (female-to-male). Dan is white British and lives in a rural town. He identifies as heterosexual and lives with his female partner of five years. He has a teenage son. He is a civil engineer. Dan transitioned six years ago.

Cheryl is in her forties and considers her gender as MtF (male-to-female). She is white British and lives in a city. She identifies as bisexual and is living temporarily with her female partner of five months. She has two young children who live with her ex-wife. She is a craft technician. At the time of interview Cheryl was waiting for her first appointment at a gender clinic, and was hoping that this would lead to hormone therapy and to her being placed on the NHS waiting list for surgical reconstruction.

The similarities within the case studies are that Bernadette, Dan and Cheryl all live with their partners and all are parents. While Dan is the primary carer of his child, Bernadette and Cheryl no longer live with their children on a full-time basis. Other key differences between the case studies relate to age and transitional time span.

Practices of Partnering

Reconfigured Partnerships

A recurring theme in the narratives of research participants who transition later in life is long-standing professional and relationship commitments. Bernadette, for example, had a high-profile career and a marriage of 30 years prior to transition. Bernadette says:

I had a wife and children to support and I became chairman of various investigative boards and had a busy time for eleven years [...] I suppose it was a matter of subjugating my feelings to professional success and it worked. You couldn't walk around with the Prime Minister and suddenly one day change gender, it isn't on. And I accepted that I was playing a fairly crucial role in Government service at that time and it would have been irresponsible to vast numbers of people and organizations if I'd have said 'Oh to hell with you, I'm going to go off and do what I've always wanted to do'. So that necessity made me plan things and wait until I had got to a point where I thought I could wind that service down.

In this narrative, professional and relationship commitments are understood as coping mechanisms for dealing with complex feelings around gender identity,

and are presented as an explanation for late transition. Bernadette's transition can thus be seen to be reflexively negotiated and performed within the context of work and family life.

When Bernadette was in her thirties her best friend of many years died. A few years after the death of her friend, Bernadette married his wife. Although it would be 30 years before she took the decision to transition, Bernadette was open with her partner about her feelings around gender identity. As Bernadette articulates in the following quotation, her partner was to become a central source of emotional support in the years before her transition:

I had a very helpful wife who supported me. She knew there was something very strange about me but found it something she could cope with. I had known her for twenty years before we got married. I got to know her as my best friend's wife in the early 1940s. So we got to know all about each other. She has supported me in every aspect and she supports me still.

Bernadette and her wife moved to the village where they currently live four years before Bernadette's transition. Bernadette became well known in the village. She was an active member of the village church and was elected Chairperson of the local council. As the population of the village fluctuated over the last decade, Bernadette believes that her transition has become less of a public issue and that she and her partner are no longer perceived as a previously heterosexual couple. Rather Bernadette believes that; 'everybody thinks of us as sisters. A lot of people think we are sisters.' Thus, subjective understandings of the relationship are located as shifting beyond a sexual framework, to be repositioned within the context of kinship bonds. Bernadette was unconcerned that some people in her community may view the relationship as a lesbian one and focused upon the shifting meanings of intimacy throughout the relationship's life span, as shown in this section of the interview:

Sally: Do you think some people see your relationship as a lesbian relationship?

B. Oh, some people might, but that is their concept of it. I have a relationship with my wife which is very intimate and loving and has been for the past umpteen years – forty years – and it isn't any different now than it has ever been and it's very good.

Bernadette suggests that the continued emotional bond between herself and her partner has been possible due to the lack of emphasis placed on sex within the relationship prior to transition. Bernadette says:

I suppose, in the case of physical aspects of sexuality, I always seemed myself to be more of an observer, than a participant and in that respect that's the problem I had throughout all my married life, but that was ok with her.

In de-centring sex within her relationship, Bernadette challenges the notion that sex is central to partnering and emphasizes the role of emotional care. A further theme within Bernadette's narrative is the significant positioning of age within shifting experiences of sexual intimacy. Bernadette says:

After one is in one's mid-fifties one can deal with their sexuality in a different way. I couldn't contemplate how we would have reacted had we been twenty years younger. So where my wife was concerned, no problem of physical relationship arose simply because I think we'd always had it in the right sort of context from when we got married in our early forties to the time of my transition in my late fifties.

This relationship cannot be smoothly characterized as either a sexual relationship or as a friendship. Rather, the meanings of intimacy transgress either framework to illustrate how intimate practices may be revitalized across time and situation. There are connections here with Roseneil and Budgeon's (2004) recent work on friendship and non-conventional partnerships, which suggests that contemporary practices of intimacy represent a blurring of the demarcation between lovers and friends. However, the narrative may also be seen to be characteristic of a common-sense perception of long-term partnerships and, particularly, heterosexual partnerships, whereby emotional closeness is seen as more significant than sexual desire.

Although Bernadette does not believe that her transition has altered the level of emotional intimacy with her partner, she suggests that a key change within their relationship has been a greater level of domestic equality. Bernadette says:

Now we have a largish house and grounds here. She's five years older than me but we can split all this up between us, so we have a good working relationship, two old women running a nice house [...] We ended up getting married after we'd been together for a couple of years and we're still together now [...] Although it's not a traditional marriage relationship we're glad we did it and we are married. I think we've been through everything together now. It's been hard at times. She's had to put up with me not being as interested in sex as I was previously, I was quite highly sexed before. I felt guilty because I wanted to go to sleep at night rather than do anything else. My feelings changed as my body changed. She's had to be strong and we've had to be strong together. I think the trust has grown.

Bernadette's discussion of increased levels of domestic equality post-transition resonates with findings from previously discussed studies of same-sex relationships (Dunne, 1999; Weeks et al., 2001). Research findings thus suggest that gendered, as well as sexual, non-normative practices may enable a space beyond conventional assumptions of gender roles in which to negotiate equal relationships. Within the context of this long-standing partnership, the meanings and lived experiences of intimacy can be seen to be fluid and adaptable to transformations of gender identity. Moreover, practices of emotional care and the values of honesty and trust are emphasized above sexual desire. However, there are apparent tensions in Bernadette's narrative concerning the role of sex in her marriage. In the previous quotations, Bernadette can be seen to shift between competing accounts of her marriage: while she initially positions sex as unimportant in her marriage, she proceeds to describe her pre-transition identity as 'highly sexed'. Such tensions show the value of discourse analysis, which views

interview data as socially constructed and momentarily situated, rather than as a fixed 'truth' (Plummer, 1995). The complexities of shifting experiences of intimacy within the changing context of gender transition are also apparent in narratives of relationship separation.

Relationship Separation

Findings show that the process of gender transition might initiate irreconcilable shifts in partnering roles, leading to relationship break-up. However, intimacy remains located as a fluid rather than a fixed process, which is frequently able to transgress the boundaries of sexual relationships and friendship.

Cheryl cross-dressed for many years, though had decided to begin the process of gender transition only six months before our interview. She has been married twice, though both relationships ended. Cheryl was open with her partners about her feelings around gender identity, saying that she 'told them both probably within a month so that when we got married they were fully aware that I would cross-dress'. Cheryl said that her first marriage ended because she and her wife 'drifted apart', although she also said that 'she (her first wife) couldn't really handle the situation very well'. By the time she met her second wife, she had made friends with other trans people and often spent weekends away at transgender social events where, initially, her wife would accompany her. Cheryl says:

My second wife and I got on very well. She could handle it all and she came away with me for a couple of our weekends and she said they were some of the best weekends she's had. Everybody was so friendly. We used to get really close when I was dressed.

Yet Cheryl also discusses how her partner's initial acceptance of her gender transformation was unrealizable, and her marriage broke up when her wife found that she could no longer manage the shift in gender roles. Cheryl says:

And then basically last November things were getting more and more intense [...] And my wife said I should see a doctor and she said 'If you are TS (transsexual) I can't live with you any more because I married a man and you don't fulfil that role anymore.' It was hard for both of us.

Cheryl has been able to build a friendship with her ex-partner, who now has a new partner. She says:

Her (Cheryl's wife) friend from across the road has moved in with her now [...] They're together now and I couldn't wish for a better person to be around my kids. I'm really pleased for her. My wife has said that she'll support me as much as she can and we are good friends.

Within this narrative, a range of affective possibilities are illustrated and the boundaries between sexual relationships and friendship are seen to oscillate. This resonates with Roseneil's (2000), Weeks et al.'s (2001) and Roseneil and Budgeon's (2004) discussions of a continuum of sexual desire and friendship

that fluctuates across time and circumstance. Issues around sexual desire and practice, however, are often of key importance when it comes to forming new relationships after transition.

Forming New Relationships

Findings show that the formation of new relationships after transition is a significant theme within narratives of intimacy. After several years of being single, Dan felt that he wanted to begin a relationship, though he was fearful of being rejected by a prospective partner once he told them about his transition. Dan says:

I didn't have a relationship for many years for several reasons, one of which was because the situation didn't present itself. Secondly I didn't know what sort of relationship I wanted and thirdly I was so shy of my body. I'd had chest surgery quite early on but it's just a real fear about if someone will accept your body.

Dan met his current partner through an internet dating site and they communicated for a few weeks by e-mail and phone before meeting. It was important for Dan to discuss his transition with this woman once he knew that he wanted the relationship to progress:

I'd decided before we met that if I really liked her and we clicked I was going to tell her that night. And so I told her and I just rabbitied and rabbitied and she was quiet for about five minutes, didn't say a word, and I just thought 'oh no, I've blown it, I've blown it' and then she just said 'well it doesn't make any difference'.

Despite these reassurances, Dan worried that his new partner's feelings towards him would change once the relationship became sexual. Dan says:

You know, she was saying everything was fine, but how was it going to be when things started getting physical? And eventually we did, well it wasn't that long anyway (laugh) and it was just [pause]. I was also really worried about, you know, would I know what to do? So I was really worried and I was worried that she wouldn't like my body, that she wouldn't like it because I didn't have a willy. But I did know what to do (laugh) and for her [pause]. She wanted [pause]. She did want to be with a man but what she didn't like was, you know, the penis side of sex. So she was happy, I was happy.

Bodily acceptance as a man is positioned as central within Dan's experience of forming a new relationship following transition. The interplay between (trans)gender and sexuality is complex, and Dan's narrative reflects the significance of gendered embodiment within trans subjectivities (Hines, 2005). Similarly, the earlier tension around the changing priority of sex in Bernadette's narrative can be understood in relation to shifting experiences of gendered embodiment, as Bernadette's sexual identity changed from a heterosexual man to a heterosexual woman. While the issues here indicate that gender 'matters', suggesting that desire may be 'inherently gendered' (Jackson, 1999: 4), trans gendered identifications clearly question the constitutional qualities of gender

itself. MacCowan's argument that 'Gender *per se* is not the problem [...] (1992: 318), but the 'correlation between biological sex, gender identity, gender or sex roles, sexual object choice, sexual identity ... It is this system and the denial of any other constructions of gender (which is problematic)' (1992: 318), is useful for an analysis of transgender identities, which act to untie biological sex and gender identity, and bring new meanings to sexual identity categories. While Dan's narrative questions normative understandings of gender and sexuality as experienced and practised through biological 'sex', there is, however, an investment in a discourse of romance, whereby non-normative gendered bodies 'make no difference'. Such a discourse is different from a discourse of realism, whereby non-normative bodily status would be acknowledged and negotiated. Moreover, a trans romance discourse contrasts with a queer discourse, in which non-normative bodies would be a site of celebration and pleasure in their own right.²

Cheryl met her current partner, a trans woman, shortly after her marriage ended. In the following quotation, Cheryl discusses the importance of emotional support within her new relationship:

It's a very close relationship and she's been so supportive. She's there for me when times are hard. She's been a rock, she really has. We are having a relationship but it's also about our friendship.

Cheryl's broader story articulates the fluidity and complexities of gender and sexuality as theoretical categories and as lived experiences. Within her life history, Cheryl's gender and partnering identities have shifted from a married man in a heterosexual relationship, to a female lover of a lesbian-identifying woman. Thus the binaries of male/female and hetero/homo are complicated and a diversity of intimate subject positions are reflected.

Narratives of transgender practices of intimacy raise a number of themes in relation to changing practices of partnering. The experiences of participants such as Bernadette and Cheryl lend support to suggestions of an increasing fluidity between the boundaries of friends and lovers (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Sandell, 1994). Second, they resonate with findings of research into same-sex partnerships (Weeks et al., 2001) to suggest that understandings and experiences of intimacy are fluidly situated, and a range of affective processes are constructed within non-normative intimate practices. The cases considered here reflect broader research findings, which show that gender transition is often reflexively negotiated alongside commitments to family and work. Participants can be seen to be acting as 'energetic moral agents' in 'weighing up the pros and cons of the consequences of their actions, considering others' perspectives and needs and reflecting on the decisions they make' (Williams, 2004: 42). Such processes support the assertion that intimate relationships within contemporary society reflect an increased presence of reflexivity and negotiation (Giddens, 1992; Weeks et al., 2001). However, narratives vary to the degree in which they speak of individuality or relationality, and some narratives, such as Dan's, fit more with a conventional partnership discourse, which is based around notions

of romance. Nevertheless, within narratives of partnering relationships, a strong emphasis is placed upon the value of emotional honesty, which, as the following section illustrates, is also a key theme within narratives of parenting through gender transition.

Practices of Parenting

Although many trans people are parents, there is an absence of sociological research on the experiences of transitioning parents. Outside of sociology, Green's (1978, 1998) clinical studies on the impact of gender transition upon the children of transsexual people remain the only UK studies within this area.³ Moreover, while lesbian and gay parenting sparks much debate within contemporary society, there is a cultural reticence to speak about trans people as parents, which leaves the practices of transgender parenting largely invisible. For the three participants of this article, relationships with children are pivotal to narratives of intimacy.

Telling Children

Decisions around when and how to tell children about their forthcoming gender transition were central to the narratives of trans parents. While the issues of disclosure here relate to gender and not to sexuality, there are links with the experiences of 'coming out' to children within the context of lesbian and gay parenting. Gabb comments that 'heterosexual parents do not need to make "proud" declarations of their heterosexuality. The image of such parents routinely "coming out" to their children as heterosexual is almost beyond our imagination' (Gabb, 2001: 347). Similarly the 'inside/out' (Fuss, 1991) gender binary naturalizes non-transgender identity as that which does not have to be articulated, while trans identity as the outsider to the silent norm is forced to speak its name.

Dan was in his thirties and the lone parent of a nine-year-old son when he decided to transition. Dan felt dissonance with his gender identity as a young child. In his twenties, he married and had a child. In the following quotation, Dan's decision to become a parent is articulated as an attempt to manage his conflicting feelings around gender:

I didn't start dealing with it, well, talking about it, until I was in my in thirties but I went through lots and lots of denial in that time and I got married because I thought it would make it go away. One of the reasons for having a child was that it would make it go away, it would make me whole. You destroy all this stuff that was doing my head in, but it didn't.

Dan's marriage broke up when his child was a baby and being a parent did not stop Dan questioning his gender identity, as he wished at the time. Parenting

commitments, however, moderated his decision to transition during this time. Dan says:

I had my son when I was in a can of worms. That was the hardest bit whilst I was sorting my head out, it was 'I need to do this for me, but what impact is this going to have on him? Will I lose him? Will he hate me? Will I have to face a custody battle?'

As his son grew up, Dan began to change the way he viewed the link between transitioning and parenting. Dan says:

My point of view then was that I was becoming so screwed up in my head that I was starting to fail my son as a parent and if I didn't sort my head out and live as me, as how I felt, then I would totally fail him because I didn't have it in me to love him and provide for him and, you know, I'd end up on tranquillizers and god knows what. So he would have ended up without a parent 'cos he wouldn't have had a parent to support him.

Thus rather than seeing transitioning as problematizing his relationship with his son, Dan began to see it as a process which would enable them to have a more successful relationship. Initially Dan's son found the situation hard to understand, as Dan describes:

He was very distressed when I told him, he was nine, just nine. His first reaction was that it'd messed his life up. But after two weeks he came back and said 'OK if it's got to be, it's got to be'. I think to start off he was worried that he'd go to school on Monday morning with me as his mum and I'd pick him up on the night as his dad. And I explained to him that you started off very slow and he realized it was going to be slowly.

Dan's openness about the procedures involved in gender reassignment can be seen to have enabled his son to more fully understand the changing situation. The importance of open dialogue is also stressed in terms of enabling children to adapt to the changes initiated by gender transition.

Open Dialogue

As Dan began hormone therapy, open dialogue with his son enabled a close relationship through the first stages of transition. Dan says:

And he'd known that something was troubling me, but he didn't know what it was. So I'd hidden a lot from him during that time and once I'd opened up and was honest I told him everything that had happened since that time and he actually started asking some really, really pertinent questions. But he was brilliant, especially at the beginning, if I needed to go to the loo he'd insist on going into the loo first so that he could find out where the cubicle was for me. So he was very protective of me which was brilliant. It was nice to know he cared that much [...] We've always been in a close relationship and it's been tested along the way and we talk and we've always talked.

Dan's narrative suggests that open dialogue can enable a climate of emotional care in which support is generated not only from parent to child, but also from child to parent. Reciprocal caring between parent and child, however, may mean that the child cares for the parent by not revealing the full extent of what is happening in his/her emotional life. Children may feel more internally conflicted, or face more external conflict than they feel willing or able to reveal to their parents. Thus it is important to note that the children in question were not interviewed and to acknowledge that children may offer different accounts.

Support between parent and child is also articulated within Bernadette's narrative. When Bernadette married she became step-parent to two teenagers. In the following quotation, she discusses her relationship with her stepchildren and talks about the support she received from them when she decided to transition:

My stepdaughter is one of my best friends [...] Unfortunately, my stepson died, but he again was someone who was totally supportive of me. I was always entirely honest with them and it's been very good.

Here we can see fluidity between parenting and friendship, which supports Pahl and Spencer's (2004) thesis of a fusion between friends and family within people's 'personal communities'. Moreover, as in discussions of significant values within partnering relationships, emotional support and honesty are emphasized.

Although at the time of the interview, Cheryl's children did not know that she was about to transition, she too related to the importance of openly discussing the process of gender reassignment. As Cheryl's wife is the main carer of the children, Cheryl's situation with her children is more complex than that of Dan. While Cheryl's wife supports Cheryl's decision to transition and they remain friends, she is unhappy about telling the children. Cheryl says:

She (Cheryl's wife) doesn't want to tell them yet. I'd love to live my life as I do when I'm seeing them but I respect her wishes on that. In time when I start taking hormones and my body starts to change obviously things will change. To start with it won't be a problem 'cos it's such a slow process so we're probably taking a minimum of eighteen months and they'll be seven and nine. I want to talk to them about it, but for now the important thing is that I keep seeing them.

Although Cheryl is pragmatic here about not discussing her transition with her children at present, she indicates later in the interview that she experiences the situation as problematic. Cheryl continues:

I live at home as Cheryl and I see myself now as a cross-dresser from female to male because I cross-dress to go to work and to see the kids. Before, her clothes were in a suitcase in the loft, now his clothes are tucked away and I have to get them out to go to work. And it's the same with family and I think with kids honesty matters and is important but I'm not able to be honest. I feel resentful about that sometimes but it is going away because things are happening and the goal is getting nearer.

Here, open dialogue with children not only signifies an emphasis upon honesty within parenting relationships, but is also linked to the affirmation of Cheryl's identity as a woman.

A significant component effecting relationships between trans parents and their children relates back to partnering relationships. Findings from this research suggest that the relationship between a child's parents significantly impacts upon how the child accepts gender transformation. Partnership breakdown can thus problematize parenting relationships for trans people, especially if the child lives with the other parent. Similarly, Green's (1998) clinically based study reported that children of transsexual parents stated that they were effected more by the breakdown of their relationship with their transitioning parent following parental divorce, than with the issue of gender transition itself.

Amicability between ex-partners who are parents can thus be seen to significantly affect a child's emotional well being. Moreover, the parents interviewed in this research project were aware of the importance of maintaining an amicable relationship with their child's other parent. The maintenance of positive relationships between separated parents can thus be identified as a key objective within transgender practices of care in relation to parenting. This corresponds with the work of Smart and Neale (1999, 2003, cited in Williams, 2004), which finds that parents frequently sustained their relationships following separation: 'practical ethics which are important in these situations are based on attentiveness to others' needs, adaptability to new identities, and a spirit of reparation' (Williams, 2004: 45). Balancing self-identity with emotional care for children can be complex (Lawler, 2000), however, and the process of negotiation between the two is a significant theme in the narratives of trans parents.

Negotiating Transition with Children

A significant issue discussed in relation to helping children come to terms with gender transition concerns the linguistic shifts which accompany changes in gender identity. Rather than reversing the parenting nouns of 'mum' or 'dad', each of the parents I spoke to had suggested that their child call them by their new first name or a nickname, which was often a variation of their pre-transition name. Dan, for example, says:

He doesn't call me dad, he calls me 'Danny' and I think that made things a hell of a lot easier for him. And at the school he was at the headmaster talked to all the staff and they were instructed that from that moment they were to call me 'Danny', nothing else, you know, never to say to my son 'when's your mum coming?' or 'when's your dad coming?' just 'when's "Danny" coming?' That really helped things as well. And it helped with the pronouns, but for a couple of months I heard the most convoluted conversations, you know, 'ask Danny whether Danny wants a cup of tea' and it was quite interesting (laugh). But I think that really helped him. I think one of the main issues children have problems with is changing that. A few people in the group (FtM network), when they've been talking about problems

with children, I've said 'don't try and get them to go from "mummy" to "daddy" try a nickname, even if it's not something you want to be known by, some androgynous nickname'.

Similarly, Bernadette's stepchildren called her 'Bernie'. Considerations about how children would address their transitioning parent are thus reflexively situated in relation to enabling children to adapt to the changing gender status of parents.

A further theme within discussions of negotiating the process of transition with children relates to how children experience the changes in their parents' appearance once they begin to take hormones and/or have surgical procedures. Findings suggest that children of parents who transition from female-to-male may find the process easier to adapt to, as their parent was more able to present androgynously before transition than were MtF (male-to-female) parents. Dan, for example, says:

I always wore a shirt and a tie to work before anyway. That's what everybody else wore and that's what I wore and I've still got clothes now that I was wearing seven or eight years ago and that shows how male stroke androgynous they were. So my clothes hadn't changed. So it wasn't like one day I was taking him to school in make up and the next day I was in a shirt and tie.

Greater cultural acceptance of female androgyny compared to male femininity can thus be seen to impact upon the experiences of children to benefit the children of trans men.

Children's experiences of their parents' transition, however, are not only effected by the ways in which their parents negotiate the process. In the following quotation, Dan discusses how the understanding of the head teacher at his son's school smoothed the process for his son:

Obviously his peer group were going to be an issue at some point, but again the school dealt with that. It got to the point where some people, some of the boys, were starting to question why I was looking more masculine and the headmaster rang me up and said 'I'm telling the boys tonight'. We'd agreed it would happen at some point, and we don't know what he told them but they sent my son off on an errand and told the boys [...] All I know is that some of the parents rang me up the next day and said 'my son has come home and told me what's happening and you've got our total support'. We don't know what the headmaster said but he said something that really bound them together in a protective network and as far as I know my son has never had any difficulty.

Here Dan articulates the significance of the head teacher's role as a mediating agent. For parents of young children, the school environment and particularly the reaction of teachers, parents and other children, are raised as important factors that impact upon a child's adaptation to parental gender transition.

Corresponding with the narratives of partnering relationships, a central theme to arise from narratives of trans parenting relationships is the reflexive negotiation of the process of gender transition within the context of relationships with children. Thus, rather than representing an individualized process,

decisions around the timing, disclosure and management of gender transition are considered and realized in relation to parenting concerns and responsibilities. Key values in negotiating the process of gender transition with children can be identified as trust, honesty and care.

Sandell's point in the early 1990s that: '... men and women have, for years, formed committed same-sex relationships, and had children, but what is relatively new is for men and women to self-identify as being part of a gay or lesbian family, and to have children with that identity' (Sandell, 1994: 2) is pertinent to the current state of play in relation to trans parenting. Thus historically, while many cross-dressing and cross-gender-identifying men and women would have been parents, self-identifying as a trans parent is a recent social development. Further, as social and legislative debates around lesbian and gay parenting have contributed to the growing public profile of lesbian and gay families (Sandell, 1994: 2), the Gender Recognition Bill⁴ is drawing public attention to the existence of transgender families.

Shifts in gendered parenting roles problematize normative assumptions of the link between biology and parenting identity, which firmly situates motherhood with female biology and fatherhood with male. Castells argues that technological developments, such as surrogacy, sperm banks and in vitro fertilization, have led to increased reproductive possibilities and choices, representing 'growing control over child bearing and, over the reproduction of the human species' (1997: 241). Developments in reproduction technology additionally present increased parenting possibilities for surgically reassigned trans people. Moreover, developments in reconstructive surgery and endocrinology further sever gender identity from biology. Castells' premise that technological transformations have effected a 'whole new area of social experimentation' (1997: 241) can thus be expanded to take account of transgender practices of parenting in order to address the issues these practices raise for theories of social change.

Conclusion

The findings from this research suggest that studies of transgender practices of partnering and parenting enable a richer understanding of the dynamics of contemporary 'life experiments' (Weeks et al., 2001). Notions of agency and choice run through the accounts of partnering to illustrate how complex decisions around gender transition are negotiated within the context of partnering relationships and family commitments. The meanings and experiences of sexual identity and sexual desire and practice can be seen to shift in relation to the performance of gender diversity. Boundaries of sexual intimacy and friendship are traversed as emotional support and care is emphasized within current partnering relationships, and in relationships with ex-partners. The impact of gender transition upon parenting relationships is reflexively explored, and the notions

of openness and honesty are frequently stressed as important responsibilities within practices of parenting. Understandings and experiences of intimacy are thus fluidly situated, and a range of affective practices are constructed. Research findings thus show that practices of intimacy within transgender partnering and parenting relationship are amenable to complex shifts in gendered meaning and expression.

While these case studies articulate personal creativity and agency, I would like to situate them beyond an individualized context. I suggest that these stories talk not only about individual change over time, but that they speak also of socio-historical changes in the diversification of meanings and experiences of gender, and the impact of these shifts upon intimate lives and social frameworks. The incorporation of transgender practices of partnering and parenting into analyses of contemporary patterns of sociality thus sheds further light upon the ways in which intimate relationships are subject to ongoing contest, negotiation and innovation.

Notes

- 1 All the participants interviewed, however, were white and British. 'Informal' discussions with one member of a support group for racially and ethnically diverse transgender people highlighted the specific issues faced by transgender people from minority ethnic communities, and the complexities between transgender, ethnicity and 'race' represent a greatly under-researched area (Roen, 1996).
- 2 There are also complex questions to be asked here about the heterosexual eroticization of FtM bodies, which is, however, beyond the scope of this article.
- 3 Richard Green is a prominent psychiatrist at the Gender Identity Clinic (GIC) at Charing Cross Hospital. Green's first study in 1978 was based on interviews with 16 children of transsexual parents who were in attendance at Charing Cross GIC. His second study in 1998 focused upon 18 children of transsexual parents in the same setting.
- 4 The Gender Recognition Act (GRA) gives transsexual people legal recognition in their gender of choice. The Bill was passed by the House of Lords on 10 February 2004.

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