

Trends in Contemporary Queer Kinship and Family Research

ABSTRACT

There have been great advances in socio-legal queer rights in recent years and many of these have clustered around partnership and parenthood. Whilst these rights are seemingly progressive and welcome, they have not come without a cost. Cultural studies and queer theorising have critically engaged with, and effectively critiqued, these advances. However, in many ways empirical research on “same-sex parenthood” has largely glossed over the problematic of contemporary equality rights and focussed instead on the opportunities presented. Research in this vein typically instantiates heteronormative gender and sexuality through insufficient attention to everyday experiences and the ways in which these queer kinship. Geopolitical and socio-cultural contexts are used as scene-setting rather than being operationalised to prise apart the intersections of public/private intimacies. A genealogy imperative is defining families, with queer practices of conception invoked to separate one family from the next. We may now be better able to understand how we relate to and engage with others and the social world around us, but homogeneity simultaneously occludes the specificity of experience. The clustering of sample-defined groups erases *within* group differences and obscures the structuring factors that underpin academic scholarship. In this piece, therefore, we ask: In these precarious and paradoxically permissive times, whose lives matter in same-sex parenthood research? To what extent have familial discourses shut down sex and sexuality debates in studies of queer kinship? What exactly, if anything, makes same-sex families *queer*?

WHILST WE MUST remain critical of Western and globalising linear progress narratives (Kulpa and Mizielińska 2016), it is true to say that in the past two decades, there have been great advances in socio-legal LGBTQ rights in many parts of the world. Most of these, and especially in the North/West, have clustered around access to partnership/marriage and, often in direct relation, parenthood rights. In some ways and in some places, it has become a truism to propose that these advances have contributed to challenging the homo/hetero binary in political, as well as scholarly understandings of family life. Yet, these rights, however seemingly progressive and welcome, have not come without a (queer) cost. Indeed, demands for recognition by the state have frequently been made from the position of those whose bodies, lives, and relationships have the most to gain from and most closely resemble that of the ideal or norm of family-making in a given context (cf., Butler 2002). Frequently, the core of the very argumentation for such rights is the heteronormative analogy that we are *like* you (Butler 2002; Dahl 2014).

Within cultural studies, queer theorising has for a long time been engaged with critique of socio-legal advances (Butler 2002; Duggan 2003; Freeman 2007; Rodríguez 2014) and critically interrogated their shortcomings and effects. At the same time and often quite separately, *empirical* research has tended to focus on the opportunities of “same-sex parenthood” and often glossed over the problematic of contemporary equality rights. We contend that research on such constellations is often normative in the sense that it highlights how queer (as in non-heterosexual) families persist, in many cases against the heteronormative or homophobic odds, and manage to raise well-adjusted and socially conforming children in healthy child-centred environments. The degree to which meanings of family and reproduction are themselves normative is rarely reflected on. Critical interrogation of what it means to be a parent or have a family, are side-stepped with insufficient, if any, attention to the values of neoliberalism and individualism, and radical re-centring of the nuclear family and of parents (cf., Eng 2010). This means that the *contextual* framework and focus of research tends to be on how same-sex parent families navigate external challenges in institutional,

discursive, and cultural forms and on how queer families negotiate what is variously called “families of origin,” “biological kin,” and so on, in a range of different geopolitical contexts. Indeed, as the field of queer kinship studies grows exponentially and internationally, with a significant rise in conferences, special issues, anthologies, and research projects, it seems to us that geopolitical and socio-cultural contexts are used as *scene-setting* rather than being used to prise apart crucial dimensions of how we understand what kinship is and the ways in which public/private intimacies intersect. How the very discourse of choice, intention, and resilience is entangled with, for instance, the radical dismantling and outsourcing of the welfare state remains unknown. Similarly so the ways in which demands for individual recognition of family constellations segue with discourses of the citizen/taxpayer as “customer” and “consumer” rather than ideas of sexual subjectivity, or how “same-sex families” grapple with the growing discourse on “anti-gender.”

As we shall outline further below, research in the field tends to focus primarily on the *gendered* dimensions of queerness, not the sexual ones, often with the result that sexuality – that is non-heterosexual desires and practices – fall out of the picture. This resonates with early queer scholarship on parenting and kinship (e.g., Gabb 1999; 2001; Smith 1992) that has since been pushed aside by the fascination with the technologies of reproduction, ideas of origin and conception, and the rise of equal rights. Genealogy is once again defining families, albeit queer practices of conception now fix the boundaries of intimacy and kinship rather than instantiate family function. Similarly, heteronormative gender typically provides the scaffolding for research on “same-sex parenthood” with its emphasis on “two mothers” or “two fathers.” For instance, researchers opt to dance on the heads of analytical pins to fit “same-sex parenthood” into readily accessible forms such as “rainbow families” rather than explore the ways in which parental constellations reproduce and challenge the very core of kinship, namely the heteronormatively gendered nature of kinship categories themselves. Simply put, what two mothers or two fathers raising children together actually teaches us about gender (difference), or about

the ways in which our very kinship vocabulary is gendered, remains implicit and under-theorised.¹

While research on non-heterosexual parenthood has certainly been inspiring to us and to many others, and while its implications for public policy and debate definitely should not be underestimated, as queer feminist and lesbian scholars we want to call out the ways it often instantiates heteronormative ideas of gender and sexuality. We also want to point out that in many respects, research in this area rarely attends to the very notion of kinship itself and how this is queered by everyday practices. Thus, when queer kinship is the (titular) focus, it tends to be deployed as an analytical umbrella to explore the diverse composition of family and parenting forms, rather than operationalised as a critical departure point for a theoretically rigorous decentring of affective ties; that is to say how we relate to and engage with others and the social world around us.

In this essay, then, our aim is to point to some trends and to provoke further discussion on those defined as the subjects and objects of research, to reflect upon the meanings and materialities of “context,” the relationship between studies of sexuality and studies of reproduction and family life, and how contemporary academia shapes research knowledge. Family and sexuality studies, we argue, are two areas within queer studies that are seemingly moving further apart, and doing so during a moment marked by growing precarisation and inequalities on all levels. In other words, we wish to reflect on some of the tensions, silences, and erasures that have increasingly shaped queer studies in the past decade in the locations that we share and are in respectively. To that end, we draw on observations made from many years of doing research on LGBTQ movements, politics, and family life, including what we have witnessed both in teaching and supervision and by participating in a range of queer and feminist research projects, networks, and conferences that assemble colleagues from different geopolitical settings and where we engage with colleagues and students from different geopolitical and national contexts.² We also draw on our own discussions about our work and about queer politics more broadly over the past six years.

In what follows, we unpick some of the characteristic factors that we see as defining contemporary research on queer and same-sex parenthood. Legal and scientific advances, important and life changing as they are to those who benefit from them, to us begs anew the question: What is *queer* in non-heterosexual kinship these days? Furthermore, for scholars who study these advances, we must ask: How do we study the increasingly complex and diverse phenomena of LGBTQ kinship, reproduction, and family? Ultimately, the essay is driven by a provocation: Whose lives and kinship matter in research on LGBTQ parenthood in these Janus-faced permissive and precarious times? How does queer parenthood materialise? How can our research better reflect contemporary matter-of-fact queer experience? And what has happened to sex and sexuality in research on queer intimate life?

Queer Lives, Normative Methods?

In the new millennium, there has been a virtual explosion of research on same-sex families and reproduction across a wide range of national and international settings. In sociological terms, this is not surprising; it is a “phenomenon,” much like the rise of new forms and deployments of assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) that merit study due to their novelty, uptake and increasing societal and demographic importance. With the rise of rights and paths to non-heterosexual conception and parenthood, growing numbers of children are indeed being conceived and raised in families that are not predicated on heterosexuality as the core kinship symbol. It goes without saying that scholars interested in social change, power, (in)equalities, and so on, understand it as our task to study these phenomena. But how do we do that? Is it enough to tell stories about the consequences of rights in different geopolitical settings, or to repeatedly tell stories about how (lack of) legal recognition is the single one parameter that shapes paths to everyday experiences of parenthood and family-making? And what does all this have to do with larger questions of how academia and research is being designed? Let us begin with some observations about the architecture and design of qualitative research on queer kinship.

Research training in the neoliberal academy with its assembly-line production pressures and various national variations of bibliometrics, research evaluation, and assessment systems (such as REF in the U.K., ERA in Australia) is certainly constricting to all of us; it reinforces the need for tightly defined topics, with clearly identified research questions which must drive the research sample. It is a model that clearly suits some bodies more than others. What does it mean to be and do queer in such a setting? While twenty-five years ago, studying queerness in any form was strongly discouraged at the PhD level for the pragmatic reason that it was unlikely to ever provide you with a future in academia (Weston 1998), today such stigma has lessened but not disappeared. Sexualities research is typically being completed by junior scholars – and LGBTQ parenting is no exception. Notwithstanding the persistence of a small band of (typically embattled) senior scholars, sexualities research continues to reside on the margins of the margins. Academia shuts down queer research through privileging normative research in funding, appointments, promotion processes, and publishing and this serves to delimit and define the research agenda. Given its hinterland status, then, it is not surprising that research in this area remains predominantly small scale and typically qualitative (Gabb and Allen forthcoming).

As feminist researchers with backgrounds at the intersections of women's/gender studies and sociology (Gabb) and anthropology (Dahl) respectively, we have much in common, not the least of which is a joint canon of previous research and theories, but perhaps above all, we share a general methodological approach on qualitative research. As we understand it, contemporary *qualitative* research on queer kinship and families can be characterised by three dimensions; its reliance on interviews and participant observation, its insistence on contextual analysis, and above all, its comparison-based arguments (Borofsky 2019), the latter being a point we return to in the next section. Reviewing a range of recent work published in journals and monograph form, as well as attending many conferences, we find that work on queer families/kinship almost always replicates more or less the same research design; a design that nevertheless has to be introduced in every article and conference presentation for

the obvious sake of establishing scientific authority. Simplistic gesturing towards “ethnography,” we have noted with increasing concern, now usually amounts to accounting for techniques used to solicit the typically small number of interviews conducted.

As feminist supervisors we regrettably note that for reasons that are certainly beyond our (queer) control, the PhD journey is increasingly turning into a prescriptive journey: methods training, literature review, upgrade, fieldwork, and writing up – ordinarily within three to five years, depending on national setting and funding structure. On the (queer) research assembly line, most research unravels as follows: reviewing literature one finds a gap, an absence, in the form of a topic hitherto not investigated, a question not asked, and an un(der)studied population to engage. This quest for novelty and compulsion to unearth something of substance, that is something that will get you noticed, inclines previous contributions to be summarily dismissed. Rather than building a dialogic body of knowledge it is pioneering individualism that is celebrated and rewarded with the plaudits of reach and significance. While feminist and queer research has historically been predicated on a critique of normative science, today’s neoliberal academia pushes even the most intellectually and theoretically creative and “queer” forms of research into standard formats (the consequences of standardisation are further explored elsewhere, see Gabb and Allen forthcoming). Indeed, epistemological and ontological concerns often coalesce around the compulsion to curate “the latest new.” The frontiers of reproductive technologies keep moving and must be documented – they might be gay men’s use of surrogacy, lesbian mothers of colour navigating available sperm, or simply “plugging the (knowledge/community) gap.” One consequence of this is that the ordinary is often overlooked as the fascination with novelty segues with research career and funding agendas while the research process further compounds structural differences. A proposal is drawn up and the project’s ethical dimensions are vetted by the appropriate boards of experts, frequently emphasising the vulnerable position of a “sexual minority.” Protocols for ethics may have the best of intentions but they also often build on and reproduce heteronormative ideas

of what is private and what is public, and these understandings do not always correspond with how informants themselves understand their identities, biographies, or vulnerabilities.³ Participants are then “found” through advertising on social media discussion groups, health clinics, or LGBTQ community spaces; arenas that are heavily dominated by articulate, rights-aware and relatively “privileged” LGBTQ people. All these dimensions have bearings on who gets studied, who can study what, and in turn on how we understand and theorise what counts as queer kinship, family-making and intimacy.

Not only is the current framework for PhD education and research often uncondusive to queer students, students with families, or students who have migrated for the sake of PhD training, to name but a few, it typically offers very little time to reflect and develop research in more sustained ways. Research grants are now few and far between, and the edict of “value for money” all too often leads to “quick and dirty” research that delivers readily achievable and measureable outcomes. These *at best* aim to refine services and inform policy rather than challenge the status quo. The era of spending one year “in the field” to observe, to engage with and to explore experience, or the idea of ethnographic monographs that do more than extend the standard model of the peer-reviewed article, are pushed to the extremities of the margins, ordinarily out of reach due to the outcomes-driven research agenda and compilation theses of today.

Moreover, queer/feminist focus on “our own communities” has led to a tremendous amount of engaging research being done on populations that have much in common with the researcher her/him/themselves, and in recent years, especially so by early career researchers. While this focus on “ourselves” is in many ways politically and epistemologically worthwhile (cf., Dahl 2010), it points to and illuminates an alarming larger trend – namely, the demographics of academia itself. For instance, we might note the strong correlation, at least in the North/West, between the growing numbers of white middle-class lesbian academics coming of age and having children in an era of rights and a focus on this group in sociological, psychological, ethnological, and anthropological research. While queer studies, following J. Halberstam’s (1997)

and others' calls, have critiqued the long trend of sexual minorities being studied by those for whom we seem abnormal and exotic, and insisted on "our own" perspectives, the demographics of academia urges us to carefully consider and scrutinise the correlation between growing rights and empirical research. In other words, we argue that we need to carefully consider the confluence of this population – which is also the most visible, privileged beneficiary of recent socio-legal rights – and the focus of research projects. Which policy agendas does this research then serve? How does it further theoretical development?

The call to "slow down" the academic process is also keenly felt and markedly evident (O'Neill et. al 2014; Berg and Seeber 2016). The numbers of fast output articles are increasingly challenging to keep up with and serve to heighten the deeply unequal geopolitical dimensions of citation and circulation. The short presentation format required by costly (and environmentally questionable) international conferences, tend to involve "sexy" sound bites of data displayed on far too many slides and decorated by as many funding and institutional logos as possible. We argue that all these dimensions of neoliberal academia come with a cost; in particular, they leave little space for conceptual or theoretical discussion. Instead, data is frequently left to "speak for itself," rather than be analysed thorough deliberation and the development of conceptual and theoretical frameworks. The stratification of research agendas is also compounded in other ways. For example, students and postdocs with projects on "their own communities" and who seek training in Euro-American or Western European settings are often "matched" with supervisors with little or no actual experience of or expertise in the geopolitical contexts of concern. This speaks to larger patterns within the academia and of how the academy reproduces itself in particular kinship terms. The question remains, then: Who does it speak for, and how?

The Geopolitics of Context and the Materiality of Difference

If qualitative research is characterised by comparison, it is worth pondering further what is being compared in research on queer kinship. Situated research has longstanding feminist standpoint credentials;

however, and all too often, research location is used to foreground a study and then perfunctorily place the sample and analysis *in context*. Once this scene-setting is done, analysis often progresses unencumbered by factors outside the analytical focus. For instance, if members of the white majoritarian population do not bring up questions of race, then it is frequently understood not to matter to the analysis. The particularity of queer parenting and family life experience, and how this is rendered meaningful through understandings of the temporal, political, socio-cultural situation of others, is frequently overlooked by a simplistic reference to something vague called a national context. We contend, however, that rather than use context to situate our research it should be instead manifested in research, being ever-present and informing the framing of research questions and our analysis of findings. This means that we cannot sidestep the fact that equality rights, for example, are measured and has come to be known/experienced through their difference to inequality, prejudice, homophobia, stigma, and so on and so forth. It also draws attention to the *significance of other factors*, above and beyond parenthood and/or same-sex parent family life, for example. Other (contextual) factors – such as, high incidences of mental health issues amongst participants, power and inequalities between parents, experience and circumstances that differentiate LGBTQ parent families from each other – are, arguably, equally or even far more telling of what shapes LGBTQ parenthood (Gabb 2004a). For example, in the U.K., queers of all ages may now share formal equality of socio-legal rights, but these do not have equal impact in a nation that is increasingly stratified in terms of race, class, migration status, and geographic location. In both the U.K. and Sweden, younger queers are growing up knowing they can form civil partnerships/get married, have children, share pensions, etcetera, indeed they are increasingly presented with an *expectation* to do so (Mamo 2013). The embrace or repudiation of these equalities of opportunity that young people experience today are very different from older generations whose lives were shaped through the experience of stigma and lack of opportunity (Gabb 2018). We contend, that without attention to intersectional dimensions of queer family-

making, we end up with flat comparisons of different kinds of national examples, where generalised experiences of state regulations of family become the main source of “difference.”

Studies of queer parent families are riven with and a consequence of *generational differences* in how people expressed themselves and their affections and how location (where, when) confined and defined public displays of affection (PDAs) – on the street, down the pub, at home (Gabb 2018). In contemporary studies of LGBTQ parenthood, the geopolitics and practices of temporality remain all too often pushed to the footnotes and under-theorised, resulting in a plethora of writing where the able, neoliberal citizen picks from a smorgasbord of choices that have been afforded or denied through advances in seemingly progressive equal rights. Nevertheless, choices are not free-floating signifiers of opportunity and agency; they are political and they are defined by context. Demographic factors are not simply variables. In an increasingly unequal world, our own research experience has taught us, questions of race, class, sexuality, gender, and ability profoundly shape not only how we understand what it means to be “queer” or “same-sex couples/families,” they also define the very meanings attached to reproduction, parenthood, and “the good life” as much as public opinion or state regulation. Yet, much of the work that is emerging now appears to be a return to much more crude and static points of comparison – for instance, East versus West or North versus South. While it is certainly true that research produced in the global North/West, and published in English is much more widely circulated and read, we find the tendency to simply design a study “against” a “western paradigm” serves to flatten out some of the much more nuanced dimensions of what it means to live in coupled relationships and families. We are not convinced that the differences between, say, being queer and being poor or elderly in rural conservative areas in different nations can simply be explained by recourse to national settings or legal frameworks, nor that it is the task of researchers in international conferences to speak on behalf of “their countries.” We expect more of queer research and ourselves.

After nearly thirty years of intersectional research, we would strongly argue against the idea of the nation as a point of comparison; in fact, we find that this form of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003) reproduces the idea of kinship as only conceivable as that which contributes to the reproduction of national culture and is legitimated by the state (Butler 2002). Contextual factors may define the research sample, but the elitism of so much of queer conception both in terms of financial outlay and also the capacity to even imagine planned parenthood, remains insufficiently analysed. Above all, citizenship status and racial belonging along with socio-economic and educational disadvantage (class) remains fundamental in the experience of queer kinship and LGBTQ parenthood (Taylor 2009). These tendencies to flatten or obscure the materiality of differences, we argue, severely limits the degree to which the empirical work done in this field can actually contribute to theoretical developments around queer livelihoods. Queer parenthood, in short, does not have universal meaning and national variation.

Gender and/or Sexuality?

In addition to the challenges of qualitative research in neoliberal academia, and the relative lack of contextual depth with regards to questions of geopolitics and analysis of content, to us as feminist scholars and theorists of gender and sexuality, several additional themes within queer kinship research are worth noting. First of all, while it seems to often go without saying that parenthood and families are deeply gendered matters, very little work has been done on *how gender actually comes to matter* in “same-sex” families. While there is a tendency among activists to focus on “parents” in general or to use other non-gendered terms, in research, the categories mother and father remain central. Needless to say, these are deeply gendered categories and at the same time, deeply affective, insofar as even when terms such as “co-mother,” “father mother,” or “adoptive parent” are used, the reference remains to biological sex and heterosexual reproduction. Frequently, the normative tendency is to highlight sameness (both are mothers) rather than difference (queer parental positions are different) (cf., Dahl 2018a; 2018b).

Thus, it seems to us that in research on queer parent families, gender and sexual categories are frequently reinforced rather than interrogated; precisely because the investigative focus tends to assume one shared unit of analysis. Thus, while much research sets out to concern LGBTQ families as a broad and diverse phenomenon, in reality, most empirical work concerns phenomena described as “same-sex” families, “lesbian families,” “gay fatherhood” or “transgender parenthood.” Whilst this makes good empirical research sense (including to ourselves), we think it also poses serious challenges to a broader theorising of gender and sexuality as concepts with specific histories and as always already intersectionally differentiated in experience and theorising. For instance, while the category mother is frequently broken into “biological mother,” “co-mother,” “social mother,” “adoptive mother” and so on, the *gendered* dimensions of this category remain obscured. Frequently, even when the intention is to challenge “biologism” (cf., Park 2013), these hyphenated terms cannot avoid referencing back to pregnancy and gestation. Furthermore, by centring on “mother” as an unexamined and ever-expanding category, the tendency to equate motherhood with femininity remains unchallenged and under-investigated. Instead of examining the different gendered meanings of parenthood, research is often focused on the effects of having one’s parental status legally and/or culturally recognised. While this is of course an important question, we contend that it is only one of many dimensions of queer parenting with one or several others.

We are still desperately missing research on the complex dimensions of gestation in relation to the gender of parenthood; for instance, on transgender parenthood, butch mothers and fathers, or even butch femme parenthood. We do not know nearly enough about the division of household and intimate labour in gay male parenthood. While in the Swedish context, there is a growing number of studies that compare parental “equality” of lesbians in terms of parental leave and salaries to that of heterosexual couples there is to our knowledge no research done on these matters in gay male households with children. Moreover, the very heteronormativity of gender equality itself goes unchallenged which

leads to a simplistic equation of gestational motherhood with heterosexual women and co-parents with heterosexual men. Indeed, the flattening out of gender differences in the concept of “same-sex parenthood” works against both the notion of gender fluidity that characterises queer research and theory more generally and the ways in which people inhabit, experience and strategically occupy multiple genders, including in everyday parenting.

Reviewing literature, we find that while there are some promising attempts to describe phenomena such as “lesbian fatherhood” (Ziv forthcoming a and b), most accounts discuss the challenges present in phenomena such as “co-motherhood” and how it is riveted by competition, maternal jealousy and fears around the primacy of biogenetic ties. While illuminating in many ways, we argue that such framings point to the resilience of primary (embodied) gender within studies of queer kinship and to the ways that biogenetic versus social, or essential versus constructed binaries remain the starting point of analysis and thus the capstone and conclusion of debate. Yet, both in the data we have assembled, and in our own parenting experience, we find that if we look at the activities that we do during the day and the interactions that we have with others as we go about *being* parents, there are multiple situations where gender loses its *a priori* status, as well as situations where it gets assigned and reproduced in ways that we do not anticipate. On the one hand, questions such as legal recognition of one’s parental status or even the very terminology used for parents call the primacy of gender into question. On the other hand, factors such as age, race, socio-economic status, resources, and relationship status all shape how parenthood or care for children is experienced and how one is read in the world. Add to this the very obvious facts that children have their own vocabularies and kinship maps for the grown-ups in their lives and that relationships change over time, while parental status or meaning is certainly not given for all time any more than gender is. This is not to suggest that the materiality of gender should be erased – in many instances it should not. Gendered inequalities persist in every sphere of public and private life, as well as within queer parenthood. Indeed, in same-sex parent families

if we shift the lens from differentiated genders in our descriptions of everyday life and then deploy it strategically when it impacts on experience, we can advance a more nuanced understanding of *matter-of-fact gender* and use this to explore when and how gender matters and how it is in fact queered by parenting and family-making.

Sexuality seems to work in a similar *a priori* way. Sexual identities are typically fixed in the research moment rather than situated in the life course, sexual biographies, and/or the fluidity of sexuality. Research thus advances a form of “sexuality snapchat” that fleetingly immortalises the sexual subject. Biographical narratives can help to situate a participant in the life course, but the speaking subject bears the weight of sexual identity. It is this subject that has been recruited to research, and their account will be analysed through this subjectivity. Furthermore, as with gender, we want to suggest that for same-sex parents, for most of the time, sexuality, including sexual practices and intimacy, is insignificant (Gabb 2005). Parenthood ordinarily overrides other points of identification as everyday parenting leaves little time for anything that signifies, let alone materialises, sexuality. For instance, the routines of parenthood take precedence, children’s emotional and practical needs overshadow those of the parent and/or parental partners. Places of intimacy (such as parents’ bedroom) lose definition and become reinscribed as family space (Gabb 2004b). Parenthood in many ways, then, erases the materiality of sexuality. Children adversely impact on parents’ sex lives – from co-sleeping, tiredness, to dungeons being turned into children’s playrooms.

Sexuality and Kinship: Never the Two Shall Meet?

This brings us to our next point, which is the tendency in empiricist queer kinship research to *desexualise queerness*. In some ways this desexualisation might be read as the radical effect of the distinction between sex and reproduction in an age of reproductive technologies, which as Rosi Braidotti (1994, 19) famously put it, has made possible “reproduction without sexuality – babies without sex.” As queer feminists, we think there is a paradox here. On the one hand, the field of queer research

continues to encompass studies of sexual politics and practices, of desire and gender transgressions (cf., Weiss 2011; Allen 2012; Rodríguez 2014; Amin 2016). On the other hand, it consists of an ever-burgeoning and rich vein of research that documents “our” families and reproduction. Curiously, we find that in most research there is hardly ever any connection made between these two dimensions of life and intimacy. While conferences and special issues dedicated to various forms of LGBTQ reproduction and family life abound, the majority of contributions, it seems to us, tend to focus on rights and negotiations of paths to procreation, on struggles for legal and cultural recognition, and on how understandings of kinship and belonging are being circumscribed by “norms.” We often find ourselves missing conceptual discussions, wondering what exactly the meanings of “same-sex” or even queer families are? If what sets us apart from the heteronorm is our desire(s) and/or our sexual practices, it seems to us that the field as a whole has stopped attending to these dimensions of queerness; instead, they are simply taken for granted.

The dilemmas here are extended further by an important and growing attention to parenting among friends. While this approach potentially raises a range of potent theoretical and political questions, it frequently departs from a very specific understanding of the idea of “families of choice.” As with research on married or cohabitating couples, the “choice” to have children and the consequent relationship with the child often become the focus of inquiry, rather than the complex spatio-temporal relationships between parents, romantic or otherwise. Arguably, in David Schneider’s (1968) theorising of kinship intercourse and (romantic) love are collapsed into one core (heteronormative) symbol that in turn organises consanguine and conjugal kinship relations (see, Dahl 2014). Extending feminist critiques thereof, queer contributions to kinship theory conversely tend to pull these apart, sometimes to the point of complete loss of connection between them. Despite the fact that many queer families consist of multiple parents and lovers, cultural narratives and socio-legal opportunities, which surround and shape “the (queer) couple,” have seemingly driven us inexorably towards research-

ing “compulsory coupledness” (Wilkinson 2012). This begs the extremely interesting questions: What does this tell us about queer desire in an age of reproduction? Why do (queer) people “choose” to have children together at all? What does it matter if parents are (sexually) intimate or not? We are dissatisfied with the argument that it is simply an aspiration to assimilate into the norm, or that “bed death” is an effect of most couplings with children, even if our empirical research at times suggests this. Simply put, we do not think sufficient attention has been given to how romantic love, desire, and plain old hot sex are often precisely what make and unmake kinship, and to how affect and desire thus works in both normative and queer ways.

Indeed, in our research on queer parent families, sex typically only enters the research story through discussions about its absence or irrelevance, that is in the breakdown or ending of relationships and/or with the arrival of new lovers or conversely, in discussions of post-divorce parenting. In other words, our interviewees hardly ever bring up sexual or romantic intimacy with their partners or co-parents as part of what makes up everyday queer family life. There are of course evident parallels that span couple relationship experience, irrespective of sexual identity, especially so during children’s infancy and in response to the everyday stressors that accompany the birth of the first child (Gabb and Fink 2015). In fact, many stories we have heard suggest that the disappearance of sex and intimacy between parents can precipitate relationship dissatisfaction while the presence of sexual excitement with a new lover becomes the motivation for a relationship change. While this may seem obvious in some respects, from the point of view of continuing to *queer* kinship, this makes us ask: How do we describe kinship relations when conjugality is removed from the centre of the equation, as the differentiating feature that defines relationships and rudimentary understandings of kinship? What does a kinship map that encompasses and makes sense of the multiplicity of affective relations between adults and between parenting adults and children look like, and how do we analyse them? If relations between parents no longer pivot around the children and, in fact, are constituted by anger, disappointment, jealousy, and even

legal battle rather than joint bonds to a child that are characterised by desire, love, and passion, how does kinship help us explain these bonds in meaningful ways? Differently put, what happens to parenthood and kinship when ties are structured through rupture and fragmentation?

Such questions are obviously not only relevant for queer kinship; in fact, growing numbers of children grow up with multiple mothers and fathers in recombinant families, step-families, bonus families, etcetera. Because of the multiplicity of gestational, reproductive, and historical points of departure that make up the “origin stories” of queer kinship itself, it seems to us that developing a framework to explore what makes kinship *queer* might open a particularly interesting lens through which to theorise the meaning of kinship, parenthood, and family life more broadly in this day and age. For now, though, we are compelled to ask whether the very definition of same-sex relationships with children might in fact be the in/significance of sex and intimacy. Differently put, we ask ourselves: Has same-sex partnership manifested in parenthood literally come to mean a domestication of queer sexuality in the service of biopolitical reproductions of the cultural norm? What exactly, if anything, then, makes same-sex families *queer*? And if as some tend to argue, the desire for recognition of same-sex parenthood and access to paths to reproduction is simply an expression of a universal or “normal” human desire to reproduce and have a family, what are we to do with those queers who do not conform to acceptable standards of family life? In short, all who do not fit within Western, white, middle-class, respectable forms of doing parenthood?

Conceiving the (Reproductive) Order of Kinship

This brings us to a fifth theme, which is the tendency for queer kinship research to focus on how “families”/babies are made, that is, on conception stories rather than on the multiplicity of kinship narratives that characterise past and present experiences of parenthood and adult/child relationships. Journeys into queer parenting have been examined (Tasker and Bigner 2007) through experiences of fostering and adoption (Hicks 2011; Goldberg 2012) and donor conception (Nordqvist and

Smart 2014), for example. The impact of heterosexist norms, legislation, and familial ideologies have shone a light onto the ways in which queer parenthood is discursively conceptualised (Thompson 2002; Riggs 2007), while others have focused on everyday acts and strategies of resistance that may combine, for example, to queer lesbian motherhood (Park 2013) and examine the changing nature of queer families in contemporary societies (Gamson 2015). Characterising this work, advances in reproductive technologies along with expansive legal frameworks are understood as facilitating and epitomising the underpinnings of queer kinship. In the U.K. and Sweden, as with many European nation states, there is growing tolerance of lesbian and gay relationships and legislative changes are extending in vitro fertilisation (IVF) parenting opportunities to lone mothers (2005 in the U.K., 2016 in Sweden) and same-sex couples (2009 in the U.K., 2004 in Sweden) (Dahl 2018; Gabb 2018). However for many people ARTs remain out of financial reach and/or beyond the scope of geopolitical imagination: “Not on this estate, never!” (Gabb 2005). For those without sufficient financial resources or knowledge it typically remains an either-or choice: homosexuality or parenthood, or unregulated and potentially unsafe routes into parenthood (Nordqvist and Smart 2014).

At the same time, in other settings, the economics of reproductive choices is only one of the defining factors that shape experiences of (paths to) same-sex parenthood. As Ulrika Dahl’s (2018a; 2018b; 2020) research on LGBTQ family-making in Sweden has shown, the racial politics of assisted reproduction also matter. For queer couples of colour, the welfare state’s explicit policy of “racial matching,” routinely presented to white couples at times poses a problem. Dahl’s interviewees report that they are told that “one doesn’t get to choose” or that there is a lack of particular kinds of donors. While many are expected not care about the background of the donor and may not, others for whom it matter must then turn to more costly options of reproductive travel or turning to the commercial fertility market. It seems clear to us that questions of how race features in relation to assisted reproduction with donated gametes are likely to become more complex in the future. At

the same time, we argue that it is worth keeping in mind what several queer researchers have argued and shown, namely that the overwhelming majority of children growing up with non-heterosexual parents, in for instance Australia and the USA, are *not* conceived through economically and emotionally costly ARTs (Dempsey 2013; Rodríguez 2014). It also seems that white middle-class gays and lesbians are overrepresented among those who talk about reproduction in terms of “choice.” In our empirical research, working-class queers and queers with migrant backgrounds more frequently centre their discussions about family and kinship around care in a more extended sense; such as the challenges of taking care of parents and other aging relatives or on raising and giving material support to friends, siblings, cousins, or siblings’ children.

Despite the complexity of lived queer kinship and family, the emphasis on advances in ARTs and parenting rights are nevertheless increasingly narrowing the very definition of queer families to those who are formed in this way. Given this, we wonder why so much discussion and perceptions of same-sex parent families tends to orient around queer means of conception, and as a consequence, what this teaches us about (understandings of) queerness itself. One obvious effect of this focus, we argue, is that it in fact reinforces heteronormative ideas of coupledness through privileging shared and “intended” parenthood, and in so doing obscures queer kinship and the wider networks of intimacy that may be present. Boundaries are reinforced around and through types of relating, as discussed above, rather than capacities to care and sustain myriad emotional attachments (Gabb 2011). Distinctions, such as the sexual/non-sexual, parent/partner, and friends/family, often maintained in research questions and analytical strategies thus uphold and ingrain heteronormative relationship categories in ways that ride roughshod over the complexity of feelings.

Clearly, the early vestiges of radical potentiality that were present in “families of choice” (Weston 1991) have now, in many ways, been overwhelmed by biogenetic imperatives. There is a marked decline, often absence, of work on queer families conceived through former heterosexual partnerships, or of queer-identified women who have children with male

partners whilst remaining integral parts of queer and lesbian communities, or even on queers who lose or fail at their parental role, despite the fact that these remain part of the material diversity of LGBTQ parent families. Furthermore, we argue, the academic fascination with means of conception as the defining criteria for units of analysis both buys into and reincarnates the pronatalist agenda in deeply problematic and often unscrutinised ways. Starting “a family” is now part of the queer life trajectory, materialised in the permanence of bricks and mortar, which embed futurity into the very construct of the household. In many ways, this makes perfect cultural sense in an age of austerity and neoliberalism. As among others, David Eng (2010) has persuasively argued, irrespective of sexuality, the path to adulthood and full citizenship centrally involves obtaining coupledness and parental responsibilities, which include combining work and childrearing, economic self-sufficiency, educational aspiration, and conformity of behaviour. Of course there is some research that has centralised race to highlight the ways in which racial differences cut through the homogeneity of a sexuality-defined cohort (Moore 2011); similarly so in relation to class and educational privilege (Taylor 2009). Nevertheless, it seems to us that in the Nordic region and across Europe, the neoliberal parental citizen and intensification of parenthood now drive both the political and the research agenda around queer kinship.

Queer Precarity in (Homonationalist) Times of Rights

In this essay we have offered an intentionally polemic description of trends in contemporary research on “queer kinship” and pointed to the overall conditions for the production of qualitative research in neoliberal academia, the pitfalls of geopolitics as context, the lack of in-depth analysis of gender, the evacuation of sexuality from queer kinship, and the emphasis on origins and genealogy in understandings of family. The crucial and final point that we want to make is the significance of the contemporary knowledge-producing context of queer studies of kinship and reproduction. Access to education and to postgraduate research is increasingly stratified, in the world and in the national settings

we are in, and this continues to reproduce white middle-classness as the invisible norm. We argue, therefore, that there is an urgent need to think critically about how our choices of research foci are related to who is in the (queer) academy and on what terms. By looking ever-inwards we externalise a limited range of factors that shape both the lives of our informants and the field of study.

The need for research questions and analytical focus are crucial to the empirical investigation of LGBTQ parent families, and we would certainly advocate guarding this with jealousy and conviction. However, we also argue that we need to be mindful of and attentive to the *other factors*, which shape our research and more importantly, that inform and shape the *lives of others* who fall outside our analytical frame of reference. For instance, how does white privilege, middle-class privilege or having one's citizenship or belonging to nation denied on racial grounds shape queer parenthood? Race, socio-economic, and educational disadvantage, for example, inflect our data even when they are declared absent from the almost always predominantly white, semi-professional, higher-than-average education sample. Authors' guilty admissions of sampling limitations are typically buried in an appendix or a footnote and/or as sample descriptors rather than as defining factors that set up the epistemological framework and substantive analysis.

A further and perhaps more prescient final point is the lack of sufficient detail to *political contexts* and the ways in which these shape our studies. For example, contemporary studies of LGBTQ parenthood in the U.K. have yet to reflect upon the impact of Brexit – with all its invidious ramifications and generative acts of resistance. Similarly, in the Nordic region, research on LGBTQ families rarely attend to how growing family rights among the majority white population relate to growing anxieties about immigration, or the regulation of family reunification for migrants and refugees, including those who seek asylum on the grounds of their sexual orientation. Neither in contexts nor elsewhere, do we see attention given to the re-emergence of conservative politics around abortion and contraception, or to biopolitics more broadly. The omission of historical and political context may be a consequence of

academic publishing pressures and the idea that we must “future proof” our writing to secure its lasting significance and resist unduly localising analysis to increase academic reach. Citation indices thus curtail temporal and geopolitical fixity. However, and using Brexit as a case in point, such political contexts bring the intersections of power, politics, and personal life into sharp relief and illustrate how the personal is profoundly political, at every level. Rhetoric of a “migration crisis” is being mobilised to shore up heteronormative family and kinship ideology and queers are naïve if they believe that their rights are not entangled with the lack of rights of others. Getting married and registering “both” parents on a child’s birth certificate are not matters of choice when access to citizenship is dependent upon these criteria. The requirement for non-U.K. residents to prove their LGBTQ sexuality and the enduring and genuine nature of couple relationships casts aside privacy rights as courts mine social media accounts for evidence, reigniting former debates on the invisibility of lesbian sex and sexuality. Equally alarming is how easily white same-sex couples’ rights to reproduction and family-making seem to fit into queer liberalism (Eng 2010) and homonationalism (Puar 2007). In a time when the presence and influence of extreme right-wing parties is growing across Europe, a paradoxical picture is therefore emerging. On the one hand, these parties are known for their staunch anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ agendas. On the other hand, there is a growing tendency to cast white gay and lesbian citizens, as those in need of protection from allegedly homophobic immigrants and their “honour cultures.” What is clear to us is that future research on LGBTQ kinship, family-making, and reproduction cannot afford to centre on the privileged sections of the community nor to remain focused on homophobia, heteronormativity or rights alone.

LGBTQ families do not exist in a queer bubble nor are they necessarily always or only on the frontier of a new family order. There are plenty of conservative LGBTQ people who support a range of right-wing agendas, ranging from the Open Moderates in Sweden, to LGBT+ conservatives in the U.K., and Gays for Trump in the USA. We contend that such movements and the families that are entangled in them, need

to be further researched. The devastating contemporary political arena also means that strategic political alliances such as Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants (LGSM), the global Extinction rebellion and “anti-Trump” movements are part of what we would consider a politically queer family landscape – one in which multiple relations of power are interrogated and where non-normative sexuality and family-making is only one of several crucial questions of organisation – implicitly and often explicitly. This does not mean that we propose that all research must always include such global foci and/or the inclusion of subset samples to include minorities within the sexual minorities. Instead, we want to stress how micro and macro networks of relations intersect and overlap in everyday scenarios: people *feel* the immediacy of their intimate connections in ordinary daily encounters. This macro-focus requires researchers to drill down into data and move beyond the description of otherness and marginality and in so doing to take account of the ways in which public/private lives intersect. The wide-ranging *networks of intimacy* that constitute LGBTQ family life are indeed political. Queer kinship is, and should remain, political even when equality and citizenship rights afford normative privileges. Rather than closing the door of the family home and looking inwards, it is important to account for the ways in which the outside (politics) is manifest within everyday lives and loves.

Perhaps in this era of political uncertainty, where the gap between the “haves” and the “have nots” is ever-widening, there is a need to focus on the precarity of queer kinship instead of sexual identities; to acknowledge the relations, interconnections, and solidarity networks that are structuring contemporary structures of feeling. In this sense, as Judith Butler (2015) reminds us:

Precarity is the rubric that brings together women, queers, transgender people, the poor, the differently abled, and the stateless, but also religious and racial minorities: it is a social and economic condition, but not an identity (indeed, it cuts across these categories and produces potential alliances among those who do not recognize that they belong to one another). (Butler 2015, 58)

To conclude and to be clear, then, in this essay we have not sought to diminish the rich and burgeoning vein of queer kinship scholarship that is published or the forthcoming work that will continue to stretch the analytical boundaries of our fields of study. Instead we have crafted a provocation: to remind scholars – ourselves included – to be *ever-mindful of context* and to not ignore the foundational questions of gender, sexuality, race, and nation that inform kinship. To remember that the *personal is political*. *Research is political*. This does not mean that we must identify political meanings even when there is scant evidence of these in our data or seek out the “activist subject” to articulate a political message. What it does mean is that we use our power – our academic voices in all the different ways that we are situated – to *evidence the material impact* of contemporary precarities and the ways that they are shaping lived lives and contemporary experience of queer kinship. To that end, it may also be worth thinking further about what queer intellectual kinship means, who we care for and who we consider ourselves related to in our epistemological and political interventions and to how our geopolitical, sexual, gendered and generational differences and ties shape and make our affinities and solidarities.

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NOTES

1. A key exception is Amalia Ziv's (forthcoming a and b) work on lesbian fatherhood.
2. The underpinning research for this article includes Gabb's projects *Enduring Love? Understanding Adult Couple Relationships* (ESRC RES-062-23-3056) and *Behind Closed Doors: Researching Intimacy and Sexuality in Families* (ESRC RES-000-220854), and Dahl's project *Queer(y)ing Kinship in the Baltic Region*, funded by the Baltic Sea Foundation.
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