

## Proud Pictures

### Negotiating Family through Same-Sex Couples' Sharenting

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Today an ever-increasing number of family photographs are taken and shared on social media. Although debated, the parental digital sharing practice *sharenting* – sharing + parenting – has in Western societies “become a social norm” (Brosch 2016:226). Social media afford new practices and ways of being a family through digital technology and have contributed to social expectation and the normalization of digitally sharing family photographs (Leaver et al. 2020:174). For parents in a digital age, family life is often encouraged and expected to be shared online (Blum-Ross & Livingstone 2017:111). On Instagram an increased visibility of Swedish-based same-sex families can be noted.

In the last few decades great advances have been made for queer sociolegal rights in Sweden, of which many have clustered around partnership, marriage, and parenthood (Dahl & Gabb 2020:210; Rydström 2011). However, Dahl (2022:162; see also Rydström 2011) argues that the inclusion of same-sex families in family law was more about solving a practical problem; many LGBTQ people already had children. Thus, a revision of the family law in 2005 was intended to “better regulate and secure new family forms conceived outside the nation and the law”. Differently put, the acknowledgement of LGBTQ parents and same-sex families may have been more about society accepting a compliance with heterosexual norms rather than of non-heterosexual orientations per se (ibid.). After the Second World War, the nuclear family – a (hetero)normative institution consisting of father, mother, and child – became idealized and was regarded as central and instrumental in the establishment of the Swedish welfare state (Frykman &

Löfgren 2022:11–12). In recent decades, the hegemony of the heteronormative nuclear family has been challenged as new family forms and ways of parenthood have been made possible. Moreover, reproductive technologies and reproductive medicine have also led to a decoupling between sex and reproduction (Gunnarsson Payne 2015; Braidotti 2011:181), which further adds to the complexity of how family and kinship can be defined. Even though same-sex families, as well as other forms and concepts of queer kinships, existed long before the revisions of Swedish family law (Dahl 2022), the implementation of the right to insemination for same-sex female couples within Swedish county councils in 2005 was significant. Also, there has been an increase in adoption and conceiving through surrogacy among gay men in relation to a growing global fertility market (Dahl 2022:162). As Dahl and Andreassen (2021:80) point out: “Scandinavia has witnessed a veritable queer baby boom.”<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on interviews with five same-sex couples and a selection of their publicly shared family photographs, as well as observations of the hashtag “#regnbågsfamilj” on Instagram, this article focuses on experiences from a queer generation, where parenthood is often expected to be included in the queer life trajectory (cf. Dahl & Andreassen 2021; Dahl 2022), and whose parenthood and family life are lived in a digital age. In a seemingly open and progressive time, the aim is to examine how heteronormative notions of family are negotiated, challenged, and/or reproduced through same-sex families' sharenting. How do same-sex parents position themselves in relation to heteronormative notions of family, and making mean-

ing around their sharenting practices and shared content on Instagram?

### Sharenting

Research on sharenting opens for qualitative ethnographic knowledge production about the social, cultural, and political aspects of everyday life, as well as about parenting and family life in a digital age. The article is a contribution to a long-standing ethnological interest in family (e.g., Lundgren et al. 1999; Gunnarsson Payne 2015; Frykman & Löfgren 2022), and also contributes to queer kinship studies in Scandinavia (e.g., Malmquist 2015; Gunnarsson Payne 2015; Andreassen 2017; Nebeling Petersen 2018; Dahl 2018; 2022). Most of the current research on sharenting focuses on family influencers (e.g., Abidin 2017), sharenting in relation to gender aspects, mainly focusing on performances of motherhood within heterosexual coupling (e.g., Lazard et al. 2019; Pedersen & Lupton 2018), and children's online privacy in technology-integrated societies (e.g., Fox & Hoy 2019; Blum-Ross & Livingstone 2017), as children increasingly are "being born into the internet" (Brosch 2016; Leaver et al. 2020:175). The latter has been debated more frequently in recent years, and in some cases has been legally regulated (e.g., a French law passed in 2020 about the earnings of online child influencers). Concerns for children's safety and well-being have also been raised about digitally shared images and videos as they may expose children to sexual abusers (Brosch 2016:231). Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2017) state that risks of data mining, marketing, and facial recognition are also growing concerns in relation to integrity around sharenting prac-

tices. Sharenting has also been regarded as narcissistic and naïve (Webb 2013), and Lazard and colleagues (2019:2–3) mention "humblebragging" and oversharing as two other maligned behaviours of sharenting.

Although it is debated and critiqued, sharenting has also been described as empowering. For example, Lazard and colleagues (2019) present sharenting as a way for mothers to perform good motherhood by communicating pride in their children. Historically, mothers have been scrutinized for their lifestyle, choices, and practices, and have been denied active participation in forming their own narratives. Similarly, LGBTQ people have often been objects for others' opinions, besides state control of sexuality, reproduction, and bodies. In connection with motherhood, Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2017:120) state that digital spaces "may overcome historical silences". This suggests a potential subversiveness connected to sharenting as a practice (cf. Lopez 2009; Pearl 2016) which could apply to same-sex sharenting as well as in relation to queer visibility. In this article I will explore this further and discuss how shared content as well as same-sex parents' reasoning around their sharenting practices is used to negotiate heteronormativity in relation to family and parenthood.

### Method and Material

The fieldwork began in January 2021 with orienting observations on Instagram to gain an overview of relevant hashtag flows, recurring image genres, and general patterns regarding what kind of family constellations were visible in popular global LGBTQ family-themed hashtag flows. I then narrowed the focus to observe what

was at the time the most popular LGBTQ family-themed hashtag flow in Sweden: #regnbågsfamilj. The hashtag was observed every other week for four months with a focus on the content and kind of families that were visible in the hashtag flow. Before the start of the fieldwork, the study design was reviewed and approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2020-06056). Besides this standard practice, ethical and reflexive considerations have been treated as an ongoing process from planning to execution of the study and the dissemination of results (franzke et al. 2020). All content observed during the time of my fieldwork was shared from public Instagram accounts. This means that the users have chosen to make their shared content publicly accessible and visible to all Instagram users. The observed images can thus be assumed to have been shared with the intention of being made publicly visible. To access and be present at the field site(s) I set up an Instagram user. However, as an ethical approach, I chose not to interact by posting content myself, nor to comment on or like images uploaded by others during my fieldwork. In that sense, I was not part of, nor did I participate in, the study field except by approaching potential participants through direct messages on Instagram.

To recruit interviewees, I initially approached a selection of Sweden-based Instagram users who frequently posted images tagged with the observed hashtag, inviting them to participate in interviews together with their partners. Not included for recruitment were influencers, politicians, or celebrities who use sharenting for financial gain and/or as part of their personal branding. Six users with an interest in participat-

ing responded, but three of these decided to withdraw before the interview.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the participating couples remaining, another couple answered an open call that I had posted in a group on Facebook for rainbow families, and one couple was recruited from my personal network. Three female same-sex couples and two male same-sex couples were interviewed. The five participating couples live in different areas of Sweden but consist of a homogeneous group in terms of age (majority 30–40 years old), sexuality (homo- or bisexual) and family formation (couples living together in a monogamy, but with variation in family size), and to a large extent also in terms of race (majority white). The recruited participant group is representative of the most frequent userbase visible in the hashtag flow #regnbågsfamilj at the time of the observations, with the exception that a majority of the userbase were perceived as female same-sex couples. All couples were interviewed together regardless of whether they shared images from separate accounts or if it was only one of them who shared family photos from a public account. Four interviews were conducted and transcribed in Swedish, and one (with Jin and Peter) in English. Quotations from the Swedish interviews were then translated into English by the author. Due to restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic I conducted the interviews digitally.

The interviews were semi-structured and contained open-ended questions about the participants' use of social media, with the focus on Instagram, their sharenting in general and motivations for sharing family photographs, and how they reasoned around private and public. Participants were also asked about interaction and re-

sponses to their images and whether, how and why they used hashtags. Before the interviews each couple provided a selection of five images from their publicly shared family photographs. Inspired by photo-elicitation interviewing (Harper 2002), I asked the participants about their images and what they wanted to show with them. This method made it possible to understand the couples' own meaning-making around their images, and "how an image works in relation to broader systems of meaning" (Rose 2016:106). Furthermore, I also used these images as empirical material with an understanding of family photographs as having agency (Rose 2016). This includes the potential of becoming political objects, both in the way they are made and shared, and as they are perceived by different audiences. As such, I take the images to construct accounts of the social world and to have the potential to confirm or challenge normative notions of family. In this, I am informed by representation theory (Hall 1997) to explore specifically how norms and values are communicated in photographs and captions. Following this, I understand the shared family photos framed (or not) with a certain caption, emojis and hashtags as meaningful in relation to the viewers' experiences as well as by norms and family and kinship discourses within both LGBTQ and heterosexual communities.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

My overall theoretical understanding proceeds from queer theoretical perspectives (e.g., Butler 1990) with a focus on the social constructions of heterosexuality as normal and desirable in opposition to other sexual orientations. In relation to heter-

onormative discourses, I analytically use the concepts of queer visibility and happiness to explore how these come to matter in same-sex parents' sharenting. In this article I use the term "queer" as an umbrella term for non-heterosexual and non-heteronormative identities and family formations with an understanding that such identities and orientations are inevitably defined in relation to normative power structures such as heteronormativity. In my analysis I am also influenced by Stuart Hall's theorizing about different approaches and positions in relation to meaning conveyed in dominant discourses (1980). Hall argues for three different positions: the dominant-hegemonic position (to agree), the negotiating position (agree with the overall message but locally re-negotiate the message), and the oppositional position (position against) (Hall 1980:136–138). Applied to my material, Hall's ideas make visible how the participants, both through their shared content and in their reasoning about their sharenting, take different positions in relation to normative ideas and representations of family, and how heteronormative notions are negotiated from these positions.

### **Queer Visibility**

Visibility has long been a central political strategy applied within the LGBTQ community in the Western world (Barnhurst 2007:2). Visibility in terms of openness has also been a central strategy for LGBTQ activism, with Pride festivals as one example, "coming out" as another, including more radical examples like "outing" as a strategic activism in the 1990s (Watney 1994). Despite more extensive family rights legislations and state-subsidized reproductive technology during the two last decades in

Sweden, research studies show that queer life to some extent continues to be surrounded by discrimination and invisibility (e.g., Malmquist et al. 2019; Malmquist & Wurm 2018; Malmquist 2016, 2015). For example, LGBTQ people often experience minority stress in contacts with health care during pregnancy and in connection with childbirth (Malmquist et al. 2019; Malmquist 2016). It may also be a matter of having to deal with prejudices and being questioned as a parent, which can include having to explain family relationships, answer questions about methods of reproduction, and so on. Queer parenting and queer family formation have also historically been, and to some extent continue to be, the subject of negotiations. So-called rainbow families have been pitted against the heteronormative nuclear family as an ideal, with reference to the children's best interests (Malmquist & Wurm 2018:5). Against this background, it can be assumed that there is a stronger need to make one's family visible to the world among same-sex parents.

Visibility is also relevant in relation to social media. A notable change in the visibility of family and children is that family photographs have moved from being stored and kept in physical albums in private domestic settings, visible only to a few chosen people, to become widely accessible by a public on social media (cf. Larsen & Sandbye 2014). Optional use of hashtags also contributes to the dissemination of individually shared content, as searchable user-generated thematic flows are created (Zappavigna 2015). This enables Instagram users to form a community of known and unknown audiences within such thematic hashtag flows. The affordance of visibili-

ty through social media is also significant for an increased digital queer visibility, as families of all sorts can upload images on the platform and thus make their families part of the visible representations of family and family formations (cf. Blum-Ross & Livingstone 2017). By sharenting, same-sex parents and families are able to own their narrative when telling the (visual) story of their family to a wider public.<sup>3</sup>

### Happiness

Previous research shows that the concept of happiness is central to family photographs as a genre of photography and what they are likely to show. In her book on family photographs (pre-social media), Gillian Rose (2010:11, 13) states that family photographs tend to be on the idyllic side, leaving out the everyday hardships such as housework, sick children, or teen tantrums. Besides being a recurring theme, not least in the visual empirical material, I also use happiness as an analytical tool to discuss how "emotions shape what bodies do in the present, or how they are moved by the objects they approach" (Ahmed 2006:2). Sara Ahmed points out that above all happiness is described as "what gives purpose, meaning and order to human life" (2010:1). Differently put, feelings like happiness are intentional, affective, and as such, *orienting* (Ahmed 2006) towards certain objects and paths in life where such feelings are expected to be reached (Ahmed 2010:90). Queer lives have historically been excluded from imaginaries of happy endings, for example displaying unhappy representations of LGBTQ people in popular culture to promote queer lives as a path to unhappiness – at the end of the story "lesbians and gays must turn straight,

die, or go mad” (Ahmed 2010:91). Also in real life, being queer has been associated with being on the route to unhappiness, as a family, and in particular children are portrayed as “happy objects”, or the crown of creation in a (hetero)normative life path (Ahmed 2006:17; 2010:94). As the promise of happiness through marriage and children has long been exclusive to heterosexual couples, and queer sociolegal advances have been a fairly recent achievement, it is relevant to explore the potential subversiveness that happiness can hold in visual displays of same-sex families.

In the next section I will discuss the participants’ thoughts and approaches to visibility. In the subsequent sections I will account for different strategies applied by the participants and discuss how they position themselves (cf. Hall 1980) and make meaning around their sharenting practices in relation to normative notions of family.

### **Being Visible**

Visibility in terms of easy accessibility to their images was mostly constructed as something positive by the couples. This way, the participant argued, they could first and foremost stay in touch, and thus maintain a togetherness, with relatives and friends (cf. Rose 2014:76). This was said to be especially useful during the ongoing pandemic when the participants had limited possibilities to meet their friends and relatives. Images became a way to “invite people to our home”, as one of the participants said.

Notably, none of the couples reported feeling much fear of homophobic reactions to their online content. In the rare case where there had been a negative comment on one of Anna and Lisen’s images

showing a rainbow flag, they commented that a much greater number of people had showed support. They also felt confident that, if needed again, people would have their backs. Visibility and being seen by others were thus perceived and constructed as a security rather than a risk. Overall, the participants had a rather unproblematic approach to sharing images publicly. Regarding sharing images of their family and in particular their children, the participants’ concerns were mostly about what type of images they felt was okay to share publicly (no nudes or ridiculing images), rather than the practice of sharing itself.

Furthermore, most of the participants said that they were more likely to stop sharing images as the children grew older, and/or that when their children became older, they would be asked for their consent. In Mia’s family, this was already the norm for their teenagers. This relatively unproblematized approach to sharing family photos, and photos of their children, points towards the social acceptance that sharenting has gained in a short time. This should also be understood in the context of increasing expectations from other relatives and friends towards parents to share family photos, especially of their children (cf. Leaver et al. 2020:174; Blum-Ross & Livingstone 2017:111). Moreover, having a public account was not something all the couples actively thought about. The participants’ reasoning about their sharenting practices can therefore also point towards how public digital spaces can be perceived and experienced as more private than they are (cf. Markham & Buchannan 2012). A publicly shared image can be public in that it is available to virtually anyone on a platform but was meant to be private (with



followers/friends as the primary intended audience). It is thus possible to interpret the participants' thoughts about their sharenting practices as experiencing "privacy" in the specific context of their Instagram accounts.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, a certain awareness about being public was also expressed. Some of the participants said that, besides friends and family, they also welcomed being accessible to other LGBTQ people and heterosexuals with relatable experiences of using reproduction technologies. Being public and visible thus helped to get connected with others, and by extension to create a community around their images, and in turn also to connect themselves to desired online communities. Visibility was also made important by the couples when they talked about becoming, and to some extent positioning themselves as role models for others. Both Anna and Lisen, and Simon and Daniel, described how they had lacked role models themselves when it came to starting a family as a same-sex couple. Anna explained that they had to search for information on the Internet, since they had no one to ask. Lacking role models was described by these two couples as a motivating factor to become role models themselves, by publicly sharing images of their family and identities, and their process of starting a family. This was also expressed by Jin. Although he said that he didn't want to be a role model per se, in the capacity of living openly as a gay dad, giving hope to especially young LGBTQ people in Japan, where he had grown up, was described as a strong motivation for him to publicly share his family story. The possibility to reach a wide audience via social media was in these examples constructed

as central to making the couples visible to both known and unknown audiences, and hence becoming potential role models for others.

For Simon and Daniel, however, positioning themselves as role models was not exclusively directed towards other LGBTQ people, but included anyone, regardless of sexuality and gender, who planned on using surrogacy. By connecting their posts not only to hashtag flows such as #rainbowfamily but also to #surrogacy, they were able to reach others in the same position, directing the content to an audience with such presumably relatable experiences (cf. Zappavigna 2015). In this sense, the method for starting a family seemed to be a major reason for forming a community with others through their account, equally important as being a same-sex couple.

### **Making a Statement**

All the interviewed couples said that they thought Swedish society nowadays is very open and accepting of LGBTQ people and families, and they expressed no tension in living openly as lesbian, bisexual, or homosexual. Still, some of the couples referred to same-sex families being considered norm-breaking in relation to heteronormative nuclear families, thus making it necessary to post "statements". Furthermore, the couples also expressed an awareness that the LGBTQ-positive climate in society they now experienced had not been won without activism and struggles fought in the past. This knowledge was repeatedly used to embed their own sharenting practices in a discourse of LGBTQ activism. Further, sharenting in relation to being same-sex families was made significant in terms of politics and a need for contin-

ued representation. Hence, their personal online visibility was closely paired with the political importance of being open and proud.

Mia: For me, there has never been any obstacle to show who I am. Because I'm not ashamed of who I am, and I'm not ashamed of who my family are. And I think that is very important, because if we are ashamed, it would be like taking a step backwards. What we want is to move forward, we want it to be even more accepted than it has been before.

Jin and Peter also mentioned the importance of being public and open, and Jin added:

I thought that I would never be able to come out of the closet because of the lack of social acceptance in Japan [where he grew up]. So, I had been hiding myself for almost thirty years. And now, after that [...] showing my face and telling my story honestly, that is totally related to my pride.

In the excerpt above, being open and showing his face becomes a way for Jin to express pride, but as he also mentioned during the interview, to regain self-esteem. In that sense displaying openness and pride in his images, besides being representations that show potential life directions, it also orients Jin towards happiness, a path he previously believed to be excluded from (cf. Ahmed 2010).

In these statements, openness and visibility were recurrently constructed as necessities to maintain the present status and rights for LGBTQ people, but also to make society even more inclusive of norm-breaking sexualities, identities, and lives. Both in the interviews and through their shared images, the participants oriented themselves towards a politicized idea of

visibility. In the interview with Anna and Lisen, Anna emphasized the importance of visibility in relation to context, drawing on her experiences of previously having lived in Dubai, in a big city in Sweden, and now in a Swedish rural village:

Anna: I strongly believe in being even more open, especially in places and contexts where I think it's needed. [...] I feel that I have a need to share such posts.

Lisen: Yes, you more often share images as statements.

Anna: Yeah, I know I can reach a lot of people and... there are many idiots in this country. Even in this country.

Through these examples visibility is seen as having a political function. Anna, whose account has a lot of followers, also recognizes the specific impact her sharing might have in contexts that she feels need it.

While all the couples declared that making statements was not their main reasons for sharing family images on Instagram, they occasionally made outspoken statements. For example, in the captions in one of Emma and Julia's images they discussed prejudices against lesbian families, like getting questions about "where is the dad?!", or "who is the real mom??" In the caption the couple pointed out that this kind of questioning was never posed towards heterosexual families. Another example is a "groupfie"<sup>5</sup> uploaded by Anna, showing the couple standing close to each other, and Lisen, the non-biological mother, is wearing a t-shirt with the text "100% mommy". This message functions as a statement in response to heteronormative discourses about motherhood as reserved only for the carrying mother. The message is reinforced by Lisen also holding the baby, as if to say,



“I carry too.” Anna, who uploaded the image, also salutes her wife in the caption and acknowledges her equal role as a mother. Previous studies have shown that, in connection with parenthood, heteronormative structures are often brought to the fore, frequently resulting in the non-biological parent not being understood as a parent (cf. Malmquist & Wurm 2018; Malmquist 2016, 2015). These two images can thus be understood as examples of statements in relation to heteronormative notions of family where queer visibility matters. Anna’s image was posted during the International Family Equality Day, an official day for celebrating and making visual LGBTQ families. She tagged the image with the hashtag #rainbowfamilyday to mark and connect her image the event, also connecting it to this certain hashtag flow (cf. Zappavigna 2015). In many of Anna’s images she applied LGBTQ-themed hashtags, and by doing so positioning these images as non-heteronormative visual representations. The interpretation of the images is thereby guided towards being a political statement (Hall 1997:167). This way Anna contributes to a global oppositional discourse through which the opportunity arises to redefine the notion and representation of family (cf. Hall 1980). Through the use of these specific hashtags, the image is also connected to a wider global campaign for queer social legal rights, visibility, and recognition, thus further bringing out the subversiveness of what otherwise looks like a mundane family groupie of two parents and their baby.

### “How Lucky We Are”

One of Anna and Lisen’s images is their wedding photo. The image shows the cou-

ple in their white wedding dresses kissing each other. They are standing in a field in the countryside with the soft light of an ongoing sunset. Overall, the image denotes a dreamy fantasy, in the composition, in the setting of the scene, and in the couple’s dresses and hairstyles. The dreaminess of the image also relates to a trend in wedding pictures – the happy couple living happily ever after (cf. Knuts 2006:129–131). In this image the (queer) wedding couple is thus recognizable as a normative representation of a couple on their wedding day. However, instead of the normative fairytales main characters – the prince and the princess – the image shows two princesses. This queer distinction, strengthened by Anna’s use of the hashtags #lesbianvisibilityweek and #lesbianvisibilityday, is underlined in the caption:

A week, a day, like any other in our life. We have been fortunate to grow up in a country, in a time, where all people are treated equally. Where we all have the same rights and obligations, whoever we are.

Where we can walk safely together, hand in hand on the street, without the fear of being abused or insulted.

Where we get to love like everyone else.

How lucky we are. ♥

//Mrs&Mrs

There is a political significance in such distinction and visual representation, visible in the written statement as it alludes to a relatable fairy tale historically featuring and reserved for heterosexual couples. The princess saga the couple performs in the image was made possible by LGBTQ activism in the past. A recognition of the couple’s possibilities to position themselves as fairytale princesses as a gift, and yet not

to be taken for granted, is also something that is underlined in the caption quoted above. Happiness is another key strategy in pair with visibility to be noted in Anna and Lisen's wedding photo. As Ahmed says about happiness: "Heterosexual love becomes about the possibility of a happy ending" (2010:90), the love and happiness expressed in the couple's image is a same-sex representation of such a happy ending. They represent something to wish for – to live happily ever after with the woman of your dreams – and thus provides queer directions to the route of happiness.<sup>6</sup> However, the queer arrival at happiness can also be a compelling force that makes other queer orientations invisible, as there are nowadays strong expectations for queers to orient along heteronormative routes (cf. Dahl 2022; Dahl & Gabb 2020).

Dreamy, wish-for-happiness is also present in one Emma and Julia's images. The image shows a close-up of Emma kissing Julia's baby belly. This kind of image is an almost iconic image among digitally shared family photos, the kissing of the belly to display the expecting parents' happiness and excitement, as well as inclusion of the baby in the belly in the couple's family. The expression of happiness and the display of their happy family also align with the visual narrative mostly found on Instagram in general, and in family photographs as genre (Rose 2010). In that sense, the image is not remarkable, rather expected. However, the happiness displayed in Emma and Julia's image is another example of where happiness can be understood as subversive in relation to older imaginaries of queer unhappiness in a society where happiness and success have often been associated with family life and chil-

dren, something which has previously only been possible along a heteronormative line (cf. Ahmed 2010:94, 2006:17). Yet, this direct political statement is not found in the image itself, nor in its caption of the belly kissing close-up, to which Julia wrote:

Arrgh, she won't stop talking to the little bean inside of me and kissing my belly! 🥰🥰 But, on the other hand it's quite sweet and cute! 🥰🥰🥰

While describing what she wanted to show by sharing this image, Julia said that it was to show an expression of how suitable Emma was as a partner, and as a mother to be. Furthermore, Julia compared her former heterosexual male partners, with whom she also has children, to Emma, the latter described as already being a better parent. Here Julia referenced back to the image as a demonstration of Emma as such a loving and caring person. In the interview, Julia also described Emma as more engaged in their relationship, and once the baby was born this also included the caretaking of the baby, including Emma being very attentive to the baby's emotional needs. In her description of the image, Julia not only described Emma as a good parent, but also characterized her girlfriend as "a much *better* mom and co-parent than my ex-boyfriends". In Julia's description of the image and what she said she wanted to show with it, the same-sex family formation becomes significant as the happiness displayed in the image becomes a way to talk back against discourses of the "child's best interest" that have often been evoked to disparage same-sex parenting (cf. Malmquist & Wurm 2018:5). In that sense, their happiness and the display of cute cuddling in the image, is used as a statement to

say that we are not only good enough – we are better parents.

### **Subversive Ordinarity**

Most of the visual material consists of prosaic and mundane images, such as snapshots of the five different families in moments where they are gathered in the sofa, eating a pizza at a local restaurant, or documentations of the family on holiday, or engaged in some outdoor activity. In these images, sexuality is absent in that no touching or expressions of intimacy between the adults are depicted. Furthermore, there are rarely any visible rainbow symbols or other signs in the images that direct the viewers' interpretation of the images towards queerness being meaningful in the context (cf. Hall 1997). In most of the pictures it's either only the children who are present in the image, or the whole family smiling at the camera. Looking at these images without the context of #rainbowfamily or knowledge of the family, they could pass as heteronormative families. Such acts of passing, and downplaying any difference from heterosexual nuclear families, were described as intended in some of the interviews.

Mia: I've never felt like I've had to flag that we're two women and that we live in a rainbow family and... it's like, well, a straight couple doesn't have to do that. So, I'm like orienting myself in the world like in a hetero body and I think just like all hetero couples do, that it's completely normal! I mean for me there is nothing else. You don't question a hetero couple about things, and for me this is *my* everyday life and it's very standard.

In the above quotation Mia talks about orienting in the world as straight bodies would do. The position of being an ordi-

nary family is here made desirable and associated with freedom, as it allows her to extend into space without hesitation or fear of being stopped (cf. Ahmed 2006). Being ordinary is also described to enable being visible, and hence to become invisible from the (potentially judgemental) eye of society and other people. However, to orient in the world without hindrance was something Mia talked about as a privileged she had not always experienced:

When I came out, my mother said, "Please, you don't have to go around and hold her hand in public." But why not? I mean my sister gets to hold hands with her boyfriend, but I can't because I have a girlfriend?! So, for me, submitting to such pleas would mean that we accept being invisible and not show who we really are.

Here Mia equates the possibility, and right, to hold her girlfriend's hand in public with being considered normative and as being regarded normal as a lesbian. Her mother's plea for her not to hold hands in public is an example of how queer bodies often are subjected to others' opinions and subjected to control. Mia's refusal of narratives about being different from the norm becomes a way of escaping, and to challenge, such attempted control of one's actions. Positioning as ordinary thus becomes an act of resistance. Paradoxically, few of Mia's images show queer intimacy and the right to "orient in the world like in a hetero body" in terms of making visible any signs of her sexual orientation, and romantic or sexual desires are not exercised. Doing ordinarity could thus been understood as downplaying being a lesbian and (just) being a same-sex parent.

### “We Don’t Do Strange Stuff”

Downplaying also seemed to be a strategy very much about avoiding undesirable associations:

Mia: There is nothing strange about it. But I know that not everyone thinks so. I know there are those who think differently. But that’s what we must work on and what still needs to get better. We need to get them to stop, but I don’t think we need to get them to change their minds by making statements on Insta. Because I don’t think you win from that either, but more just show that we exist like everyone else.

Tess: We can exist and have family lives like any other family.

Mia: There is nothing strange about us, we don’t do strange stuff, or whatever people think.

Avoiding being associated with strangeness was also something Anna and Lisen picked up on in relation to whether they should share family photographs online:

Anna: It was probably never really a discussion about us being two women. I think it is important that, well for me it’s nothing strange, and for Lisen it’s nothing strange. And it’s important that we show that it’s not strange. For others to understand that it is not something strange. Like, wow, he’s got arms and two legs like any other child [laughs] That’s sooo strange [laughs] [...] I’m not taking a photograph to show that the three of us can go swimming together. So [laughs], so nothing like that. Not all my uploads are about statements... But on the other hand, I try in like a casual way to show others that [a same-sex family] is completely normal.

Most of the couples kept coming back to the importance of showing and positioning themselves in their images as a same-sex family, as “normal” and “ordinary” families (cf. Eggebø et al. 2019). This use of a homonormative rhetoric can be seen as a

strategy for avoiding the historical perceptions of queerness as the deviant “Other”, and strangeness as an attribute historically stuck to LGBTQ bodies, lives, and families (cf. Ahmed 2004:35). In relation to Ahmed’s thoughts that some paths lead to happiness and others to its opposite, the couples’ pursuit of ordinariness can be understood as a means to avoid embarking on a path towards a perceived predestined queer misfortune (cf. Ahmed 2010:96) and as a simultaneous effort to produce happiness as connected to love rather than heterosexuality.

Claims of ordinariness can also be seen as a strategy to enforce and advocate for LGBTQ rights. In that sense positioning as ordinary is a strategy that becomes necessary in relation to heteronormativity. Although this strategy can be said to have political intentions, Mia considered it a better strategy to show that “we exist like everyone else”, rather than making outspoken statements. Anna also pointed out that her images are not always meant as statements, but still stressed the importance of visibility to gain social recognition. Just like Mia, Anna believed it is better to represent ordinariness as a same-sex family than to make statements about being different. Such strategy advocates for inclusion of same-sex families as the norm, hence the act of passing becomes an attempt to widen what constitutes the norm. In this endeavour queerness is downplayed and disidentified (cf. Muñoz 1999) in terms of expressions of sexuality, activism, and an aspiration to question the normative notions of families. One way of this downplaying was brought up by Mia. Avoiding certain hashtags seemed part of her strategy for passing:

Mia: I don't use hashtags very often, but maybe more in connection with Pride. [...] I don't do it in general, I think. I mean this thing about tagging us as a rainbow family. More often we call ourselves "Family Eight", and these photos are just family photos. It's not so much about saying that we are a rainbow family.

Here the labelling made through hashtags matters in relation to Mia's self-presenting practice. Although sometimes using LGBTQ-themed hashtags during Pride, by more often referring to the family as "Family Eight" instead of a "rainbow family" she avoids associations with deviance as a same-sex parent. Rather, the difference from the norm she wants to be associated with is being part of a large family, her family of eight.

Such a strategy of passing can further be understood to rely on visual self-presentations of a same-sex family as respectable and good representatives of a family, where queerness and the queer as a contestator of normative ideals in opposition becomes constructed as undesirable. As Sacks (1984) argues, "do being ordinary" is reserved for a position where such doing is possible (cf. Hellesund et al. 2019). The ordinary, de-politized queer subject, in this context represented by relatable and happy families as depicted in the images, become a means for expressing and achieving respectability through opposition against and disidentification with the construction of queers/queerness as something strange and largely oppositional. On the other hand, the couples' sense of awareness of historical, and to some extent ongoing, discourses of LGBTQ as "strange" and/or "different", and their displaying of the "ordinary" as a response, can be understood as a subversive strategy to escape being stuck in such

discourses. It can also be understood as an exercise of the privilege of being regarded as normal, which has been a central political struggle fought by the LGBT(Q) movement. Or as Tess said: "We can exist and have family lives like any other family."

### **Proud Pictures**

In this article I have explored same-sex parents' sharenting with a focus on how normative notions of family are negotiated, challenged, and/or reproduced. In the interviews the couples stated that the heteronormative nuclear family was generally considered as the hegemonic normative family structure in society – Instagram included. In relation to this, all the interviewed couples in some way negotiated between positioning as ordinary, yet different, as being same-sex families (cf. Eggebø et al. 2019), and thus alternated between taking a negotiating position and an oppositional position (Hall 1980) that explicitly challenged the hegemonic concept of family. As shown in the empirical examples, both these positions – emphasizing ordinariness, or difference, in relation to heteronormative nuclear families – can be regarded as approaches with subversive and political potential, but they are based on different political views, approaches, and goals. Regardless of agenda, affordances of social media were instrumental as they enabled the couples to reach out and form communities with known and unknown people through their accounts and in themed hashtag flows.

Although none of the participants primarily defined their sharenting as solely motivated by being a political practice, different political strategies were still present in the couples' meaning making around their sharenting. For some, being a same-

sex family was also expressed as motivational for publicly sharing family photos, and some images were used as a means for civil rights advocacy. This message was often further strengthened in the captions, in which the couples addressed norms and/or prejudice. Here the couples positioned themselves and emphasized being different from heteronormative nuclear families.

Highlighting themselves as same-sex parents became relevant in this endeavour, queer visibility and displaying happiness were the two main strategies applied by the couples to challenge norms from the position as same-sex parents. The participating couples live in a context with legal and technological possibilities to start a family, and thus have been able to choose a normative life path. Their visually displayed happiness can partly be interpreted as a strategy for talking back to older imaginaries of queer unhappiness (cf. Ahmed 2010). Further, queer visibility, especially representations of happy queer people, can be argued to (still) hold a politic significance. On the other hand, displaying happiness may also be the only possible way to represent your family in relation to historical imaginaries of queer unhappiness. In that case displaying happiness could also be understood as a form of passing at the mercy of heteronormativity.

During my fieldwork on LGBTQ family-themed hashtags on Instagram, an overwhelming majority of the publicly shared images were representations of same-sex nuclear family constellations displaying a (queer) life where any difference from heteronormative notions of family was absent and downplayed. The critical question “What is *queer* in non-heterosexual kinship these days?”, originally formulated by

Dahl and Gabb (2020:213), becomes relevant to ask in such contexts. The couples participating in this study represent a queer generation living their life and experiencing their parenthood in a time and context (Sweden) when family making is both possible and indeed increasingly expected. The legislation in place today has led to an increased acceptance of LGBTQ people in Swedish society. Due to such legal advances, the homosexual subject has become respectable in the national sphere, but this is also conditional and often requires assimilation. In that sense the images of same-sex families on Instagram can to some extent also be understood as representations of de-politized homonormative identities (cf. Duggan 2002) that reproduce the idea of the heterosexual nuclear family as an ideal (cf. Frykman & Löfgren 2022). However, being “ordinary” was constructed by some of the couples as desirable, as it allowed for exercising a freedom they otherwise associated with heterosexuality. By positioning and presenting themselves as ordinary families it then becomes a subversive act of resisting other people’s potentially judgemental opinions. Displaying ordinariness also becomes a strategy to widen the frames of normality and advocate for same-sex family constellations as possible within the framework of the constructed normal. In conclusion, there are many layers to same-sex parents’ proud pictures.

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## Notes

- 1 For a deeper discussion and examples of research about family and kinship in relation to queer perspectives see also *lambda nordica* 24(2—3), 2019: Queer Kinship Revisited.
- 2 Two of the initially interested Instagram users chose not to return after the study information and consent form were sent out. A third initially interested parent was refused participation by their ex-partner and co-parent, and my ethical review requires all legal guardians' consent for participation.
- 3 Although not the central focus of the article, children's online privacy remains a relevant discussion concerning parenting in the digital age in general, not least in relation to an increased social expectation and encouragement to share family life online (Blum-Ross & Livingstone 2017:111). Blum-Ross & Livingstone (2017:112) show that parents are often faced with a "digital" dilemma: "to represent one's own identity as a parent means making public aspects of a (potentially vulnerable) child's life, and yet because they are the parent, they are precisely the person primarily responsible for protecting that child's privacy."
- 4 The issue of private/public has been widely discussed in Internet ethics literature and guidelines, mainly with the focus on how this may affect which data can be used for research purposes, and if so, how they can be used (see e.g., Markham & Buchanan 2012).
- 5 Slang word for a group photo in the style of a selfie.
- 6 It is worth pointing out that the freedom expressed in the excerpt is (still) a dream rather than a reality for many LGBTQ people in Sweden, both in terms of being able to form or be understood as a family (cf. Dahl 2022:176), and also in terms of being able to orient in the world without encountering (sometimes violent) resistance in the surrounding society.

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