



**SCHOOL OF GLOBAL STUDIES**

# **QUEER PARENTHOOD ACROSS TEMPORAL AND SOCIAL LINES**

*An anthropological study on queer individuals  
experiences of parenthood in Swedish society*

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine the everyday experience of queer parenthood, relating to aspects of gender and sexuality, family relations, and social norms in Swedish society. The study reveals that being a queer parent in contemporary Swedish society means being in an ambivalent position where factors of time and space, as well as gender identity and expression proves to be a leading force in how the parents practice parenthood and whether the political aspect of queerness comes to be consciously or unconsciously expressed within parenthood. The term *queer* is central in this study, as it is used to refer to non cis and heterosexual identities, movements and practices. Therefore the study has been framed by a queer theoretical perspective with a focus on norms and anomaly relating to *sexuality* and *gender*, *temporality*, and the construction of *kinship*. The empirical data were conducted in a two month fieldwork that took place in Västra Götaland, Sweden, with semi-structured interviews as the bearing method.

**Keywords:** Queer parenthood, parental line, temporality, emotionality, kinship.

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# 1. Introduction

*... any theory of queerness and futurity, or queerness and utopia, must consider the place of the Child within it. While some theorists address the Child's queer potentialities, a more holistic approach considers the role of parents, in particular queer parents, in the fostering of a queer future. (Heston 2013: 245)*

With this quote I would like to introduce the topic of the dissertation, which is the experience of queer parenthood. And in relation to Heston, invite future research and theory on queerness to involve the child and the parent as these are central in the production of contemporary and future narratives and practices of parenthood and constructions of queer kinship.

My interest on the topic of queer parenthood sparked while working in a preschool, where discussions on families are ever present. Pedagogues worked to broaden the perspectives on 'different' family constellations with literature and dialogues. This work opened up discourse on families and, in my perception, brought the anomaly into the normality. The discussion on categories of families in terms of rainbows, alternative, ordinary and different, came to reproduce narratives of non-normative and normative, as in aiming for tolerance instead of acceptance of queer family constellations. These observations and thoughts drawn from them are my own and are contextual to specific social places, which brought me to the inquiry of how queer parenthood is experienced from the perspective of the individual.

In order to explore this topic I have interviewed a group of parents who identify as queer. The conversations with the parents have ranged from childrearing, family of origin, queerness, and social norms. With this study I hope to contribute and challenge the ongoing discourse on family construction and values in Swedish society, by bringing queerness at the forefront of that discussion.

## 1.1 Background

Since 2003 it has been a legal possibility for same sex couples to share their parenthood and custody of joint children in Sweden. The new legislation on partnership and adoption came about after the government appointed an inquiry; Committee on Children in Homosexual Families (SOU 2001:10). Since then, over the past 20 years, new legislation has been

introduced that has made it possible for LGBTQI+ people to form families and register their parenthood within the framework of the state.

The most recent change in legislation regarding parenthood was introduced on January 1th 2022 and means that a presumption of parenthood applies to all married couples, regardless of gender. The purpose of the law is to modernise and simplify the regulation surrounding parenthood and therefore make it more equal and gender neutral (Prop. 2020/21:176). The new laws surrounding parenthood are based on a wider acceptance and understanding of different family constellations, and more so of LGBTQI+ individuals increased legitimate position and recognition by the state.

The new legislations that have been applied over the years have primarily worked to include non-heterosexual individuals, in monogamous partnership. Up until 2013 it was not a possibility for trans individuals to legally change their gender identity unless they in relation to the juridical sex change also underwent a sterilisation procedure (2012/13:SoU24). The history of legislation regarding queer identities and parenthood in Sweden looks different in relation to different LGBTQI+ identities and their stigmatisation in society, as seen above with the temporality of certain legislations.

## **1.2 Aim and scope**

The aim of this study is to explore how queer parenthood is experienced in contemporary Swedish society. The purpose has been to capture experiences connected to social and emotional factors relating to parenthood in everyday life, therefore aiming to capture queer parenthood in its wholeness. The research questions presented below are formulated to reflect those factors.

### **1.2.1 Research questions**

- What strategies does the individual have to act in- and handle their parenthood in relation to a general heteronormative cisgendered idea of parenthood?
- How is the concept of rainbow family and the placement within this category interpreted and experienced?
- How is parenthood experienced in relation to the individuals' queer identity?

### 1.3 Previous research

In this section I discuss previous research in areas of gender and sexuality, sociological and anthropological studies on the topic of queer parenthood and everyday life surrounding it. Within anthropology as well as other disciplines, research on queer relations and family constellations has mainly focused on kinship as socially and culturally constructed between non-biological ties (Nardi 1992; Weston 1991). Queer parenthood in anthropology continues to be relatively unexplored, which Lara McKenzie criticises the discipline for. McKenzie argues that a greater use of the term parenthood makes it possible to understand the complexities of modern parent-child relations, as well as its neutrality makes it possible to challenge the gender binary understanding of motherhood and fatherhood (2022). The research presented in this section is all within a North American context. Though the history and sociocultural norms regarding parenthood may differ from a Swedish context, I find the research and their analytical findings relevant to my study as it provides different perspectives on how queer parenthood and family constellations play out within cis- and heterosexual societal frameworks, as well as how family life is constructed.

In *Lesbian Mothers: Accounts of Gender in American Culture* (2018) Ellen Lewin conducted research on motherhood mainly through the lens of lesbian women, as well as single heterosexual women. For lesbian women, their motherhood was seen as somewhat separate from their lesbian identity, as it was sometimes necessary to separate the identities in order to maintain relations with bio-family, children, work settings, and sometimes the fathers of their children. Lewin argues that the traditional social roles in American culture leaves women with little autonomy and space for building personhood, while being a lesbian and a mother would influence and validate women's definition of self. Being in non-heterosexual partnership gave the women space to craft personal identities where motherhood, with its richness and complexities, would often overshadow other identities. I use Lewin's study as an understanding of how the parents relate to family of origin as well as how commonality of queerness creates freedom in shaping relations and practising parenthood.

Laura Heston discusses queer parenting in *Utopian kinship? The possibilities of queer parenting* (2013). Queer parenting was expressed by participants in the study as the practice of parenting children in queer kinship collectives such as, family friends co-parenting, chosen family stepping into the role of aunt and uncle, couples raising their child with the sperm

donor etc (p. 257). Heston argues that this practice of parenting contributes to queer 'world-making' and the shaping of queer futures. This is done by how parents refuse to raise children in dominant ways, as in rejecting fertility clinics and instead conceiving through friends, raising children in family structures of chosen kin, and parenting in ways that teach children against the conformity of gender, sexuality and sociopolitical ideologies (p. 265). The findings in Heston's study, regarding the definition of family and analysis on queer futures is applicable in my study as the same narratives and definitions can be seen among the parents.

Christopher Carrington discusses in *No place like home: Relationships and family life among lesbians and gay men* (1999) the production of gender identity and the meaning and creation of relationships and everyday life among same sex couples. Carrington challenges the general image of same sex couples as more equal in the domestic domain based on their shared gender identity. In the study the couples would take on and categorise themselves and their partner in certain traditional gender roles in their homes, related to femininity and motherhood and masculinity and fatherhood. This could depend on their personal characteristics, interests and how much time they spent in their home, including doing domestic chores. Carrington speaks of 'doing gender', as a means of what one does rather than what one is. This means that recurring actions in everyday life creates gender, whereas domestic labour was seen as the main practice of creating and maintaining one's gender identity (p. 51). Carrington's discussion on 'doing gender' within the domestic domain and how certain characteristics are tied to gender, becomes applicable in the gendered experience of parenthood, but more so in the light of 'gender as given' by social actors.

## **1.4 Theoretical framework**

My research has been framed by a queer perspective with an influence of Sara Ahmed (2006), Fanny Ambjörnsson (2006, 2018), and Jack Halberstam (2005). In order to analyse queer parenthood as a lived experience I discuss concepts of gender and sexuality, temporality, practice, and kinship in a Western context. This is done by shedding light to constructions of normality and how queerness relates to these constructions through rejection, adjustment, and embodiment.



### 1.4.1 Through a queer perspective: Gender and sexuality

A queer perspective involves a critical understanding of sexuality and gender, with a focus on notions of normality and anomaly. Fanny Ambjörnsson discusses in *vad är queer?* (2006) the term queer as ambivalent and notes that its meaning is shifting depending on its use within social groups, time and place. Generally it is understood as a form of norm breaking and activism, an umbrella term for LGBTQI+, and as well a synonym for weird or even pervers (p. 8). By this definition, concepts of normality become central. In this regard, Ambjörnsson discusses binary oppositions, such as woman and man, heterosexual and homosexual, and that the division between these categories means that there are expectations of how the individual should behave based on their identity. In *Gender trouble feminism and the subversion of identity* (1999), Judith Butler discusses these binary oppositions as constructed and performed through socially learned behaviour that form the basis of what is considered natural. Gender and sexuality is therefore understood as performative and maintained by repetitive behaviours in interactions with others who themselves perform by a social script.

By looking at norms and individuals through a phenomenological perspective Sara Ahmed discusses in *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects and others* (2006) how through a repetition of behaviour, norms are created in straight lines and pathways. When the individual follows or acts within the straight line it means that they are positioned towards the future, the body is therefore oriented in space and time. By not following or acting within the line the individual has lost its direction, the body has fallen out of the normative and has therefore become disoriented in space and time. The straight line has thus become, as Ahmed puts it, wonky or queer (p. 66). The phenomenological perspective in this regard explains how norms are not only external social rules, but also how they are established in the body and shape awareness of the body's limitations within different social spaces.

### 1.4.2 Kinship

The meaning and definition of family and kinship has a central part in the study, specifically in regards to what biological, social and emotional relations mean for the experience of everyday life surrounding parenthood. In *After Kinship* (2005) Janet Carsten looks at the concept of kinship in anthropology and notes that the meaning of it has come to shift with technologies that make the distinction between the biological and social no longer self-evident. In the same light, Dahl and Björklund discusses in the article *Queer Kinship*

*Revisited* (2019) how the meaning of kinship in modern times has become queer, as in reconfigured, in effect of new laws and medical technologies that make it possible for queer individuals to form families. Queer family formations within a Nordic context are to a greater extent considered to be indifferent to heterosexuality and comparable to a 'normal' form of parenting. However, the authors argue that it's a one sided perspective that puts white middle class queer individuals in focus, where first and second generation queer immigrants, and non white individuals are not given the same space in the discussion. Whereas racialised queer individuals do not have similar opportunities to marry and have children, even if the state allows them (p. 17). In this discussion I would like to add another factor against the equivalence of queer parenthood in relation to heterosexual parenthood, which is the emotionality of queer parenthood. While the factors mentioned are important to reflect on in queer parenthood and how they affect the probability of being positioned as 'normal', the emotionality of being perceived within the normality is left out. I argue in relation to Dahl and Björklund that even in a Nordic context where queer parents are within normality, the emotional and internal experience of being a queer parent are peculiar to being queer and a parent that in itself can be comparable to a heterosexual parental position.

Queer kinship has and continues to be seen as fluid in its creation and definition of family. Kath Weston discusses in *Families we choose* (1991) the notion of choice as recurrent in lesbian and gay mens construction of family, as well in how parenthood is practiced. 'Choosing children' meant a conscious act of planning children and the responsibilities regarding them, as well as working out agreements between friends who would co-parent and become important parental figures without the juridical legitimacy of that role (pp. 188-191). In Westons study, queer kinship with or without the presence of children can be seen as a conscious choice that resembles as well as it is dissimilar from the heterosexual family. As the heterosexual family is many times categorised as the nuclear family, its 'opposite' would be the rainbow family, that in Swedish society has come to be an accepted and used term by groups that fall in this category, as well as by institutions and other social and juridical establishments. The definition of a rainbow family is broad and includes the chosen family, bonus families and families with children, where one or more people identifies as LGBTQI+ (RFSL 2021). This means that in comparison to the nuclear family, the rainbow family can exist without children and without parenthood, specifically within the chosen family. My focus and use of the term rainbow family, however, is on the family with children, where the parents are LGBTQI+.

### 1.4.3 Parental line

The term 'parental line' is used by Sara Ahmed in discussing the reproduction of family, where the heterosexual couple is understood as a starting point where the world unfolds and that its outcome of child production is expected in order to stay in the linearity of family (2006: 85). Heterosexual reproduction as an expectation in order to stay within the lines is relevant in this study as well, though I would like to use the term 'parental line' in the matter of Ambjörnsson's term 'line of women' and the temporality surrounding it. Line of women is used to explain how the practice of cleaning combines the past with the present, specifically in how one body's experience and practice of cleaning stretches itself over time and shapes another body's experience and act of cleaning. The bodies referred to are women, specifically mothers and daughters. Whether the experience of the mothers cleaning practices observed in childhood were positive or negative, the practice became a legacy embodied in the future (2018: 43-51). The practice of cleaning has then created a generational line of women, passed down from one woman to another.

In this matter, the parental line then means that experiences from childhood come to shape parenthood in the present. These experiences can be defined as negative or positive and thereafter figures as a guideline in how parenting is done in the present moment. The understanding and practice of parenting is not just an effect of its sociocultural surrounding and place in time, it is as well a legacy passed on from one parent to another, that stretches itself from one time into the present moment. Queerness can also come to disrupt this line, as it creates new pathways of childrearing that differs from heteronormative spaces and expectations one came to be familiar with in childhood. The parental line means that parenting in the present is understood and followed, as well as rejected through an example of one's own parents, and being positioned where one relates to past generations while raising a new one.

### 1.4.4 Queer temporality

From the theoretical discussion above, the theme of time is prevalent, both in how individuals apply meaning and organise life around time, as well as how certain meanings and positions shift through time. As seen with the position of being queer in a time that was and a time that is now, where through sociopolitical events queer individuals positions have come to shift. Elizabeth Freeman uses the term chrononormativity in *Time binds: queer temporalities, queer*

*histories* as an understanding of a linear time, where one event follows another in an already planned out and expected order for everyone. This linearity of time constitutes itself through a logic of productivity, where the past is only useful if it predicts and becomes material for the future (2010: 5). In *In a queer time and place* Jack Halberstam discusses the same idea of a logical time as productive or as well reproductive that can be tied to family times, that include the practice of childrearing. Another time relating to family would be the generational time, where values, morals, wealth, and goods are passed through family ties from one generation to the next one (2005: 5).

Through a social lens, in order to create meaning in life it is necessary to organise oneself and events around the chrononormative line, where productivity and reproduction is of a central standpoint. Halberstam (2005) terms this as life schedules, where individuals are expected to pass certain marks in a certain order and timeframe. A desirable life schedule is organised through actions and events as linear in relation to age; a childhood as a boy or a girl, puberty occurring at the right age, romantic love where gender and desire coincide, appropriate career path, the formation of the heterosexual family, etc. Heteronormativity as a fundamental part of life schedules put queer individuals in another temporality, where queer lives who don't follow the expected life schedules are constructed as immature or inauthentic. Ambjörnsson and Jönsson discuss how individuals are seen as associated with adulthood when it correlates to heteronormativity and a 'right' form of gender expression (2010: 213). For queer individuals who raise children, parenthood can then be seen as a bridge into adulthood, as it follows one of the main life projects of what is socially expected and demanded of adults.

## **1.5 Material and methodology**

The empirical data presented in this study was conducted from a two month fieldwork from January to March 2023 in the region Västra Götaland, Sweden. In this section I discuss the methods applied during the fieldwork and after when analysing the material.

### **1.5.1 Participants**

The study consisted of seven participants who all reside in Sweden. The majority of the participants I was able to meet to conduct semi-structured interviews (see 1.5.2) either in their homes or in public settings. I conducted a few interviews on zoom, in regards to practicality and geographical distance between me and them. In order to come in contact with people who

were interested in participating I reached out to a Facebook group aimed at rainbow families, and an organisation aimed at creating queer spaces and events for LGBTQI+ people, as well as a few participants I came in contact with through a common acquaintance. In my conduction of the research I aimed to keep it as open as possible in relation to the research topic, by that I mean I included every participant who identifies as LGBTQI+, is a parent, a Swedish resident, and spoke a language the both of us could communicate in, which turned out to be in English and Swedish. In the ethnographic discussion I refer to the participants' age group, which I have categorised as 'middle adulthood', meaning in the ages of 30-39, and 'late adulthood', meaning in the ages of 40+.

### 1.5.2 Semi-structured interviews

The study was conducted through a qualitative approach, with semi-structured interviews as the bearing method. Though participant observation was not my main method as the title suggests, I would still like to lift its importance in conducting qualitative ethnographic fieldwork. As Emerson et al. notes, that in order for the ethnographer to approach and understand the lives that are studied, participant observation in everyday life is of the utmost importance (2011: 3). Interviews and participant observation can as well be seen as intertwined. Göransson discusses interviews and participants observation as relational and in effect of one another, as conversations between ethnographer and participants are ongoing in participant observation, as well as observation is continuous before, during and after interviews (2019: 107). In line with Göransson, I view these two methods as relational, as I have come to observe participants' movements, shifting language and emotionality, as well as their surroundings in interviews, which has given me a deeper understanding of their experiences and narratives.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the purpose of conversing on specific subjects and themes regarding the participants' parenthood. Bernard classifies the semi-structured interview format as the most effective when the researcher is only able to interview someone once, whereas the method allows for 'freewheeling', as well as the foundation of an interview guide provides proper guidance in the conversation (2017: 164-165). This means that a semi-structured format allows the researcher to some degree steer the conversation by including already formulated questions and themes in order to cover the main theme of the study (DeWalt & Dewalt 2011: 139). The interview guide I formulated

consisted of three themes based on the research questions, whereas each theme consisted of one to three open questions. This method proved to be effective as it opened up conversation within the frames of queer parenthood, as well as the participants were able to steer the conversation within that framework. The number of interviews I conducted were seven. I conducted two interviews on different occasions with the same participant, as well as I interviewed two of the participants at the same occasion with the reason of them being in a partnership. The interviews were 40-70 minutes long, except for the second interview I conducted with the same participants, which were 15 minutes long. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants.

### 1.5.3 Data analysis

Each interview was transcribed and coded into the main themes, emanating from the research questions. The analysis of the transcribed interviews were done by qualitative coding, which Emerson et al. defines as an open approach to the empirical data, where the analytical categories reflect significant events, discourse and experiences. As well as identification of concepts and analytical insights are made through a close examination and reflection of the data set (2011: 175). While coding I found patterns that related back to the main themes, theoretical standpoints and to previous research. In the ethnographic discussion I divided the research questions into three main themes with a title that reflects the research question and empirical data presented and discussed within that title (see 2.). Each title then consists of two to three subthemes, where I explore and analyse different areas relating to the experience of queer parenthood.

### 1.5.4 Positionality

An inevitable effect of ethnographic research is the researcher's impact on the field. As Eldén notes, even though the researcher may have ambitions of being 'neutral' in relation to the people who are studied, social background and substantial ideas makes it easier to approach and understand groups that resemble oneself. As well as it affects how information is perceived, whose stories are seen as credible and whose perspectives end up in the periphery (2020; 70-71).

With the notion of resemblance, I have come to reflect on my queer identity and what it means in relation to the participants and the research field. Though I came to relate to and

understand some of the participants' feelings and experiences, I strived to separate their narratives from mine, as in maintaining my position as 'the researcher.' This meant positioning myself as 'unknowing' at times when the participants would explain a feeling or experience, where I would invite them to further explain themselves so their stories and narratives would remain their own (Goodwin et al. 2003). I also gave the participants space before and after the interviews to ask me questions, as to meet on a mutual ground where I wouldn't only be the student who collected social data regarding their personal life.

## **1.6 Ethical considerations**

During and after the time in the ethnographic field I have followed the Swedish research council's (2017) ethical guidelines and recommendations, as well as the American anthropological associations (2012) statement on ethics aimed at the safety of the participants and respect for the research field. This has meant a responsibility in my position, specifically in regards to how I have secured the empirical data, anonymisation of the participants, as well as vocalise transparency and respect for the participants and their right to retract their participation.

Even though participants' children are not part of the target group or the problem formulation of the study, due to the central question of parenthood, they have come to be present in the social space and a part of conversations. In order to protect children's identities, information regarding the children has not been documented to the extent that it designates them as 'individuals' in comparison to how the parents and their experiences have been documented. This means that I have come to define the children as a unified entity, and whether the participants have one or more children I refer to them in the analysis in singular as 'the child'.

When presenting the participants in the ethnographic discussion I have given them pseudonyms. I have as well altered some of the excerpts presented as they have contained personal or revealing information, such as names of places and people.

## **2. Ethnographic discussion**

The ethnographic discussion below is divided into three main themes that are composed of a few subthemes, aimed to answer the research questions. In the first theme, titled *queer*

*parenthood against the background of heteronormative parenthood*, I discuss how queerness shapes parenthood, as in how the parents practice parenthood in relation to societal norms and familial relations. In the second theme, which is *defining the rainbow family and oneself in relation to it*, I discuss how the parents define their family and see themselves within or outside a normative parenthood. Lastly, in the third theme, which is *navigating queer parenthood*, I discuss the overall experience of parenthood relating to emotionality and temporality, gender, and family.

## **2.1 Queer parenthood against the background of heteronormative parenthood**

### **2.1.1 Queer parenthood as everyday resistance**

The participants were somewhat divided when it came to how they saw their queer identity in relation to their parental role, as some did not put much weight into their queer identity affecting their parenthood in certain ways, while others put a lot of weight on their queer identity as strongly correlated to their parental role. In regards to this, the participants who saw their queer identity as tightly correlated to their role as a parent would discuss certain life choices and actions as a form of everyday activism. What is important to note here is that none of the participants consciously separated or disregarded their queer identity from their role as parents, it was more so a case of how much the political aspect of queerness and other intersecting identities inflicted on their parenthood.

Sonia and Maria, a couple in their middle adulthood, who had worked with LGBTQI+ rights through activism in their country of origin saw the importance in just existing in public without hiding their queer identities. The resistance in itself is existing unapologetically as a rainbow family and therefore challenge the harmful stereotypes of queer people often showcased in media:

As a rainbow couple, we thought that we should be visible, because that's why we [speaks native language], raise the consciousness that rainbow families are around other people in the society, not only in the television, in the media, where often queer people are ridiculed.



As same-sex marriage is illegal in their country of origin, Maria as a transwoman and Sonia as a ciswoman were able to get married as their partnership was classified as cis- and heterosexual, since Maria had not undergone the process of a legal sex-change. For Maria and Sonia having lived in their country of origin the majority of their life as socially and juridically marginalised, made the political aspect of queerness a potent reflection on their parenthood. Being visible was seen as an important act, that even in unsafe times and settings the act of 'showing up' would overshadow other emotions. Linda who is in late adulthood, reflected back on the first time she walked the pride parade with the child:

I remember when I had *the child* in a carrier. There had been a shooting somewhere. And I was terrified, I thought 'I'm not going to be afraid to show myself!' But I was so scared, I went and held *the child* in my arms and kept watch the whole time. I thought 'what if there's a sniper here, what happens then? But I still have to do this'. [...] it just felt so important to show up.

Even though this experience happened years before, the emotional effect it had on Linda came to shape how parenthood is experienced and practiced in the present. For Ellie, who is in their late adulthood, the political aspect of queerness extends itself into many aspects of everyday life. It was a recurrent expression that the practice of everyday activism occurs naturally as intertwined with the essence of being a queer individual living and existing outside of hetero- and gender norms. In relation to the child's growing up process, everyday activism extends itself more and more into parenthood which becomes explicit in social encounters:

But just highlight in everyday situations that it can be in a different way, that I think more about the whole, to live as a queer person in this society, to actually dare to stand up for yourself or *the child*... It becomes like quite a lot of small everyday activism, a bit. Even if it becomes uncomfortable, [you] try to make it so de-dramatised so it doesn't become uncomfortable. That is very much part of parenthood right now, to stand up for *the child's* creation of identity.

Participants who related back to past times where they were active in the queer movement or in curated queer spaces, and to some degree still are, spoke of resistance as inhabitant in queerness that shapes their everyday life and parenthood. Intersecting identities were as well

inflicting on how one would identify with the resistance of queerness, such as being trans, gender non-conforming, and an immigrant. Being outside the normality in expressing a 'right' form of gender appearance can be seen with Linda, who a couple of times in the conversation brought up that what type of hairstyles she have had would upset people, sometimes to the point of confrontation. Linda also spoke of bringing the child into queer spaces as way to enrich the child's life with a more open approach to different identities and ways of existing in a otherwise confined society:

The advantages are that *the child* actually gets to grow up in that world, where it's like... what is positive is that I have close friends who may have gone through transition, I am active in [different curated queer spaces] and *the child* gets to meet a lot of different people this way. It won't be this otherwise confined... Or I hope that the positive thing is that *the child* simply gets a richer life.

Being within queer spaces and what it has to offer is not limited to Linda who identifies as queer, it is shared with the child as a way to bring them into the same space of belonging and acceptance of differences. Queerness as a space of existence is transformed into a legacy that is passed on to the child. In this sense the parental line is disrupted in how the parent distances themselves from the social space they were raised in, while simultaneously creating new pathways of childrearing that initiate possible new parental lines for future generations. This could be defined by Heston as an act towards queer futures, as queer parents, unconsciously or consciously, parent their children in non dominant ways that create new practices of parenting in future generations (2013: 265). This is as well expressed by Ellie, how raising the child as a queer parent in politically engaged contexts is of an emotional value for them, as it was something that they missed in childhood:

I think that just being a parent, being a queer parent, how it has affected my parenting, if I hadn't been [queer]. [...] That how it will also affect *the child*, that they have been on demonstrations since, well, the stroller era. They're like 'yes demo, it's the most fun!' So it feels like a nice thing to be able to pass on or give, which I didn't get.

Lilja and Vinthagen define everyday resistance as ‘hidden transcripts’, that happen behind the curtains of the public scene, beyond the reach of authority (2009: 72-73). Authority in this discussion reveals itself as social norms, or in Lindas words “the confined”. Here, everyday resistance doesn’t necessarily happen behind the public scene, as parenthood is played out in public and private settings, the resistance comes to express itself in conscious everyday acts or just in existing as a queer parent. Queerness in this regard goes beyond sexuality and gender that can be transformed into a legacy passed on to the child.

### 2.1.2 Practicing and understanding parenthood through one’s own parents

When discussing what parenthood means for the participants, most would relate it back to their own parents and how they were raised. Lewin notes how kinship is of an importance for lesbian mothers as it provides an illustration of patriarchal ideology that they worked to separate themselves from. The family of origin was seen as influential in how the mothers created their own family, but more so as an instance of what one doesn’t want to reproduce rather than a source of ongoing validity and meaning (2018: 75). The same can be seen with the participants as many felt hurt from their childhood, which they came to use as a guideline in order not to reproduce that hurt in ongoing generations. Many would also lift the positive aspects from their childhood that they strive to reproduce in their parenthood. Camilla, who is in middle adulthood, spoke of recreating the unity and connection she felt in childhood, her parents and in-laws were seen as a guideline in how positive parenting is done:

I want this connection I was brought up with. Spending time with one's parents and *the child*, but being able to create something yourself. [...] because you want to be a really good parent and grab the best from your parents, both from my parents but also from my in-laws.

The connection between family members that Camilla felt in childhood is seen as a legacy that can be passed on to the child in their experience of childhood. The experiences from childhood then become valuable material in the present of parenthood, as a foundation of a possible reality for their own child. Here, the parental line is not challenged or disregarded, as what has been is identified as positive, it comes to be reproduced for the next generation. Sonia reflects on experiences from her childhood as well as how her parents were affected by

their parents, in this regard a generational line of hurt is revealed as undesirable in the recreation of the next generation:

Even though they [parents] tried to stop a lot of things, for example didn't hit me or my [sibling]. But they could scream a lot, yell a lot and I think we are much more conscious and also our generation works much more for example in therapy not to copy this same behaviour. We know like what behaviour was toxic or hurtful and we try of course, but nobodies perfect, but we try [...].

The participants as well as their parents can be seen within a grander scheme of lines and spaces; the generational, geographical, and sociocultural. Which means that events and experiences are in relation to and affected by its place in time and space. When Sonia says "our generation", referring to the millennial generation, it puts her in a time and group who are aware of negative patterns of behaviour that have been passed on. Positionality and social change that accompanies the passage of time also creates an understanding of why one was raised the way they were. Participants queer identity could be understood as primarily in questioning and exposing certain patterns, especially those who fall in line with heteronormativity, as Ellie expresses, "it was unthinkable that you should be anything other than straight in my upbringing."

## **2.2 Defining the rainbow family and oneself in relation to it**

### **2.2.1 Defining family**

When asked whether the participants related to the term of being a rainbow family or not, all of them saw themselves within that category. For some the description of a rainbow family seemed to be applicable only because they fitted within the description, the term in itself was not claimed to a further emotional or personal degree. Johanna, who is in middle adulthood, expresses that she would classify her family as a rainbow family, because the child has two mothers. But there is still some distance in relation to the term, whereas there are other forms of family constellations that seems to be more within the frames of a rainbow family:

I usually say this, everyone can be who you want to be as long as you are kind to each other, if you want to be four parents to a child, or if you just want to be

alone, you can be exactly as you want. So I don't care what people do with their lives, or if they see themselves as a man or a woman, or who don't want to define themselves as anything. But I would still say, I think, yes. When you say rainbow family, I still think we are in that category.

The understanding of family in Western cultures has long been through the nuclear family, though it has come to change, its dominance in defining family as a configuration of two parents and one or a few children is still prevalent in the understanding of a legitimate family. Even though family here doesn't consist of a heterosexual partnership, the expression of family doesn't angle itself too far away from the family line as it stays within the proximity of a general definition and acceptance of family formation. Linda didn't relate too much with being within the definition of rainbow family as well, the fact that there is another mother present in the child's life was seen as secondary. Though the term could be used as a tool to explain ones family constellation to others:

I use that word, rainbow family, so that people understand what it is, sometimes to make it easier, 'ah but I have a rainbow family'. So it's nice that the term exists, but I probably don't use it.

The general definition of a rainbow family among the participants was that queer adults have created a family with children as a central part of it, which in regards to the topic of queer parenthood is not unexpected. Ellie, whose family consist of more than two parents who together co-parent the child, define rainbow family as chosen relations and an ongoing creation that is as well applicable to the child in their definition of family:

For me it means that you get to choose your family, that it also applies to *the child*. I don't take for granted that I'm the only one who will be important because *the child* has other adults in their life who are also important, with whom they have their own relationship with, who aren't us who, so to speak, the ones *the child* lives with. That *the child* also gets to choose who they call family.

This definition can as well be seen in Heston's study, where some participants would define family relations as fluid and extended beyond the home, as the question of what and who is family was seen as continuously changing (2013: 263).

### 2.2.2 Being *within* the normative framework of parenthood

Here, the word 'within' is used loosely, as none of the participants were really within a 'normative' parenthood. Participants were in some settings perceived as normative, while in other settings perceived as non-normative. Being a queer parent and how one is perceived would at times create ambivalent feelings in relation to what one knows about themselves and how one is categorised by social actors. As seen with Mattias, a queer transman in middle adulthood who is perceived as cisgender and heterosexual, came to reflect on whether the term rainbow family is applicable. From an outsiders' standpoint the family may not be perceived as a rainbow family, though being in queer spaces affirms the family as queer in its formation:

[...] We just happen to be read outwardly as straight. So it's a bit double, I absolutely think we belong in queer contexts, but I also understand that people around us assume that we are not. I had quite a long period when I thought 'but are we really a rainbow family'. But then I notice when we're in queer contexts, we are accepted as queer. So I guess I've come to understand that too, yes, but we are actually queer.

When discussing how social norms affect parenthood it was mostly gender and heteronormativity that were discussed. Another aspect that shapes the experience of parenthood is the participants' age as well as when they had the child, whereas the social and political position of being a queer parent has come to shift with time. Camilla, in middle adulthood whose child is still relatively young, did not feel marginalised in her partnership and family constellation:

We don't feel discriminated, we're not targeted because we're two mothers, just from being parents. We are also lucky because we're not the only rainbow family where we live.

Though community and recognition with other families is of importance in queer parenthood, for Camilla being a parent means being targeted to certain situations relating to childcare no matter one's identity. The social gaze and interactions is influential in participants' self perception of identity as well as how that gaze comes to include or exclude participants within the normality of parenthood. Linda expressed the feeling of "being in a cult of mothers", when she was pregnant. Suddenly, because of the bodily changes that accompanies pregnancy she was perceived as heterosexual and therefore within the normality:

People were nice to me outside, no one argued, they treated me like I think my straight sisters are treated [laughs]. I became like one with society, it was very strange, but also nice.

As seen with life schedules and the straight line (Halberstam 2005; Ahmed 2006), where reproduction and orientation towards the future is of a central standpoint in being a part of the normative. Pregnancy, mostly understood as an outcome of heterosexual reproduction and productivity, means that Linda is as well perceived as heterosexual. Through the timespan of pregnancy, the body has become oriented within the straight line and therefore blends in as "one with society". This feeling of belonging is as well amplified by Lindas past experiences, where being queer in Swedish society was not as socially and legally accepted compared to the present moment. Being within normality was not always an effect of the social gaze, it could as well be a conscious decision to claim normality, not in a heteronormative aspect, but more so perceiving family in the context of everyday life. As seen in Sonias expression:

I would say we are like any other family and this was also our message in [country of origin], that we are not different than any other family. We have a pet, we go shopping, *the child* gets sick and we go to the doctor and I don't know, we recycle trash and our car breaks down.

In this sense normality is not just in identity or perception of that identity, normality is practiced in everyday life. Being a rainbow family in this expression is within the normality as the maintenance of family relations and everyday life is done the same way everyone else does it.

### 2.2.3 Being *outside* the normative framework of parenthood

As seen in the discussion above, being ‘within’ normality is relational to social settings, perceptions of identity, and time. The state can be seen as the main mechanism that maintains normality through laws regarding partnership and family formation, where queer individuals ‘must’ relate to normative ideals in order to exist within its legal framework. Butler discusses how the state works in ways of legitimating and delegitimizing individuals, where a delegitimate position is embodied as self doubt and ‘loss’ of a right to claim positions and identities (2002: 114). Though the Swedish state allows queer individuals to form families within the nuclear model; one or two parent configuration. The parents that don’t fit within that model become delegitimate, as in no legal right to parenthood and the child. Ellie who co-parent the child with more than two parents and therefore doesn’t reflect the nuclear model, highlights the difficulties in not being recognised within the legal framework of parenthood:

If you take the legal aspect, it's so stupid, it makes a lot of trouble, it's very, very difficult. You can't do anything when you're not legal, 'no I can't go and vaccinate you, no I can't go with you and get your ears pierced'. So there are so many things that you always have to have the legal parent's permission, that it also becomes a burden for the one who is legal, it is very annoying.

In this conversation with Ellie, I came to observe the emotional effect of not having a juridical claim to parenthood, as it brought feelings of distress as well as an expressed worry for future scenarios as economic inheritance for the child is not guaranteed. Halberstam concludes that within the generational time exists the hypothetical temporality, the time of ‘what if’, which demands protection from legal institutions such as health care, insurance policies, and wills (2005: 5). The question of ‘what if’ was present with Ellie, as there is no guaranteed legal protection when the time of passing on the will to the child comes. The state in relation to society as a whole can be seen as a strong force in how queer individuals are able to claim their identities and access certain positions, seen with Maria who talks about imagining parenthood when she lived in her country of origin:

I always wanted to have a child and of course because I am a transgender person, somehow I knew, I felt that I wouldn't have one. And also I was



scared because of the society and the government and the [church]. Which has a huge influence and like constantly attacking lgbt people and now transgender people mainly.

With this expression imagining the possibilities of parenthood and as well being positioned on the parental line is not an acceptable option to begin with, as the state and other social actors control the narrative on parenthood as a practice of maintaining and reproducing family within heterosexuality and the gender binary. Though Maria did become a parent within these narratives, it proved itself to be difficult for her to feel fully secure and safe in her parental position.

## **2.3 Navigating queer parenthood**

### **2.3.1 The emotionality and temporality of parenthood**

Not every participant had envisioned a future with children in it, though everyone concluded that parenthood was felt as deeply emotional and therefore the feelings of parenthood were hard to put into words. In order to describe the depths of what parenthood feels like, Johanna makes an analogy of a close relative dying and being a parent:

It's the same thing as when someone dies, you can imagine that it's huge, that it will be very difficult and so on, but then once it has happened, it will be something else, you can imagine the feeling... It's like that feeling, but in a different way. It's hard to describe.

When Johanna had the child, her mother put the emotionality of parenthood into words with an expression of what is to be expected in an ongoing future, which was, “congratulations now you’re going to worry for the rest of your life”. With this simple but potent expression, the emotionality of parenthood is not only passed on from one parent to the next, Johannas mother has as well positioned parenthood on a timeline towards the future of what is to come in effect of her own experiences of parenthood. This aspect of parenthood then becomes a legacy positioned on the parental line as experiences are passed down as guidance to what is to be expected from this point in time and further on. The participants also expressed putting themselves to the side while raising children, that a lot of time and energy was put into childrearing and the child's needs that meant that time for themselves was affected. Camilla

expressed that most life decisions regards the child, though this is not seen as negative as she enjoys being a parent and that she has already had time for herself as well as that there will be a time later on for herself:

I think a bit like this, one that it will be a time later on and that I've already had thirty years of my life to myself and that okay I put myself aside, but at the same time I'm having incredible fun with *the child*. We do a lot of fun things, so I mean, yes... I put a part of myself aside [...].

Being a parent means that life can be sorted into sections of a before, during and after the child. Where the self can be seen as already created in the before, whereas the during is a time where the identity of parenthood is established and developed, while the time after, when the child grows older and more independent, the self can align with the time before alongside the child. While time is mostly seen and in this study discussed as linear, it could as well be understood as circular, as what has been can become again. Ellie expressed it like this:

After those first years when you really just took care of, and now it's starting to show that I can be a bit on the same level, you can do the same things together that [we] find fun, then more of my personality can come out as I was *before*. [...] Now *the child* can see me from other sides as well, me as an individual.

As parenthood is strongly correlated to adulthood, having the child was also seen as a pathway into adulthood. For queer lives that don't follow the expected life schedules, adulthood can feel distant until the self is brought back into the linear events of life. Linda puts into words Halberstam's (2005) and Ahmed's (2006) terms of life schedules and straight lines, where the queer individual is in a sense 'lost' on the path of life, while becoming a parent can orient the individual back on the straight path and into adulthood:

I became an adult in some way. And I think that has to do with the fact that in our groups, [we] don't need to have so many rites as heterosexuals, or not those types of rites anyway. In the heteronormative world, there are rites that girl meets boy, they become adults, man and woman, engagement, marriage,

children, house, blah blah blah. We don't have a *straight* path, but when I had *the child* I felt that I became an adult.

### 2.3.2 Parenthood: A gendered experience

Being perceived in the division of either motherhood or fatherhood and the implications of those gendered categories, brought different thoughts and feelings among the participants. Language could be seen as lacking in expressing a gender neutral form of parenthood, as well as it could be useful in terms of neutrality when participants didn't want to disclose their parenthood or family constellation. Ellie discusses the term motherhood as neutral in the sense that there is no other expression of what it means to be a caring, nurturing parental figure. The implications of motherhood can be seen at its core as nurturing and caring, that the term parenthood or fatherhood doesn't seem to grasp:

I can say things like 'now my mom-heart hurts', but it's not that I think, now *my* heart hurts. [...] But it's also where I live in a bubble where I don't have good experiences with fathers, neither do many of those around me, so perhaps being a father is not what I think, there are lots of good fathers too, but for me it has never been associated with being nurturing.

Among the participants who identify with motherhood or with the implications of motherhood, there were no overbearing negative associations or experiences with the term. Mattias, who identifies with fatherhood, expresses how being a father means a deeply emotional and economical responsibility and caring for the child. From a social standpoint, Mattias is read as a heterosexual and cisgendered father, which means that he often times by just spending time with the child fall into a gendered stereotype of fatherhood:

People read me as a cis dad, so I think I have terribly low expectations of myself. It's like 'oh you're taking your *child* to the library, wow how fantastic'. I find that quite humiliating [laughs] or not just quite, I find it terribly humiliating and somehow think that just because I'm with *the child* I'm suddenly the best parent in the world.

Being perceived as “the best parent in the world” by just spending time with the child can be read by Mattias expression as absurd, almost to the point of humorous. Being equal and held to the same standards as motherhood doesn't seem to be possible, as motherhood and fatherhood are each other's binary oppositions. In Carrington's study, motherhood and fatherhood were not tied to gender, but more so to actions and practices. ‘Mothering’ was defined by the practice of cooking and investing in the home, whereas ‘fathering’ was defined by the actions of setting goals, directions and creating focus (1999: 55). Fatherhood by this definition is not tied to the domestic domain and the practices that uphold family life. This can as well be understood by Sherry Ortner's (1972) discussion on women as a symbol of nature and men as a symbol of culture. Where the man is tied to and expected in the public sphere where he can produce culture, and the woman is by default tied to the private sphere, as a caring figure who reproduce life and therefore closer to nature. These gender binary oppositions reflect a traditional and historical division of labour, that in present times has come to shift in discourse and within Western societies. Though the gender division presented above can be seen as a foundation that would explain the praise that Mattias receives as the act of spending time with the child is not socially expected and demanded of his role as a father. Being perceived as heterosexual and cisgender becomes central in this experience of fatherhood, the image of the father who doesn't partake in childcare and domestic labour is not relatable or desirable for Mattias. This image and reality of fatherhood is expressed as irresponsible by Camilla, who regards her partnership as more equal compared to heterosexual friends:

I think we have a more equal relationship, ninety eight percent more equal compared to heterosexual couples. I'm not going to generalise all fathers, but I think we take a very equal responsibility regarding household, childcare and work. We almost only hang out with heterosexuals and we think that those women have it tougher, the men don't take as much responsibility.

The division of fatherhood and motherhood and their social implications in heterosexual partnership was not seen as undesirable by every participant. Linda reflects back on a time when the child was younger and expresses how the division could have brought a sense of comfortability in being the mother who does the expected emotional labour regarding childrearing:

I kind of just felt 'I just want the child close to me' and I couldn't 'cause we're two women, we're equal! and I'm not supposed to feel like that!' and so on... it was very hard, I actually thought it was complicated. Sometimes I even thought 'oh I wish you were a guy!' because then he could be the father and then I could be the mother and then you don't have to fight over the words either, like, who is who.

With this expression I asked Linda if she had wished for more distinct guidelines on what is expected within parenthood, whereas she laughed and answered, “Yes, more distinct guidelines, absolutely! [...] That it would have been easier with a guy, this *dad*.” What Linda expresses is not the lack of a father within parenthood, but more so wanting the opposition of fatherhood and motherhood. Where she would have been able to claim the nurturing role of motherhood, without sharing the implications of that role with anyone else.

### 2.3.3 Creating and maintaining kin

Carrington (1999) and Weston (1991) notes that within queer relations, kinship is socially constructed with the act of consciously choosing and defining relations in the moulds of a sociocultural understanding of family. The same act of choosing and defining family can be seen among some of the participants, where friends who share experiences and identities can be defined as family. Linda who saw her friends as family would also include these relations into her parenting, though this could also be understood as an effect of not being in a partnership where the emotionality and practice of parenting could be shared:

If I had a partner, I would talk to them. But now I'll be talking to my closest friends. Because otherwise it'll be too much to deal with, because it's about such strong emotions. It will be very difficult to walk and carry it yourself. [...] I use my friends. We simply talk about it, 'what do you do, how did you do?'

Lewin notes how lesbian mothers viewed lesbian friends as a reliable source of support and providence of assistance in their parenting and other social and economical matters. The shared identity made it possible for the mothers to be understood without having to explain themselves, as well as practising parenthood without judgement (2018: 140). Commonality among the participants was also seen as important in building close relationships, as well as

spaces of commonality brought freedom in practising parenthood. Ellie would often return to the word 'choice' when speaking of family, and that being queer and being in queer contexts and relations creates freedom in shaping parenthood through one's own ideals that differs from the social norms of parenthood:

It comes back to queerness where people choose such different lives, it creates another freedom in daring to be that kind of parent one wants to be and not falling for the conventions too much.

Family of origin was also seen as an important element in the practice of parenthood and everyday life, specifically with regards to the emotional and sociocultural legacy passed down the family line. Participants queer identities could as well be seen as disruption and cause of friction with relations in family of origin, where boundaries often had to be set in order to maintain an emotionally sustainable everyday life. Sonia's mother had a hard time accepting her partnership with Maria and their roles as mothers, Sonia handles the situation by claiming her queer parenthood and partnership without negotiation as well as removing herself from family settings when that claim is not met with acceptance:

She invited all of us for mothers day. She also loves these speeches, every time there's an occasion, like Christmas or something she gives a speech. So I told her 'okay if you're planning to give any speech about mothers and mothers day, please remember I am the mother and Maria is also a mother.' And she became so hysteric, like we didn't go and I think we did not talk for a month.

This could also be seen with Johanna who expressed not negotiating with her father who did not approve of her marrying a woman:

I said 'you're welcome to the wedding, but if you're going to come here and bring the mood down and walk around and be grumpy, then you don't have to come. Then you can stay at home.' But then he ended up coming to the wedding [...]. He understood that I wouldn't change, and if he wanted me, he had to accept me.

In Johanna's expression there is an unspoken ultimatum between her and her father, where he had to accept her queer partnership in order for her to be present in his life. Participants' children could as well be seen as an instrument in mending relations with members of family of origin, or in general bringing these relations closer together with the child as a common interest. Participants' queer identity then became secondary as their own parents saw the continuity of children within the family as primary. Maria's mother had exclaimed "finally!" when she found out Maria and Sonia were having the child, as she really wanted to become a grandmother.

### **3. Conclusion**

In this anthropological study I have sought to examine the experience of queer parenthood in contemporary Swedish society. What the empirical data have shown is that there is no 'one lived' experience of queer parenthood, as experiences are relational to individual and sociopolitical factors. Queer parenthood can be understood as fragmented with different blocks all building up to the wholeness of parenthood. The participants all had different building blocks made up of past, present and future narratives, families and other relations, gender identity, and ethnicity. Which comes to shape how parenthood is experienced and what role queerness comes to play within it.

I have discussed queer parenthood, in relation to the research questions, to the backdrop of cis- and heterosexual parenthood, not with the intention of comparing them or highlighting one as better than the other. It has more so been an effect of sociopolitical discourse on families, where the definition and understanding of family is contextual to its place in time and space, which is Swedish society in contemporary times. As Lewin notes in her study on lesbian and heterosexual mothers, the notion and meaning of motherhood was shared on a foundation of a general understanding of motherhood in American culture (2018: 182). Many experiences relating to the queerness of some of the participants' parenthood was in relation to heteronormativity, where the aim was to distance oneself from the normative where they couldn't practice parenthood by their ideals. Not seeing oneself within the normative gave expression of queerness as a place of security and even resistance, that could as well be transformed into a legacy positioned on *family* and *parental lines* towards the future passed on to the child, and possibly ongoing generations (Halberstam 2005; Ahmed 2006; Ambjörnsson 2018).

Furtheron, being a queer parent means being in an ambivalent position, shifting between being within and being outside the normative, as well as shifting between past and present times. Being outside the normality of family and parenthood was mostly an effect of social encounters with the general public and relations in family of origin. It was also an effect of being left out of the juridical framework of parenthood, which then made future scenarios and possibilities harder to imagine and access in the present as well as parenthood became more difficult to practice in general. Being within was as well an effect of social encounters, as how others would perceive the participants as cis- and heterosexual. This could then give rise to unsureness in relation to one's queer identity or as well comfortability in being perceived within the normality. The participants who have had continuous and potent negative experiences in the past in regards to their queer identity, would express being unsure of how it is in present times being a queer parent. Even though they are themselves queer parents in present times, past experiences came to shape how parenthood is practiced and lived in the moment.

With this study I hope not to have reproduced the narratives of non-normative and normative parenthood, but instead acknowledge that these terms figures as tools that mediate the experiences of queer parenthood in relation to its social surrounding. I also encourage ongoing discourse and research to define the queer parent-child relation within the expression of queer kinship. As positioning queerness within heteronormativity gives little nuance and space to marginalised queer individuals (Dahl & Björklund 2019) and to the emotionality of queer parenthood, that continues to be situated in relation to the historicity and political aspect of queerness.



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