

## Future Building and Emotional Reflexivity: Gendered or Queered Navigations of Agency in Non-Normative Relationships?

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### Abstract

This article sets out a conceptual framework for examining future building as an emotionally reflexive practice of intimacy and gendered agency. Emotionally reflexive future building is a relational activity, subject to gendering but open to queering. We illustrate this by drawing on cases taken from three qualitative studies that deal with the future building of women in relationships that do not conform to norms around having and rearing children. By referring to the future building of single mothers, women who are undecided about having children and women in non-cohabiting distance relationships we illustrate the significance of reflexively making sense of one's own and others' emotions in navigating gendered constraints and opportunities. Anger, despair, ambivalence, love, guilt and other emotions are key in how women with differing degrees of economic security imagine and try to create futures that queer gender.

### Keywords

agency, emotional reflexivity, futures, gender, intimacy

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## Introduction: Future Building

Imagining shared futures with intimate others involves thinking, reasoning, creating, feeling, talking and doing. This process of imagining and attempting to enact is what we call future building. Future building is pursued through emotional reflexivity, not solely via an ‘internal conversation’ (Archer, 2003; Mead, 1967), but in dialogue with real and imagined others (Burkitt, 2012). The dialogue includes negotiations with what people are doing or may do (Lebano and Jamieson, 2020) and is navigated around the possibilities and constraints of structured social relations. Our focus in this article lies on how women living in diverse ‘non-normative’ relationships use emotional reflexivity in imagining and attempting to build intimate and child-referenced futures while navigating institutional and gendered barriers to their imaginings. The relationships are non-normative in that they imagine or practise heterosexual child-rearing outside of gender norms that privilege economically secure, male breadwinner and cohabiting couple relationships. Our aim is conceptual, testing the value of emotional reflexivity as an idea that helps trace how intimate future building is directed towards queering across multiple forms of late modern relationships.

The case studies we present highlight how the possibilities of queer futures are opened and constrained through women navigating gendered institutional and structural contexts. These contexts include the prescriptions of and gaps in the welfare state, patterns of paid work, unpaid care and norms and expectations about how to do family and intimacy. We argue that imagining and enacting futures is an emotionally reflexive practice done in relation to others. It is an increasingly necessary practice in a world where an array of differently gendered intimate futures seems possible and emotions are vital in reflecting on and enacting desired forms of intimacy. Emotional reflexivity is how people navigate between the constraints of gendered structures and agency to pursue the futures they wish for.

We start by introducing the article’s conceptual framework, discussing emotional reflexivity and its enactment through gendered practices of intimacy. We then briefly outline the three qualitative studies: on Australian single mothers receiving child support (also termed child maintenance); on a sub-sample of young European couples who are undecided about having children; and on a sub-sample of UK couples in distance relationships yet to have children. We illustrate their emotional reflexivity using a case study from each piece of research, noting how the ability to exercise agency is not just about strategic or instrumental resilience but about the enabling or constraining of actions and change at an emotional level. By centring emotional reflexivity in our analysis, we highlight its potential for understanding how agency is gendered in building towards queer futures, with women’s future building shaped by emotions experienced in relation to others that are structured by gender as well as economic positioning.

## Future Building as Emotional Reflexivity

Future building is an emotionally reflexive practice of intimacy. Our approach uses sociologies of gender, intimacy and emotions to focus on the feelings involved in ordinary women’s efforts to think about the possible intimate lives ahead of them. This challenges

the fixation of future studies on instrumental planning, forecasting and rational planning for social change. Future studies emphasise 'those who wrestled with the questions and issues of alternative futures in history' (Sardar, 2010: 184; see also Westwood, 2000), not everyday imaginings. Some literature on future social imaginaries argues that 'fictional expectations', rather than rational calculation of consequences, are at the heart of developing ideas about what the future may hold in uncertain times (Beckert, 2016). However, even such work with promising attention to uncertainty contains only passing references to emotions (for example, see Beckert, 2016: 66, 78, 113). Some sociologists who have written about everyday imagining of futures (for example, Elliott, 2010; Harden et al., 2012), have discussed gender and agency but generally not attended to the emotional content of such imaginings (other than brief reference to hope). Mische's (2009) more sustained consideration of the importance of hope and aspiration in imagining futures eschews the sociology of emotions and only mentions 'emotional states' as something that experimental psychology warns us are likely to be inaccurately predicted due to cognitive limitations (Mische, 2009: 699). Cook (2017) is more sociological in analysing hope as a type of agency for some of her respondents who imagined alternative futures that could include more emancipatory and harmonious forms of sociality. Generally, it is rare to find sociological accounts, like O'Reilly's (2014) on British migrants' imaginings of a future life in Spain or Malaysia, that include more considered discussion of the way emotions are integral to the reflexive processes of future building and not just another outcome to rationally predict. The analysis in this article is novel in using the concept of emotional reflexivity to put emotions at the core of making sense of everyday imagining and building of intimate futures.

Future building requires emotional reflexivity as complex, globalised social conditions present people with constantly novel situations for which traditional or habitual gendered practices are often an inadequate guide (Archer, 2012; Holmes, 2010). Emotional reflexivity is relational and bridges the personal and the structural levels as people seek to resolve contradictions and struggle to get a feel for what they might mean for their future. It is an ongoing process or 'dialogue'; people act and interact based on often flawed and changing interpretations of the actual, assumed and ambiguous feelings of a range of selves, significant (intimate) others and the generalised Other (how we represent to ourselves the attitudes of those in wider society) (Burkitt, 2012; Holmes, 2010; McKenzie, 2015; Mead, 1967: 90). The relational navigation of the world may involve geographically or emotionally distant significant Others (Holmes, 2014). In this view, emotions are not interior to individuals, nor simply played out in a supposedly separate intimate sphere but are part of the wider social fabric and key to the patterns of social recognition or misrecognition that reproduce social inequalities such as those around gender (Holmes and McKenzie, 2018).

These relational processes of emotional reflexivity can be observed especially in non-normative relationships. Our definition of 'non-normative' relationships encompasses those that challenge assumptions that committed couples (heterosexual or non-heterosexual) should 'settle down' together, that women should have children and that parenting should involve two cohabiting parents with women being primary carers. The departures we discuss may not be radical but they are changes nevertheless (Beasley et al., 2012), and highlight how gendered intimate practices relate to wider social

change. The labelling of single parents as ‘non-normative’ may seem rather dubious in the context of widespread legal and social recognition of that relatively common intimate practice. Yet, there continues to be stigma and inequalities associated with being a single mother or a woman without children (Wilding, 2017; Wilkinson, 2020). The gendered aspects of these inequalities are at the heart of our studies, but they intersect with class, race and sexuality. Non-cohabiting committed couples may be more privileged but are subject to a lack of social understanding for their departure from scripts or narratives about love (Bergen, 2010; Holmes, 2014). Duncan (2015), Jamieson (2020) and Jamieson and Simpson (2013) have suggested that those living apart together (LAT) are not necessarily radically transforming gendered inequalities in intimate relationships, but such relationships may contain subversive forms of heterosexuality that can be considered queer in their departure from gender norms (Beasley et al., 2012). By looking at ‘ordinary’ subversions we can see ‘how traditionally regulative conventions are not superseded by, but are incorporated into, emergent contemporary conventions’ (Heaphy, 2018: 174) and understand queering as process. What queer future building might look like in practice has been examined in relation to activism (Goltz, 2013; Yekani et al., 2016), but less so in relation to how different forms of intimacy might constitute ‘alternative queer futures’ (Wilkinson, 2020: 671). Our examination of future building seeks not to artificially divide the personal from the political, but rather to argue for personal lives as a starting point in thinking about how such imaginings challenge heteronormative and patriarchal ideas and practices.

In our approach, future building is an emotionally reflexive, relational activity that is subject to gendering but open to queering. Queering captures ways of imagining gender that go beyond binaries such as feminine/masculine, man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual and the linked heteronormative intimate relationships. A focus on queering tends towards imagining futures in which masculine and feminine are more fluid and flexible identity categories (Butler, 1990, 2004), and heterosexual and heteronormative relationships are not the sole legitimate form of intimacy – a diversity of ‘non-normative’ relationships are empirically evident and possible to imagine and practise (Holmes, 2014; Roseneil, 2005; Roseneil et al., 2020). For example, most marriages are now preceded by cohabitation, and it is commonplace for children in Europe and Australia to be born outside of marriage or raised across households when their parents separate. However, dominant categorisations of sex/gender and sexuality still tend to privilege sexual, indeed heterosexual, ‘settled’ couple relationships between supposedly biologically distinct men and women (Holmes, 2019; Roseneil et al., 2020). Nuclear family arrangements with co-parenting still hold normative force (Wilding, 2017) and single mothers continue to be stigmatised and subject to punitive welfare regimes (McCormack, 2004). Women remain more likely to be primary carers and to carry heavier loads of domestic and emotion work (Erickson, 2005; Moreno-Colom, 2017; Umberson et al., 2015). Yet we argue that there is a shift in ‘emotional regime’ (Reddy, 2001) or a new emotional period (Stearns, 2019) at hand, as contradictions appear between continued normative emphasis on the value of a ‘settled’ family life and political and economic demands for flexible, mobile workers and citizens (Holmes, 2014, 2019). There is a greater acceptance – and somewhat less implementation – of differently gendered patterns of caring for children and engaging in paid work but these practices are bounded by continuing social structures of gender, class and

race, and other inequalities. In some local contexts progress towards more egalitarian gender relations seems stalled, evidenced by the continued disadvantages faced by women and the ways intimate practices are part of the unequal structuring of gender, reinforced in and through dominant views on intimate relationships (England, 2010; Jamieson, 2011).

The greater diversity evident in intimate life is not an open menu – this diversity must be navigated and negotiated at the societal and inter-personal levels (Wilding, 2017). This raises questions about women's agency, and here we want to consider women's agency in terms of 'mundane rather than spectacular challenges to the status quo' that are limited by the power structures to which they respond (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996: 15, 16). Relationships that vary from the normative can illustrate different kinds and degrees of agency in how women mount these challenges through emotionally reflexive practices of imagining and building future intimacies.

## The Studies and Their Methods

This article's conceptual explorations are grounded by bringing together data from three pieces of qualitative research on intimacy in Australia and Europe, each of which deal to some extent with future building within non-normative relationships. The possibilities of addressing new research questions by pooling data from previously separate qualitative studies have been discussed by Davidson and colleagues (2019). We find the case they make for sharing qualitative data persuasive however, in this article, we are not conducting a radical re-analysis of the pooled studies but rather revisiting data in order to explore the conceptual issues outlined above.

Each study included semi-structured interviews with some focus on imagined futures. All involved types of intimate lives that are relatively commonplace but vary from the arguably still dominant gender normative family ideals of heterosexual couples cohabiting and co-parenting. The samples discussed are: mothers bringing up children without a resident father; women over age 30 in established couple relationships who say they want children but are not trying to have them; and committed couples who are living apart.

The first sample comes from a study of 37 single mothers who interacted with Australian government bureaucracies when seeking child support from their former partners, most of whom were not consistently complying with formal assessments. Their average income was below the Australian poverty line, and around half of the women relied on welfare payments; under these economic constraints, a former partner's non-compliance typically felt like a significant financial loss even when assessed amounts of child support were low (Natalier et al., 2019). We use Isobel as a case study to reflect on the experiences of this group.

Our second sample is of 26 partnered women who trouble gender norms by imagining futures without children. It comes from a wider study on European fertility focused on partnered childless women aged 30–35 who were citizens and residents in selected cities in Spain and Italy. The research participants were chosen to include equal numbers of women with high and low educational qualifications, secure and insecure employment. This article focuses on the 26 women either not ready to decide whether they want to have children or who say they probably want children but 'not now' and often with a

receding time horizon (see Lebano and Jamieson, 2020). The participants who are actively trying to have children and those who were certain that they will never have children are excluded. Those who are postponing, like Natalia, who is described in detail, are often ambivalent and unconvinced about realisation of future children, even if they have a well-developed image of the kinds of childhoods they want them to have, or the sort of parent they want to be.

The third sample is from a study based on semi-structured interviews with 14 couples in distance relationships; the case study is drawn from those couples yet to have children. Those yet to have children were the majority of these 14 couples (most heterosexual) who lived apart most of the time, having jobs in different cities. In all the couples at least one partner was an academic. Here we focus on the case of Claire (and her partner Hugh). The initial interview was in 2004, with a further email interview conducted eight years later (see Holmes, 2014). This study thus has slightly different methods from the others, drawing on a joint interview and follow-up data; however, it is Claire's future building and its outcomes that are our present focus.

The studies are connected because they involve people who are not conforming to norms around how to couple and when and how to have children. The key differences across the samples lie in people's relationships to work and welfare in different geographical locations. The currently childless couples and distance relaters enjoy somewhat greater financial resources – not always attendant on job security – and experience fewer interactions with government bureaucracies which are widely recognised as intrusive and disempowering institutions (Natalier, 2017). Specific contexts are considered but whether being Spanish or British, rather than Australian means being part of different emotional regimes is a topic for another article. The emotional tenor of relationships is a pertinent difference, with single mothers describing high levels of conflict, fear and often ongoing abuse absent in the other samples (see Natalier, 2018). We are not undertaking a comparative analysis across all dimensions but are using these differences to explore emotional reflexivity in varying relationship types and contexts of structural constraint and possibilities for agency. To illustrate these ideas, we present one case from each study, chosen because they distil key themes and allow an extended exploration of emotional reflexivity and future building.

## **Single Mothering and Future Building Struggles in the Face of Anger and Despair**

The emotional reflexivity of single mothers is dominated by anger and despair in ways that can make future building seem nearly impossible. In Australia, parents who are welfare recipients, more commonly single mothers than single fathers (De Vaus et al., 2014), must lodge child support information with the Department of Human Services – Child Support (DHS-CS) to receive their full payments. These payments are determined with reference to formal child support assessments; in practice, high levels of payer non-compliance translate into unreliable and/or reduced child support and potentially lowered welfare payments (Cook et al., 2015). Child support often interacts with welfare surveillance and Family Court proceedings to create further complexities. The disjunction between formally stated policy and regulations, former partners' behaviours and institutional non/response

generated a lack of certainty that cannot be clarified through knowledge of, and planning within, institutional processes. Thus, single mothers engage and re-engage with government bureaucracies to report discrepancies and advocate for compliance, typically with little success (Natalier, 2017). Within these gendered and classed processes, the material pressures of low and unreliable child support are layered with emotional responses to institutional practices and former partners' behaviours.

Isobel is emotionally reflexive in interpreting and seeking to act on her former partner Jack's toxically masculine behaviours, describing them as 'so incredibly vicious and intimidating and threatening and bullying'. Welfare payments and low and unreliable child support mean Isobel lives in poverty. Jack hides income to lower formal child support assessments, and pays late, inconsistently or not at all. He aggressively used the Family Court to claim Isobel was mentally ill and an unfit mother, and pursued shared care arrangements preventing Isobel from moving away from an area with few jobs and support networks. She understands his conduct as the manifestation of anger, spite and vindictiveness. In defining Jack's actions as emotionally driven, Isobel turns her emotional attention to her former partner and the gendered institutional processes that facilitated his actions. This is reflexivity as 'an emotional, embodied *and* cognitive process' (Holmes, 2010: 140, emphasis in original) through which Isobel attempts to strategically use DHS-CS reporting and compliance mechanisms, informed by her interpretations and responses to Jack's emotionally driven impositions on her finances and autonomy, to live and mother in ways she desires.

Isobel's emotional reflexivity extends beyond Jack to frustration at institutional failings and a greater despair over restrictions on her financial future, autonomy and ability to mother, thwarting expressions of love such as treats or holidays while Isobel continues the gendered work of thinking ahead for her son and dividing the emotional resources she routinely devoted to 'being there' for him. Sometimes, Isobel attempts to manage Jack's anger and her own fear by suspending institutional processes. Out of fear, Isobel stopped a re-assessment of Jack's child support obligations when Jack re-instituted Family Court proceedings to seek sole care of their child: 'when someone's [Jack's] threatening to take your child away from you, thinking of doing an assessment to have their finances looked at when they're clearly being dodgy is very scary and overwhelming, you know'. At other times, Isobel believes Jack's anger will never subside and will continue to drive his child support non-compliance. This encourages Isobel to undertake complex evidentiary and accounting tasks to advocate for effective DHS-CS responses. However, these efforts do not translate into useful institutional action and changes in Jack's behaviours. The situation is 'so hard, it is such a battle. . . . Everything with Child Support [DHS-CS] has been in the "too hard" basket – "it's not possible to do that" – there are so many constraints or they're so immovable it's really frustrating.'

Isobel's response is similar to many of the women in this study:

Really frustrated and upset. They [DHS-CS] just weren't even, they weren't even trying . . . So it felt like it was pointless, it felt like I didn't have any of that empowerment or any of that trust in them, that, you know, it was of any benefit.

Isobel's lack of trust in the system and fear of Jack's vengeful behaviours means she speaks in terms of the things she cannot do: retrain; get a job; move closer to family. She

describes herself stuck in the same place – more existing than living. Isobel's future plans end at a straitened Christmas – two months away at the time of the interview. She has no imagined future beyond poverty and constraint:

It's really hard to put in words, the extent of it, because it goes to everything. . . . And now I'm stuck in this place and can't get any work and it's just, you know, we don't have a quality of life. . . . It impacts my self-esteem . . . And I can't do the things I want to do with my son.

For Isobel, the significance of poverty lies in both financial constraint and its manifestation of Jack's persistent attempts to limit her ability to be a 'good mother'. She cried as she enumerated the things she cannot do for her son: she cannot afford a warm and welcoming house, meet his educational needs, help him maintain close relationships with his grandparents, offer him holidays, extra-curricular activities and interesting food. She compares her limited mothering practices to the resources of Jack, who offers their son an array of opportunities and delights. Isobel is sensitive too, to her son's response to these dynamics:

It's been quite a, it's been quite a significant impact on, I'm going to get teary, my son comes back from being in his father's care and says, you know, they went out for dinner or they did this or they did that and I just get so upset.

Isobel is distressed by the contrast between her own and Jack's parenting, and this also informs her attempts to counter Jack's behaviours. But her ongoing failure to do so generates anguish that erodes her mental health: 'I'm not sane. I'm not staying strong and I'm not staying sane.'

Isobel attempts to push back against the emotional and resource challenges she faces but she cannot translate her emotional reflexivity into mothering practices that queer models of women's dependence on men because she is also pushing against the weight of child support and welfare policies reinforcing this dependence. The financial constraints of unreliable and low child support make it difficult to plan and build futures beyond the immediate challenges of keeping body and soul together. The possibilities of autonomy and mothering in ways that are not limited by a male partner's contributions are eroded by gendered structures facilitating Jack's expressions of anger and control. Isobel is constrained in her future building but constraint is a bloodless word for the frustration and despair that emerges from and reinforces a feeling of 'stuck-ness'. This 'stuck-ness' foregrounds the present in stasis, with no clarity about the shape and timing of a different future.

## **Ambivalence and Uncertainty in Imagining Childless Futures**

Future building has a more ambivalent emotional flavour for Natalia, as she navigates gender norms that expect women to have children. She is part of a stable and unmarried heterosexual couple, supported by friends and family, living in her own home, working in a job she enjoys, albeit low-paid. At age 30 she says in the interview and to her partner that they are probably not going to have children:



I'm saying to you I don't want children and I know I have accepted it but it's unacceptable at the social level, I think I got used to the idea I won't have children as I see how things are going . . . but I think it'll be a deception to my family, my parents, my grandparents.

Natalia is emotionally reflexive in imagining the feelings of others. She knows her partner's parents will be particularly unhappy and anticipates the emotion work of keeping this imagined future from both their families and the restrained practices of intimacy this implies. However, childlessness is not the only imagined future raised in the interview albeit presented as the most likely. It is an issue that she and her partner have returned to over the years, checking out each other's feelings about alternative futures with and without children.

Like Isobel, economic insecurity makes future planning difficult for Natalia, but she is navigating feeling uncertain with the help of love, rather than against anger. Natalia's parents had encouraged her to use her high grades at school to go to university but, mindful of the financial burden she was placing on them, she withdrew from her veterinary medicine course in her first year of study to find paid work. She is now an animal carer and enjoys this work. More recently she accepted her parents' financial help to buy the flat where she lives with her partner. Throughout the 12 years of their relationship, economic insecurity has required careful day-by-day money management to ensure they can pay their mortgage. Yet this is not the only constraint they face.

Over time, worry has become a key feature of Natalia's future building as sexism and institutional structures work against her imagining combining paid employment and childcare. Natalia interprets the sexism she has encountered since taking up her employment as reason to believe that her job would be threatened by having a child:

I know my boss didn't want me at the beginning. It was a guy who they wanted to hire, because, 'You need a stable person for this job and a woman sooner or later gets pregnant.' [. . .] Because I'm in the age of fertility my boss always puts me in an uncomfortable situation, and to me, it's like, 'I told you many times. I'll let you know if it happens. Please stop asking.'

Natalia worries that time off to have a child could lead to demotion at work. It seems that her experiences at work negate any sense of protection by formal structures designed to support gender equality in paid employment. Because Natalia's partner is not in stable employment, loss of her job would undermine their precarious economic security.

Thus, the circumstances in which children can be imagined involve Natalia's partner becoming the main carer, and in this queered future she feels some confidence but also uncertainty. When she and her partner discussed the possibility of having children, they agreed that he could become the main carer while Natalia continues to work. She notes that among her friends who have children, the mothers do all the work and the men do nothing but comments 'he's not like that, and so I'm not worried, I think we'll share tasks without problems'. Despite this confidence, Natalia is also wary about putting strain on the quality of their relationship. This concern, along with fear of losing her job, is a factor in their continued childlessness.

Natalia's imagined future involves the gendered emotional work of focusing on the needs of others – a future child, her partner – as well as attending to the emotional needs

of the couple relationship. Her imagining cycles through how she might feel, how she thinks her partner will feel and, by way of analysing potential threats to their relationship, the feel of couple dynamics. She indicates that they have discussed how a child would exacerbate the financial constraints that already restrict the possibilities of pleasure and relaxation together. Natalia also reflects on how her focus on the needs of a child might prompt her to withdraw support for her partner's time to himself and his own pursuits. She concludes that children would create new conflict in daily life – 'now it's like you want to do this and I want to do that, "Ok, no problem". The day we'll have a child it'll be more complicated.' An emotionally reflexive, relational imagining of the unlikely but longed for future that escapes the grind of low income and insecurity, leads her to conclude that being able to enjoy their relationship must come before having children. Hence, 'if they won a lottery' rather than immediately having a child, Natalia would first want them to travel and take the trip of a lifetime they have sometimes fantasised about:

in all these many years of our relationship, and we never, I don't know, if we eat out one night, or we go out a night, the rest of the month we stay at home, and so we watch money very closely, we haven't lived as a couple really, we didn't travel, well we did but making our own sandwiches, and, which is fine, we haven't been bad, but a really nice trip, Africa is really appealing to us.

When asked how she saw her future, Natalia's feelings about having children seem to have swung from excitement through diminishing hope to a defensiveness about imagined childlessness. As if thinking aloud, Natalia describes how the memory of emotional excitement she shared with her partner when imagining the joint project of having children, has been supplanted by hopelessness of ever achieving the economic security that she considers is an ethical necessity before bringing children into the world:

I would like to have a child. It's been something, with my partner we've been together for a long time, and we always said it'll be awesome to have someone in common, to teach him, to transfer our shared values to him, so it's always been a thrill . . . we used to have the excitement, I say 'used to' because, as time goes and I get to the age [of having children], I see it's a 'no' . . . I'm 30 now, and seeing the situation and our future what can we do? I don't have money to buy . . . I think you have to take responsibility and, if you can't, then don't try it.

Some hope of building a future with children is maintained by imagining how they would feel about IVF or trying to adopt a child, if they were to feel ready later but then found that they could not conceive:

Fertility techniques are really advanced nowadays so I still have time, although I know it's not the same. Of course you can have a child at 40 today, but when your kid will be 20, you'll be 60 . . . at the beginning, he said 'No I don't want to adopt', but now seeing how things are going, it's something that we talk about and say, 'Well, we'll always have time for adopting.'

However, added to these pressures are fears about wider issues like sustainability. Indicating her own modification of the generalised Other, she has moved from assuming

that those who do not want children are selfish to thinking that the selfish ones are those who do. Given the harm human populations inflict on the planet she thinks ‘we don’t need more people, not really’.

Natalia has some agency to build a future that aligns with gender norms around family (women having children) or is queered by diverging from them (having a primary caregiver father, or remaining positive about being child free). However, this requires that she reflect and act on ambivalent feelings about having children that emerge in relationships, primarily her relationship with her male partner, the potential co-author of a parenting future, and with whom practices of intimacy are most intense. Making sense of the ambivalent feelings involves emotion work and practices of intimacy with each other and their families, drawing on and contributing to the shifting gendered parenting scripts of the generalised Other and navigated around continued gender discrimination. Natalia’s agency is constrained by institutionalised gender norms and by their limited material resources. This restricts their ability to practise intimacy and either have children or be happily child free as they might desire. The worries that arise leave Natalia ambivalent in her queer future building.

## **Distance Relationships, Feeling in Limbo and Finding Settled Futures**

Couples in distance relationships may disrupt gendered patterns of work by the women not following their male partners (Holmes, 2019) but plans for departing from norms in future childbearing are rather reticent, and in emotionally unknown territory. Even for the relatively privileged couples in the distance relationship study, there was considerable uncertainty attached to future building due to the constraints of the academic job market. These constraints were why they lived apart, typically reuniting at weekends. Some had been in a distance relationship for many years, others were new to each other and to living apart. Hugh and Claire, both academics, were somewhere in between. They had been together several years when interviewed and had very recently got married. Having jobs in distant locations made living together difficult and they were struggling to find a way forward given the uncertainty. As Hugh says: ‘well the thing is we’re in a limbo, I think we’ve been in various stages of limbo’.

The feeling of being in limbo was not entirely shared by Claire, but this might be a sign of a gendering of the work of future building, with women in the study often looking to take advantage of the flexibility of academic jobs to make distance relationships work (Holmes, 2014: 8, 127). Claire, for example, had a research grant at the time of the first interview, allowing temporary cohabitation. Even without the grant she claimed she had reached a point where she ‘was definitely going to change something anyway’. Hugh seemed to be passively ‘in limbo’, while Claire was wondering what would happen when that grant ended:

I don’t think my workplace think I’m going to go back. I mean I, when I first took it up in January I was like, well it’s very unlikely that I’ll go back. It would be very hard for me to go back to several nights a week blah, blah, blah, but then again, I look ahead and I think well, I do want to carry on my career and what – am I just going to give it up? It’s very difficult and

then of course there is the question, although it is unresolved in that for all sorts of personal and professional reasons, about whether we have a family.

For the women in particular, many questions arise when they 'look ahead', about whether and how to continue with their career if it means continued separation from their partner and about whether to have children.

In her emotionally reflexive processes of future building, Claire takes account of her feelings and of the generalised Other (in the form of dominant gender norms) in imagining how she might feel about queered futures.

Claire: . . . if I had a family then that would be very difficult and we have actually had a little conversation about that [going back and commuting] it's like, oh Hugh could do this care for a kid for several nights a week but I just don't know how that would feel and I don't know if it's asking too much really.

Hugh: But we shouldn't discount that as a possibility.

Claire: It is a possibility.

Hugh: I mean obviously we'd have to sort of de-escalate my sense of my job. It would have to be both of us, we'd have to refigure our jobs.

Claire: But I mean people do, do it, lots of people do it, so it is doable but I don't know, it would be hard to go back when you've left it, definitely hard to go backwards but I can't discount it unless we both move somewhere else, or we win the lottery or something happens.

Here an alternative queered future is imagined, varied from the gendered norm, where Hugh doing more of the childcare is contemplated as a way to practise family intimacy and maintain Claire's career. However, she is not sure how she would feel about this, even if 'lots of people do it'. Why this feels as if it is 'asking too much' is left unexplained but suggests some possible gendered guilt at departing from the norm and asking Hugh to 'de-escalate' his job.

The often emotive gendering imposed by significant others, including partners and wider kin, is also reflexively incorporated in efforts at future building. Claire's imagined future guilt may be amplified by Hugh's parents, who Claire says are 'not expecting [her] to go back to do what [she] did' and she thinks 'they have a different expectation about [her] as a female partner of their son and what [her] role in work and long distance is, that it's sort of secondary to the relationship'. To depart from these expectations would make these queered practices of intimacy something that would fall largely to Claire, as the 'female partner' to account for. Added to the burdens of commuting and caring, would be that of justifying her slight drift away from the heteronormative script (Bergen, 2010). There is emotion work involved in managing her potential guilt as well as the astonishment or surprise of others. Claire and Hugh feel in limbo, they do not want to discount the possibility of doing things differently, but Claire is unsure how refiguring their jobs and their gendered relationship would feel. She has some agency and flexibility with an academic job and as a couple they believe in gender equality. However, not only must she negotiate gendered work patterns that privilege men's careers, and guess at her own

uncertain feelings, but her imagining of alternative practices of child-rearing must navigate the possible obstacles of others (some close to them) who strongly feel that it is women who should 'settle' to care.

And 'settling' is what transpired, for most of these distance relaters (eight of the 14 couples were still together when recontacted eight years later, six were cohabiting, most with children). Claire and Hugh had not enacted the queered practices of intimacy imagined. A few years after being interviewed Claire got pregnant. She lived alone in the town where she worked during most of the pregnancy and travelled back to see Hugh at weekends. She then moved to be with him to have the baby and during maternity leave. Once that leave ended, she returned to her job 'travelling daily at that point and trying to spread work days across the week in order to be at home for the baby at night. It was going to be unsustainable and so soon after [she] returned [she] resigned' and went to live with Hugh. Claire found an academic post there but she '[didn't] see promotion opportunities' and although she took some pride in feeling they were 'living well', her husband's more secure and senior post had taken precedence and she was the one doing the school run. Claire and Hugh's (slightly) more radical imagined future had not been built.

## **Conclusion: Future Building, Agency, Emotions and Social Change**

We have examined the value of the concept of emotional reflexivity for understanding how queer futures are imagined and put into practice within intimate relationships. We have argued that such queer future building is most easily observed within non-normative relationships like those examined, but intend that this serves as a starting point for studies of emotionally reflexive future building in a range of intimate relationships. We expect to see that interpreting and acting on one's own and others' emotions is always vital to how gendered and other social constraints are navigated and queer futures imagined.

Our focus on gender gives insight into how agency is felt and done by women in varying circumstances. Isabel imagines working to mother positively outside a male breadwinner relationship, striving to build a mothering future against her partner's anger, the indifference of government bureaucracies and the disappointment of her son. Natalia imagines and tries to enact a happy and ethical future life as a couple, queer in its potential departure from norms of women's childbearing as key to a fulfilling life. She weaves between declining and accepting loving and sometimes financial support from her family, feeling confidence in her partner's willingness to care for children, her uncertainty about bringing up children without economic security and conceding that a future life without children may also be a virtuous one. Claire imagines a queer future of shared caring but navigates uncertainly around and does not quite reach it, worried she might feel guilty or be made to feel guilty if she steps back from caring for children. By looking at their emotionally reflexive processes *as relational* we can see how and why each of these women might struggle to imagine or build the queer intimate futures they desire.

Through a focus on gender we can recognise emotional reflexivity as an ongoing and increasingly necessary process within a changing world and diversifying intimate

practices. As gendered relationships shift and queer futures are imagined, women must navigate the possibilities. These possibilities are not primarily understood through the lens of rational choice, rather the women take account of others' feelings and are ready to give accounts of their own in their future building. They may not always be certain about those feelings, but their accounts imply considerable skill and effort in ascertaining feelings and updating their emotional knowledge.

Focusing on gender also illustrates how emotional reflexivity is key in mediating between structure and agency (cf. Archer, 2003). All the women discussed have agency but their positioning within intimate relationships and structural gender relations means they have varying degrees of space to navigate and negotiate the different opportunities or obstacles they face. Efforts to exercise agency are inevitably felt, or emotionally experienced, according to structural and interpersonal circumstances. Isobel's emotional reflexivity indicates that agency to create a satisfying queer future can be limited by fear and constrained by the anger of significant others. She navigates between engagement and disengagement to manage and mitigate these feelings as best she can with sparse material and emotional resources. For Natalia, agency is limited by considering her family's disappointment and her own ambivalence. She has drifted from excitement to resignation about not being able to afford children, confidence and uncertainty in her partner and hopefulness and stoicism about alternatives. Her agency is fragile in the face of gender discrimination and the limitations economic insecurity places on enjoying being a couple or raising children. Yet she is helped by the love of her partner, parents and in-laws. Claire's reflexive future building hits the obstacle of potential guilt in the face of what significant and generalised others might feel about queering models of mothers as primary caregivers. Her agency to do things differently is limited by her own and others' feelings, if not so much by material constraints. Whether these women are able to enact queer futures, depends not simply on their social and economic positioning but on their positioning relative to gendered emotional regimes that can systemically induce despair, uncertainty and reticence about doing things differently. Yet all these women found 'mundane' ways to resist, to disengage, to enjoy and sometimes to live in ways that feel good.

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