**“I’ve always thought that I’m not good enough… why would someone good looking want to be with me?”: A qualitative exploration of the impact of visible differences upon intimacy and intimate relationships**

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**Background:** Whilst visible difference is associated with a variety of psychosocial challenges and intimate relationships can be considered an important component of healthy, meaningful adult lives, the intersection of visible difference and intimacy has received relatively little attention in the research literature. This qualitative research explored participants’ accounts of the impact that their visible difference has upon their intimate life.

**Methods:** Twenty-two participants (16 female, 6 male) aged 25-64 with a range of visible differences including Cleft Lip/Palate (n=6), Alopecia (n=5), Psoriasis (n=3), Breast Cancer related changes (n=2), Ankylosing Spondylitis (n=1), Facial Birthmark (n=1), Facial Scarring (n=1), Ichthyosis (n=1), Facial Palsy (n=1), multiple aetiologies (n=1) were recruited through advertisements placed with a number of relevant charities and support groups. Participants were offered the choice of how to participate (via the telephone, skype or by speaking in person) and individual semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using inductive thematic analysis.

**Findings:** Participants considered their visible difference to have impacted their intimate relationships and to have influenced their sense of self and social identity. Four superordinate themes were identified: Appearance Attracts and Detracts; The Disclosure Dilemma; Physicality and Reality; and Delineating and Defining Relationships. Drawing from each of the superordinate themes, the focus of this paper is upon the following themes: The Discounted Self; The Disclosure Dilemma; Invading Physical Intimacy; and Enriching and Fortifying Us.

**Discussion:** Participants understood their visible difference as having a pervasive and enduring impact upon themselves and upon their intimate life and as presenting additional challenges that must be negotiated both in the formation and the maintenance of close personal relationships. It is important to recognise, however, that positive effects were also recounted and these are acknowledged within the themes identified. This research elucidates participants’ understandings concerning the breadth and depth of these impacts and extends our knowledge regarding the impact of visible difference upon intimacy and intimate relationships. Recommendations for peer to peer support and for future research are considered.