

”This is really close, the way we all are”

A queer phenomenological study of chosen families in Belgium

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Abstract

This study explores chosen families within the queer community in Belgium. Chosen families and their dynamics are not well understood because they do not follow the heteronormative way of forming a family. The aim is to see how queer individuals understand and construct their families. It is important to show how people outside of the heteronormative system care for each other because they don't fit in to the norms that are upheld in society. Five people were interviewed, and the resulting transcripts were analyzed using queer phenomenology and thematic analysis. The material showed that there are different ways of constructing a queer family, and that there are certain objects and places that support this process. It also shows how the participants care for their families by sanctioning some heteronormative practices, such as marriage and caring for "kids". These findings provide us with insight into how families can be created in unique ways, and how people care for others by challenging the norms of what it means to be in a family.

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1. Introduction

When people talk about their family it has always felt like a very foreign concept for me. I didn't see my own biological family fitting in to the traditional structures and it didn't bring me the sense of security that other families seemed to portray. It took me a long time to understand that I don't have a family, but I have several. I have parts of my biological family in Sweden, my friends that I have made all over the world and my fantastic step kids. Some are my biological family, some are my chosen ones, and they all care for me in different ways. All these people create clusters of families that mean a lot to me, and I believe that other people feel the same way.

As a person that no longer lives in my home country and who has been surrounded by queer people, I have seen that there are other people that also formed alternative families around them. This to me seemed like a creative and fluent process that challenged the heteronormative standards of the family. I started wondering if the care for others in alternative families could be viewed as a form of activism against that one great biological family model that I felt threatened by. Because I have no desire to have biological kids of my own, and I feel comfortable in close relationships to people without any biological ties, I often feel judged or questioned. Why do I have to defend my choices regarding who I consider family, and why would anyone else need to? By looking closer at the queer community around me, I have been able to find other people that challenge traditional norms regarding family and see how they as individuals form their own chosen families. So how do these processes work? That is what this study hopes to determine.

1.1 Background

In what can be classified as a "normal" family, there is usually a mother, a father, and children. But what does a family look like when one does not fit into that model? In most Western societies today, it is accepted for heterosexuals to divorce and start new families with modern constellations of shared parenting. In most of these countries it is also accepted for same sex couples to create families that mimic the heterosexual core family. In Belgium, where this study takes place, same sex couples have been able to marry since 2003 (ILGA 2023, <https://rainbow-europe.org/#8624/0/0>).

Before I go further into this subject it's important to clarify what the term *queer* actually means. To understand what queer is, we need to start by talking about norms and the power that they hold. One of the norms that exists in most western countries is that it is normal to want to be in a relationship with a person of the opposite sex, which is called heteronormativity. This norm is created through our repetition of it, and it contributes to the idea that a heterosexual life is the one that is most sought after (Ambjörnsson 2016). Queer can mean different things to different people. It can be used as an umbrella term for people that identify lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other identities (lgbtq+), but it can also a way to describe people that do not follow heterosexual norms (Ambjörnsson 2016, 15).

Queer theory focuses on how queer identities are fluent and moving, which means that there is no clear explanation of exactly what a queer identity is (Ambjörnsson 2016, 172). The ways in which a queer person live outside of the norm can be the way they dress and talk but can also be through their gender and sexual identity. This means that people that identify as queer can look different or act different from what is expected of them, and this is also extended to the way family is formed. The families that I am focusing

my research on are then the queer variants of family, the families that does not follow the norms of how a family should look like. By looking at the queer families that are around us, we can extend the idea of what a family is and gain a deeper understanding to the genuine bonds that are created between queer people. This is often referred to as queer kinship, queer families or chosen families. For my research, I have chosen to use the term chosen families.

By researching chosen families, we get a broader understanding of how different family structures, both biological and non-biological, can be formed. Interviewing queer people and their views on close relationships can help us to look away from preconceived ideas of what these relationships should look like and see how different family constellations are needed for the people that do not want to follow the normative path that has been laid out for them. By focusing on the places and objects that surround these individuals, it also becomes possible to analyze how these chosen families sanction or challenge heteronormative family structures and processes, such as marriage and caring for children.

1.2 Purpose and research questions

The overarching aim of this research is to explore how people that stand outside of the norm care for each other through chosen families, and how this process is beneficial for this group within our society. By using queer phenomenology, the study analyzes how queer identified people in Belgium construct conceptions of the family, and how they relate to (hetero)normative views of family and care.

Research questions

- How do queer identified people in Belgium understand the concept of families and how do they construct their own close relationships?
- In what ways does the queer ways of organizing relationships challenge and/or sanction heteronormative formations?

2. Previous research

Kath Weston was one of the first to do research on specifically chosen families, and in her book *Families We Choose* (1997) she studied follow non-heterosexual men and women from the San Francisco Bay area during the 80s and 90s. In her book, we get to follow how these individuals were often portrayed as irresponsible by societies norms and how these families become a threat to the heteronormative family formation by not following the heteronormative way. Although some of these individuals are biologically or legally unable to have children, they choose to create families with those close to them, such as friends and partners. This is to provide care and to take on roles that others have chosen to abandon:

Lesbians and gay men, originally relegated to the status of people without families, later lay claim to a distinctive type of family characterized as families we choose to create (Weston 1997, 29)

There is also research that focus on care of the chosen family. The article “We Just Take Care of Each Other”: Navigating ‘Chosen Family’ in the Context of Health, Illness, and the Mutual Provision of Care amongst Queer and Transgender Young Adults (Levin, Kattari, Piellusch & Watson 2020) studies how young queer and transgender adults care for each other regarding health. The part of their study that is most relevant to this one is that they found caring to be a main theme amongst these people: “Providing and receiving care was discussed in the form of organizing around health needs, emotional support, and eating together”

(Levin, Kattari, Piellusch & Watson 2020, 11). Eating together and sharing meals was important for many of the participants because it was a way to come together and to nutritionally care for the members of the family (Levin, Kattari, Piellusch & Watson 2020, 14). The participants also expressed how the emotional support from their chosen families was important because they were able to relate and understand the struggles of being queer or transgender.

Joanna Mizielinska and Agata Stasinska (2019) have written about how food (culture) has a big role in selected families. Cooking for each other and eating together creates a community, but it is also how many families take care of each other. The dining table also has a central role in a family, as it is a place to gather (Mizielinska & Stasinska 2019). This means that the location can include, but also exclude certain individuals.

Much research on chosen families focuses on same-sex parents creating families, and this is highlighted in the article Trends in Contemporary Queer kinship and family research (Dahl & Gabb, 2019). In the article, the authors talk about how chosen families have been researched in recent years and how technology and new laws have made it easier for non-heterosexual couples to start a family. Dahl and Gabb (2019) also question how we conduct research in the subject and what affects this such as geography, economics, context, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Research on chosen families does not look the same everywhere and can change a lot depending on where those families are located, but the research can also look different depending on who is doing it. I will look closer at my own position as researcher in the following chapter.

Joanna Mizielinska has also written the book *Queer Kinship on the Edge? Families of choice in Poland* (2022) where she focuses on chosen families at

the local level. This is important to specify, because a general theory around a phenomenon does not work in all places around the world, because knowledge is situated. Therefore, Mizielinska thinks it is better to tailor the theoretical tools to different people in different places. Since it is not legal for non-heterosexual couples to marry in Poland, Mizielinska believes that an important part of the relationship will then be moving in together or owning a property together. Having a home together becomes an important part of family formation and the home also becomes an important place where people can be a family (Mizielinska 2022, 40-50). She has collected material through various methods and analyzes this based on a local context, using the word family because it has a great meaning in Poland. She believes that it is a form of activism to use the word family because it is often presented as solely heteronormative (Mizielinska 2022, 1-2). The informants in this study broadened family boundaries to include partners, friends, but also pets. For the individuals, family was created through practice related to the household or the practice of family rituals (Mizielinska 2022, 72-72):

In their thinking about family, many informants emphasize such practices as giving support, care, trust, mutual understanding. Therefore, a family becomes a group of people they can always count on, who understand them and do not let them down in difficult situations, offering help in moments of crisis. (Mizielinska 2022, 78)

The study showed that family is something that is important to people who stand outside the heteronormative, but the forms and boundaries of these families are not as clear (Mizielinska 2022, 92).

By continuing the research that Mizielinska (2022) has done, but in Belgium, I will be able to see if the participants view chosen families in a similar way or if it is different because of the different location and

different cultural attitudes. I will also be seeing how the participants care for each other through different rituals, and how their relationship is with their biological family.

3. Methods, ethical reflections and material

3.1 Methodology

To see how the participants view family formation, I carried out a phenomenological study which involved the thematic analysis of transcribed interviews and family maps. Phenomenology has the purpose of finding the essence or phenomenon in lived experiences (Creswell & Poth 2018, 75). This can be done by seeing how several participants view a phenomenon or lived experience, and then determining the common meaning between the individuals (Creswell & Poth 2018, 75). To collect the material for a phenomenological study the researcher needs a heterogeneous group of people that have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth 2018, 76). That is why I have decided to interview 5 people that all have experiences with chosen families. To be able to go deeper into the shared experiences of the informants, I will also be using Sara Ahmed's (2016) theories on queer phenomenology. I will present her theories in the next chapter.

To get a picture of the informants' chosen families, I carried out exploratory interviews that were open with little structure (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014). In this way, I could accompany the informants in their explanation and ask questions, without coloring the informants' idea of who is a part of their family. I did choose to explain my research to the informants to make sure

they understood the purpose of the interview and that family could be extended beyond biological family.

During the interviews I also asked all the informants if they would be willing to draw their family map. I explained that the family map could look any way they wanted, and they had the freedom to structure it however they wanted and include whomever they felt should be on it. This activity was inspired by Mizielinska (2022), who did this with the participants in her book. Four of the informants did this and I was allowed to keep or take a picture of their drawing. To keep them and their families anonymous, I have redrawn all the drawings and removed any names that the informants put in the drawings. That is why it says “deconstructed” under the drawings, since it is not the original drawings made by the participants.

To avoid disruption in our conversations I decided to use my phone to record the interviews. This would make it possible for me to give my full attention to the informants and I could transcribe the interviews afterwards. I knew that I would be doing a thematic analysis of the material, so it was necessary to transcribe the material to familiarize myself fully with my data (Braun & Clarke 2006). Because of this, and because the material is very personal, I did the transcribing of all the interviews myself. To be able to conduct my analysis and use quotes, I did a literal transcribing of the interviews without notes of pauses, laughter, or my perceptions of emotions (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014, 227).

To find the essence of the phenomenon I decided to do a thematic analysis that would make it possible for me to code the transcribed interviews into themes (Braun & Clarke 2006). Since I already knew the theories I would be working with, I did a theoretical thematic analysis that was driven by queer

phenomenology. The first step in thematic analysis is to familiarize yourself with the material, which I did through transcribing the interviews and re-reading them (Braun & Clarke 2006). The next step of the analysis is to generate codes. I did this by printing the interviews and writing the codes on the side of the quotes. To find themes that were relevant to my research I started looking at the codes across all five interviews, which led to me having different themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke 2006). After reviewing all the interviews and codes together, I identified four themes: Caring, Places and objects, Biological family, and Kids. I will continue the analysis of these themes in the analysis part of this thesis.

3.2 Ethical reflections

Before the interviews I send the informants information about participation in the study (appendix 1). I also asked the informants if they had any questions or if anything was unclear before we started the interview. All informants were asked to sign the agreement to participate or in the cases where this was not possible their approval was recorded. This was done so that the informants were fully aware of what the interview would be used for and who would have access to the material (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014, 107). I was clear with the informants that their information would be confidential, and I would not publish their names or any names that they mentioned during the interview. All the participants were asked if they wanted to choose an alias for me to use and I also asked what pronoun they would like me to use when referring to them. This was important to me to show respect to the participants, but this led to an issue I had not thought about beforehand. One of the participants did not feel comfortable with choosing their pronoun since they did not feel that it was their responsibility to have to choose one. The participant explained to me why, and that is because they are genderfluid and their pronoun changes and

does not always stay the same. The participant did not want to choose and gave me free range to use whatever pronoun I wanted. After a lot of consideration, I decided to use they/them for this person, since I do not know in which situation the participant identified with which pronoun. The situation was new to me, and I had not considered that some people do not want to have that responsibility.

The benefit of my research is that it gives a platform for the voices of people who are not officially families from a legal point of view, and it shows the importance of the intimate relationships that they form. From a utilitarian point of view the benefits should outweigh the risk of the participants being hurt from my research (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014, 110). I have carefully kept this in mind throughout my research process, and because the participants are not named, I do believe that the benefits outweigh the risk for my research.

3.3 Situational knowledge

As I discussed in Previous research, I as a researcher have the power to design my study, and the knowledge I hold can direct or limit the information I am searching for. I have lived in Belgium for almost nine years, and I have been active in the queer community in my town of Leuven. This however does not mean that I am fully able to understand all the cultural references, and I am not fluent in Dutch (which is the language that is spoken in this part of Belgium). Andrew Gorman-Murray, Lynda Johnston and Gordon Waitt (2016) write about how subjectivity is something that we need to reflect upon in order to see the relationships with the subjects that are being researched. They also talk about the dichotomy outsider/insider and how this can be viewed as either bad or good when doing research (Gorman-Murray, Johnston & Waitt 2016).

The corollary is that 'outsider' status does not necessarily mean poorer understanding in the research relationship. This is even more the case when we realise that, through the circuit of social power, the multiple and fluid nature of subjectivity means that we are all *simultaneously* insider and outsider. (Gorman-Murray, Johnston & Waitt 2016, 104)

By thinking about my position as fluid, I have stayed open in the communication with the participants. However, I am a queer woman who originates from another country, which means that there will be certain information that can be perceived wrong by me. I have done my best to avoid this and to ask questions when there were certain things I did not understand. This was especially important since my research is focusing on the lives of queer people in Belgium.

3.4 Delineation and presentation of participants

To find participants for my interviews, I used Facebook and wrote posts in various groups that I could find there. I focused on different LGBTQ+ groups and a polyamorous group in Belgium. My delimitation for informants was that they live in Belgium, that they identify as queer and that they are part of a chosen family. Three of the informants contacted me through Facebook and we got in touch through my posts there. The fourth informant contacted me after he heard about my research through his sibling. I contacted the fifth informant myself after a friend recommended to contact them.

The five participants are Connor, Gretchen, Ryan, Avy and Brian. The participants themselves were allowed to choose which name and pronoun I use in my study.

Connor (He/him) is 21 years old and is a transgender man. He is studying to become a teacher and lives by himself in a student apartment. But he is often at home with his boyfriend and his parents. Connor is also close to his mother and sibling and is with them on weekends.

Gretchen (She/her) is 45 years old and is a lesbian woman. She was born in USA and has been an exchange student in Sweden and in Belgium, where she now lives with her wife, two cats, a dog, and a rabbit. They all live in a house together where they also help to take care of Gretchen's parents in law.

Ryan (They/them) is 41 years old and identifies as a transgender woman, non-binary, demi-sexual and polyamorous. They have a girlfriend, but they do not live together. Ryan has a biological son that lives in another country and has two queer kids that lives in Belgium.

Avy (It/it's) is non-binary, pansexual and polyamorous. It lives alone in an apartment but has a big community of non-binary people that it is surrounded by.

Brian (They/them) is 30 years old and non-binary lesbian that lives with their girlfriend and pets. They are active in the queer community and do a lot of volunteering for the community by hosting events and creating safe spaces. Brian also co-presents and hosts a queer radio show.

4. Theory

Sara Ahmed (2006) believes that phenomenology is useful for studying what is queer. We can use this to look at lived experiences, what is around us, and how this creates bodies in different places. For phenomenology, orientation is central because we are always oriented towards different places and objects that control our consciousness. Orientation is important because it determines what and who we are oriented towards. To use orientation and lines, it will help me to see what the informants are oriented towards and how they are (not) following certain lines.

Ahmed (2006) further argues that what is near us is there because we have followed certain lines. What she means by lines can be explained as patterns, like paths in the ground. It also means that bodies can go beyond

the paths and not follow the lines that exist. What is considered heteronormative is being attracted to the opposite sex, but can also be linked to what are considered the life-lines we are supposed to follow – like getting married and having children. Being gay (or anything other than heterosexual) means that you no longer follow the lines. By not following the heteronormative lines, one becomes different. According to Ahmed, doing something queer means that it disrupts the social order or violates the heteronormative, and she describes queer in other words as crooked or unstable (Ahmed 2006, 161). By looking at the queer practices of care that the participants are expressing, I can use this theory to see whether they are challenging the heteronormative or if they are partaking in some of the heteronormative practices.

The orientations Ahmed describes are what we orient ourselves towards but also what is available to us. When bodies repeat certain actions, there are objects present that become part of the orientation (Ahmed 2006, 56-57). What is in the background of a home, various objects such as wedding photos or heirlooms, orients us towards the future. The background becomes what we come from. Following the line that you have inherited from your family becomes important to carry the line forward by having children of your own. To not do this is to disrespect the line you were created to follow (Ahmed, 2006 p.86-90). So how are the informants disrespecting these lines and how are they creating new ones?

Bodies belong to different places. Depending on which places this is, there are different objects that the body can reach in these places. Bodies can also be changed by different objects or contact with others (Ahmed 2006, 53-54). The object's purpose is how we use them and then it becomes part of what we are oriented towards. Ahmed (2006) believes that phenomenology gives

us the chance to look at objects that do not belong, objects that are queer. When a body does not fit into a place or arrives in a new place that is not part of this body's inherited lines, the body can be seen as different or queer. This can be described as disorientation. Ahmed (2006, 162) describes it as when something becomes unstable. Disorientation can be a very uncomfortable feeling but is an important part of how we change our orientations. What you thought was stable is no longer so when you go outside the lines. The stable can return by finding one's place, or orienting oneself towards another place (Ahmed 2006, 157). Being disoriented gives us a chance to go a new way and (queer) objects can give us support in this (Ahmed 2006, 170). This means that we can see how objects and places are supporting the caring that these individuals do for each other, and if this is something that they do because society does not accept and care for them.

By using these theories of queer object and orientation, I want to look at how the informants are oriented towards their family and how they care for them. What objects are there to support these families and are there certain spaces that are available for these families? I want to see how the relationship between queer and family leads to other lines being created and the actions that the individuals are taking to shift their orientation.

5. Analysis

Following the inspiration from Mizielinska (2022) I decided to use the word family for describing the people that has a close and caring character in people's life. I did this because I thought it was what most people would be able to relate to here in Belgium, and I would be able to explain my reasoning for this to the informants. Four out of them followed my line of thinking and explained how they had biological family and queer family in

what they considered their family, but for Avy it wasn't as clear. When I asked Avy who it considered it's family, it asked what I meant with family. It has people that are close to it, but Avy did not use the word family to describe it. This shows that the word family doesn't always work for all queer people because it has another meaning to them.

I also asked all the participants what they thought of the idea of the heteronormative family.

Tove: What do you think about the idea of the heteronormative family?

Ryan: I mean, if it works for you it works for you, right? But I think we need to be very like, to pay a lot of attention that it doesn't work with everybody. And, if people go into that with the idea that "oh that's the perfect family" then you are diminishing all other families. And you're making them feel like "Oh, I don't belong in this world". That is something that I hear from a lot of young queer people, where they feel like everybody says that something's wrong with me.

Ryan shows how important it is to showcase different kind of families, and how it can be hard for people not to have their family being accepted. The care that they give to each other then becomes an action of protest against the society that won't accept them. Because these individuals are taking an active step away from their inherited lines, they are betraying the heteronormative expectation (Ahmed 2006, 85-86). Avy thinks that the heteronormative family is boring.

Tove: Ehm, what do you think about, what we talked about before, the really heteronormative of what a family should look like. Like the heterosexual, stereotypical family? What do you think about that?

Avy: Ehm, it is very boring.

Tove: Yeah?

Avy: Definitely not how I want to structure my family.

Connor expressed that families could look very different.

Connor: Eh, I think a family can look like everything. I think it can also be like one person and a cat, I think that can be a family as well. Or like a bunch of friends, can be a family. And I think it's more like a spectrum, like the color spectrum. And not as black and white as people make it out to be. Or even one child and like a poly...

Tove: Polyamorous?

Connor: Yes polyamorous. Like, I think that can be just as good as a family as like, the traditional family. People say.

What we can see from these answers is that these individuals have no interest in looking like a traditional or heteronormative family. They are standing up against the very idea of a family having to look one way.

To find the meaning of what a chosen family is, we need to look closer at what it means for the individuals. In this part I will analyze what the informants have shared with me with the help of Ahmed's (2006) theories that I presented before. I will look at the orientation of the people and how queer phenomenology can provide an understanding to the care in chosen families.

5.1 Caring

One of the elements that I found important when reading Mizielinska (2022) book was how she described the care that chosen families gave to each other.

In their thinking about family, many informants emphasize such practices as giving support, care, trust, mutual understanding. Therefore, a family becomes a group of people they can always count on, who understand them and do not let them down in difficult situations, offering help in moments of crisis. (Mizielinska 2022, 78)

The people around you that support and care for you become your family. This is theme that I could see in my material too, and that is why this part of the analysis will be about just that, but it can also be seen through the other themes of the analysis.

If people that are queer are making their own paths in the grass, then we can say that queer people wanting to get married is a finding back to the path that has already been walked on. It shows us that following or not following these lines can be fluid. Two of the informants, Gretchen and Brian, describes how important it is for them to get married. I believe that this is what Ahmed (2006, 177) refers to as making the “familiar” strange. It does not have mean that Gretchen and Brian want to be a part of the familiar, but that they want to bring forward what has been overlooked and to make marriage something that can also be strange.

But there are two important reasons, like first for the administration. I want on paper for the law that we are a couple. Also we need more lesbian weddings, hello! And it’s always been my dream to get married. So it’s a very personal thing and I just want a party where me and my lover is the center of the attention, I just want that! (Brian)

Brian shares how there are multiple parts to wanting to get married. First that it comes with a security but also how they think there should be more lesbian weddings. This means that Brian in some ways is drawn to the heteronormative way of creating a family but wants to do so in a queer way. Ahmed (2006, 66) believes that we follow lines that that are heteronormative and when people follow these lines, they become deeper. To go outside of these lines will look different, and this is what can be viewed as queer. Here we have an example of both following lines and deviating from them. I think this could offer us a new perspective on lines, and I would see it as the lines being broadened or colored with rainbow

colors. The fact that it is within reach for these individuals means that the action of homosexual marriage now is an acceptable action in Belgium and there are spaces for this. This means that what has been a conservative institution, now is available for queer people. Repetition of certain directions creates objects, which means that marriage has evolved further on to something that is within reach for the queer community (Ahmed 2006, 88).

I, you know, I think it gave me more sense of connection.
Eh, you know, some people say that it's just a piece of paper, it was something that I always wanted for my life.
But I never had the opportunity, of course. (Gretchen)

Gretchen is married with her wife, and it was important to her to get married. She explains how it can be viewed at just a piece of paper, but how that object is important to her family. By using this piece of paper (the marriage license) to perform a queer action, it becomes a queer object that is a part of what Gretchen is oriented towards (Ahmed 2006, 46). Because a queer object is an object that supports a queer action, this piece of paper gives Gretchen a chance to create her family the way she wants to, which for her means to have a family with her wife. This shows how people who stand outside of what is heteronormative can still be following lines associated with it, but how it can be done in a queer way. The couples in Mizielinska (2022) study were not able to get married, because it's not legal in Poland, which tells us how queer ideas about marriage can be different depending on the location of the queer couples. But the Polish participants expressed how it was important to care for their partners and show unconditional love, and that is how the informants in my study as expressed themselves as well.

Both Brian and Avy talk about how important it is to forgive and being there for each other no matter what. Avy describes how a friend didn't behave nicely, but how that doesn't mean that the group should exclude the person. To me this shows that these are important relationships that can be caring but also challenging. Just because there is a conflict, that doesn't mean that the person gets excluded from the family.

Avy: There was a thing with one of the birthday parties where one didn't feel included. Ehm, and it took a bit of time to realize that. They were also saying stuff that made it easy to, like, be angry at them as well.

Tove: Mhm.

Avy: But then someone said "no, we are going to be nice and make them feel invited". Ehm, no matter what they said while they felt hurt or whatever. Ehm, and I really liked that.

Tove: To give people the benefit of the doubt? A little bit?

Avy: Ehm, is it even giving people the benefit of the doubt, it's... They were definitely, they were not acting on their best behavior.

Tove: No.

Avy: But that doesn't matter because they didn't feel included. And that's what we had to do.

Avy is explaining how the other person felt excluded, and how it's something that affects the whole family. This person in Avy's family that didn't behave nicely, could have been feeling the loss of space amongst the friends. Ahmed (2006, 160) describes disorientation as violet feeling for a body that does not fit in to a space.

Brian is also expressing how family should be there no matter what.

It's an unconditional kind of love that you find within an, that you should find within an actual family. And the knowledge that even if things go bad, I won't run away, I

will still be here. I think that's very important one. I have had friendship where something goes bad and the friend just leaves and is like "I don't really have the energy to fix this or to talk with you about this", and that's the difference between friendship and family to me. Yeah I think family is there for each other even if things go bad and they are not running away. They are staying there; they are listening and they try to do their best just to be there. I think that's the biggest difference and I want to make my kids feel safe and that they can tell me anything, anything, there will be no judgement whatsoever! (Brian)

The way that Brian and Avy are describing what family is focuses being there for each other no matter what. It's more than friendship and it's standing up with your fellow queer family. It is an action of care to support other queer people that are not fitting in to the heteronormative in our society.

5.2 Places and objects

While analyzing the material, it became very clear that certain places and objects are important to the informants, but it was shown in different ways. There were the physical places that the people have been oriented towards, but there were also the online places that has created space for these communities.

Ryan, Avy and Brian are all active in creating spaces for their community and families, and they are doing this through social media and chat apps. In phenomenology it is important to see the orientation of a person because it shows what the person is giving their focus to. Ahmed (2006, 2) thinks that phenomenology can be used to see what is queer because it helps to cast light on the experiences, what is around and how this shapes us. By looking at the spaces that these individuals are creating online we can see how they shape the space to be queer because of their use of it and the people that are taking part in the space.

But there are, also at that place, to your queer families right. So we got a discord server there, and I think for many people there they form little groups there they met people and they consider that place a little bit of their family. (Ryan)

Ryan explains how they have been active in creating a space for other queer people to form families. Avy has a chat group with over 100 people that identify as non-binary that it started for that group to be able to support each other. Brian has also brought the community together through chat groups.

Ehm, recently I, well recently, the last couple of months one of my close friends and I, we try to bring the Antwerp queer community together. Because we felt like everybody was so scattered all over the place. And there wasn't really one place where we could all come together and in the past few months we have gathered. Like quite some queer people and we meet up all the time. We have this whatsapp group of everything where we ask for emotional support, where we hang out together, where we just talk about jokes and memes or whatever. And I have never felt so comfortable in my life before. As in this group of people. (Brian)

One of the first things Brian brought up in our interview was how they have tried to bring the community together and how they have used a chat group for people to get support. What we as people do and where we do it has an impact. What Ryan, Avy and Brian have done is create queer spaces online for queer activities. By making the decision about what can be done in a certain space, this then becomes an accepted activity in that space (Ahmed 2006, 52). By using the tools of social media and chat apps, they are opening up more queer spaces that can be reachable by other queer people online. This then becomes a way for queer people to construct families.

For Gretchen and Connor the focus on place is linked to their homes which have a connection to the older generation, and where they share a space with their blood and chosen family. Gretchen lives with her wife in a small village in Belgium and she expresses how important their home is for her and her wife. The land has been in the wife's family and means a lot to her, and Gretchen expresses how that makes it important for her too. This means that even though this is a queer family it doesn't change the importance of a family's orientation. It's the place where they have their family and take care of each other and the wife's parents. Their house then supports the caring action of their family, which means that the support of the object changes. Because it is now supporting Gretchen and her wife, it transforms into a queer object that they are oriented towards. Gretchen explains how they live next to two other lesbian couples; *"There's, we're kind of the gay triangle here."* So not only their house, but a triangle of three houses with three lesbian couples. One of the reasons why Gretchen jokingly describes how they call their houses the "gay triangle" is because their chosen families are different from the heteronormative, which then makes the space queer (Ahmed 2006, 66). A house can be inhabited by different kinds of families, but the fact that these houses are supporting queer people makes them queer objects.

All but one participant has expressed how they do not feel like Brussels is a safe place to go to. Ryan explained how they needed to protect their space when they attended a comic con in Brussels.

Brussels is bad. Because I told you about the con right, and the next one is in Gent. But we've also been at one in Brussels. And we have this wall that we put up where people can put a post-it note and they can write supportive messages on the wall. And it's usually amazing, good supportive messages. When we were in Brussels, we had to guard it because people were putting

homophobic messages on there. So it's a very different atmosphere there. And I don't like going to Brussels because of that, and lots of queer folks don't like Brussels too much. (Ryan)

Also, Connor expresses how most places in Belgium are good for queer people, but how Brussels is one of the places to avoid.

Gent and Antwerp are really good. But I don't really know a lot of other cities because I think in all cities there are places that are good for queer people. But places like Brussels I don't feel like they are that good because there are a lot of violence there, which is scary. (Connor)

Gretchen also expresses how she hears about harassment happening towards queer people in Brussels. This shows a very clear orientation away from Brussels, and it means that it is not always a safe space for queer people or their families. Even though most informants have expressed that other parts of Belgium are safe, both Avy and Ryan told me about how they have been harassed in Antwerp. Ryan gets verbally harassed on the street.

You know what the safe spaces are. Eh, and like, anybody I talk to is also very like, at work, and people not necessarily part of the community offer their support, are supportive. But it's occasions when eh, on the streets it gets tough. So, I don't pass as a woman, and I'm really tall as well. So I get, like on the way here I got shouted at. (Ryan)

What Ryan is explaining can be viewed as what Ahmed (2006, 139-140) theory that bodies gets "stopped" when they stick out. Because Ryan looks queer that means that their body cannot move around freely without being stopped by people questioning their identity. Avy explains how it feels unsafe on the streets and how it was physically attacked a year back. This has led to Avy keeping interactions with society minimal. Both Ryan and

Avy are being stopped because they do not follow the norms of what a “man” and a “woman” should look like.

But also, for Avy there are places that feel safe with it’s family. For Avy this safe space is a cultural center in Antwerp but also Avy’s home. The same cultural center also has a big meaning for Brian and their family. It’s the place where they arrange lesbian movie nights and it’s a safe space for queer people. For Brian it’s very important to find a place that can’t be disturbed by people outside of the community. This can be seen as the outside world being unstable for queer people and how the safe space of the cultural center offers the support for Brian and their family. We can also see this as Brian being disoriented in the world, and how this offers them to find a new path and places that are queer (Ahmed 2006, 170).

Pots and pans were the first thing that Connor brought up when I asked if there were any objects that made him think of his family. *“I saw her use the pots and pans a lot, so now when I use them then I always think “Oh my grandma gave them to me””*. It means that objects can fill more than a practical function, it can be objects that show support for the person. This is also a great example of how a queer person can be supported by an object that comes from their biological family. Not all queer people have only their chosen family and how certain objects can bring comfort and history. Ahmed (2006) means that objects can hold history and that they can bring reflection to that history.

Such wonder directed at the objects that we face, as well as those that are behind us, does not involve bracketing out the familiar but rather allows the familiar to dance again with life. (Ahmed 2006, 164)

The pots and pans offer Connor something familiar that supports his queer life, and it does so through opening up memories from his grandmother.

Mizielinska & Stasinskia (2019) believes that food is a way of caring for each other, and here we can see how the objects involved in that practice has a meaning to Connors life.

5.3 Biological family

Biological family is in my opinion a sensitive but very important theme to bring up for my research. As I mentioned in previous research one of the earliest researchers on chosen families is Kath Weston (1997), and even though very relevant to her research, she portrays blood family as an excluded part of queer people's life's. I do believe that this is the case still for many people in the queer community and it must be a very hard thing to deal with. However, I agree with Mizielinska (2002) that it is more complicated than that for the people in her study, and for the people in mine. There is not always a clear line between blood family and chosen family, and often they come together.

For instance, it can be that part of the blood family accepts the choices made by the queer people, and that is the case for both Connor and Brian. Both express how their moms are very much part of their family and how their moms have supported them. The dads and their sides of the family are not seen as being part of the close family. Brian has decided to break off all contact with their dad's side of the family and it has been a long process for them.

Tove: Do you consider your partner a part of the family?

Brian: They are definitely family. Much closer than my biological family I would say. Like ehm, it's probably important for the research as well, I have broken off all contact with my dad's side of the family. And I also changed my last name because of it. So I changed my first and last name. Because my dad's family were racist, homophobic, transphobic and I did not want to be associated with that part of my blood line anymore. So I

just cut of all contact and it has been very though. It's been a process of two years, and like now it's, now my last name is changed, last month. I have been waiting two years for it, now it's finally closed off. But there is still a huge, a weight inside of me or something, because I lost half of my family. And meeting my girlfriend, and their family, has helped me a lot to deal with that emptiness and fill that up. That's, eh, longing for more family or something. It's something that I recently discovered, is that I really feel the need to be accepted and approved by them and their family.

Brian explains how the process of breaking with family can be painful and how it has left them with some emptiness. This can be connected to Ahmed's (2006) theories on disorientation.

Disorientation can be a bodily feeling of losing one's place, and an affect of the loss of a place: it can be a violent feeling, and a feeling that is affected by violence, or shaped by the violence directed towards the body. Disorientation involves failed orientations: bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape, or use objects that do not extend their reach. (Ahmed, 2006 s.160)

The process for Brian can be seen as a disorientation and because of their decided to change their last name. But it could also be that the disorientation started when they started identifying as queer, and it was then that Brian stopped following the accepted lines of the family. This meant that Brian was disoriented and that there was no stable place to orient towards, and that meant that there was an emotional space open for another family (Ahmed 2006, 62). This is what made it possible for them to orient towards their girlfriend's family and it is why Brian might feel such strong feelings of being accepted by them.

For Connor it's because the dad's part of the family is not accepting of him.

I only consider them family of blood, but not really like, a real family should, it's a bit complicated. Because I don't even know if they accept me and (sibling) or not. They

just don't talk to us anymore, but it's been, even before, it was really complicated because my dad's mother always wanted a grandson but at that time we, I wasn't out of the closet yet so and covid didn't really help. So we really haven't talked, and then my little brother came and we were kind of forgotten. So it's weird. (Connor)

Connor sees dad's side of the family as a part of his blood but for him it doesn't feel like they are the way a real family should be. If we follow from what Brian and Avy said about family giving unconditional love and care, then it is clear that family is not something that should abandon you. This is something that was expressed from the participants in the study made by Levin, Kattari, Piellusch and Watson (2020) where it was described that the chosen family could help more because they were able to understand the struggles of being queer.

Connor expresses a close bond with their sibling with whom he is identical twin with. This is a person that is their biological family, but the sibling is also queer, which could be a reason why he puts them as the very closest part of the family in his drawing.

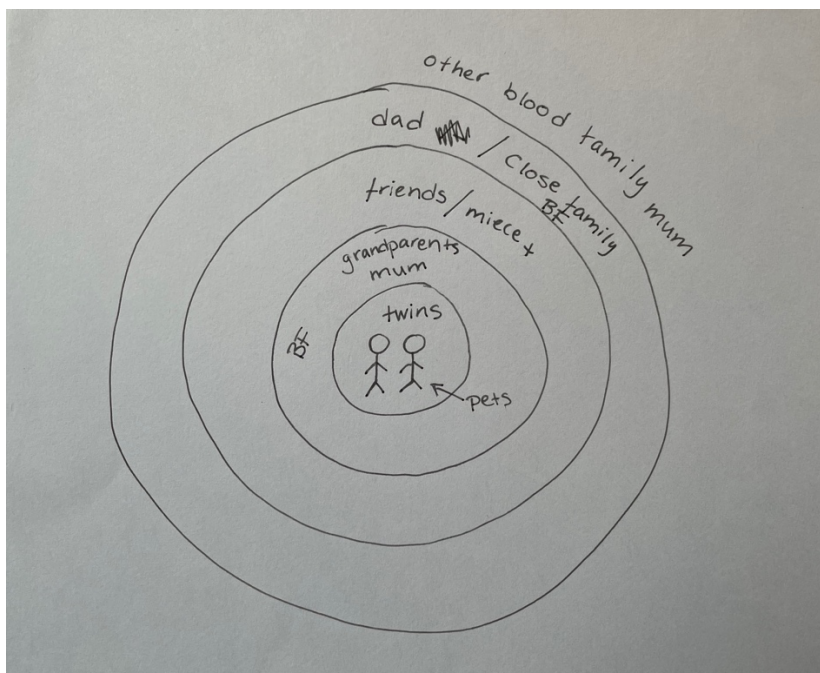


Figure 1.1 Family map by Connor (reconstructed)

This is different from the other informants, who often put partners closest to them on the drawing. When Connor showed me the drawing, I was quick to assume that it was his partner that was right next to him on the drawing, but he explained that it was his sibling because they are the closest person to them. It shows that there are assumptions on who should be your closest person, even I drew conclusions based on what I thought, but for Connor it is more fluid than that. Even though he is the youngest participant, it still shows how different people form their chosen families in connection to their blood family.

5.4 Kids

Ehm, I also have two adopted kids. Like eh, I'm like their queer mom. And I do consider them my kids and we, I invite them over for dinner and they can call me whenever they need help or advise. And we go to museums together and stuff. And I do consider them my kids and, because I would never have biological kids. Because I am non-binary and I don't see... Whatever. Like adopting queer kids and being there for them is so much more meaningful to me. And I have had my two kids now for three years, I think. And this close queer family is just like the past few months, but I really feel like... this is really close. The way we all are. (Brian)

Ahmed (2006) describes how we carry on the line of our family by having children. If we see this is the light of being crooked or strange, then it's clear that there are people who want to do this but in different ways. Having children does not have to mean that someone has biological kids, but it can be so much more than that. Several of the participants have children that they see as their queer children. By queer children they mean people that they care for and that they support by being a family. It has also become very clear through my interviews that pets are viewed as children in these families, and I will focus more on that later.

Brian describes how their mom was a safe space for them growing up, and how their mom comforted them.

It was me clinging to my mom for safety basically. And that's not what, maybe that's what I am trying to do for my kids now, be that mom they can cling to for safety. I guess. (Brian)

What Brian is doing is following their moms' footsteps of providing a safe and caring space for their children. Kids is something that is often portrayed as very important to the heteronormative family and people that express that they do not want to have biological children can quickly be judges because of this. Brian has experienced this when they wanted to have a hysterectomy. It was part because of a medical condition, but it was also something that they wanted to do. Brian tells me how they were questioned for their choice and how they were encouraged to not do it.

I was denied the surgery for years because they kept telling me that I am a healthy young woman and I will want kids, both wrong! (Brian)

The hospital was convinced that Brian would change their mind since they were a "young woman", but Brian does not identify as a woman and had to argue their case to get a hysterectomy. This is an example of how Brian might have been view as strange or crooked in the eyes of the hospital, because they wanted to follow other lines then what they expected. Ahmed (2006, 91) believes that bodies are shaped by compulsory heterosexuality, when norms are followed and repeated. That is why it is expected by a woman to want to have biological kids, because that would be to follow the straight line. Brian making the decision to have a hysterectomy makes them look strange in a place where wanting biological kids is part of compulsory heterosexuality. It could have also been a choice for Brian because they did not want to follow the shapes of the body that was expected by them. To

not have the ability to have biological children means that Brian's body is shaped for something else, it's able to follow other lines.

Just because Brian doesn't want to have biological kids doesn't mean that they do not want to be a parent. Brian has two queer kids that they care for and how they are very meaningful to them. This is two young individuals that Brian cares for and that they refer to as their kids, and Brian is the mom. They met through friends and through the community and their relationship grew in to a family bond. It is a relationship that has been chosen, thus making it a part of Brian's chosen family.

And I do consider them my kids and, because I would never have biological kids. Because I am non-binary, and I don't see... Whatever. Like adopting queer kids and being there for them is so much more meaningful to me.
(Brian)

Ryan has a biological son that lives in another country and is described as being a part of the family even though he is far away. The son will visit and when he does it's a meaningful time for Ryan to spend time with his son. We can see in Ryan's family map that they place their son both close and far away. If we look at this from a point of orientation, this can be seen as the son being out of reach for Ryan. The son is not within reach because Ryan is disoriented and is going in a new direction (Ahmed 2006, 170).

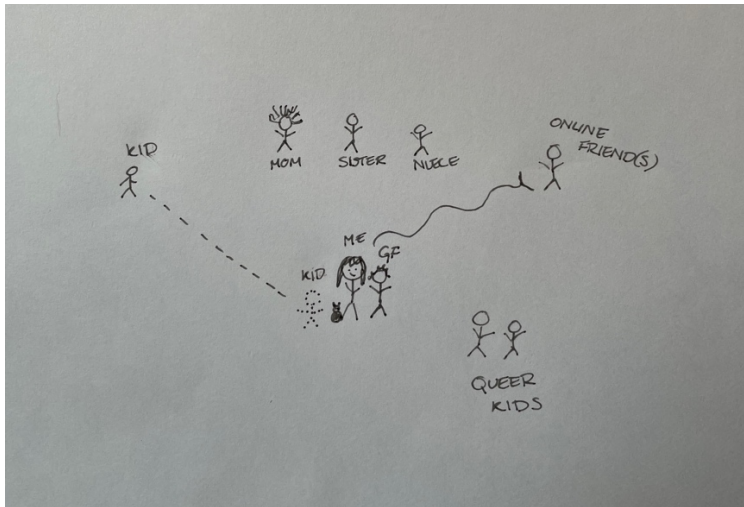


Figure 1.2 Family map by Ryan (reconstructed)

Ryan is also a queer mom. Ryan describes how a couple of queer kids have adopted them, and not that Ryan has adopted the children.

Ryan: ...And I have a couple of kids that have adopted me.

Tove: That has adopted you?

Ryan: Yeah. Eh, like they just started calling me mom and some time, and now it's basically I'm their queer mom.

This means that the queer way of having children doesn't mean that the parents make the decision, and it doesn't follow the norm of how a parent-child relationship should look like. It is not dependent on someone giving birth or having an official adoption. Since both Brian and Connor have met their adopted children through friends or queer spaces, it means that the relationship is formed in other ways of caring. This can again be seen as a way of making the familiar strange (Ahmed 2006, 177) since they are using words like parent and child, but they are doing it in their own way. Ahmed (2006) also suggests that we can see this as "mixed genealogy". It means that some lines are followed but it gets away from typical lines. Brian also shows a more fluent relationship with their children and talks with great admiration for them.

I'm happy I have him. I admire him, I think I admire him more than he admires me. Like, he is a 16 year old kid

and he knows more about history, politics than me. He is so smart! I admire him so much! (Brian)

5.4.1 Pets

Even though pets are very important to me personally, I was surprised by how most of the informants felt the same way. Four of the informants have pets and they all referred to the pets as their babies or their kids. Ryan referred to their cat as their little baby but had not thought about the cat being a part of the family before now. Because the four of them all referred to their pets as their children, I decided to continue the theme of kids with pets.

Brian tells me about their 3 cats and dog that they have. Brian is mommy and their girlfriend is daddy for the pets.

Eh, and there is just this thing with the two of us, my partner and I, it just flows naturally with our pets. They are daddy and I am mommy. It's very heteronormative, but it just works! And we both feel very comfortable with it, so we are mom and dad. (Brian)

Here is a clear example of heteronormative formations being sanctioned by a queer family, and it is done in a way that fits them. The repetition of heterosexual norms is being done in a fun and unique way, as if it's a form of drag. They are not following the straight line, which makes this a queer repetition of the line (Ahmed 2006, 70-79). I believe that by being mommy and daddy to their pets they are both accepting and challenging the heteronormative.



Figure 1.3 Family map by Brian (reconstructed)

In Brian's family map they included their pets because they are an important part of their family. Brian tells me about how the cats were their support through hard times and how they are their children. The pets are also part of the community and clusters of family. Brian had big bills after one of the cats got sick, so they started a fundraiser for their cat. The whole community stepped in, and Brian was able to pay the vet bills. This shows a great understanding from the community on how important pets are, and an orientation towards other kinds of kinship and community than the biological or even the human family. The disorientation of the queer people opens new channels for caring, that reaches further than the heteronormative view of care.

Connor has a hamster that he refers to as his son and that lives with him, but he also talks about the cat that lives with his mom, and how that is his brother. I believe the cat is viewed as the brother since the cat is living with Connor's mom. This means that the heteronormative lines are very much

followed in the way that this is viewed, but with the twist that it's about the relationship to a cat that means a lot to them both.

Gretchen and her wife have many pets. They have cats, a dog and a bunny that lives outside in the garden. She talks about the animals with much love and says that the pets are their family. This is also official by putting the animals names on cards.

Tove: That's really nice. Do you consider the cats part of your family? Like the pets?

Gretchen: Yes. Oh, yes. Most of the birthday cards that we send we sign with our names, the dog and the bunny, and the cats. Because we have also have a bunny that lives in the yard.

This action of putting the animals on the cards means that it becomes a queer object that supports the caring in this family. A queer object makes it possible for these people to care for each other and for their pets since the family is created through the object (Ahmed 2006, 169).

6. Discussion

This phenomenological study aimed to find out how queer individuals view family. A few important themes were identified by a thematic analysis, such as places, objects and kids. An important word through this research has been care. It was the way I looked at my families, it was the word that came up in previous research, and it has been something relayed to me in all the interviews. Family is the people that care for you and that you care for. It is the way that queer families are organized, and as we can see from the participants it can be done in different ways.

We have been able to follow how the participants are supported or not by places and objects. These make it possible for them to orient themselves towards queer objects and places that supports them and their family.

Looking at how Gretchen is married and how Ryan wants to get married, shows how queer bodies can reach something that was previously limited to heterosexual couples. The two of them are oriented towards the line of getting married and it means that marriage is something that is important to them. This shows that some rituals that are linked to heteronormative lives are still attractive to queer families. My belief is that this is queer people making things their own, like Ahmed (2006) describes making the familiar “strange”. By doing this they are creating new ways of understanding family but also constructing unique ways to care for each other.

When it comes to kids the informants had very different views on children and we got to see how parent-child formations are done in many ways. This to me shows that within the queer community there is no pressure to have biological kids, but there is a feeling of wanting to care for others. This has been shown in the way that the informants have adopted queer kids and all the pets that are in their lives. The heteronormative formation of having kids is sanctioned in the way that these queer people have decided to do it their own way.

The study has given us an insight into how queer families can be constructed in Belgium, and how these participants view their close relationships. We can also see how some heterosexual practices are sanctioned by the queer family, and how they are making it unique and strange. The participants express a dislike of the heteronormative family

and challenges the way it's performed by caring for their family without the official recognition from the government.

This study has been limited to five people, and a way forward from this could be to make it a broader study all over Belgium. Especially to focus on the Wallonian part of Belgium to see if they have a different view of chosen families, but also to reach further across ethnicity and class.

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Figures

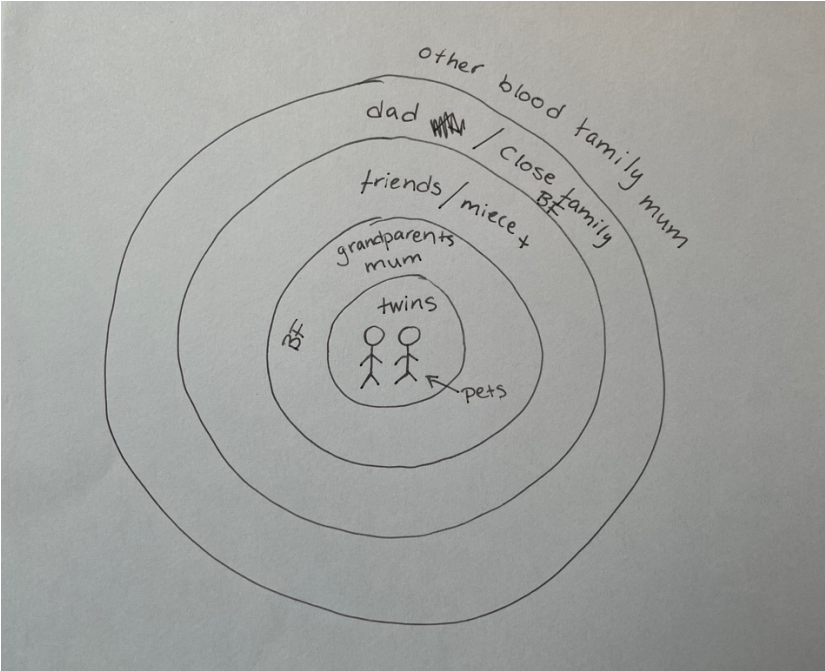


Figure 1.1 Family map by Connor (reconstructed)

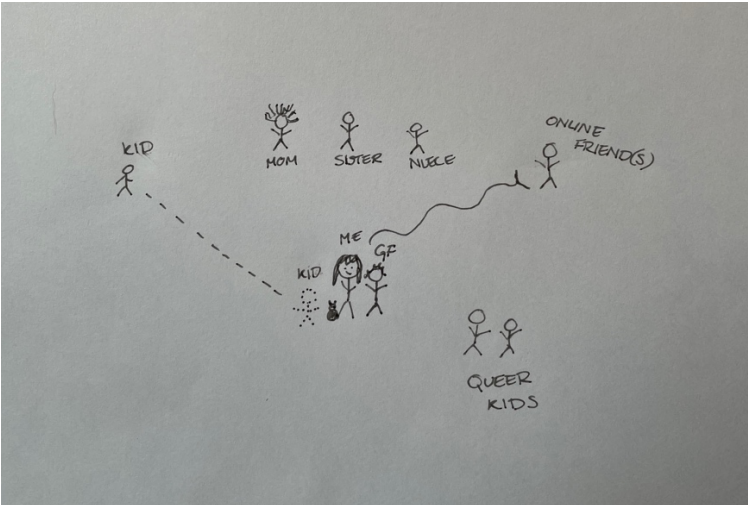


Figure 1.3 Family map by Ryan (reconstructed)



Figure 1.3 Family map by Brian (reconstructed)

Appendix 1

Information about participation in the study

This information is aimed at you who have agreed to participate in a study conducted by students at Mittuniversitetet. This information applies partly to the study itself, partly to the handling of personal data. Any data that can be directly or indirectly linked to a living person (e.g. name, social security number, e-mail address and voice recording) is personal data.

The purpose of this study is to gather information from people that are part of queer families. This information will be gathered through interviews with the informants and will then be transcribed and analyzed.

How does the study work?

The interviews will take place in person or online, depending on what you as the informant are more comfortable with. I will ask questions about your family to find the essence of what a family is to you. The interview will take about 60 minutes.

Volunteering

Participation in the study is completely voluntary, and you can cancel your participation at any time without having to state any particular reasons for this. Your personal data will be treated confidentially so that unauthorized persons cannot access it.

How will collected material be used?

The study is carried out within the framework of the course Genderstudies C. The study constitutes a degree project and will be reported through a report. Results will be presented in the report in consolidated form, with interview quotes as illustrations or clarifications. These will be anonymized, which means that they will not be able to be derived from you as a person.

Who receives the report?

It is first and foremost the supervisor, the opponent at the examination seminar and the examining teacher who will take part in the examination work. The report will be preserved at Mittuniversitetet by being posted in DiVA, i.e. the university's digital scientific archive.

Provided the authors give their approval, the report will also be published in DiVA, which means that the report will be freely available on the internet.

Processing of personal data

Personal data will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

The personal data controller is Mittuniversitetet, 831 25 Östersund, tel 010-142 80 00 vx. The data protection officer is Emelie Holmlund (email: emelie.holmlund@miun.se).

If you want to know more about how we, as an authority, handle personal data, see www.miun.se/kontakt/personuppgifter/.

Collected personal data will be processed securely by being stored on the server space that every student at Mittuniversitetet has access to via their personal student account.

When the study is completed, which it is considered to be when the grade for the degree project has been set and registered in the study register, all personal data, i.e. the recorded audio file, the interview transcripts and the signed consent forms, to be deleted/discarded.

Hereby confirm that I have read the information about the study and the handling of personal data.

..... Signature

