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Redressing the balance: Lived experiences of the harms of visually mediated transgender identity

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Abstract
Trans* identities have a history of being constructed, regulated and erased. Often a trans* individual's social status is judged by others on the basis of their perception of that individual's achievement of normative standards of gender. We are living through a time characterized by the prioritization of visual identity alongside intense scrutiny of trans* identities in relation to their authenticity and right to recognition. Research should support a reorientation of scrutiny towards these issues and acknowledge their relevance to lived experiences of the hegemonic discourse related to conceptualizations of gender as binary that engulf trans* individuals' lives. This paper is informed by empirical research undertaken at the University of Plymouth and in particular reflections on trans* individuals' lived experiences of social harms. It contributes to victimology by presenting a discussion of cultural (re)presentations of the self and processes of othering in relation to trans* individuals. The adoption of participatory visual-narrative methods as a route through which to challenge these harmful discourses is proposed. Such methods can refocus our gaze away from trans* individuals as problematizing the world for others, and on to the lived experiences of the structures and processes that foster stigmatization and marginalization.

Introduction

This paper is informed by empirical research undertaken at the University of Plymouth and in particular reflections on the lived experiences of trans* individuals in relation to hate and broader social harms.[1] This paper contributes to criminology by presenting a discussion of cultural

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(re)presentations of the self and processes of othering in relation to trans* individuals. The paper proposes an appropriate methodology to fulfil the identified gap in knowledge of trans* individuals' lived experiences of contemporary visual culture. It is based upon experience and research with trans* identified individuals, but also raises issues relevant for 'non-binary' (a gender label used by individuals who do not ascribe to a diametric classification of gender as either 'male' or 'female') and others who 'trouble' hegemonic westernized gender norms. In particular the paper is interested in examining societal rules related to visual (re)presentation which contribute to stigmatization and the issues that characterize lived experiences of trans* individuals.

A series of events in the past decade have galvanized mainstream media attention: talk show appearances by trans* individuals, academic debate (and attempts to 'no platform' speakers), and anti-trans campaigns mounted in the UK and USA. Of note is the highly publicized introduction to the world of Caitlyn Jenner via her *Vanity Fair* front page and media interviews. This example of a well-known reality star, previously known to the world as an elite male athlete, coming out in such a public way thrust trans* individuals across the globe into the spotlight. It also invited a wave of media commentary on gender 'transitions' and the broader implications for women (and men) (for example, see Burkett, 2015). This sensationalized public debate highlighted how trans* individuals lack autonomy or agency over how they are represented and how their identities are exposed to external, often public, interpretation. This example illustrates concerns about the implications of (re)presentation for wider trans* acceptance, not least owing to the reductive trans* discourse deployed through 'before and after' narratives and imagery that emphasizes the commodified process of 'beautification' epitomized by Jenner (see Serano, 2007).

This climate poses inherent risks for trans* individuals and this paper calls for thoughtful participatory approaches to research that avoid the reproduction of historic harms. Research produced through these means instead strives to generate data that can influence policy relevant to individuals' experiences and needs (Bettinger, 2010). This paper and the approach proposed within it acknowledge trans* individuals' vulnerability within the research process and, referencing examples from the psycho-medical profession, academia and the media, highlight examples in which state institutions control trans* (re)presentation and identities. In doing so, it identifies how harm is generated in relation to the regulation and policing of a binary gender order. Contingent with this are issues of misrepresentation, imposed (in)visibility, and external and institutional forms of acceptance and legitimacy. These themes are intrinsic to trans* individuals' lived experiences, serving to construct, sustain and reinforce a framework of social stigmatization that continues to restrict individuals' agency over the expression and performance of their gender identity and instead requires conformity to the binary gender order in a contemporary society. The paper illustrates the influence of cultural institutions' reductive and transnormative (the hierarchical framework against which trans* individuals' gender expression and experiences are held accountable; see Johnson, 2016, for a fuller exploration) depictions of trans* identities before turning to examine the associations between the visual and trans* identities, and how some individuals have embraced contemporary visual culture as a mode of self-declaration and resistance. The paper concludes with a consideration of how academia can contribute to the generation of new knowledge using a participatory visual-narrative approach to elucidate lived experiences of trans* individuals.

Methods

The issues addressed within this paper emerged during the fieldwork phases of a separate project exploring trans* individuals' lived experiences of harm in relation to their gender identity. The

fieldwork was undertaken with participants from across England and Wales during the spring of 2016. In the course of the in-depth interviews undertaken with 11 individuals who self-selected participation within the study, issues related to the visual representation of trans* identities became apparent and prompted a momentary diversion from this substantive study to consider these issues in more detail and develop a proposal for a visual-participatory methodology that might help to redress the imbalance of visual misrepresentation of individuals and the harms they experience.

Participants were drawn from a sample of individuals who self-identified under the broad umbrella term of 'transgender'. This definition of those pertinent to the study was kept deliberately broad so as not to perpetuate issues associated with reductive categorization and labelling of individuals that fall outside of the binary norms enacted throughout westernized society. A number of potential participants were previously known to the researcher through a role whereby they administered and supported a regional network of trans* individuals and organizations interested in addressing discrimination and promoting trans* equality. A small cohort of individuals were invited to take part in the research and they then shared details of the research with others alongside an endorsement of the research aims and researcher as sensitive to trans* issues.

This led to a total of 11 research participants, quotes from seven of whom are provided within this paper under pseudonyms. Of the seven included here, two were assigned female at birth and identified as trans* men, but 'Fred' articulated how he had transitioned more recently; he would have more likely identified as non-binary (that being for Fred 'in the middle' or on a spectrum between male and female); four participants were assigned male at birth and identified themselves as trans* women and finally 'Simon' currently expresses herself as male gendered but has previously transitioned and plans to do so again in the future with the ultimate aim of identifying herself as a woman as she does not wish to be identifiable as 'trans*'. Participants ranged in age from 40 to 83 and were all White British and undertook various elements of both social and medicalized transitions during a period spanning from the 1990s to 2010.

Alongside the qualitative inquiry, which gleaned thick descriptions, the research incorporated visual methodology to elucidate individuals' lived experiences of the world. This was achieved by providing participants with disposable cameras (where they did not have access to their own camera/phone) and inviting them to capture Point of View (POV) images of their day-to-day experiences and spaces they navigated. Participants were invited to capture images that represented something about their gender identity and the world from their perspective as a result. This supported the researcher in understanding and interpreting the world through their eyes (Harding, 1992). In addition, the production and discussion of images by participants produced an additional level of engagement and reflective analysis on the part of the participants about what the images represented to them and how they might otherwise be interpreted by others. The focus of this paper is to present the rationale for undertaking participatory visual-narrative methods when conducting research with trans* individuals. Future publications will present the findings of the substantive research and engage more thoroughly with the visual outputs and wider research findings gleaned through this method.

Freakish spectacles: Historic harms

The gender identity concerns experienced by trans* individuals are characterized by varying degrees of 'personal dissatisfaction with ... gender demarcating body characteristics' and the 'perceptions of others' (Levine, 1999: 119). Trans* individuals and their identities have long been deliberated and constructed within psycho-medical and academic discourse, being commonly

defined as 'pathological'. This has been supported and sustained by the tradition for 'professionals', in particular physicians (Califia, 1997), to appropriate the role of identity gatekeepers. Professionals in these fields are bestowed with the power to make declarations on an individual's sex and therefore (culturally ascribed) gender status.

There are examples of research that propose more nuanced theories of gender identity, including the pioneering work of trans* theorists such as Feinberg (1996), Bornstein (1994) and Wilchins (1997), credited by Ekins and King (2006: 21) as establishing 'a new paradigm for the conceptualization and study of transgender phenomenon' that extends far beyond essentialist origins concerned with how trans* identities problematize the fixed binary conceptualization of gender and sexuality, and instead move towards perspectives that see the issue generated in a society 'characterized by transphobia and gender binarism' (Suess et al., 2014: 74).

Such works recognize intersectionalities and the value of exploring these to understand broader inequalities (Monro and Richardson, 2010). Others recognize the fluid and complex nature of identity and the 'repressive results' for individuals who struggle to find a place within the one-dimensional, 'hierarchically conceived group classifications' of society (Conaghan, 2009). However, mainstream media production continues to echo outdated psycho-medical narratives, by presenting trans* identity expressions as 'abnormal' or a 'deviation', and trans* lives as something to be fascinated by, instead of focusing on the experiences of individuals and the stigmatizing implications of living in a society that does not accept identities beyond the normative gender binary system of 'male' or 'female'. Mass media continue to produce and regurgitate images and discourse that reinforce the heteronormative binary and in doing so a 'transnormative' hierarchy of acceptability.

Contemporary discussions around transgender identities emerge from a history of viewing identities outside the normative binary system as 'freakish' and morally monstrous (Califia, 1997: 158). The ideologies and ensuing practices of early gender clinics were founded on conceptualizations of 'transsexuality' for which 'cures' centred around facilitating an anatomical transition of the body from one fixed gender to 'the other'. The clinics, founded and run by academics, served as convenient sites for research and surgical training (Billings and Urban, 1996: 103) on trans* 'subjects' as 'natural experiments' (Stoller, 1973: 215). Power and authority were exerted over patients in their obligations to take part in research for which they would be 'rewarded' with treatment (Stone, 1977). The aims of such clinics were to produce 'attractive' adults who could function in and be 'accepted', undetected, by a society that regulates a binary system of gender expression. Denny (2004: 29) notes how applicants were selected and denied treatment on grounds of 'projected appearance in new role', as well as clinicians' subjective assessment of a patient's 'youth and sexual attractiveness' in a heteronormative conservative culture that valued dichotomous expressions of femininity and masculinity. In this way, trans* identities are simultaneously constructed and erased (Namaste, 2000) by the psycho-medical profession.

Lev (2006) discusses how the 'psycho-medical gaze' deliberately seeks out human deviance and institutionally classifies it as a way of establishing social control (Foucault et al., 1978). This professional 'surveillance' (Beauchamp, 2014: 163) of gender identity was formalized through the publication of the first edition of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association's *Standards of Care* (1979), which included a definition of 'transsexual'. These standards governed practitioners' approval of access to hormone and surgical treatments and perpetuated the established expectation that those in receipt of treatment assimilate into normatively gendered (binary) society (Califia, 1997; Stone, 1991). The specificity of the criteria for accessing treatment,

combined with the power of the clinicians with decision-making powers, meant that those who desired treatment learned to present their personal narrative to conform to the system's requirements, regardless of how erroneously it reflected their own lived experience (Stone, 1991). As a result, other narratives have been marginalized and silenced and lived realties of alternative presentations of gender variance erased (Bornstein, 1994).

The psycho-medical system perpetuates this narrative through its censorship and denial of any that are contrary to this established norm. So too do some trans* individuals themselves who are vulnerable and often desperate at the point of accessing support from the psycho-medical system. As such these assumptions are perpetuated through the media, which informs mainstream societal discourse, and become embedded in normative culture. Attempts to challenge assumptions through the increased exposure of non-normative identities and experiences 'occurs within a complex, changing, and often hostile sociopolitical environment' (Martin and Meezan, 2003: 197). Despite some gains, we are still, as a society, struggling to keep pace with the shifting definitions, the expanding fluidity of language and the interconnections between sex, gender identity and sexuality. These persist as contested areas of debate within academia, medicine, courtrooms and the media (Meyerowitz, 2009).

Impacts of cultural (re)presentations of transgender identities

The media feed society's fascination and anxieties (Garber, 1997), and inform our understandings, interpretations and perceptions of the world and people around us, including our understanding of trans* identities. They are responsible, in part, for the construction and reinforcement of existing social definitions of gender, including the visual and discursive erasure of expressions of identity that fall outside the heteronormative. By contrast, they can also play a crucial role in successful challenges to such norms (Capuzza and Spencer, 2017). The media and those with the cultural and financial capital to engage with them are among the most influential of the 'institutions of culture-change' (Warner, 1993). However, Phillips (2006: 4) suggests that 'the crossing of genders . . . will prove the most significant single cultural challenge [of our time]' as a result of the implications it has for redefining the fixed and binary nature of sex and sexuality upon which much of western society is established.

Mainstream media representations of gender (or gender nonconformity) have played an influential role in moments of self-recognition (Green, 2004), which reinforces the important connection between mediated forms of information and representation and trans* history. This was supported by my own research findings where participants recalled poignant moments in discovering themselves when faced with an 'agony aunt'-style newspaper article or a phone-in discussing 'transsexuals':

> Claire Rayner was on, and she was talking all about homosexuality, a little bit about lesbianism, and finally just on a passing reference to sex change, and one or two of the women who'd done it. And something just rang a bell. (Kayte)

> I saw a TV programme about a commune in Germany, or a squat, living in an abandoned building. And I can't even remember what the subject was about . . . but I do remember there clearly was somebody living there who was a guy, but he was dressed as a woman. And I just thought I'm going to go and live there, because I can be. (Julie)

Meyer (2003) noted how young people often look to television to inform their developing sense of identity. Participants in my research discussed these moments as forms of epiphany, where they

realized for the first time that they were perhaps not alone in their feelings. While these moments of mediated self-recognition in the reflection of others 'like me' provided some trans* individuals with hope and the opportunity to discover themselves, these were fleeting, chance encounters. Biased selection and framing of subjects in the media can reinforce stereotypical, reductive and other harmful images of trans* individuals. Such representations feed the reduction of trans* identities to matters of surgery and 'passing' and sustain transnormative hierarchies that further stigmatize and marginalize individuals.

The failure of the media to acknowledge the existence of trans* men and non-binary identities is concerning in what it says about the media's indulgence of society's disproportionate fascination 'with the surface trappings that accompany the feminization of "men"' (Serano, 2013: 229). How erasure specifically impacts on trans* men is worthy of future discussion in its own right. A discussion of the role and impact of visual representations of trans* identities is important for trans* individuals themselves.

There is a paradox in how the media represent trans* identities as 'morally monstrous' while also selecting examples of trans* identities to reify and award celebrity status. Adopting a tactic rooted in historic misrepresentations of trans* identities by psycho-medical institutions, the media deploy trans* tropes, including 'before and after' coverage of stereotypical feminine (application of makeup) or masculine (weightlifting) activities in discussions of gender transitions (Serano, 2007) to simultaneously call into question trans* individuals' authenticity and to reinforce the gender binary sustained by ideas of masculinity and femininity as the only acceptable expression of gender. The media's selection and representation of trans* individuals such as Caitlyn Jenner serve to feed contemporary culture's reification of 'celebrity' on the basis of beauty. Siebler (2012) argues that representations of trans* characters across television formats has sustained a dominant monolithic narrative related to the transition of trans* individuals, as opposed to any other element of lived experience, reducing trans* individuals to the 'transition' alone.

This dual narrative underwrites binary gender assumptions, alongside perceptions of a divide between normative expressions (masculine/feminine) of gender and those embodying something outside this system. Such reductive narratives erase issues of intersectionality. For example, the case of Caitlyn Jenner highlighted the socioeconomic disparities between those who do not have the means to access the 'required' cosmetic treatments that smooth the way to social acceptability or the cultural capital, through the mass media itself in Jenner's case, to persuade systems of power that you are 'different' from the marginalized masses or 'one of the good ones'. Restricting discussions of trans* issues to those only affecting individuals who have been granted relative public acceptance on the basis of their ability to 'pass' and perform within the normative binary gender order (Catalano, 2015) erases the lived experiences of individuals living a less glamorized existence, and who have been disproportionately disadvantaged through social stigma and marginalization.

My own research highlights a direct example of the control and manipulation deployed by media institutions in the production of content involving trans* individuals. Jenny-Anne took part in a reality television programme that revolved around the filming of gender confirmation and associated surgeries. During the recruitment stages for Jenny-Anne's selection to take part in the programme, the production team expressed how some of the other potential programme participants had expressed concerns related to the exploitation of trans* individuals as a result of the format being focused upon a physical transition. While Jenny-Anne may have jovially retorted to the producers 'Well then please "exploit" me!', Jenny-Anne also explained how the surgical team

had tried to pressurize her into having larger breast implants than she wished to have. Because 'the television company wanted big boobs' (Jenny-Anne).

Such was the strength of this desire that the surgical team attempted to insert larger breast implants against Jenny-Anne's wishes and without her knowledge, while she was under general anaesthetic. There is a future discussion to be had in relation to 'entrepreneurs of the self' (Rose, 1990: 117), which state institutions desire as representatives of 'acceptable' trans* identities. Siebler (2012: 9) offers a critique of representations of trans* narratives that are solely trans-feminine, whereby the primary focus is on aesthetics and how this hypersexualised 'ideal . . . pivots on capitalist models of gender facilitated by product consumption'. Such individuals are selected on their capacity to feed into the capitalist, neoliberal project that celebrates autonomy in the form of individuals who hone themselves 'to be physically, spiritually, and emotionally fit to engage and excel in competitive free-market relations' (Irving, 2014: 51):

> It is time for the mass media to abandon the sensationalist line of the talk show reveals, and the fixation on absurd, intrusive questions about genitalia, and thus start a serious discussion like oppression, discrimination, and violence. (Gherovici, 2017: 2)

Culture still focuses on the 'acceptability' of an individual within a visual hierarchy; that is, it sets up parameters of what makes a 'good' trans* person: one who can 'pass' within the system of normative binary expression and in doing so does not challenge or 'queer' the fixed gender order (Warner, 1993). This itself recreates the harms of the historical research outlined above, whereby individuals are selected for treatment on the basis of fitting predefined visual criteria. The media produce and reinforce perceptions of trans* individuals in this way, and in doing so they also serve to influence, empower and mobilize their audience in the daily regulation of identity, a form of gender policing (Joyrich, 2014) that characterizes many trans* individuals' everyday experience. In this way, there has been a form of 'net widening' (Cohen, 1985: 56) whereby regulation, previously the domain of psycho-medical professionals, has expanded beyond these professional boundaries into mainstream media and the general public serves as judge and jury, declaring recognition (or not) and acceptance (or not) within the bosom of mainstream, normative society. Miller (2015) suggests that issues of invisibility, combined with stereotypical representations of trans* identities, contribute to the general public's prejudices and foster discrimination. This calls into play a politics of visibility in which social spaces and those within them are subjected to constant surveillance and policing for the presence of non-normative visual representations of identity categories. This leads to the associated erasure of those who do not 'pass' the expected presentation standards (Enke, 2007), whereby individuals elect to avoid such spaces for fear of reprisal.

Willox (2003) demonstrates how uninformed journalism denies trans* individuals their gender identity, for example in the use of the incorrect pronoun. In doing so, it reinforces dominant gender ideology and perceptions of trans* identities as 'unreal' and deceptive of an alternative (Bettcher, 2007) underlying 'reality' ascribed to the body. This was of particular concern for participants in my research who were pursuing personal and sometimes intimate relationships. For example, Simon discussed the complexity of the challenges of negotiating these relationships as a trans* woman:

> I guess I didn't want to deceive people . . . relationships were odd in the fact that there are transgender dating sites, so there's people out there looking specifically to date transgender people. Now, a lot of

these people are looking to date transgender people pre-op . . . I was planning like to go for the full surgery, so I'd be like, would they want me even after I'd had the surgery? Are they only wanting to be with someone who's . . . ? So that's really complicated. (Simon)

This pervasive trans* discourse underpinned the premise of the Sky-produced reality entertainment show, *There's Something About Miriam* (Sky, 2003). The dating show involved men competing for the affections of 'Miriam' after selecting her from a line-up of other women without knowing that she was a trans* woman. The use of this 'deception' trope was deployed as a tool for generating horror and suspense in its audience, illustrating the manipulation of trans* individuals' lives to provide entertainment in the form of a TV 'plot twist' or 'reveal'.

As interest in trans* lives peaks, we begin to see greater inclusion of trans* individuals in the media, but it does not automatically follow that their treatment is more respectful (Humphrey, 2016). Mirroring the experience of many trans* individuals that take on the role of 'expert' patient (Bockting, 2009) in interactions with frontline medical practitioners in the course of seeking support, trans* individuals are being invited to take part in mainstream media programming as 'educators', under the auspices of representing a singular trans* experience for the greater good of educating the wider population on 'trans* issues'. However, Namaste (2011: 4) discusses involvement with the media for trans* individuals as a form of institutional discrimination whereby 'guests' are 'required to give their autobiography on demand'. Inappropriate personal lines of questioning replicate the daily harms experienced by trans* individuals as a result of prejudiced assumptions that feed society's 'fascination' with the nature and extent of individual's physical transition. Television chat show approaches to trans* lives reinforce lines of questioning that breach individuals' rights to privacy by asking detailed questions about surgeries (Singh et al., 2010). *PinkNews* recently reported on how *Good Morning Britain* presenter Piers Morgan questioned Caitlyn Jenner about her genitalia (Jackman, 2018). There is evidence that the unfamiliar, inexperienced, uneducated and unaccepting continue to perpetuate social prejudice in the media with their use of 'judgmental phrasing and suggestive words, leading to sensationalist work' (Arune, 2006: 130).

This mediated attention creates distractions that limit trans* individuals' authority and capacity to highlight more significant political and institutional issues that impact their everyday lived experiences. Namaste (2011: 61) suggests that this is a manifestation of a common social dynamic whereby cisgender people 'determine when and where' trans* individuals 'can speak'. Lombardi et al. (2002) relate the high incidence of violence against trans* individuals to society's sanctioning of people who do not conform to normative ideologies on gender. As we have seen, such practices are informed by mediated representations of gender identity. In their analysis of scripted television shows in the USA, Capuzza and Spencer (2017: 225) found representations of trans* individuals as members of a wider political group to be absent: this 'failure to acknowledge the existence of a transgender social movement depoliticizes and disempowers this form of activism'. Cases of violence against trans* individuals, no matter how distant, are brought into the homes and consciousness of trans* individuals across the world and represent the threat to their lives presented by their gender identity. Such examples serve as 'message crimes' within hate crime scholarship (Dixon and Gadd, 2006). This issue was elucidated in my findings by Simon:

I was still really nervous about being out in society . . . there was higher risk . . . I'd heard lots of different accounts of people's horrendous stories that they've encountered in their lives. So, I knew

that that was a possibility. And now I was actually living that role, that it was a possibility that could become a reality in my life. (Simon)

Reflections on the visual

This section of the paper presents the visual-narrative methodology proposed as a means to detach discourses of trans* experience from reductive visual representations. Such representations are devoid of any context and meaning derived from trans* individuals' own lived experiences of the world. Specifically, the approach proposed here seeks to avoid the recreation or encouragement of judgements of the acceptability of an individual based on their perceived ability to 'pass' according to the monolithic westernized standards of beauty in terms of the masculinity/femininity binary. Such standards were established with and continue to be perpetuated by the psycho-medical and media state apparatus.

Mainstream media representations do not accurately reflect the complexities of lived experiences, nor the diversity in the broadest category of 'gender' or those covered by the umbrella term 'transgender' (Darwin, 2017). There are several paradoxes associated with the use of the visual with trans* individuals. Research concerned with exploring lived realities and challenging essentialist ideologies of sex and gender expression must reveal and address these paradoxes rather than shy away from them. Visual practices ignorant of the social context in which they take place can ingrain modes of power that disregard the ability, autonomy and agency of individuals to define representations of their own identity and realities. The visual-narrative approach proposed here enacts a central premise of Phillips and Bowling's (2003: 271) 'minority perspective', which proposes a more nuanced methodology that documents difference as a rejection of 'essentialist categorizations'.

I took inspiration from the work of Barbee (2002) around the use of photography to generate 'visual-narratives' with trans* individuals in my research, as a tool to understand lived experiences outside the pathologization framework. My research involved working with participants to capture images that represent something about their gender identity and their experiences in the world as a result. The emphasis was that these images did not need to take the form of self-portraits but focus on other elements of the world. In contrast to the 'psycho-medical gaze' discussed above, this approach attempts to facilitate a 'transgender gaze' (Halberstam, 2005: 85) whereby we enter the world *with* trans* individuals and experiences from their perspective are revealed in the process. Such images elucidate the ethnographic interview data collected during my time with each participant. They produce new, idiosyncratic representations of how trans* individuals 'are located in the world' (Namaste, 2000: 1) and as such contribute to the development of new knowledge in this area.

Issues of visibility for trans* individuals are foregrounded by the social and medical requirement to adhere to the gender binary to access support and treatment or to achieve some form of invisibility (and therefore acceptance) within society as discussed above. This process serves to erase trans* lived experiences and Stone (1991: 230) argues that it erodes the corrective potential of visible representations of trans* identities because 'it is difficult to generate counter discourse if one is programmed to disappear'. For many trans* individuals, the issue of visibility is a troubled one, born out of a long history of not fitting in with the prevailing gender order, associated expectations around performances of masculinity and femininity, and being marginalized as a

result (Green, 2004). In my own research, participants described multiple references to a life in 'hiding' or adapting to fit the expected norms:

> Going into hiding was preferable to being called a freak . . . I could see people who probably were trans who hadn't transitioned, but who would . . . be called 'butch dykes', but who looked like me. Like I knew I looked inside. And they couldn't hide, and I thought shit, I look like them. I don't want to look like them so I have to hide. (Zdzislaw)

> The only way I can describe it, is like I felt like I was in drag. And it was quite obvious there was something wrong with my deportment and everything, because I was ridiculed. So, other people were picking it up loud and clear as well. And it was the, sort of, enforcement of that – just made it feel even worse . . . So, I sort of regressed back into what I thought was 'safe'. (Fred)

Visibility is also an important tool in any political claim to existence for many marginalized groups (Gross, 2012). For many, cultural visibility is the key to achieving rights and protections, and visibility can legitimize and empower those not validated by mainstream culture (Hennessy, 1994). Trans* individuals also seek to avoid visibility to manage exposure to risk and harm. In seeking and sustaining invisibility though, trans* individuals engage in a form of 'tacit collusion' with the binary normative gender order, which is 'largely instrumental' in creating the mental disorder categorized as gender dysphoria (Zabus and Coad, 2013: 86). Johnson (2002) establishes a connection between 'passing' and citizenship in explaining the imperative for lesbian and gay individuals to 'pass' as a method of encouraging invisibility and aligning the gift of citizenship with the individual's ability to regulate self-expression when in certain public spheres; that is, an 'acceptable' trans* person is invisible or undetectable within the binary gender order. This complex overriding paradox associated with 'recognition' as validated only through the act of 'passing' or avoiding being 'read' within the binary gender order is illustrated by Zdzislaw's experiences since transitioning. While he suggests his public transition was not about achieving externally bestowed acceptance and rather a means to achieving a level of personal acceptance of who he knew himself to be, Zdzislaw described feelings of joy gained from those interactions:

> With people where I don't need to fill in the back story . . . what kept coming across to me was not about hiding my story or telling him about my health, and Oh my God here we go again, but it was a man to man contact, in a way that you don't often experience because it just isn't there . . . he's accepting me on my terms and that's great . . . cos they don't know any different . . . I worry now, sometimes, about 'What if they found out?'. (Zdzislaw)

As a method of supporting the incorporation of trans* individuals into what is deemed culturally intelligible by broader society, this paper proposes that photography can be used in an empowering and collaborative way, as in Russell and Diaz's (2012: 5) study of liberated lesbian identity. This will allow trans* individuals to 'convey the human experience', to 'make the invisible visible' and to expose the granularity of trans* individuals' own 'cultural experience', in contrast to the traditional emphasis on how trans* individuals problematize the world for others. With the expanding 'mediascape' (Appadurai, 1996: 35) come opportunities for trans* individuals to utilize visual modes of identity to resist and reconstruct mainstream representations. There are also opportunities for academic research to create a 'replacement discourse' (Henry and Milovanovic, 1991) by embracing an approach that supports this queering of the traditional heteronormative representation of gender identity. In documenting the lived experiences of trans* individuals in a way that

counters the traditional constructions of trans* identity as pathological, judged on merits of 'passing' or traditional and commodified notions of 'beauty', cultural criminologists can deconstruct official narratives and 'produce alternative understandings' (Ferrell, 1999: 410). A key component of retelling the lived realities of trans* individuals is revealing the political and other processes by which non-normative gender identities are marginalized within society. Indeed, queer methodologies emphasize the need to 'challenge stagnant forms of scientific discourse' (Ferguson, 2013: 1), a discourse of particular power and relevance to trans* lives.

Katz (1988) suggests that criminologists should place more emphasis on the emotional and embodied experiential nature of crime. This approach logically leads to a privileging of personal experiences (Presdee, 2003) through adopting ethnographic research methods which position individuals at the centre of the development of any theory of deviance or transgression. Young et al. (2008) suggest that it is only through taking account of these emotional and cultural data that a sense of meaning and consequences for those involved can be elicited. In synchronicity with Gherovici's (2017) Lacanian psychoanalytical explanation of trans* identities, cultural criminology conceptualizes 'transgressive behaviours as attempts to resolve internal conflicts that are themselves spawned by the contradictions and peculiarities of contemporary life' (Hayward, 2010: 4). As such, the 'symptoms' (or Lacan's 'sinthome') of gender dysphoria may be understood as a logical response to the disconnect that trans* people experience when understanding their sense of self in the context of an overriding cultural conceptualization of gender as binary (Gherovici, 2017: 23).

Images play a significant role in the 'creation of identity' (Presdee, 2003: 163). Hayward (2010) highlights how the image or photograph is the primary experience we now engage with and constitutes a lived experience of self in and of itself. It is in this context that the image 'can be used as both a tool of control and resistance' (Hayward, 2010: 5); too often, externally generated visual representations of trans* subjects have been used as tools of control and regulation. In adopting a more ethical and culturally cognoscente approach to the production of alternative visual representations of trans* individuals, Carrabine (2012: 464) reminds us of the 'moral consequences of looking'. The act of photographing someone can reduce them to objects, upon which judgement and meaning can be subjected, yet this is a widespread clinical practice to capture and record visually the bodies of trans* individuals before, during and after surgical transition procedures. It is a process which causes distress and yet individuals feel powerless to decline given the precarious relationship with clinical decision makers and their power over access to future treatment:

> They made me have pictures taken of me. And around me body . . . I didn't have a choice. Didn't have a choice. (Bird)

There is much within the academic literature, which there is not space to consider more fully here, that discusses the colonial violence and voyeurism implicit within the act of photographing minority communities (see Mirzoeff, 2002). By contrast, there are also arguments that emphasize how images can 'confer importance and accord value to their subjects' (Sontag, 1977: 28), and in this way we can understand visual representation as a paradoxical system 'capable of functioning both *honorifically* and *repressively*' (Sekula and Bolton, 1989: 345). In viewing the camera as a tool rather than a weapon, visual representations offer the potential, within the context of a need to widen the social narrative of trans* identities, to 'introduce new forms of value into the world, contesting our criteria, forcing us to change our minds' (Mitchell, 2005: 92).

Today's generation of social media-savvy trans* individuals have embraced such opportunities. For example, the Instagram hashtag '#MomentsInTransition', and others including '#transisbeautiful', have been adopted by trans* individuals wishing to visually document and present significant moments in their own stories of 'transition'(*PinkNews*, 2018). These images are representations of individuals as they have chosen to be seen by the online social world. Many of the images uploaded to this social media platform, in presenting 'before and after' comparisons, could be interpreted as exacerbating the social and political implications of sensationalist mainstream media representations. There are perhaps questions to be raised about whether such mass-mediated depictions (of mainly trans* women) reflect the diversity of lived experiences and presentations of trans* identities by focusing on visual, physical transition and, through the nature of the platform itself, on achievement of beauty framed by masculine and feminine ideals. However, as Farber (2017) finds in relation to trans* men's use of online fitness message boards, while this activity may be seen to reinforce normative practices associated with masculinity/femininity, trans* individuals' engagement serves to queer ideas on who can legitimately aspire to these standards.

This mediated 'coming out' via a visual social media platform represents a form of power and autonomy over the reductive representations produced by others (see Brody et al., 2012, for a fuller discussion of the role of social media in marginalized communities' development of community and self). For example as Darwin (2017) notes, non-binary 'selfies' can constitute expressions of pride in individuals' gendered appearances. In addition, the narrative life stories that support these images introduce new dimensions of information, knowledge and modes of recognition and acceptance for the individuals concerned (Lombardi, 1999). Gagné and Tewksbury (1999: 59) highlight how trans* individuals 'neither passively enact nor completely escape the dictates of the binary system of gender knowledge'; what is important to trans* individuals is to achieve an authentic sense of what it is to 'be themselves' (1999: 63) within that milieu. Following the work of Garland et al. (2005: 431), documenting 'visually acceptable' variations of gender identities that challenge the idea of homogeneous gender binary categories can help 'reduce the power of the presentation' of a monolithic conceptualization of gender against which the lives of minorities are judged and stigmatized. Images can play a reparative role in counteracting the historic rejection and denial of visual identities that exist outside the binary gender order. In doing so, they can be of value in creating communities and providing 'sustenance . . . even [within] a culture whose avowed desire has often been *not* to sustain them' [emphasis added] (Sedgwick, 1997: 31).

Participatory models of research have the potential to redress inequitable power relations between researcher and participant, a key issue for research with trans* participants (Prosser and Loxley, 2008). There is an institutionalized privileging of the written word as the legitimate method of conveying deeper understandings of the world in which we live. In overriding this belief, there is much to be gained by adopting visual methods in research work with trans* individuals, which can go some way to addressing the limitations of language. Bouman et al. (2016) outline how the misuse of the power of language is another route by which trans* individuals have been marginalized and discriminated against. The limitations of language related to trans* experiences have left individuals unable to challenge harmful hegemonic narratives and exposed to internalized transphobia (Iantaffi and Bockting, 2011). When research participants are given cameras, the images they capture represent a shift away from the 'researcher-centric construction of the social world' (Prosser and Loxley, 2008: 31) and legitimize the trans* individual's perspective and provide an alternative means of communicating it.

Through its inherently collaborative nature, this approach addresses the harms and challenges presented throughout this paper. Participatory visual-narrative methods provide for a negotiation of what is to be visually represented and what the underlying meaning being communicated is (Croghan et al., 2008). For trans* individuals, this approach recognizes the authority of their own experiences and ensures ownership of how those experiences should be represented to the world (Mannay, 2010). In addition, projects that involve 'respondents with cameras' (Prosser and Loxley, 2008: 31) are often concerned with participants capturing images representing the 'ordinary', the everyday experience relevant to the participant. This supports and facilitates participants' identification of issues that are relevant to them and their journey in the world, provides data that can be used to encourage change through social and political action and begins to allay some of the mistrust and suspicion fostered by the systemic cultural harms outlined in this paper.

Given the wide-ranging challenges and discrimination experienced by trans* individuals, Singh et al. (2013: 94) note that there is a 'tremendous need for research' in this area, and advocate a participatory action research (PAR) approach that encourages research to be undertaken *with* rather than *on* trans* individuals. The participatory visual-narrative approach to research work proposed in this paper is set against the framework proposed by Singh et al. (2013) and within the broader desire to undertake research work that does not dominate in the process, as established by Baum et al. (2006). Pure PAR has a broad goal: to understand, challenge and ultimately contribute to the changing of social conditions responsible for the negative psychological experiences of individuals. The method considers the implications of gender identity-related researcher privilege and participant oppression to the power relationship in research, and draws on a feminist theoretical framework in this respect (Singh et al., 2013). Adopting a feminist approach to research with trans* participants centres researcher intentions on the importance of valuing and legitimizing knowledge grounded in experience and seeks to share these stories as a tool to enlighten wider society (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). Combined with ethnographic interviewing methods that foster a research environment where participant agendas emerge during the research process, photographic visual-narratives situate experiences within the lived environment and provide powerful data (Warr, 2004). Participatory models of research support a move away from the historic positivism associated with the study of trans* individuals that prioritizes scientific method and observation over more constructivist approaches which posit researchers and communities as partners in the co-creation of knowledge (Brooks, 1999).

Conclusion

This paper has presented an argument and grounded rationale for the use of participatory visual-narrative methods in research work with trans* individuals. Such work recognizes the vulnerabilities of trans* individuals in the research process and represents resistance to the harms and influence of embedded cultural assumptions of acceptable (re)presentations of gender. The discussion highlights the harms inherent within the psycho-medical foundations of broader societal perceptions of trans* identities within the confines of a heteronormative binary gender order, alongside other risks inherent within a contemporary climate that is concerned with visually mediated (re)presentation of the self that are contingent upon upholding a feminine/masculine binary. In turn societies' surveillance and regulation of transgressions outside of this hegemonic norm are mobilized. The paper has charted connections between these early misrepresentations and contemporary mainstream media representations that recreate reductive stereotypes that simultaneously erase and vilify trans* identities.

The harms generated by the ongoing psycho-medical monopoly on the categorization and (re)presentation of trans* identities, and the reinforcement of such reductive ideas through mass media, require the generation of new knowledge to be grounded in the lived experiences of trans* individuals. Knowledge generated in such a way helps to focus the issues away from the individual as the cause of the prejudice against them, towards the contemporary social and cultural dynamics of the contexts in which such perceived 'transgressions' occur as problematic. The approach advocated here aims to generate data that are reflective of the lived realities of trans* individuals in a way that can highlight the structures and processes that serve to marginalize them and others, and acknowledges the authority and autonomy individuals should have over how their experiences are (re)presented to the world (Mannay, 2010). Such data have powerful potential to encourage culture change through social and political action and redress the balance of power and mistrust that is understandably ingrained within researcher relationships with trans* participants.

Note

1. This study's selection of the 'trans*' term is in acknowledgement of the ongoing project resonating from within trans* communities to expand the vocabulary and terminology of definitions. The term 'trans*' with the addition of the asterisk has been adopted as a term capable of being inclusive of a wide range of individuals who are both currently, and could potentially emerge, as identifying as trans*.

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