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### Imag(in)ing Trans Partnerships: Collaborative Photography and Intimacy

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# Imag(in)ing Trans Partnerships: Collaborative Photography and Intimacy

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## Abstract

In this article, I argue that collaborative photography offers dynamic potential for imag(in)ing trans intimate partnerships beyond the authority of textual representation. I present five photographic and narrative case studies, spanning a range of trans partnerships in the UK, to demonstrate some of the complex ways in which bodies, genders, sexualities, and time intersect in trans intimacy. I argue that the photographs create an imaginative resource, both for the people depicted in the photographs and for those viewing the photographs, providing new possibilities for thinking about trans partnerships, expanding the ways in which trans intimate partnerships are imag(in)ed, and opening up new spaces of possibility for gender and sexual identities.

*Keywords:* collaborative photography, gender, Gender Recognition Act, intimacy, marriage, partnerships, polyamory, sexuality

The year 2004 was memorable for many trans people and their allies in the United Kingdom. It was the year in which the Gender Recognition Act was passed, enabling trans people to be issued with a new birth certificate allowing them to marry or enter into a civil partnership in their newly assigned legal gender. In the same year, the UK Civil Partnership Act was passed by the Labour government allowing “same-sex” partnerships to be recognized in law.

The Gender Recognition Act was accomplished by persistent campaigning carried out largely by the UK trans lobby group, Press for Change (Whittle and Turner, 2007). Prior to this legislation being passed, the UK was one of four European countries that did not legally recognize a trans person’s self-identified gender (Whittle, 2000, p. 44). The Act is based on the premise that biological “sex is preceded and exceeded by gender... Sex in this sense is determined by gender identity—the social role that one chooses to take” (Whittle and Turner, 2007, n. p.). Further, the Act marks a shift in the legal framing of gender as distinct from sex, which in turn indicates a shift in broader social and cultural understanding (Hines, 2007, 2010).

By enabling a trans person to marry an individual of the “opposite sex,” or to enter into a civil partnership with someone of the “same sex,” the Gender Recognition Act affords citizenship rights to trans people who identify as women or men (Hines, 2007, 2010; Whittle and Turner, 2007). Thus, the Act has been useful in gaining social and legal recognition for some trans people. Nevertheless, Sally Hines (2010) argues that the Act does not afford citizenship rights to trans people who identify beyond the binary female/male categories.

Marriage and civil partnership laws control the ways in which sexuality, and the gender it rests upon, are regulated and socially recognized (Coombs, 1996; Davy, 2010; Hines, 2010; Monro, 2005; Sanger, 2010; Whittle, 2002). Tam Sanger (2010) argues that the Gender Recognition Act

serves to uphold the heterosexual dichotomy and suggests that this results in limiting and regulating the kinds of intimate partnerships with which people engage. Sanger (2010) contends:

Framing intimate partnerships with respect to heterosexuality and the assumption this implies—monogamy, vanilla sex, partnerships revolving around gender inequalities—works to erase other possibilities within people’s minds... Such limited engagement with intimate possibilities also regulates the types of relationships people envisage themselves becoming involved in. (p. 24)

Underpinning the heterosexual hegemony is the conception of gender identities as fixed entities. The Gender Recognition Act was also constructed on this notion. Thus it is assumed that, having transitioned from one polarized gender identity to another, a trans person’s gender will remain stable within the boundaries of their new legal identity. This is based on the premise that a trans person’s identity is fixed to begin with, even when this is not in accord with the sex assigned at birth (Hird, 2002).

Zachary Nataf (1996) argues against the idea that trans identities should be conceived of in terms of an ideal of either fixed or fluid identities, suggesting instead that this should be determined by the individual. Sanger (2010) proposes that neither identities nor partnership configurations should be construed as stable, and asserts that “fluidity and change over time must become factors recognized within intimacy studies” (p. 26). Further developing the concept of fluidity in intimate partnerships, Carla Pfeffer (2008), in her study of cis women’s partnerships with trans men, establishes the significance of relational dynamics between partners: “the body image of one partner may affect both the body image of another, as well as the ways these bodies may relate (sexually and non-sexually) to one another (p. 331). In other words, body image, gender,

and sexuality can be understood as dynamic processes that are co-constructed and socially embedded.

Pfeffer (2008), Sanger (2010), and Hines (2010) suggest that trans experiences of intimate partnerships should be taken into account in academia, society, and law. However, as Katrina Roen (2011) maintains, queer research has “struggled, and often failed, to reflect diverse material realities and lived experiences of people it purports to speak about” (p. 65). The studies of Pfeffer (2008), Sanger (2010), and Hines (2010) draw on oral accounts given by trans people and their partners. In these studies, by focusing on the spoken and written word, trans people’s and their partners’ narratives become “disembodied.” Not only is embodiment clearly significant in intimate partnerships, visibility is also crucial in the recognition of identities (Alcoff, 2006; Owens, 1992; Steyn, 1997; Taylor, 1992). Alison Rooke (2010a) proposes that participatory art practice enables a “focus on the relationship between materiality and representational practices, social and political recognition, [and] the specificity of trans experience” (p. 30). Extending Rooke’s (2010a) notion of participatory art practice, I argue that collaborative photography offers a specific potential for allowing trans intimate partnerships to be “seen” and thus become more culturally intelligible, contributing new perspectives to the work begun by Pfeffer (2008), Sanger (2010), and Hines (2010), and opening up a new space of possibility.

## Representations of Trans People and Their Partnerships

The most widely-available representations of trans people are generated through the mass media, and are often found in the “freak show” genre of reality and transformational television, which pathologizes and sensationalizes its subjects in highly problematic ways (Dovey, 2000; Gamson, 1998; Irving, 2007). As a consequence of these television shows, trans people tend to be depicted in ways that invite judgement and ridicule and are presented as visually “spectacular” (Biressi & Nunn, 2005; Heller, 2006; Oullette & Hay, 2008). For example, the publicity material for a recent UK television “documentary,” *My Dad is a Woman*, reported that the program offered “intimate access to two families” and “follows the dilemmas two trans women face as they take the ultimate step to change their lives forever.”<sup>1</sup> The “ultimate step” mentioned here is genital surgery, which, despite the emphasis on “family” in the publicity material, constituted the focus of the program. While surgery is an important part of many trans people’s lives, placing emphasis on surgery alone reduces the trans person’s experiences to the body and to narratives of “the wrong body.” In turn, this renders other parts of the person’s life, including their relationships with others, invisible and/or insignificant.

Historically, photography has also had a problematic relationship in the visual representation and production of the “other” (Pinney, 2003; Tagg, 1993). Following this, while interviews are typically referred to as being “given” by a subject, photographs are generally conceived of as being “taken.” Widely-held perceptions of photography support the notion that a

photograph is not only “taken” of a subject, but that it is also “taken” *from* the subject—in the sense that the image is “stolen” (Arbus, 2003; Back, 2004). However, there is an ongoing body of work (Back, 2004; Harper, 1984, 1998; Spence, 1986, 1995; Wang, 1997; Weiser, 2002) that examines collaborative photographic practices that seek to recognize photography as an interactive social process. Sociologist Les Back (2004) argues: “Lenses are not always about the control and fixing of subjects. To see photography merely as a governing technology misses the instability and complexity of the drama that unfolds on either side of the lens... It is a mistake, I think, to see the lens as only looking one way (p. 136).” Further, photographer Sebastio Selgado asserts: “Sometimes people call you to give the pictures. People come to you, to your lens, as if they were coming to speak into a microphone” (Selgado, cited in Back, 2004, p. 136).<sup>2</sup> Here, Selgado proposes that photographs may also be “given.”

## Method

The understanding that not everyone feels compelled to make their experiences public (Rooke, 2010b), the premise that the photographic lens can look more than one way, and the notion that pictures can be “given” as well as “taken,” inform my collaborative photographic practice.<sup>3</sup> Photographs have a specific place in accessing and exploring social life, in that it is not what they say that is important, it is what they show (Back, 2004). Photographs offer another possibility beyond the authority of textual representation. Nevertheless, a photograph can be ambiguous and “not easily and unequivocally reveal *what it is about*” (Becker, 2007, p. 38). In order to avoid such ambiguity, I present excerpts from participants’ verbal accounts together with photographs (Davidmann, 2006, 2010). The photographs reproduced herein were made in

collaboration with participants with the intention that the pictures would be shown, both in publications and exhibitions. Participants decided *how* they would want their intimate partnerships represented and they were actively involved in imag(in)ing their partnerships. This was important in the light of the project's purpose, which was to create an imaginative resource for new ways of thinking about trans intimate partnerships.

This article is located in practice-based research that combines photographic practice with qualitative social research. The aims of the project were to explore individual and collective practices of trans intimacy. The research was conceived in the knowledge that trans people are a vulnerable group, who are somewhat “over-researched,” having become something of a fetishized queer subject (Rooke, 2010a). Online communities for trans people and their partners regularly receive calls for participants to take part in studies conducted by sociologists, psychologists and other academics, leading to “research fatigue” within some of these communities (Rooke, 2010a). Additionally, researchers’ (many of whom are non-trans) concerns are not always synonymous with the most pressing concerns of trans people and their partners.

With these trends in mind, I invite participants into a conversation rather than a single, unidirectional research dynamic. This project arises from ongoing collaboration with participants and constitutes emic rather than etic research (Berry, 1999). Participants were recruited through word of mouth and internet social groups. All participants reside in the UK. Entering into these exchanges requires trust that has been developed over time through my extensive work in the trans community. In my earlier studies (Davidmann, 2006, 2010), I developed a collaborative photographic method that expanded photo-elicitation (Harper, 1984, 1998). This transpired



through a combination of collaborative photography and audio recorded semi-structured interviews. In the project described herein, I extended this approach to working with trans people and their intimate partners.

The ethics of “seeing” and “showing” in photography are central to my research (see Davidmann, 2006, 2010). Because participants were to be photographed, and some of these pictures would be disseminated through research outputs, ethical considerations were highly important. I was aware that participants ran the risk of being recognized and identified as trans people and that such recognition and identification carries potential interpersonal, familial, social, and economic consequences. Accordingly, I gave participants collaborative control over the research in which they had taken part, including its subsequent dissemination. Participants made decisions over which photographs could be retained for use in the research and which pictures were to be destroyed. This process took place iteratively, as each set of photographs was produced. This also provided a way of ongoing monitoring of the work and representations. Additionally, in interviews participants discussed sensitive topics regarding their everyday lives. Consequently, participants were given the power to veto the use of particular interview excerpts in research presentations and publications.

In my practice, participants evaluate whether or not to grant permission for each research output on an ongoing case-by-case basis as they occur. This process of agreeing or refusing permission is continuous, enduring *beyond* the research collection period. Participants may withdraw from the project at any time. Before commencing the research, participants were provided with written information on the project’s aims, objectives and research protocols, and

research dissemination targets were discussed in detail. Additionally, I followed Cromwell (1999), Hale (1997), and Griggs (1998) with respect to more general ethical considerations of avoiding misrepresentation of trans people, particularly among cisgender researchers working with trans people. For this article, I present photographic and narrative case studies of five partnerships from a larger body of research to demonstrate some of the diversity across trans partnerships in the UK and to reveal some of the nuanced ways in which self-images, genders, sexualities, bodies, and time intersect.

## Findings

Earlier, I briefly discussed the UK Gender Recognition Act, one of the aims of which was to allow legal recognition of trans people's partnerships (for further discussion of these legal frameworks and their limitations see Hines, 2007, 2010; Sanger, 2010). Of the five partnerships described herein, two obtained legal recognition through the Gender Recognition Act. In 2010, Lee, a trans man (assigned female at birth), was granted a Gender Recognition Certificate to enable him to marry his primary partner, Carolin, a cisgender woman. In 2011, Jenny-Anne, a trans woman (assigned male at birth) was granted a Gender Recognition Certificate, allowing her to marry her partner, Elen (also a trans woman, assigned male at birth).

While the Gender Recognition Act has been useful in enabling legal recognition of these partnerships, the Act fails to acknowledge Elen's gender identity, which she described in an interview as being "in-between male and female and in-between transvestite and transsexual." Further, neither civil partnership nor marriage laws currently recognize the complexities of

Jenny-Anne and Elen's sexual relationship, which they both describe as "trans lesbian."<sup>4</sup> In order to be able to marry, Jenny-Anne's *new* legal gender and name, and Elen's *birth* name and *assigned birth sex* had to be used.

Lee and Carolin's negotiations for getting married were also somewhat complicated. Lee self-identifies as "trans" rather than "male" and the Gender Recognition Act does not recognize "trans" as an identity. Rather, only the binary categories of "male" and "female" are recognized. Additionally, while marriage provides social and legal acknowledgement of Lee and Carolin's partnership, the law does not recognize the nuances of Lee and Carolin's intimate lives and the polyamorous nature of their relationship.<sup>5</sup> Lee is married to Carolin, his primary partner, and he is also in a sexual relationship with Bryn, a "transman." In an interview, Lee described the ways in which his understanding of his sexuality has changed over time, indicating a strong relationality between his body, sexuality, and the sexuality of his partners. Lee's narrative highlights the instability of sexuality, which is often widely (mis)conceived as fixed.

The notion of relationality between intimate partners and their gender identities, sexual identities, and bodies also came to the surface in an interview with DK, Rachel, and Lu, who have been in a three-way polyamorous partnership for 12 years. DK explained: "We've all changed on the gender spectrum and the emotional and sexual relationships have evolved alongside those changes." For ten years, DK, Rachel, and Lu have lived together and raised DK's three children. In contrast to DK's, Rachel's, and Lu's three-way parenting approach, Paula and Rob described creating a family that is more socially recognizable or typical as it would seem to follow or reflect the two-parent female/male model. Rob's conception of gender transition also differs

from the descriptions offered by Elen, Lee, and DK. Rob (assigned female at birth) identifies as male and described his transition as moving from one gender polarity to the other. Paula, Rob's partner, is cisgender. Paula and Rob both describe their relationship as heterosexual and monogamous. At the time of the interview, Paula was six months pregnant. Paula explained that, before her relationship with Rob, she self-identified as lesbian. Her partnership with Rob led Paula to redefine her sexuality, offering a further example of relationality between intimate partners translating to shifts in sexual identities.

While mass media representations of trans people and their partners may be negative or damaging, they are not uniformly so. Indeed, trans media representations can also have positive impacts, expanding the ways in which people understand their own and/or others' gender and sexuality. Michael's narrative offers an example of this positive potential. Michael explained that he initially thought he would not be able to engage in an intimate partnership because he was trans and sexually attracted to men. It was only when he came across the concept of a "gay trans man," while watching a television documentary, that he realized that this was how he self-identified. Following this realization, Michael began to believe that personally-satisfying intimacy and partnerships might be achievable in his life. Michael's narrative reveals the potential power of media representations of trans people and their partnerships. In the subsections that follow, I use a brief case study and collaborative photographic approach to focus in on the various gender and sexual identities and partnership configurations that this subset of participants described.

## Jenny-Anne and Elen

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Jenny-Anne and Elen were legally married at a Registry Office in October 2011, which was followed two days later by a church blessing and wedding party. They were each previously married to cisgender women and have children from these earlier marriages. Elen is 68 years of age and Jenny-Anne is 65 years of age. Elen self-identifies as “inbetween male and female” and Jenny-Anne as “female.” Jenny-Anne takes hormones and she has had facial surgery, breast augmentation, and genital surgery. Elen does not wish to have surgery or to take hormones. Jenny-Anne and Elen both used the term “trans lesbian” when describing their sexual identities. Elen explained:

‘Trans lesbian’ works on the basis that we tend to identify largely as female—that’s the simple answer. When you’re not fully male and not fully female, sexuality often becomes something quite fluid or hard to pin down. For example, would you say that Jenny-Anne and I are a gay couple? Or a lesbian couple? Or some sort of funny straight couple? How do you define it? It depends on which you take as a base. If you take just our physical bodies you could say we’re a gay couple. If you take our personalities and presentations we’re a lesbian couple. You could say it’s a straight relationship—the male bit of me is attracted to the female bit of Jenny-Anne and visa [sic] versa... When you’re trans, *what* a person is is far less important than *who* they are.

Here, Elen articulates the complexity of some of the ways in which sexuality and gender intersect in her relationship with Jenny-Anne, and the failure of current terminology to articulate these nuances.

## **DK, Rachel, and Lu**

[Insert Figure 2 here]

DK described her partnership as a “leather family” and household as “a traditional family with an unconventional framework.” DK explained that their relationship is “a hierarchical DS [domination/submission] arrangement.” DK is number one, Rachel is number two, and Lu is number three. DK described their individual relationships as “overlapping,” and all three were married as a triad in a pagan handfasting ceremony. DK is 44 years of age, Rachel is 48 years of age, and Lu is 46 years of age.

Ten years ago, the family was “matriarchal.” At that time, DK (assigned female at birth) identified as “high femme.” He explained that he now considers himself to be “primarily male.” Rachel, (assigned male at birth) had previously transitioned to “female.” Lu (assigned female at birth) described herself as a “soft butch” ten years ago, and stated that she has since become “more masculine” and “harder.”

DK explained: “We’ve all changed on the gender spectrum and the emotional and sexual relationships have evolved alongside those changes.” DK said that the relationship between himself and Lu developed in a way that mirrored the changes in their respective gender identities, with DK changing from being Lu’s “Mistress” to her “Master,” and with their sexual

partnership now including a “gay male relationship” as one of the ways in which they interact sexually. Rachel discussed how she was sexually active at the beginning of their three-way partnership, but that she considered herself to be “asexual” at the time of the interview. Lu, Rachel, and DK all asserted that Rachel’s lack of interest in being sexually active had not affected the emotional bonds that exist between them. They stressed that these bonds are as strong as ever, and DK stated: “Rachel is my rock, my safe place that I come home to.”

DK’s, Rachel’s, and Lu’s accounts demonstrate a powerful relational dynamic between their gender identities and emotional and sexual relationships. This mutual evolution over time has enabled them to maintain their three-way partnership and enabled DK’s gender transition and Rachel’s altered feelings towards intimacy, whereby she is now no longer sexually active, to be accommodated. This narrative illustrates how the binary concepts of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual fail to fully account for or represent DK’s, Rachel’s and Lu’s shifting identities and relationships over time.

## **Rob and Paula**

[Insert Figure 3 here]

In contrast to DK’s, Rachel’s, and Lu’s polyamorous “leather family,” Rob and Paula have created a family based on an intimate partnership that they describe as “heterosexual and monogamous.” Paula is 36 years of age and Rob is 38 years of age. Rob stated that Paula and he had been friends before they became lovers and that their intimate relationship began nine years

ago, just after he started to transition. Paula explained that before her relationship with Rob, she self-identified as a lesbian. Her partnership with Rob led her to redefine her sexuality.

Rob, in contrast to Elen, Jenny-Anne, DK, and Lee, described being trans as a medical condition and as “something that needed to be fixed.” He explained that transitioning has allowed him to feel comfortable in himself. When the photograph, above, was taken, Paula was six months pregnant. Rob discussed how it was he who first suggested that they might have a child. Rob said that if he had not been able to transition, he would never have considered the idea, because he could not conceive of being anything other than a “father” to a child.<sup>6</sup> Rob stated that they would tell the child about his trans history when “she’s old enough to start understanding.” He said that he is unconcerned about the fact that he is not biologically related to his daughter and asserts: “I can still be a good dad. It doesn’t bother me at all that I’m not [biologically] related... because it’s not just about me any more. It’s about family.”

## **Lee, Carolin, and Bryn**

[Insert Figure 4 here]

Lee, Carolin, and Bryn are in what Lee described as a “V-shaped polyamorous relationship.” A V-shaped polyamorous relationship is made up of three people and two pairs of sexual relationships, with one person involved in both relationships, forming the “hinge” or “pivot” of the V. Lee is “the hinge.” Lee self-identifies as “queer.” He is in a sexual relationship with Carolin, who also identifies as “queer,” and with Bryn, who identifies as “a gay man [and] also as a transman.” Lee is 32 years of age, Carolin is 48 years of age, and Bryn is 37 years of age.



Lee described how his intimate partnership with Carolin began as a monogamous relationship and evolved into a polyamorous relationship. He explained that, in 2009, while they were living together, with Carolin's encouragement he began a sexual relationship with Bryn, who had previously been only a friend.

Lee stated that he began to transition when he was 21 years of age. He explained that, at that time, he could not clarify how he "felt," but that he knew that he "wasn't female." Lee said that he belonged to a lesbian community before transitioning, and discussed the importance of this community, and his previous experience living as a female, in shaping his gender identification. Lee asserted:

Before I transitioned I had decided that I was a dyke and I enjoyed the friendship [the community] gave me, the strength that it gave me... I really miss the sisterhood in being seen as female. I didn't start to transition until I was about twenty-one, so I lived for twenty-one years as female. And I understand that and I know that. I didn't live as a female trapped in a male body. I lived as female. And I was tomboyish. But I still experienced my life as female and there are aspects of me that are female. So now I don't fit in—which is why I'm so vocal about being trans. Because I fit into the trans community whereas I don't really fit into 'male' and I don't really fit into 'female' anymore... I don't feel I fit into either... my identity is more in-between.

Here, Lee describes how his past experiences have influenced the ways in which he now understands his gender identity.

In the photo, above, Lee is photographed wearing a t-shirt with the word, “Tranny” written across it. This is a deliberate attempt, on Lee’s part, to assert his trans identity, which might otherwise be rendered socially invisible. Lee explained in an interview that in his everyday life he is “read” as male, which, as the quote above clearly articulates, is not in accord with how he “sees” himself.<sup>7</sup> Lee also discussed how his body has changed over time, through the process of transitioning, and that this affects the ways in which he relates sexually to others. Lee said: “It wasn’t until after I had my chest surgery that I felt confident enough to be with another man and be seen as male... I then went completely off women and wasn’t interested at all... so I thought I must be gay. And then I met Carolin and all of that exploded.” Lee’s narrative demonstrates that the experiences of his body changing over time directly affected his perception of whether or not he was “seen” by others as male. In turn, this influenced his intimate partnerships and the sex/gender of the people with whom he became intimate.

## **Michael and Matt**

[Insert Figure 5 here]

Michael is 25 years of age. He described his gender identity as “transsexual or transgender” and his sexual identity as “mostly gay or a bit bisexual.” Michael explained that he is primarily interested in having sexual relationships with men. For some time, Michael had difficulty understanding his sexual feelings toward men and it was only when he came across the concept of a “gay trans man” in a television documentary, *Make Me a Man*, that he realized that this was how he self-identified. Media representations also influenced Michael’s previous understanding of what was possible in terms of trans sexuality. Michael explained: “Because of media

perceptions, you just assume that the only people who transition are people who want to sleep with people of a particular sex. The only reason why a woman would want to live as a man is because she... wants to sleep with women. So I just didn't have a perception that there could be such a thing as a *gay* trans man.” In other words, Michael’s understanding of trans sexuality was shaped by the heteronormativity of most cultural representations of sexuality.

Michael started to take testosterone when he was 18 years of age. He discussed how, for a long time prior to this, he had wanted to have a sexual relationship with a man, but that he had assumed no cisgender man would want to be sexually intimate with a trans man. Michael stated: For a long time, I thought a relationship just wasn’t going to happen for me. I transitioned relatively young... and I hadn’t had much experience of relationships beforehand. It was something I always wanted but for a long time I just saw it as completely unobtainable.” Michael described how this idea began to change when he met trans men who were in intimate partnerships with other men (cis and trans). Michael spoke about how “the variety” of configurations of intimate relationships opened up new ways of thinking for him about partnership possibilities.

Michael is now in a monogamous relationship with Matt, a cisgender man. At the time of the interview, they had been together for eighteen months. Michael stated that, despite his initial concerns, Matt is very accepting of his trans history and body. Michael explained:

One thing that really surprised me in my current relationship was that I assumed that if I ever did find a relationship, it'd be something that we'd have to spend months getting over, and talking through, and trying to work out what it meant. And he was just very, very accepting. I spent quite

a long time trying to say, ‘Are you sure you're ok with this? Are you sure there's nothing you need to discuss?’ Maybe there is some stuff he'd still like to discuss, but it's never been an issue really.

Here, Michael describes how much easier it has been being trans in his relationship with Matt than he had anticipated. He explained that this has given him confidence in his gender and sexual identities.

Michael's narrative demonstrates the ways in which understandings of what might be possible in terms of intimacy and partnerships may be shaped by both limited/negative and more expansive/positive depictions of trans people in the media, revealing the everyday power of representation, both of trans people and their intimate partnerships. Michael stressed that his own life had been so transformed by the experience of witnessing a gay self-identified trans man that it fueled his desire to help others like him, facilitating his involvement with this collaborative photography-narrative project.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this article, I have presented five case studies presenting narratives and photographs spanning across a range of trans intimate partnerships. I have argued that photographs have a specific place in accessing and exploring social life in that it is not *what they say* that is important; *it is what they show* (Back, 2004). I have further argued that previous academic research on trans partnerships tends to draw somewhat exclusively upon oral and textual accounts given by trans people and their partners (e.g., Hines, 2007, 2010; Pfeffer, 2008, 2010; Sanger, 2010), whereby

participants' accounts become "disembodied." The present research, therefore, seeks to bring the body and embodiment—key aspects of gender, sexuality, and trans partnerships—back into focus. Collaborative photography allows the relationship between materiality and the specificity of trans experiences to be made visible, offering another possibility beyond the authority of textual representations.

I am fully aware of the potential for photography to be exploitative and I have discussed the ways in which I work against such exploitation. The photographs in this article were produced *with* participants as a way of imag(in)ing their intimate partnerships. The photographs and narratives featured in this article were created with the mutual intention of being shown to others and are reproduced herein with the participants' full consent.

Through photography and personal accounts, these examples demonstrate some of the diversity across trans intimate partnerships in the UK at this particular time in history. Two of the five partnerships discussed herein gained legal recognition of their partnerships through making use of the 2004 UK Gender Recognition Act. I have outlined the ways in which this law often fails to recognize the complexities of these partnerships because it was developed through normative (and binary) lenses of sex, gender, and sexuality—female/male, woman/man, heterosexual/homosexual, and monogamous. As the narratives in this article demonstrate, however, these normative lenses of sex, gender, and sexuality are often inadequate for bringing the diversity of trans partnerships into sharper focus. The participants' narratives reveal that self-image, bodies, gender, sexuality, and time intersect in trans partnerships in complex ways that exceed trans-normative, homo-normative, and hetero-normative tropes. In participants' accounts,

sexuality was frequently construed as unstable and relational dynamics were evident across all case study partnerships. The failure of existing terminology and legal recognition to adequately describe the nuances of participants' self-identifications of gender and sexuality limits the ways in which selves and partnerships are able to be understood and defined.

The importance of access to knowledge about the diversity of trans intimate partnerships, the power of visual imagery, and the potential of representations of diverse trans partnerships to serve as catalysts for enabling new modes of imagining trans intimacy have been highlighted. Following this, through the dynamic potential of collaborative photography, the photographs in this article broaden previous scholarship on trans partnerships and allow for more holistic perspectives to emerge. These photographs constitute an imaginative resource, both for the people depicted in the photographs and for those viewing the photographs, that expand the ways in which trans intimate partnerships are imag(in)ed, enabling new ways of thinking about how trans partnerships might look, and opening up new spaces of possibility.

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Figure 1. Jenny-Anne (on the left) and Elen (on the right).



Figure 2. DK (centre), Rachel (on the right), and Lu (on the left).



Figure 3. Rob and Paula.



Figure 4. Lee, (centre) Carolin (on the right), and Bryn (on the left).



Figure 5. Michael (on the left) and Matt (on the right).





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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Available at: <http://www.itv.com/presscentre/mydadisawoman/week09/default.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from *Selgado: The spectre of hope*, Arena, BBC2, 30 May 2001.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to instigating photographic projects, I am frequently asked to take pictures by individuals and organizations in the queer/trans communities to which I belong. These requests are made because my photography is based on reciprocity. Indeed, the photographs reproduced herein are from a larger photography book project that I am carrying out with the trans organization TransBareAll, at their invitation. Lee (pictured in this article), initially took part in a three-year Arts and Humanities Research Council Fellowship project (2007-2010) that I was carrying out. Following this, he invited me to work with TransBareAll on the current project on trans relationships. Similarly, Jenny-Anne and Elen took part in the Fellowship project and later asked me to take photographs at private trans social events, which were for *their* use only, and to be their wedding photographer. These and numerous other requests are made because of relationships of trust that have been built over years (since 1999) and a body of work that I had already completed on issues of living as a trans person (Davidmann, 2003, 2006, 2010). The photograph constitutes one “point” in the process of reciprocity, collaboration, and dialogue.

<sup>4</sup> For descriptions of identities that similarly demonstrate the difficulties of naming, see Cromwell, 1999; Hines, 2010; Sanger, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Polyamorous partnerships differ to monogamous relationships in that they involve more than two people. Polyamorous partnerships are arranged with the knowledge and consent of all partners and they can vary considerably in terms of how they are configured. In this article, two examples are given.

<sup>6</sup> In contrast to how Rob views the idea of giving birth, another participant, Jason, gave birth as a trans man in 2010. Photographs of Jason pregnant, and with his partner and child, were presented in a keynote paper co-authored with Nikki Sullivan, *Somatechnical figurations: Kinship, bodies, affects*, Södertörn University, Stockholm, 2012. Three of these photographs were also exhibited in *Trans\* Homo: Of lesbian trans\* gays and other normalities*, Schwules museum, Berlin, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Whilst some trans men have taken up the term “tranny” with the aim of achieving greater visibility, many trans women have rejected it. The term is the cause of contentious debates within trans communities. The term has a history connected to transphobia and many trans women have been subjected to transphobic hostility and violence because they are more visible.