

Narrating and Relating to Ordinariness

Experiences of Unconventional Intimacies in Contemporary Europe

By Tone Hellesund, Sasha Roseneil, Isabel Crowhurst, Ana Cristina Santos & Mariya Stoilova

We are ordinary people and such great events, apart from death and birth, do not happen to us. I can't tell you much.

Despite this claim, Albay, a Bulgarian man of Turkish descent, did have a lot to tell us about his life. When we interviewed him, Albay was in his early fifties and married to a woman, but he was living in what we characterize as a non-cohabiting relationship.¹ Albay was amongst the 67 participants in the research project, "Intimate Citizenship in a Multicultural Europe: Women's Movements, Cultural Diversity, Personal Lives and Policy".² We conducted interviews with people from a range of ethnic and racialized communities who were living outside conventional families in four European cities: Sofia, Lisbon, Oslo and London.³ We have analysed these narratives from many different angles, focusing on the narratives themselves (Roseneil et al. 2012) and on the experiences of the different groups amongst our interviewees (e.g. Roseneil et al. 2013a; Roseneil et al. 2013b; Stoilova et al. 2014; Roseneil et al. forthcoming). Whilst there are significant differences among our interviewees, across many axes (Roseneil et al. 2009; Roseneil et al. 2010a; Roseneil et al. 2010b), our focus here is on how the lure of "ordinariness" cuts across these differences, exerting a powerful impact both on those who see themselves as being denied ordinariness and those who consciously seek to escape it.

We use Albay's words as a starting point for exploring the notion of "the ordinary" as conceptualized, presented and lived by our research participants. Like many of our interviewees, Albay switched between sometimes portraying himself as ordinary, and at other times focusing on what he perceived as his own non-ordinariness. The negotiations

around the ordinary in Albay's story are linked to the normative value of the ordinary. In this paper we explore the positive and negative valences associated with being ordinary. In so doing, we intervene in recent discussions about intimate life by focusing on how *the idea of the ordinary* colours life stories and self-perceptions. We draw on a body of biographical-narrative interviews in which ordinariness emerged as an important theme when people were asked to tell the story of their personal lives and relationships. Through their narratives we will discuss the duality of the ordinary in contemporary culture: it can both be accepted as the gold standard of a good life as well as being rejected as stifling and restricting. We further argue that both these ways of relating to the ordinary are entangled with diverging, but coexisting, cultural ethics.

The transformations of intimate life that have taken place during the last forty years mean that "more people are spending longer periods of their lives outside the heterosexual, co-resident nuclear family unit that became the dominant model during the twentieth century" (Roseneil et al. 2012:43; Roseneil & Budgeon 2004). Despite major changes in the way people lead their personal lives, we also see a tenacity of norms regarding how people *should* live them (Roseneil et al., forthcoming). In other words, some intimate lives are seen as more norm-fulfilling, and are more valued culturally, than others.

Ordinariness was not a concept with which we began our research, nor was it elicited through direct interview questions. Rather, it emerged from the accounts of our interviewees. We were struck by the centrality of being ordinary, or not so ordinary, in the

life narratives that were shared with us. But what is an ordinary life? Who are ordinary people? What do people think and feel about being ordinary or extraordinary in their lived experiences of intimacy? And why does ordinariness have great symbolic meaning to so many people who are living unconventional intimate lives? In this contribution we explore some of the ways in which our interviewees relate to ordinariness and its opposite. In his article “On Doing Being Ordinary”, sociologist Harvey Sacks argues that to be able to “do being ordinary” one has to have access to the appropriate tools: one has to be in a position in which doing the ordinary is possible (Sacks 1984). By living outside conventional families, our interviewees report experiences of exclusion from “doing being ordinary” in their intimate lives.⁴

The four national languages used by our interviewees attach slightly different value and connotations to the word *ordinary*, relating it in different ways to notions of *the usual*, *the conventional*, and *the regular*. The most common Norwegian word *vanlig* connotes usual, while the English word *ordinary* also indicates plain and not fancy. The etymological origin of *vanlig* stems from *vane* which means habit, and the ordinary thus also links to the habitual. In the interviews the term A4 was repeatedly used by the Norwegian respondents when they talked about ordinariness. A4, the standard European format for a sheet of paper, is often used to describe something ordinary, something that fits squarely within the standard size and shape of things. The Bulgarian word *обикновен* has connotations of plain and uninteresting. However, in Bulgarian the word for normal, *нормален*, is more widely used than ordinary, and with the former comes the

powerful implicit assertion of normativity and stigmatization of that which is out-of-the-ordinary. In Portuguese the word *ordinário* or *ordinária* is a gendered adjective that can have two contrasting meanings: it can either mean common, average, normal, or it can mean of poor quality, cheap or even slutty. Indeed, when preceded by the word woman – *mulher ordinária* – it is the most common euphemism to describe a woman who has several lovers or whose sexual behaviour is condemned by dominant moral values. As in Bulgaria, the word *normal* is more widely used, along with the word *tradicional*, to signal a family life and/or an intimate arrangement that is in accordance with dominant standards. Similar to Portuguese, another English definition of the term *ordinary* is of something unrefined and vulgar.

Our interviewees did not make clear distinctions between the concepts of *ordinary* and *normal*. This is in accordance with the work of the historians of ideas Peter Cryle and Elizabeth Stephens in their genealogical investigation of the word *normal*. They argue that the word came to mean ordinary and common after World War II, and still retains this meaning (Cryle & Stephens 2017). And it is not only our interviewees who slip between words and definitions. In his article on “Doing Being a Misfit”, the literature scholar Alessandro Grilli uses the concept *normal* when he discusses the work of Harvey Sacks (1984), without commenting that Sacks originally wrote about the *ordinary* (Grilli 2018). This illustrates how closely linked the notions of ordinary and normal can be, not only in contemporary perceptions and everyday language, but also in contemporary scholarly work.

We could also have framed an analysis of

our material through the lens of “the normal” or “the conventional”. We will argue, however, that “the ordinary” is an interesting core of the negotiations performed by our interviewees in their stories about their intimate lives. Despite the fact that different words are sometimes used (ordinary, normal, usual, typical, average, common, A4), and that ordinariness is talked about in indirect ways, our interviewees share an understanding of the great symbolic importance of “what most people do” and of “the usual way of living” in the realm of intimacy.⁵ Maybe surprisingly, the phenomenon of “the ordinary” is something everyone we interviewed relates to and seems to understand in much the same way. In their highly diverse living situations, across national contexts, legal and policy regimes and group belonging, they all related to notions of an ordinary life. Although the concrete content of what is seen as ordinary might vary in different contexts, the notion of the ordinary as a central cultural yardstick was present across our interviews. What distinguishes our interviewees from one another is not so much their understanding of the ordinary, but rather the value and disciplining force they attach to it.

The example of Grilli/Sacks also exemplifies how these terms can seem so self-evident and obvious that they do not need further discussion, reflection or definition. Both Sacks and Grilli use ordinary/normal without seemingly feeling that explanations are called for. Among cultural researchers of the ordinary, Sacks and Grilli are not alone. The practices of the ordinary are looked into without necessarily investigating the category of the ordinary in itself, or the significance of it at a given time, in a given context. The ordinary’s status as natural and obvious

– as doxa – is in some ways dependent on this silence. It does not need a definition, because “everybody knows” – or should know (if they are ordinary) – what the ordinary is. To make it explicit, to attempt to discuss or define it, to look at it too closely, could potentially break the spell of “the ordinary” as a “natural” and “stable” category.

This article seeks to make explicit how people breaking with conventional family norms bring up ordinariness as an important theme in the narration of their life story in the early 2000s. Although our study is certainly not a terminological genealogy, we hope that it contributes to an understanding of the notion of the ordinary not as a universal or an ahistorical term, but as something that is constantly constructed and negotiated in people’s lived lives and the stories they tell about them. The understanding of being ordinary, and living an ordinary life, is open to cultural negotiations and to personal interpretations and practices, although the hegemonic status of the ordinary can make doing the non-ordinary difficult and hard. We acknowledge the “fuzziness” of the concept of the ordinary, and explore, rather than sorting or categorizing, the articulations of ordinariness that emerged in our material. Under two themes – *ordinariness denied*, and *ordinariness escaped* – we discuss the variety of ways in which our interviewees related to being seen as non-ordinary. Although “the parameters of ‘ordinariness’ vary for each human being” (Weiss 2008:1), in living a life outside the conventional family, all of our interviewees experienced a cultural gaze defining their intimate lives as “not ordinary”. There are, however, major differences in how they approached this. We are interested

in how the interviewees' constructions of ordinariness, and their experiences of being seen as living somehow out of the ordinary in the field of intimacy, lead to different reflections and life strategies. What language, and what values, are available when they talk about and evaluate their lives as not being ordinary?

The Common Hero⁶ – the Values of Ordinarity

As researchers invested in queer studies, scepticism towards ordinariness is a familiar theoretical and political position to us.⁷ However, in various theoretical traditions, in popular culture and in our interviews, it is also possible to find many positive values imbued in the concept and implications of ordinariness. In one interpretation, ordinariness represents moral virtue. In *A Politics of the Ordinary*, the political scientist Thomas L. Dumm writes about how “ordinary life” is accorded specific symbolic and moral significance.

Ordinary life, the life-world, the everyday, the quotidian, the low, the common, the private, the personal – everybody knows what the ordinary is. The ordinary is what everybody knows. The ordinary gives us a sense of comfort; it allows us to make certain predictions about what will happen; it provides the context for the text we provide. The ordinary allows us to assume a certain constancy of life. It is reliable. We can count on it. The sun sets, the sun rises, another day of life begins. No matter what else happens, we live our lives in the manner of ordinary people. And so we celebrate the ordinary as the practical form that peaceable living takes when catastrophe takes hold of us or when our circumstances are diminished, when life is bad (Dumm 1999:1).

Dumm further argues that ordinariness is romanticized and rendered synonymous with common sense. As such, it becomes the backbone of liberal democracy, the essence of what is democratic and good. Ordinarity is the place where “the good life” is found (Dumm 1999:3, cf. Hellesund 2008:67–70; Hellesund 2011). Dumm writes from a North American perspective, but much of his contribution is also relevant in the national contexts in which our research took place: indeed “ordinary life” is widely cultivated and sentimentalized in all four countries of our research – Bulgaria, Portugal, Norway and the United Kingdom. An appeal to the ordinary is a part of the political and institutionalized imaginaries of each of these countries, and each political culture works with ideas about “ordinary families” as central to their notions of the worthy citizen/subject. Ordinarity can also be seen as an egalitarian ideal, and be valued as such. As Dumm says, “A picture of ordinary people pursuing ordinary goods and leading ordinary lives constitutes an ideal vision of liberal-democratic society” (1999:3). The ordinary people are the people uncorrupted by the decadent and dishonest ways of the elites. In such a context, separating oneself from the crowd can be seen as disloyal to a group, family or society, and to their collectivist projects. Sticking out by being non-ordinary can also be interpreted as being “pretentious” (Sacks 1984:418–419).

Many would claim that the study of ordinariness – seen as the everyday – constitutes the core of European ethnology. It is primarily the life-worlds of “ordinary people” that researchers seek to understand and analyse (e.g. Ehn & Löfgren 1996; Ehn & Löfgren 2001; Ehn, Löfgren & Wilk 2016). Eilert

Sundt is seen as the founding figure of ethnographic studies of Norwegian folk life and culture. Starting out with a study of the Norwegian travellers, his concern soon became the living conditions of the common or ordinary people, “den almene mands kår” (Sundt 1855, ch. 1, 3). He was among many academics around Europe who became interested in doing “folkelivsgranskning”, “volkskunde”, or “folklore studies” – studying the “folk” (“the people”) – from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. “The people” was here understood as ordinary people, a group the cultural and economic elites until then knew and cared little about. For many of the new “people-investigators”, it was paramount to uphold the overlooked and neglected *valuable* elements of ordinary people and their ways of life.

A focus on “ordinary people”, “normal people”, “most people”, and “the average person” can thus also be seen as a political move, expressing criticism of elites and elitism, and resistance against the cultural hegemony of the elite (cf. Carpentier & Hannot 2009; Gibson 2001; Gregg 2007). Such an explicit turn can also be found in cultural studies, sociology and history during the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s (McCarthy 2006). The idea of ordinary people had strong class-related connotations, as it was primarily the working classes who were understood as “ordinary” or “common”. Precisely for this reason, ordinariness, everyday life and mass culture became important themes in the social and cultural sciences during these decades (see e.g. de Certeau 1984). Ordinariness was to be elevated and saved from the contempt to which it had been subjected by elites and academics.

In recent years, much exciting literature

has been published in European ethnology and cultural studies on phenomena that are so commonplace that they can be difficult to detect and articulate. What is going on an ordinary Thursday in an ordinary supermarket among the ordinary people who shop there, for instance? This is not usually a question we ask, but Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren argue that in the unarticulated ordinary we can find “the subtle knowledge of everyday skills and shared competences and understandings” (Ehn & Löfgren 2010:5).⁸ It can be argued that both the so-called “phenomenological turn” and the “affective turn” in cultural studies and the social sciences can be seen as a part of this trend (Frykman & Gilje 2009; Gregg & Seigworth 2011; Highmore 2011; Löfgren & Wilk 2006; Löfgren 2014; Vallgård 2013). Many scholars want to explore fantasies, dreams, longings, moods, the unsaid – things that are so well-known that they remain unarticulated, and that are often, ambiguous, fragmented, contradictory and inconsistent (Ehn & Löfgren 2007; Highmore 2011; Löfgren & Wilk 2006; Stewart 2007). Researchers concern themselves with how these phenomena stand at the margins of, or in-between, well-integrated ideas, systems and cultural patterns (Ehn & Löfgren 2007:10–11), and how apparently deeply personal, routine, random, confusing, isolated and surprising phenomena are also connected to “a realm of communal (and differentiated) life” (Highmore 2011:vi).

Although our work is more concerned with exploring *the idea of the ordinary* than exploring the practice of the ordinary (de Certeau 1984), what we share with the above research is the recognition of the powerful

ethical and emotional significance that is attached to the ordinary. Kathleen Stewart poetically defines the ordinary as “a shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges, a scene of both liveness and exhaustion, a dream of escape or of the simple life” (Stewart 2007:1). The ordinary as a dream, a cluster of affects, filled with promises and reassurances, is certainly present in the landscape we explore. Our approach is inspired by a wish to understand this aim for the ordinary, what we call *an ethic of ordinariness*. Striving to lead an ordinary life is also striving to live a good and honourable life, and to many the ordinary seems to be “a dimension of life from which the raw material of happiness might be drawn” (Dumm 1999:3).

Whilst in other work we have focused on the differences in how intimacies can be lived in our different national and group-contexts (Roseneil et al. 2010, 2012, 2013a and b, forthcoming; Stoilova et al. 2014), in this article we are more struck by how ordinariness is a theme that cuts across the different belongings and positionings among our interviewees. Although we recognize how people are differently positioned regarding the possibility of “doing being ordinary”, we focus here on how the cultural imperative of ordinariness is talked about within a wide variety of life stories, and how the interviewees use ordinariness as a standard for measuring their own lives, as either sadly lacking, or as happily transgressing, ordinariness.

The Problematic Ordinary

While ordinariness and ordinary life have been romanticized, sentimentalized and treated as ethically worthwhile projects, they have also been subject to scepticism and

contempt by critics of the ways in which ordinariness is imbued with moral value and how it acquires a hegemonic and exclusionary character (Titchkosky 2003:22–23; Cohen 2004; Duggan 2002; Lenon 2011; Warner 1999). The notion of the “ordinary” citizen can be used, and has been used, to implement policies that erase the right to difference, placing the heterosexual and reproductive citizen as their normative reference point (Roseneil et al. 2013b). Michael Warner is among those who criticize homosexuals who want normality, ordinariness and respectability. The logic in the “respectability camp”, he argues, always leads to some (other) groups being singled out as non-respectable. Fighting for the recognition of one’s own normality necessarily confirms the deviation and pathology of others. Like Dumm, Warner argues that “the taken-for-granted norms of common sense are the only criteria of value” (Warner 1999:60). He is also a strong opponent of deviant groups’ desires to be accepted within the bounds of such logic.

In her essay “Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary”, Biddy Martin claims that both queer theory and profiled queer academics have expressed a fear of ordinariness, and a fear of assimilation (Martin 1994:70). The media scholar Alan McKee expands on this, arguing that this is also a fear of “being banal, mainstream and suburban” (McKee 1999:214), of losing one’s identity, disappearing in the crowd, and being reduced to statistics (McKee 1999:239). McKee studies science fiction literature in which the assimilating culture is often presented as lacking feelings and passion. Its feelings are “constrained and analysed, safe and stable, and barely deserving to be named

as emotion” (McKee 1999:240). The assimilated world – the ordinary, normal, A4 world – appears as “unsexy” and “boring”.

The sociologists Henning Bech, Anthony Giddens, Sasha Roseneil, and Jeffrey Weeks have all argued that the differences that are used to mark the distinctions between homosexual and heterosexual intimate lives diminish in late modernity. Through the rise in, and prevalence of, divorce, the increase in the single population, the emergence of “pure relationships”, serial monogamy, and “chosen families”, heterosexual intimate lives have changed at least as much as homosexual lives, and heterosexual intimate patterns have become more like homosexual ones (Giddens 1992; Bech 1997; Roseneil 2000; Weeks 1995; 2007). In the context of this changing intimate and sexual landscape, in which the cultural valuing and recognition of same-sex intimacies has undergone significant transformation (Roseneil et al. 2010), and the stark binary opposition of homosexual/heterosexual has shifted (Roseneil 2000), our research nonetheless points to how some patterns and practices of intimacy are still seen as ordinary, whilst others are not. Although the philosopher Gail Weiss quite rightly argues that “what counts as “ordinary” can differ radically from one person to another” (Weiss 2008:1), societal structures as well as overarching norms favour some forms of intimate lives over others, and in so doing they also contribute to a sense of what an ordinary intimate life is.

In our study we looked at a multiplicity of intimate arrangements that fall outside the conventional family. This extended view means that we look at ordinarity from a different angle from the discussions of Warner, Martin and McKee above. Our goal

in this paper is to understand the negotiations of ordinarity in which people engage. We explore what being ordinary, or non-ordinary, means to the people we interviewed, and the ethical connotations they attach to ordinarity.

Method

In our multimethod research project we carried out an historical study of the claims and demands of movements of gender and sexual equality and change in regard to intimate life (Roseneil et al. 2010a), a critical analysis of law and policy concerning intimate citizenship (Roseneil et al. 2009), and a biographical-narrative study of everyday experiences of intimate life among people living outside conventional families, which is what we draw on here. By conventional families we mean those family patterns preferred and promoted by law, policy and cultural traditions.⁹ Some of the currently (still) prevailing conventions relate to being part of a couple, and more specifically, an opposite sex couple, and to living in a shared home with one’s partner. Having children within such a couple and living together as a household is also part of the conception of a conventional family across all four of our national research sites. We therefore chose to interview people who were one or more of the following: (a) un-partnered; (b) in a non-cohabiting (living-apart-together, or LAT) relationship; (c) lesbian, gay, bisexual/in a same-sex relationship; (d) living in shared housing (with people to whom they were not biologically related or in a sexual/love relationship). People living outside, or in conflict with, convention are often forced to a higher level of reflexivity than people following more culturally expected life patterns. They have to

explain and defend their situation in a way people in conventional family settings never have to. We believe that this, together with our chosen interview method, resulted in particularly reflexive life narratives.

Participants in the project were between 30 and 55 years old. In each of the four countries, we interviewed (at least) 16 people, both men and women. The four countries were selected according to a “most-different” comparative methodology. We wanted to hear the intimate life stories of people living in different kinds of welfare regimes, and in long-standing as well as newer democracies, recognizing that the structural frameworks of the nation states influence what kind of lives citizens can legitimately live. We chose Bulgaria – a post-communist state, Norway – a social-democratic Nordic welfare state, Portugal – a southern-European, Catholic post-dictatorship state, and the UK – a north-western, (neo)liberal/social investment welfare state (Roseneil et al. 2012, p.44–45).

The interviewees were recruited largely through gatekeepers, organizations and online platforms, and snowballing from participants and from personal contacts (Crowhurst et al. 2013). The recruitment was somewhat challenging, particularly because we were seeking participants with different ethnic/ racialized backgrounds. In each country, we interviewed both members of the national majority population and of two minoritized/ racialized groups. In Norway we selected people with Sami and Pakistani backgrounds. In Portugal we interviewed Cape Verdean and Roma people, in the UK people from the Pakistani and Turkish-speaking communities, and in Bulgaria Turkish and Roma people.¹⁰

The interviews and analyses were conducted in accordance with the biographical narrative interpretive method (BNIM) (Breckner & Rupp 2002; Roseneil 2012; Wengraf 2001, 2009). After giving information about the project, we opened each interview with the same narrative-inducing question: “Can you tell me the story of your life and personal relationships — all the events and experiences that have been important to you personally, how it has been for you? Please begin wherever you like.” The intention behind this approach was to let the interviewees themselves decide the focus and the narrative structure of their story, and to let them choose what they thought was relevant in answering the question. Through this part of the interview, the interviewer remained silent, and did not ask any follow up questions until the interviewee had finished answering this first question. The length of this session varied from 5 minutes to 4.5 hours. During this opening session, the interviewer took extensive notes, and after a short break (during which the interviewer consulted her notes) a second follow-up session started. Here the interviewer asked for more narrative detail about the events and experiences mentioned in the interviewee’s initial answer. The questions followed the structure of the story told by the interviewee, and follow-up questions were only asked about the topics raised by the interviewee in the first session. In our view, this one open-ended question, and the time and space allowed for the interviewee to shape her/his own story, provided rich, complex material about intimate life experiences. We believe that this method gave us more varied and self-directed stories than we could have achieved

with semi-structured interviews. It also allowed specific themes to emerge from the interviews that we had not conceptualized in advance, such as ordinariness.

In accordance with the method, we also developed a rigorous system for analysing the interviews, requiring that we all worked closely with the interview transcripts, aiming for an in-depth interpretation that stayed close to the complexity of each case. We performed a group analysis process for a large number of the interview transcripts, where we first focused on each individual's "lived life" and then on their "told story". We spent a substantial amount of time collectively discussing each case.¹¹

All the interviewees had experienced being seen as non-ordinary because of their non-conventional intimate life arrangements and status, and all the interviewees we discuss in this article actively constructed their stories in relation to being seen in this way. We find it intriguing how ordinariness is *both* something that can be desperately wanted and lamented if lost, and something that people are happy to escape. As we shall see, the experience of being non-ordinary ranged from a feeling of being different but still socially acceptable, to feeling abnormal, and to having something wrong with the self, to those who aspired to being non-ordinary, or even extraordinary, to rising above and/or overtly challenging the value of ordinariness. In our interviewees' narratives of intimate life, we identified different ways ordinariness was perceived as having been denied or lost, as well as ordinariness seen as a fate that was happily escaped. We also investigated therein the ethics imbued in pursuing or transgressing ordinariness.

Ordinariness Denied

The interviewees discussed in the following section all strove to live good and honourable lives, and in many ways they would agree that the good life could be found in the ordinary. They embraced the value of ordinariness, and tended to regard with regret that their intimate lives were breaking with ordinariness. Some of them were constantly reminded of this by the questioning they experience from relatives and friends

Omar (mid-40s) and Behat (mid-30s), British men from Pakistani and Turkish backgrounds respectively, both talked about struggling with being single at an age when they are expected to be married with children. A recurrent theme in Omar's story was not only that he "is still single", but also that "something must have gone wrong" in his life. Omar saw his story as highly unconventional, an unconventionality resting solely on the fact that he was still single in mid-life: "My story will be very strange for you. Not a typical Pakistani life. I stand a little bit different, because I am still single, because I took another route."

Subverting the norm of marriage makes his life "very strange", "a little bit different", and throughout history, the lack of marriage repeatedly came up as something that needed an explanation. As he talked, he tried to figure out what had gone wrong, at which point of his lived life he had made the wrong choices.

Marriage and unfortunate singleness also figured prominently in Behat's story, a British Turkish-Kurd man. He talked about feeling great pressure to get married. His parents lived in Turkey and they were constantly asking him when he was going to settle down and have children. They themselves felt a

great pressure from the community around them about his plans to have a family.

Nowadays my biggest issue is my marriage. I am almost 35 years old and I am still single, and this is not acceptable. It is not my parents own decision but it is the people around them [...] For example, the first thing, when I go to Turkey, is: so are you married? Are you engaged? And I would say no. "Oh this is not acceptable, you must!"

Behat also explained that when he calls his parents every week, they always ask him whether he has a girlfriend, and when he is going to get married. His mother cries and his father starts lecturing him:

There are certain things in life [...] for example, you are born, then you grow up, then what you do after a certain age, you get married, you have to produce, you have to make children, so why are we alive? What's the meaning of life, if we don't do it? OK you come like a plant and then you go like a plant, without any meaning, and I say "Dad", then I start justifying again, "it's not easy to get married. [...] it's not like your time, it's difficult now". [...] But they are not convinced and they say it is a big shame on our family and everybody thinks that I am living a totally deviant life and my Dad always tells me "you know, I am ashamed to walk the streets in town sometimes", and he gives me examples like that person I know, "Ali [...], I went to see him today and we had coffee and he asked me if you are married and he said I couldn't answer. You don't know how I felt that day, you can't imagine it, you see, I am facing this kind of thing every day because of you." And you know the conversation starts with my marriage and it ends with marriage. And the next week, of course, it is the same. Honestly, there is a big, big pressure on me.

Not having achieved intimate ordinarity

weighs heavily on Omar and Behat. They both longed for a permanent partner and marriage, and their stories focused on the external pressure to conform to an ordinary life according to the standards of their family and cultural community. Being ordinary is not only an individual but a communal issue. Cultures more oriented towards collectivism than to individualism tend to demand even greater loyalty to the recommendation of parents, family and tradition (Bredal 2006). To deviate from ordinary family life is to disrupt the social order and the cultural logic and values of the community.

While Omar and Behat did not achieve what they regarded as an ordinary intimate life, others had been there but had lost their ordinarity. In the stories of Bjørn (an ethnic majority Norwegian man, mid-40s) and Shirin (a Norwegian-Pakistani woman in her mid-30s), painful divorces were key themes. Both had taken it for granted that their lives would follow customary, traditional trajectories when they married and had children at an appropriate age. They had expected to remain on this track. Bjørn explained:

When I got married, it was... of course the ideal for my family was that I would grow old with my wife and be married until death. I do not know to what extent I had reflected on it at the time, but that was just how it was. I had never imagined that I would divorce at some point.

Living an ordinary life, achieving the small and large milestones, make reflection somewhat superfluous. In a late modern life of seemingly endless possibilities, "doing the ordinary" seemed to relieve the self from some major choices. Doing the ordinary can seem both obvious and natural; it "was just how it was".

For Shirin, divorce was even more of a shock. She entered into an arranged marriage as a teenager and had tried her best to be a good housewife. Her husband nevertheless wanted a divorce. Neither Bjørn nor Shirin imagined they would one day undergo divorce. Both felt sorrow and shame over having failed marriages, and over having lost the normality and respectability they had assumed was their destiny. For Shirin, the complications of being non-ordinary were redoubled since she needed to relate to more than one type of intimate ordinariness:

But I think... us girls, we... from two cultures, right? That is very difficult for us, because sometimes I am half-Pakistani, half-Norwegian. When I... There are no Pakistani girls who live alone in our community. But I do. What does that make me? A Norwegian girl or a Pakistani girl? But I can't just find a man to live with, because I'm Pakistani. But I can live alone. Do you understand what I mean? That's what I don't understand myself, sometimes it's allowed and other times not. And when it's allowed, it's because it suits the others. But when it suits you, then all of a sudden you are being the wrong person. So you have to adapt to the opinions of others.

To be what Shirin called “a wrong person” – someone who breaks the important norms and moral codes – was not what she wanted. Quite the contrary; she did all she could to fit in with what she understood as the ordinary and normal pattern. However, the divorce entailed a dramatic break with what was ordinary in her environment. Shirin pointed out how conventional morality is also subject to negotiation and cultural change. Divorce and women living alone had become a social reality in some Norwegian-Pakistani families. Shirin never wanted to be placed in

this position, and partly blamed her parents for finding herself there. As she saw it, her parents were busy with their own lives and left her alone and lonely in an unacceptable social position. She had been forced to live like a “Norwegian girl”. However, when she wanted to change her situation and find herself a new man, which is what a Norwegian girl would do, she was “not allowed”. She adapted to the norms that “suited” her parents, and carried the burden of living the “wrong” sort of life alone.

Shirin and Bjørn are differently positioned in the national context within which they live. Bjørn is a white, well-educated, majority man, centrally situated in a culture where approximately 50 per cent of marriages end in divorce. Shirin is a minority woman without an education, in a Norwegian-Pakistani culture in which there were very few divorces when her own took place. In this context we are more struck by the similarities in their divorce stories than by their differences. Both Shirin and Bjørn were devastated and deeply shaken by their divorces. This was not how life was going to be – they were supposed to live an ordinary life. Their ideas of an ordinary life, and the ordinary life as the good life, were very similar. When it came to the future, however, their ways parted. While Shirin saw her divorce as placing her permanently outside the ordinary, Bjørn was busily trying to rebuild his life, and his hope and plan was to enter a “new ordinary” through entering a new romantic relationship.

The ordinary can be felt as a challenge to be achieved and an ideal to be realized.¹² The interviewees in this section are prevented from experiencing their intimate life in a positive way due to the pressure to conform

to what is seen as an ordinary intimate life. They are unable to experience their own lives as ordinary. The ordinary life is the respectable life, and the interviewees – and sometimes their families as well – feel strongly the scorn and the lack of recognition when the respectability of intimate ordinarity is absent. But even more existential than the shame of being gay, single or divorced in contexts where this is seen as less than ordinary, is the feeling that not being ordinary is preventing access to the good life. For different reasons, these interviewees' lives are not lived "in the manner of ordinary people" (Dumm 1999:1). Although there are significant differences between the levels of exclusion and marginality in these cases, they all feel that they are denied access to the "ordinary as the practical form [of] peaceable living" (ibid.). The comfort of ordinarity is out of reach.

Ordinarity Escaped

Although ordinarity can be highly desirable, ordinarity can also feel stifling and restricting. Bowing to the convention of the ordinary can be experienced as in conflict with another central cultural value, namely, the ethical obligation to live in accordance with an authentic inner self, and not to let societal conventions hinder a realization of this truth (Taylor 1991). The interviewees in this section do not aspire to ordinarity.

Amina (British Pakistani woman, late 30s) moved from Pakistan to Britain when she was a teenager. She works in the media, and her story revolves around her struggle to get away from a conventional and traditional life. Amina fought hard to remove herself from the pre-determined path that she saw

awaiting her, and she left her family in Pakistan in search of a freer life. She ran away to avoid an arranged marriage, to avoid a life "where I wasn't going to be able to be free to be myself". She fled to London, determined to make a new life for herself there.

In London, Amina had some sexual liaisons with work colleagues, but soon she met and started a secret affair with Peter, who was a "big name in the industry". They used to drink a lot and talk, and it was "very intense, crazy, excessive".

He was my idea of what bohemian is, someone who has never been married, he was almost twenty years older than me, never been married, with long relationships with people, in a Jean-Paul Sartre kind of way.

Amina loved being alternative, different, living a life that was a complete rupture with what she views as the ordinarity of her family.

My entire relationship with him [Peter] had been based on a sense of unconventionality and the appeal of him was that he was much older than me, and I found it quite attractive. There was something sort of subversive and transgressive in our encounter. He came from a '60s politicised, bohemian sense of the world and had lived a very unconventional life, having girlfriends, more than one at the same time. He felt like my kind of guy, very bohemian.

When Amina unexpectedly became pregnant by Peter, the relationship with him completely lost its appeal to her, as it became ordinary. As she explained, whilst Peter was very supportive, "very there for me, and for the baby", she felt that her romantic and sexual attraction to him had completely faded

away. This was not what she imagined for herself.

During this time Amina met Hassan, an Asian man, and started a relationship with him. She continued to share a house with Peter and their young son, with Peter knowing about her relationship.

It went on for three years, and it was fine. It was society that wasn't able to cope. Everyone else wasn't able to cope. It was just too much. I would have loved Peter to meet someone, and for us keep living in the same house.

Here Amina seems to suggest that the extraordinary circumstances of her family arrangement suited her perfectly, but it was just too difficult to sustain them because other people found them too complicated and untenable. She bought a house not far from Peter and broke up with Hassan, as he wanted a more conventional life, with more children: she was not prepared to do so. –

What made Hassan unsexy is that he wanted the conventional set-up and he wanted me to be pregnant again, and he wanted a baby, and he wanted a house together, and I am “no thanks”, and he became less desirable.

Her current set-up was one that Amina cherished: she had her own house, and her son Sabir spent part of the week with her and part with Peter, who lived a few blocks away.

I like it now that he [Peter] lives down the road. He's Sabir's dad, he has an involvement with me. We hang out, we are very friendly with each other [...]. I am sure it's to do with the fact that when I was growing up the stuff that I was reading, the role models...Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir...oh God I want to be like that, and it is still like that. And even now, my ideal is to meet someone who wouldn't necessarily want to live

with me, but might want to live next door, or opposite, or down the road. “Cos I've done the living together thing, and all the things that people say about it, are ultimately true, it's that although it is lovely companionship, although it is lovely familiarity, the truth is that I don't know how anyone manages to sustain that and keep it sexy, and keep it surprising, and keep it alive, and different and energized, when you are in this set-up together and it is your default position.

At the end of the interview, Amina reflected on her fear and dislike of “conventionality” and whether she would be able to find a way, the “magic formula”, of having a sustainable, long-term non-conventional relationship.

I don't know how people in marriages, where they are living a conventional life together forever, I admire them, but how the fuck do they manage it, I don't know! [Laughter] That's why I feel that the way to keep that spark is to have the artifice that you get together, you have a passionate evening, and then you go for a few days, and then you do it again. I feel that there's a magic formula that I don't know yet.

To Amina the ordinary was boring and unsexy – the opposite of her own life project, which was about “keeping the spark” and being “free to be herself”. In her case, the ethic of authenticity trumped the ethic of the ordinary.

Norwegian Astrid (mid-thirties) is from an ethnic majority background, works in a creative profession and lives with her female lover. She was uncomfortable with our open questions and tried to find out more about what the interviewer wanted to hear. She asked whether she could focus on the fact that she does not “live a completely A4 life”. Up until Astrid met her present partner,

when she was in her late twenties, she had only been with men. She said that it was relatively unproblematic to enter openly into a relationship with another woman, and she had only received positive reactions from those around her. For Astrid, choosing a female partner seemed to be a way of making a positive break with a suffocating ordinarity:

Yes, I could have ended up in a kind of A4. I had, you know, a sort of lover, a boyfriend, when I was younger, so we could have easily ended up together. But luckily we did not. [...] The A4 life I could have ended up living would have been with this boyfriend of my youth, and we could just have stayed together and married when we were 24 and bought a semi-detached house and children and car and... And I would surely have ended up with a completely different career than I have now. And I do not think I would have been as happy.

Why would you have ended up with a completely different career?

Because I believe he would have seen it as... a bit, you know, exotic that you suddenly work completely strange hours and that... and he is probably much more like, it's fine if you work from nine to five and eat dinner when you come home and... So, as such, I am very glad that I don't... I would probably have ended up working in a store or something. But it's like you... or what I've been afraid of, what I think of as an A4 life, that it would bore me to death. But of course, it's not certain that those who live that way think it is. And nowadays my life is actually not all that different either. I have a house and a lover, a cat, car and job. It's not all that different.

In the interview, Astrid suggests a fear of disappearing in the crowd, of drowning in ordinarity. For her, choosing a female

partner represented a welcome non-ordinarity. The role this non-ordinarity plays in her story has very little to do with dramatic violations of convention and far more to do with a freedom from the "A4 norm". The life she lives is consistent with her values and ideals and she experiences these as legitimate in the society in which she lives. She values a life that is not boring and a partnership that is based on intimacy and an active desire to be together, exemplifying the notion of the late modern "pure relationship" developed by Anthony Giddens (1992). For Astrid, living a lesbian life offers more room for excitement and unconventional choices than are offered by heterosexuality. She imagines that if she had ended up with a male partner, she would have made more "boring" choices than she actually has made in other areas of life.

While Amina quite consciously had chosen to flee a traditional intimate life, and to pursue something else, Astrid seems to have stumbled upon unconventionality by choosing a same-sex partner. However, they are both embracing the excitement this non-ordinarity adds to their lives. Our three next interviewees resemble Astrid and Amina, but resisting intimate ordinarity also seems to rest on a wider ethical rationale. For them being true to themselves and their inner potential is far more important than bending to convention. The final two interviewees in this section, Vera and Paul, also seem to understand themselves as part of an intimate avant-garde. By defying conventional ordinarity they can help widen the scope of intimate ordinarity for others.

Norwegian Saera is in her mid-30s, and is from a Pakistani background. As a divorced single mother, working as a secretary, she

feels partly excluded from the community in which she was raised. Nevertheless, she does not experience this as a great loss since she feels she has little in common with many people in that milieu. She has started an academic education and is heavily involved in debating political and religious questions on Internet forums. Through this activity, she experiences herself as having both power and influence. She describes herself as rebellious and strong. Even as a child, the longing for autonomy, the ability to decide for herself was what was important; it was not important for her to be ordinary. Saera wants to make a mark on the world. She says she would like to “be remembered in 2,000 years”, either for the intellectual work she hopes to do, or through her descendants. She believes in development and progress:

The meaning of life is that you should develop yourself and become something better, so that the generation you give birth to will inherit your genes and develop to become even better. This is because if you didn't do this, we would still be Neanderthals today. We should develop ourselves. We should develop ourselves to be the best, and all our qualities.

Saera has little time for uneducated, narrow-minded ordinariness. Indeed, she seems to be aspiring to extraordinariness.

In her interview, Vera, a Portuguese woman in her 40s from an ethnic majority background, focuses on what makes an interesting life, interesting experiences, and interesting personal relations, and their opposites. She underlines that she leads an interesting and unconventional life. She takes great pleasure from having the freedom to construct her intimate life in any manner she wants. From a very young age she decided

that she did not want to have a biological child, and later she decided that she would adopt a child by herself, and that she never wants to live with a lover. In her biographical account of herself, it was clear that Vera feels that she is not living a conventional intimate life, and she was very proud of this. She has a lover, Victor, whom she often sees at weekends, whilst she shares her daily life with a gay friend, Bruno, with whom she has a strong emotional bond. Realizing that her living and love-arrangements are anything but ordinary, she enjoys the reactions she gets from others around them:

We've got a long-term joke which is to say that Bruno is my husband, and all of my friends know this: he is my husband! When I say “my husband” everyone knows it refers to Bruno, and so [laughs] all of the others who come in the interim are my lovers. And the same with him, [laughs] his lovers and the wife. And it is like this, really, if we wanted to transpose this to a normal or normalized family relationship, say, the one that is considered normal by society, Bruno would indeed be my husband, because it is him with whom I share almost everything, right, except for bed. So, this is why I like to [say this], because it shakes [convictions/expectations] a bit, and, really, my husband and my lover, people get a bit lost and I make sure I explain them so that people get to think it over, and to question things.

Paul, a Norwegian man from a majority background, is another interviewee who does not strive for ordinariness, but at this stage in his life he is quite happy to see himself as non-ordinary, or even extraordinary. Paul is married to his long-term male partner. He is in his mid-40s and works as an engineer. As a young man, he experienced his homosexuality as an almost insurmountable abnormality, but it has now been many years

since he felt homosexuality to be a problem. He lives what can be characterized as an exceptionally successful life, with a brilliant career, a good marriage, children to care for, and close relationships with friends and family. But Paul also has a more hidden life. After being with his partner for some years, the two decided to open up their relationship to other sexual liaisons. Paul relishes the thrill, the chase and the sexual experiences, and he also develops close friendships with some of these other men. Paul feels that Norwegians – including homosexual Norwegians – are too puritanical about sexuality, and that important elements and possibilities in homosexual life have been suppressed through the focus on securing normality, and the struggles for the right to marry and to adopt children. Paul refuses to be “tamed”, as he puts it, by these norms, choosing instead to live a life that corresponds with his own ideals, not with conventional societal norms about monogamy.

The lifelong monogamous relationship is a social construction that is important to the continued existence of society. It's very, very important as a... as a set of traffic rules. But biologically... you need discipline for that to work, I think. And I am in the privileged position where I [get] the social pattern to work for me, while I am able to also live out the animal side. And to me that has been just great.

Paul experienced that being sexually promiscuous at the same time as being married strongly diverges from ordinary Norwegian morality and ideals of the good life, and he was careful about with whom he shared this information. He had no desire to fit into ordinary society in this respect. On the contrary, he lived a life that he thought many

men would envy: a stable marriage with a loving, long-term partner, and the excitement of extramarital sexual relationships and encounters. He recognized that society is not yet ready to accept his lifestyle, but until then, he lived well by enjoying the best of both worlds.

In the previous section on “ordinariness denied” we saw how ordinariness can be unavailable to some groups or individuals due to key aspects of their intimate lives that place them outside the boundaries of ordinariness in their cultural context, and we also saw how ordinariness can be lost with changing intimate circumstances. This section also showed how several of the interviewees saw ordinariness as a value and a way of life to pursue, or to grieve when it was lost or unattainable. From this perspective ordinariness is a privilege for the lucky ones, offering the reassurance of order, safety and existential stability. In the section on “ordinariness escaped” we have seen how other interviewees in different ways and for different reasons embrace and take joy in breaking with ordinariness in the field of intimacy. Here non-ordinariness might be seen as a privilege, particularly for the resourceful and lucky ones (see also Heaphy 2017). The philosopher Gail Weiss underlines how the ordinary, “the sedimentation of everyday experience into recognizable patterns can serve to codify oppression as readily as it can promote a reassuring sense of existential stability” (Weiss 2008:5). For the interviewees in the last section, “intimate ordinariness” represented constraint rather than relief. For them intimate non-ordinariness offered new opportunities for self-realization and satisfaction. In the words of Alan McKee, it also gave them the opportunity not to disappear

in the crowd, to escape the “banal, mainstream and suburban” (McKee 1999:214). Weiss points out that the disruption of the ordinary can also be a hope, a fantasy or even a prayer” (Weiss 2008:5). Maybe these stories could be looked upon in such a way, as hopes and dreams, or as the prefigurative practice of utopian living?

Concluding Discussion

In our study of life-narratives of people living outside conventional families, we found *the notion of the ordinary* to be a prominent theme. Being situated as non-ordinary through their intimate lives, our interviewees reflected extensively on how their own lives could be seen and spoken about in relation to this notion. People around them questioned their lives as single, as not living with their partner, as divorced, or as living in same-sex relationships. They were aware that people were questioning whether their lives and relationships were good and valuable lives.

The worldview that it is opposite sex couples living in monogamous, lifelong reproductive unions who are ordinary (and hence experience the “good life”) is produced and reproduced through subtle and sophisticated mechanisms of power. Our interviewees met these mechanisms through daily reminders from the popular press, from their relatives and friends, from official documents and encounters with law¹³ and policy, that their intimate lives were not seen as ordinary. Even more importantly, many found it natural and obvious that their lives should be seen this way. The hegemonic worldview of what qualifies as an ordinary intimate life has been rendered as natural and legitimate. The sociologist Tanya Titchkosky, who reflects at length on being blind, writes that when

people intuitively think of an ordinary person, they always think of someone who can see: “Anyone appearing normal, competent, average, or ordinary is often seen as sighted” (2003:69). Here one could also add: the person perceived as normal, competent, average or ordinary is also usually heterosexual, white and has a partner with whom they cohabit (Roseneil et al., forthcoming).

Through its interrogation of the significance of the idea of ordinariness this article has also touched upon the vulnerability of our personal lives, the longing for belonging that most of us share, and the crucial role that recognition of our intimate relationships plays for most of us. How this vulnerability plays out, what sort of recognition different people crave – and from whom – needs to be addressed if we are to understand how ordinariness, and exclusions from it, work. The category of the ordinary is not universal and natural. Neither do we see the longing for ordinariness or for the not-so-ordinary that we have demonstrated as a universal longing, but rather as a longing situated in the complex relationship between belonging and exclusion, community and individualism, adaptation and authenticity, all pressing issues in our time and place.

Living peacefully in the manner of ordinary people is certainly an important ideal in all the four national contexts we have studied, and many people find joy and happiness in subscribing to this ethic of the ordinary. But the other side of this are experiences of frustration, exclusion and unhappiness if access is denied, not only to an ordinary present, but also to the future life-script of events and life-phases that the narrative of the ordinary promises.

In an often heartless world, intimate ordinariness represents a haven of continuity and safety (Dumm 1999). Being a cog in the machinery, doing what is expected, fulfilling the expectations of those around us, honouring traditions, just living an ordinary respectable life, is rewarded with thousands of large and small affirmations. The ordinary is where the good and righteous life is assumed to be found. Bjørn and Shirin subscribed to such an ideal. In some ways, so did Omar and Behat, although for them the external pressure to conform was as present as the internal ones. In Brian Heaphy's study of same-sex civil partners, he found that ordinariness was an ideal among both the privileged lesbians and gays and the more marginalized who were "less well positioned to fully achieve it" (2017:41). The general aspiration towards ordinariness is also something that Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward write about in their ethnographic study of blue jeans in north London. They argue that jeans allow individuals to inhabit the "the ordinary", and emphasize how becoming ordinary is important for immigrants and the population of north London more generally (Miller & Woodward 2012). In contrast to this, our study showed that the extent to which ordinariness was held up as an ideal varied significantly among our interviewees. Relief and pride in being "not so ordinary" was also a position that was taken by interviewees.

And there is also an ethics attached to breaking free of the conventions of the ordinary. The ethic of the non-ordinary can also be connected to the ethic of authenticity (Taylor 1989; 1991). Living a life in accordance with one's inner self is, for some, more important than striving for ordinariness.

Heaphy argues that the queer perspective on ordinariness as primarily oppressive is "derived from the relatively extraordinary experiences of elite cosmopolitan queers, and that ignores the social, economic, cultural and spatial constraints that shape "ordinary" non-cosmopolitan lives" (2017:33). Our study resonates with Heaphy's findings. While the ethic of the ordinary can be found across our sample of interviewees, the ethic of the non-ordinary is primarily found among interviewees with higher cultural, social and economic capital, although there are exceptions to this (e.g. Saera).

Both of the ways of relating to ordinariness that we identified amongst our interviewees – embracing the value of the ordinary and rejecting it as stifling and potentially inauthentic – resonate with powerful discourses in contemporary European cultures. These parallel values can be activated by, and put their mark on, people across different socio-cultural groups. For those who felt they were in danger of drowning in ordinariness, or who felt ordinariness to be like a straitjacket, elements of life outside the conventional family could be used to build a positive identity as someone unusual, unique, special, exceptional or "not completely A4". For others, ordinariness was a place to which they desired access, or sometimes a lost condition, representing the possibility of belonging and social recognition for which they yearned. In one way or another our interviewees connected to a positioning of ordinariness as either the valued good to which everyone should aspire, or as the boring and banal, conventional and inauthentic that should be resisted. This duality in people's relationships to ordinariness, and

the powerful lure of the ordinary in narratives of intimate life, represent an important aspect of culture in contemporary Europe.

Tone Hellesund

Professor of Cultural Studies
Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion (AHKR)
University of Bergen
Postboks 7805
5020 Bergen
Norway
Tone.Hellesund@uib.no

Sasha Roseneil

Professor of Interdisciplinary Social Science
Institute of Advanced Studies and Dean
Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences
UCL
Gower Street
London WC1E 6BT
UK
s.roseneil@ucl.ac.uk

Isabel Crowhurst
Senior Lecturer
Department of Sociology
University of Essex
Wivenhoe Park
Colchester, CO4 3SQ
UK
icrow@essex.ac.uk

Ana Cristina Santos
Senior Researcher
Centre for Social Studies
Colegio S. Jerónimo
Apartado 3087
3000-995 Coimbra
Portugal
cristina@ces.uc.pt

Mariya Stoilova
Post-doctoral Research Officer

Department of Media and Communications
London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street
London
WC2A 2AE
UK
m.stoilova@lse.ac.uk

Notes

- 1 For a further discussion of non-cohabiting relationships, see Stoilova et al. (2014)..
- 2 This project was a part of the larger European Union Framework 6 project FEMCIT Gendered Citizenship in Multicultural Europe: The Impact of Contemporary Women's Movements (www.femcit.org). The work package on Intimate Citizenship was led by sociologist Sasha Roseneil. The researchers were Isabel Crowhurst, Tone Hellesund, Ana Cristina Santos and Mariya Stoilova. See also Halsaa et al. (2012).
- 3 Further information about the sample and selection criteria will be provided in the methodology section.
- 4 Sacks also argues that even when people have "illegitimate experiences" they can still choose to do them in the usual, ordinary, way (Sacks 1984:418).⁵ For a discussion of when, how and why the statistical average came to be a category, and a category also linked to what is normatively good, see e.g. Cryle & Stephens (2017) and Igo (2007).
- 6 Michel de Certeau starts his famous book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, writing "To the ordinary man. To a common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets" (de Certeau 1984).
- 7 See e.g. Duggan (2002) and Warner (1999), and our further discussion in the next section.
- 8 Their focus is on waiting, routines and day-dreaming.
- 9 We discuss how our four nation states have different laws and regulations around family

life, and how these have changed historically in several of our publications (e.g. Roseneil et al. 2009 and 2010b).

- 10 The scope of this article does not allow for a full discussion of how belonging to a minoritized ethnic group affected our interviewees attitudes to being ordinary.
- 11 For more detailed discussion of our use of this method, see Roseneil (2012:44–45) and Crowhurst et al. (2013).
- 12 Kathleen Stewart writes about an early morning walk in a residential neighbourhood, “This is no utopia. Not a challenge to be achieved or an ideal to be realized, but a mode of attunement, a continuous responding to something not quite already given and yet something happening” (Stewart 2007:127). In our material, however, *the idea of the ordinary* sometimes takes the form of utopia, and certainly as a challenge and an ideal to be realized.
- 13 Examples of laws that have regulated intimate ordinarity are laws against homosexuality, homosexuality as a diagnosis, race-discriminating laws and regulations (cf. Gibson 2001:286), taxing bachelors at a higher level, and the denial of legal majority to unmarried women (Stoilova 2009:78–79).

References

- Ahmed, Sara 2010: *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, N.C: Duke University Press.
- Bech, Henning 1997: *When Men Meet. Homosexuality and Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Breckner, Roswitha & Susanne Rupp 2002: Appendix A: Discovering Biographies in Changing Social Worlds. The Biographic-Interpretive Method. In *Biography and Social Exclusion in Europe. Experiences and Life Journeys*, ed. Prue Chamberlayne, Michael Rustin & Tom Wengraf. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Bredal, Anja 2006: “*Vi er jo en familie*”. *Arrangerte ekteskap, autonomi og fellesskap blant unge norsk-asiater*. Oslo: Unipax.
- Carpentier, Nico and Wim Hannot 2009: To Be a Common Hero. The Uneasy Balance between the Ordinary and Ordinarity in the Subject Position of Mediated Ordinary people in the Talk Show Jan Publiek. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2009, 12(6), pp. 597–616.
- Certeau, Michel de 1984: *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cohen, Cathy 2004: Deviance as Resistance. A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics. *Du Bois Review* (1), pp. 27–45.
- Crowhurst, Isabel, Sasha Roseneil, Tone Hellesund, Ana Cristina Santos & Mariya Stoilova 2013: Close Encounters. Researching Intimate Lives in Europe. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 16(6), pp. 525–533.
- Cryle, Peter & Elisabeth Stephens 2017: *Normality. A Critical Genealogy*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Duggan, Lisa 2002: The New Homonormativity. The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism. In *Materializing Democracy. Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo & Dana Nelson, pp. 175–194. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press.
- Dumm, Thomas 1999: *A Politics of the Ordinary*. New York: New York University Press.
- Ehn, Billy & Orvar Löfgren 1996: *Vardagslivets etnologi- Reflektioner kring en kulturvetenskap*. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur.
- Ehn, Billy & Orvar Löfgren 2001: *Kulturanalyser*. Malmö: Gleerups.
- Ehn, Billy & Orvar Löfgren 2007: *När ingenting särskilt händer. Nya kulturanalyser*. Stockholm: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag Symposion.
- Ehn, Billy & Orvar Löfgren 2010: *The Secret World of Doing Nothing*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ehn, Billy, Orvar Löfgren & Richard R. Wilk 2016: *Exploring Everyday Life. Strategies for*

- Ethnography and Cultural Analysis*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Frykman, Jonas & Nils Gilje (eds.) 2009: *Being There. New Perspectives on Phenomenology and the Analysis of Culture*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.
- Gibson, Mark 2001: Myths of Oz Cultural Studies. The Australian Beach and “English ordinarity”. *Continuum* 15(3), pp. 275–288.
- Giddens, Anthony 1992: *The Transformations of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism* Oxford: Polity Press.
- Gregg, Melissa 2007: The Importance of Being Ordinary. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 10(1), pp. 95–104.
- Gregg, Melissa & Seigworth, Gregory J. (eds.) 2011: *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Grilli, Alessandro 2018: On Doing “Being a Misfit”. Towards a Contrastive Grammar of Ordinarity. *WHATEVER. A Transdisciplinary Journal of Theories and Studies* 2018, 1, pp. 105–121.
- Halsaa, Beatrice, Sasha Roseneil & Sevil Sümer (eds.) 2012: *Remaking Citizenship in Multi-cultural Europe: Women’s Movements, Gender and Diversity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heaphy, Brian 2017: Ordinary Sexualities. In *Sexualities Research. Critical Interjections, Diverse Methodologies, and Practical Applications*, ed. Andrew King, Ana Cristina Santos & Isabel Crowhurst. London: Routledge.
- Hellesund, Tone 2008: *Identitet på liv og død. Marginalitet, homoseksualitet og selvmord*. Oslo: Spartacus.
- Hellesund, Tone 2011: “Kjærligheten er jo det viktigste av alt”. Parforholdet som selvkonstituerende arena. In *Til rette ektefolk. Holdninger til homofili og ekteskap*, ed. Unni Langaasand & Paul Leer-Salvesen. Kristiansand: Portal forlag.
- Highmore, Ben 2011: *Ordinary Lives. Studies in the Everyday*. London: Routledge.
- Igo, Sarah Elizabeth 2007: *The Averaged American. Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Lenon, Suzanne 2011: “Why Is Our Love an Issue?” Same-Sex Marriage and the Racial Politics of the Ordinary. *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 17, pp. 351–372.
- Löfgren, Orvar & Richard Wilk (eds.) 2006: *Off the Edge. Experiments in Cultural Analysis*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Löfgren, Orvar 2014: The Black Box of Everyday Life. Entanglements of Stuff, Affects and Activities. *Cultural Analysis* 13, pp. 77–98.
- Martin, Bidy 1994: Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary. *Differences* 6.2–3 (1994), pp. 101–125.
- McCarthy, Anna 2006: From the Ordinary to the Concrete. Cultural Studies and the Politics of Scale. In *Questions of Method in Cultural Studies*, ed. Mime White and James Schwoch. London: Blackwell.
- McKee, Alan 1999: “Resistance is Hopeless”. Assimilating queer theory. *Social Semiotics* 9(2), pp. 235–249.
- Miller, Daniel & Sophie Woodward 2012: *Blue Jeans*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Roseneil, Sasha 2000: Queer Frameworks and Queer Tendencies. Towards an Understanding of Postmodern Transformations of Sexuality. *Sociological Research Online* 5(3), pp. 1–19. <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/5/3/roseneil.html>.
- Roseneil, Sasha 2012: Using Biographical Narrative and Life Story Methods to Research Women’s Movements. *FEMCIT. Women’s Studies International Forum* 35(3), pp. 129–131.
- Roseneil, Sasha & Shelley Budgeon 2004: Cultures of Intimacy and Care beyond “the Family”. Personal Life and Social Change in the Early 21st Century. *Current Sociology* 52(2).

- Roseneil, Sasha, Isabel Crowhurst, Tone Hellesund, Ana Cristina Santos & Mariya Stoilova 2009: Policy Contexts and Responses to Changes in Intimate Life. *FEMCIT Working Paper* No. 1, Work Package 6, Intimate Citizenship. London: Birkbeck University of London.
- Roseneil, Sasha, Isabel Crowhurst, Tone Hellesund, Ana Cristina Santos & Mariya Stoilova 2010a: Changing Cultural Discourses about Intimate Life. The Demands and Actions of Women's Movements and Other Movements for Gender and Sexual Equality and Change. *FEMCIT WP6, Working Paper* No. 2. Workpackage 6, Intimate Citizenship. London: Birkbeck, University of London.
- Roseneil, Sasha, Isabel Crowhurst, Tone Hellesund, Ana Cristina Santos & Mariya Stoilova 2010b: Intimate Citizenship. Statistical and Contextual Background, Working Paper No. 3, Workpackage 6, Intimate Citizenship. London: Birkbeck, University of London.
- Roseneil, Sasha, Isabel Crowhurst, Tone Hellesund, Ana Cristina Santos & Mariya Stoilova 2012: Remaking intimate citizenship in multicultural Europe: Experiences outside the conventional family. In: Halsaa, Beatrice, Sasha Roseneil & Sevil Sümer (eds.): *Remaking citizenship in multicultural Europe: women's movements, gender and diversity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Roseneil, Sasha, Isabel Crowhurst, Ana Cristina Santos & Mariya Stoilova 2013a: Reproduction and Citizenship/Reproducing Citizens. Editorial Introduction. *Citizenship Studies* 17(8), pp. 901–911.
- Roseneil, Sasha, Isabel Crowhurst, Tone Hellesund, Ana Cristina Santos & Mariya Stoilova 2013b: Changing Landscapes of Heteronormativity. The Regulation and Normalization of Same-Sex Sexualities in Europe. *Social Politics. International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 2013.
- Roseneil, Sasha, Isabel Crowhurst, Tone Hellesund, Ana Cristina Santos & Mariya Stoilova, forthcoming: *The Tenacity of the Couple Norm* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sacks, Harvey 1984: On Doing "Being Ordinary". In *Structures of Social Action. Studies in Conversation Analysis*, ed. Maxwell J. Atkinson & John Heritage. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stewart, Kathleen 2007: *Ordinary Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Stoilova, Mariya, Sasha Roseneil, Isabel Crowhurst, Tone Hellesund and Ana Cristina Santos 2014: Living apart relationships in contemporary Europe: accounts of togetherness and apartness. *Sociology* 48(6), pp. 1075–1091.
- Stoilova, Mariya 2009: Bulgaria. In: Sasha Roseneil, Isabel Crowhurst, Tone Hellesund, Ana Cristina Santos & Mariya Stoilova: *Policy Contexts and Responses to Changes in Intimate Life*. FEMCIT WP6, Working paper no. 1.
- Sundt, Eilert 1855: *Om Giftermål i Norge. Bidrag til Kundskab om Folks Kaar og Sæder*. Christiania: P.T. Mallings bogtrykkeri.
- Titchkosky, Tanya 2003: *Disability, Self, and Society*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Taylor, Charles 1989: *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Charles 1991: *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Vallgård, Karen 2013: Følelsehistorie – Teoretiske brudflader og udfordringer. *Kulturstudier* 4(2).
- Warner, Michael 1999: *The Trouble with Normal. Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. New York: The Free Press.
- Weeks, Jeffrey 1995: *Invented Moralities. Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty*. UK: Polity Press.

- Weeks, Jeffrey 2007: *The World We Have Won. The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life*. London: Routledge.
- Weiss, Gail 2008: *Refiguring the Ordinary*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press.
- Wengraf, Tom 2001: *Qualitative Social Interviewing. Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods*. London: Sage Publications.
- Wengraf, Tom 2009: *BNIM Short Guide Bound with the BNIM Detailed Manual*. Interviewing for life-histories, lived periods and situations, and ongoing personal experiencing, using the Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (version 9.06e).