

## “After All, She Belongs to the Family”

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‘Do you have family?’ is a question that normatively refers to a specific constellation of a partner of the opposite sex and biological children- even if a majority of people do not live up to the white, middle-class ideal of a family in Sweden today. How is the concept of ‘family’ filled with meaning by lgbt-people and queers in different ages? Lgbt-persons life conditions and strategies to create viable lives are historically and culturally situated, and so is the meaning and content of the concept of ‘family’. The position of lgbt-people’s rights and possibilities as citizens has changed radically over the last 30 years, in the Western world, along with larger structural changes of the organizing and meaning of family, intimacy and close relations (Bech & Bech-Gernsheim 2002, Budgeon & Roseneil 2004). In this paper I will look into how elder lesbian and bisexual women and queer youth in Sweden relate to the concept of family. How is the term ‘family’ filled with meaning and how is it related to friends, partners/expartners and lgbtq-community in negotiating, reproducing and contesting normative concepts of what family is? How is feminist and queer critique of the conventional family, as well as the resistance-cultural environments, resources in the processes of producing other visions and practices?

## “AFTER ALL, SHE BELONGS TO THE FAMILY”

In her book *Families we choose* from 1989, Kath Weston presented a study of lesbian and gay peoples' intimate lives in the Bay area on the US west coast in the 1980s, and how lesbians and gay men constructed their own notions of kinship by drawing on symbolism of love, friendship and biology. The term chosen families was established in lgbt-environments during the 70-ies, referring to families not restricted to blood relatives, but to different variants of important close relations, including friends, partners, lovers and ex-lovers, pets, biological/adoptive children as well as accepting biological relatives (Weston 1989). It also often included lgbt-communities. Rather than building on the notions of biological vs gay families as contradictions, Weston wanted to bring the two areas together to develop a more fruitful approach to understand what 'family can mean.' She argues that the concept of chosen family thus puts weight on the agency of the individual to act outside of the prescribed paths of relational hierarchies and virtues of which lives and relations are considered real and valuable, even if the notion of choice also has been criticized by several researchers over the years to follow (Heaphy 2010, Evans 2004).

Today, some interesting changes have taken place in many parts of the Western world when it comes to the organizing and discourses of sexuality and intimate lives. Increased individual rights of in particular women and non-heterosexuals as well as a general liberal discursive turn of the individual's right to choose has led to fractures in the heteronormative life scripts, making other life styles more socially, legally and economically possible. Sasha Roseneill who has been studying non-normative life styles from different angles, argues that ways of living and loving that has been characteristic for queers have to a larger degree become available also for straight people (see f ex 2005). Non-heteronormative life styles are becoming increasingly culturally acceptable, challenging what Budgeon and Roseneil (2004) call heterorelativity; "the heterosexual relationship order of co-residence, romantic love, monogamy and the primacy of the conjugal couple" (ibid 129). They include living single or in shared households as adults, prioritizing close friendships over partners, organizing partnered lives as f ex living apart together (LAT), same-sex relations, polyamorous relations and more. Increased rights for lesbian and gays have also strengthened the position of the same-sex couple through the possibility for marrying and having children through adoption and assisted fertility treatment. Maybe it could be formulated as the straight world becoming queerer- and queer lives straighter?

The EU-project FEMICIT studied amongst others intimacy and relational practices in 5 countries, and goes as far as suggesting that in England and Norway today, heteronormativity is more about the importance of being in a couple (or not) rather than the combination of sexes (Roseneill and Hellesund in press 2011). This has also been suggested by queer scholars through the concept of 'homonormativity' (see f ex Lisa Duggan 2002); where the most important thing is to settle down with a partner to share your life with, if not the whole life, then at least to live monogamously in one relationship at a time. The same-sex couple is in the Scandinavian context in the process of being taken up into the heteronormal - if it fulfils other criteria for respectability that is; in terms of being a legitimate and moral citizen. Parallel to this there is also a queer critique of the lgbt-movements assimilation agenda to fit into the heteronormative life script, where alternative ways of living fall outside, with less legal, social and economic support (see Halberstam 2005, Ambjörnsson & Bromseth 2010)

## MATERIAL AND APPROACH

This paper is based on the project Queerkids, (baby)-butches and lesbians. Life conditions and resistance strategies in two generations of lesbian, bisexual and trans-women and queer

youth.<sup>1</sup> In the project, my colleague Fanny Ambjörnsson and I have interviewed non-heterosexual women and queers in Sweden who are either between 18-30 or 60-94, looking at how they create liveable lives outside of heteronormativity. All informants live in or close to a big city and take actively part in some form of lgbtq-social network. We have been talking to people both individually, in couples and in groups, as well as been doing participant observation in a variety of social spaces. One dimension of the empirical material is the reflections about and negotiations of intimate lives and the notion of family/chosen family. How do they present their own ways of living, and how do they relate to the existing norms of heterorelationality as well as homonormativity?

I have been interviewing the elder non-heterosexual women, which will be the main examples in the paper. We will also look at some quotes from an intergenerational interview that my project partner and I did at the beginning of the project that is interesting when it comes how family is presented that is tied to both lgbtq-generation and historical time. Our young informants present themselves as 'queer feminist', actively resisting both hetero- and homonormativity. They take part in both the institutionalized sexual political movement/organisation as well as in queer feminist activist cultural spaces, which is not presented as particularly conflicting (as opposed to previous years when lesbian feminists chose to mostly work within the separate feminist movement) (see Bromseth 2010). The elder women have mostly (and/or is) been part of the gay and lesbian movement, or, they have been (and are) active in the lesbian feminist movement. As opposed to previous years, when the lesbian feminists worked rather separate from the sexual political movement they are today participating in the same social senior group for elder lesbian women organized at the Rfsl (The Swedish national lgbt-association). Whereas the younger informants have grown up in the new 'open society' where the non-heterosexuality has come to take place within public discourse in non-stigmatizing ways (Rosenberg 2002), the elder bear with them experiences from a longer life in a landscape of shifting ideas of both homosexuality and of family.

Next, I will look into how family and close relations are negotiated by our informants through three dimensions; 1) what is a family, 2) friends, partners and ex-partners and 3) the meaning of lgbtq-community.

### *What is family?*

In the heteronormative notion of family, the hierararchisation of relations is an important part of regulating what is private and what is public, where the couple is the primary relation, with an exclusive sexual relation, living together with children (Halberstam 2005). Family and the private home is thus overlapping, Lindholm and Nilsson argues (2002), something that is not always characteristic of non-heterosexual lives, as we will see in the coming examples.

Most informants underline the importance of family as chosen, in one way or another, representing a mix of different types of relations, including both family of origin/blood relatives, friends, partners and lgbtq/feminist community, even if they describe it in different ways. This depends on both age and individual experiences, but also on the relation to the queer/ or lesbian feminist movement, who have been and are explicitly criticizing the nuclear family as a ideal in different ways.

The younger queer feminists and elder lesbian feminists tend to enhance friendships and community as ideologically more important than the heteronormative family model, even if all informants challenge heteronormative notions of family in stories of practice, like Lilly.

Lilly started to live lesbian in her 40s. She lives in a long-term relationship with her partner in a central part of a big city and is active in a social group for elder lesbian women.

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L: We always say, Hillevi and I, that we have a family of our own. We don't have children, but we have a lot of acquaintances and a few good friends. So these are our family. And that feels good for us.

all: Mmmm

L: And these people have we chosen ourselves, to a certain degree.  
(everyone laughs)

L: You don't choose family.

(Quote from intergenerational group interview)

Lilly enhances her family as partly chosen, where her partner and friends have a central part.

In describing her chosen family, however, she makes some interesting linguistic contradictions that are quite characteristic for many of the elder informants where family is given two different meanings; the normative notion and ones own practice. The traditional notion of what Family is presented as a contrast to ones own chosen family, where Family is connected to family of origin, or blood relatives. As she sais, they have a family of their own, a family of their own choice- at the same time, you don't choose Family.

In Lillys story, the couple is the point of departure that the other relations circle around. This is similar for Vera, 67, who also lives with her female partner. Vera has just retired from her work in a church and has previously worked actively to organize a range of activities for Christian and non-Christian lesbian women. In the quote, the notion of home and family is presented as overlapping, where the cohabiting relation with the partner is marked as 'the closest', while the biological relations with children and grandchildren are the most important extended family (even if the partner is not biologically related to her children):

V: When I think about family, then I think about the absolutely closest family, the ones that I live with. And that is my partner. That's my family. Then there is the extended family: my mother, who now lives in a home [...]. My sister, but first and foremost my children, but in particular the grandchildren.

(Quote from intergenerational group interview)

Sorting out the landscape of important/less important family relations by degree of closeness, the notion of family here is quite similar to the conventional ideal of the nuclear family.

Kim, 24, strongly objects to identifying the couple with children as hir notion of family, as something that zie does not want, and an explicit queer ideological resistance to the nuclear family.

K: I know most of all who I don't consider being family (everyone laughs), but I can start anyway. I would say that I have many families. I have one bio-family, I do. I have two parents who live together and who love each other, and four siblings with children and partners. And then... I have more of a chosen family. I like having it this way. I do ... not want a partner and children as a family. I guess that could also be an option sometime but. But even if I did, I would have a lot of friends.

(Quote from inter-generational group interview)

Mo, whose also a queer activist, and the same age as Kim, puts forward time, as well as people she has lived with, as well as the here and now –quality of her relations as criteria for counting people as family- a constellation that is constantly under reconstruction. Also members of her family of origin have been 're-chosen' in her adult years, where the relational content has gained new meanings for Mo:

Mo: I count a lot of people that i have spent a lot of time with [as family]. I have some people who have lived with each other and such, they are still family, or 3-4 of them. I still count them as family. [...] even if I don't see them so often. Very much as a chosen family. [...] I have started to appreciate [my biological family] a lot now, because it feels like I choose them more now. I had dinner with them yesterday, and I feel that it is fun now in a totally different way.

The younger queer informants separates different concepts of family in the descriptive language they use for different types of family; there's a 'bio-family' and a 'chosen family', (even if both can be chosen), a division of relational ties that are content-wise similar to Lilly's in many ways. When it comes to the monogamous co-habiting couple, it is not something that is valued, however, on the contrary it's something that they explicitly don't want, resisting the hetero- as well as the homonorm. The aspect of choice (and oneself as an actor) is an important part of describing the relations and ones influence in defining them, for the younger more than the elder, thus reproducing the discourse of individualization referred to at the beginning of the paper.

Choosing an alternative family is however not restricted to a young generation of queers. Let's look at Eve, who is the same age as Lilly and Vera, in the late part of the 60ies. She lives half of the year with her partner in another city, and half of the year in her small collective garden cottage house where a number of other lesbian feminists have a small cottage and a parcel, constantly popping over for a coffee at each others houses. Eve has a background from the lesbian feminist movement starting early in the 70s, and she is still active, although not in the same degree as before. For her, the partner is described as the least accountable part of the 'family', and friends the most important:

J: Do you use the word family today- does it refer to children or what is it?

E: No, I would say that it is my friends, first and foremost my feminist friends, since I don't have so much family – I have lived in different kinds of shared households and so, so for me it's more friends. Friends and people, women, you meet and such.

J: The ones who are close to you?

E: yes

J: Can you challenge the notion of family then?

E: Yes- as I say, love comes and goes, but family and friends are always there, isn't it so? (laughs) That's how I see it. It isn't totally uninteresting to have biological relatives, but for me it has been more important having friends, female friends. But also male work colleagues that I have known for a long time have a small place in my family. But not a conventional family, no.

For Eve, family and friends are used to refer to each other, where what she refers to as the 'biological family' or a 'conventional family' is something different.

Ideologically, there are some contrasts between the feminist and non-feminist informants in how ones family is presented, in asking directly about it. The elder lesbian feminists and queer feminists/activists explicitly enhance a critique towards the traditional nuclear family, and put forward the importance of friends in their own notion of what family is. Some are however in practice living more conventionally than their ideology- and vice versa; some of the non-feminist elder women appear to live queerer in practice than their outspoken ideology. Discursively though, the informants who have identified with a counter-normative movement of resistance where other ideas of family and close relations have been central draw on both normative and non-normative ideas of family/close relations in their reflections on what family is and should be.

### *The blurry boundaries of friends, partners & ex-partners*

Friendships have a strong position in our informant's stories of family (and generally amongst the lgbt-population; Weeks et al 2001, Heaphy, Yip & Thompson 2004). They also often include partners as well as ex-partners in different ways, relations that are also spoken of in terms of friendships. As compared to the heterorelational ideal where the sexual partner is supposed to be superior to friends, and where the ex-partner exits when the relationship ends and a new partner enters the scene, the ex continues to be important in non-heterosexual relations to a larger degree our informants argue (see also Weston 1989 as well as Weeks et al 2001). In the social group for elder lesbian women, they often talk about the ex as 'the third' as Lilly puts it; the ex-partner who doesn't leave but continues to hang out with the ex and the new partner. For her, it was a shock though that her present girlfriend's ex continued to be a regular visitor at their house, something that has changed 20 years later:

Lilly: It was horrible in the beginning. I thought 'I am going crazy!' I thought that.. I don't want to make restrictions for someone who means so much to me, but after a while.. Now it's actually really nice when she turns up. We are really like a family.

The third herself, Ida, 74, who today lives single, also enhances the importance of Lilly and Hillevi, as social and practical support in the everyday life; 'They are really cute taking care of me'. She hangs out with them watching TV or drinking coffee in town, and also have them as their primary contact if something should happen.

To continue socializing with the ex is by many described as both practical and a virtue, both amongst the younger and the elder lesbians and queers. After all, they will continue hanging out in the same small lgbtq-environments, as one says. Or, as Mo formulates it, she likes that she has been together with almost all her friends, and hates to lose contact with them if the relationship ends. But her previous girlfriend who had not been in a same-sex relationship before was not so interested in that:

Mo: So now I would say that I have a family that I have partly been together with. I would put it like that. [...]

I was together with my last girlfriend 3-4 months but very intensively, and she had only had heterosexual relations before. And we ended it, and since then I haven't heard from her for 5 months now. And I think it's really extreme because I am used to follow up on people how they're doing. But there is no contact at all, and feel that it is really uncomfortable. But she's like, 'I come from the hetero-world'..

Both Mo and Kim challenge the monogamous heteronorm in the way they form their sexual and social relations, identifying with what is in the queer environment referred as 'relational anarchy', where the importance and meaning of relations are not predefined. This is not always so easy to explain to ex parents though. It's not only that their not straight and have transgendered identities, Kim reflects, but they also have a 'queer frame' where there are more possibilities of organizing sexual life and relationships in alternative ways, inspired by the subcultural environment they are part of:

Kim: I think it is really common to have non-monogamous relations in relations that are non-heterosexual because you have created the relations yourselves. Because when I think about our friends, there are many of them who don't follow the regular pattern of either being together, or when you're not together you stop seeing each other.

Many informants talk about the famous lesbian chart they could draw (last seen in the TV-series *L-word*) of who has been sleeping with whom in the lesbian/queer environment. 'Everyone here has been together with someone, one or more, of the other women', Eve whispers to me at the Saturday dance for elder lesbian women. Even if few of the elder informants are today living in poly-relations, the lesbian feminists report that it used to be a norm in their social movement, wanting to challenge the nuclear family's relational hierarchy (see Hallgren 2008):

Katrin: It was such dramas all the time, it almost destroyed the political movement at one point.

Katrin lives as happily single today in a smaller city, and does not miss the poly-amorous practices in the lesbian feminist movement that she is still a part of in different ways.

But more than that, she can be frustrated about the relational hierarchies of some of her friends, where most are partnered and prioritize socializing with their partners for vacations and week-ends.

K: It can be frustrating to always be option number 2 or 3. But I have learned to accept that there is a couple norm in society, that's just the way it is. And I like living alone, I want that. But sometimes I can feel lonely.

### *Community as family*

Historically, 'family' has been used metaphorically to describe 'like-minded people' ('såna') Lindholm and Nilsson (2002) writes in their book *En annan stad*, and also working as a discreet code-language to refer to non-heterosexuals and lgbt-community (*A different city*) (based on interviews with elder non-heterosexual men and women about experiences of place, sexuality and identity with focus on the period of 1950-80 in the Swedish town Göteborg). The home has not been the primary 'safe place' for lgbt-people, and 'home' has often been used to symbolically describe a feeling of belonging with other queers, like the bars and clubs that started to establish in the 60s. Coming to a queer space is thus often described as 'coming home', as Lilly when she recalls her first time at a gay club. It is often then the places outside of the home that is connected to lgbt-community and identification, more than the same sex love relations as such. This would also include organizations and lgbt/feminist movements, creating a 'sense of imagined community' to use Benedict Andersons term (1991).

Even if it is the gay family, the queer family- or the lesbian feminist sisters to use some of the creative familiar terms I have stumbled over during field work, they seem to have a range of different meanings tied to them. Some of my elder informants enhance their previous and contemporary participation in lesbian community as strengthening, and a sense of belonging that continues to be important even if the glow from the activist days has faded years ago. Eve imagines this is different from heterosexual women their own age, because the social networks are wider and not tied down to biological family, she argues:

Eve: I think that we lesbians have more networks, our parties, the feminist community, organized social groups and such. My heterosexual girlfriends' lives are ok, but they are very tied down to their families and grandchildren and such. And if they hadn't had that it would have been very lonely.

For Nina, who is retired and lives single with no children, other non-heterosexual people are characterized as 'family'. Nina is not part of the lesbian feminist movement, but her life is organized around a group of lesbian close long-term friends, and a larger lesbian social network. When I meet her one day on her way to help another woman to move into a nursing home, she tells me that this woman 'belongs to the family', not that she is lesbian:

Nina: When I say that 'she belongs to the family', then I mean that she is like me. Do you understand what I mean?

After being in the lesbian community for almost 40 years, some relations go way back, implying going on vacations together, sharing good and bad periods of life. 'We had a lot of fun together. I think it is just fair to help when she needs it, she reasons'. For Nina, it is the 'like me' that binds them together, an essential notion of being similar through sexual deviance and the life experiences it has involved. The image of belonging also implies that Nina feels responsible for the members of her 'family' in practice, helping out other lesbian women when they need it with driving them to the store, or to the Tuesday coffee at the senior lesbian group.

This particular tie, including a tie of vulnerability and exposure, is also enhanced by Vera, when she's trying to explain the difference between hetero-friends from the non-heterosexual friends.

J: Is it because you have some shared experiences that they [the non-heterosexual friends] are special?

Vera: yes, of course it is about sharing experiences, but.. It's a little bit like people who have been experiencing war- you get the most out of it and the biggest satisfaction when you meet people who have been part of the same thing (break). You don't have to explain, because they know how it is.

Gudrun, 68, lives with her partner and their dogs having a wide social network of different people in town and in the countryside. She thinks that the ties between non-heterosexuals were stronger before, in the 80-90s, when she was active in the sexual political movement- that the social movement became like a family because there was so much resistance in the mainstream society at the time, in the 80's. She can be provoked however, by lgbt-people who in spite of the societal changes do not live openly, or continue to live 'discretely', and still uses the old secretive code language like 'family' and 'likeminded people'.

Gudrun: there are still elder people living in the closet who use the old terminology of 'the family' and such'.

For Gudrun, who was fighting in the 80s for more people to come out, the 'family' represents a historical time of secrecy and double lives that she distances herself from in several ways. She wants to be an integrated part of society, not be stuck in closed and secretive lgbt-environments, she says.

A third meaning of community as family seem to be used by the younger queer generation in particular, where the 'queer-family' is actively used to refer to the particular relations with and within the queer community, in non-essentialist and creative ways; and could be seen as a queer resistance strategy of filling traditional words with new content. If queer can be family, then there are also 'relatives', other non-heterosexual and queers, and I have also stumbled over examples where children of queers are called 'queer-cousins' as well as lesbian baby-boomers looking for 'lesbian grandmothers' as additional caretakers of their children.

This is also a well-known practice from the feminist environment, where feminist and lesbian 'sisters' (syster) have long been the way to address other women with the same political agenda.

## TO CONCLUDE

I have in this paper wanted to show a few dimensions of what meanings family, as ideas and as relational values and practices are ascribed amongst some of our young and elder lesbian and queer informants living their lives in the outskirts of the 'straight line' (Ahmed 2006). On one level, they all live against the heteronorm, if we still consider same-sex relationships



as falling outside of heteronormal ideal of heterosexual couple with children- even if they legitimize and present their life choices differently and partly from different ideological and political positions.

Family is still used as a term to refer to people who are close to you in one way or another, a family of choice rather than strictly one of blood ties, where the queer kids separate the two meanings using the specific terms of 'family of origin' and 'family of choice'. They refer though to different contents, something that seems to be tied to both age and political resistance positions. The queer feminists and lesbian feminists protest against the nuclear family as the legitimate form of living, and its heterorelational grounds of the heterosexual couple as well as the relational hierarchy of separating partners and blood family from non-biological relations. The younger informants are also protesting against the homonormative life style, where the heterosexual ideal is adapted by non-heterosexuals, in building traditional families within monogamous couples with children.

For all informants, the importance of friends seem to have a unique position, something that resonates well with several international studies (Heaphy 2010, Weeks et al 2001, Andersen 1995), someone who supports and preferably share a non-heterosexual or queer identification in one way or another. A close friend was in the British study of lgbt-people's view of ageing and life conditions mentioned as the most important person one would rely on in times of crisis (90%) vs a partner (50%) (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson 2004). They are all familiar with the pattern of ex-partners transforming into friends in the lesbian/queer social environments to some degree, even if there is a generational difference when it comes to the value and practice of polyamorous relations. Dividing strictly between the content of the terms friends and lovers/partners, and the hierarchical relation between them is also critiqued by particularly the young queer feminist as well as the elder lesbian feminist (but not by the non-feminist elder informants).

Feminist and lgbtq-community and social environments are described as important spaces for creating and maintaining relations with other non-heterosexual and queer people over years, and fill a range of functions of 'intimacy, care and companionship' (Budgeon & Rose-neil 2004).

In general then, in line with previous studies of same-sex (and non-heteronormative) intimacies, the concept of family stretches well outside of the heterorelational as a ground for belonging and care. Maybe we could see it within a frame of what bell hooks calls a communal love ethics (2003), from her book *All about love*, where she critiques the notion of love as belonging to the romantic couple and the nuclear family. Or with Judith Butlers notion of the precarious selves that we are, always dependent on other's recognition to exist (2004), where building communal relations with others who experience vulnerability and exposure because of their deviant gender and sexuality seems to be important in the strivings for recognition. This is in particular characteristic of the elder generation coming out in the 70's and 80's, who found strength and support in the lesbian feminist/lgb-community, ties that for many are still strong and important (and maybe even more when many are retired and parents have often passed away?).

bell hooks argues that love also needs to be at the core of radical politics, in order to create change implying amongst others expanding an image of responsibility and care for others from the traditional spheres of biological family and close friends to wider community.

To be able to formulate what this implies we also need to further study how family and close relations are already created in non-traditional ways, something that is increasingly expanding according to several studies. To be able to formulate social policies that do not privilege heterorelational norms and marginalize other, the experiences and stories from lived lives need to lead the way to reformulate and de-center what is considered valuable and good ways of living and loving. This also goes for the normative grounds in most research taking

place of 'the family', where a divide between family and 'alternative families' or 'rainbow families' continues to reproduce norm and deviance in simplistic ways in an complex social landscape.

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